

Marko Vovchok
After Finishing School
(Instytutka)
Translated by Oles Kovalenko¹

To T. H. Shevchenko

I

I'm a rather cheerful sort of person and some people think I'm without a care in the world. As it is, I'm cheerful by nature — I was born with it, you might say. When I got a beating — something I hate to remember — I'd often break down and start crying. But then I'd cool off a bit — and soon I'd be laughing instead. All some people do is weep over their troubles. Not me: I've been trying to laugh mine away, mostly. Anyway, if I were to cry on account of every one of my troubles, I would have long wept my eyes out. I never knew my father and mother, as I grew up an orphan, among serfs. Even if the work wasn't too hard, nobody really cared if I was hungry or cold or alive at all.

I was taken into the house soon after I'd turned ten. The old mistress was quite all right — rather harmless, that is. This was probably because she was already so ancient she could barely drag her feet along. And she always mumbled, so that half the time you couldn't even make out what she wanted

to say. Anyhow, she was no longer fit enough to care much for beating her serfs. All day long, she'd sit around on the porches, and as night drew near, she'd do plenty of moaning and groaning. Of course, she was given to some fancy tricks in her time, but then again, that's something one !has to stop, sooner or later.

At least, when I was there, life was already pretty quiet in the household. The only trouble was that we weren't allowed to take a step outside the yard. The mistress would only let us go out to church on some big holiday once in a while, but Sundays were out.

“No!” she'd grumble. “You'll get out of hand altogether. Yours isn't yet the right age to think of God. You've got time enough — you aren't going to die tomorrow.”

So we'd sit in the servants' room, day after day, working, and there was this silence all about that made you think the whole place was under a spell or something. We'd only hear the mistress moan once in a while, or one of us girls would whisper something in another's ear or sigh with boredom. Did that work bore us! It nearly bored us to death, but there was nothing we could do. At least we didn't get beaten ten times a day like we heard serfs did in other places.

At times, though, we suddenly got merry for no reason at all. And then we felt so happy our hearts sang with joy. If only we could, we would have sung too, making it so loud it could be heard all over the village. We never did though. All we did was just make faces at each other till we were all bursting to laugh. And we'd wink at one another, or tie someone's braid to the back of the chair; and sometimes one of us would spring to her feet and make like she was dancing — on tiptoe so the mistress wouldn't hear — twisting, twirling and all, arms waving and flailing up and down. Well, we sure did\ lots of things!

The old mistress had no family, except a granddaughter, and she was studying in Kiev at a finishing-school, whatever it was. She often wrote letters which the old lady read and reread, and cried and laughed over them every day. Finally, she wrote to say it was time somebody came and

1. Marko Vovchok. *After Finishing School. A Story*. Translated by Oles Kovalenko. Kyiv: Dnipro, 1983.

took her back home. Mother of God! The whole household became a beehive: on to wash, whitewash and clean everything! The young mistress was coming!

The old gal seemed to perk up immediately. She shuffled in and out of the rooms, peering at the road through every window and sending us all the way beyond the village to keep

watch. This was just fine with us! We never had it so good as during that week when we were watching out for the granddaughter. Each time we were sent out we'd go flying. It was so good to see the steppe and the lovely fields. The green steppe seemed to be running away from us, before our eyes, far and wide. It was like a breath of freedom!

We picked flowers and made garlands and put them on, like we were brides, and kept them on until we got back to the yard. But just before entering, we'd pull them off and throw them away. It was really such a pity, having to throw flowers away!

II

Finally she arrived. And she was certainly a good-looking girl, too! I wondered who it was in the family she took after. Anyway, she was so nice to look at, it's no use trying to put it in words. The old lady just hugged her and wouldn't let go, kissing and fondling her. Then she showed her all around the house, explaining everything; and the young one just kept turning her head to all sides and casting curious looks all around.

Then the old mistress seated her granddaughter at the table, asking all kinds of questions and crying and beaming with pleasure all at the same time. Every so often she urged the girl to help herself: "Would you like to have some of this?" and "Won't you take a sip of that?" She loaded the table with all sorts of food and- drink, took a seat herself, and just gazed at her granddaughter, like she couldn't get her fill of her. And the girl was putting it away — fast and clean, like a sparrow. We peered at them from behind the door and listened to what the young one was saying, trying to make out what was on her mind and just what kind of person she was.

"So how was it, living all on your own, my child?" asked the old one. "You haven't told me anything yet."

"Granny! There's really nothing to tell. It was all so boring!"

"Did they make you study much? What have they taught you, anyway?"

"Do you really want to hear about it? Well, Granny, over here you've been free to live as you please, so you can't even imagine what I've gone through with all that learning. Best never mention it to me again!"

"Oh, my poor girl! Of course — it must've been pretty hard on you, what with all those strangers... Then why didn't you write immediately to tell me-all about it?"

"Oh, no, Granny! Impossible! They would've found out in no time at all."

"My poor little child! Tell me how those horrible people treated you."

"Oh, Granny! It was sheer torture having to study all those silly things. We had to learn this and that, and God knows what else — just drill and drill all the time! Now, why do I need to know how the stars travel across the sky or how people across the sea live or if they live well over there or not? All I really need to know is how to show off in company."

"But there is something that makes people want to study, my jewel. Take our neighbors' girls here. Practically penniless, all of them, but they, too, twitter in French."

"Granny," the girl chirped up. "Why, I certainly did my best to learn French and music, me too! Same with dancing. Because one really needs it — that's why. That's something everybody pays attention to, and anybody can appreciate. All the rest is just trashy stuff you -learn and forget anyway. And it made the whole lot of us sick — both those who taught it and those who had to listen. I just wasted plenty of time that way."

"What do you mean? Was their teaching so bad?"

"That's exactly what I mean — bad, boring and useless! Getting paid was all the teachers seemed to care about, and all we wanted was to be finished and out as fast as we could. Is something wrong, Granny?"

"The thing is, child, they've been charging good money for teaching you — and doing a bad job of it. What if you forget all of it?"

"Granny, what a silly thing to say. God forbid! If I entertain and go out myself, there's no way I will forget music or dancing, or even my French. As to all that foreign nonsense, I let it in at one ear and out at the other, anyway, so I don't really know any of it. Drat it all!"

"Now what if somebody comes up and asks you how those stars travel in the sky or something? People might talk when they see you don't know what you studied."

"Oh, that? Now, Granny, I've only let you in on it, but anyone else will never find me out — not if they question me all day long! I'll fool anybody — and make them regret they ever asked. That's the way, Granny! Would you care to hear me sing? Listen!"

She sang, and her voice lilted in a silvery sort of way. The old lady rushed to kiss her: "My darling! My joy!" And the girl fawned on her and pleaded, "Please, Granny, buy me some fine dresses, the latest fashions!"

"Don't worry about that, my girl. You'll have everything! I'll make sure you look like a princess."

We all looked at one another: the little granddaughter had surely learned quite a lot — mostly how to fool people, so it seemed.

III

"Come along, child," the old mistress said. "I want you to choose yourself a maid." She led the way towards the door, so we sprang away from it and huddled up in the corner.

"Here's your young mistress," she told us. "Kiss her hand."

The girl barely looked at us as she held out two fingers for us to kiss. The grandmother pointed to each of us in turn, telling her this was Hanna, that was Varka, there was Domakha...

"My goodness!" the granddaughter cried out, jerking suddenly and clapping her hands. "Can any of you do my hair or lace me up properly?" She stood and stared at us, her hands clasped together.

"Why?" the old one said. "They can, dearie. If not, we'll teach them how."

"What's your name?" the young mistress asked me. But she didn't even wait for my answer. She turned to her grandmother and said, "I'll take this one."

"All right, whoever you wish, darling. Let it be her, then." Speaking to me: "Mind you, Ustina,

serve the young mistress well and she'll be good to you."

"Enough, Granny, let's be going," the girl broke in. She made a face and turned away, leaning to one side, like she wanted to bolt, and even screwed up her eyes — exactly like a cat when one blows smoke into its face.

"Well, child," the old one said* "We'd better start putting some sense into her, because they're all so silly. I'll tell her something, you'll tell her something else, and she might make a decent maid yet."

"I wish they'd been taught before, Granny, so that we wouldn't have to worry about that now. You should've sent one to town for

training." That was how they spoke about us, like we were horses or something.

"Well, Ustina," the girls pitied me. "What's going to happen with you? She certainly doesn't look too kind."

"So what, girls?" I told them. "It's no use crying over spilled milk. There's no getting away from fate, either. Let's wait and see."

But I, too, started thinking.

IV

That same evening they called me, "Come undress the young mistress!"

I went in, and she was standing in front of the mirror, already pulling things off herself.

"Where have you been loafing about? Come on, undress me and make it quick, because I want to go to sleep!"

So I began undressing her, and she kept shouting all the while for me to be quick about it. Then she flung herself onto the bed.

"Come take off my shoes! Do you have any idea of how to go about curling my hair?" she asked.

"No, I guess not."

"My God! Oh, goodness! How stupid~ you are! Get out!"

The girls were waiting for me.

"How was it, Ustina? Just tell us, what's she like, dear?"

What was there to tell them?

"I'm stupid, girls," I said, "because I don't know how to curl hair."

V

Next morning, the young mistress got up quite early, washed, dressed and ran all over the estate — buildings, garden and all. She was in a gay, exuberant mood. "At last I'm at home!" she kept saying. "At home! And I'm free to do anything!"

She kissed and played up to her grandmother, asking: "Will we be visiting somebody soon, Granny? And when will we start entertaining?"

"Just let me gaze my fill of you first."

"But I can't wait, Granny! I've been dreaming of getting back home and starting, to celebrate — with plenty of people, music, dancing and all. Dear Granny, please!"

"All right, child. Just let's dress up before I start inviting people."

And they went right ahead with that dressing-up business. The old lady had some chests pulled out of the storeroom, got out lengths of velvet and fine linen, cut them out and had the young one try them on. And it all delighted the girl — her cheeks glowed and she was well-nigh jumping for joy. She rushed from one mirror to another, and even when she took a glass of water, she'd peer into it, admiring herself. Now she'd braid her hair, then she'd unbraid it and plait ribbons into it or fix some flowers....

"Oh; Granny!" she'd cry out. "When will I get a really nice satin dress to wear?"

"As soon as you're engaged, my girl," the old one would tell her. "I'll marry you to a prince or a count — somebody really rich."

The young mistress would then stick out her chin and prance about like she was already a real princess, no less.

All they seemed to talk about was princes and noble gentlemen. They'd picture themselves all set for the wedding, living in brick buildings and riding about in fancy carriages, fine horses and all. They'd just rattle on and on until the young one sighed:

"That's just talk, Granny. And we haven't yet had anybody over."

"Just wait a bit — we'll be having so many guests there won't be room enough for all."

VI

Sure enough, they came running — so many of them you'd think the house was on fire. As some were leaving, more would be riding over. We had neither sleep nor rest, running off our feet, waiting on them and bustling about from early morning until late at night. At times we had such a crowd that it seemed just about everybody was there. The whole lot were roaring with laughter, dancing away, eating and drinking, all of them so carefree and well-fed. There were some ladies who could barely squeeze through the door. The house swarmed with young gentlemen, who hung all around our young mistress, droning like bumblebees. And she never missed a one of them, either, speaking to some, nodding to others, gently asking one about his health or complaining to another that she felt sad and strange without him around. Or else, she'd pick out one of them and seat him next to her, like he was a relative or something. The poor fellows were so taken with her that they wasted away, pining for her and making fools of themselves. They kept coming back, day after day, each trying to get there before the others and looking askance at their rivals. You couldn't tell whether they had all really taken such a fancy to her, or simply had nothing better to do; only they kept coming in droves. But then again, what fun could they get out of life? What could they do to make their youth taste sweeter? Eat fine food, drink good drinks, play around a little — perhaps. But what else was there?

VII

Bit by bit, the young mistress molded the entire household to her own ways.

"Stop knitting, Granny, for God's sake! Don't you have anybody to do it for you? What if somebody comes and finds you fiddling with that stocking, as though you were a servant or something?"

"It's boring without something to occupy yourself with, child," the old one would say.

"Try reading a book then."

"How can I read? My eyes aren't good enough for that any more."

"Then go for a walk, only don't knit, Granny dear. You might as well put out my eye with that needle!"

"All right, just don't fret!"

She stopped knitting and was bored. Her granddaughter made her wear a bonnet with bright ribbons, and seated her in an armchair in the middle of the room. When guests popped in, there she was, ready to greet them.

The old mistress already had a foot in the grave, and her granddaughter kept rejoicing, "Everything's so nice here, so really nice and grand and splendid, isn't it, Granny!"

VIII

And she set us to embroidering. She herself taught us how to go about it, popping in every so often to make sure everybody was working. She even frowned and grumbled whenever we went to lunch. She got nastier by the day, and soon she was berating us in a real way. Sometimes she'd also pinch or slap one of us, not very hard at first and blushing as red as a rose, like she was ashamed. That was because she was still new to it; but as soon as she settled down and made herself at home, we found out just how rough life could get.

Whenever I came to dress her she'd make it hot as hell for me. I braided her hair and she'd say it was all wrong. So I had to undo it and braid it once more, only to be told it was wrong again. She'd spend the whole morning at it, pinching me, poking me, scratching me with a comb, pricking me with hairpins and throwing water over me — you name it, she'd try just about everything to hurt me. Poor me!

Once we were expecting officers from the regiment stationed in town. The yard had been swept clean the night before, and the house had been tidied up as if for the Easter holidays. Then she sat down to have her hair done. Merciful heavens! I would've sooner carried red-hot coals with my bare hands rather than having to stick it out working on her fair braids. I was this, I was that, I was told to get out of her sight and then to get back in a hurry, and then... Then she just started pushing me and jumping on me. Was I ever frightened! And all the while she kept scolding and cursing me and stamping her feet until suddenly she burst into tears! I shot out of the room and she rushed after me — all the way to the garden. "I'll tear you to pieces! I'll wring your neck, you beast!" I looked back at her and she looked so terrible that my legs sort of gave way. That's when she clutched at my throat with both her hands. They felt cold as snails, her hands did! I wanted to scream, but I just

couldn't find my voice, and then I dropped under this apple-tree and fainted. Cold water brought me to, and I saw the girls clustered all around me, their faces chalk-white. The young mistress was sobbing, sprawled out on a chair, and the old one was standing right over my face, raging at me. She was really breathing fire — she was that mad.

"Look what you've done, you idler! How dare you annoy the young mistress? I'll send you to Siberia! I'll make short work of you!"

She then turned to her granddaughter, trying to calm her down.

"Don't cry, my angel, please! She isn't really worthy of your tears. You might even get sick, God forbid! Look, your little hands are all cold! Enough, calm down! Why did you try and deal with her yourself? If there's anything you don't like, let me handle them." Back to me: "And you, loafer, I'll show you yet!"

I'm not sure why they didn't make things even worse for me, only I didn't get a beating. That was probably because I was pretty sick. Anyway, the old mistress just kicked me once and told the girls to carry me inside. The girls picked me up and carried me in, and once we were in the room, they all sank down around me, crying: "Ustina dear! Who could imagine a worse fate! Oh why do we have to live with such a monster?"

IX

All spring long they fed me on warm milk till I mended a little.

I lay there all alone — everybody was out in the fields, working — and thought to myself, "Oh, Lord, how can one so young also be so wicked?"

It was cool and quiet in the room, the walls were white and mute, and there I was, alone with my thoughts. The wind stirred outside, bending a branch of sweet-smelling lilac down into my window. At noon, a hot beam of sun shot through the room in a bright, quivering ribbon, sending waves of heat through my body. It was stuffy and I felt dozy, but sleep wouldn't come. And all that time I lay there alone, thinking how was I to live on in this world. I was happy — God knows how happy! — when the garden rustled in the wind, the light faded and the rain beat against the ground. Suddenly I heard the patter of footsteps, then noise and laughter, and then a bunch of children burst right into the room, all excited, their faces flushed. They greeted me and shook themselves, sending drops of water flying onto me. Impatiently, they clambered onto the window-sill to see if the rain was going to stop soon, shouting and singing:

Come out, come out, Sun-beaming Shine on grandpa's fields greening, And on granny's strawberries, On the playground lot merry...

As soon as the sun peeped out from behind the clouds, they all cleared out. But for a long time after they were gone, I still seemed to hear their laughter, now in one corner, then in another, like somebody was jingling tiny silver bells.

In the evening, when dusk had already fallen, people would return from the fields, exhausted by the scorching heat and the hard work. Nobody would say a word, except that some would sigh heavily or, perhaps, somebody'd hum a sad, sad song...

Once in a while, one of the household girls would drop in on me: "Ustina, darling!"

"How're you getting on there?" I'd ask her.

"You'd better not ask — it couldn't be worse! Hanna was beaten today, Paraska yesterday, and tomorrow it'll be my turn, for all I know. Oh, dear, what if they see that I'm missing! Well, Ustina, we're really in for trouble."

"Did they ask about me?"

"Sure they did. Why isn't she back at work? Why is she lolling about like some grand lady? That's what they've been saying, if you want to know. Well, I'd better be running. Bye now, Ustina!"

X

One morning I lay there thinking, when Katrya rushed in.

"Come, come quick, Ustina!"

"Come where?"

"Over to the young mistress — and the old one, too. Hurry up, Ustina! The young mistress has been complaining to the old one that you're well enough already and just don't want to work. Come on, let's go!"

"Just how do you want me to go, Katrya? I can't put one foot in front of the other."

"I'll help you along, dear. You'd better try, or they'll make it even worse for you. Now, let's get going!"

• I barely made it to the manor. The young mistress stood at the door, waiting for me.

"Lolling about, are you? Why aren't you back at work? Lazy — that's all that's wrong with you! Just wait — I'll think of something for you, something you've never seen or heard about!"

My God, it was terrible, the way she was screaming! She even lost, her breath yelling at me, pushing me and pulling my sleeve. My goodness! She looked like some wild beast, that pretty little face of hers twisted with rage!

Hearing all the hullabaloo, the old mistress also turned up to give me more of the same. She even mentioned giving me a beating, too. Which was something she had never done to us, thank God, until the young one came back. It was then that we started getting it every day — and crying every day, too. Whenever somebody smiled — which wasn't often — the young one ran right to her grandmother: "Granny, they show no respect for me!" Whenever somebody cried, she'd also complain: "They just don't want to do any work, Granny, and that's all they're really crying about!" A real troublemaker she was, bringing more and more trouble on all of us that way. And the old one got quite furious, punishing us — like she'd suddenly remembered the days when she, too, had been young.

XI

Our only respite was when all those gentlemen came to visit and made the young mistress forget about us for a while. Then she'd come out to them and chirp out in that birds' language, all nice and sweet — why, you wouldn't recognize her! And it was really something to see all those young men swarming around her. One would edge himself to her side, another would be gazing at her from a

corner, a third would be trailing behind at her heels, and somebody else would be making eyes at her from the side. And she'd wriggle among them all like a partridge.

"Which of them is it going to be?" we'd wonder. "The poor fellow has some nasty surprise coming."

At first, the old mistress was quite happy to have all those guests around, but later, as they began quarreling, she must've thought better of it. She now probably wished they'd never come at all, but she couldn't turn them away. So they'd pack the house, and each one was trying to gain the young mistress's favor, but they couldn't stand the sight of one another, and soon started squabbling and bickering, to the point that the old mistress began calling them dogs — behind their backs, of course. Then, when fall was on the way, she found her man at last, and they all scattered away, ashamed of themselves.

XII

The regiment surgeon got to know the young mistress and started calling on her every day. He was a rather regular fellow, quiet and nice to everybody — why, he didn't even look like the other young gentlemen! How did he come to meet her? The young ladies who came to visit us had long been talking about the regiment surgeon: there was a fine fellow indeed, they said, a tall man with a handsome face, a fine mouth, black brows and all — good-looking beyond belief! Only he was said to be pretty proud — that type who wouldn't look at any girl twice, nor talk to any, no matter how you went about him.

Hearing all that, the young mistress often said to her grandmother:

"I wish you'd invite that doctor, Granny — I'd like to have a look at him."

"You shouldn't believe everything those silly chatterboxes have been blabbering, my dear," the old one would say. "A regiment surgeon — big deal! He's poor, penniless! Why should you think of the likes of him?"

"Just let me see him once, Granny. I wonder if he's half as good as he's made out to be?"

"I wish you wouldn't. What if he just tags along? We've got plenty of them hanging around as it is, but not one has proposed as yet. All they do is try to get in one another's way and kick up rows, a plague on 'them!"

The old lady did her best to talk the girl out of it. But her dear little granddaughter wouldn't budge — she was bent on seeing that doctor, and see him she would! So the first time the officers from his regiment turned up for our party, the old mistress had to ask them to tell the doctor he was invited. They agreed promptly. "Of course we'll bring him along," they said.

"And when are you coming back?" the young mistress asked, twisting among them like a fox, and peering into their eyes, "Will that be soon?"

"If you're eager to see us, we could make it as soon as the day after tomorrow," the officers said, nearly jumping for joy. And away they went, happy fools!

XIII

That day, the young mistress really dressed to kill! And the old one scowled and grumbled: "What use do we have for somebody who's poor as a church mouse?" But the girl seemed not to hear all that talk about him being poor, so the old one took it all out on us.

The military came around, but the doctor wasn't with them. "He thanked you for your kind invitation," they said, "but he doesn't have time — not even an hour. He has many patients, and he's been busy treating them."

"Don't push him," the old one said. "Let him treat those patients, God help him."

The young mistress only flushed and bit her lip.

Well, we surely got it, as soon as the guests left. We took the blame for everything!

That same week, the young mistress fell ill — moaning, groaning, screaming and all. The old one got scared and cried, and said to fetch a doctor. The regiment surgeon was pretty good, they said, and he was also the nearest one around, so he was sent for. Meanwhile, the girl dressed in her finest and lay in bed, waiting for him, as pretty as a picture.

He came, looked her over and asked some questions. And she was something to see — arching her neck coyly, and talking soft and sweet, like she was singing. He stayed for about an hour. "I'll call on you tomorrow," he said as he left.

The old one asked something, but she was lost in thought, and just nodded. "What about that doctor? What does he seem like?" the grandmother asked again. The girl started. "Oh, he's proud," she said. "As proud as a grand duke. Just who does he think he is?"

So the poor fellow kept coming to treat her until he fell in love with her. She, too, fell for him. All those young gentlemen immediately caught on and made themselves scarce.

The old mistress was so desperate she nearly knocked her head against the wall, but there was nothing much she could do about it. "Just try getting into our way, Granny, and I'll kill myself!" the young one told her. "And stop that talk! Don't try to make me change my mind — have pity!" So the grandmother stopped trying and just groaned.

XIV

The yard was empty and quiet; no more horses stamping their hooves, no more carriages rolling in and out all the time. The young mistress also got quieter. She didn't scold or beat us, or even complain about us any more. All she did now was sit and think.

Almost as soon as the sun went up in the sky, the doctor would be there, driving his two horses. She'd be watching for him at the window, dressed up, pretty and flushing as red as a rose. He'd run inside, and if one of us chanced to be there, he'd say, "Morning, girl! How's the young mistress?"

Often he stayed the whole day. He'd just sit next to her, never moving more than a foot from her side. The old mistress would peep at them, first out of one door and then out of another, and listen, trying to catch their words. She was terribly annoyed to see them together, but there was no way she could break them up — she was that much afraid of her beloved granddaughter.

Then the doctor proposed. The old mistress wept and grieved mightily:

"Did I hope to marry you to a prince, a wealthy man, a great noble!"

"Oh, my God!" the young one shouted, crying. "If he were rich and a great noble, I wouldn't have waited a minute. I'd have married him long ago. But what can I do if I'm so unlucky? That's my cruel fate!"

"Is there none better?" the old one spoke again, not really insisting, but making it sound like she was simply asking a question.

"To me, there's nobody but him in the whole world — and there won't ever be any better!"

The young mistress became so moody she even lost color and got thinner. The old one was completely at a loss, not sure with which foot to approach her granddaughter. If she so much as dropped a hint that they didn't really have to go ahead with that marriage, the young one would fly into a rage and burst into tears. But when the old mistress wanted to comfort her and started saying things like, "Wait until you get married," that only made the girl curse her fate.

"The Lord has brought this misfortune down on me," she said. "But all I know is I can't help it."

Her sweetheart noticed it all and began worrying.

"What's the matter? Why are you so sad?" he'd ask.

"Well, I'm not, really..."

"Tell me the truth, please," he pleaded, kissing her hand.

"So we're getting married," she said. "But how shall we live? In misery?"

"So that's really what you're worried about, darling? But do we need to be wealthy for our lives to be sweet and happy?"

"Which means you don't think of me at all," she retorted. "How will you like it if somebody comes to visit us and then starts going around, saying, 'Well, those two are counting each penny?'" She cried.

"Well, dear, what do you expect me to do about my being what I am — which is poor? How can I help it? I've never really cared about being rich, though now I wish I possessed all the riches in the world for you to enjoy. But what can I do? I could promise you the moon, but you know I'll never get it!"

And the two would complain to each other on and on.

XV

She did love him in her own way, but it was a bit strange — not exactly the way people usually love. There were all those young ladies, her neighbors, coming to see her every now and then and asking all sorts of questions:

"Is it true that this high hat has fallen in love with you? Has he proposed? Is he jealous? What gifts has he been giving you? Do you do everything he says or is it the other way around?"

"Judge for yourselves," she'd reply with a sly smile. And then she'd start giving them examples.

"Look," she told him once. "Go into town and buy me this and that and make it quick.

You'd better hurry if you don't want me to be angry!" So he went right off and brought everything she'd listed.

"My God, what've you bought all this for? I don't want any of it! Go and exchange them,

because I don't have any use for such things. Where did you dig them up, anyway?" So he had to go back and have it exchanged.

Or else, he was about to drink some water.

"Don't, don't drink that water!"

"Why?"

"I don't want you to — that's why!"

"But I'm thirsty."

"But I don't want you to — can't you hear? I don't want!"

She'd then glance at him or smile in some way that made him obey. But when she was annoyed, she'd turn her back on him and refuse to speak to him. Then he'd apologize and plead, and she'd nearly bring him to tears that way.

Those girls who came to visit were wondering:

"Well, I never! Who'd think he was capable of such a love! Just how did you do it? What prayers did you say?" But our young mistress only smiled. When asked about his gifts, she just spread out before them all the velvet and satin dresses her grandmother had given her: "Look what he's bought me!" she'd boast. Well, isn't it funny, the way the gentry love,?

For his part, he plainly couldn't stand the sight of all those respectable neighbors, and could barely wait until they were gone.

Meanwhile, the old mistress had been asking around about how he was getting along, and she'd somehow found out that he had a hamlet.

"Let me tell you something, dear! He owns a hamlet!"

"Oh, does he?" the girl shouted, starting up. "Where? How do you know?"

"It's not too far from town. They say he had an aunt who died not long ago and left it to him in her will. She never had children of her own, and it was she who brought him up."

"Good Lord! Why didn't he tell me? It must be something pretty small — nothing special. But still, it's a hamlet! Why, it's an estate!"

When he came, she gave him a warm welcome and was really nice to him, which pleased him immensely. He didn't know, of course, that it wasn't him that was welcome — it was that hamlet!

XVI

They were engaged at Christmas. Guests turned up in huge numbers. The young mistress was cheerful and talkative, and her eyes shone as she walked around on his arm. He didn't take his eyes off her, so he even stumbled as he walked. The party didn't break up until daylight.

But as soon as her fiancé and guests had left, she suddenly broke into tears, complaining about her misfortune:

"Oh what have I done? Why should I? Now my life's going to be really miserable. I wish I'd never seen the light of day! I'm so unhappy! Poor orphan that I am!"

Her grandmother probably wished it had never come to that engagement, and she began to soothe her: "Don't you cry, my dear! That's enough, stop it!"

"Oh, why didn't the Lord make him well-off?" the girl wailed, running all about the room,

shedding tears and wringing her hands.

"My child! My dear! Don't cry! You aren't going to be the richest, but you won't be poor either. Because all I've got is yours too."

That was when the young one darted to the grandmother and hugged and kissed her.

"Oh, Granny! I'm really so grateful — heart and soul! You've made the world look brighter to me, you've made me feel like I've been born again!"

"Enough, let me go now, or I'll start weeping myself. Well, I never!" said the grandmother, laughing and crying at the same time.

"Granny, dear! Will you be living with us?"

"I surely wish I could, but I don't think it would be the right thing to do. I'd rather stay here in Dubtsi to keep the place going. You go and take charge of the hamlet. How else? We leave this place or the other — and without us around it'll go to wreck and ruin. We wouldn't be quite happy about it, anyway.

The master's footsteps fatten the soil, as the saying goes."

"Good, Granny, fine. Let it be so then. Ah, Granny, I do feel like I've been born again."

"Stay joyful then and don't cry."

"I won't, Granny — never!"

Her fiancé had barely stepped over the threshold when she sprang to him:

"Granny's going to let us have Dubtsi!"

He looked calm enough as he told her, gently:

"I see you're glad and so am I. I myself have taken a fancy to this village. Here we met and fell in love. Do you remember how green and blossoming the orchard was as we were walking in it, talking to each other?"

And she said:

"Green orchard, dear me! Better think of how profitable Dubtsi is."

Here the young fellow shuddered and just stared at her as though something had suddenly struck and frightened him, as if he'd been stabbed in the back.

"Is something the matter?" she asked. "Why are you staring at me like that? Did I say something mean? Don't you want us to manage our property in a decent way?" She took his hand and smiled sweetly to him. He also smiled.

"Oh, you," he said. "My dear little landlady!"

XVII

The young mistress became more cheerful and set about her dowry, ordering us around, getting everything ready and doing a lot herself, too. Plenty of shoemakers, tailors, seamstresses, peddlers and vendors were brought in from town. She was bustling about the house, running her fiancé off his legs, buying, cutting, packing — it was all breakneck speed. We serfs had it toughest of all — which was our lot anyway. For whether the masters mourned or celebrated, all we knew for sure was: the master's wedding is the chicken's death.

We had so many guests for the wedding that the house was buzzing like a beehive. All those

young ladies gazed at the trousseau wide-eyed: "Oh, isn't it lovely! And this is nice, too! Look at this! Now, that one must be really expensive!" Every now and then, one of them would suddenly close her eyes, as though her heart had missed a beat at the sight of a kerchief or some dress. They were attracted by all that stuff like flies are to honey. Were we glad to get rid of them at last!

XVIII

What with all that crowd, fuss and rushing-about, I couldn't spare a minute to say goodbye to the girls. So I ran to them only when, the horses were already standing in harness, ready and waiting. I couldn't find my voice and just hugged them all, old and young alike.

The bridegroom came for her in a carriage drawn by four sleek black horses. The coachman was a broad-shouldered mustached fellow wearing a tall hat. He, too, was a serf, but he'd been schooled after the masters' fashion. The gentry were making all kinds of noise saying goodbye to one another and crying, and that coachman just sat there stock-still, looking neither left nor right.

The masters got on. I was seated at the back, on a seat perched high above the ground.

"Go, Nazar, and may God help us!" my new master shouted merrily.

It was a quiet, clear morning when we left the village. There was also a tingling frost. Frost had powdered the willows and their branches were white and glistening in the sun. The girls fell out onto the street, bowing goodbye to me. The horses galloped quickly and everything seemed to flash past my eyes. Then we left the village behind us, and there was just the road — the long empty road all the way ahead.

XIX

Before long, we drove into town, and in a way it was like stepping inside an anthill. The whole place was teeming with people — walking, riding, selling, buying... There were serfs, gentry, soldiers, peddlers... Also, wherever I looked I saw Jews in their long frock coats, crawling like cockchafers all over the place.

The master told the coachman to pull up at the inn and led his young wife inside. He gave the coachman a few coins, telling him to find himself some lunch. But he didn't even look my way. So I just sat there, looking all round. It was all so strange and new to me! Then I heard somebody calling, "Hey you, the pretty one!" It even made me start. That was the coachman calling me. I had a good look at him and saw he was like a crow, because his hair was so black. He grinned, showing his countless milk-white teeth.

"You want somebody?" I asked.

"Guess who! What's your name? Ustina, isn't it? I'm Nazar. Let's go and have a bit of lunch."

I'd gotten terribly cold, so I wondered if I should come with him. But should I? What if the mistress raised hell?

"Thank you," I told him. "I'm not hungry."

The coachman smiled. "As you like, sweetie," he said and went.

XX

I had to wait a good while until they came out. The master's eyes then fell on me.

"What are you sitting like that for, Ustina?" he asked. "Have you had anything to eat?" He turned to the bearded owner who had also come out and was standing on the steps, jingling the coins as he counted them in his palm. "Hey!" he called out to him. "Give this girl something to eat, will you!" The man pocketed the money and ran back inside.

"What? What?" the mistress gasped in horror. "Are we going to wait for her?"

"Why not, darling?" he said. "Isn't she hungry and pretty cold, too?"

"So what? They are used to it. We're late, and I'm afraid to travel in the dark."

"Run, Ustina and make it quick," the master told me. "Just hurry up, so we don't have to wait for you."

The mistress turned red to the roots of her hair.

"Time to go!"

"But she's hungry, darling. Look how cold she is."

"I am cold, I, I!" she whined, stressing that "I". "Get on!" she snapped at me and jumped onto the carriage. The master looked bewildered; he stood there not knowing what to do or say.

"Well?" she said. "Are you coming?"

The poor fellow climbed up and sat next to her.

"Now what about that lunch for the girl?" — this from the bearded innkeeper.

My master and mistress kept on talking for quite a bit after that. Then they stopped and stayed silent even longer.

XXI

It was already dusk when we reached the hamlet. Here and there, light could be seen in the windows. We drove along the street and stopped in front of the master's house. Out on the porch stood some folks with lighted candles and holy bread, bowing and greeting the young couple.

"Thank you!" said the master, accepting the bread. "I've brought you your mistress. Do you like her?" He laughed happily — who wouldn't like such a beauty? But the mistress's eyes glittered with rage; she flashed an angry glance at him, and there was a terrible expression on her face. The master's serfs advanced towards her to greet her after their own fashion, but she just snatched a candle from somebody's hands and sprang inside. The serfs drew away from that door and didn't even get a chance to say something to the master. He hung his head low and went straight in, looking sad and uncomfortable.

I went in after them and looked round the house. The rooms were rather small, but clean and nice. The tables and the chairs were all new and shining. Then I heard the master and the mistress talking. I paused to listen — she was sobbing and he was doing everything to try and get her to stop:

"Don't cry, my love, my dear! If only I'd known you'd object, I wouldn't have said that — never!"

"You must have been encouraging your serfs to be familiar with you! Oh, how nice indeed —

them staring at me, grinning at me, almost rushing to hug me! What a shame! How dare they!" She screamed that last bit.

"Look, darling! They are good simple people..."

"I don't want to look, or hear, or see anything!" she spluttered. "You just want to get rid of me, that's what you want!" she sobbed.

"Enough, my dear, enough! You might fall properly ill... Stop crying, please! I'll do everything as you tell me. Forgive me."

"You don't really love me. You don't care anything for me. May God forgive you!"

"You know better than to say such things. I don't love you? That's just not true, and you know it!"

Then I heard them kissing.

"Mind you," she said. "If you don't do things my way, I'll die!"

"I will, darling, I will!"

XXII

I went through all the rooms, and there was not a soul around. It made me wonder if they had all run away from us. I went out onto the porch. The night was clear and starry. I stood there, looking round, when I heard "Good evening!" suddenly, sounding like somebody had plucked a string right behind me. I started and spun round to find myself looking at a tall handsome fellow who stood there, smiling at me. I suddenly felt shy and frightened and I froze. I was tongue-tied and just stared into his eyes.

"You're standing here all by yourself," he spoke again. "It looks like you don't know your way around."

"If I didn't, I'd ask you," I snapped at him, finding my voice. "Good evening." And I hurried back inside.

"Bye, sweetie-pie!" he called after me.

XXIII

The master and the mistress were still walking about the building. She peered into every corner to see what was what. Then she saw the dried flowers stuck behind an icon.

"What's that?"

"Some flowers my old housekeeper put there."

"What? Is it she who runs the house? Throw that stuff away, darling. There's too much peasant about it."

"All right, dear."

Then she kissed him: "Oh, you're such a darling!"

When they were finished walking and talking, the master said:

"Why isn't there anybody around, I wonder. Where's my housekeeper?"

"You see, you see," she nagged him. "See how slack they are? She must've gone out because

she felt like it — as simple as that!"

"She wouldn't go far. Let me call her. Hey there!" he called out like an obedient little boy. "She'll be right over," he assured the mistress.

"Just where is she?"

"She must be busy doing something, dear. She's my only servant."

"And where's my Ustina? Or has she also learned to run away without asking? Ustina! Ustina!"

I hurried over to her.

"Where have you been?"

"Over in that room."

I went back behind the door and kept on looking and listening.

XXIV

An old, old woman entered. She was bent with age, and her face was all wrinkles, but her dark eyes were remarkably alive and clear. She went in, stepping softly, bowed to the mistress and asked:

"What do you want, sir?"

The mistress nearly started to her feet, hearing such bold talk from the old woman.

"Where have you been? I've actually had to call for you," said the master.

"I've been in the kitchen, helping Hanna to prepare a truly tasty supper for you."

Even, though the master felt his wife breathe down his neck, he didn't have the heart to scold the old woman there and then. He blinked, coughed, walked up and down the room, but still couldn't make up his mind. The mistress turned away from him, and the old woman stood quietly at the threshold.

"What about that supper?" the master asked, frowning even more.

"It's ready, sir," the old woman replied quietly. He turned to the mistress:

"Shall we eat some supper, darling?"

"I don't want any," she said curtly and dashed out of the room, slamming the door behind her.

"Then I won't be eating either," the master said sorrowfully.

"I'll be going then. Good night, sir."

"You may go. Only mind you, don't make me run about looking for you!" he began sternly, but then bit his tongue at once when she said evenly, "Certainly, sir." She bowed to him and went out.

XXV

The master was pacing up and down 1 room. He heard his wife crying across the wall. "My God!" he spoke to himself. "Why is she crying?" He spoke that last word very softly, and his voice sounded so very sad!

Then he couldn't stand it any more and went to kiss and soothe her. It took him quite a while before she stopped.

"All the same, I'm not eating," she declared "I couldn't stand the sight of your servants anyway. Why, they treat you as they would their own brother. Some relatives!"

XXVI

I sat all alone in the servants' room. It was sad and still. Was this going to be my life? Very encouraging, indeed! It occurred to me that now our girls back home would have the time of their lives with the young mistress gone. They'd certainly have it nice together. And there I was — away from home and not a soul around...

There suddenly was a tap on the window. The blood rushed to my cheeks, because I somehow guessed who it was. But I sat where I was, pretending I'd heard nothing.

After a while, there was another tap. I jumped to my feet and closed all the doors, so the masters wouldn't hear it.

"Who's there?" I asked.

"It's me, sweetie-pie."

"You must have lost your way," I said, "because it seems you're knocking on the wrong window."

"I bet it's not the wrong window — not this one! That's what I've got eyes in my head for — to find who I look for."

"You shouldn't have taken the trouble. And what's the big idea — talking through a double pane? Get away from that window if you don't want the masters to hear us." And I walked away from the window myself.

"Look here, sweetie-pie!" he went on.

"Why have you stuck your nose in that window, Prokip?" somebody grumbled in a low voice. "Supper's been ready long enough and none of you people have turned up yet!"

XXVII

I heard somebody step into the passageway. I went to open the door and saw it was the old woman, the master's housekeeper.

"Good evening, my girl," she said. "We invite you to have supper with us, dearie."

"Thanks, Granny."

"Come along then."

"I'll have to ask the mistress first."

"Are you sure you have to? You're just going to supper."

"She tells me if I'm going."

The old woman didn't speak for a while and then said:

"All right, go and ask her. I'll be right here."

The master and the mistress sat close to each other, chattering happily. She snapped as I went in:

"Why are you butting in?"

"May I go out to supper?" I asked.

"Take off — have supper!"

XXVIII

I followed the old woman across the yard into the outbuilding.

"Well, here she is," said the old woman as she led me into the room. Sitting at the table were Nazar, the black-haired coachman, and a pretty young woman, his wife. The stove was ablaze. Light flickered merrily on the whitewashed walls and on the icons in the corner which were hung with an embroidered towel and decorated with dried flowers and herbs. Green, red and yellow earthen plates of all sizes gleamed like jewelry from the dishrack. Everything in that room looked clean, bright and gay — a tow of soft flax hanging on a pole, a black sheepskin coat on a peg and a wicker cradle with a baby in it.

They bowed to me: "Welcome to our midst."

"Now what about seating this beauty next to me, eh?" Nazar grinned.

"Just what makes you think you're the best here?" I asked. Then I looked around and saw that Prokip was also there, sitting in a corner and looking at me in such a way that I felt a strange thrill run through me.

"Why not?" said Nazar. "Take a good look at me: don't you think I'm a mighty good-looking fellow?"

"You sometimes look like that in the dark," his wife teased him merrily. Her name was Katria, and a nice pert woman she was. She had blond hair, her nose was turned up just a bit, her eyes were blue and bright, and she was all nicely rounded and fresh-looking, like an apple. She wore a red kerchief and a green flannel skirt. She was perky and witty and awfully spry. She was talking, working and rocking the cradle all at once. Now her embroidered sleeves would fly all over the table, and the very next minute her rings were glittering over at the stove.

"Well, well," Nazar said. "If it weren't for supper, you'd surely hear a good one from me!" At this very moment Katria placed a plateful of dumplings on the table. Nazar winked at me.

"It's no sin to have a good supper for one who's skipped lunch!" he said.

XXIX

For all her talk and banter, Katria still seemed sad and worried. The old woman was sitting quietly, dignified and thoughtful. Only Nazar was in a playful mood, cracking jokes, roaring with laughter and flashing his milk-white teeth. As to Prokip, I wasn't looking at him any more.

"Tell us, dearie," the old woman spoke to me. "How long have you been in the young mistress's service?"

"Isn't she pretty?" Katria broke in.

"What good is there in her being pretty," Nazar cried out, "if she makes you wither just by staring at you!"

The old woman sighed heavily. "Don't get started, Nazar."

"Our master, though, is a truly decent fellow," Katria spoke again. "He can't have hurt a soul as long as he lives."

"I wish to God his wife were like him," said the old woman.

"What is it going to be like for us now?" Katrya said worriedly. She sighed and sank into thought. "Just what is it going to be like?" she said again, softly, looking at me, like she wanted me to tell her. But I didn't say anything.

"It will all be according to God's will, dear," the old woman said.

"Well, come what may," Nazar called out. "We can take it. Now everybody get down to the dumplings. Why don't you join us, Prokip? Is it the young mistress who's caught your fancy? Or, maybe, this beauty here?" He winked at me again.

"I wish I'd never see that young mistress again — not even in a dream," said Prokip as he took a seat across the table from me. "Where do they make them so mean, anyway?"

Then Katrya turned to me:

"Dearie! Tell us everything!" She paused. Everybody was looking hard at me. Prokip also had his eyes glued to my face. If it hadn't been for him, I wouldn't have cared, but he somehow made me shy, so that I blushed and nearly felt like crying.

"Dearie! Is our young mistress bad?" asked Katrya.

"She's a cruel thing," I said.

"Good Lord!" she cried out. "That's what I've felt in my heart all along! Think of my child!" She sprang to the cradle and leaned over the baby. "That surely wasn't what I bargained on, when I, a free girl, agreed to marry a serf! And now she's already as good as doomed us all with that evil eye of hers!" Tears gushed from her eyes, pouring down over her face.

"The devil's not as terrible as he's painted," said Nazar. "No need to get panicky. Let's wait and see first." But Katrya just kept on crying and wailing as if she were certain that her baby had really been doomed by the mistress's evil stare.

"Stop crying, dearie!" the old woman tried to comfort her. "Do we have to torture our hearts? Don't we all have the merciful Lord to take care of us?"

Prokip didn't breathe a word, only wherever I looked, my eyes met his stare.

XXX

I finished my supper, said a prayer and ran back to the building. "Good night," Prokip called after me. "Good night!" I called back, diving into the passageway. My heart was throbbing as I entered the servants' room. I began thinking, wondering why he'd been staring at me like that. Next, the mistress came to mind; she'd hardly set foot in the yard, but she'd already made everybody worried. But why was Prokip after me?...

Why, he surely looked like an awfully nice fellow! A full moon was hanging low in the sky, and the words of a song came to me:

Oh dear moon up in the sky, Hide your light from everyone...

A feeling of sweet sadness suddenly engulfed me. I wasn't sure what I really wished in my heart of hearts — to hear his voice through that window once more, or never to see him there again.

XXXI

A day passed, then a week, then a month, and soon half a year went by like water under a bridge. The hamlet looked quiet and peaceful, its orchards green and blossoming. But anyone who'd bother taking a closer look would have immediately seen that things had changed a lot. Now people woke up and went to bed crying and cursing. The young mistress had gotten her way in everything. She had found hard work for all and made it plain hell for everybody. She did not allow a soul to go idle — not even poor cripples or little children. The children were made to sweep the gardens and feed the turkeys; the cripples had to stay in the master's kitchen garden scaring away sparrows and other birds. The mistress also made every job a real torture with her nagging and arrogance. She seemed to have a hundred eyes which saw everything and to be everywhere at once, twisting her way all around the hamlet, like a lizard. God knows what it was she had in her; only whenever she looked at you, it felt like she was wringing your heart.

Her gentry neighbors praised her to the skies: "Isn't she a good manager! Isn't she clever! It doesn't matter she's young — we all should learn from her."

At first, the hamlet folks pinned their hopes on the master but before long they all lost faith. He was a good-hearted easygoing master, but he was weak — a real coward! True, he did try to talk some sense into his wife, but she plainly wasn't that kind of woman. So he was soon afraid of even broaching the subject and just acted like he didn't see or hear anything. He had neither strength nor spirit. Oh, he was certainly a good master — one of those kind masters who didn't scold or beat their serfs — but never took care of them either! She had only to do a little moaning and screaming and make like she was going to faint to have him there in a wink, kissing her hands and feet, crying himself and raging at us, "Damn you all! Hang you all! My wife nearly died because of you!"

"He's no good," Nazar said. "I could immediately tell he had no backbone when I saw him buying that lunch for Ustina. If I had a wife like his, I'd make her walk straight into a swarm of mosquitoes and let her puff and pant there." He broke into laughter. That was just like him — laughing and joking all the time. It seemed he would be cracking jokes as he was fried alive.

Katrya, however, kept on weeping her eyes dry. She did so much crying it made you wonder where all those tears were coming from. She would take her baby in her arms and cry on and on, and then, all of a sudden, she would break into sobs.

Prokip got quite moody too. He brooded most of the time and wouldn't even say anything funny to me.

"How come you're so gloomy?" I asked him one evening. "What makes you so sad?"

He suddenly grabbed my hand and drew me close to him and kissed me. Then he was gone before I could understand what had happened.

XXXII

All the people in the hamlet now seemed to have faded and withered; only the old woman was as dignified as ever. For the mistress just couldn't scold her long enough or shout at her loud enough to ever make her frightened or fidgety; the old woman walked softly and spoke softly, and her eyes were always calm and clear. On several occasions I'd suddenly find myself in her arms, crying — exactly like a child cuddling up to its mother.

"Now don't cry, my girl, don't cry," she'd say then, softly and gently. "Let the evil ones weep; you show patience and see it through to the end. You can endure it, can't you?"

Oh, Lord! Those were days full of sadness and sorrow. There was none of the usual lively talk or laughter. The hamlet folk kept well clear of the master's yard; and those who did come over on some business, kept looking around cautiously and just couldn't wait to get out, like it was a far-off forest where some evil wild beast was at large.

One evening I finished supper rather late, and was hurrying back to the master's, wondering why Prokip hadn't been in for supper. Then he appeared in front of me, out of the blue. He stood in my way and wouldn't let me pass.

"Tell me truly, Ustina, do you love me?"

I would have fled, but my legs failed me. I stood there, my face burning... He took my hand and held me in his arms and asked me again and again, "Do you love me?" Now, wasn't he funny!

We sat there for a while, talking and kissing and holding hands — and we forgot all our troubles. I felt joy in my heart and loved the world, and everything in it seemed so bright and beautiful. Why, even the mistress noticed. "What's the matter with you?" she asked. "Why are you so red, as though you've been beaten? Or have you pilfered something?"

XXXIII

Good heavens! How impatient I was, looking forward to those dark, sheltering nights! By the time the mistress told me to go off to supper, Prokip would already be waiting outside. He'd meet me and we'd stand there for a while together, speaking of our worries. During the day, though, even if we chanced to run into each other, we'd just exchange glances, without a word, and continue on our separate ways.

"It'll get you into trouble, this love of yours," Katrya used to say.

"You're just being wise after the event, my dearest," Nazar would tease her. "If you were now to fall in love with me all over again, you'd do it cheerfully!"

"What are you talking about! I just can't bear to see these two, because my heart bleeds when I think of what awaits them."

"Now don't you frighten and torment the girl," the old woman would say. "If she's in love, let her love. It was destined for her."

XXXIV

As to the mistress, she became even more cruel and wicked. Whenever she thought I was a bit slow or a minute late, she met me with her usual "Where have you been?" which always meant I was in for it. At first, it drove me to despair, but after a while I became sort of indifferent to all this abuse.

The trouble was there for good, anyway. True, I still couldn't help crying while she was berating me and yelling at me; but after I'd done my usual share of crying, I'd wipe away my tears and become my own self again — cheerful, laughing and joking. I kept my hair neatly braided and my blouse

washed clean, and I wouldn't even complain to anyone. A lot of good that would have done me! That would have only made the other folk think of their own troubles, and every one of them had plenty. Why, I wouldn't breathe a word even to Prokip, because I knew that always got him into a mood as black as night, when nothing would make him cheer up enough to talk or eat something.

Good Lord! What with all those troubles — my own and other people's — we saw little we could do to help one another. Katrya's baby got sick, and there she was, busy all day long, digging and sowing the kitchen garden and cooking for the masters, also hearing the mistress shouting at her all the time, "You never get anything done at all! You only get fed for nothing! I'll teach you yet how to work!"

Throughout the night Katrya wouldn't get a wink of sleep sitting with her baby daughter, and as soon as it was daylight, she would be off to work. The old woman would then look after the baby, and she'd always be doing something to cheer up Katrya too. She'd either carry out the baby to her once in a while, or come out herself and say something like, "She's quiet now" or "She's gone to sleep". A real gift from God the old woman was, always tireless and alert and helpful.

"Why are you working yourself to death, Katrya?" I asked once.

Her eyes were sunken and burning in a sickly way.

"I'll just keep on working while I can. Maybe it'll please the mistress and make her show some mercy."

But it never did, though. She went on working and going without sleep until she went out like a candle at the cradle one night. She woke up and rushed to the cradle, but the baby was already well on its way to the heavens. The poor mother barely had the time to look at it and 'press it to her heart before it passed away.

Katrya suffered and grieved terribly, although at times she sounded almost as if she were glad: "Now my child, my poor dear baby will be an angel in heaven where she'll never know any suffering!" But then she'd break down and wail: "But she'll never again stretch out her tiny arms to me! She'll never be here to comfort me in this world! My child! She's left me forever, my dear little daughter!"

Nazar seemed all in one piece and did what he could to console his wife, telling her she was still young and all, but his once ringing voice had faded somewhat, and he, too, grieved, although he tried not to show it.

After that misfortune, Katrya wasted away completely, her health failing to the point she could barely walk, let alone work. Yet the mistress wouldn't let up: "Why aren't you working? I'll teach you! I'll show you!"

"I'm not afraid of you any more." Katrya said. "You may eat me alive for all I care!"

The mistress made sure, of course, she didn't get away with saying such things.

"What's going to happen to us all?" I asked Prokip.

"Ustina, dear! You've bound my hands!"

XXXV

The mistress drove Katrya out of the house to work in the fields; even her husband's being the

master's coachman meant nothing to her.

The master gave Katrya a ruble, making sure the mistress didn't see it. Only Katrya wouldn't touch that money, so he just placed the coin on her shoulder, but she shook it off, as if it were a bee. That ruble fell onto the lawn and lay there until it blackened, because nobody would touch it. Finally, the mistress herself spotted it and picked it up as she walked through the yard. "Have you been out scattering money?" she asked the master. "Dear me, dear!" The master said nothing, only his face turned beet red.

Katrya just didn't want to live any more. Something had snapped inside her since that terrible tragedy. She ran around woods and swamps, looking for her daughter until one day she drowned, poor thing. The master was pretty distraught, but the mistress only said: "There's no reason why this whole thing should upset you so. Didn't you see she was always crazy? Her eyes were so weird, and then she was always saying things that made no sense..."

"True enough!" the master continued eagerly. "She certainly didn't have all her wits about her!"

And crazy it would be. Wasn't it comfortable to think so? They talked for a while and erased the whole thing from their minds.

XXXVI

A retired soldier from town was hired to do the cooking. There was a curious fellow! Each time he finished cooking for the master and mistress, he'd eat a bit of lunch and lie down on the bench and start whistling. There he'd lie, whistling on and on, and then suddenly he'd sing out, making a high, shrill sound, like a rooster crowing. He cared not a bit about our troubles; he'd only ask sometimes, "Were you beaten today?" adding, "It can't be any other way — that's what service is all about."

Nazar had never been quite the same again; he kind of wilted, but he kept on joking: "If I got somebody for a servant a single day, I'd make sure he remembered it as long as he lived!"

The mistress praised that cook highly, saying he was a mighty decent fellow who treated her with all due respect. He was certainly something to see when he stood before her, as stiff as a ramrod, his arms pinned to his sides and his eyes fixed on her face. "I tried to catch the spotted pig; the spotted pig ran off into the weeds; so I went after the black pig, caught the black pig, killed the black pig, roasted the black pig..."

He'd rattle it off and wait for the mistress to say something, his eyes blinking...

The mistress would tell him, time and again:

"Good! Very good! It's all good! But mind you, don't get slack here among my lazy rabble."

"I'd never do that, Madam!"

He'd bow low to her, face right, face left, smack his heels and march out — back to the bench and more whistling.

"Damn you!" I snarled at him once. "Will you never stop that whistling? Here we are, grieving, mourning, suffering, and you..."

"Don't fret! It isn't called service for nothing. Look how many teeth I've got left. Lost them in the army. There was a captain — ugh!" He just moaned. "What did you think, anyway? What's the way to live in this world? What's the way to serve and to please? They bear down on you and tear

at you, they hoot and howl at you, and you better just stand there and don't dare bat an eyelid! No, sir! God forbid!"

And he went on whistling. Prokip suddenly got so mad he flung his pipe on the ground.

"Even oxen in a yoke bellow, and here you want good Christians to put up with injustice and abuse and not even speak up!" he thundered at the soldier who stopped whistling and gaped at Prokip like he was seeing a white crow. "I'm just not that kind of man," Prokip said. "With me it's either win the saddle or lose the horse."

"With me it's just run away!" Nazar laughed. "The road's my home."

"You'll get caught!" the soldier cried, leaping to his feet. "They'll get you and then you're in for it!"

Even though we had plenty on our minds, we all burst out laughing.

"All captains aren't fast," said Nazar. "Some may trip as they run. You better tell me where to run. It may turn out to be running from bad to worse. It might be like getting from the frying-pan into the fire..."

"Gentry, masters everywhere..." he broke into a song like he'd suddenly struck a bell.

XXXVII

A year after we had moved, the old mistress died. She'd clung to life to the end, though. She kept praying and reading the Scriptures, and had had prayers said for her in churches. She also had candles burning at the icons day and night; and once, when a candle went out, she ordered a flogging for the little girl whom she'd put there to keep them lit. "You're a sinner," she said, "and you've done harm to my salvation, too."

XXXVIII

Our mistress grieved terribly, mourning her grandmother.

"I'm all alone in the world! My property, too, will now run to ruin! I can't take care of everything by myself," she told the master. "And I can't expect you to be of any help either. You certainly won't add to our possessions — if anything, you'll squander what little we have. You don't seem to care that God will soon send us a child. For the sake of our child, if not for me, mend your ways, dear! Learn to manage things, keep an eye on everything, but above all, don't spoil the serfs!"

"For God's sake, darling, what makes you say such things? There's no need for you to worry. I'll do everything you want me to, everything!" he tried to reassure her.

Then once he told her, thinking he was going to make her happy:

"Stop being busy for a while, will you, darling. Listen to what I'm going to tell you — I've already chosen a godfather for our child."

"Whom have you chosen?" the mistress immediately demanded.

"A friend of mine. He's really a fine fellow."

"Oh, God! Just as I thought — a nobody! Well, I'm having none of that! Not on your life — never!" And she burst into tears.

"Don't cry, darling!" the master begged her. "It might make you sick! All right, we won't have him as godfather — I'll tell him I'm sorry and that will be it. Tell me whom you want, and I'll go and ask him."

"You should ask the colonel, who else?"

"So the colonel it will be. I'll go to him tomorrow. Well, darling, I'm sorry I've annoyed you."

"That's just it, you don't care for me at all, you only make me angry."

"Darling!" the master spoke softly. "Try to care for me as well. All you do is get angry, shout, quarrel, and I hoped..." And he suddenly burst out in loud sobs. The mistress rushed to him: "What's the matter? Why?" She tried to take his hands, but he pressed them to his face and continued sobbing. She spoke to him, kissed him and embraced him, but it took her quite a while to calm him down. "Tell me why you cried! Please!" she asked him.

"I don't really know, dear," he said, trying to smile. "Something came over me. I don't feel too well. Anyhow, don't let it bother you. Well, that was really funny, wasn't it, me crying like a child?" But he sighed.

"Maybe you think I don't love you any more?" the mistress said.

"You certainly do."

"You know I do! But we just can't sit around together all the time. We've work to do, darling!" She kissed him.

Next morning, the master went to ask the colonel.

XXXIX

The mistress gave birth to a boy. Lots of people turned up for the christening-party which was quite lavish. The colonel, who had agreed to be the godfather, rode in noisily in a carriage drawn by gray horses with jingling bells. He was a stout man with a round red face who tried to keep his shoulders square and was constantly twisting up his mustache with his right hand while his left was busy supporting his saber.

I was only too glad to find myself less occupied for a while, so I ran out to Prokip. We were standing near the porch, talking, when the master suddenly turned up, looking pretty cheerful, just as he'd been back when he was courting the mistress.

"Why are you standing here together?" he laughed. "Talking?"

And Prokip said to him:

"Let me marry this girl, sir!"

"All right, go and marry her. You have my permission. Marry and be happy."

"What about the mistress?" Prokip asked.

The master sighed and became thoughtful. Then he said:

"Come with me. Take her hand, Prokip."

He went inside and Prokip led me after him, squeezing my hand.

"Darling," the master said. "I've brought you a young couple. How do you like them?"

The room was packed full with guests. The colonel was there, too, strolling up and down among them, as vain as a peacock, giggling quietly.

The mistress was sitting in an armchair. She shot us a glance and turned away. Her merry smile suddenly vanished, and she looked up at the master angrily. "What is this all about?" she asked.

Prokip bowed to her and pleaded.

"I've already given them my permission," the master said. "Give them yours too, my dear. The Lord has made us happy, so let them also be happy!"

The mistress said nothing, biting her lip. Then the colonel interrupted and bellowed, like he was blowing a trumpet:

"Aren't they a good match, the lucky devils! Don't they look fine, the two of them? Why, we certainly should marry them off, my dear relative!" Then he asked me, "You want to get married?" He also wanted to wink at me, but when he dropped his eyelid, it stayed down, because he'd had too much to drink.

All the rest repeated after him:

"Marry them off, oh yes! Did you hear what Colonel the godfather said — they're a good match!"

At last the mistress said:

"Well, let it be."

We were out of there so fast we hardly knew what we were doing. We did not even think of any preparations; we just rushed to the priest and got married there and then so that the mistress couldn't stop us.

She was furious with the master.

"You certainly let me down," she scolded him. "I just can't forgive you this, the way you embarrassed me!" She also threatened me, "You wait, I'll show you!"

Let her show me anything now, I thought to myself. We were already married, anyway.

And I was so glad I could speak openly to him now and look at him whenever I felt like it, because he was already mine.

XL

I remained the mistress's maid. If anything, she was even worse, wearing me out till my blood boiled and teasing me all the time: "Well? How do you like it being married? Is it any easier now?" At times, it was so difficult that I might have run away from it all, had I not had my husband to keep up my spirits. When we were together, I felt so happy that I banished all my troubles from my mind. Only my husband was becoming gloomier all the time, and it made my heart bleed.

"Don't you love me any more, Prokip?"

He would then draw me close and look into my eyes so lovingly that I felt as though I were growing wings.

"Then why are you so sad, Prokip? Aren't we together forever now?"

"My darling! It was hard enough without you, but with you it's even harder. Just think that every hour God sends us may bring you more torture and abuse — isn't it cruel?"

And I can't protect you either. It's tough, Ustina"

"We'll somehow carry on together, Prokip.

Anyway, I think it's easier together." "You may be right there, sweetie-pie." Then he'd smile and say something to soothe me. It gladdened my heart to see him smiling and a bit more cheerful.

XLI

We somehow bore our troubles and woes until the fall. Then it happened...

One day we were shaking apples off the trees in the garden and gathering them in baskets. My husband was up a tree, working and shooting glances down at me from the branches. The old woman got tired and sat down to have some rest.

"The good summer's gone already," she said. "The sun is still shining but it doesn't warm you up any more." She looked around.

"Ustina, dear," she said. "Aren't there some children watching from behind that fence?"

There were.

"Well, children," the old woman said. "I think I can guess what you've come for."

The children didn't say anything, but cast furtive glances at the baskets.

"Come over here, boys," she said. "I'll give you one each."

The children scampered right into the garden. They bunched up all round her like sparrows in a nest, and she busily handed out the apples. The children kicked up a din — you know how children are. Then, out of the blue, the mistress's voice thundered:

"What is this?"

The children were terrified. Some cried, others scampered off. My heart throbbed too.

"I've been giving apples to those children," the old woman calmly explained.

"You! How dare you?" the mistress screamed, her entire body shaking. "You, my serf, have been stealing my property! You're a thief!"

"Me — a thief?" the old woman stammered, Her face turned as white as a sheet, her eyes moistened, and tears rolled out of them.

"You'll steal no more!" shouted the mistress. "I've kept an eye on you long enough, but now I've got you. Giving away your master's apples!"

"I've never stolen a thing in my life," the old woman said, her voice already calm, only with a slight quaver. "The master always let us do it. He himself used to give apples the children. God sends enough fruit for all. Just look at them — aren't there enough left for you?"

"Shut up!" the mistress yelped, jumping on her.

I heard the branches rustle. My husband was peering down through the leaves, and there was a terrible expression on his face. I begged him with my eyes.

"Thief! Thief!" the mistress barked at the old woman, clawing her shoulder and pushing her hard.

"What you're saying is not fair! I'm no thief, Madam! I've been honest all my life, Madam!"

"Are you talking back?" And the mistress's hand fell like an ax — down onto the old woman's face! The old woman swayed on her feet; I rushed over to her, the mistress to me, my husband to the mistress.

"Thank you, my dear," the old woman spoke to me. "Don't worry now, don't anger the mistress."

But the mistress had already seized me by the hair.

"Enough, Madam, enough," my husband thundered, grabbing her arms. "You won't be doing that any more! Never!"

The mistress was so bewildered she only gasped crazily.

"What? How? Eh?"

Then, as soon as she recovered a bit she flung herself on Prokip. But he kept her away, saying, "No, enough!"

At this point she screamed. People came running and just stood there gaping at us, The master, too, came tearing along, as fast as his legs would carry him.

"What's the matter?"

My husband let go of the mistress.

"That's what your good people are really like!" The mistress could barely speak. "Thank you! Why don't you say something?" she shouted. "I've nearly had my arms broken and you don't say a word!"

"What's been going on here?" the master asked worriedly, turning to all sides.

The mistress started telling him. The old woman had robbed her, and then everybody had actually tried to kill her — it was a pretty wild story she told. She was sobbing, screaming and cursing so much that the master also flew into a rage. He rushed over to my husband.

"You murderer!"

"Stand where you are, sir!" Prokip told him grimly.

"I see," the master said. "This place is too small for you. Just wait: you'll get a chance to run as wild as you like in the army."

The mistress started squealing:

"Get him in the army, oh yes! They're conscripting people in town now — march him off there right away!"

"Get him!" the master snapped at the men. "Tie his hands!"

Prokip didn't resist; he just held out his hands and even smiled.

Amid all that hullabaloo Nazar cautioned me:

"Don't get scared, sweetie! And stop crying. It can't get any worse. Though I'm not sure if it can get any better, either."

XLII

They took Prokip to the outer house and placed a guard at the door. Men started getting a wagon ready. Nazar got out another carriage for the master.

My husband was silent for a fairly long time and then said:

"Ustina! Sit down here beside me."

"What have you done, darling? Do you know what you've done?" I said.

"I know. You'll be free — that's what I've done. You're going to be free, Ustina!" *

"Free," I said, "but without you!" Suddenly I felt so bitter!

"Free!" he shouted. "Free! When you're free, you aren't afraid of anything — any troubles, any

misfortunes. If I were free I'd do anything, I'd move heaven and earth. But for a serf, no matter how lucky, anything" good turns out for the worse."

The wagon finally rattled in the yard. Prokip was led out. I also climbed on, wearing just what I had on me. The old woman blessed both of us: "May Mother of God help you, my children!" Tears ran smoothly from her gentle eyes.

The wagon sped off. I wondered why the mistress hadn't remembered about me when she'd last talked to the master before we left. I bet she wouldn't have let me go if she had!

We rode in silence, holding hands. I didn't cry or complain; only my heart fluttered, it kept beating so fast!

' Under the law, conscripts and their wives were released from bondage.

As we reached the town the master's carriage overtook us, raising dust. We entered the town, rattled along some streets at a pretty fast pace, and pulled up at a tall building.

Prokip let go of my hand. "Don't grieve, Ustina," he said. They took him to the conscript board. I sank onto the steps and sat there, as I would at a grave.

"Don't fret," Nazar said. "Nothing's so bad that it might have been worse. But then again, bad is the best." His hair, however, already was flecked with gray here and there, as though strewn with snow. There he was, trying to cheer me up; but it was plain that nothing could cheer him up now.

Then Prokip was led back out. Good 'heavens! My heart missed a beat, but he looked happy as at an Easter party.

XLIII

I stayed with Prokip in town. The time we spent there together flashed by like a shooting star, but I'll remember it as long as I live.

My husband was immediately handed over to a soldier for military drill. That soldier was a tall man with black eyes, and his hair and mustache were bristly in a brushlike way. He held himself straight as he walked, spoke in a booming voice and had a rather proud manner.

We bowed to him, but he didn't say anything, only eyed Prokip grimly. Prokip gave him some money:

"I'm sorry, sir, if that's too little, but a serf never gets quite rich, you know."

The soldier coughed and spat.

"All right," he said.

"Let's walk a bit around the town, Ustina," Prokip said to me. So we went for a walk. We strolled along those streets and alleys and he asked me now and then, "Tell me, Ustina, do you realize you're already a free woman?" He'd smile and peer into my eyes. And worried and sorrowful as I was, I'd smile back, feeling almost happy in a way.

I found a small house whose owner said she'd take lodgers, but we had no money and no way to get any either. We had nothing we could sell. All I had I'd left behind. It wasn't much anyhow — a few blouses, a couple of skirts and a sheepskin coat. To take it all along when we were leaving was the last thing I thought about, and later the mistress wouldn't let me have it. So now I thought: I'd look around to see what work

I could pick up. Prokip and I talked it over and went to speak to the owner. We told her all about the situation we were in and asked if she'd take us if we paid by the day.

"All right," she said. "As long as you have money, you can pay me daily, and I can wait when you don't."

So we moved right in.

XLIV

Our landlady was an old widow, affable, genial, and terribly chatty. She'd keep talking on and on, all about her trouble which was that all her folks had died off, leaving her all alone in the world. She also sighed every so often and would shed a few tears too. She shed lots of them on our account also; she'd sit there and listen to us talk, and then she'd start crying and saying that there we were — a fine couple with everything seemingly ideal and who should have lived happily without a care in the world... She'd just keep on crying and there was no stopping her. She'd only stop when the soldier came around and growled, "I see the widow's been moping again!" She was slightly afraid of him, because he looked like a man who wouldn't like being asked about something or even spoken to.

"Just what kind of man is that!" she'd say. "He's always so stern and grim — may God save us from the likes of him! Didn't he ever have a family or what? God knows!"

I would get up quite early and run to the work I found. And I would come back late, bringing some money. And I was always happy to go back home. Prokip would come out to meet me on my way back. He'd take my hand and squeeze it firmly and lovingly, and he'd ask me softly, "Tired, Ustina?"

XLV

One evening we all sat there together — the soldier on the bench, smoking a pipe, our landlady by the window, and Prokip and I nearby. None of us spoke. Then we heard a rat-tat at the door, and a voice boomed out, "Good evening!" It was Nazar, of all people!

He came in and stood in front of us, his head nearly reaching the ceiling. He had a pipe between his teeth, and his thick curly hair had grayed considerably.

"May God help the mistress and all of you!"

"Thank you! We'll be proud to have you with us," the widow said to him.

"Where on earth have you come from, Nazar?" Prokip asked him. "You seem to have sprung out of nowhere."

"Where I come from things are so nice it makes you want to travel a bit," he said.

The soldier fidgeted and cast a glance at the door.

"Why are you edgy, mister soldier? I'm of the same faith, if that makes me fit to hold you company."

But the soldier kept staring at the door and the windows.

"I see you're a frisky fellow. Is there some wind you want to catch with a net out in the steppe? Well, you're a steppe man, too — that's what you look to me, anyway. So you ought to know better

than trying to catch that wind. Better give me a light. How are you getting along here?" he asked us. "Any market for pretty young women in this town?" he winked at me.

"How are things back there?" I asked him.

"Fine! They offer you a free choice down there — drown or hang yourself."

"Oh, dear! It's bad everywhere!" the widow whined. The soldier only twisted his mustache.

"How's the old woman?" I asked.

"She's alive. She can endure anything. She sends you her love."

I asked what the mistress had been saying about us.

"She sure did make it hot for the master because of the two of you. 'We've now lost two pairs of hands,' she said, 'all because you've been spoiling them. Who has fooled whom?' That's what the mistress said, and I can only say that, fool or no fool, the master certainly didn't look too smart as he stood there in front of her — not a bit."

The widow invited us to have some supper. Nazar came out with a bottle of vodka and plunked it on the table.

"Let's all have a drink," he said, "and better make it a good one because life is short. Here's how!"

The soldier said:

"What vodka is that? I might as well be drinking water!"

"There's no reason why you can't," said Nazar.

"The vodka seems good," said the widow[^]

"May that storekeeper's life be as good as his vodka," the soldier grumbled. But he drank again and again. He'd drink and spit and curse the vodka, then he'd pour himself some more. The widow looked at him in amazement, shaking her head, and finally asked, "Just why are you cursing it so?"

"None of your business, woman!" he snapped at her. "For my friends' sake I'll drink anything!"

"Well, I wish you liked it," said the widow.

"You Muscovites² seem to be mighty generous folk," Nazar added.

We ate and talked, and the soldier just kept on drinking. The color left his face, and he leaned over the table. He stared at Prokip and me, and then said:

"Hey you, young ones! You won't be long together! Don't let it worry you, though... You've been together, you've tasted some good things in life and you've had your share. Some never get it — not a thing, not even a kind word! Some just get pushed around from the cradle until their dying day. Fancy a life like that! Without kith or kin, without counsel or care — isn't it lovely!"

"Why no kin?" asked the widow. "Where are you from?"

"An army orphanage," the soldier said grimly. "Cholera killed lots of us there in those orphanages — you may have heard about it. I've never even found out who my parents were."

"Not even your mother?"

"Didn't I tell you? Why ask again?"

"Me too, I'm without a single relative," the widow whimpered.

2. Muscovites — the word for soldier and the word for Muscovite are identical. The author uses this word to suggest both the military and foreign qualities of this character.

"Look who's talking!" the soldier roared. "What are your troubles? None! The real trouble is when you can't remember anyone and none will ever remember you, when you've got nowhere to go and nowhere to stay, when everyone is a stranger and there is nothing you can call your own — not a house, not a person, not a piece of what you wear!" He swung to Nazar: "A steppe man, you said. Right, brother, I come from the steppes, or so I heard, and they must have been real fine steppes... Well, woman, pass me the vodka. Let's finish the bottle, because it's sweetest at the bottom!" Tears were now rolling down his face, but he tried laughing through them, as he drank. Then he stretched out on the bench and immediately fell asleep.

"Well, it's been real nice talking to you," Nazar said. "Goodbye, brother Prokip.... Wait, I nearly forgot. I've brought you a little money — five rubles. Good luck to you!"

"Thank you, brother! I don't even know when I'll be able to repay you."

"Not another word. Just try to stay alive. It's none of the master's money. It's been collected, so it shouldn't burn your pocket. I'll earn more, because I intend to stay free at least half a year. They won't get me — not even with the dogs."

He said goodbye to all and went away, and we never saw him again.

XLVI

Good God! What life was like together! Even though it was full of cares and woes, it was also glorious and so happy! It was easy to breathe, it was wonderful to think that what little money I might earn would all be mine, that I could sit and talk and not be afraid of anyone, and if I didn't feel like working, no one would make me, and nobody would touch me. I felt with all my heart and with my entire body that I was really living.

Towards spring, however, the word got around that the soldiers were to march out shortly!

"It can't be true," I kept telling myself, but in my heart I knew that it was. Then the orders came to get ready to march.

Prokip tried to comfort me with words that it would soon all be behind us, that he'd come back and we'd both be free. "Yes, dear, oh yes!" I'd say. But my heart ached and I cried a lot.

Departure day was soon announced. We walked all the way to the hamlet to say goodbye to everybody. The master and mistress weren't at home, only the old woman was there to look after the house. Dear woman! I recognized her as soon as I saw her standing in the yard, when we were still a long way off, and I wept there and then. Her soul seemed to be the only part of her which was still really alive. I ran to her and hugged her as I would my own mother.

"Why are you crying, dearie?" she asked softly.

"Because you'll stay back here, in this hell!"

"Here I'm staying, that's true. Here I was born and christened, here my parents died, here I'll die too, my child."

"Are you going to endure it all until you die?"

"I'll stand it, yes, dearie."

She gave us her blessing and offered us what Little she had for the journey, treating us like we were her children. Then we said farewell and went. But we looked back at her more than once as we

walked away. She was standing on the threshold, all was still around us, the sky was clear, a slight wind was blowing from the fields, a cool breeze reached from the groves, somewhere a brook was murmuring, and high above it all the bright spring sun was shining....

XLVII

I walked with Prokip as far as Kyiv. There I found a job and stayed, while he went on with the army to serve somewhere in Lithuania.

"Don't waste your heart away, darling," he told me. "I'll be back... I hope. You hope too. Wait for me!"

I've been waiting... He's been serving a long time. It's seven years since he left. Will I ever see him again? I haven't been back to the hamlet, only heard from some people that everybody was still alive. Things are much the same as before. The old woman has carried on patiently and Nazar hasn't been heard from or about. I toil, look out for whatever work I can find, and earn a living. Money comes hard to people like me, and every kopeck of it is soaked in sweat. But at times I am swept with gaiety and almost happiness, when I think that if I choose, I can walk away from my work any time I like. I think about it, and it helps carry me through another year. Anyway, it's a great comfort and a great balm to know that I'm free and that my hands aren't tied. I keep telling myself that my present troubles won't last forever either.

How could I forget my husband for a minute? It was he who saved me from that nightmare, from that hell. If I forgot about it, God would turn from me. Prokip is my husband and savior. May the Mother of God take good care of him, because thanks to him I'm free! I live, I speak, I walk — and I don't care if there are masters and mistresses in the world!