

Oles' Honchar

The Cathedral

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Chapter I

You won't find the village Zachiplianka in any encyclopedia. Yet it does exist. It might even sound somewhat funny to the unaccustomed ear Zachiplianka. Someone once got hooked on something here. And so the name stuck. In the distant past, before the factories appeared, people say there was a large village on this spot, which made spears for Zaporozhian Cossacks. When the Cossacks journeyed to the Sich they stopped here to replenish their supply of spears. Perhaps back then some Cossack got hooked on some girl here and laid the beginnings of a dynasty.

People living in Zachiplianka are mostly righteous, or as Mykola the student would put it — the right people: hardworking steelworkers, people whose lives are split into shifts, day and night. A lake glistens at one end of the village and at the other end a dilapidated cathedral shimmers white in the square — an ancient Cossack cathedral. Before the village's windows, beyond the cherry orchards, across the Dnipro, the blast furnaces blaze night after night like crimson volcanoes. The sky trembles and deepens each time the foundries spill out their glow, exploding down the steep bank in a blustering stream of molten slag.

Brown skies and brown smoke hover over the town.

At midnight, after the night shift whirs by on bicycles towards the smelters and Zachiplianka finally plunges into sleep, weary from its daily cares, and the green-horned moon hangs above in the spacious sky, the cathedral looms over the villages, deep in thought, alone in the silence of the bright acacia night, which no longer even resembles night, but rather, an anti-night. It is very unusual here, this anti-night, as if bewitched by the specter of the cathedral and captivated by the silent music of its rounded, harmoniously-united cupolas, its mounting stories, and its singing lines. For the night, possessed by a desire to solve some ancient riddles and to decipher secret writings of past ages, the cathedral still brims with distant music; it thunders with an avalanche of hymns, echoes with Orthodox liturgies, chants and ardently whispered penance. It is still filled with repented sins, and confessions, and tears, and the ecstasy of human passions and hopes...

The factories produce metal. A red glow bursts into the sky, whose depth, suddenly catching fire, begins to breathe, to pulsate; at night the sky's reflections dance on the cathedral walls and on its domes.

If the student Mykola Bahlay returns home from the Metallurgy Institute at this time, he stops in the square, tilts his head and listens as usual to the cathedral, to its silence, to that “music of the spheres” not accessible to everyone. Sensing a person nearby, a marsh stork fidgets in its nest on the scaffolding erected around one of the cupolas. And so it is now: as soon as he stops, it begins to stir and fret, roused perhaps by the glow, or anxious that its young might fall out of the nest. It rises in the nest, and balancing on one leg paints a graceful long-legged silhouette among the smooth contours of the domes.

The bird stands there looking down from the cathedral's heights onto its favorite frog-filled lake glimmering in the moonlight some distance away. It surveys the silvery tents of the acacias which envelope Zachiplianka in a heavy scent of honey.

The student's past lies here, the spirit of his forefathers. The ages speak to him in this midnight hour, when pumps no longer buzz in the orchards and water no longer rustles from the hoses. Zachiplianka is cradled in the moonlight, only the red vigilance in the sky and serene glow of the cathedral watch over its quiet streets. At night the cathedral seems even more majestic than in the daytime. The student Mykola never tires of looking at it. It is one of those millennial giants strewn about the planet which stand like sullen citadels with gaping apertures, or scrape the

clouds with their arrowy steeples, or recast the outlines of the sky in the ample bulges of their cupolas... In the sea of human generations, in the flow of ages, they tower immovable. Vested in symbol and allegory, stone chimera, they have the passions of the ages carved into them. And when those distant travelers emerge from the depths of the universe one day and approach our planet, the first thing to amaze them will be ... the cathedrals! And they, those galactic travelers, will also search for the secret proportions, and ideal harmony of mind and matter, seeking the unsolved formulas of eternal beauty!

It will be so; our student is certain of this.

The air is still and free of smoke from the coking plant. Zachiplianka's Vesela Street is fragrant with acacia honey. Knotgrass spreads out along the fences while in the middle of the street lies a soft carpet of dust and the student's running shoes, well-worn from many training sessions, huff lightly on it. Though the boy has never flown, he walks on this Zachipliankan carpet like a cosmonaut. For him, for young Bahlay, the epicenter of life is here. Here, more than anywhere, the surrounding world speaks more audibly with its wise nightly silence, its wondrously entangled vegetation woven into the moon drenched slag walls. At night the baroque fullness of Zachiplianka's acacias and abundant grapevines is overpowering. Everything has changed, expanded, become entangled, and in everything, in the unity of all things, harmony is achieved. Isn't the true sense of life to savor the beauty of these nights, to live in wise harmony with nature, to delight in work and the poetry of human associations? — and to learn to value these things, to realize that they must be preserved? Vesela Street rests now, having toiled and clamored all day, dispersing its gray throng of troubles. It sleeps soundly under the narcosis of the acacias whose rich, silvery blossoms droop down to the open windows. The verandas, fences and sheds are all hidden from view by the acacias' nocturnal fantasies, their chimerical shadows. Silence, sleep and blossoms — there is something magical in the mystery of nocturnal blossoming, in the moonlit mirage and silence of these bright acacia nights. Everything rests, only the sky breathes deeply, and the cathedral looms over the villages guarding Zachiplianka's dreams and visions.

Bahlay the student plods along in his knitted track-suit, humming something as he walks. A late whoop rises from Klynchyk and is echoed from Tsyhanivka or Koloniya. The student wants to shout at the top of his voice too, but conscience will not let him; people are asleep, and so he continues softly humming something as unintelligible to Zachiplianka as his integral calculus.

In addition to young Bahlay, there is also the older Bahlay, who, because of his temperament and irascible character, used to be known in the villages as Wild Ivan; more recently, however, he is better known as the red-haired Bahlay who is in India, or simply Virunka's Ivan. Ivan and Virunka are perfectly matched — two souls living in harmony. Outside their home a comfortable bench stands under the acacia blossoms as a sign of idyllic family accord. The bench, it can be said, has a history. Ivan built it with his own hands soon after his marriage so that he could step outside in the evening and sit with his wife by the light of tranquil stars. He must have chosen the right spot, building the bench where his ancestors once sat on logs, for as soon as dusk falls a crowd always gathers around it. The young flock from all ends of the street, as if a treasure were buried here. They lounge about under the windows all evening strumming their guitars. When

Ivan was still at home he often chased them away, rushing from the house in his shorts, his ribs showing, hair disheveled, wide-eyed and angry.

“Beat it, you bums! I'm sick of your strumming. A man can't even get a decent night's sleep after work.”

He chases the strummers away today, but tomorrow they will be back, strumming and guffawing under the windows as if deliberately testing Ivan's temper to see if he really is so “wild,” if the slightest provocation makes him explode like gunpowder.

Right now the bench is empty. Perhaps because its owner is not at home and there is no one to dash out and startle them? The bench itself seems to invite him: “Sit down young man, rest after a day of righteous toil.” He can even lie face up here and continue humming to the stars.

Just as the student stretched out and felt himself steeped in serenity, a sleepy Virunka appeared in the open window. Round faced, broad-shouldered, she leaned over the sill, her bosom reflecting white in the moonlight.

The student's idiosyncrasies are well known to Virunka; only he, Mykola, has a habit of stretching out on a strange bench at this late hour to entertain the stars, even though home is only two steps away.

“You look comfortable there,” Virunka observed from the window. “And you sing nicely too, yet if you were quiet it would be even better ... You'll wake my children.”

“I'm silent, if singing is forbidden, but may I think?”

“Got some girl on your mind?”

“No, my thoughts are of a different nature.”

“What kind, if it's no secret?”

“I'm thinking, Virunka, whether I should join the Committee for Class Struggle.”

“Now, that's something new.”

They've posted a notice “on the bulletin board next to the dean's office: 'Sign up for the Committee for Class Struggle'... meaning classical, of course.”

Virunka laughs quietly. The white apples of her cheeks glisten; her shoulders turn white, bathed in the moon's milk, and she seems to smell milky too. She stopped being a milkmaid ages ago, but still seems to smell of milk, just as she did when Ivan first brought her here to Vesela Street. He showed her around and boasted, exclaiming haughtily: “No one on our street writes anonymous denunciations.” She fell in love, and blossomed into happy married life, a marital idyll, even though her daily work was not easy, shift after shift spent sitting in the cabin of her crane in the middle of the rumbling steel plant. There she is called an ace operator. On the job her face is always covered by a respirator mask which she keeps on throughout the shift so as not to be poisoned by the acrid dust of the cinders. Like a queen, Virunka sits there in the subcelestial reaches of the plant, her fingers touching the iron mane of her giant crane; responding to her slightest touch, it moves wherever she directs it, noisily seizing tons of rusty scrap iron and carrying it through the air to deposit with an even greater clatter into the molds again and again. Exposed to constant drafts, poisonous dust, amid screeching iron — such is her life in the black cabin sailing above the inferno of the mixture yard... Here the white cabin of her house sails through the scent of acacias, and somewhere in the weed thickets a chirring cricket weaves its endless night poem for the top crane operator.

“Virunka, what does the cathedral say to you?”

“That dilapidated thing? I haven't heard it say anything.”

“Listen to it, not so much with your ears as with your soul.”

“My soul has more important things to listen to: I saw Ivan in my dreams again... I dreamt the bottom of a scoop had burned through! As soon as it was lifted the bottom cracked open, molten metal poured all over the workshop, my crane was ablaze, iron was burning, but Ivan just stood there, not moving from his place! I screamed at him to run, but I couldn't get a sound out, as if my throat was choked with dolomite and magnesite dust... 'You'll burn, Ivan!' I screamed. 'Save yourself!' And then I woke up... What does it all mean?”

“It means Ivan will return a fakir, a yogi. He'll walk barefoot across red-hot slag.”

“Why did I let him go? I'll never let him go anywhere alone again. Even if they send him to the ends of the earth, I'll go with him... Life is so short.”

The pain of separation is in her voice, the anguish of waiting. Her whole world revolves around Ivan. She has made a cult of him, and no one can ever dethrone him in her heart. Others quarrel and fight, rush off to committees and courts; but they enjoy harmony, good-will and love. Their children are already in school, and still she dressed up for Ivan like a girl. She regularly runs off to the factory grounds when he is on patrol duty there with friends. People say it is jealousy that drives her there to spy on him, but she does not consider herself jealous. It isn't so much jealousy as pride which drives her to the park; she revels in seeing Ivan with a red ribbon tied around his sleeve, stern and formidable, leading his factory citizens' patrol. The drunks sober up immediately when they see Ivan Bahlay; the scum leap into the bushes when the Martenivka boys are on duty, led by red-haired Ivan. Even though they call him Red, his heart is golden, gentle, and just, and that is why she fell in love with him. Occasionally she jumps out of bed at night, thinking she has heard the screech of a taxi and seen the flash of headlights, — he has come! But it is only the melt being released. For some he is the wild redhead, but Virunka simply can't hide her pride in him when people talk about Ivan at the factory. He is a master at smelting — a virtuoso of his profession. And there are no flaws in his soul. He is the same in life as at work — wild and furious, and from this rage comes his skill and smelting talent. “I just walk up to the furnace,” he says, “and I know what is inside and how it is progressing.” To Virunka he is the greatest, a wizard of the furnace. No wonder he was chosen to go to India. Although it is not unusual now to hear in the villages that one was in Aswan, another in Afghanistan, still Virunka senses that only her Ivan is privileged to represent Ukrainian steelworkers in Bhilai.

“There'll be a surprise, when Ivan returns,” he said. “There won't be any cathedral.”

“What do you mean?” Virunka started.

“They're going to pull it down.”

“First I've heard of it. Well, it's all the same to me, but to do it without asking the people... It must be just a rumor.”

“It's no rumor. If it's an obstacle in somebody's career, if someone can distinguish himself by demolishing it, climbing up a rung...”

“You fuss about with your cathedral like it was the only thing in life. Tell me, instead, when are you going to bring a daughter-in-law home to your mother? You've probably got one on pins and needles already, eh?”

“No, Virunka, not yet.”

“Is it so hard to chose someone?”

As if to amuse Virunka, Mykola tells her how they went to a dance on the island on Saturday, to dance the very twist which Virunka so detests. Towards the end of the evening some bowlegged degenerate calls their party aside and propositions in whispers: “Want any girls? I can fix you up.”

“What a wretch!” Mykola is indignant even now. “We felt like smashing his face in, but decided not to dirty our hands.”

“You should have taken him to patrol headquarters,” Virunka remarked sternly. “We've got a good broom for people like that.”

Every once in a while Virunka can be seen on patrol in the park too. She joined after saying goodbye to Ivan, the bane of all park hooligans. True, Mykola finds this rather ironic: at home the garden is unweeded, the children are hanging around their grandmother's neck, while she upholds Ivan's prestige and fights the transgressors of social order.

“Virunka, they say all the patrols snap to attention before you.”

“Laugh then, laugh all you want. Someone has to go on patrol. You walk down the street and some young punk, drunk on his first paycheck, is annoying people. He has a sparrow's drink, it doesn't take much after a day's work... Pale, sickly, lying under the bushes — doesn't it make your heart bleed? I'm not about to mother him. Yesterday one of the young workers came to the dance square and began to pester the girls. Hanna, the mechanic, and I happened along in good time: 'Okay, young fellow, come along!' She grabbed him by one ear and I by the other, and we took him down to headquarters. And the little squirt got his hackles up: This auntie,' he says, 'pulled my ear so hard that it's all swollen... put that in the record!.’”

“Really, Virunka, have you the right to pull a free citizen by the ear?”

“And does he have the right to be a hooligan? Some protector you are! And why haven't you joined the patrol yet? An athlete like you, with your build... What are you developing those muscles for?”

“To be a sports enthusiast and to remove drunks from parks are two different things, Virunka.”

“Who's to remove them then? Always us women? And where are you, sambo experts.”

“I'm no expert at twisting people's arms out of their sockets. Maybe it makes me sick. Maybe I'm allergic to it. Probably the only worthy devotion in this time of doubt and uncertainty is the cult of the healthy body. Into a rowboat and down the Dnipro — now that makes sense, that's my style. After all, what else is left for a person on this sinful earth apart from the sky's smile and the sun's warmth?”

“The sky's smile — that's beautiful. You're a poet...”

“The winds have bruised and blown away the golden bergamots of my days.' Have you heard it before?” “Yours?”

“It's blind Kostia's little song, his words and music too...”

“People don't write anonymous denunciations, but someone ratted on him to the regional council! Claimed he secretly supplied Zachiplianka with bootleg vodka... The trouble I had because of him... Aren't you ashamed, I said, suspecting a blind man? Maybe he once did some

distilling before festivals, but now he does honest work at home for the invalid's cooperative. He weaves baskets and lives off them..."

"Man does not live by baskets alone, Virunka... The golden bergamot of my days' — that adds flavor to life." Mykola shakes his hair rapturously. "In our time art attracts the most noble souls. Art, Virunka, is possibly the last refuge of freedom."

"Ah, you're all sceptics." Virunka waved her hand, using Ivan's saying, which she often repeated, whether it fit or not. "You philosophize too much, Mykola... Look at what a night it is. Girls go crazy on nights like these! There's probably one pinning away for you some place, and here you are wagging your tongue. When Ivan and I met each other, can you imagine, it was like something happened to us, life lit up before me. Everything became more beautiful, even the farm I worked on. I tended the cows and I didn't even see the troughs, my eyes were peeled to the highway, impatiently expecting the bosses to arrive, and with them that curly redhead with the wild look in his eyes..."

Virunka must really miss Ivan, speaking about such things, such intimate thoughts, which Mykola would never have heard otherwise. Drunk with memories, she smiles, resting her head on the windowsill, smiling hungrily at her sins, her lovemaking.

The orchards stand without a rustle. Every once in a while Mykola can hear the geese honking all the way over in Yahor Katraty's yard. Yahor has probably just returned from the Dnipro and alarmed his charges. Ever since the steelworkers pensioned off Yahor, bringing the veteran furnace attendant all the way to Vesela Street to the accompaniment of a band, the old man has wanted a new job. He was unable to sit around with his arms folded. First he did hackwork, installing steam heating systems, then roofing houses with slate which was difficult to find. All the same, his own house still stands quaintly covered with straw thatch — the only one in the village. He kept this up until he finally got the job he wanted — he became a buoykeeper on the Dnipro. The old man accumulated fishing tackle and cultivated friendships with the fish inspectors, who occasionally came to visit him all the way from the city just to sample his fish soup.

Recently a new, mysterious stranger appeared in the old man's yard. Virunka, with her perfect female intuition, didn't need much to guess why Mykola kept glancing in that direction from time to time...

"Have you seen Yahor's niece watering his garden? She's a beautiful girl! And you're all asleep. You should at least invite the girl out dancing, you wretched sceptics..."

The appearance in Yahor's yard of the mysterious stranger called Yelka had obviously not escaped the sceptic's attention. Still, none of them had yet managed to befriend her. On several occasions the more curious lads zoomed past the old man's yard on their bicycles, braking and craning their necks, but none succeeded in luring her out into the street. A smile never crosses her tanned face. It is stern and inaccessible; only occasionally does she steal a glance over the fence to frown at the gaping cyclists, and again buries her gaze in the ground, down toward the hose which bubbles water, and raises it sharply as if ready to spray the curious onlooker between the eyes! More often than not she has her back to the street: several times Mykola has seen her slender figure and strong legs, tanned like copper and covered with dew to the knees in the old man's strawberries, which will probably grow as large as pumpkins from her generous watering!

Who is she, this stranger who violates Zachiplianka's peace and disturbs the tranquillity of young men's dreams?

Mykola knows nothing about her. And the old man is as silent as a rock. All that Bahlay knows is that she comes from the steppe country, where thistles grow in ravines and people's weathered faces burn with a Sarmatian tan.

“Perhaps she's a poet too?” Virunka says, musing. “Because when she runs to the village store for bread, she shies away from people, as if she were threatened... She only ventures out when the street is empty, so as not to meet anyone. She darts by, always looking over her shoulder as if she were being followed.”

Mykola rose from the bench and stretched.

“Goodnight Virunka” he said pensively. “I salute your classical patience. I salute the Yaroslavna in you, who once sat sorrowfully like this on the ramparts.”

“You're always joking.”

“No joke. I think women surpass men in the intensity and beauty of their feelings. Whenever I see a woman in love, in the holy state of waiting, I want to bow before her.”

And he really did bow. It seemed to Virunka that he really meant it.

This evening something made Bahlay wander about Zachiplianka like a sleepwalker. He went home, pumped some water, had a drink, then his silhouette appeared near Yahor's fence and the geese honked angrily at him — they looked like piles of snow in the moonlight in their enclosure near the shed. Later he stood by the lake, that dear old lake, where it seemed only yesterday he had spent his childhood splashing about, screaming, yelling, building lairs and playing skittle. Even now, as a metallurgy student, he still likes to paddle about in the lake, to frighten the carp lurking in the weeds, and each time his assistants are at his side, all those little Bahlays, Tkaches, Shpaks — the dirty-faced Zachipliankan guard which is completely devoted to him... Finally he wound up near the cemetery, on the other side of Yahor's orchard, among the weed-covered mounds of earth, above which long ago, they say, the phosphorescent outlines of ancestors once rose on dark nights. Now they no longer rise, but in the past, it is said, they would frighten people. Who were they, those who had risen? Zaporozhians with spears? The first steelworkers? And why did they rise from their graves? Was the earth too confining? Or were they driven forth by a desire to see their descendants? They say there were wizards among the Cossacks, sorcerers, supernatural people. They would take a pinch of native earth and hide it under their cap, and in battle this earth gave them the power to become invisible when they came face to face with the enemy. The Mussulman could hear the Cossack laugh, he could hear his horse neigh, but neither was to be seen — invisible as a ghost, and laughing!

The cemetery has been neglected. Only on Easter day do old women gather here to pray for the dead. To them, those lying in the earth are not ashes, not decayed matter, but an underground hospital for live, feeling people. Whole dynasties of steelworkers lie buried here; those who supplied the Sich with spears and muskets. Even now one can find things from those times. Recently a small flint ladle was dug up in Kinebas' garden. Everyone scratched his head wondering what it was. Finally they realized it was a ladle for pouring metal! There must have been Cossack foundries nearby.

The Bahlays are from the same stock. While still a teenager Mykola followed his older brother to the plant, and for the first time, through the protective blue of work glasses, saw that swirling fire which is like the core of the sun through the peephole in his brother's furnace. One look and you could never forget the sight. And when you leave by the factory gate after your shift, the first thing to appear before you is the Titan of Labor, holding in his hands torn chains poured from the first metal of the Revolution. Your father helped pour it too. Every time you look at it something touches your soul.

Then you jump on your bicycle and race home down Shyroka Street. Bending right over the handlebars you press on the pedals, dashing along the pavement, a shopping net with a loaf of bread dangling at your side, and the red-pumpkin sun rolls into the dust at the end of the street. A truck speeds past you, filled with paleface factory Madonnas. They sit under wraps in their work clothes, tired and unresponsive — looking at you apathetically. Then one of them notices something funny about you, a droopy-eared bunny from the factory, and they all begin to giggle, and you grin back at them too. No harm in that! Near the cathedral you cross the square to your cherished Vesela Street and reach your destination. From the sooty factory gates, to your mother's threshold — this is the sole journey of your youth.

Others from Zachiplianka are now sent to vocational and factory trade schools while you, a mature student, stand before the enduring, nocturnal specter of the cathedral. In its shadow, generations have lived and died. They came and went, and now you appear. And after you others will come and live in Zachiplianka, people of a different stamp, with other professions — cyberneticians, astronauts... Who will you be to them? How will they remember you? It is said that the fear of death is primary in human life. The fear of the unknown, the mystery of oblivion supposedly governs everything. But is it really so? Should not a man be more afraid that his existence is without purpose, of treading life's road like a human shopping net and shedding the blossom of his spring like a barren flower? What after all is “the final summary of all earthly wisdom?” How can one be authentic? How can one attain perfection? How should one act in order to be viewed in the face of the universe as the crown of nature? Here before you is a masterpiece, the poetry of Cossack architecture. There are singular rhythms in the structure of the cathedral, there is free-soaring inspiration, there is great love. But in what will your soul immortalize itself, where are they, those poems of yours? On nights like these girls go crazy with love Virunka says. But where is the one in your life to make you go mad? They tell you that love appeared at a late stage in man's development, and then became a commodity. Well, what next? To be sure, love will develop along the lines of the beautiful and not the monstrous. Pure and holy, this feeling will always be the great song of life and art... But where is it, this unsung song of yours?

The cathedral is silent. In its presence Bahlay always feels a strange sadness, and even something alarming. The cathedral has something elemental about it, a primordial greatness, like the steppes or the Dnipro, or the black industrial bastions swaddled in eternal smoke. The cathedral's silent music — the music of those cupolas rising harmoniously into the sky — it really does exist. You can hear it, though others seem deaf to its sounds. Zachiplianka is not spiteful, yet it seems unable to forget what this cathedral, once the largest and most magnificent in the eparchy, stood for. Many minds were stupefied here by the fumes of the vigil candles, by

the dissimulated sermons and the narcotic aroma of frankincense in the priest's swinging censers. Potbellied priests grew even fatter here, and the church wardens with bowl haircuts and oiled heads, jingled mountains of copper coins on plates, pilfered and made fortunes selling candles. With a single stroke, swindling contractors bought remission for their sins, while beggars died in the porticoes.

And the unfortunate cripples who dragged themselves here from everywhere to be healed, awaiting a miracle, remained cripples. Candles burned, icons adorned by embroideries shone, and the choir filled the cathedral with paradisaical sounds, singing heavenly, blessed songs to the people, who after the service were again cast out into the real, cruel world of extortion and want, the world of Belgian factory owners and sullen-faced "native" supervisors, into the world of wages and strikes, drinking bouts and bloody fights. But all this has passed, melting away with the smoke of frankincense, and there remains for the student only this perfected architectural creation, this symphony of art. Will they really demolish it? Virunka placated him that there was no reason to tear it down. But as soon as it annoys someone, as soon as it stands in somebody's way, they will find a reason... Oh, it is going to be hard for it to survive. And our descendants will come one day and ask: Well, what kind of people were you? What did you build? What did you destroy? What made your spirit move?

Chapter II

Anti-aircraft guns fired away madly. The sky was filled with whistling and howling, the glint of airplanes, and a sun, shaggy, like a blinding white explosion. The forces of war were locked in combat at the crossings, the Dnipro was boiling, its banks shuddering under the impact of bombs.

Factories burned sorrowfully, apocalyptically.

The parks in the workers' suburbs had been turned into ammunition dumps, and now piles of shell boxes blazed, the shells exploding, firing and whistling in all directions.

The heat of battle drifted heavily over the stripped orchards and soot settled on everything.

Everything was smoldering.

In this hell, in this smoldering, torn-apart world came a sudden cry from a small trench amid golden-faced sunflowers.

At that moment a soldier was racing past the trench, his face streaked with blood, his arm dangling by his side, also covered with fresh blood. Although he was deafened by the battle, and red with blood, he nevertheless heard the crying and stopped at the trench over a woman in childbirth. Her newly-born child, having just opened its eyes, looked at the world for the first time in senseless wonder, and saw it in total carnage. The blood-stained face above the trench spread over the whole sky; the sky was red too, reeking with smoke, and the sun wore a halo of blood. This was the newborn infant's first impression of life, the first notches carved somewhere in the depths of its subconscious.

"Tell someone, call someone" came the weary mother's voice from the trench.

The soldier stood dumbfounded, forgetting that he was bleeding, unable to believe that among all this chaos and destruction someone could be born. This place seemed fit only for dying. It was inconceivable that a small sprout of life should suddenly appear from the depths of non-existence in defiance of this mad death frenzy and force itself on these explosions, fumes and noise. It was unbelievable that this whimpering, pink, helpless thing was a human being. The baby screamed louder, as if blinded by the flaming red explosion of the universe; as if this infant's cries from the trench were the earth itself rebelling against the apocalyptic chaos, and the blind, frightening, and completely splintered sun. The craters made by the stinking bombs smoldered. The burning shells shot off by themselves in all directions from the edge of the park and the cartridges could be heard falling with a rustle into backyards and the cemetery.

"Call someone, please, call someone!"

Coming to his senses, the soldier backed away from the small trench and dived into the sunflowers, which continued to shake their golden heads after he had passed through.

It was a bloody, glowing day, a blinding noon.

What was the mother thinking? Maybe she was crying? Perhaps she was choked by guilt: why had she given birth? Why was she releasing life into this hell? She had wanted him to appear in a world of flowers, in a fragrant, rose-scented world, but the world her tiny one had entered greeted it with stench, explosions, and the frenzy of death. Maternal fear blundered about in her suffering eyes. Perhaps it was a bad omen that the child had been born in a trench? And also that the first person the infant had seen had been covered in blood (nothing, nothing burns like human blood at noon).

The soldier did not forget to call someone after all. Shpachykha — yes, it was her, the most garrulous woman in all of Zachiplianka, who prattled day and night to everyone these last few days about how easily frightened she was, moaning and groaning at every rumble — came running with a limp across the gardens among the whistle of shells: her feet were red with squashed tomatoes and she burned them on the hot cartridges scattered everywhere. (She would recount later that ; each time she stepped on them, she jumped high into the air.)

She ran up and busied herself with the woman.

“A boy!” she said. “Maybe one day when he grows up, he will raise a glass to his aunt for midwifing him and tying his belly-button amid such horror!” And so another Bahlay was born, a descendant of steelworkers.

This same one, who now would not fit on the Bahlay's family bed, lay spread-eagled, slept sweetly and smiled in his sleep. Recently he had shown his mother a dust particle under a microscope, a bit of dust from the factory chimneys which I was invisible to the naked eye. His mother had looked and exclaimed how large it was, like a rock!

“It's less than two microns across,” the son smiled, “but the air is filled with them, and together they make a cloud... This is the stuff we breathe, mother, we breathe this in... To live in magnificent natural surroundings, on the banks of one of the world's most beautiful rivers, and to have to breathe ore dust and gall all one's life... is that normal mother? Is filtering the air with one's lungs normal?”

“It will be normal when you clean the air.”

“Ah, that's the very reason why we're combining intellects — great minds seek each other out.”

He had made friends with Oleksa the mechanic, and together they commandeered the mother's table for the whole day, spreading their drawings out on it, calculating something.

“There'll be purifiers, mother. We'll install such good filters that even a molecule won't escape.”

“You know what they call our city now?” Oleksa had added. Though not much older than Mykola, his head was as bald as his knees. “I heard someone say on the bus yesterday that it's a city of youth and laughter. Youth, because it will be difficult to reach old age with such polluted air...”

“And laughter?”

“Because everyone laughs on the far bank when the wind blows toward Zachiplianka, and when the wind blows in the other direction, toward the city, then it's Zachiplianka's turn to laugh...”

Long-limbed and tanned, with black eyebrows, the student was asleep, a smile playing on his chapped, cherry-red lips. Perhaps he was dreaming of one of those girls he had seen at athletic meets, decked out in ribbons and gyrating with a hoop around his waist. He was preparing for an athletic meet himself. Or perhaps in his dreams he could see his city without soot, without clouds of brown factory smoke, which appeared to be blanketing Zachiplianka that day, for the foxtails of smoke from the fertilizer plant had turned and trailed in this direction.

The sun rose dewy and red through the grapevine on the veranda. While preparing breakfast, the mother gazed involuntarily at the morning light, for the beauty of sunrise was never boring, a

person could never tire of it. It stayed beautiful to the last dying glance. It was a pity her son slept through such a marvel; he had gone to bed late, and the mother decided not to wake him, but the alarm clock was far more decisive than she and suddenly rang so loudly that Mykola leapt up, as if scalded. "Good morning, Mother!" he called joyfully to his mother. He immediately jumped into his dark blue knitted track-suit and disappeared from the house. Before sitting down to his vellum and drawing pens he still had to go for a run, circling the lake several times, which he did no matter what the weather.

Mykola's path ran past Yahor's house, past the old man's straw palace. This ancient old building, a sunken shack with a porch, looking like a winter house from Cossack times, had survived among the slate and cinder-brick Zachiplianka houses only by a miracle. It was uncertain when the house was last thatched. The straw had settled, compressed by time, and fused into a solid mass, green with moss in places, crowned along the ridges with strong sheaves of reeds. The house was old, sagging, while the window shutters were brand new, pale blue in color, as was the fence facing the street, dappled with red designs. After the death of his wife no one had beautified the house. It stood battered by rain, for though Katraty wasn't lazy, he felt uncomfortable having to whitewash the house himself. This was woman's work. Only in the last few days had the house cheered up somewhat, standing freshly whitewashed now. The small shed was half whitewashed too, but though a bucket filled with lime and a brush stood beside two sawhorses, the whitewasher herself was nowhere to be seen. The yard was deserted except for the "Kama" pump babbling away by the well, trickling water onto the strawberries. Where was the girl who had been watering them the day before? There was still a meadow at the back of Yahor's property, now sporting a small rick of hay, a clump of bulrushes and a narrow strip of rye, which the old man lovingly called zhytechko.

There was no one there either, the girl did not appear anywhere. Perhaps she had already said goodbye to her Uncle Katraty. She completed her stay and returned to the place from whence she had come, and he would never have the chance to meet her, never be able to rediscover the strange, sorrowful pensiveness of her green eyes.

He felt his spirits fall at once, ran past without seeing her in the yard, and already felt melancholy, as if he would never see her again. No, it would not do to give in to moods. After all, what claims could he have on her? Had she arranged to meet him or something? Perhaps she was madly in love with someone else, a tractor driver or a ladies' man from the village club, and he was infinitely insignificant to her. Yes, but why had she stuck in his heart? He tried to understand the mystery of first love. Why, in particular, had this type of person attracted him and invaded his soul, rather than someone else?

Among the reeds on the banks of the lake loomed the dark form of what appeared to be a giant stump. It was Yahor Katraty sitting in his boat, patiently waiting for his perch and carp. In the early spring, during the floods, when the Dnipro waters flowed among the hillocks and reached the lake, Katraty dug small channels for the water, raked the green grass aside, luring the spring water and fish into the lake. "Come, come, my dear carp and perch," he urged them on. And when they came, the water swirled overnight at Yahor's windows. The whole of Zachiplianka laughed then: "Well, summoned enough carp, Uncle Yahor? Are they looking in your windows already?" He had said nothing. And now in silence he is trying to catch the fish

that does not want to be caught. A greasy waistcoat covered his shoulders, with a patch visible on his back, a squashed felt hat hiding his head, one of those ancient hats which the furnace attendants wore out after retiring. Bend up the brim on a hat like this, stick in a feather, and any cavalier from the Middle Ages could have waved it about, ceremoniously greeting his lady in the streets of Verona or Saragossa. Yahor disappeared under his hat; only his large potato nose poked out from under it, so red it was almost blue. The old man grew angry when people hinted at the reason for the blue tinge: no, it had not turned blue from alcohol, but from the flames of the furnace! Anyone who didn't believe that could stand in front of a furnace and stay there all his life — then they'd be convinced why furnace attendants' noses turned blue. When the fish weren't biting it was better to leave the old man alone, to run past him in silence, as if not noticing him. Choose another time, if you wanted to chat with the old man, when he wasn't engrossed in his fishing, which was actually futile, because the perch here were educated and knew how to avoid being caught. To coax Yahor into a conversation, a discussion, required a special atmosphere, usually a glass of the strong stuff. Then the old man would tell the youth of today what it meant to be a foundry worker in his time, just how strong one's back had to be so that they chose you to work in the wheeling brigade at the plant from among the hundreds lying around in the employment office. Not everyone could become a wheeler, only the healthiest, fittest men. For several years you wheeled barrows around, and only then did they put you onto the furnace, the holy of holies. “These days people go off to the plant like it was the movies. You can even get dressed up. Everyone has their own drawers (one for clean clothes, and another for the dirty ones), after work you take a shower, freshen up, change, but in those days things were different. You washed in the channel under the blast furnace! You would stick your head somewhere under a tuyere, almost burn yourself, then drench yourself with water and return to work dripping wet. It was crowded around the blast furnaces because everything was done by hand then. It was bad news if the melt hardened in the taphole! Six of us grabbed a ram and battered at it, again and again, our eyes popping from exertion, driving the steel bar in until the outlet was clear. We weren't spoiled by laboratories. Now you can hear the voice of a laboratory assistant in your workplace, telling you what you've produced according to the selector. Some even try to sweet-talk the girls into giving them favorable analyses, but they sharply say, “No, take what's coming to you! I'm not going against my conscience.” These days, by the time you've filled the last ladle, the analysis of the first is complete, but in those days everything was done with a practiced eye. What eyes we had! As soon as I looked at it, I could tell you by the whiskers, the luster, its purity to the nearest thousandth. There were masters who knew their secrets well. When Loboda made an axe, you couldn't notch it on anything. If you needed a razor, he'd make you a better one than Solingen, and if you asked him how he did it, he'd only smile and touch his moustache, then say he had quenched it in sour milk and hardened it with an onion. “And you,” Yahor would squint contemptuously at the youngsters, “Where's your wisdom? All right, perhaps our furnaces smoked a bit, but it was bearable; with your oxygen blowing they've begun to belch twice as much. That red iron smoke is yours, isn't it? And the smelly coke plant fumes, plus the smoke from the fertilizer plant which makes the leaves on the trees turn yellow. These are all your improvements, and your waters are flowing into the Dnipro making the fish float to the surface belly-up. Yes, the directors pay fines of twenty and thirty thousand, taking them out of

one pocket and slipping them into the other. The number of chimneys is growing; you're polluting the Dnipro, growing deaf from the clatter of machinery. True, out of consideration for the people they stopped blowing the factory whistles, but let me ask you, what for? The whistle was a plant's song; each had its own particular sound, and together they merged in a unique morning symphony. When the people set out to work from the villages they tuned into the plant's music; life itself was calling them."

Having run three times around the lake, around Yahor's unmoving hat in the reeds, the student returned home. Yahor's yard was still empty, the brush was still in the bucket as before, untouched, and the boy's soul was pained by the sorrow of a loss, the loss of something not yet found.

The morning was wild and windy, the wind drove tattered smoke trails from the plants, filling the sky with red, and the sun above the orchards was not as bright as the day before. When he left for India, Ivan had joked: "Our Mykola will prove himself; little wonder he caught that dust particle in his microscope. When I return I probably won't recognize our Zachiplianka. It will be smokeless; Mykola's smoke filters will be on every chimney, bearing the sign, 'Made in Zachiplianka.'"

Meanwhile the smoke was reality, and the filters were only dreams. It wasn't so hard to invent them, as to introduce them. There were many methods of filtering smoke; many projects drawn up, even approved, gathering dust in drawers. The directors were sick to death of these filters — until you showed them a simpler, cheaper way, they would continue to smother you in smoke, spewing hundreds of tons of iron dust onto the city, breathing it themselves, all because the filters seemed to provide the plants with no obvious advantage. Had the filters improved the production output by only a fraction of a percent, they would have all installed them long ago. Meanwhile, everyone was being poisoned, including the plant directors themselves. Red dust and soot settled on the acacias, their scent smothered by the stench from the coking plant, because the directors had no time for lyricism, demanding only increased production. To catch up to the Zaporozhians, to overtake "Azovsteel," to communicate, to report this was the essence of their existence.

Sitting on the veranda over a glass of tea, Oleksa the mechanic complained to old Mrs. Bahlay.

"I never thought we had so many paper shufflers, and paper shufflers with such high qualifications. The director released me from all duties for two weeks. He gave me a car and asked me to go and finish the matter of the settling tank, because we were waiting for another commission. I sank my teeth into it, did the rounds of the establishments, received all the necessary permissions and it seemed that only the easiest thing remained: I had to go to the suburban state farm to be told specifically where to build our plant's settling tank. So off I went to the state farm director, to the respected hero of Socialist Labor, Comrade Bubyk. I've been driving to his place for three days now, chasing him across the fields, unable to catch up with him."

"He's just hiding from you," Mykola said, sitting down to breakfast. "Perhaps he's right. What has he got to talk to you about, you barbarian? Why should he pollute his blooming fields with your smelly settling tank?"

“Yes, his fields are flourishing,” the mechanic agreed. “His poppy plantation alone... Is he really leading me about by the nose?”

Mykola formulates it thus: “Make the plant process a self-contained system, my friends. You pump more and more from the Dnipro every year, but what are you giving nature in return? Poison! She doesn't want your polluted waters anymore.”

“I'm going off at four in the morning tomorrow to catch him. I'll keep watch outside his yard till dawn. I'll get that Bublyk's signature yet.”

“There is too much red tape around now; people are drowning in it,” said Mrs. Bahlay. “Our Mrs. Tkachenko is being badgered over a piece of paper, and will probably be taken to court over it, and all because mice have eaten three years of her employment records.”

“That's enough criticism, Mother,” Mykola raised his eyebrows. “Better clear the table so we can get on with something positive.”

They sat around the table for hours on end. Many a time, his gaze buried in the spread-out drawings, the mechanic would rub his bare, tanned skull; many times the student scratched his head in thought too, searching for a way out of some blind alley. The orchards would wave their gnarled branches in the wind, and the sun would shine dimly through the smoky sky. These Edisons of Zachiplianka would take a break only when the streets echoed with the happy shouts of children.

“Look, look! There they are!”

Both Oleksa the mechanic and young Bahlay would rush from the house at the children's hooting and stand in the street looking at the sky in the direction of the cathedral, where high up in the air someone's pigeons flashed brightly in a cloud of ruddy, orange coke fumes. They probably belonged to the rollerman, Prapirny. Someone would be racing them up there, either the boys or the owner, letting them rise above the cathedral, above the twining streams of heavy smoke, so the smart birds could savor the clean, fresh air in the cloudless heights. From everywhere in the village people could see them slowly rising, continually disappearing and reappearing from the ruddy, orange flood like fish. They would disappear, melt away, but then sparkle again a moment later like small white leaves, scattered by the wind in the brown-red cloud. Bahlay tilted his head back watching the pigeons rise slowly, stubbornly over the cathedral, seeming to drag it up with them circle after circle, pulling it up with its domes and spires, erecting their own invisible cathedral above this visible structure.

No one in Zachiplianka would have missed such a spectacle for anything; even those who had been on the night shift shuffled outside, woken by the shouting pigeon fanciers, and looked sleepily at the unnatural orange cloud above the coking plant, through which Prapirny's snow-white pigeons slowly fought their way up. Farther and farther into the heavens they sailed, to swallow the clean air, free of anhydrides.

Bahlay the student stood in the yard among the excited youngsters, his gaze leveled on the cloud above the cathedral, where the birds disappeared and then quivered again with a flash of silver, glittering like white sparks, and the whole time the youth seemed to feel someone's gaze on him. With his eyes in the sky, he did not notice the two green eyes of a sharp-sighted girl secretly watching him from the depths of Yahor's jungle.

Chapter III

The ancient cathedral, built in Cossack times, was hidden from Yelka beyond the horizon, and she had never completely seen it as a child. From the steppe she only saw the tops of its azure domes.

The girl tended calves near her rundown farm along the red, sunburnt gullies where only thistles grew, like wild cacti in a Mexican desert, and when she climbed a hill, in the distance, beyond the sun's mirage, she saw those blue domes, the crown of her childhood dreams, the azure spheres of childhood.

Her mother had told her how as a girl she had been on pilgrimages to the church, walking there barefoot, sparing the footwear and only putting her shoes on at the threshold before entering that beautiful, sacred shrine.

Yelka grew up on the farm. She didn't know her father, supposedly begotten of a passing soldier. She grew up not knowing a father's kindness, not that many of her peers knew it either. Her mother worked permanently as a pig tender. Summer and winter, weekday or holiday, from dawn until dusk, there were only births, farrows, bran and feed. Yelka-Olena was always at her side, in the middle of events. Even when she went to school, all her free time was spent on the farm, her Hellas and Babylon were here.

She had to survive somehow. In post-war poverty it wasn't easy for anyone, least of all a single mother who didn't know how to demand things from the managers, who only knew how to work hard. Another woman would protest for her rights, goading the brigade leader, but her mother's voice was only accustomed to asking. It was good if the brigade leader promised her a cart of straw for winter, but you did not always receive what you were promised, because he could twist things to suit himself. He wielded more power here than a Roman Caesar, able to do as he wished. If you did not bribe him with a bottle of vodka, there would not be any straw, even if the water froze in your house. Then you and your mother grabbed some rope, and when it grew dark you sneaked into the fields and up to a stack. You could become a thief like this inadvertently, they would turn you into one. Snatching hurriedly, you kept looking around, your heart pounding in your chest. Then you returned, stumbling and bent almost to the ground by the bundles, not a person, just a mound of straw moving across the snow-covered fields.

She grew up wild and solitary, but when she came of age, even the brigade leaders noticed her.

“Growing into a lovely woman.”

After the high, blue summer the autumn sky crumbled onto the steppes in heavy mists and fogs, and the bright cathedral no longer appeared in the distance. There wasn't any distance, the world became tiny. The evenings were long, the surrounding darkness impenetrable, “flying-fox” lanterns lit up the cowsheds even though the metal towers of high-voltage lines hummed right over the farm.

One day a propagandist arrived on the farm pale-faced, wearing a cap, carrying a briefcase, and wrapped in a red scarf.

“Do you get to see films here, girls?” he asked brightly.

“Occasionally.”

“They pay you enough?”

“Enough.”

“What more do you need then?” he asked in sincere amazement.

Spinster Halka, who had almost given up hope of marriage, said softly, embarrassed:

“Boys...”

Everyone burst out laughing and had a good chuckle, but it was no joke. There really were very few boys left in the village. Some had gone off to trade school, others were drafted into the army, still others had left for city construction sites.

He also asked if they had a river, so that he could return in summer and get a tan like them. Though there was no river, one of the older pig-tenders replied:

“Come anyway, you'll get a tan. We've been tanning here all our lives.”

The visitor was not offended and said politely:

“Come round to the clubhouse this evening girls, I'll be giving a lecture,” and he rested his eyes on Yelka longer than on the others. She felt the invitation was aimed primarily at her. He had watery eyes, but wasn't too bad apart from that. He was young, not bad looking, nice in his bright, checkered scarf.

“What's the lecture about?” Yelka asked, turning red.

“Oh, I've got a special topic: love. 'Love isn't sighing on a bench'... heard that before? Well, and so on. Come around, you won't regret it.”

In the evening they gathered in the club. All the farm workers sat together up front, so as not to miss anything. Soon after, he appeared and stepped onto the plywood rostrum, holding his briefcase. Noticing Yelka, he smiled at her and began to lay out his papers. She did not know why she was so excited. She was expecting some discovery, hoping to hear words never heard before, special words, and she kept her eyes on his white forehead and bright scarf. He had to speak those words, words that were meant for her, words which would be revelation. Then he began. The clubhouse in Vovchuhy was small, cramped, with a pock-marked clay floor and a low ceiling. One could speak in whispers and still be heard, but he suddenly began to yell as if he were facing a crowd of stone-deaf people, or an empty void. He waved his arms about, intoxicated by his own voice, which fell affectedly or rose shrilly, ready to break at any moment. Yelka didn't even hear his words, his false tones made her flesh creep. She was continually afraid that his voice would break, embarrassed by his shrieking and ashamed in front of the girls and the other people. “How can you speak like this about love?” She wanted to cover her ears, to run away, but somehow managed to control herself and remained in her seat until he finished shouting his lecture. She remembered nothing, all the words slipped by her mind and heart.

As everyone filed out, he caught up with her outside and fell in beside her, probably awaiting praise, then asked:

“Well, how was it?”

She walked along in silence, downcast. The young lecturer interpreted the silence in his own way, obviously certain that he had been a success, and excited, began telling Yelka how much work he had put into preparing his lecture, sifting through mountains of literature. There were over two hundred quotations alone. He did not regret working so hard, for of all the lectures on various topics, this one always brought in the largest audiences. Here one couldn't complain that the material was dry and tedious. The theme of love moved everyone!

“Poor fellow,” Yelka thought sympathetically. “To have worked so hard, and for nothing. You strain, teaching others to love, and yourself, have you ever loved anyone? Has anyone loved you?”

The lecturer walked her home and stopped to talk at the gate, telling her about his unsettled nomadic life, about the muddy steppe roads and how he had once been pulled out of a ditch with a tractor, for people everywhere wanted to hear more about love, affection and friendship.

“Do you go about all the clubs bawling like that?” Yelka longed to ask, still feeling ashamed for him.

There was a light drizzle that evening and the lecturer turned up his collar against the cold, but was in no hurry to leave. He confessed that he had not been in love yet; so she had guessed correctly.

“They rage and burn, climb the walls in agony. Do you believe this?” he asked Yelka cheerfully.

He began something about people of the atomic age, about their need to find pleasure, oblivion, their desires to live under the narcosis of beauty.

Learning that she was still a schoolgirl, although a senior, he paid her a compliment:

“But you're quite well-developed. A good-looking girl. I noticed you on the farm right away.” And without any hesitation he became familiar. “You're beautiful. Let me taste your beauty.”

Drawing closer, he tried to embrace her. His gesture seemed awkward and coarse, like the behavior of those mechanics spoilt by the girls, who brazenly tried to embrace every woman in sight when they were drunk. She pushed him away angrily, sharply, with both hands.

“Go away! Learn to love first!”

Since then she had seen neither him nor his gaudy scarf.

She wanted love, but was this it, that all-powerful feeling veiled in mystery? She craved to meet someone who could respond with a singing heart, an explosion of passion, who would reveal the poetry of starry steppe nights, someone with whom she could experience the happy frenzy of intimacy. With a man like that, even these village mists would not have remained impenetrable and the impassable roads would not have been all mud, and the perpetual work would not have seemed too difficult.

Who could he be, the man destined for her?

She knew that one of the mechanics had liked her, one of those who had been spoilt by the girls. In autumn he had been drafted into the army. One day she received a letter from him: “Now having to serve, somehow without becoming accustomed — it's difficult to get used to their ordering you about but one gets used to everything. The food suffices, so I eat to my fill. So I can't complain about my health. Plus the regimen and exercise are good for my health.”¹ He had written this to her, who had read every poet in the library, had breathlessly read letters of Pushkin's tenderness and then was unable to fall asleep at night from wild fantasies... and he “somehow” managed to “eat his fill!” When she saw him off he was so handsome, danced so

¹The letter is written in coarse, ungrammatical Russian.

well, but now Yelka was indignant at his grammar, and that “regimen” of his, which merited a failing grade, and especially that “somehow”; if a person could ever become disillusioned with someone because of one such “somehow,” then this was the moment. She didn't write a single word to him.

Soon their brigade leader was replaced, for he had become a complete drunk and blathered on in the evenings about how he would wipe out the difference between the city and village. “Want to know how? Black out the cities!” Since he was babbling this when the farm was about to be electrified at long last, his guilt was only magnified and no one stood up for him. He disappeared and that was that.

In place of the “blackout” drunk, a younger, more enthusiastic man was sent to their farm from another distant work brigade. He was appointed deputy manager of the farm, but since he had been a brigade leader before, the name stuck. This one turned out to be far more industrious than his predecessor. He obtained new, padded jackets and rubber boots for the girls from the management, so they wouldn't drown in the mud; a radio appeared, and milk production went up because he established new rations for the cows. The girls even received literature on animal husbandry, for he studied by correspondence at a technical school. Contrary to his predecessor, he did not disregard the milkmaids' suggestions and consulted them on how best to increase milk production. They considered the matter together, sought out various ways, and one of the older women even suggested they use star water! That is, water which has stood the night in a pail under the stars. After all, there was a popular belief that if a cow produced little milk, a pail should be filled with water, placed out in the open on a clear, starry night, and then the cow would be given the star water the following day.

“You also need to add oilcake to the water,” the brigade leader laughed at the suggestion. “And I'll get you some, too.”

He really did. He promised to get more feed too, pointing at the distant cupolas of the cathedral.

“See the cathedral? It's filled with feed. If our officials weren't asleep, we'd have had an order a long time ago.”

The brigade leader treated Yelka with obvious kindness: she was still a young milkmaid and had to be given support. When one of the milkmaids became ill and her cows had to be reassigned, the brigade leader gave Yelka the prize cow, Princess, which was quite an honor. He even explained his plans:

“We'll be preparing Princess for a show. When I get more feed, we'll keep her in a separate stall and create the ideal conditions for her. Your Princess will go off to Moscow, Yelka, and you with her.”

Yelka's life on the farm became happier. She walked with a light step now, skipping, with a smile on her face, something of a swallow's grace appeared in her movements, and occasionally one could hear Yelka humming in the barn as she gathered cut straw for the cows.

The new brigade leader did not abuse his authority, the girls could argue and joke with him, and felt more at ease. He was very much afraid of his jealous wife Varka, however, and admitted openly: “I can't stand three evils in life: an angry bull, a wasted workday and a jealous wife.”

She was so jealous that she came running to the farm now and again, trembling with suspicion, spying, watching, especially when he had to stay behind at night to supervise during the calving season. Being a cheerful type, he really was eager for some fun, to pinch the girls and roll them on the straw in the barn. For some reason Yelka seemed to end up in the straw most often; so what was wrong with this fooling around of his? Mirthful, glowing, she even liked it. She might have been offended were it someone else, but here she only squealed and twisted about when the brigade leader plucked her ticklishly from the crowd of girls with his calloused hands.

“Come now, what are these small melons doing here in your bosom?”

In early spring, misfortune struck Yelka. Her mother was killed in a landslide in the clay-pit. She was left an orphan. Uncle Yahor, her mother's brother, came for the funeral. He was a foundry worker about which mother only occasionally talked, and even then in whispers, for that was the only proper way of remembering the uncle's youth, which was lost somewhere in Huliaypole. Before leaving, this little-known relative asked Yelka whether she had any intentions of moving to the city, and even though she had not thought about it, Uncle Yahor mentioned in any case that his house was always open to her.

During her days of mourning Yelka really appreciated the loyalty of her girlfriends for the first time. They came to spend the night with her, to share her solitude, and she appreciated the attitude of the brigade leader, who was even more considerate toward the orphaned girl. He brought her some straw, even though she hadn't asked him to. She returned home in the evening and the straw was already lying in the middle of the yard, ready for stoking the stove.

Yelka had to leave school. Up until now she had only been her mother's helper, now she had to look after everything herself.

“You'll manage, you'll pull through, and then you can take correspondence courses in technical school,” the brigade leader reassured her. “I know all the ins and outs there, I'll help you.”

One day they set out in a group for the city to pick up some feed. It was a windy day, the sky peered down in places through azure March windows. Spring was in the air. The earth had thawed, the bare outlines of trees in black fields were greening, bent and twisted by the resilient steppe winds. The winds were blowing from the south, however it was still cold and the girls, dressed in boots and quilted jackets, huddled together in the back of the truck, the brigade leader wedged between them, and covered themselves from the wind with a stiff canvas tarpaulin. They were also taking potatoes to market, dumped straight into the tray; they were sitting on them. The truck swayed about on the rough roads, barely crawling along, but once they reached the paved section, the tires whistled along the road, and those March windows immediately seemed to grow larger, turning a cheerier blue. The girls looked on pensively as another truck sped along ahead of their three-tonner, full of people crammed into the open tray, sitting shoulder to shoulder, like soldiers.

“Girls, it's the field post up ahead!”

When they drew closer, however, it turned out to be gray gas cylinders formed up tightly in the tray, one beside the other.

“These are probably our suitors,” Spinster Halka joked bitterly.

Here and there, derricks could be seen in the steppe, the first mines of Western Donbas were being sunk. The brigade leader remarked that the boys no longer went into the mines when they returned from the army, and Katria Stepanyshyn, whose cheeks were always glowing, said she would run off to the mines in autumn, that she had had enough of this collective farm, probably the most backward and neglected in the province! The brigade leader seemed almost worried by Katria's threats and began to dissuade her from such a step, promising her that no matter what, he would have the farm mechanized by the following year, that they would have droves of correspondents and various delegations coming here, who until now were being taken only to Hero. He spoke of the advantages of agricultural work, of whole days spent in the fresh air, reminding her that Leo Tolstoy had once walked behind a plough too.

"Tolstoy can do as he pleases," Katria cut him off. "I'm going to work in the mines!"

And wrapping herself in her scarf up to the eyes, she became silent.

The feed was stored in that very Cossack cathedral, which could be seen from a long way off when one approaches the factory settlements. First they went to the central market and sold the potatoes without any trouble, but when they pulled up outside the cathedral to receive their feed, a lock hung on the door, even though the end of the working day was a long way off. They didn't even know where to look for the store-man. He appeared towards evening, well under the influence, and announced hostilely in passing that he would be distributing the feed next morning, because he did not yet have all the necessary papers ready.

The brigade leader caught up to the storeman and began to whisper to him about something, but this produced no results. They were forced to spend the night outside the cathedral.

Yelka had been near this cathedral only once before, while still a child. There had been a market here then. Her mother had taken her along when she came here with the other villagers to sell cooking oil. Ration cards were still in force then, those were difficult times, and Yelka remembered how some woman roamed about the market and collected spoonfuls of oil from each of those who were selling.

"It's for the militiaman," she explained in a hushed voice.

This was done so he would not chase them away, for it was against the law then to sell oil. The women were not stingy, each gave a full spoon for the gaunt, oilless militiaman. It wasn't even a bribe, but more like a reward for his informality and understanding of the difficult situation. The cathedral had impressed Yelka then only with its severity. Now its peeling facade provoked something akin to sympathy, it was closer now to her childish dreams, to the azure spheres of her childhood.

Their truck was parked for the night under some acacias not far from the cathedral, so that the next day when the queue for the feed was formed, they would be closer to the door. A while later other trucks, jammed full with marketeers, began arriving with orders for feed. The new arrivals grabbed their baskets and bundles and went off to their factory relatives for the night. Yelka's friends also decided to go in a group to Ivan's Virunka. She was from a neighboring village and had moved here several years ago after marrying. He was red-haired and bug-eyed, but became an eminent steelmaker and Virunka was now well off. They asked Yelka to come along with them, but she said she had someone to stay with. Her uncle, Yahor Katraty, lived somewhere nearby. In a thatched house, number seventeen. Even though it was dark, she found

number seventeen at the end of the street. Uncle was not at home, however. The gate was tightly closed, he could even have gone off somewhere for the whole night.

Yelka peered around the yard and returned to the truck in the square.

The brigade leader was overjoyed and said he was leaving Yelka behind to guard the truck. With their driver, and in the company of other drivers with whom the storeman was rubbing elbows, he immediately set off somewhere to look for bootleg vodka.

Soon after, singing erupted in one of the village houses and Yelka recognized Katria's reckless voice, which rang out above the others, and recognized Katria's favorite song, "Blackhorn Grows by the House." They were probably singing in the house of that happy Virunka from Pohrebyshcha, who had tamed some red-haired steelmaker and was now "well off." She had moved into her new house in autumn, and had invited plasterers from her own village, from Pohrebyshcha. For a whole week they smoothed her walls on the inside and decorated them with folk motifs, ostensibly because the locals could not smooth properly or draw designs with roosters. A male voice joined the women, ringing in harmony, having probably had a good swig of that strong vodka which the girls had brought for their fellow villager to asperse her new house. Yelka wanted to be with them, to be with everyone in the warm, decorated house, but she restrained herself almost angrily: as if they need you in that Pohrebyshcha girl's house, a stranger to you, what's more, you'd really like looking at her prosperity.

For some reason, Yelka was angry at everyone today.

The cathedral hovered sullenly in the evening clouds. It emanated something sorrowful, almost alarming. Who had built it? By what miracle had it survived? What soul had someone invested in it, so that ages later it could still move Yelka?

Darkness fell and it began to drizzle. Yelka ducked under the tarpaulin, making a kind of tent out of it, and swaddled herself to keep warm.

The brigade leader and truck driver returned late at night, bringing herring wrapped in newspaper, a bottle and a loaf of black bread.

"We've got the feed," the brigade leader said joyously and invited Yelka: "Come on over, little mistress, we'll warm up a bit. Here, hold the bread and the bottle."

They had not forgotten her after all.

They warmed up in the darkness, breaking the bread into pieces and tearing the herring apart, pouring the drink into faceted glasses. It was some kind of rum, and they managed to divide it evenly in the darkness. They persuaded Yelka to have a drink too, she took several gulps — it was strong, like fire. Then later she began to guess that this treat had not been accidental, but premeditated, and she thought that she too had not remained under the tarpaulin by accident. It was as if something had impelled her to stay behind, even though she had no particular intentions and yet, all the time she had a foreboding of what would happen.

It happened this way: the driver disappeared somewhere, the brigade leader stood huddled alongside the truck, smoking, the cathedral stood out almost menacingly against the darkness of the sky. It must have been past midnight, the wind picked up, rattling a piece of loose tin plate somewhere on the cathedral's heights. After a while, the brigade leader also crawled into the back of the truck and ended up under the cover of the tarpaulin.

"Listen how windy it is out there. I can't stay out there freezing..."

He reassured her, moving closer:

“Don't worry. I won't touch you.”

Although she should have chased him away immediately, for some reason she did not. She didn't even tear herself away even when she heard his caressing words, she did not cut him short, she wanted to hear them. There was something believable in his complaints about life, she could feel sincerity in his concern for her, an orphan now, all alone. She was no longer indifferent to his closeness, his trust, and he, sensing Yelka's mood, crept even closer. She felt the strong heat of his body. His hot whispers and pleadings excited her. Caresses never before known aroused her. The wind tore at their makeshift shelter, the tarpaulin fluttered, while beside her she heard his fervent, passionate whispering:

“Yelka, we only live once. No one ever lived twice!”

He spoke of the many old maids in the village, no one gave them a second glance. The boys had flown the coop and there were so many girls in the villages that one could dam a river with them. She also heard about the mines where the two of them would run off, about the happiness one had to chase.

And again:

“Just once. No one's ever lived twice. So don't be so haughty. Don't be afraid. You're on your own now, free, there's no one to tell you what to do!”

And she really did feel she was free to do as she wished. Perhaps it was true that one had to chase one's own happiness, to catch it? Others would have eagerly thrown themselves around his neck, but she had such power over him that she drove her brigade leader to senselessness. Burning with excitement, she no longer resisted, and when she tasted his firm kiss she felt that this was it, that this intoxication was true love.

The night burned darkly, and it was the blackest of all her nights, this night of her fall. It was not a moment of bliss in Yelka's life. It brought her neither joy, nor delight — nothing, but pain.

In the morning the sky was barren, drab clouds floated over the cathedral and the wind had died down. In the east a small strip of the sky coldly turned a blood red. The doors of the cathedral were open, the feed was being handed out. The girls shouted to one another in the cathedral, Yelka had to be there too, but for some reason they did not call her, did not bother her. And she was in no hurry to come out from under the tarpaulin. A dirty, dark-gray pigeon settled on a cornice of the cathedral, preening and puffing up its chest. Birds twittered in the bare trees. The tree branches glistened with spring wetness. Life went on; it demanded its own, but this morning briskness, this awakening of spring, the narrow strip of dawn and the bird's twittering, the mirthful voices in the depths of the cathedral — everything seemed to exist in another dimension. Yelka seemed to perceive everything in a detached way, from her exhausted, totally devastated world. She felt she should be burning with shame, disgraced, sinful, depraved, but she didn't even seem to feel this. There was only a numb pain, a feeling of devastation and a boundless flood of grief.

At last she got up. After all, she had to go and help the girls with the feed. The driver, who had been tinkering with the engine, turned around to face Yelka, smiling unpleasantly, his teeth bared by his upturned harelip.

“How did you rest, Olena Batkivna?” and he winked in ugly intimacy. “Did you freeze under the tarpaulin? Because I froze in the cabin...”

He had been in the cabin. She thought he had went off somewhere, but it turned out he had been there, and she could see in his insolent, conspiratorial smile that he knew everything. Well, now all of Vovchuhy would know!

For a moment the thought of it scalded her, but then indifference set in once more. She wandered off towards the cathedral, downcast, wrapped in her kerchief up to her eyes, stopped at the threshold before the wide-open doors revealing the cathedral's twilight. She did not dare cross the threshold. It seemed to her that as soon as she crossed it something awful would happen: the earth would part under her feet and the cathedral arches would collapse onto her, fallen and defiled.

Inside it was noisy and carefree. She could see Spinster Halka beside a heap of feed holding a sack open, someone was filling it for her, and suddenly she raised her head and out of the blue bawled into the heights:

“He-e-ey, on the lofty mountain pasture...”

And laughing, said:

“What good resonance!”

No one seemed to take any notice of Yelka when she controlled herself and finally crossed the threshold of the cathedral, no one asked why she was late, why she had overslept. Everyone accepted her appearance in the cathedral nonchalantly, even indifferently, but the indifference had an air of deliberateness about it. It was colder inside the cathedral than outside, and there was a musty, mousy smell. Cobwebs covered the feed, dust covered the windows where the glass was still intact. Immediately after the war it was rumored that an anti-religious museum would be opened here, with a local flora and fauna section, but it did not materialize for some reason, and as a reminder of those intentions a stuffed marsh kite now gathered dust above the altar, and here and there from the walls, wolf and boar heads bared their fangs from among the faded Madonnas. There were no more wild boars in the marshes but they grinned here. In the middle of the cathedral was a large mound of feed, farther on lay a mountain of stiff

50 paper bags full of superphosphate, still farther back in a corner stood a gnarled iconostasis of dark wood with carved grape clusters and leaves. Once, they say, the iconostasis was sawn up, divided among the museums, and a section was left behind here. Everything lay in untidy piles, the walls were covered with damp stains, angry saints looked darkly through the gray cobwebs. Eternal dusk stood in the corners of the cathedral. Only above, in the heights of the central cupola, was it as blue as the sky. A painted pigeon soared blinding white among the golden stars and a portrait of some heavenly youth in bright red clothes still survived. There was no dust up there, no cobwebs, only the light of the heavens reigned there — a deep blue sky sprinkled with golden stars. Forgetting all about the feed, Yelka stood mesmerized in the middle of the cathedral and looked up into the depths of the highest dome where everything was preserved just as the first artists had left it. The depth seemed to pull at her soul, drawing it up as if in a vortex. She couldn't tear her eyes away, feeling dizzy as people say you do standing at the edge of an abyss that draws you inexorably closer. “I am defiled, I've been defiled. I dare not, I have no right to be here.” Remorse gnawed at her conscience. She stood in numb semi-oblivion

in the middle of this cluttered shrine, drowning her gaze in the celestial blue swirl of the cupola's height. Only that small island up there in the cathedral's heights remained bright and unmarred, its purity and loftiness breathing fear on her, a purity of penance, an understanding of guilt and the breath of vague, uncertain hopes. The beauty up there, why had not it been revealed to her before?

“Don't think you're in a planetarium, Yelka!” they called to her at last. “That's enough of standing around, come here and give us a hand.”

Everyone was covered in feed dust, making it difficult to recognize the girls, and when Yelka began filling a sack too, all she could see through the clouds of dust were someone's dusty boots dully trampling the feed around the sack.

Then she saw him also, the brigade leader. For the first time that day he appeared with the storeman from some corner, drew closer, unbuttoned his jacket, and said cheerfully:

“Pack them tight, girls, pack them tight. You don't always get such angelic fodder!”

And it was noticeable how he averted his eyes, avoiding Yelka's gaze. When he laughed, his eyes disappeared completely. There was a smile, but without eyes. He laughed, and they disappeared under floury eyelids, making him blind in his laughter. “So this eyeless wretch with a head firmly sunk between his shoulders, with a lascivious smile, this was the person to whom you tearfully gave yourself during the night? This was the one who cajoled you, who tore your soul apart with fervent mumblings and sympathy.” Yelka hated herself for that minute of weakness, for being blind. Her intended? Thick-necked, and round-faced, he was miserably short, especially now as he stood stooped in his somewhat hunchbacked jacket with its lambskin collar.

When they had to carry the sacks of feed outside, Yelka said hatefully:

“Carry them yourselves.”

“And you?”

“I've finished.”

Blinking guiltily, he didn't say a word. The others also decided that it was not woman's work to drag sacks around, and went over to the truck to preen themselves. Standing apart, Yelka sullenly watched the brigade leader and his bandy-legged drinking companion, the storeman, carry the feed from the cathedral, become caught in the doorway and, both small and mangy, shuffle about with their sacks in front of the cathedral like beetles, mere wood-borers before its grandeur. Was life for this? To live for feed? “I don't want to! I won't! If I don't drown somewhere in the Vovcha River, I'll leave the village forever. If they won't release me, I'll live illegally. This is my earth, my world.” The only salvation for her now seemed to lie in that obscure, illegal life without registration.

When she walked, downcast, to the truck, the other truck drivers teased her with jokes, but Yelka made no reply, their flirting filled her only with aversion. They were all hateful, all brigade leaders — brutal, clinging, with lying words, rough bestial embraces.

Before their departure she paid Uncle Yahor another visit and once again missed him. They returned home. A cloud seemed to hang over everyone, as if they had argued with one another. The brigade leader found a place among the sacks as far away from Yelka as he could, probably

afraid she would force herself on him now and try to win him from his wife. "You can rest easy," she thought contemptuously. "I spit on you. You will never even enter my dreams."

On her first night home she dreamt of the cathedral. She was alone inside it, gazing into the depths of its cupola, but instead of streaming light, instead of the deep blue sky with gold stars, she saw a gray twilight, almost darkness, and someone seemed to be stirring in the high transparent darkness. The walls around her seemed to rustle with mystery too, and in the gloom Yelka noticed bristling boar heads stirring from the cathedral walls, from all around, not stuffed, but alive.

After awakening, she could not fall asleep until morning. She thought everything over again, how it had all happened: the milkings, the oil-cake, the star water, and she branded herself almost gloatingly: "There's your star water for you. Your puddle."

Life became difficult for Yelka. The brigade leader's wife gave her no peace. She couldn't show her face in the clubhouse without being cursed and publicly abused:

"Young bitch! Whore child! Is that what they taught you at school? How to steal other women's husbands?"

And she would curse her so that Yelka didn't know where to hide. How could she explain, who would believe that for her the brigade leader was dead, he did not and would not exist anymore. And what if she had fallen in love with him? Hadn't she the right? Tell us, oh wise ones, how should a girl act if she suddenly falls in love with a married man? It didn't happen with her, but it might have happened with another woman.

After a while the brigade leader tried to make up to her again; he caught a slap in the face, and that was the end of their love, though he did stop living with his own harridan. Tormented by her jealousies, he was forced to leave the village. First he found work on the neighboring state farm and then fled even farther, disappearing over the horizon. After some time rumor had it that he had been seen in the mines of Western Donbas.

After this, the brigade leader's wife went completely berserk. She slandered Yelka around the village so mercilessly that the other women began to eye her with suspicion.

"Look, there she goes, the one who lures married men."

"Perhaps you're luring my man away too? He's got children. And me!"

Those evil, vigilant eyes kept spying on Yelka. The twisted hands were ready to bury themselves in her hair at the slightest, even imagined, suspicion.

Some of the men really believed that she was fair game now, and any fool paying alimony thought he had the right to pester her and demand intimacy.

"There goes a good-looking Magdalene," she often heard behind her.

If only the male population had known how unbearable they all were to Yelka, no better than the seducer who had ruined her youth. She had been dishonored, and now had to pay for it herself, to suffer so much humiliation, and to swallow all the wrongs.

Even the old watchman crept up to her window late one night and began scratching at it like a dog:

"Yelka, Yelka, let me inside to warm up..."

In a rage, she threw open the door and screamed into his face:

"I wish you would croak, grandfather!"

Mothers guarded their sons from her now. One, the accountant's son, tried to court her, but his mother exploded for the whole village to hear:

“That bitch Chechil, my daughter-in-law? Others have spilt her milk, and you're going to bring her home?”

And she told him in detail how this strumpet had gone marketing with the brigade leader, and what kind of feed they obtained in that cathedral.

Some splinter of the night by the cathedral must have lodged in the runaway brigade leader's heart after all, because six months later he sent her a letter, calling on Yelka to join him in the mines. Come here. I'll get a divorce. We'll start life over again.

She only confided in her closest friend, Hannusia, from the chicken farm.

“If it was me, I'd go,” Hannusia said.

“I'll die before I go off to see him. I find him repulsive. Abominable. Anyway they're all the same. There are no decent people, Hannusia, only in books.”

And she really thought that way. There were no decent people, there was no truth, it was all drowned in bootleg vodka — lies all around, empty words, everyone lived only for himself. Everyone was like that brigade leader with arms of steel, who finally had his way, plucked the wreath of her girlhood and brutally trampled the spring periwinkle.

Her friend did not agree, citing various examples, but this only made Yelka angrier: No and no! The whole world was hateful. Again and again she thought of leaving the village as others had done, heading for a factory or construction site.

“I'll become a laborer, I'll cart bricks around, hard work doesn't frighten me.”

They thought differently in the office. The manager, a gentle and reasonable person who acted kindly toward Yelka, checked her fervor each time she came to the office demanding a certificate allowing her to leave.

“We think highly of you, Yelka. You're hard working, you have principles. Why is it so bad on the farm? There might be a medal for you. As for the old women who wag their tongues — they're old women. You're a beautiful girl, you will still find your destiny.”

He talked her out of it once, twice, and so it dragged on until spring. Perhaps she would have stayed, the wounds might have gradually healed, were it not for the incident with the zoo technician's crazy wife, whose husband did not sleep at home. She came running to the farm and began cursing a bewildered Yelka near the silage pit, though Yelka had no idea what it was all about. Throwing her pitchfork into the pit, Yelka set off for the office with the firm intention of not giving in this time.

Neither the manager nor the party organizer were in, the accountant alone was holding down the fort — gray-haired, his head oblong like a cantaloupe, one eye real, the other made of glass.

“A passport — never, Yelka,” he replied categorically, hearing out her demand. “Everyone's become very smart.

Always off somewhere, and who'll create the material wealth here?”

The “wealth” enraged Yelka.

“You talk like I'm chained to this place. To stay here in this stinking village till my plaits turn gray! I don't think I signed anything not to leave here.”

“Come, come,” the accountant stared at her dumbfounded. “What are you talking about? Which books have you been reading, Comrade Chechil? Our farm not to your liking anymore? Sick of milk and cream — want something tastier?”

“I want freedom!”

“So that's what it is! There's not enough freedom for you here?”

“I want to look for another freedom.”

“Look for it, maybe you'll find something: Many a girl has already returned from there bringing her mother freedom in a diaper. Or perhaps you'll return with a cigarette between your teeth, Miss Freedom Seeker?”

“I won't return at all. Never. I hate you all.”

The accountant's live eye squinted ironically.

“Where will you go then, if it's no secret? Not to the mines on the heels of your grandfather?”

“Why, isn't it my country there too? This muddy farm is not the whole country! Do you think I'll cry after it, after your 'wealth?’”

“At least forward us your address.”

“I'm going where no one will torment me! Where they won't sling mud at me, like your big-mouthed wife!”

“Not so loud, please,” the accountant cowered momentarily, glancing at the windows, and his tone immediately became serious. “If it was up to me, Olena, I wouldn't hold you here... Go somewhere else, don't bother our boys, don't break up families. Even I've got chaos and quarrels at home, though I don't know if there is any basis for it.”

He paused, probably for Yelka to say something, but she was silent.

“So, as a family man, it would even be to my advantage to send you off on a long journey... but rules are rules. You can see for yourself, there aren't enough hands on the farm. We desperately need your hands.”

Yelka reacted as if someone had struck her with a whip.

“Is that all you need, my hands? Here they are, chapped from your wealth!” And her tensed palms flashed before the accountant's nose.

“Come on, we can do without this,” he lunged back, protecting his glass eye.

“I don't have just hands!” retorted Yelka, turning red and hearing nothing. “I've got a soul too. It hasn't all been burned away. If you don't give me a certificate, I will go anyway!”

“You won't get far without a passport, girl. You'll be picked up very quickly. Scream, beg, or even eat dirt, there's no way we can issue you a certificate.”

And he did not issue her one.

In the evening there was another altercation in the accountant's yard, again his wife's wild, biting words echoed throughout the village:

“That trampled rubbish? Someone else has spilt her milk, and you want to bring her into our home?”

This shout became Yelka's passport. With the words “spilt milk” weighing heavily on her heart, she left for the city at dawn, to disappear in it, to be lost to her fellow villagers in its crowds forever.

Chapter IV

And so she found herself staying in Zachiplianka with Yahor Katraty, her maternal uncle.

How could she explain her arrival to him? She said she had been released, for she intended to enroll in a technical or evening school. Her uncle seemed to believe her. Broad-shouldered, still sturdy, with an elongated face deeply furrowed by life, he studied her from under the thatch of his shaggy eyebrows:

“What about your documents... they in order?”

“I haven't got them all together yet,” the niece hesitated. “But I'll have them soon.”

Perhaps he had even guessed, or perhaps he had heard something about her earlier, because he dropped the subject.

“You can stay here while you get your bearings, and you can help me with some things. Ever since my wife died there has been no one to bring the house to order. And there's also the orchard and the garden... Everything is crying without the old woman.”

And taking her into the yard, he showed her the beds of strawberries, the ancient apricots and the pear tree, which was clearly his favorite:

“I've grafted all these shoots onto it myself. It was a wild pear, and now look at them clinging there like mittens.”

The pears hanging from the branches really were huge and hard, like her uncle's blast furnace gloves in the house. He showed her the hose and the well with the small “Kama” motor which pumped out water.

Yelka liked it here.

The village was quiet, drowned in orchards, and beyond the orchards, beyond the Dnipro, the plants belched smoke day and night. In the morning, when people went off to work, Zachiplianka became noticeably deserted, and only the children, faces smeared with mulberry juice, shouted in the street near the lake. Occasionally old Shpachykha would straighten up in her garden next door and say a few words to Yelka, calling her “my child.” And the blind tank driver whistled in his yard, endlessly repairing and making things. His eyes had been burned out at the front, but when he walked down the street his gait was as confident as if he could see. He would unerringly recognize every passer-by. Once Yelka wanted to sneak past him quietly on her way to get some bread and he stopped her, becoming angry:

“Whose child are you, that you don't greet people in the street?”

“Good day.”

The tank driver, the children, the old woman bent over weeding her garden... And in the Bahlay's orchards the metallurgy student, the one who jogged around the lake each morning and lolled about in a hammock all day long. After running his fill, he either disappeared into the house with that bald mechanic for the day, or he hopped into the hammock under the mulberry tree, shielding himself from the whole world with his books.

Even though Zachiplianka's livelihood was the factory, its people still did not shun the earth, they had not lost touch with it. Katraty rejoiced seeing how fruitful and abundant the harvest was: “Nature's gifts, Yelka... The nice summer sun hasn't been miserly: in summer all you need do is chew, if your mouth isn't lazy.” The strawberries were just finishing, the Petrykivka cherries were beginning to redden, the mulberries were falling to the ground and soon the apricots would be

yellow. At times the strawberries were so plentiful that the women could not pick them all, and then a general mobilization was announced and the metallurgists crawled about in the gardens beside the children. Yelka found it funny to watch these people, who were gods at the plant, crawl about submissively on all fours on the sinful sandy earth, squashing juicy strawberries, competing with the children, obediently harvesting nature's bountiful gifts. They called out to each other, ridiculing their strawberry servitude:

“How's Kashubenko's brigade over there, meeting its quota?” a voice sailed through the trees, and someone responded:

“It's fitful work here, damn it.”

“We still have to help out godmother.”

Everyone here was related through christening or by blood. There were no thieves, no drifters. Parents had lived here, and after their sons married, they settled next to their parents: on a single farmstead two to three houses vied for space, beside the old houses rose strong new ones of clinker brick. People say it used to be spacious here, but now it was becoming rather cramped. However, Zachiplianka did not fret and lived joyously. These people's lives were open, they lived separately, but somehow together, out in the open. The women knew about each other, what each had cooked and roasted, which husband had not brought his whole wage home, and who had won the lottery.

Children were densely settled here and for some reason they all stuck to that student Bahlay. They brought all kinds of beetles and grasshoppers to him under the mulberry tree, dragging him off somewhere. Even though he frowned occasionally, he still lay his notes aside and followed the children to the lake or the cemetery.

Most of the youths in Zachiplianka were red-cheeked swarthy boys and girls. They worked somewhere, studied somewhere, disappearing for the whole day, and returned to their Vesela Street only toward evening. At this time Zachiplianka became noisier, one could hear radios, the buzz of pumps, the shouts of people. After watering their gardens the people gathered in groups in front of someone's yard, most often to play dominoes, and because the street merely ran down to the lake, the people set up tables straight on the street, under a lamp-post, clicking away all evening, relaxing: no one would be driving past, no one would be troubling them. Small frogs jumped about among the players around the table, the smart creatures having found an ingenious way of hunting insects; they noticed that having become scorched on the electric light, the insects fell to the ground, and only had to be snapped up, already toasted.

Zachiplianka was a new, unfamiliar world to Yelka. Sometimes, creeping up to the fence palings, she looked for a long time from the darkness at the people of Zachiplianka, at these stubborn and thick-headed domino players. There were many handsome faces among the steelworkers, beautiful not so much in their features as in their dignity, their serenity, fearlessness, self-assuredness. When each struck the table harder than the next, hitting it with full force, they seemed to be whipping some common enemy, gritting their teeth, and then their arms became visible, some burned up to the elbows in work accidents, covered in scars which had long since healed. The healed arms seemed to become even stronger and knottier. The faces often bore a tinge of pallor, of overwork, but they contained resolution and concentration, each forehead swathed in deep thought, though of course the steelworkers were not thinking of

Hiroshima and bureaucrats, but how to “cover” their opponent so that their supporters would roar with rapture.

The young usually gathered near the Bahlay place, or further on, outside Orlianchenko's place. The boys were so handsome one would involuntarily stare at them. During the day they worked in plant workshops, pumping-stations, drove dump trucks, but when evening came they were all dandied up, with hair combed, appearing on Vesela Street in fashionable black shoes, trying to walk on grass rather than on the dust of the street so as not to dirty their sharply-pointed shoes. Sometimes Bahlay the student appeared in their company, and not in his faded track-suit which he wore for days on end, but smartly dressed in an ironed white vest or a new gray sweater which really suited him. Good-looking, tall, stately. Also wearing shoes with sharply-pointed toes, cleaned till they shone — he would be dancing with one of the girl's somewhere tonight. When the children cajoled him to kick a ball with them, the student tried to fend them off, pointing to his shoes and sweater, that he wasn't dressed to play — but there was no way he could convince them, they wouldn't leave him in peace until he lightly tugged at the sleeves of his sweater (pulling them up in such a delicate beautiful manner!) and took up a playing stance. Joining in the game, he completely forgot about the dust rising in smoky clouds from under his feet, and the ball hummed down the small street until the student's friends called out to him, and he came to his senses: then he adjusted his clothes, rested his left foot on a bench, and then his right, dusting his shoes and pulling up his patterned socks. Then he joined his friends and their merry group floated off towards the cathedral to dance in the plant park.

Uncle Katraty did not like it when Yelka stared in that direction.

“Until you're registered here, Yelka, take care... Live as if you didn't exist.”

That was what he insisted on, and that was the way it was. She didn't take a step outside the yard — living as if she wasn't there. The people did not trouble her with their curiosity, as if waiting for the girl to appear before them herself. Early in the morning the steppe sometimes beckoned to Yelka with loud quail calls: beyond the orchards a steppe quail had made itself a home somewhere in the cemetery. Each morning it called out so joyously! Yelka wandered over there and sought her steppe compatriot in the cemetery's weed thickets, wanting to catch a glimpse of it, but alas, to no avail.

The only road open to Yelka was to the Dnipro, to the beacon which Uncle Katraty serviced. Through the cemetery with its overpowering scent of thyme, across mounds of prickles and burrs, where, despite the anti-goat ordinance, the worker's goats grazed away unconcerned, through a hole in the barbed wire encircling the pumping station, and you were already on the bank near the beacon shed, next to the boat. What freedom here, what room for the soul! Motor boats chugged along the Dnipro, canoes slipped through the water, the white wings of sails floated past as if in a dream... The opposite bank was a bastion of plants, black, shrouded in smoke, and gray slag hills which rose straight from the Dnipro — those that blazed all night with flowing lava and in the day stood dark, like dormant volcanoes. A little farther up the bank in the dark greenery of a park stood the steelworkers' water-station, graceful, pleasant to the eye, all azure-white like a fairy-tale palace. Boat jetties, a café with music, the plant tourist retreats and dispensaries on the island — all this was for the use of the plant workers, all mere mortals like Yelka. They not only created wealth here, they reaped it too! After finishing his shift a worker

could go and enjoy himself while it was still daylight, and they thronged into the movie houses, the parks, and onto the Dnipro to row. Only later would Yelka see a different picture, the workers being driven home in trucks to distant towns, looking completely exhausted, squeezed out, with drawn faces. Returning from their shift the female workers did not sing songs like the girls did in the steppe on their way home from the fields. At present she saw before her the plant workers on holiday, the festiveness of summer, the calm beauty of the Dnipro's waters, on which people raced this way and that with their families. Occasionally, a lone couple would streak past — a boy and a girl, suntanned, both flying along carefree, setting a course for the barely visible Dnipro islands, toward the blazing setting sun, heading for night fires with mosquitoes and adventures and real love.

The force of life seethed, the plants belched smoke, mysterious rumbles reached here from the far bank, from the steelworker's citadel, the sun set behind hills shrouded in haze, behind the distant chimneys, the still waters of the Dnipro turned lilac and pink, the arch of a velvety wave quivered along, playing heavily in the dying rays. Slowly the velvet turned raspberry. A white tourist boat packed with plant workers drifted past like a floating island, with a spate of music which carried far across the water. It passed, and only after some time did the slow wave it left behind reach the shore and spill ticklishly onto the sand at Yelka's feet.

“Grandeur” — that was how Yelka would have described those blast furnace towers, those black industrial cathedrals. Everything swathed in smoke, everything alive with abysmal stirrings, mysterious subterranean rumblings.

“Do women work there too?” she once asked Uncle Yahor.

“There are thousands of them there.”

“I'd like to go there too.”

No, her uncle wouldn't wish her that. It wasn't all milk and honey for them up there in the dust of the sintering factory, one still unfortunately saw women with crow-bars repairing the plant's railway tracks, and on cranes sailing right over the flames of the giant ladles. Was that women's work? Would a woman have children after that? There would come a time when there would be no women at all in the plant's workshops, except perhaps those who served the workers vitamin-enriched kvass. All that mechanization and automation should first of all replace all the women in the dangerous jobs. In Yahor's youth people crowded around the blast furnaces like ants. To charge a blast furnace of this size they would have needed a thousand wheelers alone, but now it was charged by only two.

At sunset she would get in a boat with her uncle and they would row off to light the beacons, and Yelka would rock on the lilac-raspberry velvet of the Dnipro. Occasionally they found themselves near those slag hills, which made Uncle Yahor become pensive.

“Those hills, Yelka, they're a reminder of our work.”

The smoke was heavy here, and fluffy black soot kept falling on everything.

“Those who live over there, near the plant, never see white snow,” Uncle Yahor told her. “The wash turns black outside right away. I once lived there too. I've swallowed enough. In the morning when you go off to work, you print your footsteps in that soot like it was snow. There is soot on everything — the benches, the trees. Tons and tons of it fall on the city each day. They

have been talking for a while now about installing catchers, filters, but meanwhile they're filtering more with their tongues.”

Work at the steel plant was not for women's hands, Uncle Yahor cautioned his niece once more, not even every man could last out there. It was not accidental that one never saw a frail furnaceman, they were all well-built, for people with strength were needed there.

“Even when they took us from the labor exchange, they first checked our health. You had to pass the medical first, you had to show you're in good shape, before they would even talk to you.”

Yelka had already heard from her mother that after Makhno's bandwagon had collapsed under him and its wheels had rolled off to the four corners of the world, Uncle Yahor had gone to work in the plant as a roller, one of the hardest jobs. Now there wasn't even such a profession, it was all in the past. Looking at his worn old body it was hard for Yelka to even imagine what her uncle had been like as a young man.

“Uncle Yahor, the first days at the plant, after the open steppe... was it hard for you to adjust?”

“Oh, don't remind me. We were only rebuilding the first blast-furnace then. There were times we didn't leave the plant for weeks, sleeping there as well. And then I found myself in the steppe one day. When I saw it after our separation, I fell face down onto the green grass — would you believe it — I rolled about and wept... Laughing, yelling, and weeping. Eventually I became accustomed to life behind walls, I grew to like the plant, and things became better.”

“Has life tired you out?”

“Well, I didn't idle it away. I have worked enough, Yelka, oh I worked in my time, — all my life facing the flames. But then it's left its mark... those hills of slag... and our metal sails across oceans and flies through the skies.

The smoke choked Yelka here, rolling heavily from the plant, and now she wanted to leave here quickly. The old man, however, was in no hurry, calmly tinkering with the beacon, and sometimes he would stop to appraise the smoke: white smoke wasn't so bad, and the billowing black smoke wasn't the worst either — the most dangerous smoke was yellow-brown in color, almost red. On occasions it stretched for kilometers across the horizon and hung in a ribbon over the towns for a long time, making the sky rusty. Trees turned yellow from this smoke.

Gas was burning on one of the pipes like a giant torch, the azure flames were trembling, and a yellow-petalled flower played on their tips.

“What's that lamp, uncle?”

“That's a very expensive lamp. That's our money being burned. We can't use the gas fast enough. And that, see that over that park there? On the tall column... That's the Titan. He's broken the chains with which he was bound to the cliff and now he's trampling the eagle which has been tormenting him. An unchained Titan of labor, a Prometheus of toil — our own workers cast him from the first iron of the Revolution, and erected him themselves. Under the Germans he had to come off his pedestal though and go underground, hiding in cellars. And now he stands there again, above the plants like a guard on watch.

Her uncle's past was shrouded in mystery for Yelka. Ever since she was small she had heard about her mother's two brothers — one joined the Reds and was killed somewhere in Perekop,

while the second, still a teenager, found himself with Makhno, attracted by the freedom of the steppes, dissolute life on machine-gun carts. And whereas the first brother, even many years after his death, was a kind of support and protection for her mother, about the second, and live one, her mother dared speak only occasionally to Yelka. This second brother was Uncle Yahor. That past of his had since receded into the distance, and yet it still lived on like a smoldering sinful legend. Though for a long time the hard-working steel-worker, Uncle Yahor, had been, so to speak, rehabilitated from all that, people continued to recall it in half-tones and whispers, so no one would hear. And uncle himself didn't like being reminded of his wild youth in Huliappole.

Once, after the beacons had been lit and they returned and were sitting on the bank by the boat, Yelka finally plucked up enough to ask what that Huliappole was about. She was curious, for it had thrown such a dark shadow across her uncle's whole life.

Katraty did not flare up this time. He smoked a while longer, thought about it, and then said dully:

“It was a bloody whirlwind.”

“What about the freedom?”

“It flew out from under the machine-gun carts in bloody pieces. That freedom was bathed in blood and tears, Yelka. A ladle of cast iron is worth far more than all those devastating raids.”

There was neither fear nor alarm in her uncle's voice now, only sadness and sorrow. He sat hunched up, looking longingly at his plants on the far bank, at the blast furnaces and the splashes of crimson, which made the whole sky breathe from time to time, like giant lungs.

“Those who raised Ukraine aloft, they are the immortal ones, Yelka. It wasn't raised by mother anarchy. Father Prometheus...”

They sat around for a long time that evening. In the lilac distance, where there seemed to be nothing, fires glimmered, pure, of an unusual diamond luster, emanating from the blue misty haze from which they seemed to be born, as if from ashes.

They were ready to go home when a belated motor boat drew up alongside. Two figures climbed ashore and slowly began to examine Yahor's fishing tackle which lay near his shed.

“Where are the fish, Yahor Zakharovych?” one of the arrivals asked.

“The fish are in the Dnipro,” Katraty blurted out, and accepting this as a joke, the arrivals sat down with the old man and began talking.

Yelka sat to one side and listened to their conversation about new fishing laws, about how some poachers with nylon nets had been caught the night before near the mast. At the same time Yahor was teased that there was an anonymous complaint from the Dnipro fish against him.

They lit a fire from pieces of old newspaper, which flared up and quickly died away. With the splash of flame Yelka managed to observe that one of the arrivals was a youngish flat-nosed man, round cheeked, with sparkling eyes, wearing an unbuttoned canvas jacket, while the second was very thin, unshaven, in an undershirt black with grease, probably the owner of the motor boat. In subdued hushed voices they began to ask Uncle Yahor about Yelka, who she was and where she was from. And when they heard that the girl had come here with the intention of studying, the flat-nosed fellow instantly livened up, called Yelka over and affably asked her just where she was thinking of enrolling. Yelka was flustered, their interest had caught her off guard. She could tell them nothing definite. However, they began to give her advice themselves, where

it was better to try, where the competition would be less, and it turned out that they had friends in the theatrical institute and the medical institute... She could also try modeling. Yelka left them after a while, and they continued to chat with Uncle Yahor, exchanging jokes, mainly about fish soup from a fresh catch.

“The fish not biting? We'll bring our own, if only you'll cook them for us,” said the younger fellow with the sparkling eyes and flat nose. “No one can make fish soup like you. If not here, then we'll visit you at home, we're not proud.”

Obviously they had known Katraty from before, knew about his past, for in conversation one of them quipped, as if unintentionally, as if joking:

“Well, with your past, Yahor Zakharovych...”

Yelka had not heard the rest. For some reason she did not like the fact that these two reminded her uncle of his past, as if not realizing that in so doing one can inadvertently hurt a person. It was really none of their business bringing up something he had probably already overcome without anyone's help, having long ago rehabilitated his life with those slag hills.

Later they talked about the decline of morals, criticizing city girls, who, according to them, thought only of dancing and dining.

“They don't know what hardship is,” Yelka heard from the twilight. “For them life is a game. Ninth-grade girls already have abortions!”

And though they spoke of other girls, city girls, Yelka was stung uncomfortably, she felt herself blush in the darkness.

Yet they did not seem to remain indifferent to Yelka's fate, for in parting, the younger one said to Katraty:

“We'll help her out, if there's any need. The road should be opened for such hard-working people.”

“I wonder what song you would have sung had you known about my past,” Yelka thought bitterly.

They returned home in silence, stumbling across the mounds — Uncle Yahor in front, Yelka behind. The high tension electricity wires hummed above them the whole time. Above the towns the stars shone, while in the steppes far away a storm was gathering and stalks of lightning broke silently. Yelka felt her soul aching, though she herself didn't know what had caused it. Ducks quacked in the rushes on the lake — perhaps the storm was alarming them? The air had a taste of wild thyme and was the light air of the steppes. Only when the wind turned and blew from the plants would the smoky vapors reach here and envelope the whole of Zachiplanika in a poisonous, red, almost atomic cloud. The whole sky sank then. But it did not last long. A breeze would blow from the steppes, from Yelka's region, and the air became clean again, and the whole suburb received a breath of fragrant summer. Then even here, in her new refuge, Yelka heard the quiet ring of the wheat ears, the dry, hot breath of the scorched wheat fields.

So as not to stumble through the cemetery at night, they made a detour and came out onto Shyroka Street. It was late, there was no clicking of dominoes anywhere, water no longer rustled in the orchards. The working suburb was asleep, wrapped in the dreamy veils of a warm summer night.

But suddenly Shyroka Street came alive. From unseen lanes, paths and yards bicycle riders flew out onto the cathedral square, cycling in the direction of the plants — only their tires whirred in the darkness. Caps pulled down low, each rider bending right down to the handlebars, they raced along the pavement of Shyroka Street, and along the path running under the tents of the trees, slipping past Yelka, all dressed in dark work clothes, silent, like bodiless nightly ghosts of these industrial suburbs.

“The night shift,” Katraty said with sorrowful pride.

Wave after wave, with a hum of tires, with an elastic, swift breeze they rolled toward the purple hue of the factories under the mighty brown sky, which never ceased to burn above them.

Chapter V

It seemed almost as if the cathedral no longer existed. At one important meeting where Zachiplianka's future was being discussed and projects for the town's expansion according to a general plan were being examined, no one could seem to find a place for this cathedra: either it was in the way, or it would be crowded by some still nonexistent structures of a new suburb. Inasmuch as the meeting was restricted and one could be candid here, the chairman, a sullen man with bright transparent eyes and a swarthy face, asked, creasing his forehead:

“And why, exactly, should it remain standing?”

The quip was not really a command. It could have simply been considered a reflection, an internal doubt. It could have been quite accidental and may have carried no undertones. But could not the opposite have been true? It could have been understood this way: from what century was this cathedral? The eighteenth? Aren't there enough architectural monuments in the republic from the eighteenth century? And would it be such a great loss to the workers, if there were one object less from the past? Ever since people could remember, it required renovations. It required money. How much longer do we bleed the budget for such things? Wouldn't it be better economics to plan for something in its place that would really be indispensable to the people of Zachiplianka? Therefore, this quip may have been made on the spur of the moment, obligating no one to anything, but then it may have had the power of a directive.

Zachiplianka was represented at this meeting by its leading worker, Loboda Volodymyr Izotovych, the son of the once-famous master tradesman Izot Loboda, an honored steelworker of the Republic. Loboda the son was Volodymyr Izotovych to everyone in the office, whereas to everyone in Zachiplianka he was still Volodka, perhaps because he was easy-going and friendly toward the people. He had faded and grown completely bald while working for the Komsomol, and only a small sparse bush of hair remained on his head. Volodka made fun of his own hair, saying it was the remains of a Zaporozhian forelock.

Now this young very healthy Loboda was in charge of culture for the whole plant district. He had made political mileage out of the cathedral. When preparations were being made to celebrate the three hundredth anniversary of the Pereyaslav Council, and the old monuments had to be cleaned up, and no funds were available for the restoration of the cathedral, Volodka put forward an idea:

“We don't need any money. There is a solution: we'll place it in scaffolding.”

He was told:

“You're a genius.”

The cathedral was put in scaffolding, and the “genius” moved on to culture soon after. And though the marsh stork had already hatched several broods in that theatrical-looking scaffolding, this did not annoy Loboda or hinder his official business; rather it was the other way around. The decorations had peeled and slid down, once again baring the rust-covered domes, and Zachiplianka became accustomed to this state of affairs, except perhaps when the stork began to chatter too much atop the cathedral, then one of the steelworkers would look sullenly in that direction and say:

“It'll hatch us even better geniuses yet.”

Now when the matter of the cathedral was raised at the meeting again and that equivocal retort was directed somewhere toward the litter of paperwork, Zachiplianka's leading worker immediately perceived what he considered to be its essence, and developing the point, observed with the discreteness of a subordinate that the place would be very appropriate for the construction of a model indoor market for the toiling masses, that he felt there was a burning need for this. Markets had been organized in that square in the past. Later there had been a local market which had fallen into decline, so it was worth renewing an old folk tradition.

Loboda the leading worker was considered an expert on Zachiplianka, its needs and moods, therefore his discourse received an attentive reception. And though no final decision had yet been made, Volodymyr Izotovych left the meeting with the feeling that he had won. After a while no one would taunt him with that cathedral, no one would complain that it was dirty, dilapidated, that it had been turned into a feed warehouse (though now there wasn't even any feed in it). A new complex would rise in its place, they could even open a shashlik restaurant, and all thanks to his initiative, his knowledge of Zachiplianka's psychology.

After the meeting when Volodka Loboda made his way down the street, unbuttoning his canvas jacket and baring his broad chest to the breeze, someone called out to him quite democratically:

“Volodka, wait!”

Moving away from the group of visitors who were waiting for some reason outside the district courthouse and police station, old Shpachykha, Zachiplianka's community watchdog, was heading towards him. As usual, she was limping slightly — the result of an accident at work, a souvenir from building the famous fourth blast furnace in the 1930s. Volodymyr Izotovych had no time for Shpachykha now, but she bravely took him by the elbow and, looking around, said:

“I've got something to tell you, Volodka. Let's sit on that bench over there.”

And they settled on a bench under the dusty acacias directly opposite the courthouse, from which occasionally appeared the cap of a militiaman, or the face of the public prosecutory, whom Loboda knew, or the worried face of someone else, probably a detained transgressor of the law.

Shpachykha had an important matter to discuss: it concerned the fate of Zachiplianka's goats. Ever since an ordinance had been issued forbidding the keeping of goats, directing that they all be slaughtered at once, for they ate all the white bread of the city, leaving only pea-meal pancakes for the populace, Shpachykha had no peace. Commissions from the district council arrived, inspected people's yards, noting who still had goats left, who still had to be fined for continuing to keep them. She, the community watchdog, was asked from time to time: were the goats all taken care of in Zachiplianka, was she asserting her power? How could she badger the people, when she had a goat of her own which she kept illegally in a kennel! The ward leader should be setting an example, while she warned the people entrusted to her:

“Be prepared, dear people, the commission is arriving tomorrow! Drive your goats out for the whole day into the farthest hills — all the way to Raduta!”

She had a favor to ask of Volodka: could he, as a fellow inhabitant of Zachiplianka, step into the office of the highest authorities here to help her obtain an amnesty for the goats? After all, they supplied the steelworkers' children with milk..! It was insinuated that everyone was feeding

their goats loaves of bread, thereby creating a shortage of white bread, but this was not true! Zachiplianka grazed its goats in the hills; they could go and check for themselves.

“Goats are our cows, the working man's cattle, why such a calamity on them? Intervene, help us, Volodka!”

Volodka's white, full-cheeked face became sullen, shrouded in a mist of responsibility, his nose seemed to become even flatter.

“Unfortunately, Ovramivna, there's nothing I can do here. The law applies to everyone. Whether you're an in-law or a brother — no exceptions are made for anyone; so don't push our friendship, Ovramivna,” and then a worm of a smile wriggled on Volodka's juicy lips. “However, I have other good news for you,” he said, looking into Shpachykha's dry face, sharpened by attention. “In the not too distant future you won't have to run very far to get milk. You won't have to squash into buses with your baskets and head for the city to sell your parsley — Zachiplianka will have its own market. Instead of you having to go into the city, the city residents will be coming here to trade.”

“We're not afraid of traveling. When the apricots are good, even Arkhangelsk isn't far for us.”

“Then you won't have to travel to Arkhangelsk. Only two steps away from you there will be a first-rate indoor market under a glass and colored plastic roof.”

“Where will it be?”

“In the square... In place of the cathedral.”

Shpachykha's face became long with surprise:

“What about the cathedral?”

Young Loboda knew that Shpachykha had never been an advocate of the cathedral. She had been in the vanguard to have it closed and displayed special vigor in driving the stray unfrocked priest from Zachiplianka, one of those sly priests from the time of the German occupation who made circles around the cathedral like a hungry wolf and secretly christened children in the villages and towns, among them the children of responsible comrades too. And though this was done without the knowledge of the responsible comrades, some of them still experienced serious unpleasanties, in particular Petro Petrovych, whose student and protege Loboda considered himself to be.

After one such scandal it was decided to create a museum in the cathedral, and Petro Petrovych began to stuff eagles and boars himself, being a master at it. His successor, though, rejected this ethnographic idea — a pity, for since then the cathedral has stood vacant, used neither by the boars nor the clergy. Shpachykha had played a progressive role in those events, showing no mercy for the defrocked priest. “What sort of a priest is he, when he wears riding pants under his cassock?” she shouted then for all of Zachiplianka to hear. “He is a non-believer!” And she swore in front of everyone that she would never take her grandchildren to him, better they grow up unchristened, than to have to take them to such a tramp. That was how she had been, but now Loboda just could not recognize her.

“I even thought that being an outstanding ward leader, a heroine of the first five year plans, you could have even showed some initiative... There is no cathedral community any more, but

someone could organize to collect signatures and even requests from the villages themselves, approaching the district council for instance.”

Shpachykha must have had an idea. Her eyes suddenly came alive, and glistened with mirth:

“Accommodating the desires of the working masses? So that later all the blame can be heaped on us? It won't happen, Volodymyr,” she said solemnly, as if swearing an oath. “As far as I'm concerned, it can stand. It doesn't ask for food.”

“But it needs money,” Loboda reacted touchily. “Even demands it. And from what? From your taxes? Or your pension? People are cramped into communal flats, and we're going to spend the budget on church renovations?” And he resumed calmly: “True, it's not collapsing yet, we could use it for something, if only our lazy meat combine were more energetic. Why not, for instance, turn this cathedral into a modernized refrigerator capable of handling thousands of tons of meat? A giant refrigerator...”

Shpachykha rose:

“Forgive me, Volodymyr, but you're not thinking in the right direction. You'd do better to take care of the siren.”

What siren was the old woman talking about? Loboda knitted his brows with anger. Then he remembered. His own father, and Katraty, and several others had wanted to write a request somewhere after the factory sirens had been silenced, to allow as an exception their veteran plant the right to sound it's morning siren. From what he remembered, they never got around to writing the letter, the matter seemed to have been forgotten, and now Shpachykha was talking about it again.

“We'll talk about this subject later,” Volodka said to her as he rose to leave, and then added: “I'll be in Vesela Street soon, don't think I've forsaken you all... Even though I've more worries than I can handle, I'll look in on my native Vesela Street!”

And he came round that very evening. Together with someone in a modest Moskvych. Almost as if not to frighten away Zachiplianka's evening serenity, the Moskvych moved slowly down the street, even braking in front of Virunka Bahlay's place. Opening the car door, Volodka greeted his good friend from the car. She was weeding the flowers near the front fence, and he asked her when they could finally expect Ivan back. Learning that Ivan was possibly already flying over the Himalayas on his way home, Loboda expressed joy:

“Excellent! When he arrives, let me know too. He'll probably bring some coconut milk; we can sample it...”

Thus Loboda knew everything here, what was happening with whom, what each was worried about, what troubled each person. Oleksa the mechanic passed by just then, looking dejected. Volodka lavished him with attention too:

“Well, Oleksa, have you caught your elusive Bublyk yet? Gotten your land for a settling basin?”

Oleksa became even more dejected. Sure, he caught that Bublyk, he granted them some land, only it turned out... he had not given them his own land, allotting them neighboring land!

Volodka broke up in guffaws.

“So he gave it to you, but not his own... Build a mud pond, only on the neighboring fields! Well that Bublyk!

Immortal Bubyk! To swing one like that,” he said in rapture. “Managed to wriggle out of it like that!”

“Well, it's not that easy to give us the slip,” the mechanic said, and continued on his way, downcast. Laughing his fill, Loboda joked to Virunka again, saying that she didn't seem to be pining away very much for her husband, she had grown more plump, as if after a stay in a health resort, she didn't look too bad.

“Two years is a decent slice of time... Perhaps you've even begun to forget him?”

He had the insolence to ask her such a thing! She replied to his tactlessness with cold silence. It wouldn't even occur to him how many thoughts she had had in this time, how much anxiety for Ivan had passed through her soul: An epidemic would flare up somewhere and already she pictured Ivan before her; though he had had all the various vaccinations still in the tropics there were outbreaks of plague and cholera. Once he wrote that he went swimming in the Indian Ocean with a friend, and this alarmed Virunka too — there were sharks in the ocean! One day their grandchildren might fly freely to that ocean for their holidays, but meanwhile it was quite a distance! Ivan was quite inaccessible to her. Beyond the Himalayas, almost as if he were somewhere in the heavens.

Virunka stood there, resting her chest on the fence; her ripe peach-tight face became pensive. But these weren't thoughts to be shared with everyone.

“When will you renew that Potemkinian scaffolding of yours?” Virunka nodded toward the cathedral.

Volodka caught a hint of criticism, but was not offended.

“Soon, very soon,” he said. “When the tanks come passing through they might turn off... Touch it accidentally and ram straight through it! They will frighten all of the cathedral's bats away!”

For a moment Virunka saw quite vividly the cathedral being destroyed by the tanks, the garrets collapsing and bats the size of storks flying out of them.

Waving merrily to Virunka, Loboda gave the driver a sign to set off. The Moskvych dashed past the teacher's yard faster, feigned a stop outside the tank driver's yard, but continued on past Fedir the roller, stopping finally outside Yahor Katraty's place. And later, after Virunka had put her children to bed, and sat down outside her window as always, in her usual waiting pose, the Moskvych was still parked at the end of the street. Lately Volodka had begun visiting Yahor a lot. Virunka itched to know why. For the fish broth? Previously only the fish inspector had visited the old man occasionally, and now the “genius” was making tracks there. But was it only for the fish soup? Perhaps he had decided once again to attempt to get out of bachelor's stalemate, as he called it? Beauties like that old man's niece were rarely seen even in the main streets of town.

True, it would have been better for the suitor to have been a little more curly-haired, for he had grown bald at all those meetings. He and Ivan were the same age, they used to be friends before, Volodka made merry at their wedding, and when their first child was born, he thrust himself at Virunka to be the godfather. Himself, he had no luck in marriage. He had chosen a woman, but one with whom he hadn't even lived a year before she bestowed her affections on another candidate — she disappeared somewhere with a passing singer.

Volodka had managed though to get an apartment in the main street of the city right after marrying, and soon after coaxed his father to join him, no matter how much the old man resisted. After his daughter-in-law had cleared out, the father soon found himself all the way out at Skarbne in the Old Steelworkers' Home, for what was his bachelor son to do with him? There his father was cared for. He felt a part of the collective, living as if at an eternal resort.

The young Loboda didn't shun his Zachiplianka even now. On occasions he looked in to see his cousin, blind Kostia, the tank driver, and at times he stayed the night there if it were late. He felt among his own here, on buddy-buddy terms with everyone. He would join the workers unceremoniously when he was free and play several games of dominoes, even treating everyone to a fresh anecdote from the "Armenian Radio," about maize on the moon or something similar. "Don't think," he would say, "that I've broken away. I was born black and I'll remain black," meaning that he was a steelworker. For he really did start out his life at the plant in the workshop, and he had the background to be able to show off at times in his present job: "We steelworkers are a direct sort: we don't write anonymous denunciations!"

He was valued at work; that was true. We should have more workers like him, they would say. He hearkens to the new, doesn't stew in the old. And it should be said that this leading worker still had the persistence of a young Komsomol member; energy poured forth from him; he scattered ideas on the run, all those "bliss room," quiz programs, carnivals, the Wedding Palace and even the festive wrappers on the candy boxes, coloretkas, as he called them, (trust him to invent a word like coloretka) all this was the invention of their Zachipliankan "genius." Though the residents of Vesela Street good-naturedly made fun of such inventions, they were pleased that Volodka did not shun his own people, didn't think himself above anyone, not even old Shpachykha, who earlier used to make ultra-strong vodka in her cow-shed, sitting there all night long, like an alchemist. For this she had been dragged off to the militia, after which she chopped up her apparatus, went straight, and was even elected ward leader. Volodka rarely missed the chance to exchange a few words with the old woman at her gate, to take a dip into folk wisdom, as he said. One day he gave Shpachykha a lift all the way from the city with her baskets, dropping her off right outside her gate, which really moved the old woman. For three days after that all the people heard were her eulogies to Loboda, the leading worker.

Only Mykola the student couldn't make peace with the "genius" leading worker, he simply could not stand him. Mykola had only one word for him: "Father-seller!" As far as Virunka was concerned, this was a little too strong. After all Volodka hadn't disowned his father; he had probably thought of doing him a good turn when, having received the apartment in the city, he took the old man in. He was very much against leaving Zachiplianka, but his son won out: "You'll be by my side, Dad, otherwise people will say it's as if you don't have a son! You're an honored steelworker, it makes it easier for me with your fame too..." The old man became lonely on the prospect, especially after his daughter-in-law had run away, and solitude became a regular visitor to their bachelor's apartment. The old man began to have thoughts about returning to Vesela Street, where on holidays it was so nice to sit under the pear tree with his friend Yavor, but Volodka, of course, couldn't let such disgrace come to pass, besides he would have had to buy the yard from the gypsies. Though he was ready to comfort his father, to surround him with chores, he was always off to meetings, conferences, ringing someone or being rung by someone

— he was elected into a position of culture, which was a hot spot! It was then that Loboda the son had a brain storm: to send the old man off to the Steel-workers' Home. There was one in Skarbne, a Veterans' Home, in the forest on the banks of a river, amid ancient marshes. “You can go fishing there, Dad, the air's fresh; they feed you well, there are nurses, waitresses, a movie, newspapers, sanatorium conditions! What more do you need! You're attracted to Zachiplianka? Perhaps you and I have outgrown it, father? Who's waiting for you there? Mother's grave... It's well cared for. You'll only grieve more there. As it is, you always have a drink with that Makhno nut, talking about God knows what... It's enough that you've stuck your neck out for him once before.”

And now old Loboda lived out his life in the Steelworkers' Home in the company of other honored veterans. Some censured Volodka for having taken such a step. Zachiplianka talked about it for a long time, and from then on Loboda the son became only a “father-seller” to Mykola; while Virunka, though she would never have done the same herself, tried not so much to vindicate Volodka, as to understand him. Had he been married, maybe it would have been a different story, but as it was he was always eating at cafeterias and buffets, a drop of tea here, some kefir there, for he was at work till late at night — such people did not have set working hours.

The Moskvych stood with its front bumper resting against Yahor's fence, lights out, waiting for its occupants, almost unnoticeable in the shadow of the shed. They talked for a long time, though, or perhaps the soup wouldn't cook? The whole of Zachiplianka seemed to feel an antipathy toward these soup-eaters from their first visit. Such things were passed on to the children here, as if through the air: there were already complaints against the youngsters, who it seemed had painted up the Moskvych the time before, writing various unseemly words on it with mulberries. There wasn't a word from the yard, the guests sipped the old man's soup in silence.

Meanwhile, in the yard of the old Bahlay woman there was merriment, and the nightingales sang their spring songs, despite the season. Mykola had taped them back in the spring somewhere in the forests in Skarbne, and now a group of friends had gathered at his place, both friends from Zachiplianka and others who had come all the way from Koloniya — his school mates, it seemed, — and so they turned on the tape of the live nightingales, and now they warbled across the whole of Zachiplianka, lashing out at the top of their voices! What a thing to think up — to record nightingales! They were silent now, having finished singing their songs, and were sitting on their nests, but at the student's it was a nightingale night — they chirped, lashed out with warbles, echoing from every corner, as if they had settled in the marsh oaks at sunset and were singing their fill. Beyond the lake on Solonchak Street someone had turned on a radio, the nightingales were hard-pressed to outscreech it, but they did not relent; the young were enjoying themselves; among the forest warbles someone's merry scandalous voice called out:

“Freedom and love — these are the two wings of poetry! The rest is only ornament!”

And once more they let the nightingales sing their hearts out, playing them a second time, turning up the volume even more, probably to annoy those soup-eaters who were eating their poachers' soup beyond Yahor's fence! Perhaps it wasn't quite from poached fish, but the whole thing wasn't very cheerful: they made a habit of visiting the old man, probably having caught him at some small sin, and now they pumped him for soup as a penance. Ask Volodka later why he

was at Katraty's and he would inevitably talk his way out of it, finding an excuse, always giving some reason: He visited him as a live exhibit, to ask him about life as a roller or some such. Or perhaps about that exploit by unknown persons during the occupation, when someone stole the cast-iron Titan statue from under the Germans' noses, and hid it among the scrap heaps. Someone had done it, but who — no one knew even now; the hero or heroes remain unknown. Ask Volodka, and he'll make up a hundred explanations on the spot, one couldn't make heads or tails of this fellow. But Vesela Street too was one you could not keep the truth from, even the youngest child here knew why the fish inspector popped in to see old man Yahor from time to time with a friend and never during the day, always at night, like bats. Everything was clothed in secrecy. There were no songs, they sipped without saying a word, but each time all of Vesela knew how the soup was cooked that night, which fish Yahor cleaned and which seasonings had been added to the soup. If only those soup-eaters knew what all of Zachiplianka thought about them while they worked secretly with their spoons, if only they heard the peppery remarks with which the people seasoned this secret dinner of theirs, their spoons would have become stuck in their throats and they would have choked on the bones! One of the fish-inspectors was supposedly replaced, and the old man took a breather, but now the new one learned the road to the old man or Loboda had shown it to him. Volodka turned out to be not quite so squeamish: he had separated his father from Yahor so he wouldn't be drinking with a Makhno follower, and yet himself couldn't sip enough soup there... And only try to criticize him the next day in the executive committee building somewhere; he would come out with something making you look like a gossip and a criminal.

However, it was time to go to bed. Getting up, Virunka approached her children scattered on the ottoman, their small tanned legs hanging down to the ground. Carefully she lifted those tiny feet and straightened them out: "sleep, after running around all day." She began to undress. She didn't turn on the electric light to as not to attract the midges.

Chapter VI

At night the cathedral becomes younger. The wrinkles of time cannot be seen upon it, and it seems to return to its Cossack youth, when it rose from the rushes in a youthful blossoming of beauty and shone for the first time in these steppes with the heavenly hemispheres of its domes.

During the war, exhausted Italians, tattered after Stalingrad, made fires in front of the cathedral, and, hunched up, cooked Zachipliankan sparrows in their pots. Another time, a German transport camped here for the night, and during the night an attack was launched against it by the village youth, members of an underground anti-fascist organization which operated in the hamlets on the left bank. Many girls and boys were taken from Zachiplianka then, and from the other villages which formed the city's suburbs. One of those taken was Shpachykha's son, a delightful, cheerful youth who disappeared without trace — maybe murdered in a cellar somewhere by the Gestapo, or burned perhaps in the ovens of Oswiecim. Shpachykha herself was dragged in by the police, and they still talk in Zachiplianka how one of the bandits from Pidhorodne lashed her with a whip there, and he was some distant relative of hers too. While punishing his uncle's wife, the policeman covered himself with his sleeve, but she shouted at him from under the whip: "Don't hide, don't hide, you cyclops! I've recognized you anyway! I've remembered you! It'll be written down how you tortured your own aunt..!"

Those were terrible times, Zachiplianka was cruelly bled dry, its blossom destroyed. But these also became the test of its tenacity, its spiritual strength, its allegiance to that which is sacred to people. There were appearances here by the underground district Party committee, messengers arrived here with passwords and left to seek ways to pass through the front lines. One of the streets in Koloniya was named in honor of one such legendary messenger — the student Maya Prapirna, whom many still remembered.

From the haze of childhood Bahlay Junior absorbed all those stories of the restless years, with the waves of arrests, reprisals, executions, the conscription of workers to Germany, when the whole of Vesela became a street of wailing and cursing. Sometimes Mykola also felt as if he had been a participant in that national struggle, that daily resistance which Zachiplianka waged against the invaders. Zachiplianka itself and all the neighboring towns seemed to have become different in that tragic light, grimmer, more formidable, with a heroic soul. That life was distinctly legendary, the heroes of those years evoked in Bahlay a feeling of respect and sometimes he was roused to sharp self-criticism. In this square, near these ancient acacias, where his peers, young underground fighters, used to have their arms twisted out of joint by policemen, where slave girls snatched from villages were sorted like cattle beside tables — here Bahlay always frowned, here even Bahlay's talkative friend, Romtsia Orlianchenko, became silent when they passed through late at night on their way home from the plant park.

This evening they passed through the square too, having seen their friends, who had come all the way from Kodaky to listen to the nightingale concert, to the last bus. Both Mykola and Romtsia made their way across the square in silence, absorbed in thought. They stood for a while at the spot where there was supposed to have been a bell-tower, which stood apart from the cathedral; but they had missed out on seeing it, the bell-tower had disappeared prior to the war, the bells had been removed and their tongues torn out. A rusty rail — a dull replacement for the

bells — now hung in a vulgar fragment from a pole, as if it were a coat-of-arms of dogmatists and ascetics. That was how Romtsia painted it, being the first to break the silence.

“Perhaps this is the way it should be,” he thought aloud. “Perhaps in our time such a rough utilitarian approach to everything is what is required?” His dry, sharp-chinned face stood out in a white triangle under the mop of hair which he combed onto this forehead; this time it was serious, without a smile. “They came and went. How many generations have been blown past here like autumn leaves by the winds of time... And they will sweep us away too, into obscurity. There were people by that name, they existed — and then passed into non-existence, without a trace.”

“You think they disappeared without a trace?” Bahlay rested his hand on his friend's shoulder. “Do you think that there is nothing left of them in you or me?”

They turned into Vesela Street and sat on Virunka's bench.

“Those who raised bells onto the bell-towers, our steppe Beethovens, they knew what they were doing,” Orlianchenko began again. “I'm not talking about those individuals, like Maya Prapirna, who knowingly accepted death. And now?” And surprising Bahlay, he suddenly blurted out that he was transferring to another plant. One where the workmen entered the workshop in white coats, where the workers were on special diets. He'd had enough of breathing the poisonous gases of the steel plant.

“You're amazed to hear this?” he asked, merrily drawing closer to Mykola. “You always hoped to find the spark of a hero in me too? Ho-ho, it's not there. There are fewer and fewer people who've got it now. Fish seek deeper water, and we only have to be tempted once to join a specialist's workshop, with special food and higher wages... Am I the only one? Show me where those heroes are? Perhaps our Loboda the leading worker?”

“They say he started well in the plant.”

“There you are! Started! But there's such a thing as the drug of ambition, the heroin of careerism. Try it once and you've had it. The thirst for power, that's all that his eyes reflect. He'd exchange his own father for his career and pull down that cathedral just to rise a rung higher. And ask him why. So he can climb even higher! And how many of them there are... Today he is the manager of a workshop, tomorrow the director, and then he's aiming for the ministry. What do you want that ministry for, man? More worries, you'll have a heart attack sooner...! But how they fight! There, battles are fought to the death. Unseen office battles, but ones where no one is spared: either you win, or you are crushed.”

“A dismal picture,” smiled Bahlay. “But I don't look at things so dimly. Of course, there's this. The poison of careerism, self-blindness, the desire to control people around you no matter what. They race upwards, like monkeys after a coconut... But the world isn't all monkeys! No matter what it's like, you must agree though, it's not too bad, this world, and it would be great to spend three hundred or so springs in it...”

“Agreed, the world is beautiful. It's only a pity that there is so little comfort and so many walking stomachs. And they look at you as if you were raw material, an ore from which they must smelt an ingot, no matter what. Though we are poor, we're proud. We live in the shade, but we see the sun. We can pick out a real builder from a phony builder. Comfort and integrity could become, in my opinion, the catchwords of our time. Keep your balance between the forces of

good and evil, don't resort to extremes. In other words, as one man said: don't be sweet or they'll lick you away, don't be bitter, or they'll spit you out."

This Romtsia was a strange fellow. He was from the family of a steelworker too, his father was an engineer, a man respected on the shop floor, but Romtsia... "Poured into the wrong mold" as Virunka described him. The boy had an education, went to Moscow to take a course in electronic machinery, sent by the plant, but inasmuch as the machines had not yet arrived, Romtsia settled into the position of chief power engineer. He lived easily, free of anxiety, nothing special to worry about, making fun of Mykola's high-principled soul-searching. "You and I live in a cynical epoch," he would say at times. "Our mothers gave birth to us under the bloody sign of the Zodiac. Don't you think that affects our perception of the universe?"

They sat on the bench, watching the skies light up above the plants. Mykola remembered some lines from his favorite poet, and he recited them wistfully:

"Again the days are red and brown, so full of bliss and sorrow'..."

"Yes, that's not bad," Romtsia praised him. "I'll have to remember it so I can quote it, when I get the chance, to our lady doctor — she's new, just appeared in the plant dispensary. I went to see her today. There's a beetle in my ear,' I said. 'Can you get it out?' I'm not an otolaryngologist.' 'What are you then?' 'You can see that for yourself on the door... On the other side!' 'What a mess!' 'Pull it out,' I said, 'or give me a medical certificate... I'll take off work until the beetle crawls out of my ear on its own.' But she didn't come to the party, and wouldn't believe the story about the beetle...!"

Mykola was used to such stories from Romtsia, as he was to Romtsia's importunate ideas about a motor boat. Lately that was all he was worried about — the boat and building up his record collection.

"You must be a realist," he lectured Mykola. "Take any one of our hard workers. Give him a television, a motor boat and a pass to the Red Steelworker's Sanitarium on the Black Sea, and he will brush aside all that which you call spiritual. You're worrying about the cathedral. You think it moves everyone the way it moves you? Shpachykha has been walking all her life past it, do you think she needs those cupolas that much? She never even looks at them! Her baskets weigh her down to the ground, give her money! Suggest a choice to her: the cathedral or an indoor market — and she'll be for the market with both hands. What's that cathedral in her life? Or for Fedir, the roller? You can't be satiated on spiritual things alone, brother. Matter is primordial..."

"Those soup-eaters probably think the same way. You mentioned walking stomachs yourself."

"Don't take me at my word. Anyway, people have long been tightening their belts, surviving on ration cards, and if now they create a new cult for themselves — call it the cult of the stomach, if you like — then will you condemn them for it?"

"All creatures have stomachs. People aren't unique in this respect. But look at that spherical cluster of domes... to build them into the sky like an image of and a complement to the sky... only man is capable of this."

"Ah, I forgot we had a poet in our midst!" Romtsia said sarcastically. "Anyway, I don't envy you, oh great unknown poet of Zachiplianka! I know that there won't be only laurels on the path before you. History teaches us that before laurels there is often a good stick, a biting cane...!"

"Again the days are red and brown," Mykola hummed in reply.

Romtsia began telling him a new story about some good-looking girl from the slag block plant, with whom he had danced the previous Saturday and had pressed her close accidentally, and she, the naive little girl, was offended. "Well, we'll dance in pioneer style then," he told her, and led her about the dance floor only in pioneer style after that.

"I've already heard something similar," Mykola noted.

"Ah, my apologies," Orlianchenko exclaimed with feigned apology. "To you our Marusias are the better half of mankind... Madonnas, untouchables...! I reckon that they themselves don't like to be idealized, it suits them better when we look at them more earthly. Ideals and idealists aren't in fashion now."

"I don't keep up with fashion in this regard," Bahlay objected calmly. "Have you ever thought why the best poets of all times always chose to extol her, the woman? From ordinary, earthly woman they created their heavenly Madonnas..."

"And they've left you one too: she waters Katraty's garden."

"You can hold your tongue on that subject." Orlianchenko whistled in astonishment. And immediately Virunka's uncombed head appeared at the window.

"All I need here in the middle of the night are whistlers," she said angrily.

"Vira Pylypivna, haven't I the right to whistle at least in the street?" And Romtsia launched into a fast tirade how various directives annoyed people, you heard them at every step, and he finished with a Polish aphorism: "There will always be an Eskimo who will tell the inhabitants of the tropics how to handle a heat wave."

"What are you babbling, you poor unfortunate sceptic?" Virunka attacked Orlianchenko, obviously not understanding anything. "What have Eskimos to do with this? And the tropics?"

"Where's your Ivan? He's in the tropics now."

The mere mention of Ivan at such a late hour, and from Romtsia's lips, made Virunka sense something offensive and profane.

"How am I to understand your babble?" she pushed her whole disheveled form from the window. "Who'll tell Ivan even one nasty word about me? I haven't sullied my honor one bit, all of Zachiplianka knows that! Get off that bench and scam, or I'll waltz my rolling pin over your shoulders!"

"What for, Vira Pylypivna?" Romtsia quickly rose to his feet at the mention of the rolling pin.

"Because! Don't judge everyone by your standards. Today you're serious with one girl, tomorrow with another."

"But what if they're all boring and empty like autumn beaches?"

"You're empty yourself. There is fuzz under your nose, but not even a bristle of reason in your brains. If you were in our brigade, we would re-educate you."

"You know how much time is needed to re-educate us? A thousand years! I find it funny to meet people who believe that after twenty years everyone can become exemplary, that egotists and bureaucrats will disappear... No, it requires a thousand years, and not a day less!"

“Why do you hang around with him, Mykola?” Virunka asked Bahlay more calmly now. “You're a serious boy, you've all kinds of thoughts, and he, this twisted type... what have you two in common?”

Undaunted one bit by all this, Romtsia smiled at Virunka:

“Without me Mykola would wither away: with whom would he have to debate about eternal love?”

“You're the last person to be talking about love,” Virunka said almost with pity. “What do you know about it?”

“If I can't be a player, then can't I be a judge?”

“Real love is its own judge.”

Surprised by the answer, Orlianchenko nudged Mykola's shoulder:

“Listen to the aphorisms our Vira Pylypivna is using. Look what two years without Ivan has done to her!”

“She has the right to such aphorisms,” Mykola said seriously.

Remaining quiet for a while, Virunka launched into Romtsia again:

“You need to be sanded with good sandpaper, my boy. You've combed your hair on your head, you wear a ring, but what have you achieved in life? You haven't drunk enough of our kvass yet.”

She had in mind the vitamin-enriched kvass which the metallurgists drank in the workshops to quench their thirst. Orlianchenko giggled at this too:

“I know that kvass! It's so strong, that one fellow lost his eye when the cork shot into his face.”

“If he was a lazybones like...”

Here Mykola interceded on his friend's behalf:

“Virunka, don't forget that before you stands a worker of the highest rank, belonging to the elite, one could say!”

“Exactly. Finished his shift and off to chase the wind in the streets. All he has on his mind are dances and comfort.”

“People like me are needed too” Romtsia said unabashed, “without people like me life would be bland — as bland as distilled water.”

Virunka didn't want to hear any more:

“Enough, on your way, stop hanging around my windows.” And closing the window, she dissolved into the darkness of her house.

After this the boys parted. Orlianchenko turned off to his own place, throwing Mykola a farewell “Salaam!”. Mykola continued trudging down the street to the lake. He sensed some kind of truth in those words of Romtsia's about the blandness of life, and also felt that the flow of his days in Zachiplianka would have been less interesting without Romtsia's stinging, spicy comments. He was sometimes irritated by Romtsia's cynicism and satisfaction with mere necessities, but somehow he couldn't even imagine himself without the fellow's pranks, witticisms, scepticism, his annoying paradoxes. There seemed to be an organic need for this, a demand for some antidote against the monotony of everyday life, the standard notions of those who wanted to make a human brick out of you, seeing in you only pliable, spiritually destitute

building material. Romtsia figured that he had the right to a certain impulsiveness. And really, why did he have to be standardized in his conduct? And if he was a little twisted now... what of it? Even trees straighten out as they grow older!

Wherever Bahlay would have wandered that night, appearing by the lake in which floated a molten moon, or in the cathedral square, everywhere he was invisibly followed by his young Madonna with strong tanned arms, with her sad pensive face on which burned a Sarmatian tan! Mykola managed to see her only once from close up — she was watering the garden near the fence. She stood wet with dew, holding the hose in her hand, and watched Bahlay from under her brows with a deep, somehow ponderous, suspicious look. The deep tan of her face sharply contrasted the greenish blueness of her eyes, so sorrowfully cautious and lurking. Suspicion and deep sorrow — these struck him most. Her lips were pursed, while her gaze, her whole posture contained something obstinate, bold, revealing her strength of character, ardor, her spiritual steadfastness. Her dark blond hair was strewn freely across her shoulders, its curly ends glistened with gold in the sun, as if slightly scorched, burned by another, steppe sun. The sad depth of her eyes contained a certain greenishness, the thing one could only perhaps have seen in the eyes of forest nymphs somewhere in Vovchi Vody. Their eyes had met for only a short while then; he greeted her, and she replied softly: “Hello.” That was their whole conversation. But the disquiet and anxiety which that strange girl's gaze had evoked Bahlay could feel inside him even now, as he wandered about Zachiplianka like a ghost. It was to her, to this still unfamiliar person, that he would have liked to bare his soul, to share everything which he held sacred.

When a person fast approaches twenty-two, and time flows by like smoke, and the glory of a poet is still only in his daydreams, there are enough things to muse about. Two and twenty, and nothing had yet been done for posterity! Julius Caesar was said to have exclaimed something similar in his youth. Though that was in harsh Rome, and not in this gentle, poetic Zachiplianka, people still probably had the same feelings now, which had already troubled others thousands of years previously. Really, what had he managed to achieve? What had he discovered in his twenty-two-year-old world? Where was the poem of his life? Titan's Saviors — perhaps that was the name he would give it? About steelworkers, about those who amid the depravity of death saved their black myth — a cast iron laborer with torn chains, in which was cast so youthfully and uniquely the undying spirit of the Revolution. A poem about such people as that legendary Maya Prapirna from Koloniya, and your father, Nykodym Bahlay, who joined the army as a volunteer in '41, in the first days of the war, and disappeared irrevocably in the brown winds beyond the Dnipro. A poem about tragic situations, the invincibility of the spirit, but with what words should he inscribe it? So that like this cathedral it would bring future ages the spirit of these smoky, heroic times. Only would they need this creation? That new era beyond the mountains, would it be indifferent to the words of a poet? Art created by man was not all that old. Thirty or forty thousand years ago an unknown artist drew the first outlines of a mammoth on his cave wall by the light of his fire. After that there was Nefertiti, the Parthenon, Mona Lisa. And finally there was the contemporaneous modern product, a disorderly pile of people's ears, eyes and noses, harmony being replaced with chaos, in place of Raphael's paintings came the tin can and a monkey wielding a brush — was this degeneracy? Self-denial? Had the human spirit

been exhausted? Or was this a passing crisis, after which there would still be youthfulness, and spring, and the sunny harmony of new lines and new words in art?

It is said that poetry precedes deeds. Others had been subjected by life to great trials, but what awaits you amidst this drudgery, this flow of gray days, which sometimes really seems “like autumn beaches...?” And what is it like, the very nature of exploit? Is a person who prepared himself for it beforehand capable of doing it or is the person for whom it was a momentary act, a lightning-fast decision, almost a reflex action, closer to the truth? It is probably like a flash; its eternity is contained in an instant; it is there where people take deathly chances, charge into duels with evil, without hesitating...?

You feel inside you the calling of poetry, but who will teach you its magical secrets? This cathedral? A proud poem of Cossack steppe architecture — it moves you each time, evoking something, enters your youth with the echo of distant events. There is no need for ruins here, do you hear, you geniuses of destruction? Doesn't this feeling of being on an inhabited planet touch you, the certainty and order which is embodied in such creations, in their harmony — a spirit which unites mankind?

Life laid its river beds past this cathedral, workdays move past it in endless herds, new generations declare their love in these towns, old steelworkers are carried along Shyroka Street to their eternal resting-place, while the hemispheres of the domes continue to swim above Zachiplianka, like an image of endlessness this gray cliff of the ages continues to rise from the square. The cathedral always has a certain mood about it, but Bahlay likes it most of all at night, when the east wind rushes down and tears the leaves from the trees made menacing by the dark of night, and all around it is windy and moonlit, and the cathedral stands amidst such a clear night, seeming somehow full, chimerically standing white, like a sail filled with wind. It has its own plasticity, its own rhythms, peculiar only to it. But is there something similar in your present life? Perhaps it is new and different, but it is there! And you will seek these rhythms, perhaps Zachiplianka gave birth to you so that you can discover your own music of colors, which may be lurking in these flashes of the eternally alive plant sky, these cathedral-white Zachipliankan nights.

The moon had risen in the sky; the orchards glisten without a movement; Zachiplianka rests after a working day, abandoning itself to the embraces of its veiled dreams.

The Moskvych continues to protrude near the fence. Wandering along Vesela Street late at night, the student sees one of the soup-eaters stagger out of Yahor's yard and stand in the shade near the Moskvych to relieve himself. He is small, sickly-looking, with a crushed hat. He must have had more than enough soup — for he didn't recognize the moon. Lifting his mousy face to the sky, he manages a joke:

“I can't tell: is it day or night?”

The figure of the youth, dressed in a white shirt, loomed some distance away. He seemed not to hear the joke.

“Hey!”

Silence.

“Hey!” The exclamation was repeated a second time in a demanding tone.

And then came the calm, restrained reply:

“What language is this 'Hey' in?”

“What's that up there, I asked: the moon or the sun?”

“I wouldn't know: I'm a stranger.”

The soup-eater drew closer to the student, looking him over suspiciously.

“Why are you hanging around here? Looking at the car?”

“At everything.”

“My, look at us! A stranger... Where are you from?”

“The twenty-first.”

“What's that, the number of a plant? A postal box?”

“No, not a postal box.”

“What then?”

“Century.”

The inquisitor looked on stupidly for a long time, then finally understood and let out a giggle:

“Just look! A fine progeny... a descendant, it turns out. Come to visit us from the twenty-first century. Well, how is it there... in the twenty-first? People still kiss? Catch fish?”

“Yes, they catch fish,” Bahlay informed him with emphasized seriousness, “but there are fewer spongers. And imagine, they've had to stuff grafters and bureaucrats.”

“Hmm! Stuffed, eh?” the curious fellow wheezed. “You're from there, you say... A harmonious fellow. Have you got a passport?”

“What's that? I've never heard of such a thing.”

“Well any sort of documents which prove who you are?”

Bahlay took a step forward and said with conspiratorial emphasis:

“And have you any?”

The fellow in the hat scowled:

“We're not... answerable to you.”

“You're the fish inspector? The guardian of the piscine resources of the Dnipro?”

“And what if... Only what business is it of yours?”

“Your person interests me.”

“Interests... You're not about to write a denunciation, are you? Confess — is it for an anonymous denunciation?”

And here he received — in a condescending tone, with merry mockery — the celebrated Zachipliankan aphorism:

“People on our street don't write anonymous denunciations!”

The fellow with the hat was amazed.

“They write them everywhere else... what's the matter, is everyone satisfied with things here?”

“No, they don't like falsifiers.”

“Who are you talking about?”

“Those who teach us morals by day, and wean us off them by night.”

At this point another of the soup-eaters appeared, slamming the gate shut. Hefty, in an unbuttoned canvas army jacket, with a puffy face which was unnaturally pale in the moonlight, as

if dusted with cement powder. The large head glistened with baldness, a small bush of three hairs — a distant great-grandchild of a Cossack forelock — thinly disheveled.

“It's young Bahlay's voice I hear,” Loboda the leading worker said merrily, for it was him. “That's right, be proud of Zachiplianka! It is above anonymous notes. I haven't seen you around for a long time, Mykola. Still the same person? Fighting dogmatists? I give them hell too... Well, and your smoke filters? Where are they?”

“Pigeon-holed.”

“By whom?”

“Your brother.”

“See what you're like — always bristling. And I used to take turns with Ivan to give you piggy-back rides. We ran to the crossing to steal coal from the wagons as they rolled past, so that you little fledgling wouldn't freeze. And in gratitude you're shoveling all kinds of things at me, calling me names... It doesn't suit us metallurgists to start quarrels. We have to stick together! I've enough enemies without you — those hidden ones sitting in offices...”

“You once counted Uncle Yahor as an enemy too, and now, see, you're friends. Everything changes.”

“Things change, as the philosopher remarked, they change, and how! Now one can't go far on hackneyed dogma. You have to shake up the brain, seek new things.”

“Like the Potemkinian scaffolding, for instance.”

“There you go again. And you're a good boy, Mykola, from an honest family, your father and mine were inseparable buddies... Comrade Sergo shook both their hands! But you, if you'll pardon the frankness, have strayed when it comes to tradition... What have you, a young man from a workers suburb, found in that degenerate Yavornytsky? Cathedrals... Cossack sabres... huts! All of that is history's legacy, the rubbish of past ages, how can you not understand that? In the space-age these aren't the things that should be troubling us. The chief designer and you and I only know the things Zachiplianka is looking toward — and it's time we made some changes! You young people support me, and tomorrow, in place of this cathedral, I'll erect a great café for the young! With everything! A real darling of a café, they'll only gasp in the provincial center! A shashlik restaurant! A dance hall! And attractions beside it — a music bowl, a Ferris wheel towering over Zachiplianka... Make merry till you're sick of it! Doesn't it set your imagination on fire?”

“No.”

“That's what you're like now, today's Komsomol. There's no spark in you. You need everything to thunder and sing around you! More fantasy! Of course, you can ask: what about our national heritage? And am I against traditions? Am I some bastard, a passportless tramp? Everything can be designed in Cossack style; on the café's facade we can have a Cossack standing with a spear, and Cossack Mamay sitting cross-legged with a bandura, both wearing Cossack trousers. Even the café can be called 'Cossack Mamay', or 'Cossack Mamay's Place,' wouldn't that be great? But go away! It's my idea! I'm patenting it! You think it's funny? Go on, laugh... There you go. You have to know how to come up with these ideas. I haven't been in charge of culture for nothing!”

And laughing with satisfaction, he made toward the car, then came back and said in a low voice, confidentially:

“Work on this Yahor for me. Because people come and ask about the incident with the Titan, and Yahor was at the plant then. But he won't say a word about it, perhaps he has some small sin in his heart... Ah, what a heroic deed! As soon as it became known that the Germans would be melting it down, that very night, right in front of the Germans' noses, the Titan disappeared! Some unknown persons loaded it onto a platform, drove it with the scrap into some cul-de-sac at the plant, and someone managed to save it there in the dump among the scrap until ours arrived! Isn't that heroism?”

“Yes it is,” Mykola agreed.

“Well, so we've finally come to an understanding. Say hello to your mother for me. Though she's a grim old woman, she's just — she should get a medal for bringing up all you kids on her own...” And grabbing his sickly friend by the shoulder, Loboda turned him around to face Bahlay: “Look what eagles Zachiplianka gives the working class — fit for a festival! Beauty and strength, stature, musculature... You'd better not touch the local boys, pass them by quietly. Because our boys are something: they'll catch you, twist your head around back to front, and then swear that it was like that originally!”

They got in the car, the small vehicle roared off, raising a cloud of dust. The air filled with the dry smell of gasoline and dust. The headlights flashed way ahead near the cathedral, slipped over it, and the Moskvych stopped there for some reason. Those two got out, and Loboda's military jacket became white in the moonlight. What had made them stop there? Their tires hadn't been slashed yet, even though the Zachipliankan kids threatened to do that unless they stopped bleeding Grandpa Yahor for soup.

The two figures stood before the cathedral, inspecting the structure in the moonlight.

“I'm sick to death of this refrigerator of yours,” Loboda suddenly blurted out in a sharp, irritated voice. “Potemkinian scaffolding... The stork hatching geniuses... How I hate all that — with every fiber!”

The fish inspector had never before seen his friend in such a frenzy.

“It's an architectural monument,” he reminded him, to calm him down.

“Monument — what the devil makes it a monument?” his friend hissed contemptuously nearby. “What's so architectural about it? It's just history's rubbish, and nothing more! We still have to discover what those antediluvian Sich Cossacks of yours wanted to prove by it! Some Skrypnyk got it into his head to make it into a monument; he enters it into the register and we're afraid to even come close to it, slaves of some piece of paper.”

He wiped his sweaty forehead and only now seemed to notice the fish inspector.

“The worry this damned cathedral causes me... Everyone laughing, making jokes — you heard! Invented a Potemkinian nick-nack! And from the other side moth-eaten religious old grannies keep writing to various departments, claiming it was closed down illegally... 'Open it, take heed of our old age, for our sons died at the fronts...' And disgruntled phone calls from the provincial capital: 'What's the matter there with this cathedral, why don't you put it in order?' And from which assignations? Not everyone has yet emerged from cellar fiats; they're stuffed into communal housing, and we'll throw our people's money away on this?”

“Write it off.”

“What do you mean, write it off?”

“You're the authority,” the fish inspector wheezed. “The cards are in your hands... don't you know from which side to tackle it?”

“Sure, I know. You don't have to teach me how it's done. If only I could remove it from the register. Then I'd get the sappers in and it would be a pile of dust in one night, the dust of ages!”

“Then what are you waiting for... reduce it to dust.”

“And the passport?”

“What passport?” his friend was unable to understand in his drunken stupor, and even felt about in his pocket.

“There, that cast iron passport,” Loboda nodded at the dark, cast iron plaque, barely visible on the shaded side of the cathedral. The friend lifted his crushed hat higher, craned his neck, but even from close up couldn't read what was carved on that tablet, what was being protected by law.

There had as yet been no thieves in Zachiplianka, and to date there had been no need for night watchmen or for citizens' patrols. So no one saw the two drunken soup-eaters, the two nocturnal pygmies, slowly walk into the cathedral's shade, and come up to its protective sign.

The cathedral listened and was silent. The late moon looked down from the sky. The villages, bathed in deep sleep, rested in the warm embrace of the night.

Chapter VII

The manager of Yelka's collective farm visited Zachiplianka unexpectedly. He left his five-tonner in the square, for if he had entered the street he would probably have smashed all the wooden fences. He moved along on foot, sedate, deliberate. He greeted everyone he saw in the yards, asking about an Olena Chechil. By the time he reached Katraty's place, Yelka already knew what was coming her way. She darted off through the orchards and hid in the weeds of the cemetery.

Reaching Katraty's yard, the manager greeted its owner and asked if he could see Olena Chechil.

Yahor replied with a frown that there was no one by that name in the house register. He had wanted to finish the conversation at that, but the inquirer, even though he seemed meek in appearance, turned out to be obstinate in nature and was in no hurry to leave. Who had set him on Yelka's tracks and how — this was not mentioned out of fact. And perhaps it was with this that he finally managed to soften Yahor and draw him into a conversation. Yahor had been acquainted with previous managers, knew the price of those drunkards.

But this was a calm man with an already gray mustache, and though he was not from Vovchuhy himself, he somehow seemed trustworthy. Leaning carefully against the fence, he praised the old man's house, the shutters, noticed those grafted mitten-like pears too, the pride of Yahor's orchard. This touched the creative ambition of the owner, and Yahor explained in a milder tone, that the fruit had no seed at all inside:

“That's exactly what they're called: seedless pears.”

The manager began to talk about the collective farm, saying that they would have reaped thirty centners of wheat per hectare if it hadn't been burned in the last days. Just before the harvest there were hot winds and the biggest tract of wheat “fell under fire,” the grain was seared. He complained that there was difficulty with spare parts and that there weren't enough hands, thanked the plant chiefs, it seemed counting Katraty in with them as well. They had helped with pipes and helped install the sprinklers, and now no matter how hot it was, there was always rain in the vegetable gardens! After this he got around to Yelka. She was a great worker, and a girl with a future, but unfortunately it so happened that she had been dishonored there, and the accountant had acted imprudently toward her. Well, one could understand her too, for many a girl was drawn to the city, especially when the village clubhouse was pretty bad; there were few boys, and they were jealous of the married ones... But it seemed to be getting better, changes were noticeable, they were preparing to build a new clubhouse. He had come to the town for this very reason, to select a plan — they wanted to draw on a Latvian design — they were building nice clubs up there. He chatted away, marveled once more at Yahor's seedless pear, and left at that.

Yelka had trembled enough in the cemetery wormwood while they were talking. For some reason she had gotten it into her head that the collective farm manager would come for her with a militiaman, and they would lead her away from Yahor's place on a string.

After it had all blown over, she felt almost heartened by this visit, no matter what, but she had not been forgotten, relegated to a nonentity. Makar Musiyovych had come, inquired about her fate, and though he had not brought her any release documents, he had brought her a name. She had been like a nameless stray here, and now Vesela Street would know there was a girl

living in their village by the name of Yelka-Olena Chechil. As for Uncle Yahor, this announcement of Yelka, seemingly nonexistent up until now, did not appeal to him too much. Mention was made again of the house register. Here in Zachiplianka where everyone knew each other, no one bothered, but in the apartments on the prospect, sleep one night there without a passport, and the district supervisor and a watchman would be around inquiring.

She had made it this time, but what about later on? What should she do in the future? Yelka couldn't stay forever as a guest at Uncle Yahor's! He was not driving her out, of course, live here, if you like, even if you're not registered. He even seemed pleased with her industriousness, but to continue living like this, on birds' rights, was somehow unsettling, depressing. And as well, Katraty was becoming noticeably more miserly

— from old age, perhaps — and when she had to go for bread, he counted his fivers a long time, and yet in the past people said he had loved partying, put on real concerts! Even Yelka's mother had told her about one boisterous incident when Yahor, having sold a very bountiful harvest of strawberries in the town, and being quite well under the influence, hired a brass band with his whole proceeds — the trumpeting band members, also intoxicated, played for this Makhno follower all the way to Zachiplianka. Yahor's wife ran up to him yelling about where the money was, and he only laughed, pointing at the orchestra:

“The money has been transformed into trumpets... Turned into music!”

Becoming generous, uncle once gave Yelka a few kopecks for amusement and let her go off to the movie in town. She ran without touching the ground through the village, between the smutty walls of the plants where everything was black with soot, where there was a continuous din of banging and quaking, and the sun burned down from above as it never burned in the steppe. And yet, on reaching the bridge, she felt relieved

— as if life were clear skies again! She had never before walked across this high bridge — all made of iron, hot, extremely long, probably the biggest in the world. And down below glistened the Dnipro, so bright it made the eyes water, islands stood out green, yachts sailed along like full-breasted swans. On the beaches in the distance were thousands of people, bodies glimmered gold-red, appearing like a continuous field of wheat from afar, so that Yelka did not guess straight away what it was. Plants, berths, cascades of buildings down the slope of the right bank — everything was swathed in smoke, the haze of midday heat, the television mast on the hill was barely visible in the haze. To Yelka the city seemed like something unique, unfathomed, alive, having a soul. It seemed as if it had been here since antiquity, that it had grown from these ridges, just as everything else grew in this world.

The sidewalk on the central prospect was softened by the heat, countless small heels had impressed themselves onto it, and Yelka was pleased that she too was leaving tracks behind with her worn sandals. The city girls, especially those with violet eyelashes and their hair cut short, glanced critically at Yelka's sandals, at least it seemed that way to her; but she also noticed another thing, those flashes of feminine envy in their eyes when the city girls cast a glance at Yelka's slender-waisted figure, her haughty neck, her tanned face, painted only by the sun...! Some could not stop themselves from looking back at her, and this cheered her up, tickled her reviving self-esteem. Wherever she saw announcements about the acceptance of students, Yelka stopped and read everything from start to finish — outside the university building, near the

drama school, and longest outside the millers' technical school, but here too the announcement finished with a stern reminder of the documents necessary for enrollment. The acceptance committees had begun work, young people milled about everywhere, each with some kind of prospect, and it seemed that Yelka alone had been pushed aside by life, driven somewhere without helm of sail.

She found herself in the park. It was deserted outside the ticket office of the movie, Yelka bought a ticket and saw the poorly-attended matinee show. Those who had not come to see the film had not missed out on anything, and Yelka too could have done better than to waste her time here. Cigarettes being smoked without end, people boring each other on the screen, continually crying for some reason, and even when they kissed at the end of the film, even that seemed reluctant, sleepy — they were lazy, unable to even kiss normally. This was love? As far as Yelka was concerned, when it came to love, it should be full of fire, without any looking back, without restraint, and then — what would be, would be. She wanted to live a flaming, frenzied life, where people burned with bliss, where love gave birth to poetry. And though she had been burned, without even knowing love, she had once dreamed of such things on those spring nights of hers, those budding flowery nights. Well, it hadn't worked out. “Won't it ever work out?” Yelka thought, sitting in a pavilion with her ice cream, in the shade under a transparent awning, from where she saw a sweeping view of the Dnipro, the islands, the distant Samara Hills. Love was like that Dnipro, where there was wind and sun to make your soul sunny too. If only she could tell all the girls about this, pass on her bitter, belated lesson! Perhaps not all that belated and not all that hopeless! For this fellow kept coming, showering her with compliments, dropping hints — eyes big, placidly doe-like, devoted. True, he was very pug-nosed, had three hairs on his head, and his eyebrows were only fluff — but even though he was browless, he was cheerful, bold, covered with ideas, as if they were burrs. Under different circumstances she would have simply whipped a few compliments at him, but now in her helplessness she suffered him, heard him out, somehow growing used to him, to his company. And he probably had something on his mind after all, wasn't being frivolous, and so Uncle Yahor danced to his tune too:

“See, Yelka, how he keeps coming. You're not a child, you must know why. One can tell from everything that his intentions are serious. So it wouldn't do to turn your nose up at him too much. For where will you be welcome, once I'm gone? Who'll defend you? At least you won't know any grief there.”

Occasionally she was so overcome, that she was beset with doubts: so what? Who else are you waiting for? There isn't a person in the world who would sigh once for you.

After the ice cream Yelka visited the Cossack museum in this same park. She looked assiduously at those Cossack artifacts, and left feeling as if she had been enriched in some way.

People lived along your Vovcha River in those steppe fortifications — all of them giants! Their crimson banners had not completely rotted away, sabres glistened under glass, velvets smoldered red, even a Cossack boat had survived — enormous, built from a single oak, which had turned black through and through, becoming like anthracite — fisherman had raised it from the bottom of the Pidpilna River. Yelka saw those Zaporozhian knights, as if they were alive, saw their patrols on the burial mounds, the flashes of sabres as they fought in clouds of dust, amid shouts, violence, horses' neighing, bathed in sweat and blood, fighting until they collapsed,

freeing sister captives from some smelly khan. These were men, they defended your land, giving you this sky, the vastness of the steppes, and the glitter of the Dnipro as an everlasting dowry!

In the contemporary section of the museum there were all kinds of metal articles on display, pipes of various gauges, and for some reason there was even a pair of women's shoes from the local shoe factory on display under glass, but the visitors walked past these exhibits quickly, each had his own shoes on his feet. Yelka did not pause here either, but she did stop beside an extremely heavy old trolley, one of those which the wheelers once pushed about the blast furnace, and she became caught in a crowd of young pioneers, who previously had been curiously examining a collection of rusty iron grapnels which were thrown under the hooves of attacking cavalry in Cossack wars. Now the young tourists surrounded the trolley of the unknown wheeler. In white shirts, with ties of red silk, the children chattered animatedly, inspecting the trolley, some funny small pioneer, the smallest of the lot, called out proudly:

“This is probably my grandfather's trolley! He was a wheeler.”

“Perhaps it's my Uncle Yahor's?” Yelka thought. “Perhaps his work meant so much in life, that its tools are being saved for posterity?”

After visiting the museum, she cheered up: perhaps the pioneers had brought on her good humor with their chatter, their childish cloudlessness, or perhaps it was that volatile crimson Cossackdom, so fearless, which left behind such dazzling apples of impressions?

She descended the hill along the prospect, which was ablaze with tall red flowers, copiously watered, and enormous dusty acacias which, having bloomed, now awaited new flowers. Some women were laughing on a balcony, laughing for the joy of it, and not at Yelka. She remembered how that Loboda had bragged about his apartment, which was located on this prospect. “A self-contained unit,” he had said, “with a balcony, a bathroom... In bachelor's neglect, true, but a woman's hands could make a home out of it.” Which window was it, which balcony? Maybe that one, from which someone's fishing rods protruded? And could she live here? — Looking each morning at these dew-bathed flower beds, at the roses flaming in the sun. Anyway, he still probably was not aware that she had no passport, wasn't registered anywhere, that she did not even have an identity card. Otherwise he might drop her, though she doubted it; he was one who could organize anything. When he once jokingly mentioned about going to the registry office, Yelka turned red for the first thing they would have asked for there would have been a passport and all she had from Vovchuhy was a vovchyi bilet, and even that was oral. She had not finished school, and the registrar hadn't even given her a good-for-nothing identity card! “Not allowed!” She was illegitimate. How difficult it was for a person without those papers! And what use were they? Could one write a human soul into them?

Katraty told Yelka to come straight to the beacon from town, and not to tarry — was there some work to be done, or something?

A luxuriant black poplar grew inside the beacon hut and could be seen from afar. In the hottest heat one could hide in the shade there, and now a whole company had made camp under it, having obviously arrived there by motor boat — a motor boat with “Dream” written on its side was moored nearby. Uncle Yahor was already noticeably merry. His face, which was normally red, forever burned by the flames of the blast furnaces, was even more flaming now, and his nose was like a blue onion, glistening with droplets of sweat.

“Go on, go on, pour a full one, don't be afraid!” Uncle Yahor urged, holding out a faceted glass, and Loboda, meanwhile, was filling it with something from a bottle. “Full to the brim... Don't worry, I won't spill it.”

He meant his hand was not shaking yet.

A case of beer lay in the sand, and to one side, removed from the fire, steamed a full bucket of freshly-boiled crayfish. Everyone greeted Yelka with undisguised delight, they had obviously been waiting for her. They spread something on the ground for her right away, sat her down and began to outdo each other in offering her treats. Though she would not take any beer, she did not refuse the crayfish, and Loboda placed the bucket of crayfish right in front of her. And only after she had taken one, did the others lean over to try these delicacies. Crayfish tails and claws cracked away in expert hands. Loboda showed Yelka what was edible and what was not, and then introduced his friends: a young engineer as black as a beetle who, it turned out, was the owner of the motor boat, and a chubby blond fellow with long hair, a broad good-natured smile, who was obviously the entertainer in the group, with child-like azure eyes shining affably at everyone. His large thick lips champed comically, he slapped himself on his premature potbelly and said:

“We stokers aren't afraid of this, this is our pride... A whole barrel of vitamin kvass will fit in here...”

And the engineer, obviously returning to the conversation interrupted by Yelka's arrival, addressed a question to Loboda:

“How did the incident with that patrol end?”

Assiduously picking at a crayfish tail, Loboda explained to Yelka:

“One fellow was recently caught in our parts — a student from the medical institute. Turned out to be a genius, an expert at psychology, a Kafka! He took note of the type of folder delicatessen store inspectors carried around, got himself one exactly like it, a solid yellow folder, and did rounds of the produce stores. He came into a store, stood modestly in a corner with his folder, demanding nothing, asking no questions, only pretending to throw furtive side glances at the salespeople when they were weighing goods. And of course you know the people there! They're all birds of a feather, and they immediately whispered among themselves: 'An inspector! A guard!' And the guard was immediately taken behind the scenes, into the service room, offered a chair, and on a barrel before him was placed a bottle, crabs, caviar. The boy would have breakfast, thank them politely, and leave. And somewhere else he would have lunch, and stop in for dinner in some model delicatessen. Just try and touch him. When he was exposed, he wasn't at all lost: 'I'm not an extortionist,' he said. 'Did I deceive anyone or demand anything from them? People treated me to meals, asked me to eat. Who am I, a hungry student, to refuse them?' 'You should be tried in court,' they shouted at him, 'you false guard, a pretender!' And he even grinned back: 'In Rus' there were False Dimitrys, and false leaders, so why shouldn't there be false guards? What is my fault in contrast to what my predecessors have done?’”

“A clever fellow,” the paunchy young man remarked, lying on his side in the sand. “People like him can make a good career for themselves, thank you very much!”

Loboda rummaged about in the bucket, picked out the largest crayfish, handed it to Yelka, and then began again:

“It's become fashionable now to censure careerism. Anything comes up, and we immediately scream — careerist! But let's consider it carefully. What's so bad about a worker striving for a healthy career? Isn't this a stimulus, especially for our brother at the bottom? And anyway, which of us has the way open to a career? Those who work better, who are more skilled, show more initiative, who have done more for society... Work harder, and you'll move higher up the ladder. That's the law of life.”

“To healthy careers!” the paunchy fellow exclaimed, who, as it turned out, held a leading position in the factory palace of culture. “That's an important thought, Volodymyr Izotovych! There isn't a soldier who doesn't dream of becoming a general. Careers are only closed to those who aren't capable. And if you are a good worker, and on top of that show an artistic streak, an understanding of song and dance! Do you know the ensemble we have?” he addressed Yelka animatedly. “Before you is the founder of the ensemble, its first director... Until recently he still appeared before the public with castanets, it's only now that I've acquired this one hundred and ten kilos of live weight. Our ensemble is thundering, we may even visit Poland in the fall. And do you dance?” he asked Yelka, and without waiting for a reply, exclaimed with rapture: “You'd become our prima donna! Such a figure, such legs. In our villages girls become dumpy very early on, although this is a sign of affluence and good climate. Look at them, they're still young, but they can't fit into their dresses, despite the fact that we're breathing smoke and all kinds of anhydrides... And you have such a nice waist and bust. Think about it, we'd gladly take you into our ensemble the 'Dnipro Wave'.”

Katraty frowned at this, and then all of a sudden began to extol Yelka, saying that she wasn't any old chatterbox; she was hard-working, agile, tidy! Her mother was never a careless woman, and her daughter had always been busy from early on. Yelka was not used to hearing such generous compliments. She blushed.

“Isn't it work, to dance all one's life?” the chubby fellow joked, flashing his goggly, azure eyes.

Katraty, however, didn't take it as a joke and did not relinquish his train of thought, continuing with the same thing, for was it the girl's fault that she found herself surrounded by such a lack of justice? All around people walked about law fully, could sleep in peace, while she lived in constant fear, insecurity.

“We'll intercede on her behalf,” Loboda said firmly and looked knowingly at Yelka, as if she alone should have sensed a special meaning to this phrase. “There is no lawlessness in our society and there never will be.”

“Your father knew how to defend people,” Katraty said pensively.

Latching onto the subject, the founder of the ensemble immediately began to recount just how much Volodymyr Izotovych cared about his father, how the old man was living in luxury in the Veteran Steelworkers' Home, catching fish “on the jump.” There was such a method, ingeniously simple. You rowed about the swamp on the lake or along the Vovcha River on a moonlit night, there was silence all around, not a rustle. You took the boat right along the bank and they (the pike), as everyone knew, slept with their tails to the bank, muzzle facing deep water, and you needed only to slap the water lightly with your oar and the sleeping fish became frightened by the splash and jumped from the water, jumped right out and straight into your boat!

That's right! Sometimes so many of them jumped out that there was no place to put them, and old Loboda brought back a full boat of pike, creating work for the cooks!

“And what pike!” the ensemble director said, choking on his words. “The length of one's outstretched arms! That's what we call catching them 'on the jump'...”

Katraty grunted that this was all lies, but Loboda supported his friend, for the plant veterans really were living in luxury there, living in God's bosom.

“And shouldn't it be that way?” he said peaceably. “They conquered it, so it's theirs now. As pioneers they are given everything by our local and national authorities. Everything comes to them from the government 'on the jump'...” And he added almost ruefully, almost philosophically: “One day we'll probably end up there too... in the veteran's palace. It's such a fast pace, life runs along and there's never time to look back.” And looking benevolently at Yelka, he cheered her up with a joke: “The road ahead is clear: we begin in the Komsomol and finish in social security!”

When there were no more crayfish in the bucket and the beer bottles lay empty on the sand, Uncle Yahor set about shaping an oar, which he had been carving for some time, whenever he had a spare moment. And the out-of-towners invited Yelka to go out with them on the Dnipro.

Katraty cautioned them that a cloud was closing in from the west, but the company took no notice of this, merrily scooped up Yelka, and before she knew it she was already in the boat, and the motor boat sped her along — for the first time in her life! — across the expanse of the Dnipro. Sitting opposite her, Loboda looked affectedly and thankfully at her, as if explaining with his gaze: see, Yelka, everything here is being done solely for you, just to bring you joy and delight.

“Where to?” the engineer asked briefly, sitting at the helm, and though the question was directed at Loboda, he made no reply and once again asked Yelka with an expressive, silent meek look: “Voice your wish. You're the lord and master here! The motor boat, its destination, its speed and our company — everything is at our disposal! To those islands. Or under the bridges? Or to the water station? Everything here is yours, everything is open to your wish, command, order!”

The even clatter of the engine, the flow of light air against her face, oncoming boats from which came shouts of greeting to the engineer and his company, and again the expanse of the pre-evening Dnipro with its bright flood, — they could speed along like this to her native Vovchuhy, let that brigade leader's loud-mouthed wife see Yelka in this company — she'd turn green with envy!

In one place they had to pass a flock of light-winged, sharp-nosed boats resembling rockets. Eight rowers sat in each one, bending forward and stretching back in a single rhythm, in a single flap of oars, one heard only their amicable splash! splash! — and among those well-tanned athletes with wet backs and hair, Yelka seemed to espy a familiar figure. Everything suddenly palpitated with the song of those nightingales she had heard on the tape recorder that night in Zachiplianka.

The boats raced past, moving away with a rhythmic flap of oars, and the ensemble veteran called out enthusiastically in his bass:

“This is the life! This is life, not fiction! You must make your future husband promise you, Yelka, to take you out on the Dnipro every day... Give you your personal yacht... You're made for this. You should bask all summer at the beach.” And as if joking, and yet not really joking, he continued to call out, that if a beauty like her gave him the honor, he would create all the comforts for her, rest assured: she'd go to resorts twice a year, he would not torture her with jealousy, wouldn't ask her for a report, he wasn't petty.

“One can give up everything for a woman,” Loboda said, giving Yelka a significant look again, “as long as she turns out worthy, capable of creating a strong, contemporary, model family with you. Complete freedom to her for that. If you want to study — go ahead. Want to visit museums, go to the movies, to concerts — fine. Want to go on a tour — please, here's a travel order, and off you go around Europe — Rome, the pyramids, Vesuvius... I look at it this way: give a wife complete sovereignty, give her full rights for rescuing you from solitude and showing you some affection from time to time.” His voice filled with sincerity. “Let her build life to suit herself. She is allowed everything on one condition: that she doesn't run off to the committee with declarations against her husband,” he joked a little sadly. “Because I've got a friend — as soon as there's the slightest conflict, her husband looks at her the wrong way or something like that, she rushes off to the committee with a declaration.”

Yelka understood the whole current underlying this conversation, and though she sensed some as yet subconscious opposing force welling up within her, there was also something pleasant and tempting in these insinuations, these painted pictures, in his undisguised attentions to her. She was a head above everyone here; they all crept before her. She felt she was growing in self-esteem, her beauty had been noticed. She was needed by someone after all. Those words about independence were not left without a response in her soul, being on the Dnipro, where one could pass whole days without a care, alone with the sun, freedom, the azure milkiness...!

The storm came unexpectedly. They always erupted without warning, these pre-evening storms on the Dnipro. From the west, from under the cloud, everything became covered in smoke, half the sky was swathed in red — and immediately the plants, the Dnipro, and the bridges were blanketed in a frightening windy twilight. The sky, so full of azure during the day, now became muddied with a red-brown swirl of gloom, wind and alarm. The boats were tossed about like straws on the water. The white-trunked black poplars became a dark disheveled mass, frighteningly far away, and Yelka noticed a startled flash in Loboda's eyes. The black storm cloud grew, it became dark all around. The Dnipro became rougher, the motor boat labored away, plowing through the waves. Water was picked up by the wind, blown in a spray into their faces. The storm drove them back to Katraty. Yelka jumped straight into the water, lifting her dress above her knees, and hurried off to shore, while the motor boat immediately sped off to its berth.

For Katraty this storm on the Dnipro seemed not to exist, he sat under the rustling black poplar and serenely carved his oar. Battered by the wind, which had plastered her dress tightly against her body, Yelka stood on the bank feeling joyously ticklish, no longer among the waves. There was even something tempestuously merry in seeing boats scattering in all directions from the Dnipro. One sloop with the plant's number had turned over near the shore, and two naked boys clambered up onto it with rowdy abandon and began to tap out the double shuffle on that slippery overturned sloop. They'd be good in the ensemble!

Katraty did not seem to notice this commotion either, his face was swathed in a frown. Something had obviously upset the old man's humor. While in the company of the others he hadn't shown anything, but now he was like a storm cloud. Remaining silent for a while, he told Yelka the reason: the ward leader had been around to see him. After the manager's arrival and inquiries about Yelka, the ward leader remembered her duties too. She was interested in the house register, and though she was a neighbor, she warned Yahor: either register your tenant, or else they would have to seek help somewhere in the militia, so that they could register her, and legalize her existence.

Chapter VIII

The plaque had been stolen from the cathedral!

Where it had been hanging, there remained an unfaded rectangle and holes made by screws. Even Loboda, who considered himself an expert on the worker's soul, its every nook, had probably never expected that such and insignificant event as the loss of the plaque, a piece of cast iron, would create so much noise in Zachiplianka.

The first to discover the loss was Volodka's cousin, Kostia, the blind tank driver, more correctly his coquettish Nataalka with whom he was walking to the early morning bus, as he would do each time they reconciled after an argument. This couple drifted into storms and tempests many a time, and shortly before this a whole typhoon had raged in their latitudes. Both had been invited to a name day party for one of Nataalka's friends in the village of Koksokhim. They went there arm in arm, in peace and harmony. However, on the way back, Nataalka caught up to Kostia only by the cathedral, carrying his damaged accordion, grabbed him by the arms, and begged him: "Forgive me! In the name of my children, I beg you, forgive me! If you like, I'll fall down before you on my knees, hit me, kick me, only forgive me, forgive me this last time...!" No one seemed to witness this night scene, and yet the whole of Zachiplianka already knew how Nataalka had repented after the name day party and crawled about on all fours before Kostia in the square, for once again, after a few drinks, she had been vomiting, "replacing the dew on the grass," as she herself liked to put it.

Impetuous, fun-loving, Nataalka met Kostia at some wedding, where he had been invited to play: she sat down beside him, all aflame, and stroked his hand. She said that he played so well, and the fact that he was blind didn't matter. "I'm blind now too!" she laughed, and grabbing hold of him, fighting everyone off with jokes, dragged him off shamelessly into the dunes, into the desert of passions, where one's breathing was stopped by hot thyme, where one could steam away forever, lost in the scent of thyme! And now, at her friend's name day party, like a single girl, forgetting Kostia, she frolicked about all evening with the plant power engineer — that old Don Juan, warbling dirty songs to him, and then they suddenly drifted off together somewhere. Kostia immediately sensed their absence. They had disappeared and did not return; the old debaucher had probably led her off into the same thyme.

Kostia stopped playing: he smashed the accordion to the ground, so that the bellows whined with the remains of some melody. Later, Nataalka caught up to him by the cathedral. Again there were excuses and explanations, she begged him in the name of her children, and though he boiled over with insult and jealousy, he knew this was not the first time and that in the end he would accept her penance, tears and caresses, coddling her himself. There are probably times when love is sheer joy, but there must be times when it is torture and pain — just as it was for him. He had never seen Nataalka's smile, didn't know how beautiful she was, only knew her flesh, her supple body's fire, the favors of her hands — and also the salty taste of her tears, the tears of repentance.

He forgave her, they made up, and saw her, the mother of his children, to the bus stop in the morning. Near the cathedral Nataalka grabbed hold of her husband's hand in alarm:

"Kostia, what sort of omen can this be? There's no plaque on the cathedral! That's very strange..."

Kostia came up to the wall, silently fingered the holes where the plaque had been screwed on, stood for a moment and finally muttered through clenched teeth:

“The dirty scum.”

Returning home he stopped Virunka Bahlay at the gate as she was leaving her yard, hurrying off to work:

“You're part of the leadership around here,” he said irritably. “A member of the Party committee! Or perhaps you too are in cahoots with the criminals?”

“What's happened, Kostia?” Virunka was surprised by his tone.

“Someone has unscrewed the plaque from the cathedral. Was there a resolution to this affect? Were the people asked?”

He acted as if he wasn't indifferent to it, even though he was blind. Perhaps he wasn't indifferent. Perhaps in his own way he treasured this cathedral, which was all he had left from pre-war times, from the days of his childhood, his youth, when Kostia's eyes had not yet been burned out and could take in the world of Zachiplianka.

On her way to the bus Virunka also turned off to inspect the place. Yes, it was gone, deprived of its passport. Before, because of the workshops, the graphs, the countless domestic worries of everyday life, she had no time for the cathedral. And though it seemed not to exist for her, now this outrage made Virunka indignant too. The cathedral somehow came alive for her. There hadn't even been talk in the Party committee about dismantling the cathedral! Without that plaque, affixed by someone long ago, it suddenly became somehow defenseless, vulnerable, doomed to demolition, destruction. She remembered how, when she was small, a wooden church had been demolished in their village. No one knew when and by whom it was built, though real craftsmen must have erected it: it was built without a single nail. The ancient wood, still untouched by termites, was broken apart with axes and crowbars. “Without a single nail! Joined only with tenons!” the people rumbled sadly. Those who were demolishing it sullenly, unpicking that old stuff, performed their destructive task with silent fury. At first it appeared that everything should crumble apart, and yet the ancient structure resisted, it impressed everyone with its strength. Only the following day, after they had brought along some tractors, did they finally smash it to pieces, breaking it apart, scattering the pieces all over. The most frightening part for Virunka was when the loft collapsed, and large gray bats exploded in all directions from the cloud of dust, and circled blindly above the people and the pastures without a sound. Because of daily troubles these memories had become clouded, forgotten, but now, as if stirred up by something, those bats fluttered again from the depths of her memory, those silent birds of her childhood — the abominable ghosts of the ruins, rough, dusty, and blind their whole life long. She also remembered a pile of scattered church vessels covered in dust, in which the small school children dug around, finding among the rubbish and trash dried fragments of birch bark with odd writings on them. Virunka also picked up a piece of that bark, which later their young teacher tried to decipher, reading the ancient Slavonic letter sets with various abbreviation marks, scrawls. But it remained undeciphered, everything that had been written there by ancient scribes or by the artisans themselves, who could build without a single nail.

Now, obviously, someone had decided to turn this cathedral into a ruin. Ivan would return from India — and the square would be empty! Deserted! Where's the cathedral? Virunka, where's

our cathedral, near which we used to wander in the young nights of our love? A silent giant inhabitant of Zachiplianka, who saw us off to work in summer and winter, and met us each day on our way back from work — where is it? Why the wasteland in its place?

A few other village residents came up and examined the mark left behind by the plaque. Semko Deyneka suggested that they call a militiaman, and that he bring along a German shepherd and let it follow the scent — special well-trained dogs, which could latch onto any scent.

“No dog will pick up this scent,” Virunka remarked angrily and hurried off to the bus which had just arrived.

It seemed as if nothing much had happened, but even at work Virunka felt uneasy for some reason. Straight after her shift she decided to go and see Loboda: the cathedral was under his jurisdiction, Volodka was the authority over it.

The “authority” was in a cheerful working mood, clad in a blue jacket straight over his undershirt, for it was hot. Those who weren't familiar with the master of the office could have thought that this was a plant steelworker before them, a visitor who had come running straight from the workshop, and while waiting for his director friend, had comfortably seated himself at his desk. The window was open and beyond it was a soot-covered acacia, a sickly stretch of lawn, and a little farther the gray-black gate to the plant, covered in century-old dust. Obviously they weren't afraid of dust in the office — a layer of dust covered various posters or diagrams rolled into tubes lying on the massive safe, dust was also noticeable on the cast iron statuette of the Titan standing on the desk. The rumble of the plant drifted in through the window but no one took any notice of it in the office; they were accustomed to it. “You expected to find behind this desk a thick-skinned bureaucrat,” the visitors almost needed to be told, “a bitter bureaucrat, fenced off from the workers and blind to the world for all the paper before him. But this is what I'm like. I've been promoted here, so I'm sitting here. I've come from the workshop, but if they tell me to, I'll return to the workshop. I'm not holding on to the desk.” There was nothing superfluous on the desk: a calendar, a plastic writing set and only this black statuette — a perfect copy of that Titan standing in the park on a high pedestal right up in the sky, arm raised over the plants. And here on the desk, amid piles of paper, stood this miniature-dwarfed Titan, also a sign that he was always remembered in this cabinet.

“And what brings you here, Vira Pylypivna?” Loboda was sitting beside the desk, casual, legs crossed.

“Last night,” she began and cut herself short, for his eyes, always a little shifty, immediately blinked evasively, and for a moment it seemed to her that Volodka already knew all about it.

“I'm listening, go on.” . “The plaque was removed from the cathedral overnight...”

“Ah, Virunka. I thought you were here to see me about something concerning work, something urgent,” he said with disappointment. “You've really found something to come to me with. Believe me, more than just the cathedral rests on my shoulders... Let me first finish with this comrade from regional headquarters.”

But the comrade who was sitting modestly against the wall, a lanky fellow in a dark shirt with a tie, remarked that he would wait — that he would even find it interesting just to listen.

Volodka's goggly, bulging eyes again blinked imperceptibly, but he didn't even hint that he would have preferred to avoid this conversation. On the contrary, he said warmly to Virunka:

“Well, tell me what's happened there?”

She told him briefly, finishing nervously:

“This is some kind of high-handedness — without asking anyone, as if there were no authority!”

Loboda smiled at the comrade from the regional headquarters, as if apologizing for Virunka's awkwardness: what could one expect from her, she was an ordinary production worker, she exaggerated.

“There is authority, Vira Pylypivna,” he told her didactically. “And a very specific one at that. It is exactly you and I who have the honor to represent it.”

“Don't you try to pull one over me!” Virunka wanted to shout at him. “I know better than you what authority is. The village didn't elect me to the town council to be a chatterbox. Who are you trying to fool? I can see through you, you sneak. I can see right through you!”

“I didn't come here to listen to your lectures,” she said with heart. “Now to the point... It's lawlessness, you can't call it anything else...!”

“Shush, there's no need to get excited, Virunka. You and I are of a kind, we can always come to an agreement. It's a sin to attack a godparent of your child like this. Tell me instead, are you preparing a good welcome-home party for your Ivan?”

This was said with a smile aimed at the comrade sitting against the wall, to show off before him his knowledge of even the family matters of the plant workers. Noticing the interest shown by the comrade, Loboda explained to him that the husband of this Vira Pylypivna was the famous steelmaker Ivan Bahlay, who was tapping melt in Bhilai. His time would be up soon, and he was returning. He didn't evade Virunka's gaze, and while explaining this to the comrade, Loboda studied him at the same time, the “genius” probably itched to guess how the fellow would react to the question of the cathedral, so that he could appropriately correct his sails too. But the comrade was impenetrable as he listened to Loboda. Only after Loboda had finished, did he say to him in a soft voice:

“You really should look into this matter of the plaque. It really does seem strange.”

“True, this matter has slipped past our attention, Pavlo Antonovych,” Loboda hastened to admit, and his voice contained a sincere regret at this oversight in his work.

With her sharp eye Virunka had already noticed something else in the office: the edge of something shoved way back behind the safe, and covered with a poster, peered out from the twilight... something very much resembling a cast iron plaque!

“And what's that?” she asked and, without waiting for an answer, flew out of the office, angrily slamming the door behind her.

Not long afterwards she was sitting in the reception room of the secretary of the regional committee.

Chapter IX

It was as if gadflies had bitten everyone in Zachiplianka this day: there were many angry people.

“It seems almost like nothing, but it's as if they've spat into your soul,” said Fedir the roller. “I'm no architect, but I don't want the square to be empty.”

On top of everything his “Kama” had broken down too. And he had quarreled with his wife over nothing. Others also went about irritated and downcast. If Loboda the leading worker had appeared on Vesela Street on this day with his stainless optimism and fresh anecdotes, hardly anyone would have stopped to listen to his “Armenian Radio,” and they certainly would not have sat down with him to play dominoes — if you're so eager, sit down and play by yourself!

Then the nomadic brigade of restorers arrived here too, the ones who had previously erected that laughable scaffolding, which no one ever used, apart from the stork. They had hung about here for a month, made an encampment for themselves in the cathedral, drank vodka and took girls there — this was one of those brigades, whose work Zachiplianka called nothing but hackwork. Together with the plaque, the cathedral seemed to lose a cloak of protection and inviolability. Henceforth, it would be an object without a future, and this must have brought the botchers hurrying back (one could make a good penny on demolition too). Besides, this fraternity had remembered about some previously executed work here (though it was not worth a cent), remembered some agreement of theirs, which the mice had probably already eaten. The leader of the restoration brigade, a feeble old man in a beret, exhorted the villagers in the square to sign some kind of a document for him, explaining in a defensive tone why the work had been suspended back then:

“You know how it is: first the estimates weren't approved, then there was no drying oil...”

“You haven't got a soul,” Fedir the roller responded contemptuously.

“Brigadier — don't hit a man when he's down,” added Shurko, a driver of long-distance buses.

One of the restorers also complained that they weren't paid for the height, his fidgety eyes darting over the workers, seeking sympathy from them.

“According to the law, steeplejacks are supposed to be paid for height, and isn't that high?” And inviting everyone to be witnesses, he pointed at the central dome — rusty, with peeling paint.

The steelworkers looked up sullenly — that was quite some height. A pregnant woman, the daughter-in-law of furnaceman Tkachenko, looked up too, and grimaced, as if wanting to ask: “And my child won't see these domes and spires?”

The sky above the cathedral seemed more azure than usual on this day, filled with some kind of almost unbearable tenderness. There was neither haze, nor smoke from the plants. Swallows soared above, liking it here for some reason, soaring all summer above the cathedral's cupolas.

Talk in the crowd returned to the plaque from time to time, they talked about its origins, the older ones tried to remember when and by whom it had been cast, and it seemed as if this Zachipliankan plaque was cast practically by the decree of Lenin himself.

The teacher Khoma Romanovych, in whose class the legendary Maya Prapirna studied before the war, stood resigned behind the group of people, dried-up, gray, taking no part in the

discussions, only his eyes peeled to the cathedral, were wet with tears. He, probably more than anyone else, had reason to be upset. Because of this cathedral he had done time in Magadan, actually more for his temperament, for explaining far too fervently the history of the cathedral to the children. Many of the steelworkers, people of various generations, had also sat in Khoma Romanovych's class, and knew something about the history of the cathedral.

It had sprung up as if from a legend. After the destruction of the Sich, in Potemkin's times, the displaced Cossacks founded a monastery in these parts, in the swamps, which had belonged earlier to one of the borderland Zaporozhian companies. There in the swamps they cut their hair to become monks, took the Holy Scriptures into their hands instead of sabres. As if under siege, they changed into the gray everyday garb of the farmer. The wild red baggy pants of the Zaporozhian knights were covered with the mourning black of cassocks. And it was decided then at their cheerless council that they would build a cathedral — raise it up into the skies over these marshes teeming with fish, over the steppes where their horses grazed, so that their unbroken spirit would live on in this sacred structure, their freedom would shine in the sky with the glitter of inaccessible domes. The sabre may have been knocked from their hands, but the spirit of freedom and the desire for beauty had not been struck from their hearts! Their unbroken spirit would soar amidst the steppes for ages in this creation, rising into the heights as an embellishment to the Great Meadow — but who would build it? Who would be able to create it? A local teenager came forward, a clever fellow, with eyes large with inspiration. “Give me your blessing!” he said, and disappeared in the marshes. He was gone for three days, then returned to the Cossacks holding the ready cathedral on his palm, all made from reeds. He later told them how, exhausted, he had laid down in the marsh and dozed off, and the cathedral had appeared before him in his dreams.

Having examined the reed model, the Cossack council approved it: we shall build it!

And from then on the spherical domes of the cathedral began to cast their azure glow over the marshes, over this white world of the Dnipro...

Inclined to loquacity, Khoma Romanovych had once told his pupils something similar, but now, he no longer spoke about it. He was silent. He was silent about those legendary marsh reeds which once gave birth to the cathedral. He taught children arithmetic. Pure arithmetic, without any admixture — except perhaps for airing his soul occasionally with the younger Bahlay. Mykola was among his favorite pupils, the teacher believed in him and his unwritten poetry. And to those with doubts, he said in an almost straightforward tone:

“This youth is pure in thoughts and chaste in actions. One day he'll make our Zachiplianka famous, mark my word.”

During the civil war, when this place often changed hands, “lawless authority” attacked this cathedral too, the anarchists from Huliaypole received communion from the golden church chalices, but without the priest. The Huliaypolians took a liking to the large bell and decided to take it back with them to Makhnograd, to their steppe capital. On special devices they hauled off the hundred-pood bronze Cossack bell with oxen, across the Skarbne marshes; but while crossing a dam the carts collapsed under the enormous weight, the bell splashed into an extremely deep marsh lake, and they said it tolled for seven days before it struck the bottom! The old residents

still pointed to the place, which was no longer frightening; every summer children from the plant's Pioneer camps went swimming there.

Though there was nothing to do there, the people crowded into the cathedral square. Romtsia whetted his tongue on witticisms, agreeing that the idea of a shashlik house obviously won out over the cathedral. "Let's pull it down sooner, this hangover from the past! We'll build an enormous shashlik house in its place! Shashliks the size of half a lamb, Eastern food, jazz with striptease..."

"At least you could hold your tongue," Kashubenko the roller, black like a Gypsy, remarked with a frown.

Ancient grannies in dark kerchiefs had shuffled here all the way from the Hupaliv region, because they had caught wind of something about the plaque and had interpreted it their own way. According to them, they would be coming from the ministry today to open the cathedral. Thank God, someone had finally taken notice of their endless petitions!

Soon Shpachykha's voice was dominating over the voices of the Hupaliv grannies. Having finished marketing in the town, she returned to her kingdom, and immediately raised the cry to set about and write a complaint, signed by the whole village.

"I'll run from yard to yard myself and collect those signatures from you!" she shouted, addressing the residents of Zachiplianka. Shpachykha had forgotten when she last lit a candle for this cathedral; loaded down with bundles she never even looked up at its heights, and here she had suddenly began to rouse the people.

"It's remained standing under every regime!" the model ward leader cried out. "Why pull it down now? Whose throat is it choking?"

And seeing Oleksa the mechanic, who had just appeared in the square, she picked on him too:

"You still can't settle things with your Bublyk? And this high-handedness doesn't even bother you? You're the people's court representative, we voted for you!"

"What can I say?" the mechanic justified himself.

"Start up an action in court against the wreckers!"

"They should be tried! Tried for such things," the tank driver yelled angrily, supporting Shpachykha. He stood in an embroidered Hutsul shirt, erect as always, holding his stick. The stick was motionless, his face was raised, and it seemed as if the blind tank driver was looking at the cathedral too and could see it.

"It's remained standing under every regime!" Shpachykha began again, outraged by such want of justice. "And now it's to be demolished? 'One builds, another destroys...' Just as Shevchenko wrote!"

Mykola Bahlay did not join in the conversations. He didn't expect the fate of the cathedral to touch his Zachiplianka so sorely, a cathedral that seemed to stand in oblivion before this, and one would have thought, interested no one. Until now no one had probably even considered the question whether it should stand or not, whether it was possible to live without it, just as steelworkers never had any doubts about whether to appear for their shift, or to stand before an open-hearth furnace. So it turned out he had been wrong? — Thought that the beauty of this architectural masterpiece was accessible only to him, and that others were deaf to such things? Or

perhaps they really had been deaf? Perhaps only now the people were rediscovering their sense of beauty? And not only he alone was indignant that the hand of an ignoramus had dared encroach on this artistic creation. And anyway — where had this poacher's psychology come from? When in the whirlpool of revolution one had to destroy things in battles with the old world — that one could somehow understand, — battles had their own laws. An upheaval, an explosion of age-old hatred — where was there time to appraise things, when everything was going head over heels. But even then it hadn't been destroyed, someone had saved it, perhaps the people's healthy intuition had preserved it, and Lenin with his decrees had managed to protect it? And now, in stable peacetime, with growing material well-being, when art had been called to ennoble the human spirit, to awaken the yearning for the spiritual even in those who had become indifferent — at this time a gray Zachipliankan Herostratus came along, a poacher, a pygmy with a bulldozer or explosives. “No, comrade poacher, it's not so simple today,” Mykola thought. The need for the cathedral, the need for beauty, as much as the repugnance for destruction, had apparently always smoldered inside these people, builders by calling, only until now it had smoldered unnoticed, existing restrained somewhere deep in the recesses of the soul, they probably hadn't even noticed it in themselves. Just as Zachiplianka didn't pay much attention to the serenity of its summer nights until they were disturbed by someone, or to the glowing flowers of the blast furnaces while they burned. One became accustomed, attached no significance to things while they existed, one believed that it always had to be this way, like the eternal flow of time, like the inevitable beauty of the world. When a shadow fell on things, a storm hung overhead, one began to realize that there were things without which the soul would become impoverished. Today, the people had noticed their cathedral. To them, it was not subject to destruction, because they had accepted it as one accepts life's treasures, just as they had accepted from birth the blueness of the Dnipro, the crimson grandeur of the night sky over the plants, and the figure of the cast iron revolutionary Titan, which for the younger generation seemed to have come from eternity.

Chapter X

Volodka Loboda was not too frightened by Virunka's sudden attack of his office. True, when she discovered that plaque behind the safe, he felt a little uncomfortable, especially since the scene took place in the presence of a comrade from above, even though he was of a low rank. However, everything would eventually be forgotten, the mother of his godson would cease raging, and exactly which plaque had lain behind the safe — that still had to be proved. He wasn't such a naive person to begin the siege of the cathedral without securing his flanks. He was sure of himself, for he had support. The fellow whom Loboda considered a godfather, who had promoted him into a leading position, could not listen in peace when talk came around to the cathedral. That responsible comrade, one could say had burned his fingers on that cathedral; his wife had secretly had their children christened there. Before that, as it came to light later, she had blessed Easter bread every year too; those paskas were no big deal, but their own children — a scandal! And though the christening had not taken place in the cathedral, but somewhere in the village, secretly, carried out by a nomadic wandering priest, for some reason the responsible comrade vented his anger on the cathedral; he hated it with a vengeance. In the cathedral he saw the principal culprit of all the unpleasantness connected with the christening; the cathedral was guilty for his having received a severe reprimand and for the downfall of his planned career. He almost fell to the bottom, however, he fortunately managed to grab hold of quite a responsible rung. While this comrade was there, while he had influence, Volodka Loboda could inflict even greater blows upon that peeling heathen temple, and his enterprise would not be censured, on the contrary, it would find support.

The following day was a holiday, and early in the morning Loboda had decided to go to Skarbne. He would go to those heavenly places, swim his fill, rest his soul, harden himself — for a healthy body meant a healthy mind! And at the same time he could visit his old man in the veterans home. The old man had to be shown some respect every once in a while, and he had to see him about something, purely personal and intimate. When one was considering taking the decisive step in life, one couldn't do without this. It was an age-old custom among the people, that before marrying, a son had to ask his mother and father for a blessing, that there would be no happiness without this. And he wanted happiness — happiness and nothing else!

The morning was perfect, the sky clear, the forecast was for a fine day, so he would set out immediately! This time he would go alone — a person needed solitude at times — to be face to face with nature, with the poetry of the soul, to collect his thoughts. And today he needed no personal transport, he would set out as he was, simply, in his personal streetcar, as someone had put it. Well, streetcars would not be going to the marshes in the near future, however, there was the bus. No problem that there was a queue at the stop, that people pushed and shoved to get in. You only had to look sharp, stand right, and the crowd would drag you inside. In a civilized way you took a seat by the window, where a breeze was blowing and you sat modestly like an ordinary nameless passenger. Leading officials should travel like this with the people more often, associate with them on crowded, hot public transport, where no one knew you and you seemed to know them all — you sat there invisibly and studied their moods and their needs. To travel like this together with the toiling masses in overcrowded buses, to subject one's ribs to tests, having a different opportunity — not everyone was up to this. Moved, Loboda promised himself that even

when he went to work in that main Upper House, where one's steps were muffled by carpet, and several telephones stood on the desk, even then he would not order a car in the mornings, but would come to work on foot, so people couldn't say that Volodka Loboda had become haughty after being accepted into the apparatus.

The bus crossed an old wooden bridge, left to the populace by front-line sappers. There was heavy traffic across it, the wooden planking was being patched every day, and though there were no complaints from the passengers now, Loboda still placated them in his mind that in the near future the bridge would be demolished and replaced by another one, maybe resembling the one now clearly visible from the bus window: shining arches further up the Dnipro, uniting the banks, uniting the plants. The bridge rumbled past with loose boards, the bus flew out onto a wide asphalt road, which ran along the marshes and further on somewhere, to join major highways.

Along the asphalt highway lay new suburban towns, modern planned villages, that were quite different from that chaotically scattered Zachiplianka. Sunny buildings, multi-storied, but they all looked alike, built according to one blueprint, and the ceilings in them were low, as if in caves, built for dwarfs, but the number of them that had to be built! They were built from prefabricated blocks, racing up and up, by the speed method. Stay away from here for a week and you wouldn't recognize the place: new buildings rose from the sands — cheaply and angrily. The standard, they said. What would you have wanted? What else could be done with such a density of population? The statisticians showed that at the end of the century there would be ten billion plebs on the planet, so like it or not, you had to build up, skyscrapers might even grow where the Zachipliankan villas luxuriated in orchards now, especially that place of Yahor's, under a thatched roof. Of course if one weren't building for numbers, but with flair, with a spark, these monotonous boxes also could be livened up somehow, because at night, when a man was well under the influence, he couldn't even find his way home, becoming lost in this kingdom of standardization. Why not adorn, for example, one block in Caucasian style, another in Carpathian style, divide up the flowerbeds — sculptured here, with a flower clock there. “Laziness of thought, that's what is jamming us up,” Loboda the leading worker argued with someone. “How much we've fought over that contemporary ritual, the number of people we've involved in this, and it's as if they've conspired, offering texts, each more false than the next. And then we wonder that certain women, even wives of leading comrades, have Easter bread blessed, or find godparents and secretly christen their children... She wants her child to be dunked in water after all, and sprinkled with an aspergillum.”

The blocks of the new residential estate were left behind and immediately the view became more spacious. One could see far in all directions. The sun's flood had crested, and somewhere on the horizon the cathedral appeared again. They knew where to build it! No matter how far you went now, right up to the marshes, it would always stay with you. The cathedral could be seen from anywhere, from everywhere! From the side of the factories it at least didn't protrude so much, glistening with only the tops of its domes from behind other buildings and orchards, but from here it stood as if on a platter. You drove and drove, and it was still there. It should be moved somewhere from the horizon, so it would not irritate people's eyes. Someone seemed to have said at some conference: why do you need dozens of memorials from the eighteenth century? Why not leave one from each century, and the rest... Perhaps that really was the mood

there? Someone with the authority to question would be driving along the road, look up and say: “Is it still there, that whimsical cathedral? And how are things with atheist propaganda here? And sects? Those sects have probably multiplied, eh?” Try to prove to him then that the cathedral had no relationship to any sect, and that only perhaps the sparrows held services in it, flitting in through the windows.

It was a handsome structure, the carrion!

It grew like that out of reeds. The distance had swallowed everything, the rusty plated iron was not visible, leaving only poetry. It was master over the entire region, the whole horizon seemed to exist solely to offset it. And what if this really was a masterpiece? Our Cossack masterpiece? When would someone make just such an appraisal? Who then would be asked the questions — the smallest man, you! It was good that at least from here, from the asphalt road, the eye could not pick up what a dilapidated state it was in, one couldn't see the rust, nor the peeling paint, nor the broken windows — only the silhouette, the soul of its creator, as young Bahlay would have said.

And somewhere near there was Yelka probably reading a book. A few days before he had brought her a novel about the Cossack leader Sahaidachny, and she had been reading it yesterday. He had dropped in for a minute, and she couldn't even utter a word — eyes filled with tears. What's the matter? It turned out she had reached the part where Nastia was being sold to the Turkish pasha. This Yelka was a real treasure, a rare, wild product of nature. True, not so much product, as material, but what material! Let her be a little savage, a little unpolished, well perhaps this was better? He could form her himself, it was not yet too late. Though, plainly, it wouldn't be easy, one had to know the strength of materials well here. To think about Yelka — to imagine her in any way — was sheer pleasure for him. From the earth, from nature, she was all ablaze, smelling of the sun and the steppes. As for that don't-touch-me attitude of hers, he could find the key to that too! Here he kept visiting, and Katraty was doing his own bit there, preparing the ground. The old man had turned out to be progressive, even though he had once been entangled with the Makhnovites, back in prehistoric times.

The cathedral disappeared for a short while behind the trees of a windbreak, then emerged again. There was traffic on the highway, everyone was rushing back and forth, but it remained in the one place, like an axle, like a spire-peak towering over the life of the whole land. His father, Izot Loboda, had sung in that cathedral when he was still a youth; they said he had a voice like Patorzhynsky. Even now, after a drink or two, he could strike up a song. If others were proud of their fathers, then you could be doubly proud of yours. In his time he had been one of the best steelworkers; his name had thundered right down the Dnipro; he had competed with the legendary Makar Mazay. Throughout the whole war he was producing metal in the Urals; Volodka began his working life there with his father. A war child — he could have said that about himself. He grew up on ration cards; as a teenager he was already standing at a work-bench; in the frost his fingers stuck to the metal. His older brothers hadn't sullied their records either, least of all his father. The old man had a difficult personality though, and Volodka kept feeling more and more ill at ease with him. Even in the plant, when his father came to meetings where Volodka was to speak, the son immediately lost his good mood. He noticed a

strange thing: the mere presence of the old man immediately made all his words seem unreal, empty.

Volodka had grown up with the motto: people are the most valuable capital in the world. Wasn't that so? Didn't the glory of his brothers, who had died at the front, and his father's fame pave the way for him? Didn't he profit from their fame? Perhaps he had been promoted because of it? But no, he shouldn't belittle his own role, he didn't live on the achievements of others alone, he was valued for his own merits too. True, some of his peers had managed to soar higher, but he wasn't forgotten by life either. He wasn't any old dogmatist; he could still go a long way. Marriage wouldn't hurt him; even Yelka with her caresses would not lull to sleep that greed in him to move up the ladder, to take the Elbruses of life by storm. He had once heard someone (it could have been young Orlianchenko) say: "As soon as I find a good woman — that's it: I'll lock myself up in my small world, and do my own thing!" This would not be the case with him, Loboda, a happy marriage would only give him added energy... People would notice and appreciate it. More initiative was needed, more initiative! Don't show old things any mercy! Make room for the new, for innovations and contemporary rites. One could not go far on food alone, there was a need for housewarmings, dunking the newly-born, masked carnivals in workers' parks, so that things would be joyous and lively...! To demand from the lecture bureau that lectures in parks be livened up, for now the lecturer came out and babbled away from old notes about the structure of the universe, and before them sat three retirees, dozing on the park benches. They should take more care, intersperse their dry subject with folk wisdom, liven it up with proverbs, sayings — people paid attention to this now. Volodka was considered an expert on folk wisdom. Occasionally the leadership even turned to him to insert a juicy saying into a speech, to pepper it, where needed. He would have to read up on some more sayings, and more importantly, to create new ones himself, contemporary sayings, for who would create them, if not him?! He had to listen to the toiling masses, to capture gems; they knew how to leave one speechless: "We begin in the Komsomol and finish on social security..." And if you repeated someone else's witticism — there was no sin in that either: a Cossack is not branded, if he's not caught, he's no thief! He remembered how one time, when he was still in the Komsomol, he had the whole conference laughing with a quote from the Aeneid: "Zeus guzzled then raw brandy, followed down by herrings...!"

He had to read up on contemporary authors too; they must be writing something there, — thinking something. Loboda immediately became morose: Oh, we know those thinkers. They're not very strong on social realism, more on humanism... Present them with eternal questions, the eternal truths. This cathedral was for them — they'd stand before it all their lives and pray to it. Don't feed them bread, just give them those glorious Cossack times...! Strange people: they had everything, drove about in their own cars, but they still wanted something. They probably didn't know themselves what it was! Everything showered on them in a golden rain — prizes, laureateships; they were the pets of the nation. No, we've spoiled them! They criticize others and yet don't refuse comfort themselves! They probably didn't set out in buses like this very often. Or like that philosopher Skovoroda — knapsack on his back and off on foot across Ukraine. Today's philosopher did not crawl out of his limousine. True enough even though he is in his car, he knows everything, the rogue, hears everything. Just let him get wind of you, should he find out

somehow about this story with the cathedral plaque, for instance, he wouldn't pass it by, he'd churn out a whole novel about the cathedral...! What a public! What a despicable people!

And the younger ones strained in the same direction. Volodka recently met a plant poet in the editorial office of a factory newspaper. And he wasn't a bad fellow, but a good worker, the workshop Komsomol organizer, but his poetry — just like that young Bahlay, everything on a planetary scale: Titan and Antititan, the plant gate and the gate to our age. He tried to criticize him: “Why do you keep harping on this, on gates? You reach the gate and come to a stop. Go inside! You're not only a poet, but a Komsomol organizer too! Write about the production process. Write about the workshop! Sing praises to the work of your hands!” And his eyes were filled with irony: “Comrade Loboda, have you forgotten that it's not acceptable to talk about my production?” A real Eluard!

The cathedral still stood as if on a platter. Viewed from here, from a perspective, it had something of a cosmic spaceship about it, especially that central cupola, aiming steeply upward. It was strange: the number of craters the bombs had dug in Zachiplianka, and not one had touched it. In spite of all the bombs, it continued to stand like an antibomb — point upwards, into the sky, the heights.

They knew how to erect it, anticipating the ravages of time! And now he had to fight it, and who knew if he'd win yet.

But that was enough of that. There was no need to think about unpleasant things! Today should be a Day of Serene Sunshine, a Day of Pleasant Thoughts! (This too was an invention of his, worth remembering. He could offer it on occasion to the factory youth, those wingless ones, — perhaps they would pick it up?)

The marshes, at last! Skarbne. Everything in a tumult of greenery, summer in full bloom. It offered its green embraces to the arriving city dwellers, breathed fresh forest air, health. Buses kept arriving one after another, disgorging people armed with fishing rods and reels, loaded down with knapsacks. They were all immediately swallowed up by the forest, the green twilight interwoven with sunshine — they dispersed, vanished, nowhere to be seen. The numbers of them that the city spewed out here on holidays, and there was enough marsh for everyone; nature had spread out its wings, strewing the treasures of the former Cossack forest and pasture. It did not begrudge even today's people the tranquil waters nor the bright stars, which couples in love could count here at night.

The undergrowth, reeds, groves and grovelets, river branches with fallen trees soaking in the water, small and large stretches of water, paths and tracks — a stranger could easily get lost in this marsh, which was never-ending! The river meandered about, on one such elbow Volodka had his own long-since chosen spot, with a beautiful stretch of water, with a sparse forest of age-old oaks. This was near Babyne Kolino, where more than one fish soup was consumed, more than one bottle of “Ararat” downed. When he reached this place today, just as he opened his eyes wide — the place was swarming! The forest was splitting with cars and motorcycles. There were shorts on every bush, record-players were roaring, the water boiled with bathing costumes, children and adults were swimming together, bodies glistened, balls flew about, lifebuoys blazed brightly — a firework of sun, a festival of color, a banquet of luxurious summer. Many of the cars bore private numbers, belonging to some old metallurgical engineer or even ordinary steel

worker, who, having gathered together his whole family, stuffed his Moskvych or Zaporozhets with passengers to the bursting point, and came here with them to taste his fill of the forest air. Loboda swelled with pride: here was where one should study the standard of living! Though they might not yet have taken the lead in milk and meat, though so far they had only come up with a slogan. However, what a mood there was, life was blossoming all around — you could shoot a color film of it all! And they were taking photographs! Shooting film! A familiar army commissar positioned his obese woman dressed in a bathing costume near a bush — unable to capture her right, finding it hard to squeeze her into the Japanese lens.

Loboda was no stranger here either. From this and that company people called out:

“Volodka, greetings!”

“Volodymyr Izotovych! Come join us!”

It was great when you weren't a zero to people. You were accepted in any company, you were wanted everywhere, for they knew how friendly you were, even able to cheer up the dead! To get some game going or to organize a song — all this worked out well for him, came off with flair, he hadn't lost his touch even now! A girl in a panama hat and tightly-fitting pants waltzed past, lightly rocking her hips, short, thin-waisted, probably one of those doing their internship in Koksokhim. She smiled at Loboda as if he were a friend, and he felt even more pleased with himself. Really, how little a person needed to feel good!

A problem arose where to undress. Friends were friends, but it could happen that you'd recognize your clothes only the following day at the rag market. Besides, he had his documents in his pocket — one couldn't fool with them. He decided to settle down near the army commissar. While he was changing beside this fleshy couple, the army commissar and his feisty mate were rewarded with a funny story about the general who was robbed in the train, his general's pants with stripes removed — oh how difficult the poor fellow found it later to prove that he was a general!

Left in shorts, Volodka surveyed himself. It was bad that his body was white. The students wrestling over there, they were all like Polynesians already, but with the daily trivia, the worries, he had no time to get any sun. But even though his body was white, it was strong, healthy, full-bred — the Loboda line, Cossack blood. And how he would go for a swim, to wash away the dust of weekday life!

He dived into the water with a splash. Swimming around, tickled by the water, he sent splashes into the air with his hands — a blind glittering rain fell down on him from the blue of the sky!

He finished swimming, refreshed, invigorated. Skarbne was able to restore one in a flash. Nearby some girls in wet bathing suits were playing ball — long-legged, big-thighed girls. He joined them and played ball for a while also. The forest, the sun, jokes, games — this was the life. Perhaps this was it — bliss? Simple and earthy — like Yelka. No, we don't know how to relax, comrades, how to utilize nature's own weal! We're destroying ourselves. From now on, he would make it a habit to come to Skarbne on his days off. They would go to the Vovcha River, pitch a two-man tent and sleep in the forest under the stars. And they would sleep in the forest in the winter too, in fur-lined polar sleeping bags!

Dried off, warmed by the sun, he splashed into the water again, swam about, dived, surfaced, had water fights with someone else's children.

After this he didn't refuse the offer to lunch with the army commissar, otherwise the fellow's wife would have been upset that he hadn't tried her lavish spread on the rug. Here one could drive boldly into this land of bounty! Venturing out without anything, one would always find something to eat with other people, just like those students cooking chumak kasha nearby. They were quite something! Borrowed a cauldron from one group, some salt from a retired general, received an onion from someone, a potato from someone else, a handful of millet from elsewhere, only the water was theirs — Skarbne spring water. They gathered a tribute from everyone, put it all together, and the chumak kasha was already bubbling away in the cauldron, while they waited, surrounding it hungrily, holding spoons which were also borrowed from neighbors — and they were guffawing too: the prehistoric ancient forest of weal and plenty, why shouldn't it be able to feed this small handful of hungry students?

On his behalf Loboda also quoted, out loud, so that those dorm students could hear:

”Zeus guzzled then raw brandy, followed down by herrings!”

The army commissar's wife was in rapture. And her freckled Zeus liked it too; he even inquired where it was from; it turned out the poor soul hadn't even heard of Kotliarevsky. He said that he seemed to recall a historian Kotliarevsky, a monarchist apparently. All right, now he would also know about the author of our dazzling Aeneid!

“I'll get hold of the poem tomorrow,” he said. “True, I still can't read very well in your language, but I'll master it: I have a soldier's perseverance.”

He was a good-natured fellow, this army commissar, his whole body covered in freckles. He had grown fat after forsaking drill, his biceps were swimming, stocky and solid. A Pomor, from Lomonosov's parts, was once best pals with polar bears. He took that Zeus to heart, repeated it several times, but when it came down to business, he didn't act very Zeus-like at all, only spreading out his arms dolefully: he had suffered a heart attack. The first bell, as they said, but he nodded encouragingly at the bottle with five stars, which stood in the middle of the rug, a translucent amber:

“Please, help yourself.”

“At least have a drop with me...”

He spread his arms out even more dolefully. And his wife confirmed his story:

“It's his heart.”

And she couldn't drink either, had a liver ailment.

Their descendant, a milk-white blond fellow with a protruding forehead, an architect from youth, had just emerged from the water and, dropping his frog flippers and diving mask on the grass, he sat by the rug in his swimming trunks. Loboda hoped that at least this one would show everyone what a Cossack he was, but he turned out to be gutless too: he wouldn't budge! Because you see, he was driving and all that. Then why did they bring this bottle with them to the forest? They put it out only for show, just in case someone joined them, and themselves — they were some kind of ascetics! He felt very uncomfortable drinking alone, they might think he was a drunkard, and he was forced to restrict himself to lemonade. Oh well: he could refrain from drinking, stay dry. Let this day also be Temperance Day!

On this subject, Loboda also told them a tale from his past, while still in the Komsomol, how the boys once played a trick on him during a speech, placing a carafe of vodka in place of water on the rostrum. It was all right, he kept toasting his speech without even making a face, satisfactorily bringing the talk to a close. And some “five star” cognac was standing here untouched — what a real pity.

The young architect heartily dug into the food after his swim, but sat silently, making no effort at all to talk, though he should have known better how to behave in company. He only frowned and munched greedily on home-made beefburgers. Why was he frowning so much? Had he suffered a defeat in love, or was he thinking about his Corbusier? He paid no attention to Loboda, did not react at all to the guest's witticisms. Even those big-thighed girls, who drew closer with their ball, swinging their hips, even they seemed inconsequential to him. Young, healthy, fresh-cheeked — at this age every fiber in a person's body should be alive, and he sat there looking so morose. Was a new generation of insensitive dullards emerging, unemotional rationalists? (Loboda had heard somewhere about this.)

Checking his appetite, the architect got up straight away, thanked his mother politely, and without even looking in Loboda's direction, went to join the students cooking kasha. Soon he was in their company, talking animatedly about something with Mykola Bahlay, who had also appeared from somewhere, dressed only in wet swimming trunks, attracting the attention of the girls with his Hellenic build. Loboda wanted to hear their conversation, to see what they thought, these sceptical intellectuals. As he drew closer, he heard that they were talking about the cathedral. He joined in from afar, calling out:

“What's happened here, Mykola? They say someone played a joke' with the plaque? But our cathedral didn't fall down because of it.”

Bahlay trembled. He grew pale under his tan. He obviously wanted to say something in reply, but refrained.

“Is it worth creating so much fuss over this?” Loboda continued cheerfully. “I know Zachiplianka: don't feed it bread, just let the people scream and shout a little. Anyway, we cast the plaque ourselves, if need be, a new one can be made. We have our own masters at molding; there's no need to bring them in. Our Zachiplianka could even cast a devil; isn't that so?” he turned to Mykola.

But he saw only tightly pursed lips and half-closed eyes filled with animosity.

“What types these times give birth to,” Bahlay said to the architect, turning away with undisguised contempt from Loboda. And the army commissar's young son also turned his back in disdain. Leaving their interlocutor behind, the discourteous two walked down to the river bank as if Loboda hadn't even been with them, as if only somebody's worthless shadow had flitted past them.

Anyway, he still had to think of his father. Overcoming a minute of indecision, Loboda returned to the army commissar. He was no longer lost or disgraced. Even managed a smile. He dressed slowly, thanked the hospitable couple, explained that he was off to visit his father, a steelworker. No one detained him. It was clearly understood: the son was off to visit his father.

Chapter XI

Refreshed by the waters of Skarbne and caressed by the sun, Loboda walked slowly along a forest path, imagining how pleased the old man would be, how expertly he would weave the fabric of the conversation, leading his father to the most important point, to his intention of establishing a family at last. Perhaps after he married it would even be worth taking his father in? Yelka, of course, wouldn't object. The old master would have good care in family surroundings; there would be grandchildren; he would take them out for a stroll. Which bearded fellow was that playing so nicely with the little children? It was old Loboda, an honored steelworker of the Republic, the father of the Loboda who was now up there. Exactly where "there" was, that wasn't quite clear yet; it was swathed in the mist of obscurity, several variants were possible. It was interesting how his father would take the news about his marriage. Reserved, stern by nature, but even he would probably be touched: "I've waited a long time for this, son! Taking an ordinary village girl? I praise you for that. We've already seen frivolous ones... I wish you well. I bless you."

The Steelworkers' Home was in a picturesque place by the forest, on the lake, with a view of the distant plants which continued to billow smoke on the horizon. And a little more to the right along the horizon — the cathedral again. The ancient Cossack architects, in founding their residence here in the deserted marshes, must have consciously planned their sanctuary so that they could see it all the time. There wasn't a trace left of the their old sanctuary, except perhaps for some cellars and foundations; the rest was all new. A low whitewashed stone wall enclosed a spacious yard, and near the forest, covered with greenery, stood a white three-story building with columns — like a real expensive forest sanitarium. It was built with the Steelworkers' union funds back in the times of Ordzhonikidze. Here, in times of prosperity, under the wing of the state, lived those who had earned their right to society's attention through honest work. Very opulent gardens stretched into the marshes, and like a good farmstead it was stocked with cows (fresh milk every day!), turkeys, ducks, orchards, grape vineyards... The pensioners looked after all this themselves, but no one was forced to work here. If you desired work — then please, go ahead, but it was done entirely of one's own volition, on communal principles, so to speak; choose a pastime for which you have an inclination, for which your soul yearns. Some were inspired by fowl, others by bees. Those who loved grapes — let their vine-shoots grow heavy with grapes, those with a taste for the tomato could grow the meaty Bulgarian variety. On the soft marsh soil, enriched with spring silt, everything grew fantastically, straining upwards as if it were on some other planet warmed by another nourishing sun. Or maybe some kind of biological stimulator really was active in these swamps? Everything was gigantic here — pumpkins one couldn't lift. From a single eye of a potato one would dig up a whole bucket of potatoes. Break open a watermelon — it flamed like hot coals; there was a ton of sunlight in it, red and juicy — a royal dessert, refreshing, cooling, hermetically sealed by nature in a mottled or misty skin. It was paradise rather than life!

And people lived in this paradise, your ordinary Soviet people. One like his father, Izot Ivanovych, a veteran worker, a real representative of his highness, the working class. True, it hadn't happened without demagogy; he had to hear from others that he had made his own father a dependent of the state. But if one were to listen to everyone — anyway, we are the state. Of

course old age didn't agree with everyone. Everything remained in the past for these people. They clung to memories, lived on past deeds — unlike him, for whom everything still lay ahead! His future was a golden field of activity, appointments and promotions. True, the damned trivia was killing him. There was not time to think of himself, let alone his father — telephone calls, inquiries, dispatches. If any of you dear veterans want family warmth apart from prosperity and your jobs on the side, then understand this: life is life, it has its own inexorable laws. It's possible that some old Bolshevik from Barykadna, a participant in three revolutions, was forced to live the last of his days here alone too. Let him forgive us for visiting him so rarely. For someone has to set life in motion, we cannot become nannies at his side, we need to produce metal, rolled iron, high quality steels... You yourselves created all the possibilities for us. Grow! And one has to grow.

Loboda entered the yard with such thoughts on his mind. Old people shuffled before the main sparkling-white building: some warmed themselves in the sun, others sat in the shade, dozing as they probably did every day, for there were no weekdays here; one didn't have to hurry off to the plant; there was one enormously long holiday here, as in a future society.

His father was nowhere to be seen.

The director of the institution, a heavy man with a shaven head, was sitting in the shade of a green walnut tree in his silk suit and, having put on his glasses, was reading a book. A person of responsibility, he was on call even on Sundays. Loboda became acquainted with him back when he was making arrangements for his father. A regular soldier of high rank and who would have thought that this iron old-timer would turn into such an archpastor, the assiduous peaceful manager-overseer of this residence of happy pensioners.

Loboda the son came up, greeted the director with a handshake. However, for some reason the latter responded without much enthusiasm, displeased perhaps that his comrade had not been around to visit his old father for a long time, or simply because his reading had been interrupted (he just couldn't read his fill, having seven rest days a week!). He told Loboda that his father was alive and well, and if need be, he could be found. Beckoning to one of the younger pensioners, he delegated him to go down to the bee garden and seek out Izot Loboda from ward seven. While he was saying all this, a thin grimace of displeasure played on his face. Only after the visitor inquired about the book, what it was about, did the old-timer seem to become a little more benign. It turned out that he had in his hands a book about the life of Campanella. There had been such a person, an Italian monk imprisoned for many years, and he had written his book there in prison — about the City of the Sun. The work was serious, though it had provocative passages — Utopia, actually. The director was obviously a seasoned critic, because yielding to no authority, he confidently set about criticizing Campanella. What the fellow had dreamed up, could be dreamed up only by a monk and an eternal prisoner: rationed distribution of clothing, food, the fruits of labor... he even foresaw the apportionment of women.

“Women, eh?” Loboda smiled with interest.

“Yes, women. They would not be chosen by the call of one's heart, but would simply be allocated by the joint consent of members of the community. This was how he imagined the ideal future of society, the City of the Sun. Identical food, identical language, identical clothes would be worn in that society. So everything would be equal, by tickets, by tokens... The psychology of

an eternal prisoner, only this can give birth to such a conception of ideal existence. But ask anyone, even any old inhabitant of the jungles, and he will tell you that such limited happiness is not enough for him,” the retired Skarbne sage commented seriously. True, he showed the monk generosity too: he had lived a heroic life and so could be forgiven many things. He had proven how much a person could stand, to what limits his endurance reached.

“Perhaps his teachings would have been more accessible to those monks who once went about here in Skarbne in identical robes, lived by a single covenant, acknowledging the same prayers and regimen. The philosophy of standardization would have been understood by them, but we aren't ascetics; army barracks aren't the pinnacle of everything. The severity of barracks, even if it is necessary, only comes at a certain stage. In general it is an abnormal phenomenon and transient in life... People's happiness lies not in this; the future will not mold everyone in the same style as you imagined, Comrade Campanella.”

Loboda listened to this clever fellow, who had himself been through every barrack, listened to his thoughts about the ideal and checked a skeptical smile inside himself, itching to know what was lurking under the facade of wisdom and kindness of this former lieutenant-colonel of the guard: “You read Campanella, and yet you probably warm your hands at our parents' expense? Turkeys, grapes, watermelons, jobs on the side, a full cup everywhere, and all under your authority — what kind of state control is there over you?”

His father had still not appeared. The director placated him that the old man would be found, even though he was not close: he had wandered off with Yaroveha to the apiary, to their friend there — they had a hut there, not so much for watching over the place, as for having a place to talk — bee enthusiasts. They might even down a glass in honor of Sunday. That was allowed there, so long as they weren't on the grounds. Loboda the son smiled: yes, the old man once knew how to drink — like a real worker, drinking Cossack gulps.

“My old man is a real Cossack: even drinking from mugs cannot topple him off his feet.”

“No, Volodymyr Izotovych, they drink there in prescription doses,” the director assured him. “They take a miserly shot-glass between the three of them and drink like old men...”

And cheering up, he began to explain the way they consumed it, drinking it with honey. Half a glass of freshly-obtained honey, and a little of that — and one could also add a green walnut.

“You probably wouldn't mind indulging in a cocktail like that yourself,” Loboda thought. “Because you're explaining it far too enthusiastically.”

While his father was being found, Loboda the son decided to take a look at his father's cell. Inasmuch as the visitor was not an ordinary man, the director himself accompanied him. Nothing had changed since Volodka had brought the old man here to settle him in. The ward was like any other — sunny, clean, geraniums on the windowsill, a white curtain, two dressers, two beds. His father's bedding was in a crumpled pile, and the director was a little embarrassed, saying apologetically that he couldn't teach the individuals in this ward to make their beds every day — they just got up and left, sometimes for the whole day.

“Like a true bachelor,” Loboda the son said cheerily. “He got it from mother at times back home for this too. He would come back from the night shift, especially after he had been working two shifts in a row, collapse onto the bed just as he was, and snore away.”

His father's roommate had several photographs over his bed in hand-made, assiduously fashioned frames: some woman, a youth in a tunic with stripes, a colorful clipping from a magazine, a reproduction of the painting "Tapping the Melt". But above his father's bed there was nothing, and if there had been something pinned up there, it had fallen off. Now there was only a naked pin in the wall, crumbs on the dresser and a fly zooming irksomely over them.

There turned out to be even more flies in the dining room, into which the visitor also stepped — they buzzed about everywhere here; this was plain carelessness, and in passing Loboda suggested they get some flypaper. Visibly perplexed, the director defended himself by saying that there was flypaper already hanging here. However, it was hot, the kitchen was nearby, so it was understandable. As if to cover up his oversight, he even offered him some retiree borsch, with duck on the menu, with a rich broth, but the respected visitor thanked him, saying he had recently eaten. Overall, Loboda was satisfied with the state of the dining room. The tables were scraped clean with knives. A delicious smell came from the kitchen. The washed dishes stood in neat military piles on the tables... Rubber plants in tubs stood in every corner of the dining hall. Leafy branches hung over the windows outside, creating a cozy green semi-twilight.

"It's habitable," he said demurely to the director, so as not to overdo it.

They visited the Red Corner too. Here, as should have been expected, were chess games, drafts, dominoes. Play all you like! The wall newspaper was in its place. Quite old though, from before May Day. "They're reluctant to write anything," the director explained apologetically.

"And how is my old man? Participating?" Loboda asked.

"Refuses point-blank, won't even submit a single paragraph."

"You should draw him into the choir," the son suggested. "Do you have a choral group?"

"Yes, it gets together occasionally. But again, you must realize, they're old people, they haven't the voices."

"Well, you haven't heard my father," Loboda retorted proudly. "Back home, when he got going, launched into our ancient songs — the whole of Zachiplianka listened to him. He'd walk over anyone younger."

"When he's out catching fish at night, he sometimes tries out his voice. We can hear him from here. But you just can't get him into the choral group."

"An independent Cossack soul!"

"But we can forgive him that. For everything here is strictly voluntary. If you don't want to sing here — sing among nature, on your own. Forest, water, open spaces — that's his choral group."

Everything here was reminiscent of a sanitarium. Even if some Utopian socialist were to inspect this happy refuge for veteran workers, he probably would not find anything special to which to take exception. Loboda the son said exactly that to the director. For one could really sense a deft hand in everything; only there was a stuffiness, everywhere, an air of old age — in the wards, in the passages. Did they air them badly?

It was evident from everything that the director treated old Loboda with respect. He praised him, speaking highly of him, especially with respect to his work. He was a hard worker, an honest fellow, supplied the kitchen with fish year round. He didn't argue with anyone, like those old women who sometimes even had to be stopped.

“Well, and he reads books! Recently read about Genghis Khan. Swore he didn't see any changes in man's savage nature. We had a long discussion with him about it.”

“Oh, you can't get the better of him there!”

“Only your old man often mopes. Goes outside the gate, sits down, and can sit there sorrowfully for an hour or more...”

While they spoke, lingering outside the library, a dried-up old man sat in a corner of the hall, hunched over a piece of paper, scratching and scratching something with his pen. He was small, like a wrinkled mushroom, and his face had a mushroomy grayness about it too. He pulled his head in between his shoulders. Only occasionally did he look up, throwing an angry bitter glance at Loboda. He didn't even reply to Loboda's greeting, when the fellow came inside and politely said hello. “Who was he? What was he writing so assiduously, so anxiously, without a breather, as if in a hurry to go somewhere? Where do you need to hurry to, old man?” Loboda thought, feeling badly from those vicious, sullen glances of his. And when they stepped out into the hall, he softly asked the director.

“Who is he, that fellow?”

“Ah, that...” the director stammered. “A frightening fellow. He scribbles off to every court.”

“Dissatisfied with something?”

“With everything in the world. He censures everyone from top to bottom — a fanatic cultist. Says he was a Stalinist, and will die one. Keeps demanding that I take out the leader's bust from the storeroom and set it up in the yard over the flower bed... It used to stand there once, but you can't put it back there now, can you?”

It was a slippery subject, and Loboda made no reply, hurrying outside onto the veranda. He stood among the columns, where there was shade. Barely audible music reached him from the forest. People were whiling away the hours there, life was bubbling away; everyone was breathing fresh air, having a good time. But this one fellow had retired on his own, crawled off into a corner like a cockroach, and sat in the Red Corner, fabricating denunciations. What types there were!

At last his father appeared on the horizon. Loboda the son would have recognized him from a hundred verst off, this old Cossack with a large forehead and a mighty face topped with disheveled gray hair. The voice of blood, did it really exist? What had touched his soul then, when he saw the person so dear to him like this? There was something dear in his gait alone, in his arms, which stuck out, in that gray bristling mass on his head... The old man was in his everyday clothes: in canvas pants, a cotton shirt on his bony shoulders — which seemed old-fashioned to the son — made from linen, like the ones chumaks used to wear. In these everyday clothes the old master, Loboda, strode sedately across the yard. In the past, giants were selected for the steel plants, and he was one of them — a head higher than those old men who accompanied him at a trot. His face, naturally large, seemed swollen — perhaps he had been sleeping in the hut, or maybe he had put on weight on the sanitarium's food? Light, flat-bellied, with a broad bony chest — he moved along steadfastly, looking straight ahead, offering the sun his round wise forehead. A patriarch! King Lear! The prophet Isaiah! The son simply feasted his eyes on his father, admiring his every step — firm, confident, proud. The old master seemed to be moving against a wind, a storm!

For a moment a thought flashed through the son's mind: he must have done well for himself, to be stepping so firmly. And he felt almost fearful in the face of his father's majesty.

Standing beside a column, the son awaited his father with a smile, with love, a son's pride toward his father, and he — he seemed not to recognize him! Stopping several steps short of the veranda and leaving his son unnoticed, he asked the director sternly:

“You called for me?”

The director said almost apologetically:

“Your son's here to see you...”

Only now did Izot Loboda look at his son. Looked at him with angry, surprised, bloodshot eyes. A sure sign that strong mead, and not syrup, had been consumed in that apiary. Hay stuck out from his tousled gray hair — he had probably been relaxing in the hut after lunch, it would have been better not have awakened him. He held a grass truss in his hand, the way he held a belt when Volodka was a child. He showed no sign of parental feeling, staring at him silently with his red gaze.

“Here's your son,” the director repeated, to relieve the tension.

The father seemed scalded by the word.

“Son? Do I have a son?” His large face became even more swollen, flushed: “I had sons! One near Kryvyi Rih, the other in Berlin... I have no more.”

“Dad...”

“I was dad!” he thundered for the whole yard to hear. “While I carried you about in my arms! While I rocked you in the cradle! But what father am I now? I'm a dad no more! A parasite of the state! Into the refuge with him! Into the poor-house! A childless beggar, not a dad!”

The old man was seething. It was frightening to look at him, his face crimson: he might get sunstroke, fall to the ground like a cross in the middle of the yard, his lower jaw out of joint.

But the old man did not fall, standing as solid as a bell.

The scene was frightening. People appeared from everywhere. Soon quite a few of them were standing about the yard, even near the shed, against the whitewashed stone wall, resembling Scythian idols brought in from the steppes and placed in disarray on the grounds of a museum. They did not join in the quarrel, however. Loboda Junior felt intolerably uncomfortable with their dry, thorny gazes resting on him. He felt himself thrown into someone's clutches, into a trap. Just to think that all this wasn't a nightmare, a dream, that all was reality: Skarbne, and the beautiful sunny day, and this explosion of his father's anger and hatred. Refuge! Poorhouse! Ghastly, ghastly.

Even the director must have been stung by that “poor-house.”

“It's no poorhouse, if you'll let me point out... Besides, your son makes his payments for you regularly. He has never had to be reminded.”

This angered the old man even more. The disheveled fan of his beard shot up:

“Well thank you! Thank you for paying your installments regularly for your own father! Like union dues! For your father! Ooh! You couldn't pay your debt to me with your life!” he bellowed at his son again, and the blood rushed to his face again.

Anxious, the director suggested he come into the shade, to guard against sunstroke, but the old man seemed not to hear him. However, there was something helpless in his anger, and the

son caught this helplessness, and felt something respond in his heart through the insult, something which rarely surfaced. If only he could have fallen at his father's feet here, becoming a small child. He could whip him with that ruddy truss until he was bleeding, even use a wire whip, so that through the whipping, the pain, he could receive forgiveness. But it seemed that this would not happen. Before him stood a stranger, red with hatred, eyes bloodshot with bloody rage, with a truss of rusty grass in his large shaking hand. The sun burned him, sweat poured from the hemispheres of his forehead. Everything was horrific, this very day, the delirium of the person who was your father, and the sweat of tension, the sweat of hatred on his forehead.

His father wasn't wearing the freshest of shirts; his bony shoulders stood out underneath it; his hands were black — the extremely heavy hands of a god of the plant furnaces, which for the rest of eternity would not whiten from the flames and soot. “Dad, perhaps you need something? Something to wear perhaps? Dad, tell me! You'll have everything, I'll even get some bird's milk, if you want it!”

Your father doesn't want your bird's milk; his soul won't accept it. It is only flaring up in a fire of outrage because you uprooted it, parted it from its native village, from his good old friend Yavor. The sun burned and burned, rousing the intoxication of the mead in the old man, an intoxication of anger and insult, obviously not momentary, not flaring up on the spur of the moment, but something which had simmered for days and nights here in Skarbne.

“Whistlers, whistlers,” he babbled haphazardly. “Admit them in... They'll whistle everything away!”

Old Yaroveha found an apt moment and came up to his friend, reached up and planted a straw hat to his head, several more veterans came up and began to persuade Izot Ivanovych, until they finally led him into the shade, sat him on a bench. But he didn't calm down there either — both the son and the director, and the people who hung about, heard him spin more nonsense, blasting the power engineers, and again this fellow, who until now had been considered his son, to his gray father's shame. Before he had been planning to demolish the cathedrals, but now he was trying to wheedle a way to flood the swamps, to drive his father from here too! This had to be pure fantasy, complete balderdash; the son hadn't even heard a rumor of such a thing. He wanted to yell out, to deny it: “Dad!” But his father only hissed at him and continued to boom, sending an echo through the place: he had already gotten together with those plunderers from the state farm; they wanted to build another Hydro-Electric Station, what did they care about the swamps and Skarbne? They would sink with a bang! It would be like over there near Kakhovka, where half of Ukraine was flooded, where they thought they were building a sea, but built a mire instead! And now it rotted away, stinking across the whole of Ukraine! Pilots held their noses when they flew over it.

“That one's not enough for you, you slovenly power engineers? Casting your eye at Skarbne?”

“Dad! Come to your senses! What are you saying? When was I ever a power engineer?”

“You play their trumpet! Whistlers, not engineers! Give them the freedom — they'll destroy everything! Whistle everything away! And you too...”

“Dad someone's been slandering me!”

“Shut up! You've slandered yourself! Through and through...!”

The cook came up and began to placate the old man:

“Now why have you gone and flown into a temper, Izot Ivanovych? He's your son after all. He pays for your stay here...”

It would have been better had she not said that. The old man jumped to his feet again, threw the straw hat onto the ground:

“I spit on your money! I don't want it, don't pay it! I'm not a father to you any more! From this day on! Hear that? You have no father! You renegade!”

And though there was no one at all from Zachiplianka here, there wasn't even a trace of that taunter Bahlay, but he clearly heard the words ring through the air, like the slash of a razor:

“Father-seller!”

It was very hot, but he was thrown into a chill: “Dad, what are you doing to me?”

Bristling all over, the old steelworker took a step toward his son, holding onto the column in confusion:

“Did I call you here? Out of my sight!”

Followed by a resolute, banishing gesture.

“The gesture of damnation!” Loboda the son thought, already beyond the gates.

The shirt had stuck to his back, he was covered in a sticky sweat all over. Why had he come here? In what disastrous moment had he decided to visit his father? In the heat of the moment he still could not completely fathom the consequences this would have, how it would reflect on his whole future, though he sensed that it would reflect terribly, destructively, felt the confidence, authority and promotions give way under his feet like quicksand — everything reeled and collapsed, crushed by his father's heavy judgment, his drunk chatter. It was better to be an orphan than to have such a father! Another father would have been proud of his successes, his position, the fact that he was rising up the ladder, but this one? — His own father slandering him in public, dreaming up some HES, the flooding of Skarbne... Though in reality there was something in that, this idea was worth considering! Because what good were these swamps? They only bred mosquitoes! Rubbish and food scraps all through the forest! We're transforming the Dnipro, so why not transform Skarbne? By flooding it, or conversely, draining it? But that had to be considered in a calm state of mind, not now. What a ghastly scene! And the most horrifying thing was that everything took place in public, in the presence of those gray retirees, who stood about the yard the whole time, immovable, like Scythian stone idols, mute witnesses to his degradation and destruction. No one intervened, but everyone heard, took in every word of his father's curses, and that bitter character upstairs probably jotted down every last word, still probably scribbling away up there. What a wretched day! What a cursed place! “Escaping from the wolf, into the bear's lap” he remembered the saying quite inopportunoely.

Catching his breath, smoothing the wet cobwebs of hair on his head, Loboda set off down the path toward the road.

Chapter XII

The plants covered the whole horizon with smoke. They had no days off. Day and night they smoked with epic calm. The cathedral exuded its soft silhouette from the sky. It stood on the distant horizon, protruding through in the transparent blue haze of distance. From a different perspective the cathedral domes and the plant chimneys seemed to come together, to unite into one ensemble the edifices of the old and the new age.

The young architect sat at the wheel, driving his car along the highway. The military commissar and his wife felt fearless when their son was at the wheel: he drove confidently, smoothly, almost elegantly. This was not the first time the military commissar had come this way, he had spent many a year in these parts. He was born in the Solovetski Islands, where a stern archangel watched over everything from the monastery gates, where polar seagulls screamed over the eternal ice. In the dungeon of one of the monastery towers the Tsarina made Kalnyshevsky, the last Cossack leader of the Zaporozhian Sich, rot for twenty-five years in irons. In chains, in filth, with fingernails grown long, like an animal, in dejection and hatred, he lived to a hundred and thirteen. What had kept the Tsarina's prisoner alive? Surely not the slop which the Solovetskyi monks handed him once a day into that putrid hole? Raised on the freedom of the steppes, toppled and chained, perhaps he drew strength from his unbridled memories of these sunny Ukrainian spaces.

Epic heroes grew up here. This land fostered strong-spirited people, the nourishing soul of this land.

Even now there was something for the military commissar to admire when youths from the workers' suburbs filed past him for their medicals, young men cherished by the Dnipro, with well-developed lungs, strong steelworkers with iron muscles. Rarely did the commission reject any of them, they seemed hand-picked. Sons of the Cossack land. Might! Hope! And it was probably partly the doings of Skarbne, the marshes and the Dnipro, that despite the smoky air in this zone, they grew so big, robust and healthy. There was someone to defend the fatherland!

And with folk tradition the people saw the boys off to the enlistment office! The whole night before, places like Zachiplianka were carousing, celebrating a send-off; someone would remember that at one time when a Cossack left on an expedition, he promised to bring his girl back so much silk and ribbons, that when unfurled they would reach from the top of the cathedral to the ground. They were Cossack ribbons. And today's young men were sent off with flowing ribbons too, adorned, spilling out at sunrise into Shyroka Street — all the relatives, all the friends of the future soldier, the pick of the girls. He walked along with them and the accordionist, led along on both sides as if being given away in marriage, with a kerchief tied about his arm, striding along adorned like this, looking unusual, and only occasionally, with a sad drunk love, looking at the one walking arm in arm with him, as if he was already hers, her nearest and dearest, the one for whom she would wait more than just a year. They sang, and the melody was just as immortal as that of the Japanese girls singing in a chorus, seeing off their kamikaze pilots!

They would come to the yard of the enlistment office with the steelworker-recruit, and even here the window panes would rattle to their "The Cossacks Whistled." You came out onto the porch, and your soul sought immortality. These workers' towns like Zachiplianka produced reliable soldiers. And the young soldier, no matter where he would be, would never forget this

send-off, the girls' ribbons and this farewell marching song. These customs sprang from the people, from their nature, their traditions and their souls, while others dreamed up various spiritless pseudo-ceremonies, pulling them out of the air.

The military commissar had to fight in these parts. Here he had retreated in a bloodied army shirt in '41, and then it so happened that they attacked on this same front, driving the invaders beyond the Dnipro. He was younger then, his heart did not bother him then, he commanded the artillery of a guards' division. He stood beyond the marshes in the Orel region with his long-range artillery, and that cathedral on the horizon was his reference point. He first spied it one autumn morning, when after a fine blue September the sky suddenly became heavy with storm clouds, oppressing the old world with sullenness. Destroyed, burned villages all around, the black skeletons of the plants' buildings along the Dnipro, — and in this world of ruins, dereliction and pain, under the leaden skies of autumn, that immovable Cossack cathedral stood out white before the armies. Nothing more — only devastation, a war desert, and in the middle of it, under the storm clouds, the naked cathedral. It loomed rotundly with undamaged cupolas, like a specter, something incredible. Beginning in the environs of Moscow, the divisional artillery commander had seen countless of these churches and cathedrals in ruins, unspared by the war. But here, for the first time, he saw before him an architectural marvel, with unfractured cupolas, saved by accident or the mass flight of the barbarians, saved by the ceaseless movement of the fronts. It was a perfect reference point, a perfect target, but the artillery commander sternly warned his gunners:

“Don't shoot at that over there!”

Why had he said that then? Where had that desire suddenly sprung from? Had he been enchanted by the perfection of that structure, by the breath of its immortal beauty? Hardly. More likely the opposite. He had never been an esthetic soul up until then, nor did he lack decisiveness. Perhaps it was the grief of the years he had lived through, a burning hatred toward ruiners and exterminators, that had clarified his judgment, dictated the order to save it! In his youth he had seen quite a few relics of ancient architecture, monuments which were like white torches, erected by someone in the dim past, lighting this austere gloomy North. But back then he hadn't known that that piece of architecture, that light of creativity, that voice of unknown architects was sent from the gray past for his soul also, that its voice was for him too. And was he to blame that he viewed it all with eyes which did not know how to value such things, did not realize that before him stood treasures? Only later, later could he feel this, having crossed half the world along roads of destruction and suffering. But back then, in the times of the great stupefaction, it was only perhaps by accident that he was saved from going and tearing down a cathedral together with other young high-spirited men like himself, to stand a naive victor with them upon the ruins of those defenseless ancient North Russian churches. Had Rublev come this way, he wouldn't have shown him any mercy either! He would have flung him away too, with a feeling of righteousness, in the heat of destruction, without even suspecting who he was. And the fact that he had no opportunity to take part in that blind intoxication, in the banquet of destruction, was only due to chance: he had entered the artillery school at an early age.

After the war he had settled in this place. Again by sheer chance, bound by obligation as a military person. Though one could not say it had gone against his desires. In any case, when he

was sent here, the first thing that sprang to his mind was this cathedral, spared once in a lucky moment by his long-range artillery. He came here, and from then on these glowing red, undying nights along the Dnipro's banks had become dear to the military commissar. He educated his son to be an architect. After graduating from the institute, his son found work in another place, but he came to visit his parents every summer. The military commissar was pleased with his son — he was a bright lad, simply in love with art. Perhaps he was even too enthusiastic about it: those Sophias, Reimses, Parthenons — they were his whole life. He had not created a Parthenon himself, but he had a full head of ideas and daring projects.

His son sat pensively and dejected at the wheel. To somehow cheer him up, the military commissar began to relate various amusing stories to his wife in a deliberately loud voice, cheerfully speculating about the future, that it wasn't all that gloomy after all. The earth's people were growing even in a literal sense. Scientists had found that the average person's height had increased in the last century so many *vershoks*, or rather centimeters. Though he, as a military commissar, needed the small fry too, you could not squeeze Taras Bulba into the cockpit of a jet. At first his wife did not believe him that people were growing in height, but then she smiled at her stout husband:

“So perhaps there's still hope that you'll grow a little too?”

“Of course. Especially sideways...”

They laughed. But the son remained unmoved. His sullen-ness did not go away. True, he wasn't always like this. He had not lost his sense of humor, but now he was frowning — he had brought his sullenness with him from the Carpathians. He had been there recently with a friend to study highland wood architecture, walked the width and breadth of the Carpathians on foot, and in one mountain village he was witness to local high school students tearing apart their small ancient Hutsul church for firewood. And their teacher (their mentor!) was in charge of the operation.

After seeing such things, frowns did not leave one's face easily.

Today the son was completely saddened by what he had heard from his friend in Skarbne: it seemed a poacher's axe had been raised over this Cossack cathedral too, arbitrarily and criminally; its protective plaque had been removed at night. After talking with his friend, he returned indignant to his parents:

“I'm flying off. Tomorrow!” he exclaimed passionately.

Where he was flying, to whom, he probably wasn't quite yet sure of that himself. They barely placated him, dissuaded him, told him not to be too hasty, not to get too excited.

“You can't save everything,” his mother said.

But this too provoked a violent reaction:

“You want me, an architect, to become a party to this destruction too?”

“What are you talking about! You've destroyed nothing,” his mother tried to restrain him.

“We're all demolishers,” her son seethed. “Me and you and him,” he pointed at his father. “We're destroying also; by staying in the background... We're demolishing things with our indifference! There were those who tore down the Tithe Church, the gold-domed St. Michael's Cathedral before everyone's eyes... And now we ourselves are sowing indifference. Breeding heartless types... Coddling destructors ourselves!”

One felt that all those unknown, irresponsible types were his personal enemies. He made them personally answerable for everything and forgave them nothing. He could relate to the smallest detail how and by whom the St. Michael's Cathedral was demolished, and how the Tithe Church was destroyed, how they dynamited the footbridge built in the gray past and everything around it shook, but the footbridge did not give way. But they finally demolished this secretly soldered, mysteriously strong footbridge too. The Tatars had not managed it, but they succeeded... The young architect burned with a special hatred towards those who, having an architect's diploma themselves, knowingly resorted to the "clearing" of public squares, brought down monuments only to make room for their concrete pedestals. He even occasionally amazed his father with his disaffection. The old soldier seemed to grow kinder in his old age, lacked harshness in his judgements, and sought excuses and explanations even to frightening actions, but his son would not hear of any compromises.

"Stupid murderers of beauty," he said through his teeth, without looking away. "All right, back then they may have allowed themselves to be influenced by the spirit of destruction through ignorance, but now? Where do people like that spring from now? Explain to me why poachers keep multiplying."

The old soldier finally offered a truce: the next day he would go off to "stand on the carpet" before someone. "Standing on the carpet" in their family dialect meant to show up before superiors. He would don his parade uniform with all his battle decorations, with the Order of Bohdan Khmelnytsky and go off. He would express his thoughts on the cathedral too, though it was uncertain what results that "carpet-standing" of his would produce.

"Maybe it's not worth it?" his wife cautioned him. "You've already saved that cathedral once, and who rewarded you for it, who even said thank you for it?"

"History will judge, my love."

There was no need to further pursue the subject: once he had given his word, he would not back down.

The father's support noticeably dampened the son's feverish alarm, though it was obvious that those incidences of vandalism continued to give him no peace, he searched for their cause and how it could be counteracted.

The sun set into the smoke behind the cathedral, behind its domes, which rose prominently over the villages under the wing of the evening star. The heavenly body was cooling, for a while showing its red edge from behind the brow of an evening cloud, and then became extinguished in the blue mists. The cathedral and the bastions of the plants seemed to step out of a mirage — an outlandish ensemble of widely separated ages.

Traffic and more traffic, the town was drawing closer. The sun had set, soft blue twilight was falling. The starry other-world cascades of the town lit up. The honeycomb of the high-rise apartments ignited from within with a myriad of lights.

Holding onto the wheel, the young architect saw them before him. How much of that space there was still on the planet, and millions of people congregated in anthills, driving themselves into catacombs, into those modern caves with low ceilings, as if built specially for hunch-backed people, where even today not everyone could straighten up, not to mention those future people who in the 21st century would probably be another ten centimeters taller. How many bright

shores there were on the planet, picturesque landscapes, lake regions just like this fairy-tale Skarbne, fanned by curative steppe air, how much beauty there was on the earth not yet mastered by architects; and people massed into nests, suffocated in cages, in stone honeycombs linked up to water and sewage.

The city grew before the youth's eyes. It was perceived by him in the stratum of the ages, in its multitude of voices, perceived as a single indissoluble composition, where one could see the sweep of the hand that had built it, feel the energy of those who had put their work and talent into it, breathing live spirit into soulless stone, brick and metal.

Springing from a Cossack winter settlement, it grew into a giant capable of clouding the sky with its smoke. It was already cramped on its ridges. And it continued to intensify in power, and who knew where its limits would reach. It built pompous palaces for the cruel dissolute tsarina, tore up the pavement for barricade battles, and one of the streets now bore the name Barykadna. The barricade city, the worker city; it absorbed the strength of the surrounding countryside, its anger, legends and poetry. Had all this survived in its soul? What memory of itself would it pass on to descendants through the brown sails of its smoke?

Motley, crowded, black, it crowned its Cyclopean labor with grim brooding. There was a stern epic style in its breathing, the might of the times in its black shoulders. It gave the whole world its metal, its ringing steel vibrated in space. Toiling day and night it would transform itself, seeking another, new perfection. What would it be like? Erect skyscrapers of steel and glass reflected in the azure of the Dnipro? Or the silhouettes of some other striking constructions? Which spirit would find its expression in them? It was said that the more beautiful a woman was, the more greedily she sought greater beauty. There would be cleanliness, order, smokelessness; there would be morning roses in the workshops. Cherries would blossom snow-white in the plant grounds. The esthetics of the future, how could they not come? What did they embody? What dwellings, what structures had to rise above these banks, before each person could say at last: "I feel at ease. I feel great. I'm happy to be alive on this planet?"

The soul of the city — what does it dream of? When does it reveal itself? Could it be on such an evening, when lights shimmer in the distance, or on a bright summer morning, when one drives toward the city after a prolonged absence and the Dnipro suddenly appears, and it spreads out on the hills on the far side, looking almost fantastic, not severe, sooty, black and rumbling, but a kind of mirage-city, a city of gentleness rising from the serene morning mist? Light as air, it looks like some ancient hanging garden, appearing as if it were just being born in the silvery light of morning: revealing to the sun the latticework of television towers, the curves of the bridges, the cascades of buildings, and the pinnacles of plant chimneys. The city of one's youthful mornings, it rises like a single structure, woven from the most delicate materials of the future, like a giant ship, erected not with the hands of small earth creatures, but with the hands of fantastic giants. Majestically indifferent to everything earthly, shining brightly in the mornings on its craggy ridges, it seems to be listening to some other kind of life and sees the most important thing of all — the sun — a red, dewy sun, which rises before it from the swamps, from the mists of Skarbne.

Later he would see his city without mists, it would appear before him in a hell of viaducts, crossings, traffic lights, a hell of soot, grime, hollows and rumbling, making its presence felt with

a shake of the earth, the uncouthness of broken pavement, mountains of raw ore and agglomerate, irritating the eyes with its Steelworkers' Palace of Culture, with those grotesque heavy columns which held up nothing and only accentuated the weight of past suffering.

But he loved it even like this. He accepted it and loved it all, definitely!

Chapter XIII

Zachiplianka could once more rest assured that there was justice: the plaque reappeared on the cathedral. Just as mysteriously as it had disappeared one night, it mysteriously reappeared, without any witnesses, screwed back on by someone unknown, as if returning to its old spot.

And so the first “anonymous note” in Zachiplianka's history remained unposted, this angry papyrus for which the teacher's daughter, Lesia the front fighter, began to collect signatures, displaying striking energy and zeal. But of what use was there complaining when the loss was restored — before anyone even realized it? Perhaps the “Armenian Radio” could at least have said something on the subject? But the favored “genius” would not have even told his own father about his summons to the provincial committee secretary. Even before that, Virunka Bahlay had told him herself that she had been to see the first secretary, had told him everything. However Loboda did not know whether to believe her. Perhaps she was only scaring him. He believed her only after there was a telephone call for him, and he was told to appear! He went off with coolness in his heart, it was hard to guess what was in store for him there. These conversations ended various ways: one could lose, but also one could make gains, win, emerge from the office a worker of a different specific gravity: there, elements transformed before one's eyes. Loboda knew that the secretary was a man of tempestuous nature, capable of unpredictable decisions. He had to act, so as not to give him a single opportunity.

The fellow's biography had begun in this very steel plant, his mother and his relatives still lived in Koloniya, his brother worked as an engineer at the plant. Before the war, shortly after finishing the metallurgical institute, the current secretary had been in charge of the plant Party organization. Then he was promoted to the town Party Committee, then to the provincial committee, and during the war he had become a general on one of the fronts. They still remembered in Koloniya how the gallant young general had danced at the wedding of his niece when he had returned after the victory to visit his mother. A handsome, olive-skinned fellow in general's stripes, he attracted the attention of the village women, sensitive to beauty. In the postwar years he served as secretary for a long time in the adjacent, also industrial, province; then he was transferred back here again, elected this time as first secretary.

In the office Loboda saw a tired man with graying temples, and baggy, attentively half-shut eyes. His voice was a firm baritone, but sonorous. He asked Loboda to be seated and his first question was about his father:

“How's your old man?”

“It's a tragedy with my father,” Loboda uttered involuntarily, but noticing the shadow of wariness in the secretary's eyes, Loboda hastened to clarify his statement: “Not of a political nature... The old man's mutinied...”

He briefly stated the essence of his father's rebellion. In the depths of his soul he hoped to move the secretary to take pity on him, to take his side, but for some reason he received no support, hearing instead:

“You have a strong old man, a hard worker, without holes in his soul... A real giant.”

A thought flashed through his mind, to impress the secretary, to lay before him as his own that idea of his father's that the old man had dreamed up about Skarbne while drunk. It was a grandiose idea! — to transform Skarbne, to flood or drain it! Or at least to create a game reserve

with does and wild boars, which people could hunt after a tiring workday, after their responsible job. Petro Petrovych had hunted there one time. He had mounted his hunting trophies — those boar muzzles were still grinning in the cathedral! The fellow wanted to immortalize himself at least in this small way. Everyone wants to immortalize himself somehow.

However, Volodka showed some restraint, refraining from laying this idea about the game reserve on the table. A sense of self-preservation told him: wait, restrain yourself, it's still uncertain how your initiative will be taken here. These aren't trifles, brother!

The secretary continued about his father and his past steel-worker's glory, about what a master of his trade he was. And he remembered the father's comrades, the old plant guard! Papirny, Dovbyshchenko, and even Katraty — what people! It was these veterans who managed to save the Titan from the invaders at the decisive moment. Loboda was taken aback: Katraty too? Papirny was no longer around, nor was Dovbyshchenko, but Yahor Katraty? How much Loboda had shifted and shuffled around Yahor, questioned him, and yet had learned nothing about that incident with the Titan, and yet here it was somehow known. However, Loboda did not let on, pretending to know nothing at all about this matter. He blamed the plant Komsomol straight away: they fussed about here, walked along paths of glory there, but on their doorstep, in their own plant such a heroic deed had been committed, and they weren't able to ferret it out.

The secretary of the provincial Party Committee smiled:

“We found out. All the way from Czechoslovakia. From a Czech who worked as a prisoner in the plant during the occupation. Before his death he dictated his testimony into a tape recorder and named the real heroes.”

After this they switched to the main subject. As Loboda had expected, the conversation touched on the cathedral. Here was where he had to prick up his ears! — to guess what position the brass would assume! A person strained to think in one direction, but here they might think in another. What if not? What if here, as at that other meeting, they thought it was time for the cathedral to disappear, that it only irritated the eyes and caused problems? Loboda mobilized all the discretion and intuition he had acquired over the years. The only possible course was to remain impartial, to talk about assignments, budget difficulties, to hint at the doubtful historical worth of the monument, and to explain that the building had no practical use — it had once been a storehouse for feed, but not even the fodder had been removed from it. It could be rebuilt into a refrigeration plant, but it had also been pointed out that it would be cheaper to build a new one. So that was not the way out. Out loud he spoke of the general plan, the prepared plans for new building projects in the villages. He couldn't guess a thing from the secretary's reserved expression. The secretary rested his head on his arm, became pensive, and looked at the visitor very, very attentively for a long, long time with his narrowed, sparkling black eyes. Everything depended on what was being concocted under his stern olive-skinned forehead. He might say: “what kind of a public figure are you, still keeping that old junk standing, can't you think of anything more contemporary for a town of iron and steel?” No one had ever before looked at Loboda so studiously, so attentively. Something seemingly sorrowful, even profound, appeared on his forehead, and he said pensively, as if to someone else:

“And yet we're all Cossack children.”

That was all. "Cossack children." Take it as you wish. He rose, tall, wide in the shoulders; you had to rise too, etiquette so decreed. The conversation was finished. Was that all? What charges should one expect from such a conversation? Lost, Loboda looked almost beseechingly at the silvered temples.

The secretary said firmly: "Our plant workers have decided to dismantle the gasholder, that giant old cylinder. It's really outlived its time. But the cathedral isn't a gasholder, the cathedral is a masterpiece of art. It doesn't belong only to us. There was a time when certain wise men wanted to bring down St. Basil's, to extend the square. You see, it was in the way..."

With this you were sent on your way from the office. No, you wouldn't start telling others about such things. True, it happened that such high officials fell into disfavor, fell head first from the heights of power, but now there was no suggestion of that, and all that remained was to replace the plaque quickly.

Young Loboda went to see Katraty that same day, appearing good, benevolent, as the kindest man.

"So much for our friendship, eh? Why did you keep quiet? You yourself took part in the rescue of the Titan, didn't you?"

"Yes, I helped," Yahor droned, sitting under his pear tree. "But it wasn't just me alone..."

"And not a word to anyone!"

"What's there to shout about here? I took part in it — and that's all."

Honeyed words were addressed to Yahor's modesty. He was promised that from now on he would occupy a place of honor at the plant meetings as a living hero. But even this did not affect Yahor's composure: if he had to, then he'd sit there a while; it was not hard work.

It so happened on this day that the district militiaman appeared in Katraty's yard. Yelka had not become lost in oblivion, she had not been crossed off the list of the living; she was visited after all by the representative of law and order. He didn't at all resemble those hungry postwar militiamen who, having to exist on ration cards, were fed by the aunties at the market. He was one of the new generation: brawny, his collar straining to encircle his solid neck; a practiced smile of professional courtesy played on his lips. It was probably by chance that he came just when Loboda was present, dispelling Yelka's despondency. The representative of the law only nodded at Loboda in passing, as if to an acquaintance, nodded with a kind of elusive sparkle in his eye, and immediately approached Yelka, who was sorting apricots by the porch. He wanted to know more precisely who she was — this Olena Chechil — how long she had been residing here, and how things were with her registration. Lately there had been a growing number of instances in which people lived unregistered for a long time. Several families of Gypsies had settled beyond the lake, and they acknowledged no authority at all. All they needed was a horse, so that they could cart coal in the villages and then drink away their earnings by the fire. And then they bathed their scabby horses in quite forbidden areas on the beaches. To make this point even more telling, to show that he was so strict not from pettiness, but only by force of circumstance, he reminded her about the plaque. Once all kinds began wandering about here unregistered, more than just plaques would begin to disappear at night. Yelka stood before him and felt her face burning. She didn't dare say anything to the contrary, because this thick-necked fellow in his new cap was telling the truth, but when he mentioned the plaque, she choked up feeling insulted. It

looked like the suspicion fell on her; that was all she needed — to steal plaques from cathedrals! Probably noticing that he had gone a little too far, overstepping his authority, the militiaman decided to placate her with a joke:

“Even when it comes to marriage, you can't do a thing without being registered. You need to show your papers at the marriage registry.”

Loboda had obviously tired of this and decided to intervene.

“That marriage registration office of yours is up to its ears in papers,” he said to the militiaman in a commanding voice. “It reeks of red tape from a block away. Some dolled-up Fifi, who can't get herself hitched, sits there scratching away! She writes it all down, rattles away, wishes the couple happiness in a bureaucratic voice. Why can't you come up with new forms? Why not organize a special ceremony for the young when they get their papers? Or marriage registration at home? Ha? Could that be done, Comrade Yakivets?”

“You've got a point there, Volodymyr Izotovych,” Yakivets agreed ail-knowingly.

“You could put your office on wheels and, with bouquets of flowers, with smiles, with appropriate poems, head for the villages, the workers' districts, into the very depths, to the toilers, to where it's all happening...!” Loboda became excited. “Now that would be a service! And as for the girl, Comrade Yakivets, leave her alone,” he said in a softer voice, and winked with a jovial undertone: “She is under reliable supervision... Her path in life will soon be determined.”

The militiaman left the yard satisfied that he had fulfilled his duty, but his visit had depressed Yelka.

That same day she had another important conversation with old Shpachykha. The old woman came up from the rear, from the garden, called Yelka aside, led her into the recesses of her orchard, into that corner which the commission had sliced off the previous year, because they thought the old woman had too much property. Now weeds flourished here. Shpachykha was very meek, very sober. No one would have recognized in this tired and seemingly shrunken woman the vociferous wildcat who flew into tantrums that couldn't be placated by the whole of Zachiplianka. They sat down on the edge of her property and began to converse. To gain Yelka's trust, Shpachykha started to tell various intimate things about herself from her past, how in her youth her husband, disposed to drinking, had beaten her and even dragged her about the house one night by her hair. She had survived it all because she must have been quite robust. She suffered because of the children, and even worried when he didn't appear for a long time after receiving his pay. She knew where to find him and ran quickly! But he had already either been in a fight with someone or lay sprawled out in the mud, drunk. She would pick him up, bring him home, clean him off, pull off his boots, and put him into a clean bed to sleep, for he was the bread-winner. He only left the plant, allowing himself to carry on like this, about once a month, just to taste the luxuries of life. He was merciless, and yet after he died she still wept for him, because, child, it's not easy for a widow to rear children. She told Yelka about her son too, murdered somewhere by the Germans, while young as a blossom, and then she talked about this Volodka Loboda who had been a friend of her son's.

When she began to talk about Loboda her voice dropped to a whisper for some reason, as if she were afraid of scaring off Yelka's happiness. Even though he lived in an exclusive neighborhood, this Volodymyr did not scorn simple women. Even though he had a position of

authority, he would help an old woman with a heavy basket if she passed by, give her a lift in his car, and even tell her some story along the way. He had come to visit her today; not a relative, but he'd brought her a small gift and Shpachykha continued to praise him.

“He'll never even lay a finger on you, my child, he won't let you touch cold water, you'll have children, he'll carry you about in his arms! You'll build a nest and be happy, like Bahlay's Virunka! It's a sure business here, child. When this one takes you, it's forever. He won't skip to another one, because they punish you for that sort of thing in his circles. With his type of work he can't be too flighty. You'll go to the market in a car, and won't have to drag bundles of produce back until your eyes practically pop out... Don't spurn it, child, don't spurn it when it comes your way, because men like him don't lie about on the road, they're quickly snapped up by any old tail-wagger with red fingernails... Think about it, girl. Why wait? A girl's time is short, and before you know it you'll be past your prime; they'll be after younger ones... And without a husband, you'll stumble through life!”

Yelka listened in silence and could not object to anything even though she didn't imagine her bliss to be like that; she dreamed of other things. But if she were to speak, could her thoughts have gotten through to this woman who had suffered so much, who was taught by misfortune itself how to negotiate the curves of life?

In the afternoon Yahor cut his rye. When they were cutting back the people's holdings, the commission did not slice off all of his Great Meadow, a little remained for his rye too. It was a fine crop this year. He was only a little late with the mowing. On the far side of the lake the blast furnace expert Didenko was already pounding the ground with a flail, or perhaps they had mown theirs prematurely. They just wanted to thresh everything quickly, because their submariner son was home for the holidays. Until a short time ago Zachiplianka had been more rural. Many a person had a patch of grain growing in the back of his garden, but now it seemed that apart from Yahor only the Didenkos fostered a sympathy for breadmaking. That same picturesque rick that appeared in the steppes when they were harvesting could also be seen beyond the pond in the old master's yard, among the apricots. Small and insignificant beside the dark giants of the steel mills, it stood there nevertheless, waiting until the Didenko's son, a submarine officer, came to vacation here with his wife (for some reason everyone was drawn to Zachiplianka for the summer, to these sandhills and the frog-filled lake!). He emerged from under the eternal ice of the Arctic Ocean and was already on this sinful earth threshing rye with a flail, an antique flail that belonged back in the museum from where they had taken it. The morning shift was still preparing to leave for work, but the submariner was already pounding away, the sound carrying across the lake for the whole of Zachiplianka to hear. During the day, when it became hot, he covered his head with a kerchief like an Indian and set about sheaf after sheaf until he finished them all.

Yahor quickly mowed his rye; back and forth only three times, and it was done. It was Yelka's job to bind the sheaves, and she set about it with great enjoyment! The rye-ears — she wanted to caress them, to hold them to her cheek. She tried so hard to tie them neatly that even Katraty looked in awe at the first sheaf, tied as if for a show by a nimble binder. Something happened that had hardly ever happened before: his heart suddenly thawed, and something warm and intimate stirred inside him.

“I wanted to talk with you, Yelka, seriously... The militiaman was here... Something will have to be done, you'll have to decide. Though he's a loudmouth and... a little crazy, he'll look after you. You'll be protected.”

Yahor looked away as he spoke, as if embarrassed. But there was concern in his voice, family feelings. He wanted to live long enough to see his grandchildren, to know his line would not be left without seed.

“This house, the orchard — I can't take them with me on that long trip. I'd leave it all to you.”

Yelka listened and sympathy welled up within her toward her Uncle Yahor, toward his solitude, his barren old age. But she didn't know how to dispel this sorrow, that he was revealing to her for the first time. Should she reconcile herself to it? She had run away from the collective farm, retreated in the face of life's first difficulties. The girls back there kept the farms going, while you deemed yourself something better than the others, dropped everything, and set off egotistically, seeking an easier path. Well, here it is. This is what you deserve. Marriage! To a man you don't love! She held her flaming face close to a sheaf, and the ears of rye seemed to burn her with reproach.

The militiaman's visit also had a positive effect on Yelka: she felt that she could now leave the yard freely, go into the street without having to hide, walk down Vesela Street. She was here illegally, but the authorities knew about her and so there was no need to hide.

In the evening, having put on a clean dress, she wandered aimlessly all the way to the cathedral. Actually, not that aimlessly, if she were going to be completely candid. She had a deeply concealed hope, a dash of hope; she wanted to meet the student Bahlay — by accident, quite unintentionally! Perhaps he would be returning from the institute or something. She had no illusions about him. All the institute girls probably pined after him, so that he had his pick of them! Yelka could not compete with them and she did not delude herself in that regard: she just wanted to meet him, that was all. Walking past the Bahlay's yard, she felt the blood rush from her face, for without even looking in that direction she saw that the student was outside in the yard, arguing about something with his friend, that mechanic with a large head.

“I won't stay! And don't try to talk me into it! I don't want to see them!” She heard Mykola's nervous voice and then managed to watch from the square as Bahlay made off across the gardens to the bus stop with a knapsack on his back. She caught something offensive in those chance words of his “won't stay...! Don't want to see!” as if they referred to her, as if he didn't want to see her. Her brain understood that he was not talking about her, he did not even notice her, but she felt bitter, resenting even his knapsack flashing contemptuously at her from his back as he crossed the gardens and the small gully to the bus stop. He never once looked around.

Some unskilled laborers appeared around the cathedral on this day. Displaying about as much enthusiasm as burning wet rags, they set about fixing the scaffolding a second time, probably straightening it for another stork; one had left after their previous visit, taking its brood, and was probably trundling through the swamp somewhere. The restorers didn't miss the opportunity to tease Yelka when she walked past them. They asked her to join their brigade as a cook, because they were tired of cold, dry food (they were eating salt sprats from a newspaper), and they asked her almost seriously:

“Settle up there and join us...”

“Join you?” Yelka looked over her shoulder in astonishment, with that serene, almost aristocratic haughtiness, which surfaced in her from time to time from God knows where. “But you're not paid for working in the heights!”

A skinny character in a beret, the brigade leader of these lazy steeplejacks, tried to taunt her:

“Why, are you looking for heights?”

“Yes, I am.”

“What for?”

“To jump from — a high bridge will do!” she snapped back, and went on her way without looking back, proudly swinging her hips like a city girl. From the side of the road she peered into the bus windows as it drove past. The people were packed in like sardines, and that “foreigner” was somewhere there too with his knapsack, lost among them. Where was he off to? Perhaps the virgin lands? Now she wouldn't hear the warble of his nightingales for a long time! What Yelka liked most about that night was this “foreigner's” imitation of the intoxicated fish inspector. Lurking behind the fence she had heard it all. He was tall, with a big shock of hair, in a white shirt with rolled-up sleeves, with the glint of a smile on his tanned face, but she unlike him was meager, unsteady on her feet, like a real pygmy. Oh, that student had made her laugh then. There were people who could cut impudent types down to size, wittily, funnily, with dignity. They knew how to stand up for themselves. And there was that one time when he greeted Yelka as she was watering the marigolds, and that “hello” of his seemed to come straight from the heart. Though Yelka rested no hopes on him — this student was far too inaccessible, in fact he was a distant and strange person to her. She still felt that without him Zachiplianka would be a sadder place, life itself would lack something without his morning run around the lake.

Later in the evening Shpachykhya gave a concert, pulling out all the stops. She didn't do this often, and never without reason. There would always be an inner impulse, known only to her, which set her off.

On this day the storm reached hurricane-like proportions. Her daughter, watering the garden with a hose, listened to the old woman continually crashing about the house, breaking something, but the daughter didn't seem to worry; she'd rather the old woman behave scandalously in the house and not in public, shaming the family in front of the whole village. Once the house became too confining, the tempestuous disheveled woman opened the door with a crash and stood swaying at the threshold. Though her tongue became entangled, the old woman set about cursing someone, trying to scream something brutal, coarse and incriminating at the top of her voice, and the daughter, quiet and unquarrelsome by nature, was left with nothing else to do but to resort to an unfailing method: she turned the hose around and squirted her mother with the resilient stream to extinguish her unrestrained fire, so that the model ward leader, hero of the fourth blast furnace, wouldn't scream her way to calamity.

Orlianchenko was of course enjoying this scene; he guffawed with his friends in the street, rolling on the ground, but Yelka felt sad.

Late that night she again wandered out onto Shyroka Street. The buses had stopped running. With oppressive thoughts, Yelka stood by the roadside under the tent of a night tree, feeling that life was driving her again into a blind alley. Would it really squash the youthful obstinacy in her,

her brusque headstrong nature, her haughtiness? She had been happy-go-lucky once, and had known how to laugh. How much of that laughter there had been when she drove off into the forest with her girlfriends to bathe in the Vovcha River. The swamp showered them with green charms, nightingales' song.

From somewhere in the districts a herd of cattle was being driven along Shyroka to the slaughterhouse in the town. Filling the whole street, egged on from the sides by awkward drovers in capes, the cattle drifted along in the darkness. Tired, her former friends from the steppes shambled in a scattered stream past Yelka — heifers, steers, horned and hornless, young and old, probably rejects. Somewhere here there may have been those that she had hand-fed herself, which had nuzzled up to her as calves, licking her hands with their rough tongues, seeking favor. Perhaps her pet, the ribbon-winning cow Princess, chosen for the fair, was moving along somewhere in the darkness too? Yelka's heart filled with pity for these large awkward defenseless creatures, covered with the dust of the steppes. Yesterday they had still been peacefully grazing in gullies, and now they were moving along exhausted, suffering, tripping on the uneven pavement, moving past the cathedral, carrying their downcast indifference past Yelka to the crack of whips. She could smell them, feel their warmth, hear the rustle of their steps, their snorts; their eyes glistened with the lights of the city at night. In their staid movements there was tired stubbornness and fearlessness. The shouts of the drovers had no effect on them, and this alien, red-skied night did not scare them either — with a heavy rustle, lowing, at times even groaning, they thronged toward the city, toward its crimson smoke. And as if not caring what awaited them, carried their long-horned freedom, their steppe life, almost contemptuously to the slaughterhouse, to face the hammers.

Chapter XIV

Virunka Bahlay still remembered the time in Zachiplianka when the villages were awakened by the plant sirens. Anyone who had heard it, would never forget the morning organ music, when the whole of the Dnipro hinterland seemed to fuse into a single symphony in which none of the sirens became lost, each singing its own way, calling the people to the plant's sooty gates. And they went. Though the sirens had been abandoned now, having sung their last songs, they still occasionally echoed in Virunka's soul, for love had brought her here to Zachiplianka to the tune of those sirens. Only after she married Ivan did she experience real happiness after hard times, undernourishment, meager pay, years of being an orphan.

Life did not spoil Virunka. Right after the war her mother worked as a nurse in the collective farm dispensary, a squalid establishment where there wasn't even any iodine. Whenever someone was injured, the medical assistant immediately sent Virunka to collect figwort to take the place of iodine, the rough-leafed, prickly figwort of her childhood, flowering with its miserly blossoms the whole summer along the edges of fields.

Afterwards life improved a little; plant chiefs began to arrive, and helped the collective farm to stand on its own feet. Having then just finished school, Virunka met with her Ivan Bahlay. The girls called him red-haired and wild, but Virunka was drawn to him from their first meeting by everything about him: his perseverance in work as he welded pipes together, gritting his teeth; his frank, open smile, even the stack of hair on his head, red, tough as wire. That summer he brought her here to Vesela Street.

The wedding was celebrated in local fashion. A home-made flag hung atop a house for three days to signify that someone in Zachiplianka was taking a wife or being given away in marriage. Half the plant came here during those three days, dancing until they were ready to fall, singing their fill, taking the parents of the bride and groom in a hand-cart for a ride down the street, driving them onto the cathedral square so the dancers would have more room to dance. To top everything off the parents were taken for a ride to the lake too, to be hurled into the water in their clothes, to mark the occasion and to bring happiness to the couple. The wedding storm thundered past, and the flag was removed from the house. The young couple was left in peace to celebrate life.

Virunka also liked Zachiplianka because the people rose early here, as in the steppes, not missing the sunrise.

They lived harmoniously, and Virunka felt secure with Ivan. There are people who are reliable in everything, and he was one of them. Without the slightest embarrassment he boasted how felicitously he had chosen Virunka, that it wasn't an easy thing to pick a woman, but he had been able to do it. He really respected his wife and was kind to her, since their marriage he hadn't once raised his hand to her even though he was hot-natured and quarrelsome; his friends said that he could be wound up with half a turn! He even started arguments with the director, especially because of those drafts in the workshop, from which Virunka often caught cold. The drafts remained even now, but Ivan's attention was precious to her, and she cherished those words of his: "Guard your health, Virunia, for your grandchildren. You'll have to rock them too."

All the neighbors came to say good-bye when Ivan left on one of those bright mornings, and he suppressing the sorrow of parting, threw his suitcase merrily into the car and waved to his small Bahlay sons:

“You watch out now: be chivalrous knights!”

The knights were sleeping sweetly, it was a pity to wake them. She hastily prepared breakfast for them, dashed to her neighbor, Lesia the front fighter, to ask her to keep an eye on them, for old Mrs. Bahlay wasn't feeling too well.

Then she headed for the plant, no longer anxious about her children. They would be looked after, since Lesia had taken it upon herself. In the whole of Zachiplianka, Virunka's closest friend was this Lesia Khomivna, half of whose face was covered by a red scar from a war injury. Stern and not very affable in appearance, this front fighter evoked Virunka's sympathy from their first meeting. Virunka wasn't deceived by her first impression, that before her was a real jewel of an individual. She had gone to the front as a girl, and all Zachiplianka knew that she had a love affair there, which would have ended in marriage and a happy family life if in the last year of the war her battery commander had not died a brave death on the outskirts of some Polish town. His grave was somewhere there, among the graves of other Soviet soldiers, a granite slab with a gold inscription, and Lesia had not given up the hope of going to Poland one day to visit those familiar places and to place flowers on her battery commander's grave. The battery commander was an open part of Lesia's biography; he was no secret to anyone. All of Zachiplianka had grown accustomed to him, as if he were one of them, connected in some way with this steelworkers' village.

Apart from Virunka, no one else knew about another intimate episode in the life of the front fighter. She had returned to her native Zachiplianka after the war with abundant medals on her tunic, with the scalded cheek that still glowed freshly red as if aflame. Despite the scar on her cheek (or perhaps even because of it), a young instructor from the trade school showed some interest in her, desiring to become better acquainted with a distinguished front fighter. Lesia's sternness and inaccessibility did not frighten him or stop him from offering the teacher his young friendship. True, this friendship of theirs was not advertised; it began outside the boundaries of Zachiplianka.

But one fall evening the boy saw Lesia all the way home to Vesela Street, and managed to talk her into wandering off into the sandhills beyond the village. That was the first and last of their wanderings. She still could not forgive herself for that evening, carrying it concealed in her soul like a sin. She had only opened up completely to Virunka about that stroll, for she remembered everything to the slightest detail, the conversation, his intonations, an uncertain expectation of something. She reproached her brain for blindly following the call of her heart, still replete with desires and young vigor. Her heart was still young and it sought friendship, strove for warmth, was seduced by something new and ephemeral like a dream; agitated, it led Lesia into the darkness of a fall night, led her farther and farther into the sandhills. She sought his body, not his soul, but she would realize that only later, much later. Something about the boy excited her, Lesia liked his energy, his buoyancy, his ebullience, — those qualities she seemed lacking in herself, having been crushed at such an early age, broken by her loss. She was flattered by the fact that, despite her scarred face, the youth was still attracted to her, insisting on her

reciprocity. He was ardent in his insistence, persistent, and he could even be forgiven some of his coarseness for that passionate sincerity of his irrepressible, adolescent demands.

And then there was that almost totally innocent tactlessness of his, tactlessness expressed as a light joke, quite widespread at the time, about female front fighters. His comments concerned not only Lesia, but also the battery commander, her front-line sweetheart. "Wasn't it all the same to him?" (Him meaning the battery commander...) Did the boy realize later at least why she had exploded so suddenly, why she had pushed him away so sharply and angrily? "What's up?" he had asked in sincere amazement. "What did I say?" And he continued his coarse joke: "Ah, it's not all the same to you, because you slept with him in the trenches..." "Yes, I slept with him! I slept with him! So what?" And with each word resounding slaps echoed across the sandhills, probably flushing the migratory birds on Raduta into flight. The high-voltage tower hummed overhead, as if applauding her actions: that's the way, once more, and again!

Everything had died there among the sandhills.

Only years later did Lesia tell Virunka her secret, sensing that she would understand; and Lesia had not been wrong.

After that incident Lesia didn't try to seek happiness for herself. She even thought that the incident had been a warning to her, the past reminding her of itself, and the warmest intimacy in her life was once more the memory of her front-line battery commander. From him came the best days of her soul, and the school, her pupils, her class became the weekdays. She had taken her pupils recently on a cruise along the Dnipro to Kaniv; they had visited the places associated with Shevchenko, the village of Kobzareve. The children had returned to Zachiplianka rapturous over what they had seen, and now one could sometimes hear them near the lake, reciting together the facetious saying they had picked up on the trip:

"Many thanks, Taras, for the slate and asphalt!"

The steelworkers listened to that contemporary folklore with a smile, such things appealed to them.

Whatever the inexperienced sceptics might say, when Virunka passed through the gate onto the grounds of the plant, where everything thundered, rumbled and seethed with smoke, she felt a pride in her soul. It wasn't the clouds of smoke which awakened this feeling, of course, but the people's work which had become grandly embodied in these black industrial towers, in the mountains of raw materials, which every day and night were turned into fresh cast iron, rolled metal, steel, giving the homeland power and might.

The morning shift flowed into the plant grounds in a continuous stream. Thousands of people walked along, spilled into the workshops, took up their working positions and during the whole shift they would reign over this giant, over the flames of the furnaces, over the actions of the machines and the control panels, peering into flaming depths where the metal was boiling, where processes took place which even today needed more than just cold calculations, requiring human soul and talent. During the shift the people would be intent, inwardly collected, under strain, rejoicing and fuming, for they wouldn't be indifferent to how the metal was boiling, how the furnace was behaving and how it was loading, what supplies of raw materials were on the plant grounds and how many tons above quota would be produced, or how much they would fall short. These people would not be indifferent to countless things, to their plans and graphs, to

amounts and qualities, even though it might appear to some that they were indifferent to all this! In the plant a person somehow immediately became more significant. Meet him somewhere outside the plant gates with a mug of beer beside a beer dispenser or with a fishing rod on the Dnipro, and he would sit there so insignificant, not standing out in any way. But here, in the plant grounds, you knew that before you stood a skilled workman, and perhaps an expert on not only ordinary soft steel, but that special stuff, which they knew how to temper only here.

No one certainly said that it was easy. Not everyone lasted. There were burdens, delays, heat, and danger; the signs didn't urge caution without reason: "Be careful! Your family awaits you at home!" But even though it wasn't easy, the distance between people here seemed a lot shorter than elsewhere, there was less chicanery and red tape, bribe-takers didn't last long here, and the hard-working people laughed: "They can find no consumer goods here; there is nothing to steal, except perhaps an ingot." A few days earlier there had been a delegation from a patronized collective farm, where Virunka once worked, — oh, how her fellow villagers looked about here! They were taken on a tour of the whole plant, they saw the plant in action with their own eyes, not on film: the furnacemen adjusting their cannon and the girls at the factory complex wearing respirators and holding shovels were barely visible in the brown cloud of dust. They also saw the toil of the crane operators, who sailed over hot ladles, where they were seared by flame or deafened by the din over the mountains of scrap. The delegation came to Virunka's workplace too; they couldn't leave without seeing their compatriot. Virunka, of course, did not let them into the cabin of her crane, the instructions forbade that, but she came out to them on the platform and removed her gauze mask, to greet them with a smile. She asked how they liked the plant, and Grandpa Yukhym from the vegetable brigade openly shared his impressions!

"I've at least had a glimpse of hell before death... Where's the master of this hell?"

"This is probably him," Virunka pointed to a young engineer, the head of her section.

"He hasn't any horns," Odarka from the poultry farm said after scrutinizing him closely, and everyone laughed.

The head of the collective farm, a former friend of her father's, expressed sincere amazement:

"Your boys aren't afraid of fire at all: molten metal floats along, and they wade through it in their bast fiber shoes as if it were a brook of water. They shield themselves with their gloves and go on their way, doing what they have to... Habit? Or is it just their nature?"

They chatted, said good-bye, and left, gingerly descending the iron steps, and Virunka returned to her crane cabin, where the glass never held because of the vibration; no sooner was a new pane installed than it shattered. Virunka had enough problems inside the plant and outside. There was someone's apartment to plead for, then off to the court to help out Mrs. Tkachenko, whose three-year service record had been chewed up by mice, and then one of the workers couldn't get a pass for a holiday and Virunka, the union shop-steward, had to help out. She ran about, helped them, not begrudging her time, and only here, in her workplace, was every minute accounted for. No one dared call the crane operator aside, because during the shift there would be nothing more important than her work. If she left for a minute to drop into the cafeteria for a bottle of milk, they already came running, shouting to get into the crane, not to delay! You breathe this dust for seven hours straight, even though you are an ace operator!

There was never a time when her eyes weren't red; she had glasses, but didn't use them because they fogged up, and her work was exact, leaving no room for mistakes. Eyes red from the dust, voice hoarse from a cold; in winter it was dog-cold in the mixing yard, especially when the wind blew from the Dnipro; the drafts really whistled then, and the female crane operators up above got the worst of it and caught colds, even though they were given felt boots and quilted jackets. During the shift there was no sky above, instead of a sky there was metal everywhere and explosions of dust, so bad at times that you couldn't work, couldn't hear a person speak over the thunder of iron, and when you were being told something from below, you could tell only by expressions, understanding unerringly by gestures exactly what was demanded of you, of your crane.

The scrap iron that children collected all over the country found its way here, brought in by train, arriving from Poltava,

Chernihiv or Baranovychi, scrap iron from across the country, and it was already being expected down below by rows of empty molds. Virunka had to dispose of all this with the aid of a magnetic grab. She raked up piles of rusty iron with a hellish din, raking up broken wheels, flattened radiators, bent pipes, compressed offcuts of tin-plate, and the remains of muzzles and weapons rumbled by some superforce, weapons which had once fired upon and killed people. And through those rusty-red rumbling mountains, through the enormous clouds of smoke, baked dolomites and agglomerate dust, Virunka saw from time to time that dearest picture of all, of the one whose death brought tragedy to her childhood, of the one who had disappeared from the world of her child's love into the cannonade of the Dnipro crossings, never to return.

Her father was always ill. He had been brought home by her mother late in the fall, freed by her from some horrible pit in Khorol, about which there had been more talk in the village than about hell. The Germans had disembodied thousands upon thousands of prisoners there behind barbed wire, in clay pits, exposed to the cold autumn rains. It was one of the most frightening camps, where the women of their village didn't walk in those evil times! They knew all the camps of Ukraine by heart. At times they would stay away from home for weeks, hoping to find their man somewhere, to beg or buy his freedom with home-made brandy. Her mother had ransomed her husband that way, brought Virunka her father, a miserable skeleton wrapped in rags and swaying in the wind. Her mother had cleaned him up, revived him, nursed him, wrested him from the grave; only real conjugal love was capable of that. Father coughed badly all winter. Virunka nestled up to his legs, and his hand stroked her small child's head. Father's hand didn't stroke Virunka's head often, and though it was heavy and rough — how much love welled inside it!

Then the Germans fled. Incendiary units on motorcycles rushed about the village and poked fiery brushes under thatched roofs; not missing a single house, they were as black as devils. The house burned away, but the chimney and fireplace remained, naked, sooty, standing out white among the burnt ruins, and on that fireplace danced a bright, merry, long-tailed rooster painted by her mother. The village was burned to the ground, everything burned away, and only those painted roosters remained.

Soon after that young lieutenants lined up the fathers in the pasture, mobilizing them a second time. Some dubbed them "blackshirts," as if in jest, but that seemed unjust. From

morning until evening Virunka sat with the other children by the pasture, watching the handsome young lieutenant with a medal “for Stalingrad” teaching their fathers how to march, to turn the right shoulder forward and to march in place. She pined for her daddy the whole time, watching him do those exercises clumsily but diligently. Something seemed to have changed in their fathers in those days; their eyes seemed to have become deeper, and their rough hands became more gentle when they stealthily stroked their quiet sons and daughters during the rest periods. She remembered every step of that marching of his, every sad smile which he sent her almost unnoticeably from under his mustache, walking past her in formation among other “black-shirts” like himself, not yet clothed in army tunics. She remembered the stamping of feet heavy with exhaustion, those endless orders of “forward march” and “mark time,” how his stooped back strained to straighten on command, and how the blackshirt fathers treated the sergeant and lieutenant to food from bundles their mothers spread out obsequiously before them during rest breaks. Women came from neighboring villages too, brought provisions for their mobilized men, and sat to one side with the children, keeping their eyes steadily on their men as they marched and ran on the pasture.

And then one morning Virunka ran out with the neighbors' girls to look at their fathers, but they weren't there. Only the scarecrows they had bayoneted the day before remained. The pasture was deserted, no one was around, — they had been dispatched during the night! The children were lost, and the old women who had come from neighboring villages also were stunned when they found no one here, for they were told that their men would be given military wear, and that the women should take their civilian clothes away. But it turned out that they did not wait for the army dress; the men were taken to the Dnipro in their jackets, their civvies, led there by the lieutenants during the night. And from the Dnipro came a rumbling, a roaring; the sky shuddered there the whole time.

It was so melancholy to see the pasture without the fathers, everything around became so sorrowful — the burnt ruins and the devastation, the mute scarecrows pierced by bayonets and the gray cloudy fall sky. Their children's souls were carved with pain. That day the children and Virunka conspired and, without their mothers knowing, covertly set off after their fathers to the Dnipro. It was a long way to go, or at least it then seemed so to them. They walked for a very long time, their tiny feet becoming entangled in the weeds. But toward evening they finally extricated themselves from the weeds and saw the Dnipro before him, the frigid, autumn Dnipro. There was no more rumbling and no one to be seen. There were only the mute hills on the far side of the Dnipro, green with fall wheat; down the slopes of those hills, across the green, everywhere there were dark specks.

The exhausted children stood in a small group, lurking under the willows, looking dumbfounded at the far side of the Dnipro, still unable to comprehend what those specks on the green were. Craters, marks left by mines of exploding shells? And suddenly they were horrified by the frightful realization: it was them! In jackets! Their fathers!

Their children's hearts thumped away under their rags. And in the mute silence only the yellowed rushes rustled in bereavement with their dry heads, and some gray bird piped and piped away, rocking about on a reed stalk.

The years ran past, but the mind did not forget how heavy everything had been there — the leaden Dnipro water, and toward evening the low clouds above those specks on the green.

Virunka no longer felt the warmth of her father's hand, had not looked her fill at his marching. And whenever she heard the word “war,” all those memories surfaced painfully: the village pasture, how they had gone in a flock to look for their fathers, how they had stood dumbfounded by the Dnipro on that autumn day. Disposing of mountains of rusty scrap, amid the iron din of the workshop, she still heard that bird's piping which the grieving children had heard then, looking across the Dnipro at that silent green land of death.

Chapter XV

Yelka walked across some hills. Then there was a large body of water, as if a river in flood, and across it — all the way to the horizon — stretched a footbridge. It was rickety, with holes, but it held Yelka, and she walked along it. She crossed it, and again there were wild sandy hills, a mysterious desolation and an air of gloom. A German shepherd came bounding towards her from that mysterious place. It ran up to her, seized Yelka by the arm with its fangs, holding on firmly — not too tightly, but she couldn't break free, and it led her off. She felt that she was guilty of something, and knowing her guilt, this dog had caught her and was dragging her off somewhere. It would seize her arm more tightly, then let go a little, even licking it, as if sympathizing with her, and then clutched tighter and led her ahead, leading her along like punishment incarnate. Yelka moved along, not trying to break free, feeling the burden of trespasses which lay heavily on her soul. Finally she realized that she had been caught, that she had entered a forbidden world, a zone where there were military targets, maybe even something atomic hidden by those mysterious hills. No outsider was allowed to enter here, but she had wandered in by accident and now realized that she was lost, that there was no way she could redeem herself — she sensed her own guilt. There were guards here somewhere watching Yelka closely from their hiding places, even though they were nowhere to be seen. And even if the guards had wanted to let her go, to call off the dog, they couldn't have done that; they weren't allowed to — there was no return for her once she had crossed that footbridge and those forbidden waters, which now separated her from her former life.

Even in her sleep she felt a burden on her soul, the burden of some unknown transgression. A heavy dream for the daytime — she had never gone to bed during the day, except for today — and this nightmare had come over her.

From outside in the street came the voices of the little Bahlays, who were sharing their joyous news with the whole of Zachiplianka:

“There's a letter from father! He's coming soon. And he tells us to be knights!”

Joy awaited Virunka at home when she returned from the plant: there was a letter from Ivan. She showed it to Lesia Khomivna as a matter of course — they shared things together, having much in common. Both waited: one for her man from Bhilai, and the other for her battery commander, only from there — from where people did not return.

They read the letter once and then a second time, then talked about human feelings, and then started talking about Yelka. They had talked before about this girl who had found her way here to Zachiplianka, having found herself in dire straits. How could they help her? Perhaps they could arrange for a job for her at the plant? But what could she do? Perhaps she had something else on her mind? They closely analyzed why Loboda was visiting her. Of course, if there were feelings involved here, there was no need for them to interfere, for relationships between people did not come easily.

“It's hard to tell where one's fortune lies,” Lesia the front fighter said pensively. “I only know that a person who has suffered misfortune becomes more sensitive to the misfortunes of others...”

And toward evening Katraty made the rounds of Zachiplianka's yards, inviting the people to his place for some mysterious party: “Come around in the evening, if you please!” He did not skip any of the neighbors, even those with whom he was not that close.

“What's the reason for this celebration on a weekday?” he was asked.

Yahor replied evasively. He had caught some fish, and the people had not been getting together for a while now. For some reason that fish made people decline the invitation: one was off to the night shift, another was ready to go off “moonlighting.” (Moonlighting was a way to get extra money, private overtime done on the side, from which the worker would return close to midnight, crushed, barely dragging his feet.) They declined tactfully. However, he sensed something evasive in their refusal. Virunka, who was one of the first to be honored by Katraty's invitation, reacted almost hysterically for some reason: everyone knew where her husband was, she said, and she was not about to go carousing without him. And Lesia Khomivna, whom Yahor had not forgotten either, refused without any explanations, and only asked sharply:

“This means having to sit at the same table as those soup-eaters of yours?”

In the other yards they all kept asking, as if having conspired beforehand, what the reason was, and Yahor also answered them evasively. Those who agreed unflinchingly from the first word were Shpachykha and Sioma Deyneka, who had already been ousted from three jobs because of his moonlighting. This fellow went wherever he was asked, it was all the same to him whether it was a wedding or a funeral. But Katraty would have liked to see him least of all at his table. He invited him along because he had chanced on Sioma in the street, returning home, pushing along a bicycle with some boards pilfered from work.

Yahor went to the Orlianchenkos too. The master of the house promised to come along out of respect for Yahor, with whom he had once worked at the plant, and Romtsia even bared his teeth: as long as there was fish broth, eaters could be found. And no sooner had Yahor left the yard than the boy called out to others like himself across the street:

“Shall we honor them, boys, with our presence?”

“What are they going to have there?”

“I'll tell you what they're having.”

And Romtsia began to paint a picture loudly, so they would hear in the other yards too: a new engagement ceremony would be put on, completely in keeping with the contemporary mood. Until now, as was common knowledge, the old man had mostly disposed of illegal catfish on the side, but today he would be disposing of a very rare catch, in the form of that wild goldfish which had swum to him from the steppes, without a matriculation certificate. And playing the role of the receiver of the catch would be their beloved genius, highly praised by Shpachykha, their dear leader, and the like and so forth. There was no coercion here, no laughs. The curtain falls. In the second act our popular Shpachykha gives a concert to be crowned with fireworks of cold water spurting from a hose.

Orlianchenko sincerely regretted that Mykola Bahlay would not be present for all this: For the second day he was fighting for first place for his “Steelworker” in a rowing competition. His idealistic friend Bahlay would have had an opportunity to witness the gray humdrum prose that life's poetry became.

Yelka slept almost the whole day, and Katraty did not touch her. And when she woke up toward evening with an aching head after her dreams and came to the window, she saw a large bouquet of fresh roses flaming red under the old man's seedless pear, and Shpachykha and some

strange women with kerchiefs pulled down right over their eyes were fussing about and zealously laying out plates and dishes.

She did not immediately grasp what was going on. Why were they going about their work so hastily, as if embarrassed? She became filled with horror when she finally realized, and that magnificent bouquet of roses made her face flare up with angry fire. “What are you doing?” she wanted to scream out. “These aren't the old times! I'm no bartered bride! I don't love him! Understand that, I don't love him!”

She grabbed her head and squeezed her temples with her hands.

To the farm! To the calves, piglets, the team, the brigade, anywhere! It was better there. For she had friends there, not just brutal accusers. She had real friends, school friends, the manager and the Party organizer. She did not appreciate them, or ask their advice. They would have understood her, supported her, and they would have helped her survive. How could this happen to her? All around were people, plant collectives — the many joyous faces she had seen in the city! There was love somewhere. There were real human relations, true, honest, poetical... The young people gathered in the evenings here too. There was laughter, songs and music. Why wasn't she there? Had she been cast aside, too old at heart? Would they really push her aside, not accept her? Perhaps it was her own fault? Her distrust of everyone, her suspicion and furtiveness — here was what these things had let to. What should she do now? Run away? Jump out the window and run off, flying blindly through the villages? People would call her a lunatic. Running away like a fool, not from an attacker's knife, not from a gang, but from her own betrothal. She would become a laughingstock, nothing less. She should not have sat about here, watering those strawberries for hours on end, — that they should burn! She should have gone to the plant straight away, where there were collectives, where through work, through fierce work, she would have earned dignity and honor. For some reason the first to spring to mind were those combine buildings beyond the dam on the left when one went toward the Dnipro, behind that barbed wire fence over which Sioma dragged his stolen boards. She did not need moonlighting! Nothing. She wanted to live honestly, and to love the person of her heart's desire! Combing her hair carelessly, she hastily set about collecting her meager possessions. Now, don't delay — you can spend the night among the weeds in the cemetery, otherwise you won't escape! She piled everything up, shoving it carelessly into her suitcase. She pressed down on it heavily, trying to close it. Having entered noiselessly, Uncle Yahor caught her packing.

“Yelka! What are you up to? The people are already gathering...! You'll be slighting them! Disgracing me!”

She turned her red face, burning with hatred, away from the suitcase to look at him.

“And did I ask you to invite everyone? Wedlock? I've already been there! Do you hear me? I've been there! Once is enough.”

“Come on, Yelka...” Yahor was at a loss. “This is just an engagement or something... We'll get together, sit around, talk awhile...”

Yelka was sitting beside her suitcase, her face between her hands, staring at the floor. In her hunched shoulders, her doleful posture, there was something which moved even Yahor. Perhaps some ancient pain had been revived, making itself felt. Like a father, he settled down beside her, reassuringly patted her on the shoulder:

“I'm blood kin to you, Yelka... There's no one else left... Well, I'll die too. Take this garden, the house. But will it give you protection in life? It's hard, Yelka, very hard, for a person to live life alone.”

Yelka gave free reign to her tears. Her drooping shoulders shuddered with mute, disconsolate grief. She felt sorry for herself, but she felt sorry for Uncle Yahor too. He was not wishing her any harm.

“Lie down... rest awhile... recover.”

Yahor backed off, carefully, as if she were sick, toward the door. He left the room and closed the door quietly after himself.

A paralyzing indifference to everything overcame Yelka. People felt that way at times: didn't want to live, and yet it was too early to die.

And when the people sat at the table under the pear tree, Yelka was sitting among them, with hair combed and eyes dried, in front of the bouquet of cold roses that had been sprinkled with water by the old women.

Chapter XVI

Volodymyr Izotovych Loboda was sitting beside her, though not too close, afraid to lean against her. Only occasionally did he lean in her direction, asking ingratiatingly, with a subdued voice:

“Yelka, want this... or this?”

He felt a little embarrassed about his fawning, and that everyone noticed how humble he was, but after all, what a beauty she was; wasn't she worth the attention, the gratification of every whim she might have? Adorned with outward calm and cold indifference, Yelka seemed inaccessible to Loboda, even more blinding in her beauty, offset by her grim-ness, the claimant was secretly flattered that with time this beauty would belong to him, and yet at the same time Loboda still felt that fear toward Yelka, toward those truly restrained feelings of hers, which even showed through her calm. It was precisely this which alarmed Loboda. He felt that the slightest slip on his part would be enough, a single word spoken out of turn and Yelka's restraint would explode, and everyone would immediately become aware of the scandalous truth of her opposition to this engagement — an angry hostile truth established in feeling, which still came through the ice of composure, continually brewing inside her, giving Yelka an advantage and power over Loboda.

This required special tact; Yelka's obstinate soul needed to be enveloped in silks of devotion and care. That was why she kept hearing that cooing in her ears. But she didn't reply, didn't look in his direction; in no way did she display her desires.

This engagement party was somehow gloomy. The older people dined without unnecessary chatter. Shpachykha, raging and wild the day before, sat all gussied up, quiet as a saint. Today she had only sipped from the shot-glass, brought it up to her pursed lips and placed it to one side: she wasn't drinking. Volodymyr Izotovych occasionally exchanged a tedious word or two with Sioma, who had somehow ended up beside him, playing the role of a best man at a wedding or something, though no one had invited him to do that. Mrs. Vladyka's sons, Musiy and Ladymar Vladyka, worked away solidly, emptying the plates, both came directly from their jobs as rollermen. They hadn't even had time to change after work: they turned in here on their way home, simply to have dinner, so as to give the women at home a rest. Whether this was an engagement or a divorce party, or the devil knows what, they could do with a dinner after work — and they dug into the food in silence, as if sweeping it off the table. Only later, having reeled in his fair share, one of the brothers remarked that the food here was no worse than in the plant dispensary.

Romtsia Orlianchenko, who had come to the party in sunglasses for some reason, as if he were blinded by the sun, put on a show working away with a knife and fork at his end of the table, among his long-haired friends, whom no one had invited here. Romtsia had invited them to this last supper on his own initiative. Keeping his predatory, gangsterish glasses on at the table, Romtsia made monosyllabic comments to his friends from time to time, and forsaking the laws of courtesy, they giggled into their fists. After a while they heard Romtsia brag that he had become a top-notch worker at his plant, and that as a reward he might get to visit one of the friendly countries; he also mentioned how one of their plant workers had gone on a trip to Prague and an incident that happened to him there. By force of habit he jaywalked and dived into the

crowd, however the policeman caught up with him even there and whacked his shoulder so hard with the rubber truncheon, that the respected tourist went down on all fours, and turned around cowering, as if to say: what was that for? And the preserver of order immediately guessed that before him was a visitor, raised his cap politely and excused himself. But the fellow had returned home with an involuntary reflex: reckoned that now every time he crossed the street shivers went up and down his spine! The story was not very much to the point, and it was uncertain why Orlianchenko had told it. The Orlianchenko couple did not appear after all. The blind tank driver was absent too, having agreed earlier with Katraty that he would come with his accordion. His wife Nataalka came in the musician's place, and she must have cooked up a story about Kostia on the run: his accordion was in disrepair (though during the invitation there had not been any mention of that).

“It's not right, Nataalka, coming without your husband... like a grass widow.”

The “grass widow” replied that she would not be grieving in the company of such suitors, but even she felt tongue-tied in the awkward silence.

It was boring, people munched away, forks clinked, and one could hear the snort of hedgehogs out hunting in the orchard. Just sitting here with nothing happening was simply insufferable amidst this boredom and oppressiveness. Maybe some miserable music could have ameliorated the general discomfort, the imperfect mood of this engagement party, or whatever it was.

Sensing the mood of the masses, Loboda asked Romtsia to organize something “in the way of music,” because the host did not keep a radio, or play transistors. Romtsia eagerly took up the request, got up from the table, jerked up his stiff cowboy pants with the threadbare seat, and slouched off towards the gate. He was followed by his group of long-haired boorish youths, who had decided to have a square meal at the old man's expense, instead of going to a restaurant. One could hear them guffawing with satisfaction out in the street.

While they were waiting for the music, things became even more boring. Neither food nor drink would go down. But it was impolite to get up and leave like those boors, not decent. It was not right to break tradition. The women were very interested in Yelka, but tactfully glanced only occasionally and furtively at Loboda's long-necked green-eyed chosen one, at her well-tanned beautiful oval face with a straight nose and tight lips. That saddened face was expressionless — not a single pulse revealed what was seething inside her soul. The merry dimples never once appeared noticeably pale on her cheeks. She sat erect, with a cold haughtiness, and did not look at anyone — obstinate in her estranged inaccessibility, directing her cold gaze into space.

After a while the gate was thrown open by one of Orlianchenko's buddies, who had returned without any music, hastily came up to Yelka, and bent over her shoulder:

“They're asking for you.”

She flinched in alarm:

“Who?”

“A friend.”

Loboda frowned:

“Who is it?” And he looked sullenly at the impudent messenger. “If he wants to see her, he can come here, we're all friends here.”

And before this boy had taken more than a step back, the gate slammed shut once more and from behind the old man's house appeared Mykola Bahlay, stepping into the light unusually pale, in a casual sports jacket. One might have thought that the boy was tipsy, had it not been known that he never drank — so unusual was his pallor, highlighted by the electrical lighting, that severe break in the eyebrows — black, bushy, Bahlay-like.

Yelka watched him with an almost entreating expression, fear and expectation froze in her greenish eyes.

For a moment Bahlay looked only at her.

“Can I see you for a minute?”

She stood up at once, rising to her feet, perhaps even a little too hastily, amazing everyone by her actions. Without a single word, with silent readiness she drew up to Bahlay, and by the way she walked with him to the gate, without even looking back, carrying her troubled head with a defiance, everyone understood that this “minute” of theirs could drag out for a long time. It happened that such minutes later extended to a whole lifetime!

Everyone was dumbfounded.

“What a film,” Shpachykha alone spoke in the scandalous silence.

Loboda, whose face seemed suddenly to swell a lot, sent a devastating look in her direction, obviously considering the old debauchee a traitor. He sat there a while longer, overcast like a storm cloud, then left the table and shuffled morosely into the darkness of Yahor's orchard.

There was no music. Orlianchenko had not yet appeared with his amazing transistor radio which picked up every station. Anyway it was only now that the people felt they could have a good time.

The first to down a full faceted glass with a kind of debauched yell was Shpachykha. Sioma the pilferer was quick to follow suit, immediately leaning over to tinkle glasses with Natalka. The Vladyka brothers joined in too, even Katraty had a drink, then as if he felt better, he breathed a deep sigh of relief.

“Here's to your shashlik restaurant,” Shpachykha called out into the orchard. “Here's to you satisfying the wishes of the toiling masses!”

And only now, without concealing the details, did she tell everyone how Loboda had asked her to butter up Yelka, brought her a present, and, assuming the consequences of sin, she did try to persuade the girl, and then came home — and would you believe it — burst into tears!

“What have I done, I thought. Exchanged my conscience for a gift? What a ward leader for you, what a mother of a hero-son. And myself a heroine of the fourth blast furnace — a work trauma to my credit. And what a trauma! My whole life-service attained through truth, and here I was insincere...” And again she yelled into the orchard. “Don't hide in the bushes there, Volodymyr, you cannot escape constructive criticism...! Your mother isn't alive anymore, so at least we can put in a word for her. How she nursed you, how she loved you, the youngest son... She wanted to nurture you into a falcon of life, and you could have become one, just like your older brothers! But you? Where's your conscience — in your heart or locked up in a safe?”

Shpachykha was and wasn't heard, everyone seemed to feel relieved. It became immediately clear that something bad was being undertaken here, that they had taken part in this badness, and only now had rid themselves of the shame, constraint and falsehood, from the burden of untruth.

The Vladyka brothers, forgetting that they had been preparing to leave, launched into a duet, both having fine voices. Nataalka joined them in flight, catching the tune on a high note and, as if in answer to her call, her lawful Kostia the tank driver appeared in the yard with his accordion in very good repair, and stretched the bellows in a swashbuckling sweep all the way across his chest. Orlianchenko's company returned too, and Romtsia himself appeared, with a naive smile, as if he hadn't been involved in anything.

Only the couple who had left "for a minute" did not return.

No one seemed to think about them anymore. Rising in a storm, their song attracted voices, summoning even those who had at first refused, each boycotting in his own way this unacceptable pseudo-engagement. Zachiplianka came to life, one after another industrious workers began appearing, who after having worked their second shift were preparing to go to bed. Bahlay's Virunka came running over too-round-faced, somewhat full, in a clean kerchief. Katraty bore no grudge against anyone for their previous refusal, treated them generously, as he had known how to once before. Treating Virunka to a glass, he kept calling out tipsily to her:

"Slaughter the geese, Virunka! Grab a knife and slit the damn birds' throats; they're honking over there by the shed!"

And when he turned angrily to face the thick of the orchard:

"Where's that... Jisuit?"

"Jesuit," Romtsia modestly corrected him.

"Jisuit!" Katraty boomed even louder.

Zachiplianka hadn't made merry like this for a long time. Even those on the night shift had sped past on their bicycles toward the cathedral, but no one left here. This was Vesela Street! They had to make merry once they had gotten together! The people rejoiced that everything had turned out this way, gladdened by the song which brought them closer together, glad that those two had not yet returned. This was in true Zachiplianka style! That was how one should live: if you took a liking to her, you came up, took her by the hand and led her off! Without love one would not have the courage to do it! Only love gave one the right to do that!

"Come on, sing!" Virunka invited Romtsia and his friends to join in, but they only grinned, hiding behind each other, unable to sing. "Oh, you voiceless creatures! You've turned to automation! Your voice boxes will wither away at this rate."

It was past midnight, and the singing still continued. This night Zachiplianka did not worry about the coming day, was in no hurry to sleep, was deep in the tempestuous intoxication of merriment, in those white geese which flew off to the lake, in the nice dear Cossacks who whistled the start of their march at midnight.

At the very end Shpachykha harnessed herself to the wheelbarrow, for the host had to be honored, driven to the lake to be bathed. And they would wheel him off, take the old rollerman for a ride in an iron wheelbarrow with one wheel! In all their revelry, with the whole merry crowd in tow, they would wheel him with songs and shouts to the lake, to his beloved waters, tipping him out in his clothes straight into the tepid water, into the water-nettles, frightening away the lake stars and the carp sleeping on the bottom of the lake. They would wheel off the host, give him a ride, and he would not even resist, for so demanded the Zachipliankan custom, and he would only call out with immoderate generosity from the wheelbarrow: "Kill them all, kill

all my geese!” He was reminiscent of that early Katraty, the Can't-Miss-a-Tavern, the broad-natured fellow, the man capable of turning his enormous strawberries into the music of orchestras in a single breath!

Chapter XVII

Even on the darkest moonless night, the Dnipro still glowed near the plants. Both the village lake and Raduta, a big reedy lake in the sandhills, continued to glow. The brown sky imbued them with its brownness, giving them a flaming fiery luster, as if the morning star was painting these still waters all night long. The darkness blanketed the sandhills, standing in a solid wall on the steppes, while the crimson mirrors of the Dnipro lakes shone and shone for pilots and birds, and for late fishermen, clearly outlining the reeds in their rosy waters, each reed stalk.

And if a wandering couple stopped on the shore, the couple's silhouette would be reflected also in the glassy rosiness.

Near Raduta a pillbox stood white on a hilltop, lit up by the fires of the plants — one of the bastions of the already distant 1941. As far back as Bahlay could remember, he remembered this destroyed pillbox near Raduta. He had crawled into it with the boys many a time; they had helped each other up into the embrasures, clawing their way to the very top of the rugged ruins, which no longer frightened them away with its slabs of sharp-toothed reinforced concrete, broken and torn to pieces by the mighty force of an explosion. Who had blown up this pillbox and when — no one knew. Just this summer the pillbox had been whitewashed by someone, painted with lime. When the glow splashed up over the plants, it flashed white too, unnatural, as if covered with snow. The pillbox was surrounded by a fence of metal pipes to keep out the goats. The enclosure was fine, of course, but whitewashing the pillbox — “Probably the Leading Worker's idea... It's in his style,” the student thought with a smile. Or perhaps the pioneers had prettied it with lime in their childish naivete, daubing an historical monument? The whitewashers hadn't even had an inkling that together with the dark-brown grayness of the ruins, darkened by the elements and baked by the heat, they had also removed that stern spirit, which had resided here, a spirit of the heroic deeds committed by unknown people.

They walked around it, looking at the ruins.

“Stepmother epoch has left us relics mostly of this nature,” Bahlay said with sad irony.

“Aren't you and I relics too?” it occurred to Yelka. “Both living relics of the war! Your father at least left you a surname, but what did I get? The daughter of a single mother! He's probably forgotten the name of the village too.”

He had passed across the autumn steppes like the gray-coated shadows of the fronts, spent the night, and was never heard of again. Or perhaps in the final moment, in the moment of his parting with life, he finally did remember this fleeting one-night stand in some Ukrainian steppe village? Perhaps he had laid his head to rest somewhere here in these sandy hillocks? Died a courageous death, not knowing that he was dying a father, that his daughter would grow up on hard-earned widow's food, and would not grow into any old bat, but into a beauty after all, the devil take her! Otherwise, a boy like this one would not have latched onto her, this student, who, as if the answer to her dreams, wandered sleeplessly at night about his Zachiplianka.

He had come today, confidently taking Yelka from the table, leading her out into the street. Why had he been certain that Yelka would get up, drop her “fiancee” without hesitation, and follow him? Had he noticed something about her? Had she seemed flippant to him? Did she give that impression?

When the gate was behind them, Bahlay took her firmly by the hand, as if afraid she would run back. Without letting go of her hand, he asked warmly:

“Where shall we go?”

“To the ends of the earth, if you like,” Yelka smiled for the first time that evening.

And the July night led them to the ends of Zachiplianka's world, which finished with this pillbox. It led them along, and the lakes lit their way, and the plantlit sky bloomed purple above them. They would sit on the pillbox, walk along the Dnipro, where people had walked before them and would walk after them, and the sky would light their way too. How easy, how free Yelka felt with him! When the words flowed — they talked, when they had a desire to remain silent — they said nothing, without feeling uncomfortable; they felt good in the silence too.

The singing in Zachiplianka reached here too; people were still frolicking there, waking the villages with their din, and sitting beside her on the pillbox, the boy listened to those songs with a trepidation, listened to them as if to the folk spirit — that was how he understood them. What immortal poetry could be invoked from a word, the most simple, seemingly everyday material!

“Geese... cucumbers... a pail floating along... and how much is said by them.” And he asked: “Do you sing, Yelka?”

She replied that she used to sing once.

“They sing beautifully in our village; they haven't forgotten all the songs under the weight of the corn and silage.”

She was overcome with happiness, she drank in this air, this starriness of the sky, this serenity of the lakes. How had all this engulfed her? Everything around her seemed illuminated, she perceived everything differently. What was this thing, so mysterious, so omnipotent, which suddenly awakened in a person, and which probably even the wisest sages could not fathom? How many times had she walked through these sandhills to the beacon — it was a goats' desert, and nothing more; she was only cross when burrs stuck to her legs, but now — it was if a cataract had fallen from her eyes, a blanket had been removed from everything, everything was revealed in different colors, blossoming with beauty.

And the student, who had until recently been inaccessible, now sat beside her, recited the poems of a Spanish poet, and the words mingled with rumble of a train over a bridge, thundering far away in the silence of night — from somewhere to somewhere. There was poetry in that too. Bahlay seemed to shower Yelka with the generosity of his soul, everything his gaze fell upon became unusual: the glow of the factories veiled the plant Titan, and this wasteland where structures of a novel architecture were already growing in his imagination, a sunny city for people — for people, not streetcars! Even that stem of reed which had thrown its shadow in the crimson of the lake, it too became novel, revealed itself as an artist's reed, one of those reeds from which the cathedral's prototype was once woven, its first small model, which fitted on a teenager's palm. A night of tenderness, that was this night. When they were walking, Yelka got some sand in her shoe and bending over to shake it out, she felt his anxious breathing; Mykola supported her, the gentle language of his hand supported her as if she was some creature made of mist, which could only be supported so lovingly, so emotionally. After that they kept holding hands as they walked, as if afraid to lose each other in the darkness.

So they would walk along. And he would laugh openly when Yelka told him how he seemed to be running away from her then, hurrying off to the bus with his knapsack — Mykola laughed! It was quite a different reason: he was running away from his friend the mechanic, not her, because he did not want to go and meet the bureaucrats, to push through his smoke filters. He had been at a sports meet in a neighboring steelworkers' town, fighting for victory for his crew. And that golden boat was already streaking along the Dnipro like an arrow — pointed, long, like a swordfish, cutting the glassy surface — he had obviously competed on one such as this, right? Had he won?

“Nth place,” Mykola joked, “in the group of wretched non-prize winners... I sweated it out honestly, but as our brother Russians say in such cases: 'Uvy!' — Alas!”

He wasn't at all saddened by it, and this too appealed to Yelka.

At the foot of the embankment dividing the slag-concrete block plant from the sandhills, scoria crunched underfoot, and bulrushes stood black at the bottom of the small gully. And these bulrushes, like everything else around here, also spoke to him. He told Yelka that there had once been a small lake here, a backwater, the little children had caught carp there. And then one day a spring suddenly burst through, an enormous mound of water gurgled and bubbled for several days in the middle of the backwater. The plant administration — out of fright or something — dumped a hundred bags of sand and scoria into it.

“They blocked the spring, and there was no more water... But the fools remained,” he joked sadly.

He asked Yelka what she read and then began to make fun of various so-called “collective farm” and “labor” novels, which were set apart with caste severity — one from the Shelyuhiv farm to the cathedral, and the second, from the cathedral, where the outskirts of the town begin, and all the way to the blast furnace: other heroes were refused entry here.

“But people are people everywhere,” he reflected aloud. “And work is work everywhere, as long as it is real, and not only fruitless running around. After all, there is work that only has the appearance of work, self-deception. Oh how much energy we still waste on such running around — noisy, tiring work, really not needed by anyone, and essentially absurd. If it is real, then it has its own philosophy and sense, even Shpachykh's work...”

The night floated along, the sky turned purple.

Later they would linger under a tower — one of those which went off across the sandhills beyond the Dnipro, and one like a pitchfork. They would stand about, listen to the tower's hum and trembling. It also lived, with its voltages, with its electrified iron life. Standing beside it, they listened to the night tower, saw the brown swirl of smoke above the plants, and Yelka felt the boy's timid caressing hand on her shoulder. She was frightened he might remove it. A blissful intoxication did not leave her.

What was it, that intense feeling called love in songs? The affinity of souls? Closeness, in which one suddenly began to feel one's human worth? Or the explosion of mutual tenderness, which suddenly broke through from the depths like that spring, bubbling in the sun, gurgling, boiling invincibly — or was it something else still? Yes, this was it, it appeared before Yelka like a revelation, she could have told all the people: I know, I know now: love is tenderness and purity! Tenderness, which is greater than death!

She did not want to have any secrets from him; she would have told him everything about her painful dishonor, and of the thorny paths her soul had crossed before reaching this blissful sandhill night. But as soon as he began to touch on this painful subject, Mykola stopped her himself, as if sensing the pain of her unhealed spiritual wound:

“There's no need to talk of that now.”

And she felt that there really was no need.

The shortest nights in the world are the nights of people in love. Before one knew it, such a night flashed by, the stars floated off, the glows faded away across the Dnipro. The silvery fog of dawn would shimmer over the lake and the Zachiplianka orchards would show through — it would begin to dawn. And any of the Zachiplianka residents, those who rose very early, would see two people ramble out of the night, holding hands — they too would remember their own silvery mists of those most blissful of sunrises, when the two of them in love met somewhere by a gate when it was already time, and they hadn't the strength to part, because not everything had been discussed yet; he had not looked his fill at her, nor she at him.

They would find themselves by the cathedral, slowly walk around it, while to them it would seem to be spinning on its axis continually revealing new domes, larger and smaller ones, of which there would seem to be countless numbers. They were set in such a way, that Yelka could never count how many of them there actually were. It would become even lighter, and the sky would be bright with dawn in the east, lifting its high sails over the swamps, and Bahlay's words about the cathedral would seem to come from far away — about how rare it was, how its image, its silhouette, could be found in every art textbook. He would talk about the smoothness of its lines, its ideal proportions, the lacework of arches, the beauty of the windows, the cornices, about the spirit of that majestic freedom imbued into the structure of the cathedral by its Cossack architects. She would hear how they had founded it, blessed it. But all this would seem to reach Yelka from afar. Her face would burn with a different anxiety: here! Everything had happened here. The truck had stood there... They had loaded the feed over there... And that brutal, darkest night of hers, it had maimed her here with its coarse animal embraces.

“What's wrong, Yelka?”

He noticed her burning sullenness, there was alarm in his voice.

“I'm not worthy of you,” she should have said to him. “You don't even suspect how unworthy. Sainly, you think — if only you knew what an angel there was before you! You're talking to me now about those verticals and archwork, but before you stands an ignoramus incapable of the lofty. She simply wants your embraces, to press close to you, to fall onto your chest, to dissolve, to die... That is what I have on my mind! That's the way I am, though in your imagination I am quite different!” How she wished she could have been different. But with what herbs could she wash the disgrace away, what purgatory did she have to pass through to appear reborn before him, worthy of his love, his trust and purity?

The first bus going from the town to the villages had gone by. Those working the morning shift drifted towards the bus stop one by one. The east was aglow, burning. Khoma Romanovych, the eternally hunched teacher of arithmetic, was hurrying off somewhere early in the morning with a basket in his hand. Passing Yelka and Mykola, he looked about and, though there was no

one in the square, addressed the young couple in a lowered secretive voice, with his habitual bombastic instructiveness:

“Guard the cathedrals of your souls, friends... The cathedrals of your souls...!”

And he hurried off.

It appeared that it was already time to part. Mykola said that they would not be seeing each other for a while. He had to go off to a village with his institute friends to help the collective farmers with the harvest. Yelka asked if they were sending them far away, and he replied cheerfully:

“To some godforsaken Vovchuhy!”

Yelka tottered as if from a blow, covering her face with her hand. Alarmed, Bahlay asked once more what was the matter.

“To Vovchuhy... To Vovchuhy!” the words hammered at her brain. Undisguised horror overcame her when she imagined Bahlay arriving in her native village, having to hear all those lies, that dirt. He would hear things which hadn't even happened. They would slander her as they saw fit! And no one would defend her. Yelka would appear before him rolled in mud and filth. And after that, how could she look him in the eye when he returned from there?

Bahlay must have interpreted her fear, alarm and anxiety his own way: she was agitated that they would have to part, that their meeting would be postponed. In a wild burst of gratitude, he moved to draw her closer to himself, gently touched her blond lock with his hand, and as soon as he did this, Yelka threw herself at him in a kind of desperation, grabbing him in an embrace with both arms, kissing him passionately, thirstily on the lips.

“It's a good thing that I have all my documents with me,” she laughed, scrutinizing Bahlay with her gaze, and tears filled her eyes.

Bahlay looked at her as if she were a saint, a Madonna, his eyes were riveted to her glowing face, which seemed to have grown thinner overnight. Long-necked, with a large forehead, with eyes full of those unfathomable tears, she continually drew him to herself, attracting his whole spirit with the glint of her tears, and her inscrutability, and that ever-present painful grief in her gaze. The grief of parting, it wasn't this which had alarmed Bahlay. He was alarmed by something else, that something in Yelka's eyes; their greenish depths reflected a final farewell, an inexplicable hue of finality and isolation.

The bus drew up to the stop and Yelka ran off, her skirt flashing, jumped inside it. She disappeared in the crowd, as if forever and ever. Then she finally managed to fight her way to the window and, pressing her forehead to the glass, smiled at Mykola with that same pained half-smile. She sent him her smile, left it with him, and she herself was already somewhere far away, unreachable, irretrievable, like time. She began to draw away with her smile, agile, tanned, appearing so sorrowful in parting through the bus window. Had she smiled after all? That wasn't just an illusion, an apparition, a shadow? She had turned his whole world upside down, illuminated his soul and floated off, flown off, as if forever and ever.

Which documents was she talking about?

Had Mykola asked her about this, Yelka would have yelled only a single word to him from the bus:

“Love!”

Chapter XVIII

Katraty slept all day long, like a young man after a night of youthful exuberance. However, he did not forget his responsibility: when the beacons had to be lit, Yahor was there.

Late into the night a solitary fire glowed red on the bank near that beacon hut. Droppings, gathered in the sandhills, smoldered in the fire, and with them Yahor's fishing tackle as well. Whitened in the Dnipro, dried in the sun, they turned to ash, all those clever devices that were also capable of turning against a fisherman, sometimes serving as material evidence for a fishing inspector. The fish in the Dnipro were laughing this evening! Playing, they even leapt out of the water in Yahor's deep spots, and they could see their merciless catcher's tranquil fire on the bank.

Katraty was sitting before the fire on a large piece of driftwood dumped here by a wave, hunched up and deep in thought, looking immovably into the dying coals, as if with unseeing eyes...

THE BLACK BONFIRE

Freedom, what was it like? Like the steppe? Like an unfettered horse? Or like a hawk in the sky above Huliappole?

He was just a youth when he was picked up by the Huliappole wind. For even if you were the lowest rung on the ladder of life, even you would want at some stage to taste freedom. All around him everyone was drunk with freedom. This word was tempestuous, wild, intoxicating even the adults, so why shouldn't it intoxicate an unwashed teenage boy, a gooseherd who was employed for next to nothing for the whole summer by those morose colonists to tend their geese or their Blumental herd of cattle.

Yahor first heard about freedom at the railway station, surrounded by horse dung and dust-covered machine-gun carts. The sky was burning; the sky was white with heat. The red brick wall of the warehouse was high, and from somewhere atop it, just below the sky it seemed, a disheveled man in a field jacket and belts was addressing the square. It turned out that there were various freedoms, and there was also "absolute" freedom, boundless, limitless.

"Freedom and no less!"

The boy caught every word, swooned with enthusiasm in this crush between horses' tails, between horses' muzzles, between their prickled-up ears (for the horses were listening here too — they too had a taste for freedom!). It appeared freedom smelled of horse sweat, crowded squares and their hot dust, and dung. Freedom was disheveled, its hair was unwashed, and most often it had the appearance of angrily-raised clenched fists... Manes in ribbons, machine-guns mounted on carts, the blinding flood of freedom bathing dark unshaven faces... After this how could one return to being a swineherd for sullen blockheaded colonists! It was better to sleep nights in marketplaces, under a ragged sky, to subsist on the leftovers of other armies, and yet be — how did it go? A rebel of the spirit, an unchained Prometheus of the steppes!

Later he again found himself tending that Blumental herd after all, but those same machine-gun carts soon came rolling across the steppes, with shouts and singing. Countless machine-gun carts, disappearing beyond the horizon in a cloud of dust.

And at the head, riding horseback, in a creaking saddle, was that disheveled fellow. For some reason he seemed to rest his thorny gaze on Yahor, standing in the group of cowherds who had come running up to the road. Perhaps because he was the ruddiest amongst the cowherds, the

most neglected, the thatch of his hair coming down over his ears, his feet cut up by the stubble, bloodied and scabby.

“What's your name?”

“Yahor.”

“Who are your herding for?”

“Heinrich the Colonist.”

“And where's your father?”

“Didn't return from the war... Poisoned by gas...”

“And his grandfather was murdered by the State Guard,” one of the boys prompted.

Yahor stood there, choking on tears. It was true. The guards had beaten his grandpa so badly that he died soon after. The Hetmanites had taken revenge on the villagers for pillaging the landlord's estate.

“Yahor, want to come along with me as my groom? Want to ride on a machine-gun cart? We'll disembowel the whole of that State Guard.”

Straight from the herd like that, from the stubble, to a machine-gun cart, where there were handsome dappled gray horses prancing about. What a turn life could take.

“We can guess, father, why this boy won your favor,” one of Makhno's inseparable theoreticians philosophized that day when they had halted for a rest. He was a round-shouldered, scrawny fellow wearing a pince-nez. “You saw in him the picture of your childhood! Felt the concealed moaning of your orphanhood. For your path into history also began as a cowherd, a gooseherd for colonists, where the whole cup of lawlessness and humiliation was drunk. And now you have recognized yourself in him, your pain, your own little feet cut on other people's stubble. Who'll say after this that Makhno isn't capable of kindness? That he knows only cruelty?”

“They say Shamyly loved children too,” one of the rebels reminded them, and the theoretician latched onto this straight away:

“To us, father, you are the Shamyly of Ukraine! A contemporary Shamyly of the steppes...! Only he wanted to build society on the precepts of Islam, while you are building it on the freedom-loving teachings of the apostles of anarchism.”

“If I'm Shamyly, then where is my sublime village?” Makhno laughed.

“Huliaypole — that is your capital! All roads come together there, in our glorious Makhnograd.”

In Huliaypole children played war, fighting with sunflower stalks on pasture land. Teachers complained to Makhno that one boy who was chosen to be an “officer” was almost choked to death when he was hung from a school swing. Huliaypole was making merry, celebrating the honeymoon of its freedom. The boys bathed horses in ponds, dined in companies, and shot into the air with joy. Accordions were being torn apart everywhere, playing “The Apple” frantically, and girls in ribbons danced with long-haired rebels. And then saw them off:

“Where are you off to?”

“We're going to destroy jails and churches... We'll cart bells from every steppe to Huliaypole... And then when we begin tolling them, the whole of Ukraine will hear!”

Pirates of the steppes, disheveled sons of anarchy, sons of universal freedom, how they listened to their shaggy-haired leader, how true they were to him! "I'll butcher my own mother and father, when the ataman order me to!" — these were the types he rallied, these became his commanders. A terrorist from the cradle, sentenced to death and saved from the gallows only because he was a minor, a prisoner freed by the revolution, he had exchanged a prison barrow for the expanses of Huliaypole and appeared in the steppes surrounded by the aureole of his legendary deeds. The shock-haired, impulsive army saw in him its idol, and Yahor was no exception. The boy clung to the machine-gun cart like a devil-child, intoxicated with flight, the reins became as tight as strings when Yahor sensed an unusual passenger behind his back — Nestor Ivanovych himself. Chattering away tipsily, that ataman joyously asked his advisor-theoreticians about that outlandish Professor Yavornytsky, who wouldn't give the tsar any spirits! He was a professor, but he had covered all the steppes on foot, still went down the rapids each year, had broken his arms and legs on the Khortytsia cliffs, forever searching for

Cossack relics. All those Chortomlyks and Kapulivkas were being excavated by him, Yavornytsky had examined every steppe grave, obtained unheard-of treasure for his museum, including a bottle of spirits — it had lain under the head of some brave Cossack, his comrades had placed it there so he could drink in the other world. It had lain there for ages, becoming as thick as honey. During a visit to the museum the tsar had asked to sample some of the Cossack drink, but Yavornytsky had replied to the despot: it's not a drink for you, tsar.

Makhno liked listening to such stories. It wasn't often that one came across such Yavornytskys! He resurrected the glory of past ages, lived just for it, promised himself to tell the whole world about the knights of the Cossack republic. He had written tomes about those Cossacks, collected all the narratives about Zaporozhian wizards, and had become a sorcerer himself. He was afraid of nothing, it was said, neither God, nor Satan, nor Death itself. And by his very bearing, stockiness, and mustache — he was a living Zaporozhian Cossack!

"Would he give me at least a sip of that alcohol?" Makhno wondered.

"Oh, for you, father, he'd give it to you with a generous soul," they buttered him up. "He'd even give you the hetman's mace from his Zaporozhian treasures. After all, you are the number one hetman of our freedom!"

In the swamps, tired after their trek and drunk already, the Makhnovites crowded around their leader:

"Father, inspire us!"

He was merciless with them, he allowed himself to address them thus:

"You, you're stomachs with sabres! Stomachs, and nothing more! And I give you the idea! The dynamite of spirituality! With me you will rise on the winds of rebellion, rising like knights of the steppes, to build the first stateless society in history, to install anarchic rule..."

"Inspire us, father, inspire us!"

"But first I'll let you get drunk on freedom! The old must be swept away first! Go and storm it!" And Makhno's whip pointed vehemently to the distant cathedral looming on the horizon.

That way, to the cathedral! Storm the cathedral — so willed the ataman's tasseled whip.

And already freedom was ringing hoofs over the pavement of the suburbs, the doors of the cathedral were already thrown open, horses stood with empty saddles steaming without riders.

And these were going about their business inside — the holy portal was split open, they were dragging out vestments, chalices, various church vessels, covers, towels embroidered by Petrykivka women. An enormous Huliaypolian squatted down, unshod his feet, began to wrap a silk cover around his giant foot, people ran past him, teeth glistening with guffaws.

“You'll tread primrose in silk foot cloths?”

“And why not? We'll tear purple robes into foot cloths, brother... That's just what I'm doing.”

There was guffawing at the altar too, there the killers were receiving Communion, drinking wine straight from golden chalices... And the priest was nowhere in sight, he was not hurrying to save his property; he lay huddled somewhere, shaking in terror, for he had heard how these boys had taken one priest suspected of spying for the Whites, and pushed him alive into a locomotive furnace in Synelnykove. They pushed him in with guffaws, for the priest turned out to be fat, big-bellied, and wouldn't fit into the furnace. He was very unwilling to have himself reduced to tallow, struggling free, twisting his neck about, straining, and hatefully spitting only one word into Makhno's face:

“Satan... Satan...”

A whistle echoed through the cathedral. It was Shtereveria the Platoon Commander stepping out from the altar in a shaggy hat, vestments thrown over his shoulder, whistling into the heights to show his power, his fearlessness. And somewhere from the shadows, from the side, directed at him, came a sudden authoritative booming voice:

“Don't whistle here.”

The stocky sorcerer, the gray-mustached Yavornytsky, appeared as if out of thin air — many of the Makhnovites knew him by sight.

“What do you want, grandpa?” Shtereveria frowned.

“One shouldn't whistle inside a house. You should know the ancestral custom.”

“This isn't a house!”

“More the reason. It's a temple! A temple of beauty, history, a temple of Cossack architecture... And you're acting as if you're in a stable.”

“Hold your tongue, grandpa! For such things we... a quick stroke, and your guts will be hanging on the telephone wires! See for yourself, I've got a sabre, one stroke — and I'll let the spirit out of you!”

“My spirit isn't afraid of you, young man.”

“Really now?” Shtereveria rested his hands on his waist in amazement. “Are you immortal? Can neither bullet nor sabre kill you? Or here, let me try...”

“Don't you frighten me with a sabre... Hear the Dnipro rapids roaring, the graves talking away, and the winds howling! My deeds will outlive the ages! Repin painted me, and you want to slay me, you snotty-nosed squirt!” Yavornytsky's voice echoed loudly and authoritatively through the cathedral. As if he were not at all afraid of the armed gang.

Yavornytsky grabbed the flint and tinder from the hands of one Makhnovite who was striking a light for a smoke. He threw them down on the ground and stamped on them with his foot.

“Scoundrels! Sluts! Vandals! Out of the cathedral!”

“Oh, pops, we'll shoot you!” the Makhnovite said, not believing his own restraint, as he picked the flint up off the floor.

“If you've got an empty head on your shoulders, then shoot!” the professor seethed. “You have might on your side, I have truth. Might will pass away, but truth never!”

His angry roar resounded throughout the cathedral, they even heard him outside and called out:

“Bring the professor here! Nestor Ivanovych himself will speak to him.”

And so the two of them stood before the cathedral: one a solid, broad-shouldered educated man with a Zaporozhian mustache, and before him the bony-faced ruler of chaos, with greasy hair hanging down to his shoulders, draped with weapons. Makhno pierced the old Cossack with his thorny gaze, while he calmly looked him up and down.

“What are you arguing about with my boys, professor?”

“Fire. Extinguish your pipe, I said, and he kept striking. My, what a Herostratus from Holopup Settlement... And did you build it?”

“Why does he dare talk with me this way about my eagles?” Makhno gouged him with his watchful gaze. “And why am I listening to him? Why am I tolerating it? What power is behind him? Was the Commune flooding about them in a sea? Or was he really not afraid of death? Was there so much Zaporozhian courage residing in this mustached giant?”

“Professor, you don't like my army or my ideals, do you?”

Yavornytsky's mustache moved angrily:

“People don't strive toward an ideal through ruins and over corpses. Spirit of ruin, storm of destruction — these aren't my elements...”

“Father! Why argue with him! It's plain as day, he's contra, an enemy of rebellion. He walks around in an embroidered peasant shirt, and at home the moths are probably eating through his bourgeois furs!”

Makhno knitted his brows, his angry thin lips pressed together, becoming even thinner. “What's this with me? Earlier, you wouldn't have dared, old man. For one such look I would have... And now I really am carrying on! To what am I listening inside me? Do I want to hear something? And what do I hear? Your animosity. The roar of the rapids behind you...? You weren't afraid of the Tsar, but I'm mightier than the Tsar!”

“Bring my page here! Yahor!”

At Makhno's fierce cry the boy carrying the whip was immediately pushed from the crowd. Makhno shoved a revolver into his hands.

“Here! Do him in!” he nodded at Yavornytsky. “He has insulted our whole army.”

The revolver was heavy, it was too much for the child's hand, the barrel was loaded with shells, loaded with death.

“Take aim! Aim straight for his guts!” the crowd edged him on. “Pull the trigger! Fire!”

The boy's legs gave way under him, everything went dark before his eyes. The revolver slipped from his hands and fell to the ground.

“I won't!”

“Why?”

“I won't — and that's all!”

Even Makhno roared with cold laughter:

“This I like! My nature. My character! Because of this I'm sparing you,” he turned to Yavornytsky, flaunting his own magnanimity. “I grant you your life! Because you didn't give the tsar a drink of spirits! Would you give me one?”

“It's far from here,” Yavornytsky smiled evasively. “The museum is in the city, and the city isn't yours, it's held by armed workers.”

“For a draught of that alcohol I'll visit your museum. Here at my side is a sabre of a Bukharan emir, if you like I'll leave it at the museum as a memento.”

“I have a Zaporozhian museum,” Yavornytsky growled. “I seek, first of all, weapons produced by Zaporozhian gunsmiths. I collect things imbued with glory...”

“And what else?”

“... and also the peasant's wooden plow. Ancient plowshares...” He seemed to see these things before him now. “A Cossack boat. A weaving loom. And also the poker of the first steelworker to erect a blast furnace on the Dnipro. They're the kind of tools I collect.”

As he was talking Yavornytsky noticed the boy, who had been ordered to kill him only a short while before, looking at him very attentively the whole time. And now the professor seemed to be telling him alone, what of all the treasures was most valuable to man.

“Smelting metal isn't like stirring soup, boys... Even a fool can disembowel people. But the secret of artisans, the secret, let's say, of Damascus steel — who among you here knows it?” And he looked at Makhno with sorrowful pensiveness. “You are a legendary person, but why are your deeds so black? Why is the greed for destruction so powerful, so mighty inside you? Is the world coming to that? That only two emerge onto the arena: the Wrecker and the Builder... But you should know: one busy with destruction inevitably degenerates...”

Shtereveria pushed his way forward, draped in the gold of the vestments, holding a demijohn in his hand, probably wishing to play the buffoon before the ataman:

“Grandpa, can a place be found for me in your museum?”

Yavornytsky studied him closely:

“We could use something of yours too. Perhaps the louse on the lasso, or the demijohn of hooch... For what else is there?”

“Oh, you're a jester, I see, grandpa,” Semeniuta blinked sullenly. “You should have your pants pulled down for such jokes and be given a good whipping.”

Everyone looked at Makhno; perhaps he would give the order? It wasn't in his nature to procrastinate with people like this. He might raise an eyebrow, give the Zadovy brothers a barely noticeable sign with his finger, and immediately the old man would be taken under the arms, “let's go for a walk to those acacias, grandpa,” and there a barrel would be pressed to the back of his head and his mustache would be pushed against the ground, be he a historian, even a superhistorian. However Father Makhno judged it differently. Now you, Yavornytsky, were famous in the province for your lectures on the Cossack era, reading them to the simple people and even the merchants, so that they would dip into their purses to give money for excavations. So enlighten my boys now too, tell them about this cathedral — so that at least they, these heroes of rebellion, will know where you drove them from!

And Yavornytsky was somehow humbled by this request, becoming gentler, kinder immediately, and addressing the crowd, really began to tell them about this cathedral. Earlier, in the times of princes, cathedrals were most often built in honor of victories, but this one had been built by the Cossacks in a farewell to arms, to the Sich. They laid its foundation in the same year that the bitch of an empress destroyed the Sich. Her lover, Potemkin, had wormed his way into the Cossack company, becoming known as Hrytsko Nechesa, and helped that crown-bearing whore with the science of treachery. Cunningly you took away our trenches, and cannons, and flags, and military seal, and we — you could have willed to have us chopped into pieces! — instead we built a sacred cathedral, sent our spirit into the sky, to shine through the ages.

“The old man lies well,” a freckle-cheeked Makhnovite in a shaggy Caucasian fur cap remarked from the crowd, and spying him Yavornytsky immediately riveted his stern gaze upon him:

“Take off that lambskin hat of yours before this creation! Take it off before those Cossack architects who built this cathedral for you, you lazybones... We'll see what you will build.”

Makhno caught an allusion to himself. He called Baron, one of his most loquacious theoreticians, out of the crowd.

“Tell him,” he pointed to Yavornytsky, “about our movement, because he's reading lectures, and is ignorant himself.”

And the Baron began to throw articulate words at the old man, grimacing like a clown on a carpet. About the experiment of anarchic power, that this Huliaypole experiment would become a new word for the whole of mankind, becoming the kingdom of the unfettered individual. Again he mentioned total freedom, that eternal absolute, which made the professor's face grimace, as if he had tasted something bitter. “You're telling me about absolute freedom, but I'll ask you, is it really possible? You speak to me about life without violence, then why, have you yourself got a holster dangling down to your knees?” Baron felt that he already had the old man on his back, defeated and pressed down with Bakunin and Karpokrat. And these cathedrals were nothing more than heathen temples, filled only with smoke and incense; they stood in the way of the blossoming of a free individual, and so the bells had to be removed from them and lugged by oxen to Huliaypole. Their father could decide what to do with the heathen temple itself.

“Well, how was it?” Makhno looked at Yavornytsky, pleased with the outburst of the battle-trying signalman.

“Not bad,” the latter replied. “Only I can see his sabre isn't his size... What will it come to. Holsters down to the knee, sabres down to the heel... Weapons keep growing bigger, and the people smaller. They say there were people once who walked over forests as if they were grass, and now, look at them — small fry. If it keeps going this way, they'll become like baby mice: twelve at a time threshing inside an oven.”

“Oh, grandpa, don't forget that we are anarchists!”

“My lips are sealed. Because I know it's not a far cry from an anarchist to a monarchist.”

Makhno liked the joke. He slapped his whip against his three-quarter boots, adjusted his sabre, which also was too long, at times plowing into the ground:

“You, Yavornytsky, think of yourself as a wise sage, that all veritable truth is accessible only to you, but I'll tell you, in these times all the truth is here, in the tip of my sabre!”

“Perhaps, perhaps,” Yavornytsky nodded his head compliantly and sorrowfully. “For you it is on the tips of your sabres, for me, it is up there, on the top of the cathedral, at its pinnacle!”

And for some reason everyone raised their heads upward, toward the cathedral's onion-shaped dome, gazed at it and were silent for some time.

After a minute's silence Makhno again turned to Yavornytsky:

“They say you've recorded everything about the Zaporozhian Cossacks, that you collect every dewdrop of their glory. But who will collect our glory? It is growing in the very same steppes, and history's gaze is fixed on it.”

Yavornytsky frowned, he looked somewhere to the south over the heads of the Makhnovites, and his thoughts now could have been about the steppe of sun, youthfulness, past glories, and the future.

Makhno continued to harp on his own thing:

“Put the Cossack legends aside for a while, and tell us what tales the people compose about us. Or don't you hear any?”

“Why not? Sure I've heard them. They chatter at the markets that you've printed your own money with the inscription: 'Hop, woman, don't you worry, Makhno has come into money! They say it circulates in Huliaypole, but no one accepts it here.’”

“It's all lies, but splendid,” Makhno guffawed, and his army guffawed with him. “Well, and what else?” Makhno burned with curiosity. “What songs are there about us?”

“You won't get angry at me?”

“Since I've given you leave, out with it.”

“Well, songs like this”:

Oh, small apple, Whither are you rolling...? If you fall into our hands There is no return...

Makhno's jaws played under his skin, his forehead became rippled — a sign that a storm was approaching.

Makhno's Halyna, with face haggard from sleepless nights and drinking sprees, the same Halyna who had come running naked to Makhno, having escaped his band of rapists, lightly touched his elbow: “don't hurry to draw your emir's sabre, father, you yourself allowed the old man to speak...”

“You deserve one over the noggin for such songs, grandpa... Be thankful that I myself am a free thinker. There'll still be songs and legends about me, just keep writing them down.”

“Have you written down this one?” the theoretician flashed the lenses of his glasses towards Yavornytsky:

Oh, small apple, with tiny leaves,

Father Makhno comes riding with his sons!”

Without saying anything in reply, Yavornytsky set about closing the heavy doors of the cathedral. He closed them, bolted them, and like a sovereign master, turned around once more with his angry mustache to face Makhno and his bushy-haired band: “This behind me isn't yours,” he seemed to say. “I'm standing here guarding it. I'll fall to the ground a corpse before I let you inside with your whistling, guffawing and mockery...” In Makhno's half-shut eyes something else flashed with malicious sparks: “Perhaps I really should try to separate that professor's free-thinking head from his shoulders? Slice into his neck with the emir's sabre, so

that the blood spurts out from the cut arteries, grab him by that gray forelock and raise his head above the crowd of my Polovetsian knights, so they can see how their father's 'eternal absolute' is crowned.”

And again Halyna peered entreatingly into his eyes. Makhno sharply swung his whip through the air

“All right, I won't orphan your famous museum.” And he called out to Yavornytsky: “Shove off! Walk the earth a little longer... Well, and will our free shocks of hair be in the museum?” he shook his shiny locks. “And the clatter of our hoofs? And the winds which howled for us in the steppes?”

Yavornytsky spread his arms out and shrugged his shoulders: “I don't know,” he seemed to say, “perhaps the winds will be there...”

In the evening that followed, bonfires burned in the swamps and horses neighed, turning away in disgust from the drunk Makhnovites. Makhno drank excessively that night. Something nauseated him, he felt for some reason that he was saying his last farewell to this Skarbne forest. A forest where, legend had it, Zaporozhian Cossacks once buried their treasure, and where he too had intended, secretly from his army, to bury barrels of gold. It was autumny here, disquieting. And yet from here, from this very forest, he too had begun his war with the steppe guards one blinding summer day, here he had been proclaimed “Father.” He was fiercely drunk. And as happened in such instances, he showed his contempt in every way toward his lousy theoreticians. He asserted that when they had ridden together in a machine-gun cart the lice had crawled from them onto him, and he scratched himself demonstratively before his army; sitting the pleiad of theoreticians led by Baron around the bonfire, he ordered them to remove their shirts:

“You give them freedom too, scratching, only frightening them... Go on, catch them!”

“Who, father?”

“Your herds.”

“Are you talking about the insects?”

“Not the insects! The lice! I didn't let you give them freedom! Direct your binoculars (he was referring to their pince-nez) at them more diligently!”

Then he ordered that the theoreticians be bathed, scrubbed down, and soaped in the waters of Skarbne.

Offended, the theoreticians lifted their sagging lips and lowered their heads to their shirts. Baron wheezed with protest, for he, an old seasoned revolutionary, who bore inside himself all the anarchy from Zenon to the modern movement, was being publicly forced to perform such an unethical task, which promised no success. Anyway, he spread the dirty rags out on his knees and aimed his pince-nez at those biting, elusive enemies of his.

“Coax them out, coax them out from their ambush into the open,” one of the staff company advised him, and the company sat as if in a circus, watching with pleasure and merriment the bony theoreticians' penitent exercise, an exercise which befell them at the very threshold to the kingdom of eternal freedom.

He felt nothing more than cold contempt towards them, toward these lousy word-fornicators of his, even though they had taken the greatest pains to deck out their ataman in garments of grandeur. “You are the first, you are history's chosen one, a gladiator of freedom on the arena of

the steppes!” But who was he really in this arena? A gladiator or a clown? A sovereign, a helmsman of events, or a court jester of history, a market comedian? Freedom, the eternal absolute, that was all he heard from his lousy theoreticians, and yet they crawled about like reptiles, growing numb under his gaze. The eternal absolute! Then why did blood spurt from his machine-gun carts onto the whole of Ukraine...? Black oaks groaned and rustled above him. He could not see into the distance, the horizons had grown dark, stifling him, hemming him in. And what had they been like when he, a young prisoner, had first appeared on the free Huliaypolian winds, armed only with a delicate dream, nurtured by idealists of many ages — “I will free you from all authority, from all oppression, just become my warriors, sons of anarchy, sons of universal freedom! Our steppe republic will live without authority, without the violence of dictators...” And yet he himself hadn't even conquered the dictatorship of syphilis and banditry! Only as an exception had he allowed himself the luxury of charity today. Why had he allowed it, why hadn't he slain him? Toward the ideal over dead bodies — that was what he taught his army. The spirit of destruction was his strength and his banner.

The forest resounded with the roar of his drunk army, whistles pierced the darkness, black as death, and his cutthroats danced around the bonfires with whores, growing hoarse from singing and yelling:

For mother, for Halyna, For father, for Makhno! Hooray! Hooray! Hooray!!!

There was “hooray” on their lips, but they were only waiting for the moment to tie up their ataman and hand him over to the Soviet authorities for thirty pieces of silver.

A few days ago his jaw had become swollen, he had caught an infection; it hadn't taken into account that he was the lord of nature's untamed power. Pain burned him till he wanted to scream; he had to resort to a village sorceress. He sat obediently over a glazed bowl, and that old epileptic shaman cuddled him like a cat, pushing his swollen jaw into the water, doing something with her bony fingers to the crown of his head. “From where have you come, from where have you crept here?” she whispered wickedly, expelling the infection with magic. “I'm driving you out, execrating you, damning you! Go back to the mosses, the reeds! To the open steppes, the dry forests...!” And she continually pushed him fiercely into the bowl, authoritatively, as if she were driving him, and not his disease, out onto those open steppes, those dry forests... This was what his Makhnovia had become, and who knew if his early youthful dream still survived, swaddled somewhere, a dream which he was doomed to take in his coarse, bloodied hands and carry across the steppes, from where the Zaporozhian knights once launched raids. They had marched under a crimson banner, and they had a crimson soul, but what was yours like?

Makhno spied Yahor this night too and had the boy brought before him for interrogation:

“How could you let him escape with his life? How did he bewitch you, that sorcerer Yavornytsky?”

“I don't know,” the boy whispered in bewilderment.

“With pokers and tools? The Cossacks — they're worthy of something, it turns out, and we're rogues, devastators?”

And he penetrated and pierced Yahor with his thorny gaze.

“I don't know, I don't know,” the boy persisted.

“Taken a liking to him? Going to leave me? Cross over to his side?” Makhno continued to question him jealously. “Going to cast spoons out of shrapnel with him?” And he ordered Yahor: “Look at me! Everyone's eyes here are drunk with blood, turbid! I haven't seen clear bright eyes for a long time! Only in children!”

Through the darkness of the swamps he screamed boastfully in the direction of the cathedral, having sobered up a little:

“I've removed the bells from you, and I'll burn you down.”

And perhaps just then he imagined Yavornytsky's mighty figure before the cathedral gates, his arms thrown apart, defending the structure: “I won't let you have it.” Because once again he babbled threats into the darkness:

“I'll burn it down, just wait... When hard times come, when all that remains is prayer, then I'll light that last candle of mine to the heavens — a candle to the freedom of the steppes...!”

He babbled drunkenly, dozing on a stump; his head slumped and he straightened up again, and listened to the darkness of the forest undergrowth, as if something threatening were lurking there.

Black Pythias of Huliaypolian night sorrows — perhaps even then they were prophesying his demise? Perhaps they had prophesied that Paris for him, where after the final raid, after the bitter wanderings in strange lands, an old, hunched man with a yellow, flaccid face would occasionally wander into the Soviet embassy, and hiding in a corner of the cinema hall, watch greedily, ferociously the screen of his life, the flashing shadows of his deeds. He would see the catastrophe of the last crossing, hear the crunch of the machine-gun carts loaded with junk, the screams of people and the snorting of horses entangled in harnesses, choking in the muddy water; he would see the disgrace of escape, terrified horses chopping through their halters in panic, someone's shaggy empty Caucasian fur hat in the current, and the highly-polished glint of a Romanian border guard's gaiters. The victorious flash of red blades would be raised high on the far shore, from which there would be no return. An alien shore, the shore of his life exile, would greet him without gold or treasure, accepting him only with his Huliaypolian lice. It would accept the refugee only to cover him, and all his satanic endeavors with a new disgrace, so that in the burning deserts of the Sahara, under the hired flags of the Foreign Legion, his last machine-gun carts would launch raids, painted with faded apples, bespattered with the mud of Ukrainian steppe roads.

Chapter XIX

The steppes — in early childhood they entered the consciousness of the children from the industrial suburb. With their mothers they would run off to the steppe gullies overgrown with thistles to hide from the Germans. Full trucks of mottled watermelons passed through the outskirts from the steppes. And from there the wind blew clouds of dust at the end of summer; it swirled into the smoke of the plants — then the whole sky became misty. Mykola Bahlay also knew the steppes of the scholar Yavornytsky — the steppes of gray burial mounds, in which dozed the undiscovered creations of Greek craftsmen, and Scythian and Sarmatian jewelry; he knew the steppe, this cache of Cossack history, where under the wormwood, in deep layers, lay the rusting weapons of victors and their untarnished glory.

And now they appeared before Bahlay in the heat of summer, in the brilliance of the harvest sun, steppes of fertility, sunny boundless workshops under the azure roof of the heavens — Yelka's steppes! Brightness of color, the golden shocks of grain, the tan bodies in the threshing yard, the flash of smiles, the rhythm of work, the beauty and fluidity of work movements, the strength and health of the women threshing — he associated all of this with Yelka, seeing her in everything here. Red shocks of wheat smiled at him with the fire of her rosin; he smelled the dust of Yelka's roads; Yelka's hot sun kissed him thirstily from the sky! In these spaces, in this freedom, Yelka's soul continuously shone before him.

Seeing the students off for the harvest, the dean of the faculty cautioned them, and especially Bahlay, the class monitor, to return without any incidents, so that he wouldn't have to issue any directives about them, as had happened with the previous year's group. What had happened was this: several of the students in the group sent to harvest corn had concocted something there, had frivolously hung some greasy rag found in the tractor brigade workshop onto a pitchfork, and raced about the steppe bearing this black roguish flag — a local militiaman evidently chased after them all over the stubble and through the fields of corn. Of course the dean had to apply certain sanctions after their raid. Bahlay assured the dean: even if they would raise a flag, it would only be the color of the Dnipro, the azure flag of love.

And he did unfurl this flag, the devil take him, across the whole sky, and went with it to the elevator and from the elevator — only the wind whistled in their ears! All around was an ocean of sun, open spaces that smelled of eternity, steppe Hylea, described long ago by Herodotus, where Scythian husbandmen bred celebrated white horses, the so-called royal horses, known to the whole of Antiquity. Herds of these white jumpers sometimes even now galloped past Bahlay, spurred on by his wild imagination.

The students loaded the grain in the stackyards. Bathing in dry rustling wheat and naked to the waist, future engineers and doctors of science, dry-skinned Herculesees with and without glasses, all puffed with inspiration, every muscle tasting the sweetness of labor so useful to society and self-satisfying and necessary for keeping his stipend. Once more he could satisfy himself that this “perceived necessity” was in fact one of the surest truths of life. The students quickly made friends with the threshers, earning for themselves the reputation of being cheerful, hard-working people. They flooded the whole tray with grain, stretched out on top of it and pulled out onto the road, into the dust cloud which stretched for kilometers in a continuous blind run! About half-way to the elevator, when they came out onto a ridge, the cathedral came into

view on the horizon: standing there, shining up to the sun with the full breasts of its cupolas! The dry steppe air flowed around it, streamed past, and it rose out of the shimmering mirage, like a mirage itself. A melodious cathedral — that's how Bahlay would have liked to have put it, describing the harmonious relationship between its cupolas, the higher and the lower ones, frozen in a mute eternal dance.

Bahlay's workmate, Hennadiy, from the faculty of cold-worked metals, didn't much care about it. A boorish fellow! He saw very little originality in this structure, felt that it echoed St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome, and thus was an imitation of Bramante's design. Only a pitiful type brought up on “influencology” could think that way, not a contemporary intellectual — Bahlay became upset. How could a person not feel that before him stood quite an independent architectural creation; it was enough merely to look at that progression of tiers, at the canopies of the domes, bending inward towards the bottom, as if drawn tight with Cossack belts! And the secret of arranging the domes — all nine tops appeared before one, moving, as if alive, from every vantage point. How was this achieved? If there were an element of Western baroque, then it was perhaps in its picturesqueness, in its upward thrust. Besides, it was known that the Cossack architect was a historical figure, recorded in the chronicles — a Cossack youth had seen the picture of the cathedral while asleep in the swamp! On just such a sultry summer day, rich with mirages, it had appeared before the young genius in a brief dream. It was born straight away in his poetic imagination, as a totality, completed. Bahlay burned when talk came around to the story of the cathedral's origins and the legends associated with it; Yavornytsky, the scholar, was obviously advanced as a witness, but Hennadiy listened with a smile, even asked a few questions, irony wandering across his parched lips the whole time:

“You're a modern man, Mykola, a lion in theoretical physics, and I simply marvel how you can become enthused by an anachronism, submit to... mirages?”

“Without mirages there would be no veering. Anyone who knows the laws of aerodynamics would probably answer that way. But the cathedral is not only a mirage. It is the highest form of poetry, human thought inevitably strives to materialize itself, and that once happened here. Watch it float in the azure sea! Doesn't it appeal to you?”

“Well, it's all right... But what is its purpose? This probably meant something to somebody once, but today, in anno Domini 1963...? Everything is subject to the aging process. As you well know, even metal ages.”

“But this doesn't age! Art alone may contain the secret of eternal youth... You must agree, human nature aspires to an ideal harmony — as evidenced even by mathematics, logic, music... And in this creation, everything has been combined, everything has coalesced, giving birth to grand, immortal poetry. Can't you see that in that cluster of cathedral domes there resides the proud, undying soul of this steppe? Its dream lives on, the spirit of the people, their esthetic ideal... You and I will pass away, but this nine-headed structure will remain standing, must remain standing!”

“Why? Explain it to me?”

“Tell me, why do I love? Why do you love?”

“As for me, it's too daring an assumption...”

“A cathedral like this doesn't belong to you or me; more correctly stated, it does not belong to us alone. It belongs not only to the nation which created it, but to all the people of the planet!”

“Oh!”

“There is some kind of collective consciousness in people, in mankind — should it be passed on into the future? Should it survive in future memories? There were wild steppes here with white horses, the savage waters of the Vovcha River, the dark thickets of Skarbne teeming with game... Only the wide-crowned oaks stood by the water's edge, like temples. And here he came, this great builder, and with his spirit, with his creation, brought life to this wasteland. I don't know about others, but I can't imagine these steppes without the silhouette of that nine-domed cathedral. Those who built it were thinking of eternity. It is a peculiarity of people to strive for eternity, to find in it a goal and inspiration for themselves... I doubt if there's anything more deserving than to perfect one's spirit, to immortalize oneself in work, in one's creations. Or is this a mirage too, according to your way of thinking?”

“But without them, can't ordinary, simple mortals survive?”

“Sure they can. One can survive without the cathedral, and without song, and without Raphael. One can live without everything that is protected and unprotected by plaques. Anna Karenina can be read in an abridged form, compressed down to one and a half pages of text. But would we then remain people in the full sense of the word? Wouldn't we then become simply soup-eaters, devourers of shashliks? History's beasts of burden?”

“Aren't you forgetting about one thing, my friend? Our age isn't clothed in chivalrous armor. Our age is wearing an atomic helmet, and we cannot but come to terms with this.”

“I know, you're talking about the end of the world. But it might not happen, right? Instead of that apocalypse which the biblical poets called Judgment Day, can't there be an infinity, immortality?”

“Immortality? What color is it? What does it taste like?” “The color of the sky, and the taste of freedom!” Bahlay liked to say lying stretched out on the wheat. The sky above him, the azure cupola of this planetary cathedral, was without rust, without a cloud; only somewhere along the horizon some jet had girded the foot of this heavenly cupola with a dazzling ribbon. “And if we talk of immortality, then art stands closest to it.”

“Next thing I hear will be that man is great...” “Not always great, but he is great at times, that's true.” “When, if it's no secret?”

“I am great when I am embroiled in work, when I'm building a world of human happiness, when I'm creating...” “Creating — is this the sense of everything?” “And why not! The craftsmen of antiquity, builders of later ages... Didn't they justify their existence on this earth? Man ought to live with a feeling for destiny, a feeling for infinity. Man strives to project himself into the distances of the future — isn't that natural? Everything living in nature strives to attain this. Even a flower flowers to leave behind seed, to recreate its blossom in the future once more. Even the fellow who stuffed those boars and set them up in the cathedral, even he in that way... though hideously, still wanted to immortalize himself, at least with his stuffed animals. This is nonsense, of course, but I'm talking of yearning, the desire to leave one's mark behind... And art is the indestructible mark of mankind, its soarings, its crests on which reigns a spirit of victory over death, a spirit of indestructibility.”

“The person of the future won't even need teeth — he'll feed on paste squeezed from a tube, just like an infant. Knowing no infarcts, the heart will drive blood around the body with a mechanical pump — an eternal heart. But will man have a feeling for art? Even today — why is there so much pathology in modern art? It seems, the feeling of alienation of modern man is becoming a fact. So many long-haired types everywhere — those “non people” about whom our wise agronomist talks sadly. What unites them? Is it not this feeling of alienation, the cold of coming winters? They're hurrying to warm themselves under this, still-real sun. Besides, it is the only one. Couldn't there have been two or three of them in our sky? Only one, for some reason; there is no spare tire, and this one, as everyone knows, will exhaust itself some day — and we can sense this; we want to evade the cold blowing from the future. And all of these things of yours — sorcery, artistic delight — perhaps they are only an intoxication, allowing us to forget?”

“No, it's not an intoxication. It's a longing, a need. The very air demanded by the spirit, its insatiable longing for beauty. Surely you don't seriously think that the human soul can't overcome that cold of future winters? That it will dry up, that with time there will only be carcasses of intellect? You're not the first I've heard remark that the sacredness is disappearing from life, being replaced more and more by cynicism.”

“Then tell me, where does the poacher spring from? Poachers of various kinds, in various walks of life, aren't they becoming too much a symbol of the times? They force one to believe in oneself...”

“I believe in architects. I believe in change: the wrecker, the vandal have already been damned by us, and will be damned by future generations. Imagine yourself suddenly being catapulted from this grain truck somewhere into the distant future, where they would find it difficult to believe that you lived in a time when Columbuses of the cosmos had only appeared, when you were still forced to breathe the stench of factory smoke, and considered this quite normal. That you saw the builder in action, and the pseudo-builder. And that you were a contemporary of the amphibious reptiles of careerism, of various poachers — that you saw them with your own eyes. Into that life where there won't be a single poacher, neither big nor small, where there won't be pygmies sucking on tubes; instead, flowering athletes, people beautiful in body and soul, those for whom happiness has become the norm of existence. Imagine yourself there! How will this cathedral of ours appear to you from there, and the frescoes of Sophia, and Rublev's Madonnas... Look at them from there. Calculate their worth from there! Don't we look the same way now at the art masterpieces of the Greeks, the Etruscans, the masters of old Egypt... Time will become condensed, the ages will grow old, but art will remain young forever! There you are, my dear technocrat!”

The technocrat considered that Bahlay would make a decent engineer, if only he catapulted himself less, drowned less in abstract visions, which could scarcely improve the quality of future steel. Bahlay, on the other hand, felt that his friend was flaunting his practicality; wasn't it natural for people to want to peer beyond the boundary of the times, to try to imagine how a descendant's soul would be moved by that steppe grave, that distant dreamy landscape of the marshes, the nightingale's echo in Skarbne in the spring, and that girl's pensive song which reached all the way here, to the road, from the market-garden brigade. How could one think that there would no longer be any of this in the future? What would there be then? The songs of robots? Murals by

electronic Raphaels? And what about the fruits of every nation's culture? What about the cathedral, folk customs, Yavornytsky's invaluable finds?

Hennadiy considered all this to be nothing more than a game.

“You want me to proud of this? To be thankful to my fellow tribesmen for inventing the custom of kissing people's hands, and the philosophy of the gentle calf sucking on two mothers, and the wisdom of 'I don't want to be involved.' You want me to open up dumpling houses on every corner, but offer no dumplings for sale?” His glasses were already glistening angrily. “Perhaps someone needs me only as an ornament, but I don't want to be a decoration! While sitting on peas, to still manage to bake white loaves for daily sustenance? Is this what I must take with me on life's journey? No, thank you very much for such gains. I bow at the waist, or whatever that ritual of ours prescribes: I make my obeisance to the ground! When I listen to the radio, I feel nauseous from all those 'bows,' you understand? I bow to the ground before you, dear Queen Corn! I bow to the ground before you, Tsar Pea! We've tired of wheaten loaves — we'd rather eat pea cakes!”

Bahlay was guffawing, rolling in the wheat. Jumping up, he grabbed his embittered opponent by the shoulders:

“You're really telling it... But why take only this obeisance into account, the 'I don't want to be involved' attitude, and the gentle calves? For even in you now, there speaks at least the boar of a new age, and not a gentle calf!”

For a while they remained silent, Hennadiy wiped clean his dust-covered glasses, to examine another point more clearly:

“Does modern man become enriched spiritually? And if he does, then how? What exactly does he gain? And what does he lose?”

“That's what you and I must investigate.”

“We?”

“If not us, then who? You keep stressing the bad things, those 'servilities' which I find repugnant too, especially when they are clothed in modern pea garb. But there were other things too! There weren't only the formulas of ignorant serfdom; there were other things, from which we trace our genealogy.”

“I'm the son of a nation ascending'?”

“Don't be sarcastic, that's just it.”

“We're the best?”

“Not the best, but not worse than the others. We're the sons of a nation which has rammed through the old servile world with the armored trains of our hatred; our mothers pass on to us not conceit, not arrogance and greed, but a sense of honor, dignity and love of freedom — that's worth something! The sons of barricaded streets! We're the sons of Shevchenko's anger, the sons of Kybalchych! To erect these cathedrals, these steelworker citadels of the times... To raise the Titan of revolution over them... Oh, my friend, this isn't the fruit of subservient bows!”

“Perhaps so, but what connection is there between your cathedral and the flint of Yavornytsky's muskets?”

“A direct one. That untiring old fellow is dear to me not only because of his ancient muskets — he didn't only dig for muskets and spirits, he salvaged from obscurity the very spirit of the

Cossack republic, trampled as it was by ignoramus and vulgarizers, who had even forgotten about Marx's appraisal of it. It is that very spirit of freedom and patriotism that we find so dear, a spirit which lived so fully and joyously — this is what exactly we're thirsting for... Perhaps this is the very vitamin that you yourself need, having withered away in integrals, you, a descendant of the Cossacks. If there were a healthy spirit, there would be a healthy body too, let's put it that way. Just look at yourself, a decrepit child of the times, look what's happened to you on your hunger rations of maxims, on your diet of morbid pessimism! Small child's muscles, lenses on your bright eyes... Your ancestor could kill a falcon in flight, colds wouldn't topple him. And his language! What spirit raged in it! 'I, Lord Koshovy, swear on my life, and you may have me chopped up into pieces if I forsake truth and the brotherhood...!' That's the style your Khortytsia predecessors once used. There was steel in people. Well, we have it too, of course. You and I will still prove ourselves — we'll fill that elevator to the brim with wheat, eh? So lift your head higher, comrade worker of Communist Labor!"

The comrade worker remained silent, his tender skin, the skin of an intellectual, was peeling off in sheets, burnt by the stinging sun.

And on the return journey from the elevator the technocrat said nothing, squinting through his glasses at the gray burial mounds, at the cathedral, at the powerful sprinklers shooting streams of water onto the collective farm market gardens, making rainbows. Girls were working there, one waved a white kerchief to the passing truck. Bahlay even rose to his feet: she was just like Yelka! Was she there already?

Bahlay did not cease to marvel at what had happened between them. Wasn't it magic, that mysterious intimacy between two people, those inexplicable ways in which feelings are born, when one heart speaks to another with such force, and from among the multitude of choices it turns out to be just this one and no other; this rediscovered mutual destiny of two people is perceived as a revelation, as bliss. Even though he had met many girls and they seemed nice enough, none had upset his equilibrium, except for this uncoquettish, tanned, green-eyed girl who had pierced him with a sorceress' gaze, filling his soul with light, giving him strength, intoxicating him with joy, making his life blossom! Again and again she appeared before him; he saw her greenish eyes looking sorrowfully and distrustfully, saw the hands holding the garden hose, and the nimble dew-covered legs standing firmly among the bushes of strawberry, and the strawberries all around were covered with rich dew, and the dew on them was grainy, large, just like the strawberries... And that kiss by the cathedral, how it had burned him... And the smile from the bus in which there was something so painfully tender, caressing, almost maternal. One single meeting, and yet how much it had awakened in him, brewing a joyous storm in his soul; the whole world seemed to brighten, he drank its intoxicating beauty and couldn't seem to drink his fill!

You can tell right away when a person is in love. Love is written on his face, in the warm glint of his eyes, the tremor of his smiles, involuntarily dealt out to everyone. The threshing women teased Bahlay, one could see immediately that the student was madly in love. The harvest had brought everyone out into the fields; along with the collective-farm workers, there were office workers, medics and teachers. The threshing women were sharp-eyed: just watch where that shock-haired athletically-built student goes, where he settles down, our "Englishwoman"

will make herself comfortable beside him. And really, no sooner did he and Hennadiy lie down during the lunch break on the golden feather-beds of fresh fragrant straw, stretching out on their backs, enjoying rest after the sweetness of work, than she too was there: Talka, the young teacher of English, who walked swinging her hips even in the fields, as if she were on the sidewalks of the prospect. She would settle down beside Bahlay, nudge him unceremoniously with her thin arm:

“Don't sit there so quietly. Tell me, what's new at home? What troupe is touring there now? What are they dancing?”

She was acting as if she were somewhere at the North Pole. And always sitting so that he could see her legs, showing off her breasts.

Bahlay wasn't too ceremonious with her:

“One would think you were somewhere on an ice floe, Talka. Or in the jungles of Kalimantan. Don't complicate the situation. A few hours of good jolting about in the back of a truck, and you will be in the city under the evening neon lights... Though I don't see anything frightening here in the steppes. One can live here quite well!”

“That's the way it seems to you, because you're here only temporarily... But what about me. Hearing those endless 'Helios' all my life! You walk down the street, and all you hear is: 'Hello' and 'Hello.' You arrive at school and there's screaming and yelling, the children won't listen, there are misunderstandings with the principal.”

“A pity I'm not your principal...”

“You'd be kinder to me?”

“Yes. Instead of those endless 'hellos,' I would tell you only once: 'Goodbye.'”

She sat downcast. Sadly, as if oblivious, she crushed a straw between her fingers, with red fingernails from which the polish was peeling.

“Don't forget, Mykola, I'm a civilized person; after all, I grew up in the city.”

“Forgive me, love, but your civilization is on the tips of your fingers. And even that's peeling off,” Bahlay thought. He didn't want to upset her, and said:

“It all depends on you. Well, and also on the sun.”

“Why the sun?”

“Don't you know that a person's well-being, even his mood, is governed by explosions on the sun?”

“I didn't know that. And love, according to you... is it also connected with the sun?”

“Without a doubt. Of all feelings, it is the sunniest, I assure you...”

Coming to, with straw in his hair, the technocrat muttered something about what an “attack of the snoozies” he'd had, and after this they began to discuss with Talka how to translate those “snoozies” into English.

Bahlay fell back on the straw, closed his eyes. “Olentsia... Yelka... Yelena... Helena. What a wonderful name! The Greeks fought with Troy for ten years over Helen. I would fight all my life for you!”

And with his eyes closed he saw Yelka's image; it was a pleasure to summon her up in his imagination, to see her smile, her trembling lips, to hear her full, affectionate voice. She would smile, and then suddenly an incomprehensible shadow of despondency would come over her.

Why wasn't she happy? How was it for her now in his Zachiplianka? He would have loved to race her across the steppe in a golden chariot drawn by white horses, carrying her over iron bridges, just to dispel her despondency. He could already see the day when, overflowing with love, without any ceremony, without registration offices, he would bring Yelka to the old Bahlay yard. "Mamma," he would call into the orchard, "can I see you for a minute?" "Again for a minute," his mother would laugh, coming out to greet them, wiping her hands on her apron. He would point to blushing Yelka: "Mother, this girl will live with us. A daughter-in-law for you, a wife for me." His mother would look them over closely: "If you've taken a liking to each other, then live together. Your father once brought me the same way from Kodaky, and we lived all those years in harmony. But, young lady, don't indulge him too much... These Bahlays really are a little strange. He'll seem normal, normal, and then when he comes out with something — just watch out..."

"Mother, a war was once fought over a woman. That was honorable. But what do people fight over now? At times, over things worthy of contempt. This is she, mother; this is my Helen of Troy! This is the one who has made your son happy. No one else could have brought him greater joy than she, no one, not a single woman among all the women in the world!"

There was only one thing Bahlay didn't know: that that time after they parted at the bus stop, Yelka did not return to Zachiplianka any more, and Yahor's inquiries brought no results. The old man was alarmed; bad thoughts crept into his head, for one could expect anything from such stubborn, foolish types — and there were high bridges across the Dnipro.

Chapter XX

Ivan Bahlay found it hard to believe that only a few days earlier an airliner had carried him over the highest mountains on the planet; peaks and blinding ridges shone without end; chasms yawned black — the airliner moved along at that height where a blinding ocean of sunshine always reigned in the tranquillity above the planet, an ocean of heavenly white eternity.

And again the firmness of his native soil surrounding the factories was under his feet, he was greeted by the acacias which were weighed down by soot and dust, and the cast-iron Titan appeared before him with its cast-iron torch in outstretched arm. From the brilliant heights Ivan again returned to everyday life, to familiarity, to the crashes and bangs of the workshops. He had just visited the management, the Party headquarters, greeted everyone, and replied to those countless questions of “well, how was it there...?” Back in India he had decided that as soon as he returned, he would immediately grab Virunka and dash off with her to a resort on the Black Sea or somewhere. But life made its own adjustments. Things were hectic in the workshop; they were behind in metal production; the director made a wry face:

“Wait till we scratch our way through the plan, then you can take your leave...”

But for the moment, could he, Bahlay, turn up on Monday to man the open-hearth furnace? Because new converters were being put into production, some of the workers had to be transferred there; and there, by that pear-shaped steel furnace, it was obviously more complicated; there one could not take a sample, could not look into the neck of the furnace; the ore or the scrap had to be added to the melt, using one's steelmaking intuition. Not everyone was capable of that. To appreciate steel, to guess its violent boiling point, its birth — one needed talent for this, just like an artist. So take your protective gloves, Bahlay, put on your broad-rimmed hat and blue glasses again, starting Monday. He promised to come. He had to help them out.

He settled his business, went through all the necessary paper work, and now waited for Virunka — she had been held up in the workshop. They had arranged that he would wait for her here in the plant park, “near Fylymon.” Fylymon the Stalingerader was not around any more; in his place stood beer dispensers, painted red like “Shell” gas pumps. During Bahlay's absence automation had forged ahead. Yet things had been more cheerful with Fylymon around. The worker control committee had assigned Fylymon here; an honest man was needed for such a tricky position. And despite the fact that he had lost an arm at the front, even with his one arm the work hummed: he pumped it himself, poured it, giving change here, cracking a joke there, keeping an eye on someone else, checking if he hadn't had too much already, whether it wasn't time for him to go home. They considered Fylymon a supernumerary guard at headquarters. Bahlay had respected him greatly, for though he was an invalid and certainly no Hercules, even the most inveterate drunks and soaks quietened before him right away. He showed what conscience meant in a person, how much strength and authority it added! And occasionally he would tell one of the heavy drinkers: “That's enough, no more for you, and if you say too much, your fellow workers will help you out of here.” And no one was offended by his words, for he was one of them, a plant employee; he didn't make money on them by pouring foam in their glasses.

Now, instead of Fylymon's masterly handiwork, beer machines dispensed "Zhyhuli" beer to the workers. As soon as the shift was over, the plant workers crowded around the machines, drawing beer, and lashing out, cursing the czars:

"The damned tyrants! Reigned for three hundred years, couldn't even dry enough fish for us! Might as well eat the smoke...!"

Just as Bahlay was about to quench his thirst too, he heard a familiar voice behind him:

"Who do I see? Our guest from India!"

Volodka Loboda spread out his arms for an embrace. His hair bushy, no trace of exhaustion on his childishly rosy, apple cheeks, even more pug-nosed than before, with a premature beer-belly. He shook Bahlay in his embrace; he was a friend, after all, and yet Bahlay inopportunely remembered in this stormy show of joy that his mother didn't like Volodka for some reason. After that incident, it seemed... When they were still boys, and Volodka, having returned from the Urals, to where he had been evacuated, came to visit Ivan for the first time and joked: "Well, how did you live here, invader?" And a feeling of superiority came through the joke: "What were you up to, what did you do for the people?" Ivan felt annoyed then. "I made handmills," he hooted in reply. "What hand-mills?" "Those that roar and can be heard all the way to Berlin," his mother had said offendedly, and later on Ivan had shown him that handmill, a sorrowful invention of the occupation. It was an insignificant fact, but Bahlay's mother still remembered that handmill at times, whenever she was angry with Volodka for any reason. But, in the long run, this was nonsense. Volodka looked his old friend over with unfeigned joy: let's see, he seemed to say, how much you've withered on Indian food? And he was obviously pleased with what he saw: even the tropics hadn't changed the hot-headed Zachipliankan steelworker — just as goggle-eyed, with a dense bush of copper wire atop his head, a hard, bony face. But he was somehow imperceptibly different, a certain reserve had appeared, an air of nobility, so to speak.

"Well, what's it like there? Is it different?"

"Sure."

And he seemed to want to add: "I saw such things, brother, that you've never even dreamed of." But he said nothing.

Volodka's full, pug-nosed face was radiant:

"That's our Zachiplianka for you now, eh? Its leading workers are being invited to the jungles beyond the equator: come here, dear Ukrainian steelworkers, and teach us... Pass on your experience to us. Did you teach them? How much did their furnaces hold?"

Ivan did not hasten with a reply. He asked about Volodka's father. He had been his teacher; Bahlay had learned the steel maker's art from him. Seeing him off to India, old Loboda had sternly exhorted him: "Guard the steelworker's honor there, Ivan. So the glory will spread there too, about the masters from the Dnipro..."

"How is he doing, our Izot Ivanovych?"

"Haven't you heard yet? The old man is luxuriating in the steelworker's home, still the wild old Cossack he was..." and with a cloud of sullenness, Volodka explained that the years were taking their toll, his spirit was deteriorating. Old people were like children; they had to be gratified, and what could an unfortunate bachelor overloaded with responsibilities do? The daily

trivia was tortuous, tearing him to pieces. “I finally did try to build a family, though then I might have even taken the old man back in, but your dear brother ruined it all for me.”

Ivan had already heard a little about that Zachipliankan engagement with its unexpected “happy ending.” She must have been quite a girl: two eagles came out to duel over her, yet neither had won her. People said she probably dashed off to the virgin lands. Ivan found this story funny, for Volodka it turned out to be a severe blow. He complained dolefully how his life's plans had been destroyed by this hooligan act. However his complaints did not move Ivan very much; he wanted to clear up something else: “How is it, my friend, that you sent your own father, a work veteran, off to a state institution? That person who gave you life, who helped to put this government into power, thanks to whom you yourself got ahead... And now your father's become a burden...?”

“It seems she gave you both the slip, so you'll make up,” Ivan smiled, and returned to the subject of Loboda Senior.

“You know, I thought of your old man many a time in India. Soon as I had a problem, I went to him: how would hot Ivanovych have gone about this, I thought?”

“You've got an indissoluble friendship with him. When the old man received your postcard, the one with the ocean surf and palm trees — he was overjoyed, like a child. I think he still carries it with him. Because for us steelworkers, friendship is stronger than steel! Only we're too modest, that's what hampers us in life. We're the quiet, silent types.”

Becoming excited, Volodka began to tell the story of those who had saved the plant Titan during the occupation. They had been uncovered at last! And imagine, Katraty was among the rescuers. There! In essence a hero, but he remained silent as a fish. And the others too. They could have registered in their time, passed verification, and they would have even obtained partisans' documents.

“Well, we'll take care of this matter now, drag these modest fellows into the open, they'll sit on our presidiums yet!”

“And how are you surviving?” Bahlay asked.

“So-so... Promoted a little. Sometimes promoted, sometimes demoted. Still, there's been an improvement: I saw you off as an inspector, and now I'm giving the instructors the run-around myself,” Volodka smiled. And again he became saddened. “Only you know how our life is: please people a hundred times, but slip up once, react incorrectly, and all your efforts fall by the wayside. You get called up, dragged over the coals, and just try to show your temper, they throw you right out: try and prove then that you're not a camel.”

Noticing that Bahlay was listening to these complaints without any special interest, Loboda changed the tone of his voice, becoming more cheerful:

“All you can do is perhaps drop in here occasionally, breathe in the working spirit, downing a mug of beer with someone...”

Others sat in offices, at telephones, but he was not like that, he had the Zachiplianka spirit in him. He had grown accustomed to coming here, learning the mood of the masses from Fylymon. Here one could talk with the workers heart to heart, telling them something interesting occasionally. He had many ideas! And he began lecturing passionately about coloretkas, bliss rooms, and his plans for new rituals.

Bahlay, who always regarded Loboda's ideas a little ironically, could not help smiling. This put Volodka on guard right away:

“You don't agree? You don't think it will go through?” And he drank heartily from the mug.

“That's not the point. I'm thinking about the very nature of work. So that when one works, it's not a dreary task...” Bahlay became silent, frowning. Loboda watched him closely. Two years spent somewhere out there had probably left their mark on his friend, perhaps even an undesirable one — that became apparent to Loboda when Bahlay spoke again: all existence was suffering, the eastern sages thought. Nirvana, they said. The state of Nirvana had to be attained; that would be absolute bliss in our way of understanding. But to attain it one had to forsake everything earthly, to overcome the craving for life, not to become obsessed with work, to give oneself totally to dreamy contemplation... But his, Bahlay's philosophy was different: toil and toil. Not like cattle, to be sure. Not just for the sake of one's stomach. And, of course, not senseless toil, but work needed by people and giving one joy. Work and exalted the soul! — here was where a person should search for himself and his nirvanas...

Loboda pensively drummed the table with his fingers.

“If one listens to you, comrade thinker, then my job is worthless, eh? All the ideas, all the initiatives, are only a show it turns out? Empty fussing? No, excuse me: I have never been a charlatan.”

“We've already had Potemkin here, he's no match for you,” Bahlay smiled. “He was our number one charlatan, a master of showmanship...”

The leading worker stood downcast over his beer. This newly-baked Zachipliankan thinker had given him food for thought. He should stick to his steel, instead of carrying on about some nirvana. No one had yet questioned the work of Volodymyr Loboda. On the contrary, they valued it, supported it. And even if anyone ever criticized him, it wasn't too serious! They saw how he threw himself into work, having no mercy on himself. How could it be all futile? According to Bahlay, he made no real contribution, and all his efforts were merely soap bubbles? When he died, not a single dog would bark after him?

“You've given me food for thought with your nirvana, Ivan,” Loboda sighed sadly.

At this moment Virunka appeared on the horizon. Radiating a smile from afar, majestically carrying her breasts, barely supported by a new nylon blouse. Straight from under the shower, one could see: refreshed, hair combed, her white body showing through the transparent nylon, attracting attention. But Virunka remained unperturbed and proud — let everyone see what her husband had brought back for her from India. And even if the town fashion followers would sneer at her saying that this well-built woman was some three years behind with her nylons, Virunka wouldn't pay any attention to them, she would be above that; let them talk, she liked it, and that was that. Perhaps she lacked a little in taste and elegance, however her arms didn't lack strength and the skill to operate a crane.

“What did you vex him with?” Virunka nodded to Loboda, sensing both their moods right away. “No sooner have you met, and already you're both pouting like owls.”

“Conversing on a free topic,” Virunka's steelmaker said, cheering up.

Virunka wanted a mug of beer too. It was pleasant to stand like this with one's lawful husband over a mug of beer, blowing away the head, and everyone seeing that she wasn't some

unmarried woman, but a plant worker respected by her husband, being treated to a drink after work, relaxing in a civilized manner.

“She ran off to complain about me to the provincial committee too,” Loboda sought sympathy from Ivan. “The mother of my godchild too! And for what? Over that wretched cathedral!”

And briefly he told the story of the conflict. Only now did he reveal that there had been an unpleasant conversation “up above,” that he had lost face in the eyes of his superiors, though he still stood his ground. How it would finally turn out up there — time would tell. Because even more influential superiors could be found for influential superiors, ones who would take the more correct position. Therefore, it was too early to rejoice, the cathedral still had a large question mark hanging over it.

“And who sees it as an obstacle?” Bahlay was amazed. “On the contrary, it should be shown off to visiting delegations, like the Taj Mahal and various other temples. When I saw their wonders, I was reminded of our own... We had master builders too. We had our own miracle workers.”

Loboda looked at his watch, and remembering that he still had matters to attend to, said farewell to the Bahlays in cool haste. Virunka saw off his burly angry figure with a sharp stare.

“He is such good company, good friends with everyone, doesn't shun the ordinary people... Full of jokes and anecdotes, helps Shpachykha with her baskets — a good fellow. But you know how vicious he can be?” she said to Ivan. “Just disagree with him... There's probably no one more vicious in all of Zachiplianka, and we took him as a godfather.”

And she told him how she had accidentally been witness to the following scene. (This had happened during the fuss over the cathedral plaque.) Once, while standing in the orchard, she saw two of them meet face to face on Vesela: this leading worker and Khoma Romanovych — the pupil and his former teacher.

“The teacher must have said something biting to Volodka, because you should have seen the face he made. Just like an enraged rat! He bared his teeth, hissing at the old man: ‘I can see now that you've been rehabilitated a little early! If you know what's good for you, lie low, unless you want to find yourself in the tundra a second time...’ That's the good fellow he is. If he were in power, he'd probably have that old fellow sent back into the tundra. Little wonder our plant committee members try to keep away from him: he's a frightening, insidious, and vengeful type! He won't stop at anything.”

“Perhaps he's frightening, but no one's afraid of him, there's nothing to fear,” Ivan assured Virunka. And she agreed: yes, these weren't the times to be afraid.

“And don't consider him our child's godfather any more.”

“Been downgraded?”

“Naturally,” Virunka said firmly.

It was nice here in the pavilion. A cool breeze blew from the Dnipro, pleasantly refreshing the workers after the workshop. There were only a few people in the park, several solitary pensioners were dozing on the benches in front of the summer stage; the Ferris wheel was still stationary, on a painted merry-go-round cart a merry couple had found a place — a soldier and

his girl: laughing, they munched on a pretzel, taking turns biting it — and another pretzel, still whole, was in the girl's hand, for later.

A group of young plant workers hurried off to the jetty, among them two of Bahlay's apprentices — he had already seen them today; without discussion, guffawing, one could hear the dashing voice of one of them, long-necked Lionka Babych, above the rest:

“That would have been a number! What a number!”

“The boys must have had something funny for lunch,” Virunka remarked, and after a moment's silence, began to share one of her worries with Ivan, which really pertained more to Mariya from crane eight. Her husband had been before the commission today, he was without an arm from the war. Mariya had suffered all day, and the woman's anxiety was transmitted to the iron arms of the crane. How could she remain calm? Virunka would like to know, she would like to ask someone: why drag those armless and legless people before commissions every year? Did they really think that one of them might grow an arm or a leg?

Three more people in blue overalls appeared on the avenue, stopping before the satirical newspaper *Hot Rollers*. One of them, heavy-shouldered, with strong “withers,” reminded Bah lay very much of someone. Oh, it was Taratuta!

Bahlay called out to him:

“Hello there, Semen!”

Taratuta turned his unshaven, gray face around, and seeing Bahlay and his wife, slowly made his way across to him, first mumbling something to his companions.

“Hello, hello, Bahlay... Hindi-rusi bhay-bhay... Decided to live it up on your rupees? Well, buy me a drink. Because you didn't let me earn anything, after all.”

Ivan poured Taratuta two mugs of beer, moved them over to him: “Drink to your health...” He didn't wish to remind himself of that unpleasant incident now. Taratuta had spent some time in Bhilai too, only he hadn't served out his time. Without any further invitation, Taratuta's hand reached out for a mug — a heavy, swollen hand with a silver ring which ate into the skin on the fat finger.

Virunka admired the ring.

“Looking at the ring?” Taratuta's lips wriggled in a wry smile, and a predacious coolness flashed in his pallid eyes. “That's the only souvenir I have of Bhilai. Know how they docked me in the Union after that incident? I had planned to buy a Volga, but my Volga disappeared down the drain. It was a waste of time getting my license.”

“Where are you now?”

“I was at the metal construction plant. But now I've returned to rolling. You can see for yourself back there, they've taken me for a ride with a bottle in my hands. And given a title to the photograph too: *Roaming-lips*. But I'm not offended. Let them have their fun. At least with one of their own... And so life goes on. We exchange the days of our lives for the coins of trivia.”

In the time they hadn't seen each other, Taratuta had changed noticeably: bags had appeared under his eyes, his face was flabby, covered with gray exhaustion.

“Made peace with your woman, Semen?”

“Which one?” he blinked slyly from under his eyebrow, first at Ivan, then at Virunka.

“Your lawful one, I meant.”

“We've finally split our jug in half... The relatives declared war. Taratuta was needed as long as he broke records. As long as he carried premiums. Then even the state farm superiors weren't ashamed of becoming related to Taratuta, took him in as a son-in-law, sent him to Bhilai.” He was addressing his complaint more to Virunka, who seemed to be lending him a sympathetic ear. “But when I returned without the laurels of a victor... What more need be said,” Taratuta emptied the mug in one breath and grabbed hold of the other. “Life has marched all over me. And now my own fellow workers are threatening to toss me out of the brigade: they've already outgrown Taratuta, you see, he is disgracing them.”

It really was plain to see that this fellow plant worker of theirs was not having an easy time. Sporting a crew cut, Semen's head sparkled with sweat, unwashed, unkempt. He hadn't even taken a shower after work and seemed freckled all over. Looking at Taratuta, forsaken, neglected, Bahlay felt sincerely sorry for his comrade. Sometimes one such glance or one special tone in a person's voice is enough to forgive, to fill one's soul with charity.

“Want to join my brigade, Semen? Transfer, I'll take you.”

“To the open-hearth furnace? Smelting? It's hot there too. If it were somewhere in the pumping station — the temperature there is more to my liking.”

“There are a lot of you eager to go there,” Virunka interjected with dissatisfaction. “And who'll produce the metal? Or should the women work the open-hearth furnaces as well?”

Taratuta took a drink from the second mug.

“People die for metal. Once they died for the yellow metal, but we die for the black one. Where else do they squeeze people as much as at the steel plant? No matter how much you produce, it's always not enough, they're always pushing, there's always pressure. Produce the norm, then twice the norm, and when does one live?”

“It all depends,” Bahlay retorted. “To me, this is life.”

“Well yes, for you a steelworker's life means pride, respect, your picture in the papers; as for me, it's better to sell yeast on the black market... or to guard the plant boats. They squeeze you dry, and then display you in the window of satire as a 'Roaming-lips.' But what do they know about me?” Taratuta grimaced. “Perhaps I'm a person inside myself? Perhaps I don't want to live by graphs?”

“They gave you a hard time, those graphs,” Bahlay checked his smile.

“For you they're law, I know that. You're ready to bust your back because of a graph... The honor of the dynasty and so forth...”

“Why not?” Virunka was offended. “These are the Bahlays!

Generations of steelworkers! They know their honor: glory doesn't come on a silver platter.”

“Well there's no glory in my past, no tradition to uphold.” Taratuta lowered his unwashed head. “Except perhaps for some tattered, debauched, Huliaypolian fame. Whenever anything happens anywhere — I'm considered a suspect. There was a murder under the viaduct, you probably heard about it? They couldn't find the real culprit, but they didn't forget to inquire from Taratuta where he was that night? And he had spent all night working like a mule at the plant!”

Taratuta's two companions, who had been waiting for him some distance away, drew up to the table. One of them, little more than a boy, evaded Bahlay's gaze and asked Taratuta:

“He's treating everyone here?”

“Who's this he?” Bahlay asked sullenly, offended by the tone of the boy's voice.

“Well, you. They paid you well in Bhilai didn't they?”

Watching Ivan, Virunka saw that he would explode at any moment. He grew pale, his teeth were clenched. Another word, and he would explode, start a fight as he had done many times in the past. Didn't this snotty-nosed shrimp realize that before him was a sambo expert with muscles of iron, and fast with his fists, deadly with a hook? But the snotty-nosed fellow continued brazenly:

“Go on, buy us a beer, don't begrudge your foreign currency.”

“Now he'll really explode,” Virunka awaited the explosion with horror. But Ivan controlled himself: his jaws set, clenching his teeth, he watched the adolescent almost sorrowfully.

“You've returned to the Fatherland,” the second member of the group added in an unkind tone.

“Yes, to the Fatherland, and not to you, you swine!” Ivan turned even paler, and the freckles on his cheeks became more pronounced. “You're not the Fatherland to me. Understand?”

Taking her husband by the arm, Virunka quickly dragged him away from the pavilion.

“I thought you'd hit him,” she said after they had left the group. Only now did she calm down a little.

“My fist itched,” Ivan confessed. “But hitting him wasn't a way out. I sometimes think: why do we have so many bums?”

From the very first step at the airport. No sooner had we arrived, we were processing our baggage, when some loudmouth spoiled the whole joy of being back. The boys treated her politely, but she came back at them with shouts, cursing everyone for no reason at all. And she was on duty. And the same thing happened in a streetcar. It's strange: why do we have such vicious people? What gives birth to such malice, contempt, hostility toward others? More than temporary preventive measures are needed here.”

“You can't solve everything with prevention,” Virunka agreed. “It's true, there are palaces of health. They take them there by bus, they spend the night, relax their bodies... But even after that, there seems to be work for the courts.”

They walked down the avenue to the Dnipro. Virunka's face became haughty and serene once more, regaining its natural character, and this always helped Ivan to recover his composure more easily. He did not want to think any more about this ridiculous confrontation with that insolent fellow — before him, his beautiful native river lapped across the whole horizon. Bahlay's soul stirred just looking at it. It wasn't the Ganges, but it was just as sacred to him as the sluggish Ganges was to the people of that country. The open, sun-drenched Dnipro, its vastness shone brighter than the sky. Light-winged kayaks flew over its blinding glassy surface, the pike-sharp boats of the plant sportsmen, the recently-introduced Canadian canoes sped along, motor-boats rattled away; fours and eights raced along with a flash of oars, the tanned bodies swung rhythmically, the oars descended smoothly into the water and flew up again — red, yellow, and orange...

To these people the Dnipro was a part of their lives. Ivan and Virunka had crowned their marriage on the Dnipro, the young steel-maker took her for a ride under sail across the Slavuta — the weddings of young steelworkers were often topped with such outings.

“Did you miss the Dnipro?” Virunka asked with a smile.

With his hair fiery red, Ivan stood erect, grim.

“It's hard to even imagine that I was so far away from it — how distant India is! I think, now that I've been there — what was it for? Only because I was sent there? Was it curiosity? And now that I've returned from there, I can see that our mission hadn't been a simple one... It isn't the dregs, the swine who decide what matters in life. We really are bringing progress to every corner of the earth... If the earth becomes richer, we too will have a stake in it. For this, one should be willing to go to the ends of the earth. We're helping people, teaching them to smelt metal, and we learn a few things ourselves in the process.”

There were a lot of young people near the main jetty, sitting and standing on the pontoons — probably preparing for some race. From afar one of them looked very much like Mykola. Ivan even thought: really, perhaps my brother is already back? Burnt black like a devil, slender-legged, wading out of the water, carrying out his weightless canoe... He placed it on the shore and then helped a girl with her boat. They lingered a while, talked about something, laughed. The spitting image of Mykola! A warm feeling came over Ivan, almost paternal. He had carried Mykola about in his arms as an infant, hiding in trenches dug in backyards with him and their mother. Early in life Ivan had to act as head of the family, to take on the responsibilities which had passed on to him when his father had died. He made handmills, and cast spoons from cable — went with the aunties into the villages to exchange them for food. Through deep snow, along snow-drifted roads occupied by the enemy. Once, the plant workers picked him up by the forest, barely alive, frostbitten, and brought him home. If it weren't for them he would have become stiff as a board in the snow with his small bag of barley. Later he attended trade school so he could get into the workshop sooner and be able to bring bread ration cards home for the family. Life had turned out in such a way that he'd missed going to the institute; however, at least Mykola had become a student, preparing himself to be the first engineer in their family. He could be stubborn, arrogant, but his soul was good and pure. Only he was always talking about poetry and all kinds of fantasies, conversing about the meaning of life, about humanism. But tell me, brother, how can one be a humanist in your relations with those who have poisoned people's lives with vulgarity and dirt? How can one squeeze the evil from their souls?

“Bahlay, come with us! To Skarbne!” A voice rang out from the left.

There, among the cutters, a motor fitted onto the spacious boat of the blast-furnace shop boss rattled away, belched smoke, coughed and died again. The motor would not start. The owner, a burly fellow dressed in a jersey, sat before it sweating, angrily tugging at the rope, trying very hard to get a spark. Near him stood a whole group of plant workers with fishing rods and nets, patiently waiting for that divine spark, so they could set out at last.

“We should go on a trip too,” Virunka said. “We can leave the kids with mother. I haven't been to the islands once without you. There's never time. There are always worries, we think that we'll live forever, that there'll be a time for everything...”

Ivan understood Virunka's mood. After a whole day in the workshop, after the cage of the crane's cabin, where one saw only mountains of scrap, stock, and clouds of dust — especially after that, one needs to breathe in the wide open spaces, to see the sky, to notice the glint of the

water, the green of the trees that brings joy to the heart. And isn't this perhaps the real reason that drives all those people into the distant swamps to feed the mosquitoes?

After a prolonged tug-of-war, the stubborn engine finally yielded to the workshop boss and started up with a resounding chug; the rope was cast aside, and with cheers of victory, the party pushed off, going possibly for an entire night.

“After the pickerel! After the crucian carp!”

Their ample black boat, with the motor astern, drifted farther and farther away. It broke out into the open, picked up speed, lifting its prow perkily out of the water.

“After the pickerel? Is that all they are after?” Bahlay thought, watching them go. “They probably aren't after the pickerel as much as after themselves, seeking kinship with nature, harmony with those waters, with those native surroundings... For a person is only a person as long as he doesn't lose the ability to see the beauty in life, and not only its ugly side. Those who realize this, don't have to torture themselves so much, asking who am I and why am I, and where am I from, where am I going?”

The setting sun grew red beyond the ridge. Immense, red-hot. And it kept growing. Like small baby mice, vehicles crawled over the bridge, cutting the rays in two, endlessly passing across the giant burning disk.

Chapter XXI

The white metal of the sun hung over the town.

The cast iron figure of the Titan stood in the upper park, towering over the plants. Sooty, it stood gray with dust (there had not been any rain for a long time).

Further down, opposite the Titan, stood the plant management offices and the plant gates — dusty, ancient, with a plaque of dark copper, which testified that the first Red Guards detachments once marched out of here.

Makhno's horses had neighed outside these gates. While they neighed and struck their hoofs on this side of the wall, armored trains were being forged on the far side. The strength of the ages emerged from there — and from there came the legend too.

Makhno incited the steelworkers to join him.

“Open the gates, boys, and join me. Father Makhno! We'll go frolicking across the steppes. Can this be life — to swallow soot every day? You have discipline, I've got freedom. You have soot, and Ukraine blossoms for us with its poppies!”

The gates opened and a representative of the plant workers came out to Makhno. His arms looked as if they had been forged with iron. The furnaceman went among the horses, looking for a thick-maned horse for himself. Each one that he squeezed by the mane fell down on the spot. And so he went around and tried them all, and not one managed to remain standing.

“See, Father Makhno, you haven't a horse to suit me...”

And after that the armored trains left here from this plant to roam across Ukraine. The partisan Zhelezniak was on one of them. And on another one, perhaps even a neighboring one, was Bahlay the Furnaceman, whose sons still lived in Zachiplianka.

Early in the morning on that day Yelka examined the plant gates. The gates which were dear to the Bahlays, which had let Mykola through each morning into the plant, the workshop.

From these gates his road later took him to the institute. A working student, he would return here again after defending his thesis, enter through the plant check booth, put on his blue engineer's overalls in the workshop and would probably be set for life.

Following a plan she had hatched earlier, Yelka went to the management office that morning, nervously knocked on that window on which many had knocked before her and worn away the ledge with their elbows. She saw a glazed skull behind the window, gray eyes.

“Take me on! I'll do the hardest work! Where you have to wear respirators, where you go about with picks on the rails... I haven't any documents, but I haven't killed anyone, haven't stolen anything... I've got nine years of schooling... Put me on!”

Her fervent entreaty was heard out attentively. Then she heard the calm reply:

“We have twenty-five thousand workers, young woman. And not one of them is right off the streets. Not one is without a work reference.”

Ashamed, she moved away from the window, feeling as if she had wanted to fool someone. That served her right. For her intolerable temper, her blunders, her unconsidered steps. If she hadn't dared tell her loved one the truth, then everyone else would look upon her as a liar now! No gate in the world would open before her.

One of the bridges, a high scaffold bridge, was suspended over the plant's territory in the direction of the Dnipro. She went onto the bridge. The large territory of the plant spread out

below her — the blast furnaces, open-hearth furnaces, the sintering factory with mountains of raw ore on the Dnipro's bank. Farther away, in the upland part of town, the fertilizer plant let out smoke, poisoning the sky. Perhaps she should try going there? People said that when it rained, those red fumes mixed with the distilled rainwater and created nitric acid, that rain ate clean through the green leaves. No poisons scared Yelka — she was more frightened of the personnel window: what she had heard here, she would probably hear there too. Below, under the bridge there were countless railway tracks, plant steam engines were maneuvering about the whole time, lugging ore, platforms of metal. These steam engines produced the most soot: they started forward, belching black smoke which covered half the sky. The mysterious world of work, which never stopped here, a world of self-certitude, displaying indifference to Yelka. One of the engines released a cloud of smoke right under the bridge, there was an upward draft of black smoke, Yelka became swathed in a bitter cloud; a piece of soot fell on her white blouse. She felt some pity for the blouse. Mykola had touched it. She should have left the place, but could not go for some reason. Overcome with grief she looked down at the shining railway tracks. If those railway men were to see a mutilated girl's body lying stretched out on the tracks under the bridge, would they be very upset by it?

She heard barely audible music coming from the town railway station. A brass-band was playing. Why was it playing? Whom was it greeting? She wandered off there in with feeble, silent steps. The platform was filled with young people seeing students off to the virgin lands — music, knapsacks, witticisms... And though she knew that he could not be among them, her eyes searched for him in the crowd. Formal words were spoken from an improvised rostrum. The embraces were informal. And soon, untroubled youthful faces were looking from the train windows. They were singing. She should go too, into obscurity. Where no one knew her, where no gossip would catch up with her, no rumors — disappear, vanish into thin air! Farther away from those jabberers, who might be disgracing Yelka before her sweetheart even now. Burning with shame, overcome with despair, she imagined how it would all be in Vovchuhy, how the furious brigade-leader's wife would curse her in front of Mykola, pinning all kinds of stuff on her, and he would stand stupefied, dishonored in his love. They would drown her in scandal, in brutality. No one would be able to stop the flood of insults — neither the chief, nor the Party organizer. She would appear disgraced before him, the lowest creature in the village. And he was honest, truthful, open — his whole soul was on his sleeve. He was like that, and that was the way he had imagined Yelka, but she was furtive and evil! Deceived by her, stunned, made fun of by the gossips, he would be standing by the office in Vovchuhy today, listening to everything, feeling perhaps only the pain of injustice, the pain of disappointment. And who, after hearing such things, would believe in the sincerity of the most fervent feelings for him? Who wouldn't have felt the bitterness of disappointment. Her soul bled with pain. A tumultuous imagination painted Yelka one picture more horrifying than the next, and she no longer thought that all this could only be the product of her fantasies. And she didn't even suspect that she belonged to those exalted natures for whom the illusion sometimes meant more than reality.

Later she returned to the small square, where the old women had brought out their grandchildren in baby carriages. Yelka sat down near them, on the very edge of a bench; she didn't seem to have any right to more. She listened almost stealthily, illicitly, to the unhurried

conversations of the elderly women. They chatted about all kinds of things: about the bread, to which pea meal was now being added, about the pensions which were supposed to be increased for the plant workers. They also mentioned some girl, who it seemed had drowned in Skarbne the previous week because of an unhappy love. They had gone there together, both of them happy, but something had happened there, and then you had a drama like this... Then the oldest of the women related how in her youth a student had fallen in love with her. He was a peasant, uncouth — while she was from a family where they knew etiquette and how to set the table. He was unable to gain the approval of her family, and finally other admirers won out. Since then many years had passed; her sons were already grown, engineers. There had been many, many cakes for her birthday since then, various sponge cakes and napoleons — now they all seemed to come together for her into one giant cake. She had grown old; her life had ebbed away, but even now for some reason he kept surfacing among her past admirers, just him, that clumsy peasant poet, who knew no etiquette. She kept remembering the words he had told her on her birthday: “What can I, a poor peasant, give you? I'll make you a present of that star!” (And he pointed from the balcony to a star.) And even when she was hungry during the occupation, vegetating amid grief and poverty, she did not remember the prosperous years, for some reason, but kept trying to find the star in the night sky, the star the student had given her as a present on her birthday.

The old woman's confession pierced Yelka with burning pain, the woman's belated longing for something which could have been, but which had nevertheless passed by, like a distant summer shower.

Near a neglected waterless fountain children were feeding pigeons. Wild, uncared-for, the birds lived on crumbs. And Yelka remembered other pigeons, shining in the morning sun, those which had tirelessly drawn the cathedral upward, flapping in ever higher circles through the clouds of smoke, and the cathedral seemed to strain up after them, growing. They had probably glistened away forever, those shining pigeons of her short-lived happiness.

It was hard. Snakes suckle at your breast. And there is no one to blame, except yourself. Who is to blame, that you carried something disturbing inside you, and wherever you step everything goes wrong, everything you touch — you wreck involuntarily. How much this night with Bahlay had promised you, a night of getting to know each other, a night of trust, a merging of souls, a delirious night of being in love —but what was left?

She walked around Mykola's institute, a large new complex in the upper part of town. A complex formula was bricked into the facade, an equation incomprehensible to Yelka, and a model — probably the model of an atom. There seemed to be something almost derisive and scoffing in this round motel and the cryptic symbols of the equation, understood only by the chosen, who seemed to have fenced themselves off from the ordinary people with that cryptography. There was no one near the institute.

She rambled down the prospect. The barbers seemed to peer at her through windows and the salespeople from their hawker's carts, censoring her. Others were working, and she lounged around with nothing to do. Obviously a giddy girl seeking an easy penny. The restaurant had just opened, and some early customers were stepping inside.

“Come with us!” they teased Yelka. “Let's drink to an intimate friendship... From one glass!”

That's what they thought of her, so sure that she was one of those who drank with any old passer-by from the same glass, one of those who could be insulted, who would sit on strangers' laps in restaurants.

Giving them a hateful look, she quickened her pace, jumped into a bus at the bus stop. Into the first available bus — though a minute earlier she had had no intention at all of going anywhere. The bus was almost empty. Yelka sat down, hiding in a corner. Looking sternly at her, the conductress announced that the bus was going to Skarbne.

Bare-headed, gray as Sabaoth, the old steelworker sat by the gates of his paradise. Sabaoth in faded plant work-clothes. He would come out like this, sit down, unafraid of the sun, and his elderly teary gaze floated through the distance for a long time, over familiar horizons. The cathedral cut through the haze. The factories smoked away, driving smoke, soot and dust into the sky, day and night. So much soot had fallen on those workshops, that it had to be shoveled away, piled up like snow: there were instances when the roof collapsed under the black weight.

The old man looked into the distance where the plants stood. On the screen of the sky the unfading film of his life, his youth, shimmered before his eyes. A twilight person, what was he awaiting? Who would respond to him from that distance, from those past storms, from the heat of the workshops which had been smelting metal over a hundred years, from people who had once been close to him? He sat and seemed to be waiting for someone.

Every weekend the forest filled with joyous voices. But now it was quiet. The old man listened to the silence. The bells of Cossack time were tolling for him. The oaks of revolution rustled away.

He had a close friend here, Yaroveha, a metal worker too, from the barricades — back in their youth they had gone together to the Nordom on the prospect to listen to Yavornytsky's lectures. Only Yaroveha knew for whom old Loboda was waiting so long near the gates: his eyes were wrenched with tears, and he continued to watch out for his heartless son. He swore that he did not even want to see him, but secretly he waited for him, hoping. He itched to live long enough to see his descendants. Perhaps his son would come along one day with grandchildren, and the old man would nestle up to them, and they would take to him. Perhaps he would live to see that day?

On weekdays there were no crowds in Skarbne; everyone was at work. The oak forest came right up to the steelworkers' paradise, wide-crowned giants which had stood for centuries. At night the shadows of the past populated the limits of Skarbne, and it was only with them that night fisherman Izot Loboda communicated. Mustached, three-hundred-year-old Zaporozhian Cossacks would occasionally light a fire somewhere, lying around it, smoking pipes, examining food tins for want of something better to do. One of these commanders would stroke his mustache and ponder: "What do they use tins for? And what are they like, these modern people? Are there knights among them? Or are they all peasants? Can there be only lackeys and serfs, swindlers and dodderers? For the worst thing that there can be in a person is a coward's soul, a slave's soul!"

He felt how these thoughts fanned a hatred in him for someone, rousing his still-uncooled blood. Three of them had arrived one such weekday in a sedan. Pulled out their poacher's tackle from the trunk, grabbed their sapper's spades and began to dig up the bank. Each made himself an

earthen armchair, so that he could sit in it with his fishing rod, as if he were in his office. He came up to them, began to shame them: "What are you doing digging up the earth? Upsetting the bank?" They replied with coarse language. This Skarbne wouldn't last much longer. It would be dried, plowed over, everything would be put under cultivation. So close to an industrial town, and such silt was going to waste. What vegetables there would be! When market-gardens were set up there — vegetable stands would be inundated with squash. They didn't even stop to think, that without water there would be nothing. He began to drive them away from the bank. They snapped back; one even raised his spade, wasn't ashamed to insult the old man with curses. But even though he was one against three, he finally drove them away, bounced these poachers; drove them away with his righteousness.

These types did the plundering. If it kept going this way, storks would probably stop flying over beautiful Ukraine. Some bureaucrat would get it into his head: let's have a new dam over there, and there's your dam, and they'd start chopping the swamp up, creating in its place a stinking rotting sea, thick as oatmeal jelly, drowning millions of things, creeping up to the manganese ores. Would they really encroach on Skarbne? "If they dry the marshes, there will be nothing! No mists! Hear that? There will be no mists in the morning!" he called out to someone in his mind, as if it were something horrifying.

The path before him wound its way past the steelworkers' home. It was one of those which had been worn from the highway into the depths of the forest by the townspeople. On the eve of a holiday and early on Sunday, people thronged there in waves from the city, into the open air. At times he would see his fellow plant workers among them: walking along with their families, greeting the old master tradesman respectfully. Or it happened that a party of feather-brains would pass by, making a din for the whole forest to hear, with radios in their hands, almost poking them in the old man's face. And they sneered at him, young people, quite youthful, and already so callous. What made them become like that? From where had they gotten this contempt for everyone, even for old retirees? Try to say something to the young rowdy, he would retort straight away: "Haven't I the right?" They would walk past with protruding antennas, and the old man would watch them go for a long time. Without malice, more with pain, as if his own grandchildren had walked past him. "Why are you like this? Why haven't you respect for people, why are you sad, touchy? Why don't you sing songs, and listen instead to ready-made ones from those boxes? Why doesn't even your laughter resemble that of the Cossacks? I feel sorry for you. I'd like to help you, but how?"

He would think about many things as he sat there. He began as a boy at the smelter. Then spent half his life by the open-hearth furnaces. He didn't smelt only ordinary soft steels... And he opened the gates for his sons, brought them to the plant with him. He looked through the photographs of his lost sons. Looked at the blue ocean with palm trees, the Indian Ocean. How far his steel-making science had reached! Everywhere, where there were ores in the depths, there would be your science too.

It was close to lunchtime when some girl appeared on the path: downcast, she headed for the forest. Walking past, she glanced sullenly in the direction of the old man; well-tanned, a

Gypsy or something. Quite a few Gypsies had appeared now. They were being converted to a settled life, they had crossed someone's path there. But this one wasn't in Gypsy skirts, she was

dressed ordinarily, had a white blouse. When she glanced at him furtively her lips said “hello” out of habit — obviously a village girl. And there was such deep grief in her eyes, such endless, frozen despair. People like this did not come here for any good reason, heading like sleep-walkers for the forest, to the dark Skarbne whirlpools.

She had already walked past him, when he called out, sensing alarm:

“Daughter, come back here.”

And she returned obediently, stopped before him with that same despondency, with a heavy drawn-out look of despair, in which even the will to live seemed to have been extinguished. He asked her where she was from and where she was headed. And only now did she seem to notice the old man and sensed compassion in his voice.

Yelka stood before him like a tramp, indifferent, rejected by everyone. She thought she had never looked into such wise and humane eyes, illuminated with the old man's own pain, the bitterness of solitude, and thus capable of peering so keenly into the souls of others. He was no relative, yet he had noticed the state she was in. Had called her, asked her gently about herself. Without even knowing who she was, and whether she was worthy of his sympathy; two people, total strangers, meeting by accident, and like this... He asked her about her father and mother too, where she had worked. He listened to her miserly confessions, and his big gray-haired head nodded benevolently, comprehending the whole time, as if accepting without judgment her life's frustrations and mistakes, and clumsy penitence, accepting it all, continuing to read the entangled book of Yelka's life.

Yelka felt the ice of malice toward herself and others thaw noticeably; slowly she returned to being human, something which had previously seemed lost forever. After a while she too asked the old man why he was here — was he the caretaker?

The old man explained to her what kind of building this was. A home for former steelworkers, for solitary people.

“A paradisaical retreat,” he added with a sad smile.

“Why, haven't you... any sons or daughters?” Yelka asked and realized that moment that she shouldn't have asked the question.

The old man's whole face became suddenly crumpled, overcome with spasms of pain, he bent down low and his shoulders began to shake, elderly, bony, sobs gurgled in his chest, held back by force. He was crying! An old man and... This astonished Yelka so much, that she was ready to scream — from pain, the intolerance of witnessing this. There was nothing worse than seeing an old person sobbing. Seeing the hitherto serene, old face hewn by life being suddenly deformed by a grimace of suffering. In a moment the old man had regained his composure, raised his head; his eyes were dry, the trembling had left his shoulders; they seemed to be calm once more. But Yelka's soul burned with pain, sharp, piercing pain which made her want to scream. She couldn't forgive herself this oversight, chided herself for having upset the old man so much with her indiscrete question; she must have touched the most painful wound of his life. Yelka had seen grief; she knew how it hurt, but how great this old man's grief had to be, if the slightest touch to some hidden spiritual trauma could provoke such dry, spasmodic sobs! Had he ever expected that the crown of his old age would be this pain, carried about every day, suppressed? Such a giant, but he was defenseless now in his grief. She wanted to find words of comfort, to

kiss that large dark hand of this elderly person who had lost someone or had been badly wronged by someone.

The old man was embarrassed that he had shown such weakness before a stranger, be it even fleeting; again, as at first, he looked at Yelka with calm, benevolent eyes:

“Hungry, eh?”

He rose, and telling her to follow him, led her to his “paradisaical retreat.”

Chapter XXII

One of the plants had dumped dirty, poisoned water into the Dnipro, and the fish had died. It created quite a stir. A special commission arrived from the center. The secretary of the provincial committee summoned all the plant managers, the leaders of the Party and trade union organizations. He was angry:

“How long are we going to be poisoning the Dnipro? How long are we going to be poisoning the air? The state has money for purification devices, and you only pay fines year in, year out from the same state funds. And you, trade unions? What are your duties — have you forgotten?”

In connection with this, they mentioned the original system of pollution-control devices suggested by the plant mechanic Oleksa Artemenko and the metallurgy student Mykola Bahlay. The secretary of the provincial committee expressed a desire to meet with these experts. That day they telephoned the regional office, and Bahlay was notified that he was being urgently summoned to town. He was told exactly for what he was being sent. Before this, they had already seen the manager with their project. Nothing had come of it then. He listened to them hurriedly, then waved them away:

“I’ve no time for you now, we’re busy with the plan, awaiting the minister...!”

Even after that Oleksa didn't lose hope, tried to drag Bahlay off elsewhere, but the student's patience had worn thin: he'd had enough. One couldn't break down a wall with one's head.

With that, he had left for the harvest. And now, it turned out, their idea had come to life again; people were interested in it.

Bahlay got a ride into town. The sunflowers were already blooming, a whole sea of them, innumerable, golden-headed, spilling out across the steppes, faces turned towards their heavenly model. He came with a joyous presentiment of his meeting with Yelka, with Zachiplianka and those strangers who would become his accomplices in the fight for a clear unsullied sky over his native land. The land of progress must be without noxious smoke! This was his motto. Thoughts were already coalescing, forming, unyielding arguments which he would present before those with whom even now he was carrying on a fervent victorious discussion. Scathingly he made fun of some fool of an efficiency expert who proposed that all the stacks be brought together into one pipe and the smoke be led away somewhere. He put down others too. Of course there were adherents of dry filters, for there weren't sufficient amounts of industrial water everywhere. Yes, many countries were changing to dry filtration. In the West they were utilizing even sack or sleeve filters of special material which had to be extremely strong, for the temperature of the dust as it emerged from the stacks was very high. Besides, the products of dry filtration could be reprocessed, compressed into blocks; this had its advantages too. But before it could be cleaned, the gas had to be cooled, its temperature lowered — herein lay the problem. Direct exhaustion? But the metallurgists were reluctant to go for that, afraid it might reflect on the technological process. Smoke from the stacks was burning-hot gas with dust. The unseen dust particle — it was one's biggest enemy. Only after magnifying it 450 times could one begin to see this dust particle; actually it was a small sliver of iron. That was why it flew around and was easily assimilated by the body. There was a law about the allowable safe level of dust in the air, but who abided by it? Everywhere the air above the steel mills swirled with dirt. Various inspection services swallowed that dirt too. Each plant had ventilation laboratories which year in, year out recorded violations of

the safe levels. Wasn't this self-deception? Bahlay could never think calmly about this. The levels of dust had grown, especially after the utilization of forced oxygen in the open-hearth furnaces. Not smoke, but iron, pure ore, richer than that from the mines, was being blown out through the stacks, and the wind scattered it over the city day and night. Four hundred tons of dust every twenty-four hours — that amounted to three hundred tons of pure iron in the form of those brown clouds of smoke! And the managers? Each of them still had a fund even now to pay fines for pollution. And they paid, because there was no time to think about filters; they had problems, you see... Sums for the construction of gas-filtering devices were made available to them every year; here, take it, build something, but who used those sums fully? Who earnestly worried about the training of appropriate specialists? Before, there had been a technical institute somewhere in the Caucasus which prepared such experts, but it was shut down. Until forced air was employed, while the open-hearth furnaces smoked away quietly, one could still put with it, but now, when all the processes were intensified — it was like a fire above the plant! Brown clouds covered the sky, the problem of pollution control became paramount. Bahlay regretted that the former manager, Batura, who had died of cancer, wasn't around — he would have jumped at their system! The wet filtration which he and Oleksa proposed was a cumbersome thing too, troublesome; they would need vast amounts of water; large settling ponds would have to be built, new systems, each of which was like a workshop in itself. But they had to begin sometime! Perhaps it was “disadvantageous” now, comrade manager, this didn't contribute to the plan, however the air would be clean for the people, the sky above the plants would smile an azure hue — wasn't this worthy of a maximum effort?

On Vesela Street the young children met their friend with boisterous joy; the Bahlay kids and the neighbors were up to their ears in chocolate, a sure sign that Ivan had returned from India. There were sunflowers blooming on Vesela too, and it was only here that Mykola remembered that today was his birthday: from childhood, he remembered the words of his mother, that he had been born during the war, when shells were exploding in backyards and sunflowers stood in bloom!

He had forgotten all about it, but not his mother; she had baked a cherry pie. True, they wouldn't be inviting guests, besides it was the day before a holiday, and many people had set off for Skarbne. Ivan with Virunka and both the Vladykas, and Fedir the rollerman, and an engineer from Ivan's workshop had joined them too. They invited Mykola along too, to catch up to them as soon as he arrived.

“And how's your future daughter-in-law, Mamma?”

His mother's face clouded over: the daughter-in-law had disappeared. After she had left for town that time, she never returned.

The news was like a bolt from the blue to Mykola. His face grew dark. He stood stunned in the middle of the yard, his brows right over his eyes, silent. Then he said mutely, joking bitterly:

“Now, Mother... couldn't you take care of her?”

“You should have taken care of her yourself,” his mother replied seriously.

She brought her son some water to wash after the long journey. He had returned scorched from the steppes; the skin on his shoulders and chest was simply glowing. While he rubbed down his muscular body with a clean towel, his mother admired him: what a fellow he'd grown into —

handsome, good-looking! The older son was red-haired, goggle-eyed, there was even red in his eyes, but this one — his eyes shone like the sky, from under his father's bushy black eyebrows. Only for some reason that sky was often troubled. A straight nose with thin nostrils, which just like his father's, twitched each time he was upset. Everything was his father's — the eyes, and the eyebrows, and his posture. How his father would have been pleased to see him. He hadn't lived to see his son. And where was that soldier who was the first to hear him cry in the trench? Was he alive or lying somewhere in a mass grave? Though he was saddened by the news, his mother finally managed to persuade Mykola to sit at the table for a light meal.

Mrs. Bahlay also knew why her son had been summoned. They hadn't sat here in vain with Oleksa then, busily drafting plans — it turned out their smoke filters were worth something after all.

“I've little faith in this, Mamma... It's easier to break down a wall,” the son growled.

Mrs. Bahlay was angered by this. She lectured him, revealing her true spirit.

“Did you expect it to come so easily?” she asked sternly. “The smallest hindrance — and you give up right away? Just get a hold of yourself. Nothing in life comes easily, it's time you knew that.”

“Thanks for the moral support,” her son smiled sullenly.

He sipped some borsch, took a bite of the pie and left the yard right away.

The straw on Yahor's house had fused into a single earthen mass. The yard was deserted; only the mitten pears hung lonesomely, needed by no one. He stood by the lake: the small children were splashing about in the shallows, while a rubber Indian elephant with bells floated on the blinding water. Little frogs jumped about on the bank, these dwarfed descendants of the mammoths. He went farther, looked at the sandhills. She was nowhere! How empty it was all around! “And the path you walked along has grown over with thorns.” The sandhills floated along in the haze, the milkweed was turning red, untouched even by the goats. The plants smoked away vigorously, making the sky shaggy, brownly-orange. The black silhouettes of the blast furnaces, the towers of the upper section of town — the spirit of Titanism reigned here. The airplanes roared somewhere way, way up. And again Bahlay became engulfed by that feeling which had evaded him for so long: this elusive uneasiness for the world, its polygonality. There was even something alarming in the sun's reckless dazzle. Involuntarily the thought sprang to mind: what would become of everything? The people, the plants, the cathedrals? What would become of the red milkweed?

He stepped in to see Oleksa — the fellow had not returned from work yet, being held up somewhere.

Finally he ended up at Orlianchenko's place. Romtsia was preparing to depart, evidently he was being given permission for his tourist trip. He would go and see and how they cared for their cathedrals; he might even hear some organ music being played in a cathedral; people said it sounded grandiose!

“Know what the Bulgarians call steel makers? Firers! Great, eh?”

Romtsia said nothing about Yelka — he still had enough tact left. In silence they played a game of chess. Meanwhile, Oleksa had returned. Spying Mykola in the Orlianchenkos' yard, the one-eared fanatic came this way too. He had survived the front without losing an ear, but in the

workshop one had been burned off with a splinter, nearly burned out his eyes then too. After that he became a mechanic, working on flue gas filtration. His bald head was red, as if cooked; his surviving ear burned brightly.

“We've got the upper hand,” he addressed Bahlay joyously. “We won't be running after the managers now; they'll be coming after us. They place a filter on one stack, and let the others smoke away. And no one complains. When they discharge yellow smoke in Lypetsk, a whole pile of written complaints appears in the town council. But our people remain silent, accepting it. Now, comrade student, the wheel will be set in motion. On Monday we're to be at the plant with our plans.”

Romtsia gave his interpretation:

“I've taught you a long time, Oleksa: for every Bublyk you need an anti-Bublyk. For trickery — the power of antitrickery... Trickery is a whole science developed by powerful minds, perfected by them; it does not stand still. Ho-ho! You have to meet your adversary with all guns drawn! When he pushes, you pull. When he pulls, you push. A war of nerves. Wear him down — that's the only way you can win.”

The mechanic began to explain to him that that was not the case here. The provincial committee secretary, Comrade Dibrovny, had taken an interest; so they had to act.

This had no effect on Orlianchenko either.

“It is a gratifying thing, of course, that there are such positive secretaries in the world, a manifestation of progress,” he said philosophically. “Not everyone would have focused his attention on a doubtful idea matured in the minds of two Zachipliankan cranks. And before that he even interceded on behalf of the cathedral. Comrade Dibrovny is a fine secretary, you can't say anything against him. But I'm interested in something else: why should the fate of that cathedral, a national architectural monument, depend on the mood, the whim of a single person, be he even for it? You consider that right? Or perhaps this deserves a long anonymous letter which should be sent to the twenty-third century or so? How we lived. How such matters were decided by us. It's fine that our secretary turned out to be not a Bourbon, but on the contrary, quite a progressive, sensitive, touchingly nice fellow — but if he had been a mean one?”

Oleksa the mechanic wiped his bald head, then wagged his finger, and raised his eyebrow mirthfully:

“There are no bad secretaries, remember that. Remember it and don't jabber about this again, if you want to go on tourist trips.” And added without a shade of mirth: “Our secretary is lying in the hospital with a heart attack. He had some unpleasantness at the Center (not over the cathedral, of course), returned and went straight from the airplane to the hospital.”

After this Romtsia bit his tongue.

Orlianchenko refused Mykola's invitation to go to Skarbne, but Oleksa the mechanic agreed willingly: they were soon speeding along on his motorcycle in that direction.

Chapter XXIII

A new phase began in Yelka's life. And it was all thanks to the efforts of the old steelworker, Grandpa Nechuiviter, as everyone here called him, for he didn't pay attention to the way the wind blew; he just did his own thing. Izot Ivanovych brought Yelka to the director himself, who, it turned out, knew Yelka's Vovchuhy and had had financial dealings with its collective farm head. And the fact that she had no documents on her, did not worry him either; he believed her: after she worked as a waitress for them, she would have her documents.

That very day Yelka walked about the dining hall with a white lace crown on her head, bringing the old people their dinner. As soon as she had served dinner she was free, before the sun had even set. These old people then surrounded Yelka on the porch, and deferentially asked her about herself, telling her about themselves, occasionally with mirth, and with jokes.

“We're called 'dependents.' We really are dependents of the state. In the old days, we'd be dying in the gutter... But now, see, we're in an eternal sanitarium.”

“What brings us here? Solitude. And at times, it happens, that it is our own sons who check us into this paradise, but more often it's the dear young daughters-in-law, who don't want to bother with us. They pay for the maintenance of their parents, and for those of us steelworkers with a big pension they don't even have to pay...”

“There are many different kinds here among us: there was one from the battleship 'Potemkin' — we buried him last year. There was also Horbenko, who worked with Chubar...”

One woman boasted:

“We're devoting all our energy to cleanliness. Competing to be the best Communist lifestyle ward. Now our ward has the best flowers; the director mentioned us in his report... I don't laze around, despite my age; I'll clamber up and wipe the light fixtures,” the granny boasted with satisfaction.

The steelworkers laughed at these tidy women:

“But do you fight for lasting peace in your ward?” And turning to Yelka they said: “There are few squabbles between us men, but the women — it's rare when they are not fighting with each other. One wants the radio on, another doesn't; one wants the window opened, another wants it closed.”

And together they made fun of the fiercest of them who kept demanding that the director pull the leader's bust out of the storeroom and set it up in a flower bed in the middle of the yard.

“The poor critter can't fall asleep without that bust.”

And so they lived. There were activities for them: a choir, a string orchestra, also a brigade of fishermen.

One of the women took such a liking to Yelka that she made her a present of a beautiful dress, her daughter's, which had somehow been mislaid here.

Yelka had freedom here. Once she had finished her work, she could read, or if she wanted to — stroll off to the forest. After the uncertainties, the aimless wandering through the whirlpools of life, she somehow took root right away, felt at ease, sensed that she was needed. In her free time she liked to wander through the marshes. She would take off her shoes and go barefoot, feeling the earth's breath, its warmth — one could go about barefoot here. Had she gone about barefoot on the asphalt in town, she would have been scolded: where had she come from, like a

naked girl out of a poppy! But here in Skarbne, you could stand on your head; no one would notice; no one would laugh. Perhaps she would live here like this? A nanny of these old people — people in their serene twilight. They remained people here too, in this retreat of sorrow and old age. And what people! — they had been famous in the plants, on battleships, on barricades. Yelka didn't find it hard to carry plates of food into the dining room for such people, in what had once been the monks' refectory. She herself would fade away one day. Arising from nothing, one eventually became nothing. Time engulfed everything; eternity devoured everything. One dissolved into a tiny particle in the cold obscurities of matter. Or perhaps this was it, human life? And perhaps the whole wisdom lay in the fact that two people became intimate friends, were caught up for a moment in the flames of passion, only to part again, to become extinguished in eternal flight.

Various birds migrated across Skarbne. She walked through the forest during the day, and as soon as there was a rustle among the branches — her gaze would immediately follow a bird, to see what it was. And then some baby birds appeared, strange, bright blue, as if finding their way from some tropical forest, to see what it was like here in Ukraine. They flew swiftly, and it was so unusual to see these sky-blue birds, which darted in azure flashes over the dark waters of Skarbne. Sometimes she found herself in places that were kingdoms of total silence; some cove meandered about; all the banks were exposed roots. The water was dark and deep, but clear. Appearing not to flow, but yet flowing. She could have gone for a swim in her birthday suit. No one would have startled her, spied on her; only the ancient oaks would have eyed the girl's beauty from the banks. And she wandered further into eternal tranquillity, not knowing what century it was on earth. Wide-crowned oaks — the green cathedrals of Skarbne — painted their silhouettes in the water. Yelka paused many a time, pensively looking at these forest cathedrals with green domes. She began to notice the smoothness of line, about which she had heard from him then. A sky full of tenderness. Peace and tranquillity. What more did a person need? There was freedom, but what about love? She was probably not destined to have any. Her mother had spent her whole life single, and the daughter would have to do the same. Again and again her imagination recreated that fantastic night in the sandhills — a night of tenderness and poetry. Whatever he would have talked about, be it the atomic age, or about Garcia Lorca, or something else — it seemed to Yelka that this was just the thing she had been waiting for; she seemed to have had a premonition of it before — had she imagined it or seen it in her dreams? She assessed the prehistory of their meeting: how the seeds were sown, how the air over Zachiplianka seemed to carry biocurrents of inevitable love. Even when he lay in his hammock under the mulberry, surrounded by books, engrossed in his integrals, she seemed sorrowfully to sense even then the inevitability of his becoming close to her, caught the current of emerging reciprocity. And for some reason she also remembered those words uttered by the strange woman: “I make you a present of that star.” But he had given her a sun! The sun of his trust, love, and purity. There would probably never be anything more beautiful than that night with Bahlay, which was like a dream — a night of reed shadows in crimson lakes, nothing better than that silvery sunrise. He would meet another girl in his life; the best of the student girls would be his match, not some Yelka with a disgraced past. He had expected to find in her an unusual, poetic nature, but she had

turned out to be quite ordinary, with a whole bundle of serious flaws and dissonances. She could not have entangled him in all this, promoting his disappointment. Well

— let it be. For that night, and for the best sunrise in her life

— for these she would remain thankful to Bahlay for as long as she lived. As long as she lived, couldn't you spend the life meted out to you without love? Perhaps this was enough for a person, perhaps you needed nothing more than a piece of sky over your head, and this pensive rustle of forest? In spring, nightingales would sing here, everything would be bathed in dew, but was it not beautiful too, when it was so serene and dusky, and the forest was in reverie. She could feel her soul thawing out. What a heart people had! You could wound it, wound it till it bled hot blood, and it would heal again and become good and loving once more. Yelka had thought that it would never recover, but once more life breathed at her sympathetically, and she saw that she was still alive, undaunted, that she was enthralled by this forest and someone's path and the mirrors of water among the reeds.

On Saturdays, when the forest became crowded and noisy, it was best to cross the water over the fallen trunks and wander off to the wild open places, where the real swamp began. She went further away from the noise, from the splashing of the river, where reckless fellows went about naked, seeking trees sloping over the water, and dived headfirst into the dark swirling waters with Tarzan-like screams. The wails barely reached her here; here it was quiet, spacious; the azure horizons were visible; distant lakes shone in the sun. The reeds glistened like a wall; one could feel the warm breath of the water heated during the day; a small puddle was grown over with duckweed.

The path wound through the reeds, Yelka went where the path took her — into the swamp solitude, into the silence of the marshes. A slender-legged heron lurked in the reeds; it was difficult to see it right away. A water lily stood out white with its porcelain cups among the duckweed. No, the world had harmony, not everything in it was discord and chaos! It was filled with beauty, just like that sky was filled with blue — one only had to see it, even if there were feelings of bitterness and pain.

She was returning, when far away on the path she spied a young man's figure. Probably one of those who jumped into the water from the trees, and then came out here, on the far bank, to dry off in the sun. He came towards her — tanned, muscular, his skin still shining, wet with water. Her first thought was to hide somewhere, fearing he might accost her, but she continued ahead for some reason. And this was no dream and no apparition, it was reality: Mykola Bahlay was walking toward her. She had already recognized him, and her heart froze; he was walking along downcast, pensive, looking at his feet. And when he looked up at her, he looked at her almost savagely, as if not wanting to recognize her and, frightened, numbed, she was seized by a thought: “He's returned from Vovchuhy! And everything he's heard there about me he's carrying with him now!”

All the words of joy, happiness and greeting became stuck in Bahlay's throat when Yelka appeared before him. Drawing closer, she stood before him, but seemed somehow removed, estranged, almost a stranger. She did not greet him. She smiled, but only with a corner of her mouth, wryly, as if not at him. She looked him up and down with a coarse gaze, as if scrutinizing a chance passer-by, who might harass her on this deserted path. And so the two of them stood,

amid this mute splendor of the marshes. And this was she, Yelka, studying him with piercing eyes, looking at him so coldly? There was only a flash of pure female curiosity as she involuntarily slid her gaze over the slender figure of this passing youth with drops of water on his toasted shoulders. But even the curiosity wasn't Yelka's. Something almost ironical appeared in her scrutinizing gaze: was he a slave of sports? An Egyptian torso, well-developed shoulders, such types disappeared for the whole summer, rowing. Girls had little joy from these types, who saw nothing in the world, apart from their sport. There were a lot of them strolling about Skarbne with flippers and transistor radios. "Well, are you going to annoy me?" her eyes asked. Was this Yelka? Where was the girl who had enslaved him with the blossom of her soul — dear, sincere, ardent? He should shout something deafening at her to shake that invisible armor of aloofness, her ironical supremacy, indifference. Where are you Yelka? Yelka of that melodious night, of that kiss with which she branded him in public near the cathedral? These past days your voice sang to Bahlay in the steppes, the dearest voice of all, with a gurgle of restrained emotion, but now it was silent.

"Yelka!" Coming up to her, Bahlay asked sharply, forcefully: "Where have you been? Why are you like this?"

This seemed offensive to her.

"Do you want a report? You've already heard one there...! I can add a few things!"

And she spoke out. The words with which she exploded at him were vulgar, almost destructive; they did not seem to come from her lips. About some feed in the cathedral, about a trampled girl who had tasted some early love, while still not quite a young woman. And what was strange about that? She was a bastard after all! Did they ever turn out decent? They only grew into whores! When you leave, they said, you'll learn to smoke, you'll be dragged along to restaurants. And she had been to restaurants, what did he think? And she was returning from one now. Unafraid of shame or disgrace. Her soul had hardened, becoming like the skin on a collective farm nag — she felt no pain at all now.

"Stop that!" Bahlay grabbed her by the arm. "Not a word more. This is a pitiful, vulgar game!"

It was evident that she was telling lies about herself, finding a fierce delight in this self-disgrace, displaying herself on purpose as a ruined, debauched woman, who had done everything, been through everything.

"I don't want to hear this, do you understand? You're not like this! I know you better than you yourself, I know that you're..." but he didn't finish what he was saying.

Yelka settled down, hanging her head before him. Then, sighing, she looked around:

"Why is everything so beautiful in nature: the sky... the water... the reeds. But in human life?"

Bahlay graciously took both her hands in his, looked at her shoulders which slid down smoothly, bared more than usual. He looked at the lowered eyelashes with burned tips, at the painful twitch of her lips... There was nothing beyond this! The crown of life was in her. And it was a joy to be alive, for he had now discovered that someone with whom he felt a most intimate kinship.

"Were you in... Vovchuhy?"

Yes, he had been in Vovchuhy! And he knew all about her; he had heard everything about Yelka's life from the people — he had heard good, sober words about Yelka.

He kept staring at her. “You are sacred even now. Sacred and pure, like the sun! And I didn't hear what just emanated from your lips. All that pretense, feigning and acting — that was not you. And even if your imagination has sincerely forced all this upon you, don't believe the screams of your own imagination, you are better than that!”

Yelka stared somewhere toward the distant stretches of water, which blinded her eyes with glare. Beyond those lakes there were more lakes — lakes of white lily, heavy ducks, easily frightened, swift-winged.

“There is something sad in these spaces,” she said after a silence.

“There's no need for sadness!” Bahlay waved her remark aside, but became pensive too. Open spaces always had something sad about them, — the endlessness of the steppes, and probably of the ocean too. There was also something sorrowful in the gaze of people in love; the beautiful was sad for some reason.

“One fellow once said to me: you freedom-seeker... Said it like a curse... And it's true — I'm a seeker.” And her voice quavered with irony and bitterness. “And yet I found it, didn't I? For love is probably the greatest freedom...”

“How did we meet here? Stinging blackberries, reeds, a deserted path... and suddenly you. It's a miracle!”

Yelka lifted her eyes to him:

“I would have died had we not met.”

And her gaze became profound, just like back there, when he had first seen her on his Vesela over Yahor's fence. There was no more of that suggestion in her eyes, deliberately provoked, as if in defense against something. There was something quite different: he caught the hidden, painful longing for purity and love. With a gesture of inward concern and kindness, she drove a mosquito from his shoulder, and her hand remained there. Her greenish gaze shone with devotion, love; her eyes became bottomless wells, again gleaming with tears, just as they had by the cathedral.

“My love...”

“You don't realize what you do to me,” she could have said to him. “Beside you I am reborn, beside you I become a person again!”

Overcome by his own tenderness, Mykola drew her closer, hugged her.

Flapping its wings pertly, a heron rose nearby and flew over the sun, the reeds.

They stood frozen in an embrace.

There will still be moonlit Skarbne nights for you both, gray mists and showers of dew! You will rejoice at the sounds of mermaids splashing in the deep, see the silent jagged shadows on the bushes. And in flashes of fright you'll still behold your Skarbne, in azure splashes of sky, weightless, the whole space trembling with you, and the electrified heavens breathing a storm, the canyons of cloud illuminated to their very depths. There will be a storm, and the trees will rustle, so high in the dark, and appear crucified, cross-shaped.

There will still be fine mornings after storms, without the fantasies of night, without jagged shadows, without flashes, mystery and apparitions — thin-legged insects skating over the water, the water bathing the roots, and a girl preparing to bathe will stand in reverie among the oaks in

the thinning forest along the riverbank, and the young sun will kiss the girl's breasts. It will be this way: the rippling sun running across the waters of Skarbne, barely touched by the morning movement of air, small ripples of sunshine reflecting off the water, running across the bank, over the naked roots, running in waves of shadow and light over the happy faces of two people in love, over the hardened bark of the ancient wide-crowned oaks.

Chapter XXIV

Even those, in whose souls lived the poetry of urbanism, dreamed of spending at least one free day outside the city spending the night in Skarbne. They escaped here from the open-air dance areas and transistor radios, from the asphalt stuffiness and the plant smoke, to listen to the music of the frogs, the splash of water and the buzz of mosquitoes.

The mosquitoes here were the largest in the world. But the city-dwellers were not deterred — the very preparations for setting out made them happy. The plant workers gathered, as if about to set out on a long expedition, and the leader's heartening voice resounded over them:

“Well, shall we set out, brothers? To the meadows and the great plains to feed the mosquitoes, big as bears!”

With this Zaporozhian saying they filed into the bus, with knapsacks on their backs.

And before nightfall people of the twentieth century made camp here at every turn in the river on the steep banks of Skarbne, entangled in roots and fallen trees, where there had once been the campsites of primitive man (the pupils had found mammoth tusks and stone implements of our ancestors here many a time in washed-out gullies along sections of the bank). The campsites resounded with merry voices, tripods were set up, pots appeared, there would soon be chumak kashas, double and triple helpings of fish soup, there would be conversations till midnight.

And already there was a bright fire on the high bank among the oaks, the tousled flames engulfing a pot, a swamp heron cried in the reeds — darkness flooded the swamps. In the evening, a stormy sky had frightened the people, an eerie light flashed several times through the dark trees of the forest, radiating a deep blue, and disappeared — the cloud floated somewhere out over the Dnipro. Once more the warm night reigned supreme, exciting the steppe summer with its mystery, the fragrance of the marshes. From the whirlpools, the backwaters, where pike and sheatfish jumped out of the water, large-headed water goblins peered out from among the water lily leaves. And from the thickets of the far bank, from among the fallen trees, forest nymphs and goblins too desired to hear human conversation.

“There's nowhere better, brethren, than here on our planet! The earth is my *Zachiplianka*! And I don't want to exchange these Cossack oaks or the palms of India for the dross of other planets.”

“It's not the same planet which nurtured the human race; the equilibrium of life has been upset on it. Upset by man himself, who brought disharmony. Practical knowledge is outstripping mankind's spiritual evolution — this has given birth to all our misfortunes. While the intellect is making divine discoveries, passions remain at the level of our hairy ancestors.”

“Comrade engineer, I wasn't even aware that you were a sceptic. Perhaps you're also a dogmatist? Let's sing instead!” “Mist in the gully, mist in the valley...” a high-pitched female voice began, and died away, for no one joined in.

“A world of irrational emotions — therein nests the animal. From there stems all criminality, cults and wars. From there will probably rise the specter which will transform our work into atomic slag. If only we could dig down there, to those secret depths! However, the power of common sense does not diffuse into these dark caverns of instinct; the barbarian continues to slumber there... His jolts sometimes make the planet shake.”

“Oh, come on, the system is working well. There are lovers now, just as there have been in the past. The planet lives on, still green, not straying from its orbit.”

“People are threatening to knock it out of orbit.”

“That's old hat. People have thought many a time that the earth was destined for the scrap heap the following day. Various heretic sects have foretold the day and the hour of that self-same Judgment Day. And now the howlers have begun the same old song again, only to a new tune... That mankind will end through self-destruction; only mice and scorpions will remain after the blasts. They caw about it, but the planet is still here, blossoming even more. Mankind has given birth to great scientists, poets, philosophers... Geneticists have developed new flowers and new fruit. Only someone with a liver ailment can think that tomorrow will be a Pompeii. No, there's no Pompeii!”

“The savage forces, they'll still manifest themselves...”

And once more the sullenness was interrupted by a woman's high-pitched voice:

“The mist covers everything from view, the mi-i-ist...”

“At it again? I rang the workshop once for the manager, and this vociferous lass answers. 'How's it going there,' I ask her. And I hear in reply: 'The mist covers everything from view.' Meaning there was so much smoke and dust in the workshop.”

“As long as there will be couples in love on this earth, there's no need to worry.”

The water goblins listened above the dark whirlpools, lying low among the water lily leaves; the nymphs listened too, enchanted by human speech; they heard the voice of a girl by that heathen fire, sweet, trustful!

“Mykoltsia, how nice it is here... How pure this whole forest is... And the whole night is without evil.”

And the boy leaned his head against hers, still wet from a recent swim — his hair scented with the fragrance of water lilies.

“Have you heard our Yelka sing? The Bahlays love melodious types. Come on, future daughter-in-law, begin...!”

Only a green oak do I see, Only a young man do I see.

The singing flowed from a beautiful young soul! Full-voiced, resounding and echoing along the banks so that even the swamp became silent and the night listened with delight.

The song attracted another figure from the water's edge. He appeared as if out of the water. He moored his boat, made his way up the bank — with a spear in one hand — in a wide-brimmed hat, broad-shouldered, and powerful, like a giant from another time. In the light of the fire, his gray mustache glistened in a smile of greeting or a sneer. A live Zaporozhian Cossack! From his bivouac! Materializing from the dreams and apparition of the Great Meadow — coming straight toward them, toward their bright fire. A company commander or a standard-bearer who had lain three hundred years under a gray burial mound in the Samara steppes. But why was he carrying only an oar, instead of a spear? Why was he in that chimerical hat — the hat of a furnaceman from the steel plant?

“I'm not a goblin, don't get scared... I heard our Zachipliankan song, and so I turned around. Her song is like a master's melt...”

They recognized him: the father of all steelworkers, Loboda the veteran.

“Izot Ivanovych, we've been waiting for you since sundown! We've even been to your poorhouse looking for you.”

“Welcome back, Ivan.”

Two people came together by the fire, kissing like father and son.

“Now I know whom we lacked: Izot Ivanovych!”

And once again everyone was sitting around the fire, entreating the old steelworker to join them.

“I'm telling you, I steered toward the song... Wherever I hear singing, I head in that direction. Those are our people too, singing somewhere past Babyne Kolino on Zhuravel Lake.”

“Share your experience of life in paradise with us...”

“Why, I reign supreme. Guarding Skarbne from poachers. Did you see the sign near the entrance to the forest: He who plants a tree will be remembered by his grandchildren. He who breaks one will be cursed by his children. That's my motto.”

“Don't you get bored here, Izot Ivanovych?”

“Why should I get bored? I've got fishing-nets, I'm looked after, and the movies are free. The Zaporozhian lived his last years in monasteries. He spent his youth on horseback, but when the time came, he said good-bye to the brotherhood, and after drinking and carousing for three days in Podol in Kiev, he swept the streets with his baggy pants and squat-danced all the way to Mezhyhiria. Having caroused his fill, it was goodbye earthly life, farewell vanity of vanities — from now on he would only look toward the heavens... Well, and I look at my plant smoke...”

“God bless you, for helping our Yelka out in a difficult moment, getting her a job. Let her work here a while longer, and then we'll take her into the workshop; she'll replenish the ranks of the working class. If she studies, acquires a profession, she may even yet operate an electronic machine...”

The old steelworker got out his pipe and packed it with tobacco.

“Man has this streak in him — the desire to do good. Even if you do someone a tiny bit of good — how light your heart feels, how pure. People once said,” the old man chattered away, “that an invisible being... we'll call him Comrade Spirit, for argument's sake, sat on each shoulder. One sat and prompted a person to do good, and the other whispered into the other ear, nudging him toward evil... Think they don't exist today?” He seemed to smile. “We carry them about even now. Each one of us has both of them on his shoulders, on the left and on the right... Just depends which one you listen to more...”

In the darkness of night, in the web of shadows, it really seemed to those present that these invisible beings were sitting on the old man's shoulders, lurking menacingly from under the brim of his hat.

“There's trouble though, if Comrade Spirit dozes... He isn't allowed to do that... Even be they in militia peak-caps, each must keep guard close to the ear: no sleeping while on duty. We say, there's more fat and meat for each person. That's good, of course. You can't live without this. Well, and when there's a pood of fat available for each soul, if each is bathing in fat, is this, then, the fulfillment of happiness? Will the soul feel no pain then? Would it not need anything more?”

He finished smoking his pipe, then turned to Ivan Bahlay:

“How are things in the world? What kind of melts do they tap?”

THE BHILAI BONFIRE

I've been everywhere, seen all sort of things, but I'll tell you: there's no better country than the land of Truth. It all began the usual way. I was called up and asked: "Comrade Bahlay, will you go?" "Where to?"

"To the country of marvels."

How could one not go!

In Moscow, while we were getting ready, we visited the Mausoleum, looked at the cathedrals of the Kremlin. They too are beautiful!

Our superiors suggested we take no winter clothing, and though there was a fierce snowstorm outside, we boarded the airplane only in our suits and light shoes — after all, we were flying to a land of eternal spring, of eternal summer! The frost was vicious, the wind pierced us to the bone, yet we raced up the steps in high spirits, the engines revved up, and — farewell earth, farewell white winter! En route we had to make one stop, winter put a squeeze on us here too. We landed — night, blizzard all around us. You weren't allowed to remain in the airplane, you had to run to the hotel, whose lights were pointed out to us in the distance. We raced off, but no sooner had we warmed ourselves, back we went, to continue our journey. Again a marathon run across the whole airfield to our liner. But they wouldn't let us board the plane, the doors were locked, there were no pilots.

With us Ukrainian steelworkers there was also a large group of oil workers from somewhere in Bashkiria, with their families, and children; their children were lightly-dressed too — after all, they were off to the tropics. We huddled together under the wing in our jackets, encircling the small children, to shield them at least a little from the wind. We danced about on the spot and, to be sure, praised our government service. Any other time, we would have probably caught pneumonia, but here we escaped with simple chills, nobody even got a head cold — that's what it means to be in flight, to have one's nerves in one's fist.

In any case, we were soon flying over the Himalayas — the glitter of snows, the dazzle of the heavens, the purity of eternity.

Farewell to you all: you, my wife, and you, children, and you, workers from the "Marten," my dear "martens." Farewell to you too, bureaucrats; we won't see you for some time now. We're flying to a place where you'll never be, where it really is like on another planet, with only ore in the ground, and one starts from scratch with everything else.

What did we know about India? It is considered a country of contemplation, but for us it was to become a country of deeds, of concerted efforts, of the first most difficult melts.

A night spent in Delhi; the heavy smell of roses coming from the balcony all night, along streets in the morning — orchestras, drummers in leopard skins (there was a procession to celebrate some festival), heavy infantry on battle elephants... And after this, we're on the road again, and, finally, the tropics. The sweet aroma of tropical flowers unknown to us, cicadas rattling away like machine-guns, black-eyed beggar children in rags swooping down on us from all sides:

"Baksheesh! Baksheesh!"

Back home it was still winter, but here it was sultry, just like in an oven. When boarding a bus, don't touch any metal — you'll burn yourself!

And so we began our life on this brown, almost red earth, in the very heart of their most arid state. I should tell you how, in our ignorance, we tried to eat corn flakes with forks, or how we amazed them with our baggy trousers. They amazed us with certain things too. The first thing which struck us was that the plant was open on all sides, completely unfenced! Eventually it was fenced, a check booth was installed, just like at home. Next to the open-hearth furnace, below the work area, there was a market! They cooked and fried things on the go there, selling peas, and bananas; everyone was chewing on some leaf. Cows wandered among the people — you see that everywhere over there. And there's the caste system, of course. If he's a boss — he won't take any tools in his hands; there are lower people for that. The contractor is an important man there; he draws up the work contracts himself, hires people himself, without a personnel office. Once they've done the job, he shoves a rupee in their teeth and pockets the rest. Human labor is cheap there. You see machinery standing idle and women carrying soil in baskets on their heads. And there's also the fact that they all pray. Before beginning his shift, he will prostrate himself and pray toward the sun. But all these things are trivial. The main thing is that we launched into the work confidently and soon became friends with the locals.

I had an apprentice called Rangar, a family man; his oldest daughter was eight; he kept praising her all the time.

Once I said to him in jest:

“Rangar, you've got a daughter, and I've a son of the same age... Perhaps we could arrange a marriage?”

I made a joke, but he took it seriously:

“Let's Mister Ivan! She is just as white as your people!”

And he invited me to his home. He lived simply, modestly, without any luxuries. Many of them have dwellings consisting of four sticks covered by a mat roof. Still, he treated me to some coffee and put his daughter on display. She was a beauty; no two ways about it, but she was far from white! Like a Gypsy girl!”

“Agreed, I said. She'll make a fine daughter-in-law. We'll be relatives.”

And after this he really treated me as if I were kin: complete trust, frankness and sincerity.

But Taratuta didn't like this for some reason.

“Why do you keep hanging around with these black-skins?” he asked me, when I returned from Rangars' place.

The word grated on me; where had he picked it up? I said nothing. But before going to bed, after we had turned on the ceiling fan, Taratuta said to me again:

“Offended? Drop it, Ivan. What friendship can there be with baksheeshniks?”

“They're kind to me, and I'm kind to them in return.”

“Think they know what it is to be kind? The English taught them to understand one thing: the fist... And, they're ready to gyp us at every step.”

Sure the English weren't too fond of them; the locals couldn't go to the movies; this brew isn't for you. But we showed them free films, and though they understood nothing, they came with their families, bringing even their infants — the women carry them around on their backs in a cloth tied in a knot.

“You are insensitive when it comes to people, Semen,” I said.

“Well go ahead, fraternize with them.”

“I'll do just that.”

“I can't even stand the smell of them,” he said.

He was referring to the Indians' practice of putting coconut oil on their hair. And the heat was so bad, that sometimes the oil became rancid. Not everyone there was able to afford conditioners.

“You should live under their conditions for a while, Taratuta,” I said, “I'd be interested to see how you would smell then. They invite you here as a human being, pay you more than their own people.”

“The Soviet Union pays me,” Taratuta growled back. “I didn't take the job to fraternize with them. Unkind? I don't intend to be kind to everyone... A person is kindest to himself.”

We never came to an understanding with him. Nevertheless, when Taratuta's birthday came up, the boys and I decided to celebrate it. As a memento from his fellow workers, we gave the birthday boy a present: a table lamp with a base in the form of the Taj Mahal. Beautifully Grafted from white nephrite — there are a lot of good craftsmen for such things. We gave him the present and had some fun. And a few days later we saw a neighboring baksheeshnik selling this lamp with the Taj Mahal. We couldn't believe our eyes: where had he gotten it? It turned out the birthday boy had pawned it off to him. We were insulted by this. All right, the fellow was saving for a Volga; he wanted to get an export Volga on his return to the Soviet Union, but to act this way... in my opinion, that Volga can go to hell, if that's how it has to be gotten!

“Listen, Semen,” I said to him, when we left the plant after our shift, “why did you fly here from over the Himalayas?”

“For the same reason as you: to earn a rupee.”

“That's not what I came for.”

“Well, you, of course, came to lend a brotherly hand. But I ask you, for what 'God-bless-you' are we building them this metal combine? Combines for this lot, Aswan Dams for others... Have we no place to invest it back home? Haven't we enough patched-up clothes at home? How long must we remain everyone's white Negroes? First provide me, a hard-working Soviet citizen, with any old jeep, then you can be generous to others at my expense.”

“I look at it differently,” I said. “Our help is probably more valued, because it does not come from an overabundance from surplus funds.”

We got to talking about the lamp, which had shed a new light on Taratuta. He didn't even deny it: yes, he had given it to the baksheeshnik to resell.

“Every rupee is dear to me now. See, I'm only smoking Chaar-Minar — Chaar-Minar, meaning 'Four Minarets,' are their cheapest cigarettes — and you come to me with your Taj Mahal. What do I need it for? It's better to convert it into hard currency.”

“You traded our friendship and steelworker's honor cheaply.”

Taratuta had to be examined before the district committee. As it turned out, this ugly story with the lamp was only the tip of the iceberg. Our Taratuta had got in with the baksheeshniks, secretly doing all kinds of business with them. One day he'd dupe the baksheeshniks; the next day he'd be duped himself — they usually had the upper hand, being businessmen. And obviously one can't build friendship on such dealings.

They came out with a resolution: he was to clear out of there within twenty-four hours. So this junk dealer would no longer foul the colony of Soviet specialists!

That very day they sent him back.

And a few days later our Indian brethren and we put a new furnace into action. When we were starting it up, it was very hard; the heat was tortuous. You worked dripping wet the whole time, suffocating — we had to work in an oxygen-isolating apparatus.

At last the first melt was tapped; everyone was overjoyed. A metal no one had yet seen here poured forth, and past it — right across the workshop floor! — wandered their sacred cows. Sedately, majestically, without any fear, they walked past the ladle trolleys, glowing from the metal poured into them. They walked through, consecrated the place, and left. And don't you touch them; the Indians ask you to leave them alone. There was a crowd of people — it was a wonder, the first open-hearth furnace, the youngsters crept right up to the furnace — we had to push them away: the furnace was new, we were afraid it might gas our little Indians.

We stood with Rangar and watched the fiery lava fill the ladles in two streams, going into one ladle and then into the other.

Rangar's eyes filled with tears. Emotional, he asked me how one could tell which was the slag, and which the pure metal, for both streams seemed identical.

“Where there are no sparks, Rangar, that's the slag. Only pure metal produces those glittering constellations when it is being poured... Slag doesn't spark, understand?”

He liked that.

“I'll remember that well, Mister Ivan: slag doesn't spark. Only pure metal sparks.”

Tribes came from the forests and the mountains with amateur performances, the men wearing some kind of horns, the women heavily adorned... Later we visited them; they organized dances right beside the bus... Slowly things got going. The main thing was done: the Indian metal was flowing! You got up in the morning, came to work, did the rounds of the furnaces, checked the ladles, the mixture yard, the presence of slag cups. In other words, you did everything necessary as a Soviet expert. For though I left here as an ordinary steelmaker, I assumed the functions of shift supervisor there. Everything you once taught us here, Izot Ivanovych — it all came in useful. It's important not only to explain, but to be able to show them yourself — that's our real task. And I'll tell you the truth; there was no caste system among our boys; they didn't avoid any work. For this they all — down to the last man — respected our steelworkers. The Ukrainian metallurgists are taking over the shift — one could rest easy. If need be, you'd tap the melt yourself; if need be, you'd stopper the tap yourself, grab a rod and push it through, occasionally even stepping in for the apprentice to do his work — for there is no master who hasn't been an apprentice himself once!

We didn't spare ourselves. Sometimes you'd get back from work, wash, sit down for a game of dominoes with the boys or grab a book, and the plant jeep pulls up outside; you're handed a note: “Mister Ivan, please come immediately to the workshop.” You grab your hard hat with the goggles and go back there. There were times when we didn't leave the workshop for eighteen hours at a stretch. Our health didn't let us down, we endured the heat, perhaps because a steelworker's body is heat-resistant, accustomed to any temperature. Even here in our workshop in summer the temperature can rise so high on the platform, you could fry eggs there.

I got used to the sun at its zenith too. You went about by day in a tropical straw hat, and there was no shade cast by your body; that's the kind of sun it was. And it burned fiercely until the monsoon season, the time of such downpours, that it poured as if from ladles. During the monsoon season their contrasts became especially evident. One would hurry to work clad only in shorts; another with an umbrella over his head, and the wealthier came in nylon raincoats.

Meanwhile the future bride of my little Petro was growing. I'd look at her, and right away our native lands floated before me, the azure flash of the Dnipro, and Zachiplianka would appear red with cherries. I'd remember the sunflowers blooming on the collective farms. They have sunflowers there too, but there they are grown only as flowers, as a decorative plant. When I'd see Rangar's daughter dash past the sunflowers in her sari, I'd think: "What do we know about the future and how our children will be living on this earth? Perhaps they really will not want to know borders, barriers, and one day these sharp Indian eyes will see our Ukrainian sky and the brown smoke over our factories at night? Perhaps an Indian girl will appear on our Vesela, with her love, her songs and dances, and the gentle waters of Skarbne will touch those tanned feet, washed by the Ganges in childhood."

In our free time we visited our Indian friends, not only Rangar; we also had invitations from others, because even though they were a poor people, not well-off at all, they were hospitable: they loved it when guests stopped by. And besides, several of their steelmakers were married to our Zaporozhian and Mariupolian girls — they got to know one another when the Indian boys were doing their internships in our steel mills.

"Come for some Ukrainian borsch," they invited us.

And when we got together, we'd at least relax — singing Ukrainian songs to our heart's content. More and more our souls sought the cosiness of home. Sometimes you'd feel so homesick, you wouldn't know what to do.

And then there was the incident that happened to me and created such a disturbance.

It was like this. On one of our free days we set off with the whole colony on an excursion outside the city. There is a big lake there, practically in the jungle. The day passed normally: there was singing, and merriment, and jealousy, because where women are involved, such things were inevitable; it was no secret either, that the state's dry law was broken on that day. But the accusation that others later made, that I had had a bit too much then, was not true. Scotch whiskey was not the reason. Something just came over me, as occasionally happens with people; you feel sad, and you're no longer cheered by the company of others, you feel like getting up and going God knows where.

The lake was enormously wide, bigger than the waters of Skarbne; the contour of the far bank was enticing with its mysteriousness; it was almost blue, hazy, lilac in the distance. Such spaciousness, just like here in the lower reaches of the Dnipro, where it spreads out opposite the village of Viyskove, where our troops crossed it under enemy fire in '43. They crossed it, and you?

"Swim across," something seemed to nudge me.

And I dived in.

In their merrymaking no one noticed my foolish leap.

And some devil seemed to be edging me on and on, to where none of our people had gone before, toward the hazy blueness.

“What's there?” I thought. “What is that shore like from up close?” From this shore it reminded me of a strip of Dnipro shoreline, where the plant children's camps rang out every year, where my Pete was probably playing ball just then. Suddenly I saw everything so vividly — his peeling tanned legs, and scratched arms, and I could hear his juvenile jokes, and it seemed as if we were both examining that craggy rock on which a brass plaque stated that the famous knight Sviatoslav Ihorevych had died there in a battle with the Polovetsians. When the Dnipro rapids were being inundated, this brass plate was moved to higher ground, and it is now located, as you know, on the grounds of the plant's Pioneer camp. All that came to mind and tugged at my soul, and it seemed to me that I was swimming toward my native shore.

Stroke after stroke, slowly, saving my strength, I swam on, only I didn't take one thing into account — that a wind could start up. And it started up, all right, blowing pretty strongly, just like in the evening at home on the Dnipro. Like it or not, now, I had to swim onward, because if I turned back, I thought, I'd get swamped by waves. I kept swimming. To tell you the truth, I'd hoped that it would be closer than this. I've swum the Dnipro as a lad several times, always feeling confident in the water, but here I began to get scared. Perhaps because night was already falling. I was quite a distance from my people, and I had already swum the better half of the lake, and yet the far bank didn't seem to draw closer.

I'll merely tell you that nightfall caught me still in the water. In the tropics it gets dark very fast. I don't know whom to thank: the mighty spirit of some Zaporozhian Cossack which put me to shame in the middle of this lake, or whether it was my son offering a hand from shore; however, I finally reached the far shore! But it was not at all like our Dnipro bank. No rocks, no fragrant steppe. Darkness, undergrowth, and snakes rustling about around me. I don't know whether there really were that many of them, or whether I was just imagining things out of fear. I stood naked in the tropical darkness, not daring to take another step, that rustling shooting at me from all directions; everywhere I could see intertwined balls of snakes. And of course, I remembered about man-eating tigers. I knelt down and looked around, seeking a strong, tall tree, figuring I'd climb it, and though it didn't quite befit a Soviet expert, I'd have to spend this night like a monkey.

I couldn't find a tall tree; they were all like twisted scarecrows. However in the distance, somewhere on the lakeshore, I spotted a fire glimmering! Every human being in the world in such a predicament must feel the same, when he suddenly sees a fire. You don't know what it will bring you, salvation, or perhaps death, who lit the fire and how they will greet you, but for some reason you have faith and trust in it; you're ready to bound off toward it through the night, over the snakes and through the chimerical wickerwork of tropical undergrowth.

I grabbed some branch, and running it over the grass before me like a mower with a scythe, to frighten away the snakes, I began to make my way toward that human glowworm of flame.

They were fishermen. They had a fire going like this one, and were sitting around it, cooking supper. An old man stood out from the group, the leader, his beard gray, like an apostle's.

I don't know, I must have seemed like an alien to them from some other planet — a naked, wild, speechless man, who didn't know a word of Hindi. But what was interesting, was that they

didn't look at me with hostility, but only with amazement, with a desire to understand me, to figure me out, and perhaps help in some way. This is the way people — everywhere, always! — should view one another.

I, of course, began to lament in all the pidgin languages of the world, crying that I had to return to the far shore because they were waiting for me there, searching. I had become lost, detached from my group — like a savage I waved my arms into the darkness of the lake and lamented incoherently, and not quite sensibly. However, strange as it may seem, they understood me. Their leader, the old fisherman, shook his head: it was impossible. It was impossible to swim across the lake, even during the day. So don't rack your brains, young man, don't get in a fever, settle down; and he indicated quite clearly with a gesture: we'll have supper and go to sleep. He even showed me how we would be sleeping, placing our heads on our hands, the sky with its planets and galaxies serving as our blanket.

Our supper was like that of the saints: fish, salt and boiled rice — no additives of civilization.

We were surrounded by luxuriant, strange flora and our fire. In its light I saw enormous leaves, some kind of tropical burdock. After the rice was ready, one of the fishermen went and picked some of those burdock leaves, neatly laid out the leaves according to the number of us present: first he served me, then the old fisherman, then the rest. My spot was nearest the undergrowth, the closest to man-eating tigers, to all those horrors which I kept imagining, and my back itself must have sensed them involuntarily — shivers ran up and down it from time to time. And though I didn't want to show my inner feelings, the old man noticed the state I was in, more likely sensing than noticing it. The old man nodded almost imperceptibly in the direction of the young men, and they understood him, immediately got up and moved with their leaf serviettes to the other side of me; thus I was now protected by them from all the tigers which had hitherto wandered about in my imagination. It turned out now that I was in the place of honor, beside their chief. Such was our Last Supper.

I ate well in order to regain my strength, because I did not abandon the thought of swimming back in the morning.

And in the hut they provided me with a spot among them, instead of somewhere on the edge, lying me down so tenderly, thoughtfully, and covering me with something against insects. I couldn't sleep. Who were these people? And who was I to them? And why, having met so accidentally and unnaturally, were we like brothers already? There was something primordial and mysterious about them, immeasurably distant from me, these people who had lived on their reddish land since the dawn of history; everything about them was different, and yet at the same time they were very close to me. And though they burned their dead on a pyre, and cured their illnesses by carrying about a small purse of earth placed against their stomachs, and cut their black hair so that their mothers could lay it in temples for their spirits — having pondered all this, I tried to understand them. And what an ancient language they had, and from where were those splinters of similarity between Sanskrit and our languages, all having the common words *maty* and *khlib* — mother and bread? The migration of nomadic tribes? Some kind of unity shattered? But why was it shattered? This doesn't seem convincing to me. Sometimes a fantastic supposition seems more plausible — that all of us arrived here from distant planets, disgorged

here in the blackness of the past with a single ancient language, with an ancient human unity, which we subsequently lost, and have been unable to regain since.

Various such thoughts clouded my mind. That's the kind of effect that country of marvels had on me. And though there seemed nothing special about the way they treated me, back there even that seemed special to me. They know nothing about you, see you for the first time, and you are accepted by them like a friend. Or maybe this is what it should be like between all people of the world? And of course I also thought about our people, about the participants of the outing, for whom I had caused so much worry, unpleasantness and alarm. A Party member! A person has disappeared! One of the steel-workers has vanished! Drowned, or lost, or vanished somewhere? In any case, he was gone! The embassy had to be notified immediately! For such an incident many a person would be questioned, the heat would be put on someone so bad that he would find himself back in the Soviet Union, before he had time to turn around! I was plagued by remorse, my conscience tormented me about my comrades. A passing mood, something enters your foolish head, and without thinking about anyone, you set off just like that into the blue, like a boy. A serious man, but you succumbed to an uncontrollable devil, enticed by the unknown, the freedom of the elements.

And yet that devil didn't stop even here, nor would he subside completely, touching you playfully from time to time: things had turned out well after all! To set off like that into the dreamy unmeasured azure distance! You pushed and pushed, and made it across! Once, the Zaporozhian Cossacks went on their boats to visit the Turks, while you raced across Indian lakes without a visa, with sweeping strokes. You will be held accountable for this. You should bow your head, await penance. Such things didn't pass without punishment. You breathed in the expanses, pitted your strength against the elements, against the enigmatic primordial world, and now you'll pit your strength against the Soviet's just deserts prescribed for such misconduct.

The night was long; I thought the sun would never rise, but rise it did! It was bright, just like ours. Rolled right out from under a bush, growing in a pile of red fire-coals, the upper edge already beginning to glisten. Previously I had not noticed, but here I noticed for some reason, sensed what an event the rising of the sun was, the appearance of the luminary after the darkness of night. For the first time I understood why they worshiped it, why they bowed toward the rising sun. I wanted to bow before the luminary myself, to greet the day.

We left the hut and the cold fire; my friends set out with me around the lake. The old chief strode before me, his legs extremely thin, ribs pushing out, skin burned and peeling, and he paced along, knitting a net on the go and singing something to himself in his Hindi. I've seen people under various circumstances; I love to watch our steelworkers, any old rollerman standing in his workplace, on a platform, in his stiff work-clothes, glistening with black sweat and glowing red snakes charging past his feet, and he seems to grab at them playfully with his tongs — once! — and he throws them over like some fakir, a snake charmer. The steelworker knows how to stand there. The nerves one has to have, the eyesight, what a musical ear is needed to achieve that perfection of every movement, that visible ease of work. He stands there only ten, maybe fifteen minutes, but how he stands there! What dignity there is in his every movement! That was a person one could stare at. But even this bare-legged old chief walking beside you so easily and

knitting a net on the go, skillfully wrapping it around his elbow and still singing merrily — this too was a person one could admire!

We walked through marshy terrain, again infested with snakes, over silty land, between enormous anthills — I haven't seen anything like it in my life! We crossed creeks, streams, until we finally met them — our people!

Some were overjoyed, others furious.

“Here he is, the hero! Spoiled the whole excursion for us!” one woman shouted at me, whose henpecked husband had been continually immortalizing her with his camera in front of every Buddha. “We didn't sleep all night because of him, searching with torches!”

“Do you at least know where you've been?” one of our chiefs carped at me. “You stole off all the way to the tribesmen! There are only tribes there!”

I felt genuinely contrite, excused myself as best I could, because it really turned out that I had acted like the worst kind of egotist. Because of me one of the buses had been left behind, a lot of people hadn't rested and were late for work; for what was work, when something like this had happened, when someone had vanished.

They couldn't suppress their annoyance for a long time. A meeting was called that day.

“Ship him back off to the Soviet Union, and be done with it,” insisted the fellow who had kept yelling about the tribes. “Just like Taratuta, like that native baksheeshnik of ours.”

“But he was a baksheeshnik! An extortionist!” the others began to object.

“And Ivan strengthened our friendship with the tribes,” someone joked.

I had to apologize before everyone. For no matter how much I wanted to return home, I did not want a sullied reputation. No!

In the end my comrades stood up for me. Thanks to them I was allowed to remain.

And that day I was back working on the open-hearth furnace.

Thinking about my nocturnal adventure, I realized one thing: one can't build life on suspicion and distrust; one can't live by the dogmas of hatred. People had a need for something greater — the need for unity, support, and brotherhood.

However that chief, the bureaucrat, the poor dogmatist, wasn't satisfied that I gave my word to the meeting, and he called me into his office, telling me behind tightly-closed doors:

“Write!”

“Write what?”

“The reason why you found yourself among the tribes. And also write that this will never happen again. That you'll perform everything well — to the dot over the i!”

I refused to write anything. He didn't have to demand such a thing from me; he could have taken my word for it; besides, he was a compatriot — ours, from Zaporizhia. He should have realized that I wouldn't forget that night as it was. I was guilty in my own eyes, before my comrades, before those tribesmen who sheltered me on the lakeshore and revealed something which would remain with me for the rest of my life.

Chapter XXV

A boat loomed black in the middle of the channel, on a starry stretch of water, and in it sat a hunched figure: Grandpa Nechuiviter, an old steelworker, was guarding his fishnets. According to his documents, he was Izot Loboda, but here he had become Nechuiviter. In the Steelworkers Home the visiting townspeople knew him by this name too: Grandpa Nechuiviter, the terror of poachers, the public overseer of Skarbne. Those who came here to stun fish or to catch them during the spawning season, kept their distance from Nechuiviter. The old man had no fear of them, attacking whole gangs of those louts, and they were forced to retreat before him.

All this land, the marshes and their bounty seemed to belong to him, his sovereign possessions, left to him by someone as an inheritance. Those who found themselves here for the first time could wander about not knowing whether this was Skarbne before them, or Samarchuk, or Vovcha, or some other channel. They would be enchanted and frightened by the backwaters with picturesque banks, estuaries, small bogs, lakes overgrown with reeds so dense one couldn't push a boat through them. Beyond them would be more forest, and through it meandered another strange river, dark from the depth of water, steeped in roots and aquatic flora, which soaked in it throughout the summer; trees lay there for months, toppled by a storm into the middle of the river. It didn't seem very deep, but dip down the longest oar — you wouldn't touch bottom.

Nechuiviter had a habit of getting up before dawn, when gray mists still spread over the waters and the dew was like water in the lowlands, because that was the best time to gather medicinal herbs. Nechuiviter had helped many an ailing person in the Home; he knew where to find these herbs and roots. The secrets of nature were everywhere, you only needed to identify them. But they had to be gathered before sunrise, when the herbs were still bathed in dew, then they were clean, sterile, as the medics said. As for roots, they needed to be unearthed so that they wouldn't see the sun either. You dug them up and threw them straight into a sack, and then spread them out in a dark attic, and under no circumstances should they be washed. For when you washed them, you washed away all the power of the root — nature had its laws. Even a chick wouldn't hatch from an egg which had been previously washed. You looked at some inconspicuous weed, but there was power in it, and someone had called it tsar-grass or tsar-oak. There had been a knowledgeable man from whom Nechuiviter had heard these secrets: the man was no more, but his knowledge remained.

At night it was very quiet in his, Nechuiviter's, kingdom. Only three forests away did one hear the infrequent clatter of someone's motor-boat, clattering a while and becoming silent; and only when the townspeople arrived on Saturday did the whole marsh sing — life without song, could that be life? You sailed along in your boat, and heard a song drift along, rising, and then spilling out, spreading among the sonorous waters, gradually melting, dying away.

Where an inexperienced person would have become lost, Nechuiviter could find his way even in the dark — blindfolded if need be. There were no unknowns for him here; at any time he could recognize every turn in the river, the smallest backwater, every fallen tree in the river was like a sign to him, a comrade.

Before throwing empty food tins about or tossing empty bottles at tree trunks, parties of people would sometimes look around, to see if Grandpa Nechuiviter, the public overseer of all this Skarbne bounty, wasn't somewhere close by. He would come, scold them, shame them. And

not because he was an overseer, but because his soul ached to see the modern barbarian destroy and befoul this world of beauty. Where some of the oaks had been chopped down during the German occupation, oak saplings now grew, and beside them stood acacias, playing the role of a foreman, forcing them to grow faster. With the help of these foremen the oaks had risen well; Grandpa Nechuiviter had written a protective sign himself and erected it near those plantations: “He who plants will be remembered by his grandchildren...”

But not only the poachers knew their way here. People like Bahlay's friends came here too, nice people, dear to him. They had sung to their hearts' content and were quiet now that their bonfire died down, and the night dew had probably already fallen on their knapsacks. They settled down, obviously asleep, only those two in love still loomed on the bank, sitting together, their heads bowed, snuggled up to each other, over the serene waters of Skarbne. To those in love the night was without sleep, their stars did not sleep.

Old Nechuiviter sat in his boat on the water, waiting for his catch, or perhaps dozing. No, he wasn't dozing, thoughts scurried like dreams before him. He saw himself a young man, a shock-haired youth on an armored train in the steppes. On one of those red proletarian armored trains, which his class had forged for itself behind the plant wall. How brightly the sun shone then, how the world spread out before him! He raced after those for whom Yahor Katraty drove machine-gun carts — only later did the blast furnace reconcile them. Together they erected the third and fourth furnaces — the amount of metal they gave the country! When everyone was being purged in the plants, they had their sights set on Yahor too, Izot stood up for him then. For that his good friend Yahor didn't forget him even now, having visited him only several days ago; they sat together in his Skarbne hut, chatted about the past (oh, the rogues that Makhno had... And where had they disappeared? Vanished into thin air); they remembered Prapirny too, who had died the previous year from that disease for which there was no tsar-grass, and if someone found a cure for it, he would have a gold monument erected to him.

All sorts of things lurked about in his head. In this modern world of worry and breakneck pace, no one thought more thoughts than night watchmen. When the earth fell asleep and the whirlpool of daily problems died away, and the qualified philosophers were all asleep — the night watchmen, these unknown thinkers of the night, took up their positions, rowing out onto the ocean of their reflections, and the stars placed before them their eternal questions.

The young kept asking: where is happiness? What is happiness! They demanded it like a scholarship: give us happiness! If only it could be caught in these trammels and handed to them. Again he remembered Bahlay's company, near whose fire he had recently been — they were conscientious people, they became knights of labor and life. “But what kind of knights are we?” “What kind of craftsmen?” Nechuiviter divided everyone who came to Skarbne into artisans and poachers. “One builds, the other ruins...” He counted his son among the latter. Why was he like that? How had it happened that a vigilant worker had nurtured such a poacher? If you listened to him, he was doing everything for the better: the cathedral had to be torn down, because it prevented the building of a market for the working people. The mists — they bred mosquitoes. This wrecker had a ready explanation for everything, and what an explanation too! Was all this inevitable in life? Just as there was a termite for wood, corrosion for metal, cockle for wheat, then perhaps opposite the artisan there had to be the poacher? It had always been that way, but

would it always remain that way? Could it be that everywhere the builder went, the wrecker had to follow continually too, like a shadow? He was still wet behind the ears, yet he hastened to tear down the old, to clear a place for some obscure new structure. "Life is such, Dad, that one has to take it by storm! Only then can one achieve anything..." And he went ahead. But always uprooting things, for some reason. "If you throw your father's life into obscurity, son, your own life will fall fruitlessly, stalling at your feet... He who can't value the past is a cripple. Man has been given a memory reaching into the ages, for that reason he is man."

Nechuiviter heard a rumor that his son was to be promoted soon. It happened that such types went a long way. "Don't take him," his lips whispered of their own accord, as if warning someone. "Don't take him, don't take him, even though he is my kith and kin..." Without noticing it, the old man began to address with his whispers, the banks and murky depths where the fish were dozing. "Because if you take him, he'll tear down many a cathedral for you, build more than one stinking sea, stinking so much, that you won't know what to do with it." And yet he would have liked to see him. To see him come running back as an affectionate small child or a high-spirited youth, the cheerful Volodka whom everyone knew at the steel plant. He would come, bringing his children, and say: "Meet your grandchildren. Dad. Now you'll come to live with us, I'll take you away from here." Perhaps he would still come one day? And again an involuntary whisper floated across to the banks, to the dark boundaries of Skarbne: "Value the day — that's what I'll tell you, young people! Value the moment, the second. The smoldering embers are soon extinguished. Only the spark ignites new flame! Live in such a way, young people, so as to have time to leave a decent mark behind. Remember that we all must face the judgment of the future, and on that Judgment Day no Genghis Khan or Tamerlane, none of the great destroyers will be worth more than the lowest bricklayer. Leave your mark... Not a sprat tin left lying in Skarbne, not a pile of trash, but something to bring cheer to people both near and far. Cherish the moment, my sons, cherish the moment! Because dams are planned, everything in this world is planned — death alone isn't planned."

He became silent again, lowering his head onto his chest, looking asleep, but he was awake. At his age people slept very little. Nonexistence was drawing closer, eternal separation, and yet occasionally it seemed to Nechuiviter that, summoning his last strength, he would return to this reality again one day, to this Skarbne, to these herbs, to the waters, to give no peace to the despicable poachers and to take at least one more look, even from afar, at his plant Titan, at Zachiplianka's cathedral, at the brown skies over the town. That was his sky! He had made it that brown, for he had built those blast furnaces and open-hearth furnaces, had smelted rivers of metal no smaller than this Skarbne. And if the time came for him to say his final farewell, to tell everyone: I'm leaving the blast furnaces to you, giving you Skarbne as an inheritance, then he would ask to be buried not in the poorhouse plot, but on the highest of the steppe mounds, so that from one side the green oaks of Skarbne could rustle to him, and he could see the spears of his native plant stacks towering over the Dnipro. So that he could see them from there too. And what would it be like there? Would there be anything at all? Or was that world of nonexistence, that infinity that he would join, was it all only cold, cold and gloom?

Some car rumbled into the forest and fell silent — a late visitor had arrived. The lovers continued to sit on the bank; he heard Yelka's laughter; Mykola was probably telling the girl something funny.

Nechuiviter for some reason kept remembering what he had heard about the customs of those distant islanders from the student this evening by the bonfire. It had happened somewhere in Oceania, on some island. When the colonizers landed on the island their power and that of the islanders was unevenly matched, weapons provided the advantage — the new arrivals had firearms, while the islanders had only ancient bamboo spears. And even then, when the defenders of this flowering island could see that their demise was inevitable, they rallied one last time, came out with their whole tribe for that death struggle — it was called sacred in their language. The invaders saw a tragically vivid sight before them, wild like the sunny gaiety of spring: a festively dressed crowd of men, women and children, all armed only with spears, moving against their muskets and cannons, all dressed in flowing picturesque clothes, glistening with jewelry, moving forward in ritual dance, singing their best songs in a sacredly rebellious ecstasy. They went to battle without any fear, defending themselves from the invasion with the only thing they had left — a flash of beauty!

“Now, they were some people,” Nechuiviter thought, and suddenly his chest was pierced by a fiery spear; the whole sky burst into bloody red, and in the surprise of a terrible pain the old man felt himself sinking heavily into some sticky red mist.

An oar slipped into the water, but everything else was as before. The two lovers sat on the shore nestled together, and spells were cast before their eyes: starry water. A boat drifted past quietly, without a splash. A dozing fisherman stood out black in it, like a lighthouse. It looked like Nechuiviter. They called out. No reply.

“Can't hear,” Yelka smiled. “A real Nechuiviter...”

The boat continued to drift freely, without oars, the current bore it gently along, eventually to carry it into open water lavishly lit by the plants' fires. Open space, freedom... Only in the morning, by the light of the powerful morning star, which spread out its crimson sails to cover half the sky, would the Dnipro fishermen come across this oarless, drifting dugout quite by chance. Coming across it, they would see to their amazement that it wasn't being carried along empty by the current: it bore its dead master, someone's wise gray life. They would bring him back, notify everyone, and the veteran would be buried with the whole plant present, and at the behest of the workers the plant dispensary would be named in his honor; but meanwhile Nechuiviter floated along through the silence of the night, lying on his back, shrouded in the most delicate muslin mists of his Skarbne. The old steelworker drifted toward his son, toward the city, the plants, the glow of his blast furnaces, toward those undying black cathedrals of his life! Along crimson waters, under a crimson sky swirling with the brown smoke of the steel plants, which gradually drew closer, covering him, enveloping him in the crimson mantle of eternity. In it, in that mantle, he would float off to unknown shores, on that last, most mysterious journey, from which no one has yet returned.

Chapter XXVI

The party was made up of the kind of people who are always the last to leave a restaurant.

"They were the last to leave the sinking ship,' that's how they will write about us one day," the redhead said.

After the stuffiness and heavy vapors of the restaurant, the air outside on the street seemed to make them more intoxicated. The shapely-legged, tall redhead swayed about on high heels and leaned on Taratuta's shoulder.

"Give me a cigarette."

"Boy," Taratuta turned to one of the party, who had not yet passed his teens, "did you hear? The lady desires a cigarette."

The boy immediately pulled out a pack of "Shypka" and offered her one:

"Here you are, Zhanna..."

"My first husband," the redhead said, as she languidly lifted the cigarette to her lips, "Volodymyr Izotovych Loboda, would even call me Zhannusia, — he could be very sentimental on occasions. Just as a first husband should."

"He was the first and who will be the last?" asked the thug with the bulldog face and the rolled-up sleeves, a ponderous hulk of a man with a round head sunk low into his shoulders. A small lock of hair adhered to his forehead. A violet heart pierced by an arrow was tattooed on his hairy arm. "It's too bad there are no academicians in our town," he remarked, "you could then become the widow of an academician."

"Where shall we go," said the other woman who was not a redhead, but just as tall and long-legged. She had glossy black hair, and dark eyelashes. Her eyes were made up to look oriental, like those of a geisha girl.

"Let's go onto the prospect and scare the vigilantes," Taratuta suggested.

"I don't like the prospect," the redhead said capriciously. "Neon lights spoil the complexion of my face. I want to go to the Dnipro, to take a swim!"

Swimming at night is good for you," the bulldog said. He adjusted the transistor radio which hung from his shoulder and linked arms with the geisha girl.

The party set off slowly down the prospect. The neon light of the shop windows bathed them in a ghostly blue glow. From the "Window of Satire" somebody was arguing with a raised bottle.

"No, no, anything but that!" the geisha girl exclaimed, stopping in front of the "Window of Satire." Among the figures of drunkards and hooligans sketched in India ink was the photograph of a young girl, quite disheveled, obviously taken in the sobering-up station. "The poor girl! They paste you up and write underneath: a parasite without known occupation. And there you are for the whole town to jeer at."

"Certainly they wouldn't spell out," added Zhanna, "why I ran away from my distinguished Loboda, how he ruined my life, how devastated the spring of my soul..."

"Let's get out of here," the frightened geisha girl said and instinctively covered her face with her hand: she probably thought that she too could be photographed and her picture displayed on the prospect, alongside the speculators and drunkards.

"Don't worry, Era," the bulldog calmed her, "El senor is with you..."

They kept on walking, — ambling along with an air of boredom and nonchalance. Behind them another party of late-night stragglers trudged along. They made boisterous remarks about the shapely legs of Taratuta's female companions, until he turned around and confronted them:

“Are you looking for trouble, citizens? Be careful, I've had my lumps too.”

And the bulldog added:

“We're celebrating today. Observing the second month's anniversary of the return of one of our group from a place where noses freeze off the faces of young punks like you. So don't mess up our jazzy night of neon bliss. I advise you to keep your distance.”

With that the other party fell back without further argument. Perhaps some of them had even recognized the stocky fellow as the famous Obruch, who had only recently returned from the Kolyma region, which was, as he put it, his “native” land and “rich in mineral resources.” They had taken him from his job at the slagblock plant, and after his sentence was up he returned right back there.

“And why is Vitia so quiet?” said Era. “After all, the banquet was in his honor.”

“My boy, it's all to your credit,” Taratuta said as he wrapped his heavy arms around the boy. “It's damned decent of you to blow your first take-home pay. Consider yourself initiated into adult society.”

“Vitia, you an adult?” Zhanna burst out laughing, looking at the young pipefitter. “No longer just an errand boy in the factory? And I'll bet you're already looking for a woman to love.”

“But before you do, you must attend my husband's lecture,” the dark-haired geisha girl added with a smile. “Lectures on love are his trump card. When he gives them, you're enthralled! It even makes old ladies cry.”

“How novel,” Obruch said, “While the esteemed lecturer is off somewhere instructing the working masses how they should make love, his youthful wife, our beautiful Era, spends her evening in a restaurant in the pleasant company of hardworking citizens... Well, to each his own, as the philosopher put it.”

“He's not teaching anyone anything.” Taratuta remarked. “No one pays any attention to old sayings about love. By now he must have rattled off his stuff and collected his money, sleeping now the deep sleep of one on a fat travel allowance.”

“My poor lecturer,” the geisha girl became sentimental, “there you are somewhere in a provincial hotel... provincial bedbugs are biting you... Oh my dearest! You lecture to everyone on love, but you yourself never learned how to love. You'll die without ever knowing what love is!” And swinging her hips as she continued to walk, she fell to reciting: “It was autumn. A dreary, atomic rain fell. Two people were sitting on a porch remembering distant, pre-atomic springs.' That's how atomic novels will begin.” She suddenly stopped and exclaimed: “Could it be that these beautiful nights are the last? Could it be that for the degenerate generations of the future we will be nothing but antiquity?”

The electric clock on the corner pointed to the late hour.

In a sudden attack of curiosity, the redhead began to pester Taratuta why they had sent him back from India before his tour of duty was up.

“Hasn't anyone told you,” Obruch explained for his friend, “his only sin was bringing black-skinned girls back to the hotel.”

“Are the black-skins better than us? Tell me, are they really better?”

Their attention was diverted by the display window of a boutique which featured wedding gowns. A mannequin was wearing a starched wedding gown of frothy muslin...

“To wear a white gown like that, and then — to the altar!” the former Mrs. Loboda exclaimed, “that was my dream. And at night, there must be candles and organ music. In Riga I once heard organ music in a cathedral. It was so... so... I never heard anything more beautiful than that in my whole life and I never will again. Bach's fugues! Elope with me, Taratuta! Take me away! Let's get married in the cathedral!”

“Only sparrows get married there,” Taratuta muttered. “And besides, you're divorced, and they don't marry divorcees there.”

Obruch remarked that he could not understand why this cathedral had not been done away with yet. It didn't need much — a box of T.N.T... and Taratuta also thought of tanks. He said there had been times just after the war when the young tank drivers knew how to do business at night. They would leave the city as if on night maneuvers and it just so happened, they would accidentally nudge a little village shop, and then — “Help yourselves, brothers! There's plenty to eat and drink.”

“Did you make all this up yourself?” Zhanna smiled.

Taratuta only frowned, as if to say, “believe it or not.” And glancing at the display window he asked the boy in a chummy tone:

“Vitia, my green buddy, tell me, don't you sometimes have the urge to... to step up to a window like this and smash it with something heavy?”

“What for?” the youth retorted, surprised.

“Oh, just for the hell of it. Just one blow and it's all shattered... Don't tell me you never have the urge?”

“No!”

“Then you don't have it in you... that ferment of freedom,” Obruch said, peeved, “that absolute freedom. You're still a calf.”

“Don't call me names,” the boy bristled, offended.

“I said it as a friend. I would never swear at a man I didn't respect. You'll just have to forgive your leader.”

“For a leader you've a pretty difficult nature,” Era commented.

“I wouldn't deny that. It's just like the guy who sent a petition to his factory collective: 'Inasmuch as I have a very bad character and can not get along with my cell mates, I would like to ask you to let me out on probation...’”

Near the movie house the party was pushed aside by a stream of people pouring out after the last show. The excited crowd flowed past them. It was made up for the most part of young people, many of whom were probably from their factory. The “boy” ducked instinctively into the shadows of the trees; apparently he did not want to be seen in the company of drunks. Drifting past, some of the girl factory workers were sharing their impressions of the film, their eyes still glistening with tears. Others continued to pour out of the theater, dispersing in all directions down the already deserted prospect. Obruch put his arms around the shoulders of the ladies. He stood nonchalantly between his beauties and watched the crowd move by. He spoke almost

sentimentally about the many people in the world who had never done time in prison, who had never felt the presence of the guards behind their backs, and who had never heard their sentences pronounced.

The crowd subsided and Vitia withdrew from the shadows, pale from the heavy drinking and blue in the neon light. He stepped out and immediately retreated, because a workers patrol was passing by, and in it were two girl pipe fitters from his workshop. They walked in step, with an air of dignity, perhaps flaunting their red arm bands a little. The factory girls cast hard glances in the direction of Obruch's company as they passed by, their heels striking the pavement in unison. The men in the patrol appeared even sterner as they paraded past in their well-ironed pants. Obruch objected that the whole thing was too idyllic, that these female watchdogs could not even imagine the number of hardened criminals bunking down now, after lights-out, on their plank beds all over the strict-regimen camps.

Vitia asked if it were true that a felon would never betray another and that many among them were fearless.

"But who's there to fear?" the bulldog made a wry face. "There's no God, only the law. Just don't run afoul of the statutes..."

Outside the grocery store they were joined by another fellow, hair unkempt, face unshaven, wearing a crumpled beret. Although Obruch didn't know him, the stranger immediately called him an old buddy, showed him a fistful of bills, and asking where he might get a drink, even though he could barely stand on his feet.

"Who the hell are you?" Obruch snapped at him. "A cop or something?"

"I could have been a great man," the fellow mumbled, "but as it is, I'm a nobody — just like you."

"And who do you think we are?" the lecturer's wife asked nervously.

"Wild horses of these times," the stranger said, as if sobering up. "Cattle who begin to bellow before the eclipse of the sun... But we have a well-developed intuition for fate — the intuition of an inevitable and prompt end."

"Oh, you're a real sage," Obruch exclaimed, "and I thought you were a run-of-the-mill grafter who couldn't drink his bribes away fast enough — a television repairman or something of the sort."

"I can fix televisions too... and receivers of all kinds. I repair everything in the world. And I know that I'll never finish repairing anything. I even restore cathedrals... That's my crowning glory: a steeplejack restorer."

"That's really fascinating!" Era exclaimed. "So you climb all the way up the spires? Must be quite a view from there!"

"For a hundred miles around... I see everything... where they steal... where the poachers eat their fishbroth. I cast my gaze from the heights beyond the horizons of habitude."

"What about the soul? Can you peer into the depths of the soul?" Zhanna asked caustically.

"Not there. No one can do that. We have glimpsed the nucleus of the atom, penetrated the cosmos, we're piping oil from the ends of the earth. But no one has looked into the depths of the soul, no one! It is darker than night! — a bottomless gloom! Only a mysterious something twinkles there with eternal riddles..."

“What are you — a psycho?” Obruch scrutinized the steeplejack. “Maybe you've escaped from Ihren, from the psychiatric hospital?”

“You scare me!” Era recoiled.

“Don't be scared,” Obruch placated her. “If he gets nasty, I'll handle him. I'm planning to go to Ihren with a club to take care of the violent ones. They say it's a well-paid job.”

Taratuta sized up the steeplejack suspiciously:

“You haven't hurt your head, have you? You didn't fall off the cathedral?”

“You are all shell-shocked,” the steeplejack said as he sized up the group. “Maybe I am too... I didn't fight in the war, but life dealt me plenty of hard blows... So where can we go for a drink then?”

Once again a roll of bills appeared in his fist. The roll must have made an impression on Taratuta, for he remembered that the restaurant at the train station was open twenty-four hours a day.

“It's on me,” said the steeplejack, and they all headed off to the train station.

But they never reached the restaurant. A new cherry-red “Volga” parked in the square opposite the station caught Zhanna's eye. She amused herself by plucking its protruding nickel antenna with a twang. No one was in the car. Taratuta pressed his fat ring finger against the button of the door handle and the door opened easily, almost automatically. The key was in the ignition, the radio was chattering softly. The owner must have left the car for a minute, rushing off to meet someone at the train station.

“The idiot, forgot his keys,” Taratuta said as he grabbed hold of them. “What shall we do to teach him a lesson?”

Zhanna was the first to slip into the car:

“Off to the beach! Let's go for a swim! Get behind the wheel, Taratuta!”

Hurriedly, with muffled guffaws, they all squeezed into the car. The steeplejack climbed in too and flopped himself drunkenly into the lap of one of the women; he was indignantly shoved into a corner. Only the boy Vitia didn't get in. He stood quite pale, frightened by their prank.

“Come on, Vitia, hurry up!” Era's voice called from the car. “There's room for us all. You can sit on my lap.”

The boy did not budge. Horror crept into his bulging, expressive eyes.

“Well?” Taratuta barked from the driver's seat.

“Are you deaf or something?” Obruch spat out angrily over Taratuta's shoulder.

“I won't go!” the boy backed away, throwing up his hands, as if defending himself: “I won't go! I won't go!”

And he ran away from the car, as if he had lost his senses.

The cherry-red “Volga” was seen in the factory district that night, where it sped along dark alleys, jumped streetcar tracks, and then raced over the bridge at breakneck speed to the left bank, sliding under the viaduct and narrowly missing a cyclist out late at night. It sped down the river drive to the pumping station, veered around crazily and, without stopping, headed toward the outlying villages. Along the way it passed the Gothic spires of the poplars, the weeping willows on the dam, and the boys and girls under them. The couples stood entwined in embraces, as if straight out of the eighteenth century... Startled, the lovers shielded their eyes from the car's

headlights. Spraying them with exhaust fumes, the car sped madly on along factory roads in the general direction of the slag piles.

“Faster! Faster!” an almost hysterical female screech filled the car.

“Where to?”

“Into the steppe, where the horses neigh!”

“Take what you can from life! That's what my Loboda taught me! By hook or by crook!”

Zhanna ripped off a curtain, stuck her hand out of the window, and white cloth fluttered in the wind.

“This is no white flag of surrender,” she raved, intoxicated with speed. “This is the banner of our war against boredom!”

“Let's fly!” Era joined in deliriously. “Off into the unknown, towards absolute freedom!”

The steeplejack shook Taratuta by the shoulder:

“Let me drive. I can take it up to a hundred!”

Taratuta shook free of his grip:

“Leave me alone or I'll toss you out!”

“I'll take it up to a hundred and twenty...”

They wound up in some blind alley — nothing but piles of slag, factory waste, and the stench of acid. They couldn't go any further. Taratuta and Obruch climbed out to take a look around, and discussed something in whispers.

“Where have you brought me?” the geisha girl whimpered from the car. “What will my mother-in-law say? What am I doing out with you? Why am I like this? I don't understand myself.” Anxiously she searched the darkness with her eyes, the ethereal folds of night, listening for something. “Will only this dark chaos survive — cold dead canyons, in place of bustling, wonderful cities...?”

“That's enough,” Zhanna, completely disheveled, interrupted her. “I believe in universal salvation. Knights in shining armor will appear to save us. They will come, won't they?”

“No one will come,” the steeplejack growled. “We are at the end of a cycle. Descended from the Pithecanthropus, we have run our course, and now we shall disappear, engulfed by eternity. We have spent ourselves... It would have been better to have been born in the Paleozoic age, to have hunted mammoths.”

And already they could see mammoths on the slag piles. The shadows of prehistoric giants grazing amid the fantasy of the night, nibbling away at the tops of bushes. Munch! Munch! — and they are gone. A late moon creeps out from behind the horizon, out of the depths of the night. Appearing, above the horizon — red, big, and evil — not a moon for lovers — a portent of doom.

“Fun! I want to have fun!” Zhanna shrieked, overcoming the awe and fear generated by this forlorn landscape. “Taratuta, Obruch! Come here!” she cried to the two shadows. “We're scared!”

The two hopped back into the car and reversed, driving out of the blind alley.

“To the cathedral!” the steeplejack suggested. “I'll show you real heights.”

Everybody liked the idea. They wanted new diversions, new kicks and thrills. They wanted to shake up the villages, to speed off somewhere, to give themselves free reign. Squeezed

between the women and constantly pummeled by them, the steeplejack rummaged about in the glove compartment.

“Ah! We've got additional supplies here!” he exclaimed. “A bottle of brake fluid.”

Obruch grabbed the bottle from him and put a light to it:

“Cognac!”

Uncorking it, they began to guzzle from the bottle. The women also got a good swig. Everyone felt boisterous.

“To the cathedral! To the cathedral!” Zhanna shrieked. “Let's pray away our sins.”

Soon the car was speeding along Shyroka Street. The trees here had grown big, becoming entwined overhead, forming a green tunnel, through which the car flew. The moon flashed through openings in the branches like a red ball and looking absolutely ominous against the black sky.

Tearing out into the square, the “Volga” pulled up outside the cathedral. The party spilled out of the car.

“I'll have the gates open for you right away,” said the steeplejack, and after fidgeting with the lock, he actually managed to unlock the heavy portals, throwing them wide open.

The party tumbled into the cathedral. The women peered fearfully through the dusk.

“Where's the organ?”

Obruch turned on his transistor radio and for the first time in the history of the cathedral the sounds of jazz reverberated wildly under its high arches. The place resounded with a creepy echo of emptiness. The shadows came alive and began to turn round and round.

“Look, there's something there,” Era screamed, pressing herself against Obruch, and stared into darkness. “Animals! Some kind of zoo.”

Having grown accustomed to the darkness, everybody now noticed the boar heads grinning from the walls, wriggling their tusks about.

“Let's get out of here! I'm scared!” Era grabbed at Obruch. But he came up to the nearest boar and began to snarl at it, teasing the animal like a clown, increasing the volume of the jazz music.

Taratuta struck a match to light a cigarette and a naked figure appeared in the twilight before him — nailed to a cross, with a crown of thorns, and streams of blood issuing from under a layer of dust. From the heights of the central cupola hung a thick chain, from which a chandelier had once been suspended. The chandelier had disappeared long ago, but the chain remained. Stretching up the steeplejack tried to reach it, so that he could swing about on it. But he was too short, and jumped about comically, struggling, unable to get hold of the chain remained. Stretching, the steeplejack tried to reach it so that he could swing about on it. But he was too short, and threatening; their eyes had grown accustomed to seeing the boars, which now grinned almost domestically from the shadows. The jazz beat beckoned the people to dance, they sought madness, oblivion.

As if seized by a fit of wild, joyous fury, Zhanna crouched and began to do the twist. The others were swept up by the wave too — and the orgy began.

Yelka and Mykola Bahlay wandered around Raduta until very late that night, over familiar places, along those crimson lakes whose glow never faded. Yelka had met her Uncle Yahor at

Nechuiviter's funeral, came to an understanding with him, and promised to visit him; and now they were returning from this visit.

They were coming back from Raduta when everything around them was asleep, and nothing disturbed Zachiplianka's slumber. Only after they had reached the cathedral did the jazz beat and the screams of the wild orgy come blasting through the wide-open doors. Savage invaders from another planet had forced their way into the cathedral, screeching like monkeys, guffawing drunkenly, yelling profanities. Mykola didn't even have time to remember Zachiplianka's story of how Professor Yavornytsky had driven Makhno's followers from the cathedral; he didn't even pause to consider the possible consequences of his actions, only calling to Yelka to wait; with three swift bounds he dashed through the open doors into the whirl of savage, cynical ugliness which was desecrating his beautiful poem.

And Yelka had no time to stop him either, and perhaps if she had been able to, she would not have stopped him. She heard the screeching suddenly stop, heard a strange voice, overflowing with hatred:

“What do you want? Get out of here!”

And then she saw shaggy prehistoric figures flying headfirst out of the cathedral. She heard disgusting shouts, obscene drunk curses, and then something flashed through the air; the glint of a knife blade flashed momentarily in the darkness of the cathedral. Yelka became petrified: on the threshold of the cathedral, confronting Mykola with a hooligan's Finnish blade, a stocky, black and violent death stood at the threshold.

With all her strength, all her being, she screamed in the direction of Zachiplianka, towards the villages:

“Help!”

When Yelka ran up to Mykola, he was already lying face down on the threshold of the cathedral. Kneeling over him, she heard his blood gurgling, and in her despair, in a delirium of despondency, she stammered, as if pleading for his life:

“I love you! I love you! I love you!”

A commotion developed around the car. Once again curses were heard, the motor wouldn't start — they had lost the keys somewhere in the cathedral.

Yelka's screams roused all of Zachiplianka. Nobody went back to sleep in the village until the morning. Bushes snapped behind those escaping through the orchards, and now these were no longer orchards of moon-lit magic, of mist. It was not a night without evil, but a night of pursuit, of gnashing teeth, of wringing hands.

Having sent Mykola off in an ambulance, the people of Zachiplianka did not disperse; swarming around the cathedral, they waited for the militia. They were silent. Only the teacher, Khoma Romanovych, retorted in the direction of the villains:

“These are people without a cathedral in their soul... And he is like that biblical youth who drove the defilers from the temple.”

And again there was silence. A jagged moon hung red over the village. It brought to mind all of life's beginnings and ends.

* * *

The sinewy acacias of Zachiplianka await their new blossoms at night. Someone's love awaits the silvery acacia nights. Each morning the veteran plant awakens the villages with its whistles. Its powerful whistles seem to emanate from the depths, they move the people and disturb them. And the factory workers forge ahead and pursue their eternal course — from shift to shift, night and day. Zachiplianka is again enveloped in routine, in its eternal stream. The factory, home, and the factory again. And it is as if this routine were the daily staple of Zachiplianka's existence, something indestructible, something enduring in the sinewy tenacity of this life.

Zachiplianka awaits her Bahlay. She awaits him like a mother who worriedly picks fruits for her son's pie of rich Petrykivka cherries, which drenched in dark-red hue, blaze brightly in the sun. She awaits him with the glare of her lake, around which the small children play unconcerned, all these young friends of Mykola who on visiting days, bring packages for him to the plant hospital, and who are so proud of him, convinced that although he never wore the red armband of the guards, there is, nevertheless, no one braver than him among all the patrolmen in this plant district. In the hospital yard the children sometimes see Yavor's Yelka, a swarthy girl, with a white kerchief. She arrives sorrowful, sits down on the bench under the linden tree, sitting there for hours before the windows of the ward, waiting for the doctors to allow Bahlay to get out of bed, so he can finally look out at her from some window, pale and anemic. Every day these concrete sun-baked hospital buildings and dazzling windows of the ward see Bahlay's bride; she comes in the morning to stand watch by her beloved. And in pensive sadness she will wait as long as she has to, even after the fragrant linden tree sheds its blossoms and the wind blows away its leaves...

In the evenings Ivan and Virunka come out to sit on their historical bench. They sit there under the stars of Zachiplianka, an ideal couple. And whenever Mykola's name comes up in conversation, the older Bahlay can find no explanation for this drama, which he considers senseless, and he cannot contain his indignation: even back there, among the tribes where he wandered that one time, no one pulled a knife on him, but these home-grown savages attacked him here. The plant smelts steel day and night — but is it for Finnish blades? Five knife wounds, one of them only a millimeter from the heart; the boy almost lost his life. The surgeons really had to work to save him, and it could have been all in vain but for his youthful constitution. The wounds had been sewn up and were beginning to heal gradually.

Sometimes the Bahlays remain sitting outside their yard until very late. Ivan has changed, returning a different person, and Virunka senses this. Especially when he begins telling her about the mysterious snow-white Taj Mahal, which is adorned in one place with a black stone, and that stone sings. Not everyone can hear this marvel, but if one listens hard, it really does sing, although barely audibly. That's how the ancient Indian masters set it up. And even today their secret has not been divined — why does it sing? And both of them listen involuntarily to their own cathedral, towering over the square, its tops dissolving in the darkness of the sky — doesn't it also sing sometimes, softly and from afar?

The cathedral is silent.

One cannot see the peeling paint, or the rust on its domes — the night hides all the traumas of time.

All around it passions rage, lances are broken in daily battles fought between builders and poachers, but it stands, thinking its eternal thoughts. What does it think about? Everything has passed before it, as before a witness and a judge. Only recently, it seems, carts creaked past it, loaded with sheaves of grain; the revolution boiled in this cathedral square, its bells sounded the alarm, summoning the villagers to meetings, alerting them to fires, waking the surrounding areas sometimes joyously, sometimes anxiously, their heavy clappers striking the cast bronze containing a dash of silver. Thousands of female captives, their eyes wide open, looked at it one last time with an expression of suffering and yearning as they were being driven past the cathedral on their way to Germany. It heard sobs, and cries of hope, the iron rumble of war, and that even more terrible silence... Now the bicycles of the work shifts stream inaudibly past it every day and every night.

The cathedral sees all things and has seen everything. Fairs seethed around it in a rich babble, rising like the surf, tempestuous in red gaiety, bobbing with gray hats, showing off fancy sleighs. Did it all disappear just like that? Or does the cathedral retain the echo of life immortal, the flash of Cossack spears, the dissonant shouts of market days, the jokes of the Gypsies, the quarrels of salted-and-dried-fish vendors, the neighing of horses disturbed by their sale, the teasing laughter of happy tavern girls, the nocturnal whispers of lovers, starry embraces and conceptions. It is brimming, brimming with everything, wrapped in the darkness of night, reaching the stars with the helmets of its steep domes. And the steel boils away in the furnaces, and when the melt is tapped, when they pour the slag behind the Dnipro and the whole sky fills with a glowing flood, etching clarity into the tops of the orchards, revealing the smallest leaf — then the cathedral emerges from the darkness of the night too. And while the skies glow crimson and breathe over the Dnipro valley, the cathedral stands in the center of the factory village, illuminated, with wind in its sails, immaculate, just as it looked in the past, when it first rose here, invoked from the soul of its wise and mighty craftsmen.

1963-1967

Explanatory Notes

Chapter I

- (p. 2) Zachiplianka — the name is derived from the verb “zachipliaty” which means to hook, to catch, to engage, to touch, to sting, to wound, to provoke, to tease. Its reflexive form “zachipliatysia” means to get stuck on, or, to woo somebody. The topographical data provided by Honchar in the novel suggests that Zachiplianka is a suburb of the industrial city of Dnipropetrovsk (formerly Katerynoslav).
- (p. 2) Zaporozhian Cossacks — Ukrainian military host within the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth. The Cossacks lived in the steppes south of the Dnipro's rapids during the 16-18th centuries. They defended the southern border of Ukraine against Tatars and Turks. The compound adjective consists of the prefix “za” meaning “beyond” and “porohy” meaning “rapids.”
- (p. 2) Sich is the name of the Zaporozhian Cossack fortress destroyed by Catherine II. The term is also used in American Science fiction; see “Sietch” in the Dune series by Frank Herbert, who defines it as a “place of assembly in time of danger.”
- (p. 2) Dnipro — The Ukrainian name of the river Dnieper (also Dniepr).
- (p. 8) Yaroslavna — Princess Euphrosina, daughter of Prince Yaroslav of Galicia (d. 1187), the wife of Prince Ihor of Novhorod-Siversk; the heroine of the 12th century epic *The Lay of Ihor's Campaign*. Like Penelope in Homer's *Odyssey*, Yaroslavna faithfully awaited her husband's return.

Chapter II

- (p. 14) Solingen — a West German industrial city famous for its iron and steel.
- (p. 15) Azovsteel — a large Soviet metallurgical complex located in the city of Zhdanov (Mariupol).
- (p. 19) “And without any hesitation he became familiar” — In the original Ukrainian text, the lecturer switches here from the formal you form “Vy” to the familiar “ty,” in addition to the obvious implications of his actions.
- (p. 21) Huliaypole — town in the Zaporizhzhia region; the name itself connotes the idea of unbridled freedom, “huliyay” meaning “wander” and “pole” meaning “field.”
- (p. 25) Olena Bat'kivna — used as patronimic if the father's name is unknown, “bat'ko” meaning “father.” Of special significance in this context because Yelka (nickname for Olena) does not know her father, and the driver is cruelly reminding her of this fact.
- (p. 25) iconostasis — a wall of icons dividing the sanctuary from the main body of the church, i.e., separating the sacred from the secular.

Chapter IV

- (p. 33) kvass — a beverage made from rye bread or flour and malt.
- (p. 34) Makhno — Nestor Ivanovych Makhno (1884-1934), leader of powerful military units which operated in southern Ukraine 1918-1921. His history is related in Chapter XVIII.

Chapter V

- (p. 38) Komsomol — Communist Youth League.
- (p. 41) Moskvych — and Volga (p. 151) are Soviet automobiles.
- (p. 41) Comrade Bublyk — the name has a humorous connotation: In Ukrainian, “bublyk” is the diminutive term for a ring-shaped pretzel-like roll or small bun.
- (p. 42) Potemkian — Prince Grigori Aleksandrovich Potemkin (1739-1791), Russian statesman and favorite of Catherine II. Known for building village sets along the Dnipro to deceive visiting foreign dignitaries.
- (p. 43) “Armenian Radio” — Also known as “Radio Yerevan” — not a radio station as such, but a term denoting satirical rumours which abound in the Soviet Union and are attributed to the Armenians, who are known for their wit.

Chapter VI

- (p. 46) Oswiecim — Auschwitz.

- (p. 46) Vesela Street — “Vesela” in Ukrainian means “joyous” hence the irony of Honchar's description: “the whole of Vesela Street became a street of wailing and cursing.” Cf. p. 119: “This was Vesela Street! They had to make merry once they had gotten together!”
- (p. 54) Comrade Sergo — see note for Ordzhonikidze, Ch. XI, p. 83.
- Yavornytsky — Dmytro Ivanovych Yavornytsky, also Evernytsky (1855-1940), Ukrainian historian, archaeologist, ethnographer.
- (p. 54) Cossack Mamay — legendary figure of a Cossack-bandurist in Ukrainian popular culture, art, and literature of the 17th — 19th centuries.
- (p. 55) Skrypnyk — Mykola Oleksiyovych Skrypnyk (1872-1933), People's Commissar of Education in Ukraine 1927-1933; a proponent of National Communism.
- (p. 60) crimson Cossackdom — The color crimson was the official color of the Cossacks. Prominent motif in Honchar's novel echoing the glorious past of Cossack Ukraine. Cf. p. 286: “enveloping him in the crimson mantle of eternity.”
- (p. 60) Vovchyi bilet — an entry in the personal identification papers connoting political untrustworthiness, i.e., political blackballing.

Chapter VIII

- (p.66) Both had been invited to a name day party — in Ukrainian tradition, a person's feastday is much more important than the birthday.

Chapter IX

- (p. 71) Great Meadow — historical name of the steppe-area where Sich was located. The name dates back to the 16th century.
- (p. 72) Shevchenko — Taras Shevchenko (1814-1861) highly revered bard of Ukraine, whose poetic work was a fiery call for the national and social liberation of the Ukrainian people. “One builds, another destroys” is taken from his poem “The Dream” (Son, 1844). See also p. 170.

Chapter X

- (p. 76) Patorzhynsky — Ivan Serhiyovych Patorzhynsky (1896-1960), famous Ukrainian opera singer.
- (p. 77) Aeneid — A Ukrainianized imitation of Virgil's epic by Ivan Kotliarevsky (1769-1838). A mock-heroic poem in which Aeneas and his companions are depicted as wandering 'Cossacks in search of a new home. First literary work published in modern Ukrainian.
- (p. 78) Eluard — Paul Eluard (1895-1952), French poet associated with Dadaism and Surrealism.
- (p. 80) chumak — Chumaks were Ukrainian waggoners and traders during the 17th to the mid 19th centuries. Their lifestyle is reflected in Ukrainian folklore and literature.
- (p. 80) Lomonosov — Mikhail Vasileyich Lomonosov (1711-1765), Russian scholar and writer.

Chapter XI

- (p. 82) Ordzhonikidze — Grigori K. Ordzhonikidze (1886-1937), a Georgian. Important member of the Communist Party, associate of Stalin and Lenin. Known as Sergo (see p. 55).
- (p. 89) HES — Hydro-Electric (power) station; see previous page in the text.
- (p. 91) Rublev — Andrej Rublev (c. 1360-1430), Moscovite artist and iconographer.

Chapter XII

- (p. 93) Bohdan Khmelnytsky — Bohdan (Zenovyi) Khmelnytsky (d. 1657), Hetman of the Ukrainian Cossacks, founder of the independent Ukrainian Cossack-Hetman State following the war of liberation against Poland.

Chapter XVIII

- (p. 128) Khortytsia — Island in the Dnipro near the HES; historically part of the Zaporozhian Sich, now flooded.
- (p. 132) Bakunin — Mikhail Alexandrovich Bakunin (1814-1876), father of Russian anarchism.

Chapter XX

(p. 147) coloretkas, bliss rooms... new rituals — references to the Soviet marriage ceremony.

(p. 150) Roaming Lips — Taratuta is a modern-day version of Makhno (see p. 152: “Well there's no glory in my past, no tradition to uphold... Except perhaps for some tattered, debauched Huliaypolian fame”). The Ukrainian original for his nickname “Roaming lips” is “Huliay-huba,” which suggests Taratuta's kinship with the Huliaypolian (“Roaming-fields”) anarchist.

(p. 152) Slavuta — legendary poetical name for Dnipro.

Chapter XXIII

(p. 166) Nechuiiviter — Literally “don't hear the wind” hence Yelka's comment on p. 188: “Can't hear... A real Nechuiiviter.” Also a species of plant of medicinal value.