

Vasil Zembyak

***GREEN
MILLS***

A NOVEL

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Василь Земляк
ЗЕЛЕНІ МЛИНИ
Роман

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PART I

A heart once warmed with goodness
Will never ever cool.

Taras Shevchenko

I return to my dear Babylon in hopes that time and the tide of life have left their marks here, and I'll manage to discover something additionally interesting in her people, which would be almost about the same as taking you into my confidence, for I count on our mutual understanding that is so important at the outset of this or any other good enterprise.

It is the time of year when the roads become impassable in these parts, and in Babylon, the "highjinks of Vesela Bokovenka," as they are wont to say here, set in. This is the season when the Vesela Bokovenka comes to life in the rusty swamp. Wishy-washy in summer, the Vesela Bokovenka, in point of fact a tributary of the Chebrets River, now divides Babylon into a number of additional neighborhoods which exist almost independently of one another for some time: here you've got Tseleben, in which power is concentrated in the person of Village Soviet chairman Lukian Sokolyuk and his faithful executive Savka Chibis, who after a long hiatus has bought himself a new piece of clothing — yesterday he spent his last copper on a pair of cotton pants, and today he's rubbing his hands in bright anticipation of a holiday and clacking his tongue loudly; then there's the Tatar Ramparts where the local philosopher Fabian lives with his billy goat of the same name (the licentious son of the billy goat Fabian, a critter as distinctive as his father on the whole, albeit a nitwit); then come Skomorokhy, Volkhyv, and Huntsvoty; and on the

far bank of the Vesela Bokovenka (if Babylon is viewed from the Village Soviet, that is, from Tseleben) follow neighborhoods which are better left unnamed, since they do not add anything to the honor and grandeur of Babylon but might only blot the reputations of respected people. Take Cannibal neighborhood, for one. The reader might think that it is inhabited by anthropophagi, i. e., cannibals, but this is not the case. Throughout its history, nothing of the sort has ever been registered in Babylon; there were no anthropophagi here even in the hardest of times, yet the name stuck after the residents of a small crowded street running down to the Chebrets received a plain from the community that was added on to their garden plots. This set off a surge of snarling animosity, because not everyone got an equally good chunk of the plain; they started biting each other's heads off, which earned their neighborhood its repulsive name. Or take Huntsvoty which means rascals. It is common knowledge that the neighborhood is inhabited by sedate, respectable people today, but nothing will ever expiate the sins of long ago, and so if a Babylonian is given to falling from virtue or to adultery or something else of the sort, people will say: "He's become a Huntsvoty." In short, Babylon has everything it should and everything that has brought fame to its people, hardy, wise and immortal, for they are responsible for everything and, from now on, for you and me, because we are intent upon learning more about them and coming to like them. If that doesn't happen, it won't be their fault but mine. Conscious of this as I am, I will nonetheless keep the story rolling. Also, I will abide by a principle which might be disliked by some, but which is the only acceptable principle for a book written over such a long period of time: the main

thing is not to get to the desired end as quickly as we can, but to see as much as possible along the way. For it is said in the *Anthology of Svyatoslav*: "It is not for the visionless that we write, but for those who are overjoyed by the sweetness of books."

CHAPTER 1

Oh my, is our brother Babylonian going to be in the money! He doesn't have to open his purse to buy up scarce land, because there are thousands of *dessiatines* * lying around Babylon, and at times he gets the impression it's all his. And if he's got so much land which he may consider either his own or no one's at all depending on the extent of his imagination and his class consciousness, he still doesn't have to throw away his money either on oxen or horses or a plow or a chaffcutter of the hand-driven type with two cranks (only recently the dream of every peasant): all that was socialized in such plenty it'll last him a lifetime, and he, big landowner that he is, can now take the money he got for the sugar beets (and that's not counting the sugar he received besides!) and squander it for the first time on himself and his unhumbled soul, lest it degenerate with the abundance of the land round about. That probably explains why sugar-beet grand balls began to be held in Babylon, a tradition which eventually spread along the entire course of the Southern Bug; and mind you, they appeared without any gentry or *zemstvo* **, without any of

* *Dessiatine* — Russian unit of land measure equivalent to 2.7 acres

** *Zemstvo* — elective district council in Russia, 1864-1917 — Tr.

that which had sunk into the water of oblivion long ago, without any of those high-society occasions but simply by the will of the people, by the necessity of visiting a different world to show yourself and have a look at others, regardless of whether there would be anyone you liked or hated in the crowd. A ball couldn't take that into consideration, especially when everyone has pooled his money for the event, at which he can either be a guest or a host — whatever is dearer to his Babylonian nature. Fabian, however, relying on personal experience, offers us a word of caution: at any ball it is best to be a guest, because a host is more likely to reap laurels of ingratitude, the more so in our Babylon.

They say that the first sugar-beet grand ball was conceived by Malva Kozhushna. After the co-op was abolished, she took some courses in Koziv and came back to Babylon as a team leader specializing in pests or, to be more precise, a team leader specializing in pest control, her chief enemy being the weevil, hordes of which seemed to have burst forth from the bowels of the earth. For all that, she saved the Babylonian plantations. What stood her in good stead was not so much the knowledge she had gained in her studies as the brilliant idea of our Fabian who suggested that the hungry Babylonian chicken be committed to action against the pest. Babylon brought in a bumper harvest, and so it was decided to mark it with a grand ball. Since the autumn roads were impassable and it was believed that only the hardest of the guests would arrive, Babylon invited almost half the world to the ball — neighbors near and far, without forgetting about guests from the capital. To tell the truth, the invitations were followed by apologies that the grand ball would be held in a barn, since Babylon did not yet have a palace of culture of its own. Yet

the barn was new and huge, so only relatively speaking could it be called a barn. Vlas Chubar *, on behalf of all those invited, expressed gratitude in a letter which shortly arrived at the Babylon Village Soviet (a good enough pretext to open a file that was unique by Babylon standards — “Correspondence with the Council of People’s Commissars”) and promised to come if the frosts fell early and made the roads at least semi-passable.

So on hearing that the government — the chiefs, as it was referred to locally — had been invited to the grand ball, people from nearby, from outlying villages, and even from the neighboring district started flocking to Babylon in spite of the horribly muddy roads. Those who had not been invited were definitely larger in number than those who had been, for the former had some urgent business to settle with the government. The functionaries of the Village Soviet sunk into a sullen mood: it would have been better not to go around trumpeting about the guests of honor, for no one knew what to do with the uninvited visitors. To send them back would be tantamount to Babylon’s losing face — this wasn’t some piddling hick village like Pritske or Koziv for you, but Babylon. The disgrace would be broadcast so far and wide that nothing would help Babylon regain its good name to the end of time. It was decided to prepare reserve “ball premises” in case the barn would not hold all the visitors.

Droves of delegations continued crowding in to Babylon — some with flags, some even had their own musicians (but musicians won’t play on divine

* Chubar, Vlas (1891-1939) — Soviet state and public figure; Chairman of the Council of People’s Commissars of the Ukrainian SSR from 1923 to 1934 — Tr.

unction alone). Someone came up with what seemed like a wonderful idea — to let the locals use those “reserve premises” and put the guests into the barn; the locals would just have to put up with this one way or another. However, the activists of the Village Soviet were categorically against this idea. Fabian was sent for to disentangle the predicament, but he had fallen under a pre-ball spell, and the soused philosopher was in no condition to offer any advice.

Whenever Savka Chibis came running in from the porch (his watch post for spying out the guests) and announced who had arrived, from where and in how many wagons, Varivon Tkachuk would yell: “They weren’t invited! They weren’t invited!” Lukian Sokolyuk would clutch his head in despair and go out to greet the visitors with words he had prepared beforehand, welcoming them to the ancient land of Babylon where a new life was beginning and radically new socialist traditions were being conceived, as this first grand ball was supposed to prove. All the activists went out onto the porch as well and smiled equally benignly at both the invited and uninvited. Only Savka heehawed stupidly, bringing the solemnity of the moment to nought.

By midday, the yard was crammed with wagons covered with druggets and homemade rugs — every village had its own favorite colors; standing out prominently among them was the delegation from Pritske where once the secret of something just short of Iberian purple was supposed to have been discovered. So now it had come to the ball decked out in that color. Amidst all these colors, Fabian — solemn and proud of his Babylon, dressed in a *bekesh* coat and fur cap, the golden spectacles perched festively on his nose — strutted about with his billy goat and politely saw the guests to the barn, or rather to the

barnyard, which had been cleaned of trash for the occasion and strewn with red sand brought from the Hlynsk quarries. By that time, there were among the arrivals the Castellans, Black Cows, Golden Flies (called Dead Flies not so long ago) and all the other lesser tribes with whom Babylon had once engaged in protracted wars and was now living in peace and concord. Some of them knew one another from these wars dating back to the famous Babylon Otaman Zhuravka and from their later encounters at the fairs in Hlynsk, Shargorod and Shpikivka. So now they recognized their old hostiles, fraternized with one another, making fun of their past and of the barn around which they were milling and impatiently waiting for its doors to open at long last.

“The Lemkos!” Savka Chibis heehawed as he came running in from the porch. “Thirteen team leaders and three musicians!” “How many did you say?!” Lukian asked, turning as pale as the Village Soviet walls that had been whitewashed inside and out for the grand ball. Green Mills had also set a beet harvest record and had brought the cream of its collective farmers for the government to see.

“Oh, Lemkos! How wonderful it is that you have come to our great Babylon!” Lukian greeted them ardently from the porch, overtly pleased that they hadn’t come empty-handed but had brought a keg of beer (For the VIPs, Lukian reasoned) while all the other beet growers were arriving without anything, placing their hopes on Babylon whose “products” would be highly appreciated by Hlynsk, not to mention the guests from the capital.

The Lemko agronomist Zhurba, who was known here as a great expert on sugar beets, apologized not so much for the arrival of so many Lemkos as for the absence of their chairman Aristarkh Lipsky who didn’t

feel well. With a sweeping movement of his hand in the direction of the downcast Babylon activists standing on the porch, Zhurba said that the chairman would be glad to see them all at the grand ball in Green Mills scheduled for the next week, by which time the muddy roads would certainly be frost-bound. Savka heehawed at the thought of half of Babylon trekking to the Lemkos' ball, so Lukian had to apologize lest the Lemkos take his laughter the wrong way: "That's our executive; he's been funny in the head from birth..." Savka had donned his new pants, new cap and a shirt of Pritske purple; but oh! those confounded boots of his — Savka had mended them again and again whenever they tore, so now he was ashamed of them in front of the Lemkos and hid behind the activists' backs.

"Has Chubar arrived?" Zhurba inquired, as he was charged with directly contacting with Comrade Chubar to invite him to the grand ball in Green Mills.

"We're expecting him," Lukian said with a warning sidelong glance at Savka.

After that Fabian and the billy goat greeted the guests and led them to the barn.

Klim Sinitsya arrived in the company of several britzkas from Zhurbiv, Shargorod, and somewhere else. Sitting in Klim's britzka was Sosnin, Yasha Timchenko, the manager of the District Party Committee's organization department, and another of the lately appointed functionaries. As it turned out, he was the staff propagandist who had come from Odessa not long before. The whole group was benumbed by the cold, as they had waited for the government cars on the road, and so they apologized for being late and for the high guests who were unlikely to come after all because of the impassable roads.

“The kids! Don’t let the kids in!” someone yelled as soon as the barn door was opened.

Oh my, how the barn had been transformed inside! It was simply a paradise! Inside, the guests felt as if they were in a real palace. The musicians on the dais played a flourish for every darling of the gods the moment he stuck his head inside; the tables groaned under the weight of the roast, cream, poppy-seed cakes, pickled watermelons and everything else that was supposed to be on tables, and over them were roasted suckling pigs, lambs and fat turkeys hanging by their feet on strings from the high rafters — all that stringed roast was still warm from the oven and smelled so wonderful that we kids shoved and pushed for every chink in the barn wall to at least have a look at the Babylonian wonder of which we already had no hope of partaking.

With the musicians, however, things were utterly out of hand. Brought together on the dais from different “schools,” they could not achieve any results until Lemko fiddler Silvester Makivka led them to some semblance of unity. Soon the wooden barn was atremble with hilarity. The illumination of the garishly blue lamps (colored like Easter eggs) lent both the thatch and the tables and even the faces an air so unusual and mysterious that I barely recognized my dear Valakhs.

We kids were freezing in the cold and our mouths watered late into the night until we, too, were remembered, I don’t know exactly by whom now. Savka Chibis was walking around with a huge knife chopping chunks off the sides of five-month-old lambs for us (Fabian said that only five-month-old lambs were served in Byzantium at the banquets for the Porphyrogenite emperors), and the turkey meat simply melted in our mouths.

That's what our Babylon was like back in those days when it did not yet have a palace of culture and the first grand sugar-beet ball was held in Matviy Husak's huge barn. To make us feel equals with those for whom the ball was organized, Malva had us take our caps off and Silvester (in Babylon there isn't even such a name) played something merry, even funny I'd say, for us. But to tell the truth, music was the last thing on our minds as we stood there at the tables — at any minute, we might get chucked out of the grand ball just as politely as we had been invited in. That's what had happened to Fabian's billy goat, and it crossed my mind that nobody would have dared to treat his father, the elder Fabian, so disrespectfully.

Malva invited Varya Shatrova from the Hlynsk hospital. Varya was dressed in a gown that was too long for those times. It was made of black velvet (most likely from her wardrobe in the days when she had been an officer's wife) and she looked like a goddess in it. The sight of her scared the men off but in no way whatsoever did she outshine the dressy girls of Babylon whose ball attire was impressive for the wide range of colors of its proletarian textiles. Sosnin was the first to appreciate Varya's gown and invited her to a *pas d'Espagne*. Ruzia wore white cambric (too fine a fabric for a barn) through which the cream embroidery of her chemise showed. Klim Sinitsya had attached his artificial limb to the stump of his missing arm. As he danced the limb reminded us of its newness by creaking under his sleeve, which made Ruzia shy away from him.

“Ruzia, do you still live by yourself?”

“Yes.”

“In that same house above the pond?”

"In the same one... but without the tractor now."

"Aren't you afraid staying there alone?"

"I'm used to it. How are you doing? Do you live by yourself, too?"

"I've fallen in love... ha-ha!"

"Who's she? Is she here?"

"She's here, you know her." Sosnin and Varya were dancing nearby and Sinitsya nodded to them in greeting. Varya was absolutely gorgeous.

"And aren't you afraid, what with the alarming times today?" Ruzia asked with a smile.

"Love doesn't adapt itself to time... it's blind."

Since Sinitsya had last seen her, Ruzia had come back to life; she simply glowed with an inner light; instead of sorrow, there was a cunning twinkle in her eyes like in the days when she was still a young girl. That year, her team had set the beet harvest record, and at the ball, Ruzia was awarded a nickel-plated bed — a novelty for Babylon in those days. The beets had bleached her beautiful hands to the color of white cambric, and her stature was all grace as if she had been born for a grand ball. Yet there was perhaps one thing about her that alarmed Klim Sinitsya — she laughed loudly whenever someone touched his leather arm in the crowd and then shied away from him guiltily, which made him ashamed of his artificial limb.

Sometime around midnight, when the grand ball was in full swing, Makedonsky arrived, stopped at the door, looked around, and then beckoned Klim Sinitsya from the circle of guests (by that time Sinitsya had plucked up enough courage to waltz with Varya). Sinitsya pretended not to have noticed Makedonsky's gesture; indeed his very appearance was more explicit than words: Sinitsya, we must leave. Makedonsky was not at all tempted by the invitation of Malva, the

hostess of the grand ball, but remained standing at the door, waiting for Klim who was loath to interrupt his first waltz with Varya. Makedonsky did not bother them any more, perhaps because he himself was enchanted, watching a more divine and spirited dance than he had ever seen before. After that, it took Sinitsya a long time to find his leather cap on the clothes hanger.

Sosnin also left with Sinitsya, which might have been taken for God knows what under the influence of the lavish entertainment offered at the grand ball.

Then the musicians struck up the song "Oh the Snow Covered Everything in White, So White It Bleached the Countryside." The guests picked up the tune, and Yavtukh vocalized with special fervor.

Taking advantage of the commotion, Fabian the billy goat sneaked into the barn after all, but since there were pregnant women who by Babylonian custom were forbidden to look upon a live billy goat, the philosopher shoved him under the banquet table and invited the agronomist Zhurba, who was down in the dumps for some reason, for a drink and a piece of sausage to chase it with.

"To your health, Sir Agronomist!" Yavtukh said ironically.

"The sirs aren't invited to sugar-beet balls — there haven't been any around for a long time," he snapped, adding, "and as a matter of fact, billy goats aren't invited either."

Zhurba groped under the table, took hold of the billy goat's horns which were cold as a corpse, and the critter, utterly embarrassed at his base exposure, was dragged to the middle of the barn, which instantly raised the mood of the guests.

"To the health of Fabian!" one of the Babylonians shouted in jest.

“To the health of both Fabians!”

Fabian got to his feet to bow for the honor he was accorded, but at that moment, the lights started to fade gradually until they went out completely.

No sooner had darkness fallen than ancient Babylon immediately reverted to its old self. First one and then another surrendered to the temptation of those stringed hunks of roast lamb and turkey — and old Babylon, ignoring all of its honor, gave rein to its dormant passions. Lukian took up station at the door and intercepted Yavtukh or someone similar lugging off something redolent, roast lamb as it seemed.

“Is that you, Yavtukh? Put it back, put that lamb back!”

“By heaven, are you blind or what?” Yavtukh rejoined, disguising his voice. “It isn’t me!”

“Who are you then?”

“I’m from Pritske.”

“What the hell do you think you are doing?”

“It’s just a present for my kids...” With these words the culprit slipped out of the barn.

Outside, five of his elder children snatched the lamb out of their father’s hands and scampered off home. He also wanted to filch a turkey he had cast an eye on earlier in the evening, but someone had beaten him to it.

Then the locomobile chugged on at the collective farm, the lights flickered back to life under the rafters, illuminating the barn, and what do you think everyone saw? The Babylonians were sitting at the tables as if nothing disagreeable had happened, their faces all innocence, simply angelic, and Yavtukh was sitting with a stately mien in his proper place at Prisia’s side, hiding his greasy hands under the table. “That’s Babylon for you, brothers!” one of the guests guffawed in the ensuing silence; at that Yavtukh broke into

titters, followed by the Lemkos and then by everyone else — such body-heaving laughter was probably never heard by mankind ever since those grand balls were held. It was a hysterical outburst of wild hilarity which, it seemed, was the main purpose of the ball — to split one's sides at least once a year.

Malva wanted to calm them down by shouting the crowd but instead, a horrible cough racked her body, and it seemed she would be done in any minute. Catching her breath, she snapped out: "I could have taken it from anyone but not from you Babylonians. When will you ever become human beings! I don't even want to die on the same land with you! I don't want, I don't, I don't..." She tore the white fillet with the crown off her head and left the ball without her coat, wearing only her evening dress and pumps (and that with certain consumption to reckon with). In the silence that fell instantly, the musicians started to clean their overworked trumpets. Zhurba rushed out after Malva, either by virtue of being her dancing partner or because of some greater interest he had taken in her.

The night was dark and the mud on the dam snatched the pumps off her feet. Instead of picking the barefoot Malva up in his arms, Zhurba held timorously on to her free hand and kept trying to comfort her, telling her not to take the incident so close to heart, because the Lemkos were so well-behaved only here, while at their balls back home they were no better than the Babylonians. Another consideration was the fact that the ball had been held in a barn: he was convinced that in a fine palace of culture none of that would have happened. "On the whole, Malva," he concluded, "we haven't yet matured enough for high-society balls." When they arrived at Malva's home, her mother quickly got down from the

stove, lit a kerosene lamp, and upon seeing Malva barefoot, started to wail: "Oh my God, that'll be the end of the child!" She built a fire in the stove to warm some water for her daughter's feet, but there was not a drop of water in the tub. "Because of that blasted grand ball there's no water in the house," she complained. Zhurba picked up a pail and rushed off to get some water, but since the Singers did not have a well in their yard it took him a long time to find one. "Couldn't that redhead have taken you up in his arms and carried you home?" she grumbled. "Any other man would have carried a woman like you all the way to Green Mills."

Early in the morning next day, Savka came running to tell that Chubar had arrived and wanted to see Malva. "He surely picked the right time to do that. She's burning with fever," the mother said, pointing to the bed piled high with sheepskins covering Malva. Savka came up to the bed to convince himself that this was so and ran off to the grand ball to summon Varya Shatrova to the patient.

The arrival of the guest sent the aproned cooks into action immediately. Their provisions stored in the houses nearby, they soon brought fresh warm food for Comrade Chubar. To tell the truth, the setup differed from the previous heavenly picture of which all that remained was the strings hanging over the tables. Chubar kept glancing at them without understanding their purpose, and there was an occasional snicker among the guests until Fabian explained that the strings had held the five-month-old lambs intended for the honored visitors from the capital. Oh goodness me, what is he jabbering about? Lukian thought, appalled, assured once again that it would be unwise to have the philosopher meet great people in future.

Judging by his face, dress, and table manners, Chubar in no way resembled the Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars whom they knew from portraits and the pictures of him they had painted in their imaginations before he had appeared in the barn. He looked more like a simple tired peasant who had arrived after a long day behind the plow just now. But when he started speaking about the Tere-shchenkos, Kharitonenkos, Branickis and other sugar magnates for whom Ukraine had slaved before the Revolution, he got all worked up and seemed to lead his listeners' imagination out of the barn and into the palace of culture, the cornerstone of which would be laid here in Babylon for the grand balls of the future. The government had decided to build seven palaces in Ukraine within the next few years. Then Comrade Chubar danced with the best team leaders, and the Lemkos invited him to their ball to be held in a week's time. As it turned out, he already knew about the Lemkos' ball and said he would come gladly, but were he to indulge in balls weekly, when would he have time to manage the affairs of the Council of People's Commissars?

At sunrise, all the participants in the grand ball went up Castle Hill, the highest point in Babylon. Chubar read the decision of the Council of People's Commissars there and laid the cornerstone of the future palace of culture. From there Sosnin took him to Semivody to have a look at the first machine and tractor station. But what impressed the Babylonians most was that before his departure, Chubar wished to see the sick hostess of the ball, Malva Kozhushna, and at the same time be shown the famous Babylon swing. Had its maple board not been so slippery he probably would have had a turn on it over the precipice.

The spring was a hard one for Malva and for the co-op she worked at. Sinitsya got stuck in Hlynsk — and for a long time it seemed — as he rushed from village to village neutralizing the enemy's last sorties which were mostly unexpected and cruel (in Pritske, Ruban was shot at on the sly when he returned home one night). So Malva had to take upon herself the leadership of the co-op at what was perhaps the hardest time. From the other end of Semivody, another surprise was creeping up on the co-op whether the authorities, above all Klim Sinitsya, liked it or not. The new collective farm led a wretched existence at the former farmsteads of the *kurkuls* *; there was a shortage in mangers, fodder and water for the cattle, the horses had to be driven to the lake to be watered twice a day, the sheep suffocated in their crowded folds and died by the dozens daily, while the co-op had large stables, cowsheds and sheepfolds. So the collective farm chairman Rodion Chumak, who had but recently been on the Poor Peasants Committee, set his efforts and sights on merging with the co-op. For starters, he brought in the sheep and occupied the empty sheepfolds (the co-op had lost its herd during the plague), then he crammed the co-op farmyard with his scrawny horses which comparatively easily got to the co-op racks with fragrant hay, and topped his efforts with oxen. The next thing Rodion Chumak did was go after the co-op members themselves, urging them to join the Communards Collective Farm voluntarily. Just at that time several other co-ops (in Obodivka, Ksave-rivka and Ruzhin) were dissolved, which only kindled the enthusiasm of Rodion Chumak who sensed that

* Ukrainian equivalent of kulak — Tr.

the pendulum of time was swinging in his favor. One morning, a slogan written by hand on a white strip of paper appeared on the facade of the co-op palace: "Comrade co-op members, join the Communards Collective Farm!" The slogan actually did away with the co-op, but nonetheless its members stood their ground, posted their watchmen at night, went out into the fields one by one to sow their crops, and still hoped that someone from higher up would intercede on their behalf. And indeed an intercessor did appear one night.

Malva was standing at the dark window, watching little candlelights trickle down the street from the direction of the church where vespers had just ended. She could not believe her eyes when one of the lights turned into the gate of the co-op. Since the days when Sosnin had been co-op chairman, militant atheism had been a rule for the co-op members, and here the flickering light of a candle in a green paper lantern (there were also red, yellow, white and blue lanterns) was heading her way. The stranger easily passed through the gate (That's how Chumak's people get in here unhindered, Malva thought) and carried the lantern toward the porch, lighting his way across the farmyard which the cattle had ground into a morass of mud. Rumors had reached Malva that Danko was hiding in Semivody, so she was shocked at the thought that it might be him disguised as a Christian. With that lantern he really could pass himself off as a churchgoer.

After climbing the steps unhurriedly, the stranger stopped at the door and stood there for a long time, apparently looking it over or hesitating to knock.

"Who's there?" Malva asked, unable to check herself as she stood behind the door barefoot, with only a shirt on.

"It's me."

"Me who?"

"The former chairman..."

"What kind of nonsense are you talking?"

The guest started to laugh. In that laughter with undertones of lightheartedness there was something familiar to Malva. Still, she could not recall whose laughter it was — either because of the darkness outside or because she had heard it so long ago.

"All right, Malva, come off it. My candle's burning down."

"Comrade... Is it really you?"

"I told you I was the former chairman."

And again the gale of laughter. In the darkness Malva could not find the door latch for excitement, but once it was open, she froze, because there was Sosnin, the Innokentiy Mstislavovich Sosnin himself with a lantern in which the candle was really burning down.

"You? With that thing?"

"Some woman was carrying two, so she gave me one. In all that mud and darkness it came in quite handy. So I took it."

"Do come in, please."

He came in with the lantern, the candlelight flickering across the walls, and smiled. In the meantime, Malva had thrown a *hunya* coat over her shoulders and lit a kerosene lamp with a soot-fringed chimney. Sosnin apologized for the dirt he had brought into the room with his boots, took his leather coat off, and hung his cap on a nail near the door. Once he himself had driven that nail into the wall. It had struck a brick and bent but still served its purpose. God knows what a lot of things a man forgets, Sosnin thought, but such trifles he remembers.

And the oar was still standing in the corner, but now it had turned completely black, probably because no one had used it since then.

"I'll go and wash my boots by the gutter."

"Don't bother. Just take them off and stand them by mine. My boots aren't any cleaner. Now, Klim Ivanovich used to have some slippers around here, not much to speak of but they'll do. Here you are."

He took off his boots, stood them by Malva's, stepped into the slippers, and only then flopped into the armchair.

"I walked all the way from Zhurbiv. I'm footsore, and here it is such a wonderful church holiday. Maundy Thursday. Well, tell me how you fare? Does the co-op still stand?"

"Oh, the co-op..."

"What makes you sound so gloomy, Malva?"

"We're living out our last days. Tomorrow I'm going to Sinitsya to tell him to close down the co-op."

"Nothing's eternal, Malva. Only people are eternal. Is Sipovich still around?"

"He is."

"And what about Yarosh?"

"He's here, too."

"And both of the Humennys?"

"Yes, both of them."

"See, they're the ones I started with. How many of you are there now?"

"One hundred and two co-op members, me included."

"See, that's it. One hundred and two. One hundred and two members of the revolutionary world proletariat. So there's no reason to be getting cold feet."

"It's so good you came. Tomorrow it might have been too late. We feel like we're sitting on a volcano, and here you come along. Did they write you?"

"No, I came on my own. The co-op's done its job. Now it's up to the collective and state farms. The co-op's proven what it was supposed to prove: land can be common property, just like water and air *. It can belong to a co-op, a voluntary association. And that's no invention of utopians of the past, but a real experience of our age. Mine, yours. Does anyone have something for supper in this place?"

"Oh yes, yes. I've got milk, bread, patties with peas. Mother's sent it out to me. Just a minute. Klim Ivanovich didn't keep anything here, since he was afraid of mice. But I do. Our canteen's working in fits and snatches, so some people decided to take the food home and make their own meals. Klim Ivanovich was against it, but I'm not. They say you weren't against it either."

"Right. I forbade only moonshining. Ha-ha-ha!"

"In the village they've got some stills. I don't know exactly who, but they're at it to be sure. I can get you some from the night watchmen. They'll dig some up for you. They're a folksy lot all right."

"No, don't. I drink only state issue, and when it's around at that."

"I should have had sense enough to keep some in my cupboard."

"The co-op won't go under without it."

He drank the milk.

"Well, where's your son?"

* A quote from Russian Truth (*Russkaya Pravda*) by Pavel Pestel, one of the leaders of the Decembrist movement, in which he demanded that Russia be made a republic with freedom of the press and speech, general suffrage, and the abolition of serfdom. Seized during the Decembrists' uprising in St. Petersburg in 1825, he was later sentenced to death by hanging along with four other leaders of the movement — Tr.

“My son?” Malva asked with a start. “He’s over at my mother’s. He isn’t baptized, you know. I can’t even have my child baptized, thanks to you. So that’s what I’m like with your blessing. Still, I can’t believe you’re here. Are you just visiting or what?”

“Well, that depends. I might stay here to my last days. If I don’t get chased away, that is.”

“Here, in Semivody?”

“Exactly.”

“Which means that the co-op will continue to exist?”

“No, Malva. We’ll hand the land over to the collective farm. Horses, cows, everything will be handed over for the farm to run. Here we’ll found an MTS — a machine and tractor station. The first, model, base — call it whatever you like. It’s a new enterprise, and I asked to be transferred from Moscow to launch it. That was my personal request. I wrote a letter to Chubar since we’re old acquaintances, and he had me sent out here as director of the MTS. Chubar visited our co-op and spent the night right here in this room. Vlas Yakovich is a restless man. He could easily leave the affairs of the Council of People’s Commissars in charge of his deputy and go to the country. Once, after he had finished his business, he went after bustards with us. But not to hunt, mind you. He mounted a horse, rode close to the bustards and watched them graze. I killed one for him. Couldn’t check myself and fired from my horse. It was an eleven-kilogram bird which made a fine supper, so now he’ll be paying for that bustard for a long time...”

“I don’t get you.”

“I’ll insist on getting tractors, machines, and all sorts of implements. Yes sir, and why not? If a Chairman of the Council of People’s Commissars had been treated to a bustard you shot, and tasted it

perhaps for the first and last time in his life, that's something which isn't that easily forgotten, Malva. Even today's modest meal will be remembered, I assure you."

"You're a joker, Innokentiy Mstislavovich. First you pop up with a candle, and then you carry on about the supper. What sort of a meal is it? The patties aren't even fresh. If I'd known you were coming... I'd have..."

"Is anyone living up there?" Sosnin asked, pointing to the ceiling.

"No, no one. I lived there for a while after Volodya died."

"I think I hear someone walking up there."

Malva tensed, pricking up her ears. Indeed, there was someone clumping around.

"That's Chumak! Exactly, Chumak. He's probably hanging a new slogan."

"What Chumak?"

"Our neighbor, a collective farm chairman who's simply plaguing the life out of us. He wants to socialize everything in the co-op for the collective farm. On the other hand, he seems to be one of us as he was on the Poor Peasants Committee. You must have known him."

"Come on, let's have a look," Sosnin said, rising abruptly.

Malva took the lamp, ran up the steps leading to the garret and then recalled she had forgotten the key. By the time she had found the key and opened the door there wasn't any Chumak or any trace of his agitprop. There was only a sheepskin jacket spread on the bed, a pair of battered boots and foot rags near it, and out of the open window hung a strong rope tied to the sill. Malva went over to the window, the lamp lighting up the ground below. Under a leafless

bush stood Danko, barefoot, capless, hands behind his back, his eyes downcast, probably still hoping he wouldn't be recognized. Near his feet lay his cap which he must have lost while climbing down the rope. So that's where he'd found himself a hideout from Makedonsky — in the co-op — while Makedonsky was hunting for him around the villages.

What Malva did next was almost subconscious. She put the lamp on the floor, seized the sheepskin jacket from the bed, and threw it out the window. The boots and foot rags followed suit, their sweat familiar to Malva, which added to her revulsion. Then she quickly pulled up the knotted rope, closed the window, and said to Sosnin: "Let's get out of here. Close the door."

"Was that Chumak? Strange..."

"No, it's Danko, I'll tell you about him later on."

She stopped at the door, turned the whick of the lamp up, and said with a smile:

"Now I won't get a wink of sleep and I won't let you in there either. We'll have to spend the night down here, and tomorrow I'll think of some other arrangement."

"Don't worry, we'll rough it somehow. Besides, there's not much night left anyway."

Malva made him a bed on the cot in the alcove, and for herself she moved two armchairs together, and after turning the light off, huddled on them. The co-op watchmen beat the rail every hour, exchanging signals with their collective farm counterparts who reminded them of their vigilance with more distant and duller signals from the farmsteads of the former *kurkuls*, where chained dogs had howled not so long ago. Chumak used some of those farmsteads for storing implements, and others for keeping horses, cows and sheep. There were also chickens, but Chumak gave them back to the peasants so that after the harvest,

the fowl wouldn't go pecking the seeds, of which he didn't have enough anyway.

Sosnin fell asleep before Malva had a chance to embark on her story. He was on the wrong side of fifty. After being wounded, he had undergone treatment in Moscow, and now was jerking and moaning in his sleep until a serene, deep slumber overcame him. What made this man rove around the world, wade through dirt, struggle, suffer, and write letters to the Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars instead of quietly whiling away his time in the capital, looking after his health, family and children? He was one of those great restless men who throughout their lifetimes pawn their personal destiny for the future and happiness of others. Malva's life wasn't any better. Today everything went smoothly thanks to Sosnin's presence. She didn't feel a bit frightened; but she simply couldn't believe that Danko might have lived up there, although it could well have been. Yes, it could. It was more likely that he sat snug throughout the day and emerged from his hide-out at night.

In the morning, Sosnin's luggage was brought from Zhurbiv. It consisted of a trunk with two brass handles and a valise with his underwear. It probably also contained the shirts which had impressed Malva so much for their freshness when she had attended his courses on cheese-making. "A world revolution can be carried out only in clean shirts," Sosnin loved to repeat at his lectures.

He was still asleep when the co-op members brought his luggage into the room. On recognizing him, old Sipovich was moved to tears and went outside. The others stood there in disbelief that the first leader who had rallied them from far and wide — even from distant America — had come here now. It was him to

be sure — with a fair shock of hair, gray eyebrows, a wonderously inspired Sosnin even in his sleep, who as before was not given to rising early and did not wake them by banging away at the rail as Klim Sinitsya used to after him and Malva was doing now. Today, Malva did not revert to this practice for the first time to give Sosnin a chance to sleep his fill after the journey. In the farmyard, Rodion Chumak was flinging out his voice as he dispatched his members into the field for sowing, unaware as yet that the co-op with all its goods, lands, gullies and meadows was already his. And when Sosnin did appear in the farmyard with the co-op members to announce all that, Chumak went crazy for joy, jumped on a chance horse watering at the trough, and dashed around Semivody, hollering at the top of his voice: “Long live the co-op! Long live Comrade Sosnin!”

Today Sosnin was paying a call on the ailing Malva. He was driving a one-horse sleigh with a shaft bow, dressed in a frayed bear-skin coat which Malva remembered from the courses in Kostroma, and a rabbit cap, probably of local Hlynsk make. To keep the cold out of the house, he hung those furry articles on a peg in the entrance hall. The trousers he wore over his boots were neatly pressed as usual, and this amused Malva.

“You still keep on pressing them all the time?”

“It’s a habit, Malva, and I can’t do anything about it. I hate the sight of a man in rumpled trousers.” Like a child that rejoiced at getting a new toy, he rejoiced at every new machine that arrived in Semivody, apparently not without the assistance of Comrade Chubar. In his state of joy, he kept bragging all the time that he’d bag a bustard for Malva, but these birds had become so wary in our parts you couldn’t get close to one. From time to time he bagged a hare,

hanging it on the very same peg in the entrance hall that he did his coat and cap. Before making its final journey into the pot, the hare would freeze on the peg for a few days. Since Sosnin hailed from the Valdai Hills in Russia, he wanted to teach the Singers to make stewed hare Valdai style with mushrooms, berries and all sorts of spices, but nothing came of it. Where could mushrooms and berries and all sorts of spices come in when hare Babylon style, larded with pork fat and garlic and encircled by rings of potatoes, was something Malva's mother excelled in, and it was no less tasty.

Zhurba, or simply Redhead as Mother had renamed him, did not reappear for a long time. "Oh, mother, stop bothering me about that Redhead! You weren't at the grand ball, so you didn't see what Lemko girls came there. Some of them were so handsome they should be in a painting, and here you are keeping after me about that Redhead all the time."

"Oh, if only Sosnin were about ten years younger!"

Malva laughed kindly at her mother's worries which no one, save perhaps fate itself, could alter, but Ruzia who visited them day after day, completely neglecting her own home, kept convincing them that years didn't really matter, and that if it were up to her to choose between the Redhead and Sosnin she would have preferred the latter. Long in the tooth as he might be, he waltzed Varya Shatrova around the barn at a dizzying clip, while Ruzia could barely swing Klim Sinitsya with his artificial limb around herself. The more the grand ball receded into the past the more interesting it was for Ruzia to revive her memories about it. This worried Malva, for she had taken Ruzia's plight close to heart long ago.

Last spring, right on St. Eudoxia's Day when the March planets shift position in our parts, Malva was

unexpectedly summoned to the District Party Committee for an interview with the manager of the organization department, Yasha Timchenko, who spoke with her on behalf of the First Secretary or the First, as everyone called him. Yasha Timchenko was anything but tall, so he put on airs, puffed up his chest, and generally carried on as if he were God knows what kind of a giant. Whenever he rushed to the half-open window from behind his table at every jarring sound of a wagon or britzka, believing it to be the First returning, the broad bottoms of his pants, bagged at the knees from constant sitting, flapped lightly like aspen leaves. But the First didn't return and without him around Yasha Timchenko played the boss, grossly exaggerating the importance of his own person. Age did not seem to stand in Yasha's way, as he was barely over twenty years old and believed he still had plenty of time to climb the rungs of power, while the First, that is Klim Sinitsya, might as well vegetate in Hlynsk. Seeing a derisive twinkle in his visitor's eye and guessing the reason, Yasha Timchenko was forced to adopt a bombastic style of speech: "I have summoned you on the First's instructions in connection with an important circumstance which may change your whole life at the given historical stage..."

After a three-month course in Koziv, where Malva had stayed almost the whole winter, she qualified for a job as entomologist with the MTS in Babylon, that is, an instructor in controlling the pests which had damaged the crops so badly the previous year that the sugar-beet grand ball had to be called off. Babylon was left almost without any beets, while the turnip moth ruined the wheat. So Sosnin had been forced to take drastic measures. To save the entire crop zone from the weevil, he suggested doing away with the breeding grounds of the pest, so that spring, no beets

were sown in Babylon. He decided to transfer Malva to another crop zone — Green Mills — for that year. Since she was a Party member, the decision had to be okayed by the District Party Committee and Klim Sinitsya. Green Mills already had two communists — Aristarkh Lipsky and the agronomist Zhurba who gave lectures on vegetable growing at the courses that winter, having recently graduated from the agronomy courses in Bila Tserkva. The First wanted to set up a Party organization in Green Mills, and for some reason his choice fell on Malva, although, to tell the truth, he could have found another candidate in Hlynsk instead of sending a woman with a small child to the Lemkos. There was probably something behind all that which Timchenko did not know. “I think Klim Ivanovich could have been more considerate toward you,” Timchenko said.

When Malva entered the building of the District Party Committee, she noticed the huge rubber plant standing in the corridor (it had been there since the days of Maxim Teslya), although a far grander heritage passed on by Teslya was Varya Shatrova who had conquered the ascetic heart of Sinitsya. During his visits to Babylon, Klim Ivanovich gave the Kozhushnys’ home a wide berth, and Malva’s mother couldn’t keep from remarking once in a while, “For some reason Sinitsya hasn’t dropped in on us lately,” to which Malva would rejoin, “And what has he lost here?” When there’s no love, when it doesn’t appear at first sight, it’s useless waiting for it. Malva had learned that back in the days after she had been left a widow and had tied her horse to the co-op porch for the first time.

So it was off to Green Mills. There was the agronomist Zhurba who was far from indifferent to her ever since she had attended the courses in Koziv

where he had lectured on vegetable growing. The Red Genius, as he was nicknamed at the courses, was remarkably versed in the mysteries of plant distribution and propagation. Malva would remember all her life the theory of a certain Professor Finn on the double fertilization of definite varieties of plants, which Zhurba had learned about at the courses in Bila Tserkva and was lecturing on here with extraordinary passion. Yet the Red Genius knew nothing of and feared a woman's heart, reasoning that it simply had not been created for such theoreticians as he but for more practical men. Malva, though, was not an ordinary student but the courses' Party organizer; besides, she was on easy terms with Sosnin the director and Klim Sinitsya who put high hopes on the courses and frequented them to hear the "Red Professor." Well, geniuses are a cautious lot who weigh everything on their invisible scales. For some reason, Malva took a liking to Zhurba, probably because of his reverential attitude to plants and his understanding of their boundless world. It was only at the graduation ball when he had invited her for a waltz that she hinted she was not entirely indifferent to him. During the interview with Yasha Timchenko, she had asked what there was in Green Mills that could change her entire life at the given historical stage? (Could it be Fedir Zhurba? she wondered).

As it turned out, Zhurba was not the reason. The organization department manager didn't know anything about her relations with Zhurba. Yasha had joined the District Party Committee after the courses had already ended. He had some idea about them only from the records of his predecessor who looked after the courses on behalf of the District Party Committee, preparing reports on them for places higher-up and invariably imputing to Sosnin either right- or left-

wing deviations in his lectures. Like Malva, by the way, Yasha didn't understand much about those deviations. What counted most for him was whether a person looked ahead to the future or not, which Malva Kozhushna seemed to do, and so he supported the First's idea about Green Mills. Yasha said that it was precisely she, Malva, who was destined to build the first socialist village. Not in Babylon, or in Koziv or Pritske, but in Green Mills. For this purpose there was nothing to invent, so to speak, but simply have the farmsteads pulled down, build a single modern, socialist street, as Yasha emphasized, out in the steppe, plow up the farmsteaders' land and sow it to wheat, buckwheat and lungwort — in a word, to rid Green Mills of any remaining *kurkul* elements and turn it into a socialist village. Yasha spoke so passionately that Malva guessed that this idea about the new village was of his own making. And apparently it was. After hearing him out and seeing how thrilled he was at painting the future of Green Mills to her, and realizing in addition that the idea was utterly out of time, Malva laughed involuntarily.

"Yasha, I get the idea you want the Lemkos to kill me for those farmsteads. They've been living on them ever since their forefathers moved out to that steppe."

Yasha was nonplussed; moreover, he even seemed to have gained in stature and paced round the office, the bottoms of his pants flapping more vigorously than before.

"If they kill you, we'll name the village in your honor... Kozhushna Village. Not a bad idea, eh? Then we'll unveil a monument to you. Don't worry, I'd see to that. And so would Klim Ivanovich to be sure. But they rarely kill anyone now. The enemy's started to act on the sly. Mind you, on the sly."

"Thank you, Yasha, for putting me at ease. But it won't be that simple to root the Lemkos out of those farmsteads. It'd be almost like a second collectivization, and we'd have to ruin those people's whole lifestyle. Ruin it, mind you."

"Exactly! That's the only way to do it — to ruin it. Neither Aristarkh Lipsky, nor Comrade Zhurba, nor the local teachers there are capable of that. They're all related to one another and will stand by their kin through thick and thin. But you're from Babylon. A stranger, an outsider... Of course, you won't do it right away; first you'll put down roots there, take a good look around, then get down to the real work, and well, the honor and glory will be yours."

It hurt Malva to realize that this Yasha Timchenko didn't give two hoots about her life. Still, he had enough tact to say: "I'll replace you myself if anything happens." Malva felt that he'd go right away; he even had a good friend there — Domirel, a teacher who was a half-breed Turk. Yes, he'd go there, but he was too young to be trusted by the Lemkos. Here he was a department manager, and that made it an absolutely different matter, since he had the backing of the First, the District Party Committee, the staff propagandist, and Hlynsk. But in Green Mills, none of this would mean a thing: he'd get taken down a peg or two right away.

"The times are surely different now," Timchenko said. "There are no horses, swords, or machine-gun carts any more to put our message across. But you're just the right person for the job, Malva. We'll make Domirel a candidate for membership in the Party soon and he'll be your right-hand man. Domirel draws wonderfully, so let him draw a picture of the future village first." He didn't say anything about Zhurba, Aristarkh or the others — they were all a complicated

lot, and you had to taste gall and wormwood before coming to an understanding with a Lemko. Malva agreed to go on one condition — the Lemkos themselves would have to come and invite her.

Of that Yasha Timchenko hadn't any doubt whatsoever. They'd come! Aristarkh himself would come for her. Aristarkh badly needed an "outsider" to lean on. Timchenko saw her to the wagon in which she had come, set right the harness on the horses and angrily remarked about them being scabby, since a fine woman like her deserved something better.

"It's all I've got," Malva said with a sigh, while the department manager, having bid his guest farewell, hurried to the washstand in the yard, probably afraid of infecting the Party Committee's horses which had been in his charge for some time now after the committee's coachman Khoma had died during one of his journeys. The committee personnel, including the First himself, were now driving without a coachman. The staff propagandist Holovei made his rounds of the villages on foot, since he was afraid of horses and could not drive a wagon. "They might take me riding the wrong way," Holovei used to say. He had arrived here a year before from the Odessa school of propagandists and quoted all the great philosophers from memory; yet he was afraid of horses.

Malva waited all spring, but the envoys from Green Mills did not show up. The beets were sown, there was a good crop unspoiled by the weevils thanks to Malva's efforts, and then came the time of that first grand ball at which the Lemkos had arrived and from which she had brought Zhurba to her home.

One day he came on his own — without any prompting on the part of the District Party Committee, without any urging from Yasha Timchenko. He entertained himself on the swing by himself for a

while (Malva felt unwell and did not join him). Malva's mother got carried away daydreaming on the stove: maybe luck had come her daughter's way at long last.

Zhurba arrived driving a pair of horses with blinders, bits and other trappings — in a word, with such fine harness the Babylonians had already forgotten when they had last seen anything like it. His departure from Babylon that plashy spring day was like a scene from a fairytale. He took Malva and me with him. At that time I was an utter weakling having been fed on the Babylon flour gruel known as paste for God knows what reason. When he sent Zhurba for Malva, Aristarkh passed on a note to my father (they had once been on the same provisions procurement detachment) to remind him that his mother was living alone without my grandpa and there was no one in the house to hand the old woman a mug of water, while there were a crowd of the Valakhs in Babylon, so why not send a little shaver from the crowd to the old woman: Babylon surely wouldn't be any poorer for it. The "little shaver" in Babylon was me, and the Valakhs gladly surrendered an extra mouth to Green Mills (just for one spring!), but to me it seemed I was going there for life just like Malva, so substantially did my parents fit me out for the journey. The whole way, Malva was wiping the tears from her eyes with the edges of a percale kerchief, and her sorrow was the greater whenever we passed through the quiet twilit villages. Zhurba comforted her but not so adeptly as another man driving such a lordly pair of horses might have done. The only comfort he seemed to offer was to point constantly at the tied-up horse tails (in Babylon it was accepted procedure to bob the tails off right at the base and clip the manes, which deprived the horses of

something very essentially their own) and at the glossy croups which simply glowed under the moon: "Calm you down, Malva, and look what fine horses they've got there. That's Green Mills for you, ma'am!" Malva plied him with questions about the Lemkos and asked whether the famous mill was still working. "Sure, sure!" Zhurba kept calling out, and the horses took it for a command and put on more speed. She also asked where she would be living, to which Zhurba said that she would make her home in the house of Tikhin and Odarka Parnasenko. He had the key to the house on him and was prepared to pass it on to her right then and there. He and Aristarkh had given the problem of her accommodation a good thought. The house stood by a wasteland on the edge of the village above a pond, a truly paradisiacal spot to enjoy life. "Sure, sure!" Malva mimicked him with a sigh.

CHAPTER 2

Now I could compare everything here with our Babylon — the weeds, trees, the color of the cornflowers in the rye, the red poppies in the wheat, women, men, the local philosophers against the immortal Fabian, gods, teachers, Village Soviet executives — in a word, everything animate and inanimate that I saw with my own eyes and all the other things I was to discover myself, which back home made up the essence of Babylon. I had a feeling that this occupation would last until Green Mills would crowd my heart there would be no room left either for Fabian or for the son of Fabian the billy goat — a Babylonian crossbreed of white and bay, the colors representing the wit of his father and the

purely Babylonian frivolity of his mother (the son of Fabian the billy goat was borne by the nanny goat Chaplya who to this day can occasionally be seen on the highest hills of Babylon which only gray flocks of starlings can get to before their migration to the torrid lands in autumn). Green Mills also had a billy goat, yet without a sobriquet or a philosophical thought in his eyes, so he contributed practically nothing to Green Mills. Every day he gadded about without any purpose, and at night, so they said, he turned into a devil and scared the young Lemko women on their way home from the farming courses which Fedir Zhurba had introduced in place of the courses to eradicate illiteracy.

Zhurba, a former tender of cattle, was probably flattered to know a hundred times more than the mistresses of those cows he had grazed for such niggardly pay that the increase in the herd hardly alleviated the misery which haunted him ever since he had been a farmhand with Hordina. There was something unorthodox in the fact that instead of the great beet growers who were once the mainstay of Green Mills, he was the one lecturing on how to sow, grow and set records in beet harvests, although he hadn't brought a single wagonful of beets of his own to Zhurbiv in his life. For all his modesty and low-keyed profile, Zhurba could appreciate himself now far more than he was appreciated by those to whom he lectured late into the night in the cold brick house of the haughty Hordina who had fled abroad in the nineteen twenties and had his capital remitted there. The young women chuckled when they recalled how Zhurba had become an agronomist. When it was time to decide whom to send to study, the meeting had unanimously proposed Zhurba to get him out of Green Mills and deprive the young collective farm of its

most ardent defender and supporter. Aristarkh Lipsky, who trusted the will of the masses like a child, was soon to feel the loss. He had deprived himself of perhaps the greatest support he could possibly have hoped for, and without Fedir he felt far more insecure and diffident in Green Mills, but it was already too late to bring Zhurba back from Bila Tserkva and it would be embarrassing besides, since the student had just turned thirty then. When Aristarkh learned that after Bila Tserkva Fedir had settled down in Koziv to give his lectures there, he couldn't find a moment's rest.

Any other man would have been indifferent to the loss, but Aristarkh intensely wanted to have an educated agronomist in Green Mills, and not just anybody, but Zhurba. Figuratively speaking, he snatched him out of the first embraces of Malva who had joined the courses just at that time. Malva brought the agronomist from those courses to Babylon only once, and the second time he was seen was at the grand ball when he arrived from Green Mills along with the Lemkos who were given a chance to at least have a look at the real Babylon.

The house of Tikhin and Odarka, so people said, had been empty even when they had lived in it. They had no bed, no chest, no bench by the wall. There was only a table, its legs propped on four bricks so it wouldn't sink into the hard clay floor, and plank bed — also propped on bricks — covered with a threadbare cloth. The dish rack had only one plate, and there wasn't even a bread shovel standing in the corner by the stove.

Tikhin was a tall, tight-lipped man with a shock of chestnut hair that seemed to have been coated with turpentine; it was said that the wind rustled in that

tangle like through pine needles. His nose resembled an icicle but not the kind that formed under the thatch when a sudden frost was followed by a thaw; it was like the type where the thicker end hung downward, beginning from seemingly nothing at all — a tiny drop between shaggy eyebrows that looked very much like straw. Whenever Tikhin sneezed, Odarka thought he'd blow his nose off. He sneezed loudly, long, and with a relish, repeating all the while, "I've the honor, I've the honor." Also, Tikhin had unusually long arms that reached right to his bootlegs. When he fended the dogs off, Tikhin slapped the bootlegs with the palms of his hands without bending; seeing that they were dealing with something absolutely weird, the dogs immediately calmed down. Tikhin's eyes, kind and meek, were set so deep in their sockets the sun never reached them, and they seemed to be always in shadow.

Odarka was small of stature, and whenever they went visiting, she didn't walk at Tikhin's side but trotted behind him at some distance.

Their visits invariably coincided with lunch hour in Green Mills. There wasn't a single case when Tikhin and Odarka had erred as to what home to call on for lunch on any given day. "May this home be..." Tikhin would start saying and then go off in a fit of sneezing, letting Odarka in first. Then and there she'd start praising the redolent smells which she was supposed to have sensed before she even entered. "I've the honor, I've the honor," Tikhin would say in between his bouts of sneezing. They would be invited to the table for a treat of hot sausage or even blood sausage, for at the crack of dawn, from his hills Tikhin had seen the slaughtered hog being singed behind the barn of his hosts. Odarka took upon herself all the talking at the table, while Tikhin ate his food silently,

occasionally putting in a word of praise for the hosts. His deportment at the table was all civility, which made him look not like a tramp but like a desired and honorable guest.

Whenever they were lucky enough to have been treated to a drink, they would return home arm in arm, always singing one and the same song. Odarka her part, Tikhin his:

*Oh, good people, don't you wonder that I'm pretty choosy,
'Cause I want to have a husband who'd be fine
and smoothy.
He's to smoke no pipe whatever and sniff no tobacco
Nor love any other woman but obey me only.*

*Oh, good people, don't you wonder that I'm still a bach,
'Cause I want to find a dream girl who'll be a good match.
She's to have no crooked legs and guard my home daily,
Should I come home soused and pickled, she's to kiss
me gayly.*

To this day people in Green Mills use the byword "Let's strike up Tikhin and Odarka's ditty." When Tikhin didn't take Odarka visiting for a long time, she'd be dying of boredom and say: "What a life, I'd better go and do myself in under a mail train." If anyone in Green Mills wanted to meet an "easy death," not just any train would do — it had to be a "classy" mail train by all means. As the reasoning went, what sense was there to be done in by some freight train carrying no one except a guard in a sheepskin coat (if it was winter) in the last car; nobody would be stunned at your death, and only in

Green Mills would they say "a man's been run over" or "a woman's been run over" by a train. Only later on would anyone be interested in trying to find out who it was. But if it were a mail train, it would stop right away, there'd be a flurry of activity, and the passengers would broadcast the news about your death the world over. Say what you like, but even a suicide dreams of immortality. For half a century now, probably ever since the railroad had been built in these parts, the mail train had been passing through Green Mills from Odessa promptly on the minute just around lunch time. For the village it served as a chronometer by which the wags-on-the-wall were set, and wherever there wasn't a clock in the house, it was the signal to gather around the table for lunch. Another factor which might have been significant here was that precisely this train took the life of Marko Hordina who was villainously cheated and utterly ruined by his elder brother Mikhei Hordina. Well then, there are some examples which are blindly emulated.

So to relieve herself of the boredom, Odarka would dress up as if for a holiday and go to throw herself under precisely such a train. Since she had to cross the whole of Green Mills to reach her destination, Tikhin would catch up with her somewhere halfway, drag her home by force, and then take her on a few "visitations," as both of them called their traipsing about for lunch. Again they'd drop in on a hostess they hoped would treat them if not to sausage then at least to rolled pancakes with cottage cheese, or to dumplings stuffed with tripe, or else to roast mutton, the redolent smell of which Tikhin could sniff out at no mean distance.

So they continued living in this fashion until some-

one complained of them to the Village Soviet — now, there was no peace to be had from them, as it were, so wasn't it high time those loafers were called to account. Surely it must have been someone whose lunches they liked to frequent. Lipsky had both of them summoned to his office (at that time there was no collective farm, and he ran the Village Soviet). He had them sit side by side on a bench. Tikhin's hands grew numb with fright and dropped right to the floor from the bench. Odarka, though, folded hers in a prayerlike fashion. Never before had they been summoned to the Village Soviet, for they could not possibly have run into debt either with Green Mills or with the state. But here Aristarkh was giving them a talking-to:

"So that's what you're like, eh?"

"And what are we like?" Tikhin repeated the query and pulled his hands up to the bench, feeling that they had caught the chairman's eye in the first place.

"Tikhin and Odarka — our pride, our spirit..."

"That's us..."

"Sure," Odarka confirmed.

"So why do you disgrace the honor of poor people by sticking out like a sore thumb among our enemies, staring down their gullets, lunching at their homes?"

"Us?" Odarka was taken aback. "But we earn every morsel of it from those crooks. I crop duck and geese feathers for them, soak hemp in the pond. The whole winter long I spin skein cloth for them, may it grace their coffins! And Tikhin he..."

"I dig holes for herbage and beet cuttings and lay bricks in their cellars for them all autumn. That's hard work, believe me."

"See, but that's something they tend to forget. Now how long have you been living like that?"

"Ever since we got married. How long would that be, Tikhin?"

"Quite some time, even though we married late."

"For you it was late, but not for me."

"Oh, come on... It's me I had in mind, Odarka." Odarka was a year or two younger than her husband.

"Now don't you go around to them anymore," Aristarkh said. "Don't disgrace our class. A poor class it may be, but it's got pride. You'd be better off joining the SOZ *, and we'll help you however we can."

"They'll find it hard getting out of the habit," secretary Silvester Makivka said and advised Lipsky to have the couple pledge in writing not to indulge in their practices.

"No writing," Lipski said indignantly. "There must be a sense of consciousness to it. High class consciousness. Pride and dignity."

"Yes," Tikhin said. "Do you hear that, Odarka?"

"Sure, I can't help hearing it. I won't set my foot in their homes anymore."

Soon afterward, Odarka was nonetheless done in by the mail train passing through from Odessa. Tikhin was in the field just then, sowing rye with the other SOZ members. When the train stopped at Rak the trackman's hut, Tikhin instantly realized what might have happened. In the spring, he died as well. From grief. The SOZ members buried him with honors. Makivka played Tikhin and Odarka's ditty on the violin all by himself, since the other musicians hadn't learned it up yet.

To this day, they seem to be roaming through Green

* Short form of TSOZ (*Tovaristvo spilnoi obrobky zemli*) — Association for the Communal Working of Land, one of the forerunners of collective farms — Tr.

Mills on their "visitations" during the night, of course, with Tikhin, tall like a lath, up front and Odarka trotting behind him. Quite a few people had seen them, Lipsky, who frequently returned home later after meetings, more than anyone.

Once he hailed them on the road: "Is that you, Tikhin?" No answer followed, and they disappeared. Lipsky must have been seeing things. When I returned home late, Grandma Pavlina used to scare me with Tikhin and Odarka. "There's nothing strange about it," she said. "The miller still visits his mill ever since he was killed by flywheel there."

Those old Lemkos are a strange lot, believing in everything like children. For some time, however, I, too, had been looking intently into the dark whenever I returned home late from the Lipskys. I wished I could see Tikhin and Odarka just once. What were they talking about when they roamed the village at night? I wondered. And had they guessed already who was living in their house now?

Not far from the cottage, on a steep hill overgrown with hawthorn, there are two little graves side by side — Odarka and Tikhin's. The couple seemed to have chosen that place well beforehand to spare Green Mills any extra trouble after their death, or it could have been that those poor people were afraid of getting lost in the crowded, haughtily grave cemetery in the center of the village. Although the graves didn't have a cross bound by an embroidered *rushnik* towel or any other markers, the deceased, for all that, were resting near their dear home, while in early spring, a periwinkle spread across the graves, trailing downhill in two streamlets — one from Tikhin's and the other from Odarka's grave.

Every Sunday, Malva went to the graves, sat down on a bench which Zhurba had built for her, and

wonderingly took in that nook of the world into which fate had thrown her. Down below, a nameless brook slunk toward the rusty swamp in which cows perished every summer and people every winter. Opposite the house, a low dam bridged the streamlet, turning it into a pond every spring. By mid-summer it would dry up completely and fill up again with the onset of the rains. The house stood at the foot of the hill without a single fruit tree anywhere around, except a wild cherry tree amid islets of blackthorn and hawthorn. It was obvious that Tikhin and Odarka didn't care about their farmyard; they did not have a well, and every summer dug a spring in the meadow, scooping water out of it until it filled with silt. As soon as one spring ceased to serve its purpose, Tikhin dug another one nearby, so now there were a good many unused springs, only one of them still showing some traces of life. When Zhurba had moved in here, he dug a well in the yard; its water tasted much better. Since the well did not have a curb, he covered it with boards so that neither man nor beast would fall into it at night. The cottage was built along Lemko lines but not without some Western influences, either Austrian or German, for Green Mills had been founded one hundred and fifty years before. The houses here were long with all the components—dwelling quarters, stable and barn—under one thatch, with a raised roof for the barn. A wooden gate led to the barn; in its side wall was a narrow door locally known as "thieves' door." Zhurba did not touch either the stable or barn, considering they belonged to the various nocturnal vagrants whose traces he and Malva came across more and more often. Whenever the strangers came and gave themselves away by stomping around, coughing or even talking, Malva was usually asleep and Zhurba didn't wake her,

although he held himself in readiness, keeping the ax he used to chop hawthorn for firewood under the bench. True, Lipsky offered him one of the rifles he armed his watchmen with. Anyone else in Zhurba's place would have availed himself of such an offer and fired the gun if not at the thieves then at least through the window as a warning; in Green Mills they would have surely heard the shot and come running with their shotguns. But Zhurba refrained from doing so, uncertain as to whether he should resort to firearms without any apparent necessity. First, it would spare Malva, since a rifle would immediately put her on guard; and second, if those were really thieves, they probably knew the house had nothing to carry off. Still, he kept the ax at hand every single night as a last resort should the vagrants decide to break in. Without breathing a word to Malva about the nocturnal visitors, he stealthily looked into the barn every morning and always saw a hide of either a bullock, cow, and at times, even an ox hanging from the joist, while in the weeds, he came across entrails. Zhurba did not touch the hides, but after they had dried, they disappeared from the joist one fine night. It did not even occur to him to report any of this to Lipsky, the more so since no such thefts had been reported in Green Mills; the thieves were probably from a neighboring village and had known about the empty barn long before Zhurba had moved in. But when Malva herself came across traces of those nocturnal visitors (an abandoned pot by the well and entrails in the weeds), Zhurba set her mind at rest by saying: "Don't raise a fuss about it. It's better to keep away from that lot. Maybe they're hungry."

The barn stood on the roadside between two neighboring villages — Furmanivka and Mikhailivka. The cattle must have been stolen in Furmanivka and

brought to Mikhailivka or the other way around, and so the rustlers had turned the barn into their own private slaughterhouse where they could divide the loot and rest, while Green Mills was awarded the hides from the joist. The only thing Zhurba failed to spy out was who was taking the hides and when. Had the Parnasenkos been alive, those goods would have surely been theirs and that was no mean bargain in those days. A good hide, let alone an ox hide, could buy quite a lot at a co-op store. When, many years later, Malva told me about the Parnasenkos's barn, I involuntarily recalled the story of the Babylonian cow. This story, which is both funny and tragic, will undoubtedly remain in Babylon's annals as a monument to human ingenuity and solidarity in the face of life's hardships.

She had nourished entire nations with her milk. As long as we would be alive, we'd remember the morning and evening fragrance of her milk which was either sweet, almost honeylike from the flowers she had eaten for us, or slightly bitter as if wormwood had been steeped in it, or unexpectedly gave off the smell of a sweet-clover steppe which conjured up in our minds the Cossacks of long ago. At other times the milk smelled of rye stubble with a heady infusion of bindweed and wild thyme. Every day it was a bit different, and that dissimilarity was as miraculous as the cow herself. The only thing she could have been reproached for was her indifference as to whom she nourished — genius or tyrant, one and the other could grow equally strong on her milk.

Our cow always gave a scanty yield, although she had a huge udder with four teats (there are sometimes fantastic deviations, you know). Her coat color was of a mellow golden hue, and she had big horns,

the tips of which met high above her head, pale yellow-gray eyes, and an unusually dignified gait; when she was full, her voice was trumpetlike and lazy, but occasionally, at night she broke out into what sounded like an alarmed flute warning her masters that something was troubling her. In the herd, even the nastiest cows treated her with respect (those who lack character have a showy appearance). In a word, she was almost a Paleozoic creature, and with the passage of years, she became even more fabulous and striking unlike the other Babylonian cows, a good dozen of which had been calved by her. She was offered for sale time and again. Compromised and noticeably bearing a grudge against her masters, Zozulia marched into her farmyard a victor after every market, and then, grazed on the very same meadow and kept in the same stall she had been before, she worked miracles within a week or two.

This spring she calved down for what appeared to be the last time. Now just imagine what a hoopla there was in our home and what a fine life we had after that. For a week we had beestings, after which we slaughtered the calf whose meat was sticky and sweet. The cow grieved over her loss but gradually started to give us her milk, which we drank to our heart's content, allotting one jugful for Yavtukh's kids every day. Yavtukh came for the milk early in the morning, but before taking it home, he would drink some in two long gulps lest it spill on the way, and then carried it home like a precious treasure. Once Yavtukh tripped and broke the milk jug, after which Prisia started coming for the milk. She didn't allow herself a single gulp, taking all of the milk to her children, although my mother always filled the jug to the brim. Without those extra gulps, Yavtukh

became perceptibly weaker and grew taciturn and gloomy. Father had mother give a quart of milk over and above the jugful especially for Yavtukh. Our neighbor regained his vitality and became merrier. In the meantime, Zozulia was working overtime, and now two families with many children were praying over her as our most sacred object. Every day at sunrise, Yavtukh came running over to our home, and after learning that Zozulia was safe and sound, went back to Prisia with a light heart and hope. Once a week, mother contrived to squeeze some cottage cheese and cured it on the stove, which made it smell almost like Easter for both families.

Then suddenly, an unexpected epidemic of cow thefts struck the villages, something which had never occurred before. To steal a cow is difficult, since you can't run far with her, so the thieves could only have been of local origin. It all started in the winter, and after two or three thefts, a sleuthhound was called in from Hlynsk. Unable to catch a single thief, the dog was not sent for any more, and the thefts gained in frequency. Any time now it would be Zozulia's turn. One night the thieves managed to get into our barn by breaking through its thick adobe wall. Still, they could not lead off the cow, since they couldn't unlock the horse hobbles she was fettered in for the night. The frightened Zozulia gave less milk, and shied away even from her masters.

Yavtukh and my father devised a trap, should the thieves try their luck in our barn again. The walls were reinforced with boards from the inside, and over the door, on a special lever, they hung a heavy weight which would drop the moment anyone crossed the threshold. Besides, the entrance to the barn was reinforced by a triangle of chain, so even if the thieves managed to stay clear of the weight, which would

bump the first daredevil on the head like lightning out of the blue, they would by no means be able to lead out the cow through that triangle of chain. Probably no other cow in history had ever lived in such a fortress. My father and Yavtukh could sleep serenely now, for they had set their highest hopes on the weight, the effect of which Yavtukh almost tested on himself when he peeked into the barn one morning, forgetting about his devilish contrivance. The weight came swishing down right in front of his nose and sunk into the floor on impact. In this way Yavtukh found out that the weight dropped a fraction of a second earlier than it should, and this defect was rectified in time. Once the fortification works were set up, we children were prohibited from entering the barn, and now we could watch Zozulia only from a distance through the open door, because the chain wasn't taken down even during the day, as Yavtukh was afraid the thieves might lead off the cow in broad daylight without experiencing the effect of all the gadgetry that had cost him so much brainwork and effort. My father and mother had now the opportunity to become convinced that Yavtukh was perhaps the main savior of our cow, and in gratitude for his devotion and ingenuity, the milk had been divided equally for some time now, although the cow remained ours as before. The fortifications were also improved upon by digging and camouflaging a number of pitfalls along the approaches to the barn. That would serve the crooks right for depriving so many Babylonian children of milk.

In the meantime, creative thought did not slumber in the enemy camp either. Yavtukh's ruses were being duly registered. The pitfalls were undoubtedly the trickiest element in the entire system of fortifications,

but they could not stop the thieves. One night they made their presence felt with all the perfidy of accomplished professionals. Avoiding all the pitfalls (apparently designed more for the cow than for the thieves), they safely reached the barn, opened the door, and by all reasoning, had already espied their prey when the weight went into action. As it proved later on, no one in our or Yavtukh's home heard the weight drop, but the wild screams of the victim brought both families to their feet, because the screaming didn't cease for a long time way over in the willow scrub by the pond where the thieves had retreated to save the victim. Sleep had fled both from our home and from the Holiys', and in the morning, the fortifiers congratulated each other with the following words at the barn:

"Was it the weight?"

"Sure it was, may they rot in hell!"

My father and Yavtukh hung it up at its assault position, checking and rechecking the accuracy of its angle of impact.

After the incident, one of the Babylonians didn't venture into the open for a long time (he was Nazar from Pritske, or Nazarko as he was called, who lived with his wife's parents); he had been a suspect long since, and without a shadow of a doubt, it was he Yavtukh's weight had gotten the better of. From that day forth, Nazarko has been a hunchback. Yavtukh became so puffed up with importance it seemed he reckoned that our cow (that is, the Valakhs') had nothing to do with us anymore and belonged to him—complete with the barn and all the fortification contraptions that went with it (the weight really belonged to Yavtukh who had acquired it when he was but a beggar with pipe dreams of becoming a rich farmer). Now he attended every milking of the cow

without any ceremony and personally supervised the division of the milk. When mother hinted that it was our cow after all, Yavtukh said: "Cow or no cow, we know the Valakhs all too well. Which of the Valakhs would shortchange himself?" After that mother vowed never to set foot in the barn again; the cow was milked by Prisia who managed to get more milk. Yavtukh divided it as justly as he could, but the conflict between the Holiys and Valakhs was inexorably heading for a big showdown. The Valakhs became ever more convinced that the cow had to be butchered before it fell into the hands of Yavtukh.

One day at dawn, father went to make sure the cow was there. He woke up Yavtukh, both of them opened the door, and after having neutralized the weight, they saw that the barn was empty, without even a whiff of milk in the air. Overhead, however, the thatch had a big hole with a ladder leading up to it. All that remained of the cow was the head with its eyes staring at them from under the manger, the cow itself having been carried off piecemeal through the thatch — the only part of the fortifications Yavtukh hadn't paid any attention to. The ladder was hauled off to the Village Soviet as material evidence in the hope that someone there could identify it. It stood by the Village Soviet for quite some time until Savka Chibis burned it in the stove on which he slept. In the meantime, the future of both families was within a hairbreadth of disaster. Father filled up the pitfalls so the children wouldn't fall into them and carried out of the house everything which could qualify as cold steel, while Yavtukh grew gloomy and taciturn again. Sometimes he would go into the barn and stay there at length — no doubt he was thinking up some truly fantastic defense mechanism, but none of it made any sense any more, since the cow was gone.

"How's your White Lebedin? You know, Sosnin showed up at our place. Yes, exactly, the same Innokentiy Mstislavovich who founded the co-op. He's now organizing an MTS in Semivody, the first along the Southern Bug. In our neighborhood, in my Koziv, we're opening an agricultural school. It's in a beautiful place by a forest in the former manor of the Branickis. Sosnin has started agricultural courses there around which the school will be organized. He's teaching political studies, agronomy and something else of that sort; after all, he once studied in the Sorbonne with Dmitro Zakharovich Manuïlsky. Sosnin is in bad shape now after having been wounded by the kulaks (way out in Siberia on the Oka River), but he still irons his trousers every day just like he used to at the co-op, and he never loses heart.*

"A revolution can win in a single day, in the course of a night, if it's prepared by the entire pace of history — it can be a flash, a burst. But the small-proprietor mentality of the peasants won't be crushed immediately. The last stronghold of the old ideals will crumble when the peasant stops feeling that he is a slave of the land and becomes an industrial worker. As a class, the peasantry will decrease numerically, yet it will develop into a progressive element of society. Babylon and Hlynsk will disappear to be replaced by a fabulous town of agricultural workers. So I asked Sosnin: what will we do with the millions of peasants who'll be replaced by machines? They'll be absorbed by the industrial centers in the big cities.

* Manuïlsky, Dmitro (1883—1959) — noted Party figure and statesman; Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Ukrainian SSR from 1944 to 1952 — Tr.

That's what awaits us in the future. But so far, life is hard. Quite a lot of land has not been planted under crops, the weevils are ruining the beets, there are thistles galore on the former boundary strips of what used to be individual holdings, the winter-wheat fields are overgrown with cress, their yellow flowers such an eyesore it gives me a headache. The skeptics hope all this will become a shambles so they can take their plots back over and bring the grain from them to their private threshing floors. I see them stealthily repairing flails, sieves and grain sacks. That's a peasant for you! Is there anything more mysterious? And this is happening at a time when we're receiving threshing machines, and Sosnin is urgently training operators to work them.

"I've had the beet seeders cleaned, lubricated, and parked in a row for everyone to see, because no sooner do we begin hiding them or locking them up than the enemys' attention will be drawn to them and we will have steered him toward the 'target' ourselves.

"Varya hasn't returned yet, but every day at dawn when I go down to the wash raft by the District Party Committee to get cleaned up, I see some white goddess bathing in what used to be Varya's backwater. But it isn't her. It's probably some relation of the Snigurs on holiday here."

"You've described it so vividly I felt I had been in the backwater myself. In mente. That's my imagination playing tricks on me, Klim. In real life there's simply Varya Shatrova — freckled, with large blue eyes the color of Hypanis as Herodotus referred to our Southern Bug River, if I recall correctly. What*

* In my mind (Lat.)

attracts us to or repels us from every woman is her past, which is much better than a woman without any past at all. A woman without a past can't have a future. And where can it come from and grow toward when there wasn't any drama, tragedy, woe, doubts? Dullness and inanity in woman can be sensed at a distance. Varya isn't beautiful, but she has something which my Ivanna lacks, a spontaneity, something that's free from inhibition, so to speak. Probably the most difficult thing for a woman is to remain simply a woman. In this case, she's on the verge of becoming a white goddess as my friend sees her from the wash raft by the District Party Committee."

"All day long, I'm chairing the farm here, and at night I'm plowing up fallow on a caterpillar tractor. I've got two hundred hectares of weed fallow which is impassable either for oxen or horses. The jungles of thistles and bramble make the water boil over in my caterpillar. That's how my daddy neglected the land while he nurtured his darling oxen and read the magazine *Agronomy Self-Taught* which, incidentally, has some articles by Sosnin. I came across them entirely by chance; previously I had no idea about this magazine which taught my daddy about all the things we came upon in Babylon and then here in my Lebedin. Tell Sosnin that I'm taking some ideas from the magazine, not for myself, of course, but for the collective farm. By the way, it also has articles on how to control pests that feed on beets, potatoes, wheat, and even roses.

"Klim, don't you believe that the counterrevolutionaries could have infested our fields with new pests. They propagate on their own. Some pest grubs can lie dormant underground for tens of years and then wake up. My regards to Varya. If Comrade Hapochka

were not so vigilant, I'd have written her by all means. I wouldn't want my letters to her appear in Kramatorsk, the more so since for the sake of reconciliation, Ivanna has sent our elder daughter Halina to my place. Halina jokes that now my and her mother's forces have been equalized: two against two..."

The children slept soundly, but sleep had fled from Aristarkh Lipsky. For many a night now, Frog Lake on the edge of the orchard below kept making its presence felt. For that was where the first spring frog orchestras were coming into being.

Well, that's how it happens in life. A man creates for himself something seemingly grand and eternal at first sight in the hope of impressing the world and deriving joy from his efforts during the last years of his life at least. But life is wiser than man. It passes away, surges through its instant and is extinguished, having consumed itself in its own fires, which every man builds at the outset to burn himself up as well. The warmth of a fire built by a good man will comfort others for a long time, or maybe even stay on forever, to be freely taken advantage of by anyone who is capable of not discarding the warmth of the lives that burned before him and who doesn't place his life in the center of the universe amidst the boundless galaxy of other lives. Only megalomaniacs can nourish the hope that the universe belongs exclusively to them. They may even exist in that illusory overworld for some time, convinced that they are eternal, whereas they are spring butterflies like all the others with perhaps a larger or smaller number of daubs on their somber wings.

Aristarkh considered himself mortal, and so he took heed of all the creations of other people who had lived before him as if he were warming himself at

the fires they had built. He opened the window facing the lake and listened to the call of rejuvenation. The first call came from a ringleader, then the bold spirit was supported by a number of voices, after which the whole orchestra went into action, amazing the listener not so much by their sense of ensemble as by their ability to take sudden breaks for respite.

Suddenly, one night a violin was heard in that orchestra. Aristarkh couldn't believe his ears; he went outdoors and stole up to the lake lest he frighten away the violinist if there really were one there. Doubtless, the orchestra accompanied the violinist with a gusto as never before and without those virtuoso breaks. Aristarkh grew numb with amazement, and anything might have crossed his mind had he believed in ghosts. He hid behind a hoary poplar, still thinking he was hearing things. But the sounds of the violin carried over the lake somewhere close by. He left his post behind the poplar and went to the dam along a path left by the cattle in the nettles.

Standing there was a violinist barely bowing his instrument. The ghost of Smerechenko, Aristarkh thought, without the slightest intent of distracting him. But the violinist must have had somewhat different notions about ghosts. On seeing the motionless white shadow nearby, he suddenly froze, leaving the orchestra to its own devices on the trickiest note, turned abruptly on his heels, and bolted off along the dam in the opposite direction, his pant legs flapping. Aristarkh burst out laughing when he recognized his bookkeeper as the violinist who, forgetting in his fright that one of his legs was shorter than the other, was clambering up the hill for all he was worth. Aristarkh followed in pursuit, catching up with him at the crest of the hill. Silvester was trembling all over, his face distorted with fright. "Oh damn it,

what a comedown!" he said. When both of them returned to the dam, Silvester gradually came to his senses and complained to the chairman, pointing with his bow to the hushed lake: "There are a number of tone-deaf frogs hunkering there on the island. But there's nothing you can do with them — it's a chronic plight with all orchestras. In oratorios, when they croak before the onset of a draught, they're still bearable. But this was an adagio, a piece in a minor key portending rain with a gradual acceleration of rhythm. Listen, you can hear it now." He put the violin under his chin and slowly drew the bow across the strings. Aristarkh stood there, sensing almost physically his soul dissipating and flying off somewhere. The ringleader in the lake instantly picked up the violin's tone and then thousands if not millions of musicians flooded the lake with a melody full of delicious melancholy. By that time the bow had picked up speed, dancing across the strings to the apparent delight of the whole orchestra. And only the tone-deaf ones burst out in dissonance to this truly divine melody in which nature and man had fused into one. Then the rain started to fall — on the orchards, oat fields, barley fields, on the Lemkos; the more sensitive musicians fell silent one after another as did the violinist, and only the tone-deaf ones carried on, seemingly claiming credit for this first spring rain until a landrail lifted his voice and pressed them into silence, thereby asserting his eternal right to foretell rain in spite of his artless, monotone song.

Aristarkh returned home awed and soothed, yet alarmed at the same time, for he was almost convinced that there must have been some reason for Silvester Makivka to have staged this frog concert to the accompaniment of his violin. In the morning, however, Aristarkh didn't find anything in Green Mills

to relate to the appearance of the violinist at the lake. It was a vagary of a genius and nothing more, Aristarkh thought, setting his mind at rest as he greased the springs of his gig for a trip to Hlynsk.

Zhurba got up when the first blush of morning broke over Green Mills, looked into the barn to see whether there was a new hide hanging from the joist, and depending on whether there was one or not, he either went down the road, following the fresh rut of a wagon or ran along a footpath he himself had cut through the beet plantation. He hurried to the collective farmyard where Aristarkh Lipsky was already running around hollering. After sending everyone who had a job to do about his business, Lipsky cleared his throat and pressed his hand against his chest, complaining: "They'll grind me yet, those Green Mills, they'll grind me to death one of these days. I wish I had an amiable disposition like you, Zhurba." Then he went to the dairy, drank a quart of milk that was being steamed out in a boiler before going into a separator, hitched the horses to the gig which Hordina used to drive, and repaired to the field where he stayed the whole day among the people whom he had sent there with so much effort. There his attitude to them was kind, composed, and even gentle, and till the next morning he was of the best opinion of them. Zhurba, however, was the same in the morning, at midday, and after sunset when the Lemkos returned home from the field in wagons, singing the remarkable songs which their forefathers had brought here from the Carpathians. On one of the wagons was Zhurba singing the highest parts in the chorus. Malva loved to listen to those evening songs as she cooked corn gruel for Zhurba in the middle of the yard on two bricks placed in the burned-out knotgrass. Every evening the smoke from the fire was different, either

drifting upward which was a sign of dry weather, or hugging the ground before rain or a wind. Zhurba was walking through the beet plantation, feeling hungry but happy for all that. Seeing how he had barely stirred his stumps all that day, Lipsky had him issued a kilogram of pearl barley, a kilogram of meat of an ox who was too old to be useful for anything, and a bottle of cooking oil for frying loach. That would last him for a week, after which the cherries would be ripe, the early potatoes set, the peas would push up their first pods, and no one would prohibit the agronomist from ambling into the middle of the field of peas and helping himself to a meal of greens, something like a diplomatic stand-up, the only difference being that it would not take place in a fine hall but in the middle of a field. For the time being, his supreme hope was loach. Every Sunday, Zhurba and Malva picked up their wicker baskets and went out to the rusty swamp. Zhurba would take off his trousers, leaving his long johns on to protect his legs from the leeches (there were practically none in the water, but a man can always invent an excuse for himself if need be), while Malva was not afraid of leeches and tucked her skirt up so high that Zhurba could see all her charms even when she stood waist-deep in the water (in the morning, the water was startlingly clear). By midday they would have half a pailful of loaches, the smallest of which went to make soup (or *yukha* as it was called locally). The larger fish were fried if there was any cooking oil (the Parnasenkos had left them a beautiful pig-iron frying pan), and the rest Zhurba put on a string and hung out to dry under the thatch where there was less sunshine. In the winter, dried loach made wonderful lean borshch, but the strings of loach under the thatch kept disappearing. After such a fishing trip and lunch,

they would take the largest sheepskin coat from their wardrobe, spread it under a blackthorn bush with the fleece turned inside out (one half of it was white, the other black, and as a matter of course Malva occupied the white half) and slept on it as after a luxurious bath. To be more precise, Zhurba did the sleeping, but Malva just couldn't get used to sleeping outdoors. First a golden dragonfly that seemed to have darted out of Zhurba's red hair would flit by right over her ear, then sparrows would scuffle in the bush for no apparent reason as the sloes were still green, then a train would rumble out of nowhere and roll through Green Mills for a long time. From the Parnasenkos' house the railroad could not be seen; but the trains could be heard rolling in and out of Lemko country. Malva loved to listen to the trains and think her own private thoughts as well as about her travels far and near. Besides, she also could watch the sleeping Zhurba when beads of sweat rolled down his pug nose, and count the golden hairs in his eyelashes, thicker than other people's but so few in number they seemed to have been glued on. Zhurba's arched eyebrows grew high on his forehead and met in a dense shaggy patch on the bridge of his nose. They resembled a bat in flight and were approximately the same color. His shock of hair ranged from red to golden, curled when it was not cropped for a long time, and was remarkably soft and silky. His broad chest was also covered with hair, but that growth was more wiry, probably because it was hidden from the sunshine. Malva's mother burst into tears when Malva brought Zhurba home the first time. "Mother, give us your blessing," Malva said. "This is my husband Fedir Zhurba."

"Oh my God, such a redhead? No thanks, I couldn't possibly give you my blessing."

"But, Mom, it's not his fault, after all." Malva said with a laugh, trying to tone down her mother's bluntness, and started to praise his soul. All her life Malva had dreamed of swarthy man, but what could she do if fate had decided otherwise. Malva had known many a man and thus had something to compare him with, but probably none had had such a pure soul as he. In Zhurba she had found a peace of mind she could never have hoped for, living as she did without love or the urge to revive it. Zhurba could only have guessed this, but he never demanded love. Not without reason did Fabian once say that taking an oath leads to breaking of that oath. Zhurba had his own notions about love and believed not in someone else's love of him but in his own love of that person. When he awoke under the blackthorn and saw Malva at his side gazing into the sky with a sad and at times wistful look, he was sincerely glad she was with him and perhaps even for his own sake. Wasn't that much more than the lofty words about love he'd had his fill of in his forty years, reaping only delusion every time.

"I wake up and don't believe it's you," he'd say to Malva.

"And I kept looking at you all the time, wondering what kind of a husband I have — good or bad?"

"Just take me for what I am, Malva."

As he caressed her, Green Mills was preparing for its regular evening party somewhere beyond the hills. The Lemkos flocked there on bicycles purchased from Austria in the days when Hordina was still around. Near the club the orchestra would soon play a march, inviting and always unusual, and here was Malva, and the sky, and some bird, a shrike it seemed, which invariably reminded them of itself or of its loneliness. Then they would spruce themselves up

and head for the club along the very same footpath Zhurba took on his way to work — through the weeds, Zhurba walking with his shoes on, Malva carrying her pumps in her hands. She put them on by the ditch after washing her feet in the dew.

There were already a number of bicycles leaning against the wall of the club. They belonged to the Lemkos who had sent their younger men to find out whether there was any Tivriv beer at the party and whether the agronomist and his wife were attending. Then the Lemkos came in flocks to the club. It would take an hour or two for the party to get rolling. The last to appear was the school principal, Lel Lelkovich, a handsome dandy who was the pride of the Lemkos. Indeed, he was beautiful as a god, dressed in a hunting jacket and riding breeches, with a white high-peaked cap, articulate boots (that is, stridently creaking), and a velvety voice that was also articulate. "Lel Lelkovich, Lel Lelkovich" — the news of his arrival swept through the crowd of Lemkos like a stream.

He had come to those parts from Lemko land seven or eight years ago, that is, one hundred and fifty years later than everyone else. To them, he seemed to have brought back what they had been gradually losing. Even the teacher Kirilo Lukich whose ruler had swiped across several generations of pupils now lived only in the reflection of the principal's glory. For all that, Lel Lelkovich could take the liberty of coming for a beer without formality and feel quite at home in the club. "Oh, what a handsome man!" "What a voice he has, neighbor." "And how he dresses!" "Oh yes, you bet." Malva thought he was much too handsome for a man. Entering the club through the hallway where they sold beer, he took his high-peaked cap off, which reduced his stature a bit,

and then set out the chessmen on a little table. Right away, a girl from the buffet brought two mugs of beer to the table. "That's the way they live," Zhurba said, when the orchestra struck up a waltz and the first pairs of elderly Lemkos stepped onto the dance floor. Kirilo Lukich listened to the music in a dignified manner, sitting in an armchair near the orchestra which was conducted by his student, the lame violinist Silvester Makivka, who was also a great mathematician and the collective farm's bookkeeper. It was he who the day before had talked Lipsky into adding a bottle of cooking oil to the rations of pearl barley and meat for Zhurba. Makivka was over fifty, single, and lived with his elder sister in a cottage on the other side of the railroad in the smaller part of Green Mills. Every Sunday, his sister came to listen to her famous brother playing the violin. Makivka was friends with my father, because like no one else, not even the Hlynsk tailors, my old man could make Makivka trousers which hid his lameness. One leg of the trousers was always several inches shorter and much broader than the other, but usually no one noticed. However, now it struck the eye and seemed to clash with the divine sounds of Strauss's music. Makivka was short of stature, his nose resembled a diligently scrubbed, unpeeled potato, his mouth seemed to be blowing all the trumpets in the orchestra at the same time, and he himself was as agile as his fingers — short digits woven out of nerves. Kirilo Lukich sat in the bandmaster's armchair and was proud to have brought up such a great musician. In the meantime, Makivka's sister Georgina wept furtively among the Lemko women who occupied the chairs along the walls, forming a sort of a circle for the dancers. No one could hide anything from their eyes. Lel Lelkovich and Lipsky slowly savored the beer in

little sips, knowing that a second mug would not be forthcoming, because the beer was brewed out of rye, and here rye was divided according to the principle of highest justice.

Not knowing that beer would be sold at the party, Zhurba and Malva hadn't brought any money with them, and Zhurba didn't have the courage to borrow any. When the girl from the buffet went to Lipsky's table for the empty mugs, he remembered the couple and whispered something to the girl. She searched with her eyes for the agronomist and his wife, and a minute later came to them with two mugfuls of beer.

"It's Lel Lelkovich's treat," she said.

"Why should he do that?" Zhurba asked.

"Aristarkh told me to..."

"All right. We might as well wash down the loaches," Zhurba said in surrender.

They took the mugs with the frothing beer smelling of fermented rye and malt. Zhurba emptied his in one long gulp, while Malva sipped the beer, each gulp intoxicating her lightly. She didn't drink it all and wanted to give the rest to Zhurba, but he refused politely, although he could have drunk several mugfuls in a row. "God forbid; such things aren't forgiven here," he whispered to her. Malva had to empty the mug by herself and was utterly intoxicated. She saw Lel Lelkovich double, his white cap on the windowsill floated away somewhere along with the window, the brass trumpets shifted onto the ceiling for some reason, the beer mug fell out of her hand and broke to smithereens, and Zhurba had to pick up the pieces in front of everyone. He carried them out of the hall, then he returned for Malva and led her outdoors. He had a feeling someone had slapped him across the face: what would they think of Babylon now?

They went back home past the school which stood

to the side of the road in a field. Wary pine trees guarded the trampled schoolyard from the road, skirting the school orchard on the hill. Zhurba led Malva down a lane toward the meadow from where a little meandering stream brought them to their home by the dam. Standing on the dam, Zhurba listened intently for any sounds that might indicate that they had "guests" in the barn, but silence reigned all around, interrupted only by a quail in the millet. It was time to go into the house, but Malva remained true to herself. "I want to wash myself," she said and started peeling off her clothes right there on the dam. Zhurba didn't stop her. A gray mist was rising over the water, Malva dived into it, and carried on like a girl, laughing, squealing, spluttering, and calling Zhurba to join her. But Zhurba just sat on the dam and warned her constantly: "Don't swim out there, there's a hole. A girl drowned in it last summer." "Ha-ha-ha!" was the only reply he got. Lel Leikovich is terribly handsome to be sure, Zhurba thought. Malva's still weak, judging by the way she got drunk on a mugful of beer. On the other hand, Zhurba had also been in a different world that day. When he helped her up the dam, she said, "Take my clothes," and went off ahead of him without a stitch on toward the house. Picking up the clothes, he forgot her pumps, and by the time he had gone back for them she was already standing at the door. "Where are you?" "I'm coming, damn it. I forgot your shoes." The door was unlocked; anyone else would have been alarmed, but Zhurba only remarked, "I must have forgotten to lock it." Inside, not a scrap of anything had been touched: even the cooking oil stood in its place on the dish rack. "Must have been friends," Zhurba said with a smile as he blew out the kerosene lamp.

Around midnight, the "thieves' door" in the barn creaked and something four-footed was led across the farmyard; the animal walked slowly, its cloven hooves catching in the knotgrass (for here it was tangled and dense like an old sheep's fleece), the hooves cracked, probably after having covered a long distance; then the victim's cry (not a moan of agony, but precisely a cry at the threshold of death) came from the barn, after which something heavy dropped to the ground, waking Malva; it must have been something bulky, surely an ox which the rope tied to the joist could not hold; the lamp trembled on the table and the window panes jangled following the impact. "What was that?" Malva asked. "Probably an ox," Zhurba replied calmly to put her mind at ease, pretending he didn't care at all what had happened. After an hour or so, a wagon rolled to a halt at the clay pit, someone came out of the barn with a heavy load and crossed the farmyard in the direction of the dam, someone else went up to the door of the house, stopped there, tugged at the handle, and then stomped on to the dam and the clay pit. The wagon rolled heavily uphill from the clay pit and creaked on toward Mikhailivka. Zhurba sat up in bed, climbed over Malva, and went over to the window. A gray mist hung over the pond, stretching to the clay pit. Only the hoisting gear bridge of the sluice loomed in the mist and no more. Zhurba looked at his watch; it was three o'clock in the morning — a time, as he thought, when the world was still under the sway of crooks and astronomers. Smelling blood nearby, the bats in the clay pit became excited and made their way to the farmyard through the mist, shying away from Zhurba in his white underwear and from the windows, against which the young inexperienced bats could smash themselves.

Coming out of the house at dawn, Zhurba saw a

blood-soaked sack hanging on a nail near a roof spar under the thatch; he took it down warily and peeked inside — there was a fine hunk of beef smelling of tallow. In a matter of minutes, the farmyard could have been filled with the redolent smell of roast beef. Zhurba physically felt the alluring smell tickling his senses, yet he did not call Malva, afraid lest she succumb to the temptation. He resolutely picked up the sack, carried it to the pond, took the meat out, and threw it into the water for the crayfish to feast on. He also threw in the sack, but since it was greasy with tallow it wouldn't sink, so he had to make it go under by throwing pieces of dirt on it from the dam. The hide hanging in the barn was huge, stretching across almost the entire length of the joist; it was gray with the golden tinge of summer and a worn side — unmistakably an oxhide. Zhurba hadn't seen oxen of such a color in Green Mills which preferred the reddish "Hollanders" introduced into these parts God knows when from Alpine Europe, probably long before the Lemkos.

When Malva got up, the gruel was almost ready in the pot on the bricks. Zhurba was stirring it with a pear-wood spoon, had Malva taste it to see if it was salty enough (Zhurba never put enough salt in anything), added a pinch and then flavored the gruel with cooking oil from the bottle — the wonderful smell filled the yard instantly. They had breakfast sitting on a cloth spread over the knotgrass and ate from the same plate. Zhurba scooped up the watery gruel, leaving the thick part at the bottom for Malva, and smiled to himself, mentally comparing his breakfast with the breakfast the crayfish were having now on the bottom of the pond.

They left home together and went down the footpath running through the sugar beets. In the collective

farmyard, Lipsky was already shouting his head off. Malva hitched the horses to a water barrel, filled it with a solution of molasses, arsenic and a number of other poisons, and drove off to the beet plantation to fill the troughs which Zhurba had installed to protect the crops against beet moth, rye beetle and other pests threatening the Green Mills harvest that summer. Malva parked the barrel by the roadside and carried the solution to the troughs in pails day in and day out throughout the spring. These days, they don't put such troughs in the fields, but back then, they made them in the winter months and installed as many as possible after sowing. By the time she made one round to fill up the troughs, the others would dry up completely or crack and leak; Malva had to take care of every one of them, because somehow Zhurba knew everything about each trough and would remind her over supper: "You've missed a trough on Martsushina's plot, so don't forget to fill it up tomorrow." The next day Malva would find that blasted trough, but during supper Zhurba would again remind her of another trough she had missed right at the end of the plantation above a knoll, from which direction the turnip moth was supposed to be making its inroads. Once Malva couldn't check herself and burst into a gale of laughter during supper.

"For God's sake, what's the matter, Malva?" Zhurba said.

"When do you have the time to check on that thousand of troughs, Zhurba?"

"I fly over them like a moth," he answered and broke into laughter as well.

What a funny woman she was! Had she been more observant, she would have noticed that he made his rounds when everyone was lunching somewhere in the shade. He wandered for an hour or two and noted

the condition of every trough, or rather, the conduct of the pests over every trough. That's all there was to it. He didn't have to look into every single trough. But let this little secret be his, let Green Mills think that he, Fedir Zhurba, flew over the fields, as it were.

CHAPTER 4

Used to hills in their homeland, but missing them here, the Lemkos settled on imitation hills or rather on the Podolian knolls (here the steppe merged with Podolia *), occupying their southern slopes which at least bordered on a little stream. Those who were done out of their share of a knoll or had failed to seize a sunny spot on a slope for a house and orchard, simply settled on the plain, or the "bottom" as it was called here, and although they were no worse off than the others, they and their descendants still envied the "highlanders" who had their spring earlier and a drier autumn and whose trees lived longer and bore more fruit, because they were rooted in the red clay which even the oaks could not reach on the "bottom." The houses on the knolls were dry as a bone, while on the plain the humid corners of the dwellings smelled of mould even in summer, the more so if the houses were immersed in shrubbery. Nonetheless, the keen-witted peasants were not afraid to settle on the plain where they grew richer on their sugar beet and wheat crops from year to year, gradually pushing their poorer counterparts off the southern slopes to the northern. In this way, a small group of well-to-do peasants called the "gub'nors" appeared in Green

* Podolia — lit. Lowland — a region in southwestern Ukraine — Tr.

Mills to become the mainstay of the local counter-revolution. In 1920, Soviet power had been established here with the help of an armored train. Thanks to the neighboring railroad, the armored train rolled up several times and shelled Green Mills, which ostensibly did not want to submit to the new power. In fact, it were the "gub'nors" who didn't want to submit, for they felt their end was coming. The contest with them was terminated by Aristarkh when an armored train under his command plastered their "stone nests" in the fields of wheat which the "gub'nors" didn't want to share either with the famine-stricken Volga regions or with the Red centers of Ukraine. "Pay for gold with gold," the "gub'nors" demanded, forbidding the starving peasants from harvesting the crop. Hnat Smerechenko set his wheat plot on fire and burned himself with it. The others had to retreat, but the sly Mikhei Hordina relinquished everything he had for an exit visa abroad. The steam mill he had built in the middle of his field was perhaps the only one in these parts; it competed freely with the windmills in the neighboring villages and reaped Hordina a generous income which he had transferred bit by bit to Vienna for a rainy day. They say he left Green Mills with a valise which contained nothing but shirts embroidered by his chamber maid who had borne him a daughter. Hordina was widowed early. He had no children and lived with his chamber maid. With the birth of a daughter, he didn't lose his head either. Half a year earlier, a flywheel had killed the young miller Vlastovenko at the mill, so Hordina had his illegitimate child registered in the deceased man's name. So living now in Green Mills was Pania Vlastovenko whom Hordina had not wished to inherit his wealth. Pania was over twenty and lived with her mother in Hordina's first house which was completely

run-down, and to this day only the huge orchard remains to remind us of Hordina's endeavors. Hordina built himself a second home in the vast field where his mill loomed over everything; every spring, he had it painted in Paris green. Now that second estate of his belonged to the collective farm, Pania and her mother being the first to join it along with their orchard, horse, plow and everything else that had to be socialized. Now the yellow cherries had ripened in that orchard.

Instead of using the regular grownups for picking the cherries, Lipsky decided to enlist the services of the older schoolchildren, or steeplejacks as he called them. Another reason for making such a decision was that the children would eat less. "We've got a lot of cherries, so you can eat as much as you want, but only when you're in the trees," he said. "Once you're on the ground, that's the end of the treat, and you can take home only your earnings." Besides, he warned the children casually that overeating might make them sick and there had been cases in Green Mills when children fell from the trees for some unknown reason.

Our share in the work was to pick the cherries in the Vlastovenkos' orchard. It was an old, immense orchard occupying a huge knoll terminating in a hazel grove. The cherries grew not far from the Vlastovenkos' house where lived the mother, whom we failed to see that day — eager as we had been to have a look at the former chamber maid of Hordina — and Pania with her husband Mikola Rak who worked as a locomotive stoker and was gone most of the time, visiting his home rarely. They said he was tall, lean and parched from the locomotive fireboxes. His father, old man Rak, was a railway trackman who hailed from Green Mills and was even a distant relative of the

Vlastovenkos. One thing we knew for sure: the Raks had always been landless peasants who hired themselves out as farmhands, and then, with the appearance of the railroad, they rushed to it to seek fortunes for themselves and their kin, for whom they had quickly occupied quite a stretch of the railroad between Pilipi and Mansur. Yet for all that, they never got a higher status than trackmen. But as if to make up for it, all the trackmen's huts along the stretch were occupied by various Raks, old, gnarled, mustached men, hunched from wielding crossbars and hacks. The younger Raks, who came five and even twenty kilometers to visit the Lemkos' club every Saturday, jumped on the early morning trains going uphill and thus had a ride back home to their huts filled with a host of children bred for one purpose only — to work as trackmen. In this simple way, Mikola Rak had "hitched a ride" to his love Pania Vlastovenko; the Raks supposedly considered his marriage to her a revenge on Hordina for the misery their kin had suffered. There was more to it than Mikola's just falling in love with Pania, or Panka as she was called here. After his travels, he loved to visit her huge orchard which didn't have a watchman until harvest time, and so could be considered the Vlastovenkos'. As for their house, Rak Junior wasn't inclined either to repair or refurbish it, and it had sunk into the ground right up to the windows, with only the barn rising over its foundation walls, as if it were propping up the whole house. Mikola was a radio buff and used the high ridge of the barn roof for his antennas. He fixed a number of masts to it and twined a dense net of wires round that tumbledown house to catch the mysterious sounds of the universe for Pania. The wires would have remained simply a tangle of metal had they not been

lent perfect discipline and purpose by the white porcelain insulators — ranging from the largest to the smallest at which the wires intersected over the barn and over the trees and over the cherry trees up which we had clambered with linen bags round our necks.

We worked under the command of Kuprian, a gardener who was as fanatically thrifty as Lipsky. Kuprian was an old bachelor who went about mumbling discontentedly to himself, and a self-styled adherent of Michurin* who didn't raise anything worthwhile in Green Mills, but was proud of his correspondence with the great man. In his own orchard, he tried all sorts of tricks with the trees and ended up ruining almost all of them, making pears turn into apples and apples into pears. Every spring, Lel Lelkovich asked him to come prune the school orchard and at the same time give us some lessons in grafting. Even during those lessons the old man grumbled discontentedly, probably of our lack of response and incapability of grasping this age-old technique known from the days of Semiramis' gardens in Babylon. "Pah!" he'd say with murderous anger at the end of every lesson as he folded the blade of the pruning knife he carried on a chain hooked to his belt, combed back his bush of gray hair all wet under his sweat-drenched hat, twirled his mustache, and then aired his opinion of us: "You boneheaded nitwits. The only thing you know is how to pick other people's orchards clean, and you won't create anything in this world except the likes of yourself. Now be off to

* Michurin, Ivan (1855-1935) — outstanding Soviet Russian biologist and one of the founders of scientific selection of agricultural crops; bred and improved over 300 varieties of fruits and berries — Tr.

your Lel Lelkovich's classes, because Comrade Lipsky is expecting me." Kuprian trotted off in time with his mumbling. It might have been that subconsciously he muttered utter nonsense constantly just to sustain his gait. Trotting about as he did, naturally, he never caught sight of a single Lemko girl in his whole life, although it was said that he had once loved Pania's mother when she was still in the employ of Hordina. If he ever did love her, it must have been unrequited, like love for a tree. You can look at it, admire it, and even be thrilled by the sight of it, but it knows nothing of your feelings, loving a neighboring tree or a tree in another orchard on the other side of the pond or river or at the other end of Green Mills. Such love is fecundated by bees when the orchards are in bloom, and then the drones use the fruits of this love... Kuprian must have been mumbling about tree love as he ran from cherry tree to cherry tree, cursing our insatiability: "Hey you up there, when will you start working for the collective farm at long last?" Hearing the cherry stones drop to the ground or right on his hat made him rage in blistering fury, shake his fists at us and holler: "May you be damned if the only thing you care about is your own needs!"

The cherries were large as hoopoe's eggs, yellow-white, transparent, fragrant, still chilly after the night, easy and pleasant to swallow after several days of continuous rains which had washed and prepared them specially for us, so the bags around our necks filled slowly, and when our bodies were unable to move and work any longer, the only thing we wished for was to fall to the ground (as Lipsky had warned us would happen) and lie on the cool grass with our filled bellies upward. In the branches, the laughter had ceased, our merry cries had died down, and our contended souls strived for peace and quiet, which

made Kuprian's mumbling down below seem like the buzzing of enraged bumblebees spreading and lulling us to sleep at a time when we had to make recompense for the damage we had inflicted on the collective farm. Presently, Pania arrived with a bowl and stopped right under the tree I was sitting in.

"Uncle Kuprian," she said, "Mother's laid up and wants some cherries, so she asked you..."

"Does she have any work-days for them?"

"What kind of work-days are you talking about? I told you she's sick. She's been laid up since Epiphany."

"I'm no doctor, I'm just a gardener. Leave the bowl, and I'll bring you some later on. But don't breathe a word of it to Lipsky, because every single cherry is taken stock of for work-days. I haven't even had a taste of those cherries myself. But, of course, I can't refuse a sick person. Leave the bowl over there in the weeds."

Pania put the glazed bowl down on the grass, stood there for a while, raised her head, and then our gaze met through the twigs. Hers were large sorrowful eyes, hazel or perhaps dark blue, emitting a cool, quiet light which I seemed to have caught for a fleeting moment through the twigs. It lasted for a second or so, after which she dropped her eyes and was about to leave when I stopped her on an impulse I can't figure out the reason for now:

"Wait a minute! Don't go!"

"Are you talking to me?" she asked, hesitating.

"Wait, I'll be down in a moment."

As I was getting down, I grew jittery and hesitant, and here was Kuprian devouring me alive with his reddish little peepers, not knowing why I was getting down from the tree, since every bag was fixed to a string by means of which the full bags could be easily

lowered and once Kuprian emptied them, the bags went up the trees again. It wasn't that easy to clamber up the high trunk with a slippery bark that seemed to have been smeared with grease. I took the bag off my neck, went over to the bowl, emptied the cherries into it, and brought the bowl to her as a gift from the bottom of my heart that had been illuminated by her eyes. Pania was noticeably discomfited and confused, her eyes looking somewhere over my head — yes, she had dark-blue eyes, a long neck as white as the water lilies on the pond, while under her cambric blouse, her breasts heaved with alarm, and tears rolled from her eyes.

“Put it down,” she said. “Uncle Kuprian will bring it later on.” She turned around and left, a tall proud woman with straight shoulders and a black braid that reached almost to the hem of her skirt. I remained standing there with the bowl chockful of cherries which rolled down into the grass one by one and turned into tears there, because when I put the bag round my neck again and tried to gather the spilled cherries I couldn't find any for my clouded eyes.

“A Babylonian you may be, but you behave as if it had been you who'd planted those cherry trees,” Kuprian told me. “How d'ye like that — he's a sugar daddy already! Now take off that bag and get out of here.”

“But why, uncle?”

“Because you offended the woman, sticking that bowl of cherries under her nose like that.”

“But she's got a sick mother...”

“Are you blind or what?” Kuprian drove his point home. “Don't you see there's a cherry tree I haven't allowed you to pick? It's over there, the best we have. I've left it for them. And you little crank, you had to go sticking that bowl under her nose. Pahl!” Kuprian

spat on the ground with disgust. "I can't explain all that in front of everybody. You were told plainly enough to leave the bowl and I'd bring it to them later on. I see that in your Babylon you were never taught to mind your own business. Now off with you! Go sit by the pond until I get over my anger. You Bab-y-lo-nian!"

As I was leaving, bagfuls of cherries were being lowered on their strings from trees here and there throughout the orchard. Like someone demented, Kuprian rushed from one bag to another, untied them and emptied their contents into boxes with printed labels featuring a bunch of yellow cherries. I sat by the pond, racking my brains as to why I had been chased out of the orchard. Pania's eyes seemed to shine at me out of the water, yet deep in my heart I didn't feel bitter at all — instead something unusually lofty welled up in my heart. My train of thought revolved around her, and I got it into my head that if I were as dazzlingly handsome as our principal Lel Lelkovich, I would have certainly fallen in love with Pania. I couldn't have guessed then that this was my first taste of love for whose reciprocity I would be waiting many years.

Several days later, after a swim at eventide, I looked into the orchard to see whether what Kuprian had told me was true. Here and there, occasional cherries hung in the trees which Kuprian made the boys pick, but one tree seemed showered with diamonds. Under it, a tall ladder leaned against the trunk and someone was rustling in the twigs. I came nearer and saw Pania picking cherries into a white pillow case tied to her waist. On a side branch sat Lel Lelkovich smoking a cigarette, his patent-leather shoes pulled onto bare feet dangling from the tree. We, beginning smokers, knew that he smoked Salvé

cigarettes which came by train from Odessa to the railroad station at Pilipi, and from the station's refreshment counter, Salvé was brought to Green Mills. At the sight of Lel Lelkovich, I almost shrieked and bolted off along the footpath leading to the hazel grove. Pania burst into a gale of laughter up in the tree, guessing that only a pupil would have run away from his principal in such a manner.

The whole night through, trains kept rolling into and out of Green Mills in unprecedented numbers. Each such train could have carried Mikola Rak, which quite a few of them did in fact. Occasionally, instead of getting off in Green Mills, he threw his stoker's bread ration out of the train for Pania at one of the trackmen's huts belonging to his relatives who, after taking a share of the ration, passed the rest on to Pania.

A week hadn't passed when the oxhide disappeared from the joist. It must have been carried off during the night, because the day before, Zhurba had seen it in the barn. Such a hide, which hadn't been completely curried at that, had surely been carried away by two men, for one could hardly have managed it. Zhurba was convinced that the hide had been taken by someone from Green Mills, probably by one of his neighbors, because it was unlikely that the property had been retrieved by those who hung the hides on the joist and who surely reckoned that it was sufficient pay for the present masters of the Parnasenkos' barn and for their skill at keeping a secret. After the disappearance of the last hide, Zhurba realized for the first time that he had become the victim of a horrible paradox: the crooks thought he was taking the hides. Now those mysterious people had every reason to

consider him their secret accomplice, for in one way or another, they were paying him or, putting it bluntly, sharing the loot, as was proper for "gentlemen" abiding by the etiquette of the criminal trade. Further exploitation of the barn held nothing good in store for Zhurba, and he, in spite of the patience he had exercised up to that point, was forced to seek help from Comrade Makedonsky.

One night someone rapped on the side window giving on to the blackthorn grove.

"Who's there?" Zhurba asked, convinced that it was the cattle rustlers.

"It's friends. Open up."

"What friends? We're not expecting anybody. Go away and leave us in peace."

Presently, Malva jumped out of bed, pushed Zhurba away from the window, and said: "Beat it! We don't know you. What do you want from us?"

The strangers came out of the shrubs, went up to another window, and rapped more insistently. When Zhurba came to the window, he saw fingertips and a little higher up, a flattened nose pressed to the window pane. Zhurba looked intently at the faces of the uninvited guests.

"Makedonsky, is that you?" Zhurba asked in surprise.

The man behind the window pressed his forefinger to his lips, gesturing Zhurba to silence.

Zhurba opened the entrance hall door for the men.

"Why didn't you speak up right away? Please come in."

"Hush. They might show up any minute now."

"Yes, it's about time."

Makedonsky pointed to the three men who were with him and said to Zhurba: "Bring them some water and go back to sleep."

"I'll be with you in a minute," Zhurba said, rushed out of the room, and returned with a quart of water.

"Make it a pail," Makedonsky said. "We had salted herring for supper and are dying of thirst now."

Zhurba brought in a pail from the entrance hall.

"By the way, the pail should have been left by the well. For the crooks," Makedonsky said with a smile, taking the pail with what was left of the warm water in it. He spilled it out onto the knotgrass by the door and gave the pail to one of the militiamen.

"Bring some fresh water, Svitlishin."

"Where's the well around this place?" Svitlishin asked Zhurba.

"Over there by the meadow. It's shallow, so don't stir it up too much," Zhurba said, adding for Makedonsky's sake, "They leave their wagon at the clay pit... Maybe I should get dressed and help you?"

"No, what for? Go back to sleep and apologize to your wife for us. It must be scary for a woman to live out here."

"You must know her," Zhurba said, smiling.

"Who is she?"

"Malva Kozhushna from Babylon."

"You don't say! Do you know who his wife is, Stepan?"

"An ordinary woman," Zhurba said.

"See what love does to people, Stepan. And you said that love was an invention of the poets."

"It wasn't me who said that. It was Svitlishin."

"Tell him to be careful, or else he'll scoop up some frogs from that well," Zhurba said. For some time he, too, had been convinced that love didn't exist.

"Svitlishin, be careful; there are frogs in the well."

"It's all right, they're cool," Svitlishin's voice came already from the well. Then they heard how he

groaned getting down on his belly and scooping up the water.

"Go now, Zhurba. You don't have to lock the door. You've got a reliable guard. And apologize to Malva for us. Don't turn the light on, though. It must look like any other night when you're asleep in bed."

Zhurba then heard them drink the water in turns, the quart tinkling against the side of the pail. Someone threw a frog out of the pail — Makedonsky or so it seemed, judging by the hissing comments — and went to the well for another bucketful. Then everything was quiet in the farmyard and in Green Mills — not a sound was heard except for the night trains which plowed the silence deeply and wearily now in one direction, now in another, and faded away into the reaches of the night. Neither Malva nor Zhurba slept till dawn, waiting for those whom Makedonsky was expecting to drive their last victim across the yard to the barn in a minute.

"Does he have a Mauser?" Malva asked.

"Yes, he does."

"How many of them are there?"

"Four."

"And how many crooks?"

"About the same number I guess. An ox or a cow is best divided among four, so a fifth is one too many. Those bastards wanted to make me their accomplice. Imagine that..."

"Perhaps they had me in mind," Malva suggested with a smile.

"Oh come on, Malva, you can't be serious."

"I'm absolutely serious. Real thieves must have a woman for an accomplice by all means. Then no Makedonsky will catch them. In the day they send out a woman to check out the lay of the land, and then get down to work at night."

"How do you know?"

"I once had an affair with a great horse thief. It didn't last long, though. Only one summer. He told me the finer points of the art."

"And so you went out spying for him?"

"Oh no. I simply laughed it off. It was on the Abyssinian hills in Babylon. Andrian was dying at the time and chased me away, probably afraid I'd contract consumption from him, so I visited the Abyssinian hills."

"And what happened to the horse thief?"

"The last time I saw him was three years ago in the spring when he was hiding from Makedonsky at the co-op. That night, Sosnin arrived and the two of us chased him out of the garret he had climbed into with a rope. Then he disappeared without a trace. His brother is still in Babylon — Lukian Sokolyuk, chairman of the Village Soviet."

"You must mean Danko."

"Why, do you know him?"

"We served in the same company in General Brusilov's Army. I was in the first batch of conscripts, and he was in the third, I think. Yes, in the third. Fresh reinforcements before a counteroffensive. By that time I already had a St. George's Cross for the engagement at Beltsy. Our CO was killed in action, so I got the men on their feet for the assault."

"You?"

"Malva, I'm not a young man anymore, you know."

"Where's your St. George's Cross?"

"Safe at my mother's in Konski Rozdori. We'll go there some day and I'll show it to you. By the way, Mother wants to meet you very much. She's quite old now."

"So that's the kind of man you are, Zhurba."

"I'm nothing unusual. I liked Danko, I did. He was

a real soldier. We nicknamed him the Gypsy, because he was always stealing horses from the neighboring regiments."

"You mean right there on the front line?"

"Yes. If a horse got killed or crippled in action, you'd have to wait until a replacement came from the rear. And that's when Danko helped the company out. Oh my, what horses he got for us! He bobbed the tail and clipped the mane, and no one would ever recognize his old mount. That's probably when it all started with him. I don't seem to hear the thieves."

"Could they really have gobbled up such an enormous ox in a couple of days?"

"You're forgetting about the relatives, Malva. Each of the thieves has relatives. A hunk of meat goes to the father-in-law, a hunk to mother-in-law, a hunk to the father of the son-in-law — and that's the whole ox for you. We got a pretty hunk, too."

"When?"

"Oh, that's something I didn't tell you. One morning I went out and found it hanging under the thatch on the nail where you hang your keys. It was in a sack with the blood still dripping from it. Well, what was I supposed to do? I took down the sack and looked inside — first-rate meat. The ox must have been lazy, not overworked at all, and later on I could tell by the gloss of the hide that he had been fattened up all right. I wanted to wake you and throw a regal meal for breakfast. It would have been enough for more than one. But then I got to thinking and threw it into the pond for the crayfish."

"And kept mum about it."

"Why torment your hungry soul?"

"What a strange, strange man you are, Fedir. That's what makes you so dear to me," Malva said and kissed him passionately on his chest, while he lay

there gazing in disbelief at the low ceiling spanned by a black beam. He simply couldn't believe it. He'd lost faith in love, and now he had to overcome his disillusionment in a house where the Parnasenkos hadn't experienced any happiness. The misery and happlessness they had lived with still seemed to hang on the air in the house, and even the blackthorn growing round about, lightened by an occasional sloe here and there, looked doomed. Only the thistles thrived here. However, out by the spring which Tikhin and Odarka had dug in turns, the Parnasenkos had planted a lot of cranberry bushes which one day would make a grove.

At dawn Makedonsky left for Hlynsk in his britzka which he had hid in the clay pit, while two of his men stayed behind in the barn for another week. Green Mills wasn't supposed to know about the ambush, since Makedonsky assumed that it was someone from those parts and not some neighboring or distant village using the Parnasenkos' barn. Vasilishin fancied himself a great conspirator and sternly instructed Zhurba and Malva on what they should do under various circumstances, but he couldn't make himself stay in the barn all day long, came out of it to look around, kept running to the well for cool water, and was probably spotted in the end.

The sack was fished out of the pond but produced nothing, neither initials or any other clues that could be traced back to its owner.

One day at dawn Lipsky sent a wagon out for the militiamen and they left for Hlynsk. On parting, Vasilishin rapped on the window and pressed the palm of his hand against it, his fingers fanning out on the pane. Vasilishin had hoped to apprehend the thieves just as they were cutting up the carcass of an ox or cow, because he himself hadn't tasted real meat

for a long time, and besides, he wanted to thank his hosts somehow for sharing their food with him and his fellow militiamen. All these days Malva had been cooking for four. "Thank God they're gone," Zhurba said, glad to have gotten rid of them. Of course, Lipsky might have helped them out with the food, but in that case he couldn't have avoided approaching the bookkeeper Silvester Makivka whose musical ear had already picked up the goings on of some alien forces in Green Mills which were being kept secret from him. The only thing he didn't know for sure was their number. Silvester was one of those Lemkos who placed the honor of his clansmen above everything else and hoped to rectify their shortcomings with the aid of his divine music. To this effect, Fabian once said that all great musicians are inclined to idealize their audiences, and when they play for them they must believe that they are playing for God Himself. But the Devil also likes listening to fine music, especially when he's not hungry.

Every evening I had to fetch Grandma's cow Beany from the village herd. Actually, she was but a ghostly semblance of a cow with bones sticking out of her sides so far you could hang pails on them, horns resembling two dead tree trunks jutting out of a gray head that still had enough pluck in it, and low-hanging udders that reached almost to the ground from years of filling up with milk and could easily be washed by the dew even on the lowest stands of grass. The responsibility of driving such a critter through Green Mills was no picnic, because Beany would stop to rest from time to time, and making her budge was almost impossible, while beating such a martyr would be an act of sacrilege not only to the Hindus but to the Lemkos as well. Beany was spotted, not with

splotches of black and white as were most of her counterparts, but of crimson and white, colors which blended so well it was simply pleasing to the eye. Such harmony could be achieved only by nature. Beany would stop in the middle of the road for a rest, while I stood off to one side admiring her coloring against the background of a rye field. The crimson blended with the color of the evening sky and the white with the rye, so that the outlines of the cow almost vanished and only big daubs of color were visible. Viewed from a distance, such a pattern surely produced an indelible impression. But presently, two cyclists — Lel Lelkovich dressed in white and Pania behind him — bore down upon us. Not on bicycles they seemed to fly but on wings of inspiration. I heard the whirring spokes of the front wheel, but Beany stood rooted to the ground, and all my attempts to budge her were in vain. At the last moment, Lel Lelkovich veered aside into a field of peas and tumbled into it along with the bicycle, but Pania tore past with a laugh on the other side along the rye, leaving behind strands of laughter that caught in the cow's horns — I saw them, they tinkled, although they might as well have been strands of cobweb the steppe spiders weave on the cattle's horns at evening. After accomplishing this act of sabotage against the principal, Beany moved on, leaving me, the herdsman, answerable for her misdemeanor. Just then I realized that cows know little about their herdsman and even less about their relations with mankind. Lel Lelkovich got out of the pea field, his white shirt smudged green at the elbows (luckily he couldn't see it). He didn't say a word about the cow, as if she weren't to blame for anything that had happened, and in justice to me as a representative of Babylon, he addressed me with words from Balthasar's banquet, the gist of which remained

a mystery to me: "*Mene, Mene, Tekel, Peres* *," adding with a laugh: "That's it, boy."

He then pushed off the bike with one leg, the other on the pedal, and as the bike gained momentum, I noted with horror that a certain delicate part of his white tussore trousers was of the same color as the elbows. He would have been better off returning home to change into clean clothes, but instead he caught up with Pania, while I trudged after the cow, pondering over the prospect of Lel Lelkovich giving me a failing mark on the exam on the history of Babylon, for why else would he have uttered those mysterious words of two thousand years ago. Pania probably didn't recognize me as she was vigorously trying to evade the cow. She was in a green skirt, white pumps on suntanned legs, her knees an enticing brown, the black braid in front wound round her neck like a shawl, for otherwise it could have caught in the spokes of the rear wheel. I would have sunk with shame had Pania fallen into the peas because of my cow.

Beyond the pea field they turned onto the road leading to Zhurbiv and the sugar refinery. From time to time, movies were shown there, and Lel Lelkovich never missed a single one.

After driving the cow to the manger, I asked Grandma Pavlina why Grandpa hadn't acquired a bike.

"Oh, he had one," she said, hiding a smile in the corners of her lips. "Because of that bike I was given

* *Mene* — God hath numbered thy kingdom, and finished it; *Tekel* — Thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting; *Peres* — Thy kingdom is divided, and given to the Medes and Persians. This is the interpretation of the words of warning written by an invisible hand on the wall during the banquet of King Balthasar of Babylon (6th century B. C.). The next day Babylon was seized by the Persians, and Balthasar met his end — Tr.

in marriage to him to Green Mills. Never in our lives had we seen such an odd contraption in our Panki. But when Grandpa died, I gave the bike to Lel Lelkovich as a present for his oration at Grandpa's graveside."

"Just for a funeral oration?" I asked on the verge of tears as I imagined myself on the bike beside Pania, or to be more precise, Pania sitting in front of me on the crossbar just like the girls to whom the boys in Green Mills occasionally gave a ride.

"Oh, but what an oration it was! It made everyone cry," Grandma Pavlina said, throwing a pinch of salt into the milk pail and heading for Beany. The cow didn't care for grass anymore but ate only wormwood in the pasture which made the milk so bitter it was next to impossible to drink, although Grandma praised it as much as she could, saying that wormwood milk was medicinal, for it was the same as drinking *yevshan* * herb.

Lel Lelkovich and Pania returned late. I stood under the mulberry tree right by the roadside. The chain on Grandpa's bike was skipping now and then, and Lel Lelkovich lagged noticeably behind Pania. The stars fled past me in the nickel plating of the bikes, and a gentle murmur rippled through the rye field, beyond which the black funnels of the mill showed. Should they start belching smoke, Green Mills would instantly burst into another life unknown to me as yet. So far the funnels hadn't emitted smoke but once since spring. Lel Lelkovich would probably see Pania all the way to her house.

And now an incredibly long train, judging by the

* Wormwood (literal meaning), also a magical herb supposed to revive memories of one's native land with its distinctive scent — Tr.

ceaseless clicketyclack of its wheels, was rolling through Green Mills. The locomotive shot sparks into the night, huffed and panted up the rise, and let out a long whistle at the turn. That might have been a signal for Pania from Mikola Rak. Probably he had again dropped off his bread ration which every stoker got before a run. Back home I heard Grandma saying in the darkness that it was too early for me to be playing the beau and getting home so late, and that my milk was standing on the table in a pitcher as usual. Besides, she comforted me by saying that in about a week there'd be a new batch of baked bread. A month ago she had said the same thing. Now is there anything more wonderful in this world than our grandmas treating us to a drink of *yevshan* herb! I drank it right from the pitcher by the window and thought: Lel Lelkovich still has to get home from Pania's. The footpaths from there run in a zigzag, the bike is a tall one, so the cyclist might just take a spill and break his neck... Now and again the sound of Grandma's breathing fell behind the partition (where she slept on a plank bed) and then reawakened smoothly and quietly. I lay there, thinking that once Grandpa used to sleep in this bed under the tiny window with four panes, a window probably put in especially for grandchildren. A branch of a cherry tree, which only the day before had been white all over, peeped into the window. In Babylon, I never saw such dense flower clusters, probably because there was no little window like this one. In Lipsky's farmyard, dogs started to bark, breaking off just as suddenly as they had started up on seeing Lel Lelkovich on his way back from Pania's across the dam which old Smerechenko had built God knows how many years before. Now his house was occupied by the Lipskys! Only great Fabian could have grasped the

mysteries of the universe I tried to unravel that night to the frenzied music of the rolling trains, in which there was more of the ring of labor than inspiration.

“Old Snigur, Varya’s father, died. We summoned her from Velikiy Ustyug by telegram, but she didn’t get to the funeral on time. So the Martian and I had to bury the old man ourselves. Varya came to the District Party Committee to thank us for our help. What help was there really — just getting the planks for the coffin and inviting the orchestra from Babylon. So Varya’s a lonely orphan now. Her son stayed behind in Ustyug where his grandma is already tottering on the brink of the grave. Varya has a grudge against you for not writing her a single word from your White Lebedin. Lodgers are all the same, she says: once they’re gone, they forget you. Right she is. In a word, she’s not the same woman she used to be. It may be because of her father’s death or something else. What if her husband Shatrov turned up over there after all? When you think about it, there’s nothing to keep her here, so she might as well go back there. But without her, there’d be something missing in Hlynsk. What’s so special about that woman, I wonder. Her past? No, no, no. That’s where I disagree with you. There must be something else, something which nobody knows. Me, first of all. (Excuse me for the ink blot. I was turning up the wick in the lamp just then, and don’t want to rewrite the whole letter). We’ve got a drought in Hlynsk, but the turtle doves are already cooing in the hazel grove, foretelling rain.

“I mentioned to Sosnin the magazine which was a constant source of reference for my old man. Sosnin still believes that for some regions in Russia, say, the Kostroma region, which doesn’t have large fields and

villages but tiny hamlets, glades sandwiched between woodlands and wet meadows, it would be a good idea to set up small state farms. The huge tracts of unused land, marshes and woods in the region squeeze people out, but they've got nowhere to retreat. One of these days, this will be the world's most advanced cattle breeding area like Holland and Belgium are now. And this can be done with those state farms. If I knew as much as Sosnin does, I'd probably croak. In ancient Greece, a famine raged for several years in a row — from 330 to 326 B. C. So the Greeks rushed over here to Panticapaeum for wheat. Sosnin claims that they shipped about one hundred thousand tons of our Crimean wheat across the Black Sea every year. I didn't know this variety was so old. Besides, Sosnin says that our Crimean wheat is also grown in America...

"There's also another piece of news. Last year Green Mills approached the All-Ukraine Central Executive Committee to have the village put under the administration of Hlynsk instead of Shargorod. Green Mills is a village of Lemkos who're great sugar beet growers, fond of barley, beer and music. The AUCEC wanted our opinion on the matter, but there wasn't much we could say. The railroad station of Pilipi is also to be joined to us, so Hlynsk will have direct access to a big railroad. I gave my consent, cautiously, though, lest the AUCEC change its mind. The chairman of Green Mills is a Lemko, Aristarkh Lipsky, their local revolutionary. Tomorrow morning I'll be going there to have a look at those Lemkos. Being under Shargorod doesn't suit them. We're seven kilometers closer to them, but they insist it's seventeen, whereas I think it makes no difference and there must be some other reason for their insistence. So we'll have to tie the Lemkos to Hlynsk. Sosnin's been

there already as director of an MTS and is simply thrilled with them. He gave them a lecture on the role of the MTS in the world revolution.

"As for everything else, it's the same. The Tavern is still operating, the mill wheel is turning, the church is keeping an ever lower profile, although the priests have been lately blessing the wells in and around Hlynsk to invoke rain against the weevil. There's no escape from the weevil. We flung privately owned hens against the pest. And do you know whose idea that was? Fabian, the Babylon philosopher's. Seems like a simple enough thing, but it's the idea of a genius. The hens do what had been preordained them by nature. Truth to tell, they have to be hungry to suit this purpose.

"We've accepted Rodion Chumak from Semivody into the Party. They've got a collective farm, New World, now and all the co-op members have joined it, except old Sipovich, the one who came from America and with whom you played chess. 'I'll wait for the time being,' he says. He'll join, take my word for it. I'll take this letter straight to the mail train so Khariton Hapochka won't read it. See, this is already the first little benefit from Green Mills."

CHAPTER 5

In Green Mills, just like everywhere else along the Southern Bug, they used to place stone markers on the boundaries of private plots. These markers, however, could be easily moved over into a neighbor's plot at night, and in this way an extra piece of land could be snatched, which was done quite often and with amazing success, although occasionally it led to bloodshed. Once the rabid boundary thief Makashko

Voronets was caught by the peasants red-handed and hacked to death. After this incident, people got wiser. Instead of stone markers they planted mulberry trees, the saplings of which were brought almost all the way from Manchuria by the railroad for use in shelterbelts and could be bought from it. The saplings took root wonderfully, and once they did, they could easily give away the most hard-headed thief should he attempt to replant them. After taking root, these silent guards held fast to the boundary so that its owner could sleep serenely as long as they stood watch.

Today those mulberry trees along the roads and ditches have lost their former purpose, yet you can still hear people saying in Green Mills "Our murasha (local name of mulberry) is simply loaded with berries," or parents saying to their children "You spongers better go to the ditch and pick some berries for a pie." The status of people here used to be measured by the number of mulberry trees along their boundaries. When the trees bore fruit, they attracted children, birds and ants. Later on, we found out that some of the trees had black berries while others had white. The black ones made our mouths and teeth blue, while the white berries (almost all of them grew by the rich peasants' plots) were sweeter, larger, and involuntarily led the owners of the black-berried trees to the conclusion that in this case as well, they had been tricked by those moneybags. As it turned out, the state retailers speculating on the saplings knew there were two varieties of mulberries and made the most of the market by selling white mulberry saplings to those who could pay more. It seemed that only the trees were indifferent to this inequality, and so they stand to this day, delighting the eye and lending the fields beautiful shade in the rye and oats, on the sugar beet plantation, and even in the white buckwheat. For

the agronomist Zhurba, however, they were an eyesore, especially those that grew in the middle of the field and impeded the machines which arrived in ever increasing numbers in Green Mills. To get rid of the trees was not that simple, because they had their living adherents, and so Zhurba had to put up with the nuisance till better times, lest he trigger off a "mulberry riot," as he put it. And still, partaking of the wisdom of the ancients, he repeated from time to time: "The mulberry trees have to be destroyed."

But Zhurba was forgetting the children, birds and ants for which the mulberry trees were a real miracle like manna. As for the ants, they couldn't come to terms as to what "sweet trees" belonged to whom, and for many years now, they had waged fierce and bloody battles for them, which Zhurba couldn't know, of course, since his profession was one-sided, and you'd seek in vain a place for the little ants in it. Yet everything in this world has existed in unity and contradiction since time immemorial, although people think that they alone have mastered the world forever and don't want to share their knowledge with anyone.

The team of Pania Vlastovenko had settled down for lunch under one such white mulberry tree (the women avoided the black-berried trees so as not to spoil their dresses). Each of the twelve women contributed what food she had to the common pool, and although the meal was not as lavish as it could have been, it was for all that generous and merry. All the women were young, Pania being the youngest. In such company it was easy to laugh to your heart's content, and argue, not to mention mocking at your own fate. Raïna Plyushch, for instance, had married a conscript the previous year, and right after the wedding, he was called up for service with the Baltic Fleet, so now she was neither maiden nor wife.

Silvester Makivka, the old bachelor violinist and book-keeper, kept adding work-days to her wages in hopes of winning her favor. Aristarkh Lipsky as well was shooting glances at her with such winning sparkles in his eyes it made Raïna double up with laughter. "Laughing, aren't you, sailor's girl? Well, well, we'll see who'll laugh last," Aristarkh said every time after such an encounter. As a matter of fact, the "sailor's girl" liked the agronomist most of all and had an irresistible urge to tell him in private, say, at a dance at the club: "Fedir, why are you so afraid of women? There's no one prettier than me around this place, and I'm free as a bird besides." The others didn't like him and even shied away from his shock of red hair, his pudgy nose which always, rain or shine, was beady, and his grasping, spadelike hands, but Raïna simply yearned to ruffle that shock of hair if he would only respond to her yearning, which he in no way did. For this, he became the butt of their jokes — behind his back, of course, which made the ridicule smart like pepper. Then they would make fun of Lel Lelkovich, the school principal. Nastia Krinichna mimicked his pronouncements at imaginary declarations of love to Pania, which sent all the girls into gales of laughter, and then they would have a fling at Pania herself, so she wouldn't be putting on too many airs and fancying herself an absolutely untouchable ruler over them. Then one of the girls would be made fun of to her face for her chapped legs which no man was likely to fall for, and to crown the needle, she'd be advised to smear her legs with butter, although she might not have had a cow in her household. In a word, all the girls and everyone else in Green Mills got their share of ridicule, and the wisecrackers sometimes reached out to Hlynsk, but invariably via Babylon, the reason certainly being the

mysterious Malva who would be going round the plantation just then, checking on the troughs set up to fight the turnip moth. The barrel set on wheels would be standing at the opposite end of the plantation, the hobbled horses grazing in the fallow, while Malva would walk from trough to trough filling them with the poisonous concoction if need be. She walked around barefoot and without a kerchief on her head, which made her rather gloomy and the more mysterious to the girls who couldn't grasp the essence of her union with Zhurba or imagine the couple living under one roof.

Then the laughter died down, and the girls fell silent one after another. It was so hot the waves of air trembled over the field, lengthening Malva's figure; the horse grew numb from the heat and bobbed his head up and down in the fallow; a butterfly fluttered over the troughs, attracted by the sweet smell of the molasses; while here, in the shade, the limp bodies drifted off into slumber, from which they would be aroused by Pania or by Aristarkh banging the rail to remind them that lunch was over and it was time to get back to work. Pania couldn't fall asleep for some reason, lying on her back, hands spread out, the shady branches overhead soothing her eyes which the sun irritated and made water, probably an aftereffect of the scrofula she had had as a child. A light breeze stole through the twigs, shaking off now one, then another mulberry — the mulberries would be ripe any day now, a wonder that sometimes occurred within the space of a night, and Pania was convinced that everything ripened secretly during the night so people wouldn't know how it happened.

Several days' march from the tree, but actually almost right beside it, a colony of ants lived in a ditch. The all-seeing and all-hearing insects had built

their anthill many years before. They weren't of the tiny, fussy type that reveal their whereabouts right away, but red, wise, soberminded arrivals from some distant planet who probably landed on earth on a huge asteroid millions of years ago as was believed by Fabian who had been preoccupied with extra-terrestrial beings all his life. They had gained possession of this white mulberry tree in incessant wars with the neighboring ant tribes living to the south right behind the huge dogrose bush which bloomed beautifully but did not shed its fruit till the first frosts. The ant fortress and the mulberry tree were connected by a number of military roads, along which movement did not cease for a single minute even during peacetime.

That day, just before they launched a major war, the ants sent out their most experienced soldiers on patrol in response to an alarm signal. Some of the patrols did not return, having been either killed or allured by the female invaders. This aroused anxiety bordering on panic; envoys were immediately sent to the neighboring tribes for help, and a hundred million strong host formed ranks in the yard of the fortress to be dispatched to the battlefield. The troops were addressed with passionate speeches by the veterans and generals. "The treason of the infirm," they said, "must serve to bolster the fortitude and moral of the ant host which is conducting a war of liberation, and not for the first time."

Indeed, last summer when the first mulberries were dropping to the ground, the ants had cleared this place of haymakers who had lounged under the tree as if around their stoves back home. The ants had staged a courageous battle with the haymakers, although they had to bury their dead and pick up their wounded for several days after the fray. Having

suffered defeat in what had been a gallant battle for the ants, the infuriated haymakers destroyed the anthills with their boots like real vandals, killing the innocent in the process. Some of the ants urged that they leave this place en masse, but at that time, their old king was still alive and was supposed to have talked them in to holding on to their native land, reconciling themselves to fate, rebuilding their homes, and guarding the white mulberry tree with all their might.

And now those female vagrants whose fine bodies had made many a valiant warrior go off his rocker were the objectives of the first skirmishes. In the anthills, bells sounded the alarm and trumpeters blew their horns. The troops joyously greeted the appearance of their King Mina and his loyal guards on the parade ground. Concerned for their young king, the old generals voiced their lack of certainty in the victorious outcome of the imminent battle. Indeed, the king was still too young for such a major war, and this aroused anxiety in the ranks. Still, they set off on the campaign.

They made detours to fall upon the enemy by surprise. On the march, the king smiled to himself, hearing the doubts and gossip behind his back. Now take the lessons of history, for instance: didn't the young Scipio save Rome from Hannibal in spite of the fact that insidious Carthaginians had infiltrated Scipio's camp with Numidian, Punic and Andalusian women. Even Hasdrubal's daughter, the most beautiful of them all, failed to win the heart of Scipio.

King Mina and his guards fell on Pania Vlastovenko, a personality the ants knew only too well. The previous night, Pania had met with Lel Lelkovich under this very mulberry tree. They had come here on a bicycle — both of them on one, and talked late into

the night. The King was immediately informed of it. The war could have flared up then and there had the old generals not persuaded him to wait until dawn. When the battle had reached its pitch, King Mina got entangled in her braid and was gasping for air because of the overpowering smell of lovage, while his bodyguards were searching him in quite another area where the first warriors had met their heroes' deaths.

Without the slightest inkling that a fierce war between humans and ants was on, Zhurba rode leisurely in his gig along the road by the rye field. Sitting in the gig, he reached for a rye ear, crushed it in his hand, blew the chaff off his palm, and threw a handful of grain into his mouth: everyone has his own method of determining the onset of the harvest. The rye was still watery.

Zhurba usually arrived at the sugar beet plantation at lunch time when the women were resting in the shade of the mulberry tree or gathered to listen to political information in the meadow by the well where Lel Lelkovich came with the newspapers. Zhurba would leave the gig by the roadside, braking one of its wheels with a little prop of elm wood; the horse would doze in the meadow while he stalked in a thoughtful, stately manner like a stork in a rusty swamp. He was a man who noticed everything, measuring it all either by sight or folding rule which he carried around in his pocket, and only then did he permit himself to make a remark to this or that field team as polite as polite could be and mostly in written form. For this purpose he had a folder with paper, the troughs serving as letter boxes where he left his notes for the team leaders.

It seemed that he intentionally avoided Malva. Seeing her with a pail at one end of the plantation,

he'd go in the opposite direction, and only back home when he had settled at the table for supper would he tell her about the empty troughs he had come across here and there. For all that, the women realized he was a great agronomist and never argued with him. But in no way did this hinder them from making fun of his troughs. The women believed it was a useless waste of molasses which would make fine candies and no worse moonshine, while the turnip moth would die of its own accord as it had in Green Mills so many times before. But when Zhurba urged the women to bring manure from their farms to fertilize the sugar beets that spring, they got so mad he had had to stop the venture, seeing that Green Mills had not yet matured enough for such self-sacrifice. Bobbing in his gig above the rye field, Zhurba looked like a Roman emperor in it — severe and unapproachable, but the moment he touched the ground, he became as meek as a child.

As a rule, he started his daily rounds of the plantation from Pania Vlastovenko's plot, and in an hour or two, he had crossed the plantation from one end to the other. He left his notes signed "F. Zhurba" in the troughs for all the team leaders, who then read them aloud to everyone. His most ardently worded notes were addressed to Pania, since he was more concerned for her plot than for any other. Pania read the notes with inspiration, especially the opening lines: "Esteemed Comrade Vlastovenko, in the second row from this trough there are some very sparsely planted places, whereas we had agreed that there must be no fewer than six plants to every linear meter. Would you please, etc., etc., etc..."

And here esteemed Comrade Vlastovenko and all her eleven women appeared before his sight stark naked — dashing and skipping around the field,

shaking out their loose braids and clothes, and laughing so raucously that Zhurba almost fell off his gig. The ringleader Raina, or so Zhurba thought, judging by the fillet on her head, and some other woman tried to catch Pania to show her to the agronomist in all her splendid state of nature. It was a real display of nudism with white bodies behind the curtain of rye, but the agronomist simply couldn't grasp the reason for that spectacle.

Without a second thought, Zhurba turned his gig around and rushed off in the direction of Green Mills. He drove his horse so hard he was almost run over by the Odessa mail train as he passed the crossing.

Just then, the chairman and bookkeeper were finishing to divide the white cherries as work-day pay in kind. The huge lists, which had to be passed on to the storehouse, would not even fit on the table, for Lipsky tried hard not to do anyone out of his share of cherries, being especially concerned for the children. Presently Zhurba appeared on the threshold. And what a sight he was! His shock of hair was a confused tangle after the wild ride, his eyes blazed, his nose was wet.

"There... out there... women," Zhurba barely uttered his thought.

"What women?" Makivka said with a start. "Tell them we haven't divided the cherries yet. The list will be passed on to the storehouse this evening."

"Naked women," Zhurba said tragically.

"What?" Aristarkh asked, his eyes wide open.

"Naked women. All twelve of them. The whole team. On the beet plantation. Near the mulberry tree."

"Pania, too?" asked Silvester Makivka, limping from behind the table, thinking he knew a thing or two about the outlines of a woman's body.

"Pania, too... They're going nuts out there..."

"Well I'll be damned! Is Lel Lelkovich there giving the political information talk?"

"No, Lel Lelkovich wasn't there..."

"Let's go!" Makivka shouted merrily.

The three of them climbed the gig and rushed out to see the show.

"Stop here!" Zhurba said.

They stopped the gig and ran on in a file, crouching along the rye field to the mulberry tree. The broad leg of Makivka's pants flapped lustily. Since he was the first in the line, he was the first to rush out of the rye. And here he met with cruel disappointment.

"There's no one around..."

No naked women, no ideal curves, no music of the body, but bent, serious, fully clothed women hard at work. Lipsky burst into laughter, while Zhurba spread his arms, flabbergasted. Way off against the skyline merging with the green rows of sugar beets, Malva walked with pail in hand.

"It's because you're overworked or probably undernourished. You've started seeing things, Zhurba," Lipsky said, and added to Makivka, "What practical assistance can we offer him?"

"We've got meat, flour, cherries..."

"Issue him one kilo of meat, two kilos of flour, and three kilos of cherries."

"It might as well be five kilos."

"All right, let it be five. And now let's talk business," Lipsky said and led Zhurba to the shade of the mulberry tree.

Zhurba sat there with his head hanging, not believing he had really seen the naked women.

All of a sudden Makivka jumped to his feet and yelled:

"Ants!"

That evening, Zhurba brought his ration home; he and Malva had a fine supper under the stars that were reflected in the pond, but when Malva told him about the women whom the ants had stripped naked that day, he laughed awkwardly, pretending he was hearing about it for the first time. As a matter of fact, the white body of the "sailor's girl" against the background of the rye had produced an indelible impression on him.

The grasshoppers chirruped noisily, portending dry weather, while back at the mulberry tree the agitated ants scurried up and down the military roads as they guarded their domain. Some of them hauled white airships, in which their still unborn young had to engrave upon their memories the road to the mulberry tree.

All summer long, King Mina tried to reach his country. Along his way he came across a multitude of anthills, but they all were inhabited by black ants and he, a stranger, was turned away from their thresholds. Nor did anyone believe him to be a king who'd dared to set out on such a long journey without a bodyguard or weapons. As for King Nikon, they knew and had heard about him in these lands, and some of the anthills had even been conquered by him, but when they learned of Nikon's death they renounced his suzerainty over them. This impostor, however, who pretended to be Nikon's son and heir to a mighty kingdom, was led under escort from one border to another until, having cleared the dam and a number of steep knolls, he found himself not far away from the mulberry tree.

The border guards led him to Mochius (the ant kings and nobility had adopted human names) who

had been the ruler since the last war. Mina stood before him hapless, worn out, and sick, but with a firm belief in the triumph of justice, which lent his stature dignity. Surrounded by his retinue and guards, Mochius regarded Mina for a long time, certainly recognizing him, but he said:

"That's not him. I've never seen him before."

Turning to his retinue, Mochius asked:

"Maybe one of you recognizes him? What do you say, Macarius?"

Macarius, the Supreme Judge, said:

"He looks nothing like him, except perhaps that his skin is the same color."

"But Macarius, I'm King Mina, the son of Nikon. I'm your king."

"I'm not blind yet."

Then Mochius spoke again:

"Son, for such things I could have taken your head off with this sword presented to me by King Nikon himself. But my magnanimity and concern for my subjects does not permit me to deprive anyone of life to whom I can grant it. That is what Nikon taught me, and that is what King Mina had taught me before he perished during the last war."

"But I didn't perish. Here I am. Here I am before you, Macarius," he said, turning to the Supreme Judge. "I was the one who appointed you supreme judge, although King Nikon warned me of your cunning and dishonesty."

"King," the most venerable Macarius addressed Mochius, "I advise you emasculate this impostor. We must also show concern for the intelligence of our tribe, and you see for yourself that this crank is bereft of reason if he dares claim to be King Mina who died so valiantly before my very eyes."

"Discharge your duties!" Mochius ordered.

Two soldier ants with huge mandibles appeared. Both of them recognized Mina, but the will of the King was law for them. Mina thought that never again would he see Pania for whom he had developed a strange feeling he had never experienced before, a feeling unknown to his fellow ants. He addressed the King:

"Mochius, you yourself told me once that such a thing as love exists in this world. But you told me that this lofty feeling is unknown to us ants..."

"Well, well, go on."

"...and that it seemed to make everyone as if born anew, younger, stronger, braver. You regretted that we were not subject to this feeling. And this is why our kin is doomed to live in the gloomy underground and be borne not of a multitude of mothers but of one mother. We deny sensuality to millions of creatures who could have otherwise fallen in love, loved, and enjoyed life. Instead, we are making them into robots without any right to love and bear children!"

"That's what will happen to human beings eventually, because we are more ancient than they are. Everyone must pass through this stage of perfection. We passed through it earlier than they did, but they will reach such a point as well. What do you ask for?"

"Let me go free."

"Have you fallen in love?"

"Yes."

"With whom?"

"With an earthly queen."

"You poor wretch. I'll let you go but without the right ever to return here. What do you think, Marcarius?"

"Yes. That's a wise decision, King. Your magnanimity..."

"See him off," the King said to the soldiers without letting Macarius finish.

Mina bowed and went to the main gates. He ran so swiftly the soldiers barely managed to keep up with him. Mina was afraid Mochius would change his mind, for he knew only too well the cunning of Macarius. When he was still king, Mina used this cunning for his own ends many a time. A burning hatred of kings filled Mina when he had stood before Mochius and awaited the verdict. So now he had to get out of this place as fast as possible.

At the gates there was a hitch. Who goes? Where to? When would he be back? The guards, too, pretended not to have recognized their former king and subjected him to a thorough and humiliating search as if he might be carrying off the royal crown. Presently, Macarius's henchmen came running his way. Turning round, Mina saw them and begged the guards to open the gates quicker; he got onto one of the military roads along which he marched on campaigns with his father while he was still alive and, later on, by himself. Macarius's pursuit party neared; Mina heard them running behind his back and then the labored breath of the leaders of the pack. Mina's strength ebbed; every second lost could cost him his life. Presently, he noticed a gossamer web hanging over a field. It was Indian summer just then. Mina ran up to the gossamer, undid it from its grass stalk, jumped on it, and drifted away, propelled by the wind.

There was the pond, the dam, the huge orchard, and on the knoll, Pania Vlastovenko's house entwined in antennas like cobwebs. From the house came the sounds of music from distant worlds; it must have been a woman singing in a tongue Mina didn't understand. In the farmyard, Mikola Rak was busying

himself with something. Mina recognized him and waved in greeting from the gossamer thread. But no response followed. Only the wind whistled by the gossamer, raising the king higher and higher. Where would it carry him, where would he land? King Mina burst out crying in despair when Green Mills shrunk in size far, far behind. It would have been better had he perished in his kingdom rather than in this blue desert. The higher he rose, the more gruesome his loneliness seemed to him. He couldn't find any better way of freeing himself from this dreary and cruel feeling than dropping to the ground. And that is how Mina, King of the Ants, met his end.

Following this tragic death, came the voice of Pania: "Good morning!" How could she have known when to show up for the death of her knight? I wasn't sure about King Mina, but I was certainly alive, since I had heard her voice. I woke up, the dream still lingering in my mind, and it seemed strange to me that Pania wasn't here any more, but her voice was still on the air, while on the table lay a fine heel of factory-made bread which locomotive stokers get on their regular runs.

"Why should Pania have come all of a sudden like that?" my grandmother wondered. "We're no relatives of hers nor any matchmakers or friends. And here she comes with this bread." Grandmother broke off a piece and kissed it. "It's real bread. Too salty, though. Must be adding salt to make the bread weigh more." She went into the pantry, fetched a sickle and *yurok**, took a kerchief out of her trunk, and said: "See, what Lipsky's like. When your grandpa was still alive, he

* *Yurok* — short stick for binding sheaves.— Tr.

spent every night with the Poor Peasants Committee here, and now he even forgets to tell me the harvest's on. And you keep carrying milk to him."

"I'm carrying it for his girls, and they can't be blamed for his being like that," I rejoined (Lipsky had three daughters).

"What makes you think I'm blaming them?" grandmother said.

She left for the harvest, while I cut a piece of bread for the Lipskys, ate my share, broke some off theirs, and took the milk to their house. They lived on the opposite hill across a gully in the unusually long house of Hnat Smerechenko who had burned himself to death in a wheat field back in 1920. There were two rooms in the house, while the rest were barns and sheds for oxen, sheep, hay, and at the very end of the house, an empty wooden pigsty, all gnawed up and scary. We children would climb into the loft, wondering at its fantastic length, romping around from end to end, and falling through it occasionally. Only a madman could have built such a house for himself — so foolishly long, under one thatch, one God, one thunder. There was yet another thing Smerechenko did that surprised Green Mills. In the meadow, he dug out a lake with an island and planted it with linden. But now that linden grove had run so wild it had become a habitat of snakes which scared people away. They said Smerechenko dug the lake for fifteen years. He dug it at night by the light of the moon, wheelbarrowed the dirt off, and built such a broad dam you could turn a wagon around on it; he also intended to suspend a wooden bridge across the water. The pine logs for the bridge rotted away by the house, the springs he had hit dried up, and the lake turned silty. It was only Lipsky who visited this place, sitting for a long time on the dam, probably

dreaming of the day when it all could be restored and a bridge built across the water.

I didn't find Lipsky's girls in: on the window, which they always kept open for me to put the milk jug through without waking them, there was a note reading: "Everyone's left for the harvest. Halya." That was Lipsky's elder daughter who had taken over the household after her mother's death. Young men were already courting her, but Lipsky was against it, chasing them around his huge house every Saturday evening, after which he set off to the club for a mug of beer and a game of chess with Lel Lelkovich. The window was closed a little, but not fastened from inside. I put the milk on the windowsill along with the bread, shut the window more tightly, and left for the harvest.

Sashko Bart was taking water to the field, so he gave me a lift on the water barrel. Sashko was a great loafer at school, and we all were rather afraid of him. He spoke in a deep bass voice, one of his eyes was always squinted, he stayed in the same grade for two or three years, and a couple of times was expelled for ruffianly conduct. But he always repented and returned to his alma mater which would really have been a dull and uninteresting place without him. He was one of the boys against which Lipsky was guarding his Halya.

"Is your Babylon to the north or south of here?"

"To the south."

"And they're harvesting there, too?"

"I guess so."

"Did you know Malva there?"

"Of course I did."

"She's the one I like. There's not another one like her in all of Green Mills. See, Lel Lelkovich can't find himself a wife hard as he tries. I was in fourth

grade when he arrived, and now he's here for seven years already but he's still single. And you know why?"

"How should I?"

"It's because everything decent has been picked up by the Raks, Shpaks, Nazhdaks, and the devil knows what's left. My mother says that it's been like that here for ages. One generation gets wildly beautiful women and another such scarecrows it makes a horse jumpy. Nature gets exhausted and then does all sorts of stupid things. Is it the same your way? Are all the women like Malva?"

"It's the same as here. There's one and the same law for every village."

"But over there in the Polish village of Wiazowa Hreblia they've got such beauties it drives you nuts. Know why? They don't eat much, they drink vinegar, and smear their skin with goose fat. You don't believe me? Oh my! The barrel's leaking again. Come on, get down and drive the bung in nicely."

"With what?"

"What do you usually drive a bung in with? Your fist, of course!"

After driving the bung in, we proceeded to Verkhi. Upon reaching the top, we involuntarily stopped the horses. Below us spread a white field in which hundreds of people rhythmically bent down, straightened up, ran around, rejoiced, looked at the sun, sharpened their scythes, and threw their caps on the first heaps of thirty sheaves. By the roadside stood Lipsky's gig hitched to a white horse. Probably the same thing was taking place now in Babylon, I thought.

"If he asks you why it took us so long to get here, tell him we turned over and had to go back to the well. Understand?"

“All right.”

“But make it sound more convincing than it sounds now. I got dizzy at the well, but that’s something he’d never believe.”

I shot a sidelong glance at his pant legs rolled up to the knees. The sight was surely incongruous with his twaddle about women. To Lipsky’s questioning, I confirmed that we had turned over, and thus I became Sashko Bart’s friend for life. How little we have to expend on loyalty.

Pania wasn’t there, because her team was reaping on the other side of the field where Lel Lelkovich was mowing down the wall of rye. From the barrel I saw his hat with the black band. He was the third or fourth in the file of mowers, with Zhurba up front. That was the first time I saw Zhurba. He was a sturdy, red-headed man who wasn’t afraid of the sun. Behind him walked Raïna, raking up the stalks. Her head was nicely covered with a kerchief, she was lithe, and managed to rake up, bind the sheaves and laugh at the same time. Before he drank of the water, Zhurba invited Raïna. Her gray eyes twinkled with a smile, her lips brimmed with vigor, her face had an even tan, and in her ears sparkled silver earrings. She was three or four years Bart’s senior but behaved as if he were her equal.

“Bart, whose well did you draw the water from?”

“From ours. The collective farm’s I mean.”

“Then why are there May beetles floating in the water?”

“Better ask Lipsky why he keeps an ash tree over the well. The bugs are in the tree.”

“You’re the water carrier, so it’s you I’m asking. Come here.”

Bart approached her apprehensively. She grabbed him by his flop of hair and bent his head to the pail.

"Look!"

"I don't see anything. 'Pon my word, I don't see any May bugs!"

She picked up the pail and splashed the water out on Bart.

"Ha-ha-ha. Bring me some fresh water."

She drank it leisurely, afraid of catching a cold, while Bart stood there and smiled, one of his eyes squinting as usually. What if he had a wife like her, I thought. She could surely mold anything she liked out of him. Zhurba drank his fill, poured some water onto the hone, and started sharpening his scythe. Bart climbed on his water-barrel cart and drove off, while I carried a pailful of water behind him. Now, is there anything more delightful than carrying cool water to Pania! But Lel Lelkovich would never know about it. Neither would Pania. This mystery of mine equalled perhaps the one Balthasar saw before his end: *Mene, Mene, Tekel, Peres*. Yet Green Mills had no Fabian of its own to read this message.

CHAPTER 6

There's nothing in the world like what the Lemkos do when they bless the first loaf of bread. They choose the biggest stove in Green Mills, bake a huge *korovai* bread out of the flour of the new grist, dress a boy and girl in their traditional national garb, and adorn their heads with wreaths of wheat ears. Then they put the *korovai* on an embroidered *rushnik* towel, and carry it through the whole village into the square. In the square, the procession is met by a crowd standing about a table covered with a white cloth. Then the oldest Lemko man and the oldest Lemko woman, also in traditional garb, emerge from the

crowd, take the *korovai* from the young bearers, and present it to the people by putting it on the table. The old man addresses the crowd with lofty words about bread, the eternal blessing of having it today and at any time, about the happiness of sowing and reaping grain, and about the land which is worthless without human love and our hands. Then he takes a knife, and to the orchestra playing "Your Day Has Come," the Lemkos approach the table by family. Each family receives its share of the *korovai*, depending on how many mouths it has. They are free to divide their share and eat it then and there, or take it to their homes and partake of the new bread in the circle of their family, after which everyone is permitted to bake bread with the grist of the new harvest. No Lemko dares to miss this ritual unless he wants to bring disaster upon himself or Green Mills. They said that in his day, even Mikhei Hordina was afraid of staying away from this ceremony and came to take his share out of the hand of the old man on a par with others. And they also said that no one could bake such a fantastic *korovai* as Tikhin and Odarka. They fashioned gods and devils alike on it to placate both. Tikhin was supposed to have shaped the gods and Odarka the devils, for which they always received a little horned devil everyone else refused to take. This time it was me who got it. "Don't be afraid," Malva comforted me. "Don't be afraid. He who keeps company with wolves will learn to howl." My mind put at ease in this way, I gobbled up the little devil with pleasure, which made the Lemkos laugh and acquired me a still greater friend in Sashko Bart. Later on, he confessed that the little devil had fallen to him last time. But he put my mind at ease, saying that the devil's power held sway only in Green Mills and didn't extend to the great Babyloñ. Judging

by Sashko Bart's reasoning and way of speaking, I thought that my new friend would make a Lemko Fabian one of these days, because great philosophers were likely to take their start from little devils on *korovais*.

The Lemkos call the mill Hordina to this day, and will invariably say, "I'm going to Hordina's." The collective farm office was called Aristarkh. If asked where he was coming from, a Lemko would say, "From Aristarkh's," although he hadn't seen Aristarkh that day. The farm's strawcutter was called by its real name until the day it lopped off Prots's arm — an incident which, as a matter of fact, cost him his life; and henceforth the strawcutter was referred to as Prots. Any mention of it would sound like this: "Today Prots is putting in double time." A father could say of his child: "Now he'll finish Lel Lelkovich, and that's enough!" which was to mean that the Lemko parent did not intend to have his blockhead of a son continue his studies. When the MO-900 thresher arrived at the collective farm and the Lemkos saw what it was worth, the machine was instantly dubbed Yarema Kriviy after the watchman at the school for its industriousness and insatiety. "I've been put on Yarema Kriviy for the whole summer," one Lemko would complain to another, which meant far more than simply being assigned to work at the thresher. Similarly, "I'm going to the mill" sounded altogether neutral, whereas "I'm going to Hordina's" implied both a recollection of the past and "Hordina's" invariable fee for gristing. All this was also true for a countless number of other shades of meaning and understatements without which a Lemko would have become quite verbose had he not resorted to them.

Aristarkh agreed to lend Yarema Kriviy to the

school for one night, and only because of the rye which it was hard to thresh with flails. Lel Lelkovich knew that once the thresher appeared in the school-yard, it would get stuck there for longer. So one evening, the great laborer Yarema Kriviy, coupled to a tractor, covered with dust and wearied by toil, detached itself from the huge stack it had heaped up in the rye field during the week, and slowly headed toward the village in the direction of the school. Lel Lelkovich rode a horse in a dignified manner in front of the tractor, pointing the way; on the fender sat Malva, so far the only drum operator in Green Mills (she had picked up this trade while still at the co-op). We ran after Yarema Kriviy in a noisy merry pack, while the more deft ones clambered on it and sat there quietly lest Lel Lelkovich see them. The real Yarema Kriviy was waiting for this procession by the school gates, measuring the thresher by eye to see whether it would get through the gates or not. Our watchman and steward took special pride in such a fine expensive thing having been named in his honor. That already implied immortality, and for a Lemko immortality meant something more than life itself. Yarema Kriviy was lame in his right foot which was shod in a huge boot several sizes bigger than his left boot. Previously, he had threshed the crop from the school's thirteen hectares of rye field with a flail. He started threshing after the feast of the Transfiguration, and taking short breaks for church holidays, which he strictly observed, he continued right up till Easter, reminding the school every time who its mainstay really was. He was a watchman and steward and coachman and stableman — everything such a personality as he could have possibly been in the school's employ. But it would be unjust to say that he was simply a hardworking man toiling

for the benefit of others and the school. Apart from everything else, such men also have to feed themselves by the sweat of their brow. Yarema Kriiviy could easily gobble up a sieve of pears of the astringent variety called the Young Lady that had found its way to Lemko land a long time before. He could down a glazed pitcher of sour milk in one gulp, after which he would wipe off his red mustache and look left and right to see whether there was another pitcher around. At other times after a Lenten fast, which he strictly observed, he'd eat a whole haunch of pork, cutting it with a little clasp knife, leaving the bone thoroughly picked of every shred of meat. No one in Green Mills could make such tasty ham as he. As for the famous Tivriv beer, he could guzzle thirty-six mugs in a row on a hot day, and that without laying a wager on it or attaching any importance to his feat, but simply regarding it as sufficient to slake his thirst. He loved to entertain the inner man and knew how to do it, but at school balls, weddings, and other occasions of that sort, he was restrained and an embodiment of rare civility, and if need be, he could be content with a dewdrop. He was one of those "machines" in which the amount of fuel accorded with the amount of energy expended. After a substantial breakfast, he could root up the stump of an old pear tree, an effort that would take another man several days to accomplish. Well, and as for his kindness, it was beyond measure. There was enough of it and to spare for the whole school and personally for Lel Lelkovich whom he regarded as both a kind and great man.

The principal occupied two large rooms with a separate entrance in the school building. Yarema cleaned them, lit the stoves, made the bed, regularly aired the principal's clothing to keep the moths out

of it, washed, starched, and ironed his shirts, made a special polish for the principal's boots, and then polished them himself, placing them at Lel Lelkovich's bedside for the night, because once he had heard him saying that the Roman Emperor Augustus also put his shoes by his bed to keep them at hand in case he needed them. When a huge, impassable puddle formed between the village and the school in autumn, Yarema (provided no witnesses were around) eagerly carried Lel Lelkovich across the puddle, and the principal appeared at the club in such remarkably polished boots it seemed he had flown across the puddle in them.

The benefits Yarema rendered to the school were so obvious and indisputable that in Lel Lelkovich's absence he was second in authority after Kirilo Lukich whose pupil he had once been. Small wonder Aristarkh said that if he had ten such gluttons as Yarema Kriviy, Green Mills would be swimming in gravy (he had Yarema's industriousness in mind, of course). Aristarkh tried to lure Yarema into the collective farm by every possible means, but for some reason, they found no common language on this point. If they had, who would carry Lel Lelkovich across the puddle? A seeming trifle it might have been, but it, too, carried weight with Yarema, since he regarded Lel Lelkovich as something of a son, having no children of his own. His wife had died in childbirth when she was still young. Her name was Lepestina *, a diminutive woman, they said, whom Yarema could carry easily on his shoulders over the very same puddle he carried Lel Lelkovich across. Now a tall oaken cross rises over Lepestina's grave; every first

* Lit. petal — Tr.

Sunday after Easter (the day of remembrance of the dead), he binds the cross with a new *rushnik* towel which he himself embroiders with traditional Lemko patterns all winter long. Next to the tall cross, a little one peeps out of the grass over the grave of their unborn child. Yarema did not marry a second time. After Lepestina, no woman had crossed the threshold of his hut even when Yarema was excitably young and not yet a hopeless widower. Right now he was not so much concerned about his own destiny as about getting Lel Lelkovich spliced. He believed it improper for the principal to challenge fate as long as he had. Every new woman who aroused even the slightest fascination in Lel Lelkovich instantly became the object of Yarema's thorough consideration as a prospective bride and not simply as a partner in the principal's latest frivolous affair. Yarema would interfere with a prescient mien and an innocent remark: "She's no good for our school." In this way he helped Lel Lelkovich get rid of Halya Neklyudova, the frivolous wife of the sugar refinery's chief engineer, who came to Green Mills on a bicycle and passed away her time swinging in a hammock while Lel Lelkovich was teaching the children ancient history. In regard to her, Yarema's reasoning was simple: "If she's leaving her husband to come see you, she'll be leaving you in the future to go see somebody else." Besides, as a steward, Yarema had to maintain normal relations with the refinery where he got beet cuttings and molasses for the school's subsidiary holding. He also warned Lel Lelkovich against Pania due to her social background and the fact that Mikola Rak wouldn't surrender such a beauty of his own free will, while Lel Lelkovich's fighting over her would go against the grain of all reason, principally, the reason of ethics. Yarema had made his usual

remark about her last autumn as he carried Lel Lelkovich across the puddle on his way to the sugar-beet grand ball.

"Lel Lelkovich," Yarema said, stopping in the middle of the puddle, which he had never done previously, always crossing the mire first before speaking.

"What's the matter?" Lel Lelkovich asked from above.

"Leave her."

"Who do you have in mind? Pania?"

"Who else."

"Why so suddenly?"

"She's no good for our school because of her background. That's not to mention everything else, although she is a beautiful woman to be sure."

He carried the principal on to dry ground. Lel Lelkovich's boots glittered so lustroously that the stars reflected on his boot tips. He thanked Yarema for the advice and broke into laughter, while Yarema trudged back home, stirring up the puddle that had grown after the recent rains. No sooner was it bound by frost than a merry crowd of schoolchildren spilled onto it to skim across the ice on their heels.

Presently Yarema saw Malva. The very same Malva who lived in the Parnasenkos' house with the agronomist Zhurba, who was either a husband or a stranger to her (there was all sort of gossip on that point); the very same Malva who tended the troughs on the beet plantation, filling them with a "concoction" to get rid of the turnip moths, who had now climbed to the top of that huge thresher and was running the show in her goggles like a witch. But did she know who was standing near her, heaving up the sheaves and keeping his eyes glued on her? It was the man they were looking for, who had trans-

formed the Parnasenkos' barn into a slaughterhouse; the man who took the dried hides off the joist and on one occasion had even hung a sack of meat near a roof spar for Malva and the agronomist. Neither Malva nor the agronomist would have believed for anything that the thief who was stealing all the oxen, cows and bull calves was Yarema Kriviy who ran an exclusively one-man operation. Yarema was in the habit of talking with his mute victims on the way to the barn, thereby creating the impression that he was not alone, while in fact, he did everything himself — hanging the bull calves or oxen on the joist, skinning them, and then carrying the meat to the wagon he left in the clay pit, after which he drove along the field roads to the collective farm storehouse. As soon as it was dawn, he returned to the clay pit, loaded the wagon with clay, and slowly now, along the same route he took when he carted off the meat, he drove to the schoolyard with a heap of clay, ordinary white clay with which he whitewashed the school building. In this way, he covered up his tracks in case a sleuthhound or detective were dispatched after him; even when Makedonsky's men took up their stations in the barn and waited for the rustlers for two weeks running, he managed to sneak up to the clay pit a number of times and see with his own eyes the ambush that had been set up for him.

There was only one man in Green Mills who knew about his doings, and that was Silvester Makivka, the musician of genius, who used to play at the weddings in the neighboring villages in his time and had now turned into if not Yarema's accomplice exactly, then in any case his tipper-off. He told Yarema the names of the "Hindus" whose bull calves and heifers had found their way into the Parnasenkos' barn to sustain the lives of the feeble children.

Silvester Makivka entered the dead weight in his books and then wrote out the meat for the school. To do Yarema credit, not a single scrap of meat was ever written out on his name; he and Silvester had vowed that they would never touch any of the take, for which any court would acquit them should their racket be exposed. The latter seemed quite probable, since several kilograms of meat had gone to Malva, who had grown utterly feeble, as well as to Lel Lelkovich and even to Aristarkh (for his girls). Once Aristarkh asked Makivka: "Listen, how long will you be doling out the meat from that ox we ate up a long time ago." He had in mind the old ox who had broken his leg and so had to be slaughtered. Silvester Makivka barely checked himself in time to keep from blurting out where the meat was coming to Green Mills from, because the slaughtered ox really had been eaten up long before. Of course, Aristarkh suspected something, as did Lel Lelkovich, incidentally, but both pretended, each in his own way, that they were not interested in where the meat was coming from as long as it did not disappear from the school kitchen and kept sustaining the feeble children.

But one day the wronged "Hindus" from Knyazhe appeared in Green Mills in a one-horse wagon. There were six or seven of them, robust and infuriated peasants, who arrived to turn Green Mills inside out in search of their darling cows, oxen, and yearling heifers. Aristarkh received them with due ceremony as is proper for the wronged, and after inquiring as to who they were and what scant evidence they had against the Lemkos, he sent them packing. Yet so as to restore the honor of the village, he himself had Makedonsky summoned. Aristarkh had acted too fast, of course, because it wouldn't have been bad at all for Green Mills to have gotten a couple more of the

Knyazhe cows. The effect on the school kitchen was immediate, and Makivka made a post-factum confession to Aristarkh about that "ox" whose meat had kept Green Mills going for almost the entire spring. Lel Lelkovich also learned about it, this time from Aristarkh. Both were unsettled by the news; Aristarkh kept clutching his head, which had turned gray back in the days of the Civil War, and in no way could he come to grips with the thought that Green Mills' honor had been tarnished by a man who in Aristarkh's eyes was to a certain extent the mainstay of that honor. From his school days on, he had looked upon Yarema as an example of conscientiousness and industriousness, and all of a sudden, there was such a crushing disappointment.

Wearing the boots Yarema had polished for him, Lel Lelkovich was literally jumping with fury, because the watchman had gone too far in his good works. "Why, that crook! I'll show him, I'll show him!" Lel Lelkovich carried on so savagely in the schoolyard that Aristarkh had to stop him now and again, reminding him, "Hush, we might be overheard," although no one else seemed to be around, apart from the horse on which the chairman had come and tied to a rowan tree. Aristarkh said that sometime around autumn Green Mills could compensate for the losses of the wronged, but how Green Mills could compensate for its moral losses he did not know.

"How many head of cattle were there, after all?" Lel Lelkovich was curious to know.

"Makivka says it's eleven," Aristarkh replied. "But judging by the dead weight it must have been more."

Presently Yarema Kriviy came out of his hut with a birch-twig broom, greeted his betters courteously, and limped off to sweep the threshing floor.

"Was it really so much?" Lel Lelkovich asked with a start.

"We also ate a bit from that herd, you know."

"I didn't eat any of it!" Lel Lelkovich recoiled from Aristarkh. "Not a single bite."

"Oh yes, you did," Aristarkh calmed him down. "You simply didn't know where the beef was coming from. If you hadn't eaten the meat, you'd never have had enough strength to give all those history lessons."

"I wonder what he did with the hides?"

"He dried them on a joist and then returned them to their rightful owners."

"You mean he took them right back to Knyazhe?"

"Yes, right back to Knyazhe. When the men came here they showed me the notes they found in the hides: 'Thanks for the bull calf!' 'Thanks for the cow!' 'The ox was wonderful; ate him up with appetite.' I counted eleven such notes. Eleven!" Aristarkh clutched his head. "That's a whole herd. All of it first-grade young stock."

"I didn't eat any of that meat. I ate some from an old ox, but that ox was ours. Ours! Not somebody else's! Not stolen!"

"You did eat the meat, Lel Lelkovich. There's no use denying it. It's only he" — Aristarkh nodded in the direction of the threshing floor — "who didn't touch it, as Makivka insists."

"So Makivka knew all about it?"

"He did, that fiend."

"Which means that Makivka must be brought to court?"

"Yes, he must."

"And what will we do without a violinist?"

"Guess we'll have to do without him for a couple of years. He'll do his stretch and then come home."

"What if we just forget it all?"

"If that dratted Makivka hadn't told me about it and I hadn't told you and you somebody else, it could just be forgotten, of course."

"I know how to hold my tongue, Aristarkh Pankovich. But still, imagine what would happen if someone were to put a finger on that racket without our knowledge. What then? We'd be classified as accomplices, wouldn't we?"

"Sure. That's what I had in mind about your eating the meat."

"I didn't eat it."

"I absolutely fail to understand you, Lel Lelkovich. How could you not have eaten the meat if I myself wrote out the receipts issuing it to you?"

"But I told you: it was the meat of an old ox, sinews and no more."

"And what about the beef without sinews?"

"Oh blast it. The worst thing is those notes."

"They're written by a child. Well, at least that's how it looks. And not by one, but each note is in a different hand. That's what makes it strange."

"So there are a lot of them. A whole gang."

"Well, you must realize yourself that a single man can't hoist an entire ox carcass up a joist, even if he be Archimedes himself."

"Oh boy, did we make a blunder. Why didn't we try to find out where the meat was coming from and stop that racket?"

"That's just the reason, Lel Lelkovich, why I think it'd be better if we just forget it all."

In the end, they did not concur in their opinions. After Aristarkh had untied his horse and left the schoolyard, Lel Lelkovich went to the threshing floor where Yarema was bearing down on the broom, stood

there a couple of minutes, sighed woefully, and ordered:

"Yarema, come into my office!"

"Now or later?"

"Right now. Right now!"

"All right, I'll finish sweeping and then I'll come. Are they giving us the threshing machine?"

"Yes, for one night — the Yarema Kriviy," Lel Lelkovich said with a smile.

"And when?"

"I asked for them to bring it today."

When Yarema entered, the principal was sitting at the desk waiting. The watchman limped toward his chair in the corner, but Lel Lelkovich did not ask him to sit down, so the watchman stood at attention, his long arms reaching to his shins.

"Tell me, did you ever steal anything before?"

"We-el-ll... to be frank I did."

"What was it?"

"I stole some of your Salvé cigarettes. One cigarette each morning."

"But you don't smoke."

"No I don't. But I love to stick an expensive cigarette behind my ear. For style, I guess, so that the kids will see that I'm friends with you and that you treat me to your cigarettes. That's a sign of prestige for them, for the boys who smoke I mean."

"What else have you stolen?"

"Nothing else." After a moment's thought, he added, "No, nothing else."

"Well, and what about cows? In Knyazhe and some other villages?"

"Cows? Oh yes, some cows, too. But they all belonged to the 'Hindus.' So that's not stealing, it's expropriation, Lel Lelkovich."

"What expropriation? Where did you learn that word?"

"That means they're from the private sector."

"How did you know they were from the private sector?"

"You see, Makivka and I know half the world. We used to play at weddings once. He on the violin, I on the tambourine, and there was a third man, Larivon Stakhiv, who played the trumpet, but he wasn't around by the time you came. He died. Of the trumpet."

"It would be better for you if you were the one who had died."

"Why, did anybody tell on me?"

"Aristarkh did."

"And who told him?"

"Makivka."

"Silvester?!"

"Who else? We've got only one Makivka."

"That limping devil. So he squealed."

"Now, why put it that way? Tell me, did you do it by yourself or with a gang?"

"All by myself."

"How could you — all by yourself?"

"Like this," he said, went up to an ancient bookcase with Brehm's *Life of the Animals* on its shelves, put his arms around it, picked it up, and carried it into another corner. Under the bookcase lay a sleeping mouse; Lel Lelkovich got to his feet, stole up to the mouse, and catching it by the tail, threw it out of the open window into the schoolyard.

"That's the whole difference between you and me," Yarema said, laughing. "I can pick up a bookcase, but you only a mouse!"

"Who wrote the notes for you?"

"Those who ate the meat."

"You mean the children?" Lel Lelkovich asked, horrified.

"I'm illiterate, you know. That is, I'm not too good at writing."

"So you drew the children into it? Schoolchildren?"

"It wasn't me, Lel Lelkovich, but them. Their eyes implored to me to fight for them. As it was, I've never stolen anything except your cigarettes." He reached with his horny fingers behind his ear and produced a cigarette from under his cap. "Here it is. I took it this morning when I polished your boots. May I go now?"

"You may. No, wait a minute!" He came up to the giant and stopped. "Don't breathe a word to anyone. I'm sure, though, they're looking for you. If they catch you, don't get Makivka mixed up in this. Green Mills won't have another fiddler of such genius for a long time yet."

"So why did that genius have to go and squeal?"

"I don't know, Yarema. It wasn't me who played at those weddings with him."

"Larivon Stakhiv, now that was a real musician, solid as a rock. But a fiddle's a fiddle, no more..."

The threshing machine clattered the whole night through. Malva fed the sheaves into the drum, while Yarema stood nearby, cutting the straw bands with the same knife he had skinned the cows with in the Parnasenkos' barn. A pleasant din carried the world over, the din of joy and a new harvest, which died away some time around dawn, when even the greatest happiness could not supplant sleep, especially for us children. No sooner had the thresher stopped and the dust of this fantastic unity of machine and man settled than the threshing floor took on the appearance of a recent battlefield. Everyone dropped to

sleep wherever he or she had been standing, and some were even sleeping on the sacks of grain. Malva had fallen asleep under a stack of straw, her goggles off and her arms spread out. Lel Leikovich was very concerned about those goggles, because without them the work would stop, so he lay down by her side, put the goggles on his own head and fell asleep in this way, or perhaps he might not have slept at all but guarded Malva's slumber. The light mist of dawn carressed her lithe, suntanned legs, and under her knee showed a small blue vein — the mark of motherhood. Lel Leikovich had heard from Aristarkh that she had a son in Babylon.

Yarema came up to them with a *svita* overcoat and covered Malva with it. "The dew's cold," he said to himself and went to carry the sacks up to the loft, since Aristarkh might become envious of the school's large harvest and take away part of it as he had the year before. Then Zhurba arrived in his gig and walked around the "battlefield," probably looking for Malva. He espied Lel Leikovich in the goggles, paused over him, and nudged his side with the whip. Lel Leikovich took off the goggles, raised his head, and sat up.

"Where's Malva?" Zhurba asked.

"Shh!" Lel Leikovich wagged his finger at Zhurba as if he were a naughty pupil who had disrupted the silence.

"Oh, I see!" Zhurba glanced at the overcoat from under which Malva's feet showed. "I brought her some food for breakfast." He fetched it from the gig and put it down by the overcoat.

"We're making breakfast for everyone," Lel Leikovich said.

In the orchard near a huge pear tree, a lusty fire roared under a pot. Several Lemko women in aprons

and white *ochipok* caps busied themselves around it, beheading yearling roosters for *kulish* gruel; one of the roosters managed to cock-a-doodle-doo before meeting its death. Zhurba stood there for a while, shot another glance at the overcoat covering Malva and then headed toward the gates. By the wicket stood a green gate roof which would be put in place again after the tall threshing machine was pulled out of the schoolyard. The gate roof reminded Zhurba of another wicket in a schoolyard similar to this one. How many evenings had he stood by it about three years ago, waiting for the *liknep** teacher. She was a beauty, Felixa Ludwigovna. Zhurba fell in love with her recklessly and heroically like a careless youth, although he was long past thirty and had been through the mill at the Obodivka co-op where he had been an agronomist after graduating from vocational school. The leader of the co-op was Khristina Palatna, a lonesome and wilful woman who had taken a fancy to him though she was much older than he. Zhurba met with real love, independent, free and reciprocal. In those days, everyone attended the *liknep* courses, so the whole of Obodivka knew about his affair with the teacher. He was frequently seen standing by the wicket either alone or with her. The would-be scholars were stabbed with envy, and one of them sent her a crookedly scribbled note: "Felixa Ludwigovna, better wind up class, because that red-headed freak is already waiting for you by the wicket!" He was really sticking around there; it was autumn and raining, so he stood under the green gate roof. That was the first time she went past him. He tried to stop her, but she cried, "I don't want! I don't want!

* Abbr. for *likvidatsia nepismennosti* — liquidation of illiteracy

I don't want!" and ran off into the downpour. Then during the winter term, she met an officer in Yelizavetgrad*, married him, and joined him at the Nicholas Barracks (so named after Czar Nicholas who had had them built).

Some minutes ago, that "red-headed freak" had been standing before Lel Lelkovich like a bad pupil who had done something wrong. After having a look at the progress of the threshing, he should have left. But no, he had to go offering that breakfast of his. Heavens sake, what for? he asked himself. You heard plainly enough that they were beheading roosters for her. Now that handsome bastard Lel Lelkovich will be thinking God knows what about our relations, since I didn't dare wake her up. For other people such relations were called love, but for Zhurba they spelled only suffering.

Lel Lelkovich took the parcel, unwrapped the newspaper, and saw it contained a still warm black rye *kulebyaka* pie with cherries. It was steaming when Lel Lelkovich broke a piece off it. What a wonder! The Lemkos didn't know such a pie wafting of rye and a cherry orchard. It was a country creation from Kinski Rozdori where Fedir Zhurba had spent his childhood among the rye fields.

CHAPTER 7

Almost every night the cry comes from the mill:
"Kin-dzi-i-ial!"

The higher the stack of straw, the clearer the sound carried over the din of the threshing machine below

* Present Kirovograd — Tr.

and the rhythmic thumping of the steam mill by the water meadow. Should the grindstone "get out of hand" or a squabble ensue by the hopper, or some other trouble arise, the miller's male customers, let alone his female customers, knew how to call him. They ran upstairs to a little window taken out for the summer to produce a draft, and hollered at the top of their lungs into the night over the sweet clover meadow.

"Kin-dzi-i-ia!"

And then and there Aristid Kindzia would show up. He was supposed to be as just as God and never offended or deceived his customers. Small wonder, because Aristides means The Just in ancient Greek, which for all that did not hinder Kindzia from luring his frivolous female customers into the meadow, for they were prepared to go to any length to avoid paying him the peck of grain as a fee for milling. The Lemkos pardoned him his foibles, for he had nothing else to gain from the mill. As regards some of his flighty partners in the deal, they were put through another mill by their husbands back home. Once Kindzia had been a swarthy, tall young man with a gorgeous shock of hair who caught the eye of both girls and young women even without the peck. But he had ground away his youth and vigor handling the steam mill and his willing female customers who then used to explain away to their husbands: "Well, all right, so I cocked him an eye and gave him a saucy grin and he ground my grist. Oh damn it, you act as if you didn't know Kindzia's not worth the trouble anymore."

One of these days will see the end of that beautiful name whose roots it is useless to seek amidst the present Lemkos, because it probably belongs to their long-distant past when they did not yet live in the

steppe but called to one another across the mountains like Asturians and Andalusians. Just imagine that you are perched on one such brown cliff where Kindzia's ancestors nestled, then inhale as much mountain air as possible, and call out: "Kin-dzi-i-ial!" No matter how deaf the Kindzias might be, they'd have heard you, because with no other name is it possible to produce such a melodious sound.

That day there was no wind, and the vanes of the windmills in the neighboring villages had gone limp, so the farmers flocked to Kindzia on foot and by wagon. The mill shook as if in a fit of ague, its stack belching out smoke day and night. The passing locomotives knew that mill and greeted it with joyous whistles on the new harvest in Green Mills, for throughout the whole of winter and spring, the mill had not betrayed any signs of activity whatsoever. Still, Aristid survived — as did the Lemkos! How beautifully the moon swayed for them that night, caught in the white net of summer over the clover meadow resounding with the familiar "Kin-dzi-i-ial!"

For a couple of nights more, the threshing machine seemed to be engaged in a contest with the mill, and when its din died down and the red dust settled on the threshing floor, no one, neither the teachers nor us, wanted to leave, because we had become such wonderful friends during the threshing. The stack of straw — piled up by Sashko Bart who proved to have an inborn talent as a stacker (that was acknowledged by everyone now) — gave off a smell of grain and clover, while inside, if you listened intently, there was something moving and whispering, and this would go on until the winds and rains would pack the stack tight by late autumn; when the frosts set in, Yarema came with a straw hook which calloused his hands for the whole winter. Sashko Bart kept clear of those

calluses which seemed to have been glued to the huge palms of the watchman.

The last crop to be threshed was the barley. This was also the accepted harvest sequence in Babylon. The Lemkos grew Hanna Loofdorf, a brewing barley which was sent to Tivriv for making beer. Whatever its name, the barley had an incredibly prickly awn. Small wonder the nightingales fell silent in the meadows, choking on its sharp spikes. What a damnable experience it was to thresh barley after the soft, silklike oats, especially when you stood in the shard and chaff. So notwithstanding the late hour, someone put out a call to go down as a gang to the pond to bathe.

The boys picked the deeper water near the dam, diving from the sluice roof which had been built that summer, while the girls bathed around the raft where Pania Vlastovenko did her wash every week. Had it not been for the moon which made Sashko Bart cup his manhood with his hands since he had no trunks on, we might have bathed with the girls. Pania's orchard and antenna-webbed house on the hill could be seen from the pond. Her team had been stacking straw, and the sheaves were pretty heavy that summer, so she was probably fast asleep now and didn't hear our shrieks. The disparity between me and Pania was so glaring and tragic that I would have to turn into either a king of the ants or a water goblin to approach her and feast my eyes upon her. Had I been Aristid Kindzia the miller, I would have definitely ground her grist without a peck. And had I been Lel Lelkovich with such a fine knowledge of history, I would have taken Pania farther away from Green Mills, well, say, to Babylon at least, to the gardens of Semiramis, or to the Phoenicians in Tyre.

After the threshing that day, Malva had asked me whether I missed Babylon. She yearned to see her son and wanted to go there after the harvest; the collective farm was providing her with a wagon for this purpose, so I might as well come along. She also told me that I had begun to resemble my uncle Andrian, her first husband. Surely I had grown up a lot since I had fallen in love with Pania Vlastovenko here. As for Malva, she had been reborn in Green Mills, tanned by the sun and coarser in a way, but still as beautiful as before. Lel Lelkovich had taken a fancy to her during that harvest, always seating her by his side at the hastily improvised tables under the pear trees in the orchards for the lunches and suppers which our language teacher Maria Pasovska prepared for us. At nights, when the thresher gave us some rest, Lel Lelkovich invited Malva to come to his house, to which she responded with a flat refusal, preferring to rest under the stack of straw like everybody else. Because of her, Lel Lelkovich also denied himself of the comfort of his home. Once when they were lying under the stack and chatting about this and that, Zhurba drove up on his gig again. Having inquired as to Malva's whereabouts from Yarema, he went up to them, and seeing them side by side, left the schoolyard without saying a word. Zhurba was a proud man and never reappeared in the schoolyard after that, while Lel Lelkovich, rather afraid Zhurba would drop in again, left Malva under the stack and moved into his house where he had a high bed with a wrought-iron head; Hordina himself was supposed to have slept in this bed — an elegant specimen of metalwork you won't come across today.

Once Lel Lelkovich plucked up enough courage to take Malva to the pond. He sat her on the crossbar of his bike and rode her out there. They dismounted

under a willow tree, and Malva ran to see what the water was like. After the day's heat, the water seemed to be at the boiling point, whereas Malva loved cold, nippy water. On seeing her, Sashko Bart ordered us to get out of the pond and rushed off to chase the girls from the washing raft, which ended in such a hullabaloo that Lel Lelkovich had to interfere from the bank: "Aren't you ashamed of yourself, Bart?!" Now, what had shame to do with all that, if the pond had to be cleared for the principal. Refreshed and in good spirits, we walked toward the village under the leadership of a great stacker and regretted that the threshing had ended so quickly.

"Listen, do you want to meet Aristid Kindzia our miller?" Sashko asked me, stopping at the bend in the road leading to the mill. "He's a friend of mine. You don't believe me, do you?"

I knew that Sashko Bart loved visiting the mill, especially when it was a beehive of activity. He helped Kindzia collect the peck, watched the line, and occasionally downed a drink or two with the farmers, after which he completely forgot about his school affairs. That night he confided to me that after Kindzia's death Bart would take his place, building himself a house near the mill, start raising pigeons, and enjoy life. Nowhere did Sashko feel as grand as at the mill from which Green Mills had received its name.

That night, a lot of wagons had come to the mill, as was usually the case on the first nights after the new harvest. The horses tied to the wagons were munching hay; in the meadow the yoked oxen had settled into the clover; the peasants who still had a long time to wait for their turn were sleeping on sacks outdoors. It was so crowded in the mill you couldn't elbow your way through; now and again,

noise and laughter broke out in the crowd, although I had expected the mill to be a domain of solemn silence or perhaps gloomy on the occasion of the new harvest. Some unreal, semi-mythical throbbing pulsed through the mill, fusing, as it were, the infusible into an even and free motion of the grindstones so wonderfully performed by the water at water mills. And all that racket, gritting, and spinning of gears and wheels was given a semblance of order by Aristid Kindzia, the little deity in this inferno smelling of bread that had recently been taken out of the oven.

"There he is!" Sashko said with a motion of his hand.

Kindzia, a weary looking, tall, intense man was standing by the hopper, listening intently to the work of the grindstones; his hands were crossed on his chest, and his head was covered by a leather cap too small to confine his gorgeous mop of gray hair. He greeted Sashko with a nod and remained standing without stirring, as if he hadn't anything to do with this place. Then he gave a sign to some mustachioed peasant to fill the hopper, and got down to the millrace.

It was only now that I saw Pania. Except for her bare feet, she was dressed up as if for a grand ball. Kindzia had ground her grist finely, rubbing the flour between his fingertips with a smile.

"Beyond compare!" said Kindzia.

"Come over to my place for some dumplings," Pania said.

She packed the flour in the sack and tied it. Then she asked Kindzia to help her hoist it up on her shoulder and had already bent down when some sudden urge made me rush ahead of Pania.

"I'll carry it for you!" I said to a confused Pania.

"Oh, what a gentleman!" Kindzia remarked and helped me with the sack. "Who is he?" I heard him inquiring of Bart behind my back.

"He's from Babylon. A relative of Malva's."

A jeering snicker accompanied me to the door, but even if the whole mill were roaring with laughter now, it would have been too late for me to retreat. Once outside the mill, I asked Pania:

"Where to now? To your house?" I said it as if I could carry the sack anywhere she wished.

"Oh yes, to my house. Zhurba promised to come, but for some reason I don't see his gig. Maybe he forgot. or perhaps he's still stacking? And here I'm stranded with some forty kilos on my hands," Pania complained.

"Those kilos are nothing to me." I even skipped with the sack on my shoulder to let her see who she was dealing with.

Pania wanted to walk down the road, still expecting to meet Zhurba driving from the field. But by my reckoning, Lel Lelkovich and Malva would have to come down that very same road on their way back from the pond, although there was nothing to make them hurry: the water was warm, and the night was fine, so they could bathe as long as they wished.

I talked Pania in to cutting across the field to make our way shorter. As for Zhurba, let him keep on stacking the clover.

If Lel Lelkovich was still at the pond, he'd certainly stop me, and that assumption instantly made me feel the sack heavier than it seemed at the outset. But why shouldn't I, a conscientious schoolboy enamored of history just like Lel Lelkovich, have the right to help Pania, whose husband was away on a distant pas-

sage, while no one had provided her a wagon to take the flour from the mill? You see, Lel Lelkovich, I argued in my mind, Pania's tall, and it's not so easy for her to hoist the sack so high from the ground, while for me it's simply a pleasure to carry it. Pania must have guessed my imaginery conversation with Lel Lelkovich.

"Isn't it too heavy for you, boy?"

"No, not in the least."

"Now mind you, if it is, we can switch places."

A strange woman, that Pania! What kind of a Babylonian did she take me for if she thought I could possibly dump such a heavy sack on her tender and beautiful shoulder whose skin was peeling from the sun. Pania was in a sleeveless jacket, and I had noticed her sunburn back at the mill. I'd sooner overstrain myself than put that sack on a figure more graceful than even that of Semiramis or, for that matter, of the Queen of Sheba whose beauty Lel Lelkovich spoke of as if he himself were in love with her. We weren't brought up in Babylon to think we didn't have to pay for our feelings.

So there I was stomping down the road. At that moment, the whole world could have belonged to me had it not been shrinking with every step I made — the sack kept slipping down my shoulders, pulling my whole body backward, but I struggled on, stopping now and again, jumping on one leg, balancing the weight with the other to slip the sack back to its former position. It pushed me lower to the ground, so I saw only the footpath crossed by chicory with red flowers (but they should have been blue!) and a little patch of sky upon which I wanted very much to lean and rest. There is no price man wouldn't pay for his love, but like it or not I had overestimated my powers in the heat of passion. We had covered hardly

half of the distance, when I sensed the sack would get the better of me no matter how much I struggled or how low I bent.

Somewhere from behind my back came the rustle of Pania's skirt of crimson satin (that's another thing I had noticed back at the mill). The rustling sound resembling a breeze in the leaves was catching up with me, which meant that I had wanted to run away from the sack and had actually broken into a run. If only I could make it to the dam! And no farther. If Lel Lelkovich was still there and if he loved Pania a little bit at least, let him try and lug that sack up the hill to Pania's house. Such an effort was disagreeably different from a stroll with Pania for an evening movie at the sugar refinery — it was work, Lel Lelkovich, and backbreaking work at that! Sweat drenched my eyes, and the flour, so soft and warm at the beginning, burned my back like a blazing stone — it was simply astounding what had happened to that flour. A strip of pond appeared in view, and farther I saw the whole pond with the sluice. Lel Lelkovich was nowhere around. He had taken Malva, clean, refreshed, and merry, back home on his bike. I rushed on to the dam on my last dregs of willpower or, perhaps, on the loftiest of impulses when a man is ready to suffer the harshest trials for the sake of another.

The sack slipped out of my hands against my will; I still remember the feel of it sliding down my back, but I couldn't stop it — the sack plumped dully onto the ground where it burst like a puffball (the sack must have been pretty old), and a white haze concealed me from Pania's view for a moment. There followed a gale of laughter, either from the sluice or from Pania, and when the haze settled, I saw a tiny pile of flour showing white on the dam and a mirth-

less Pania standing beside the pile in her crimson skirt.

“Well, here we are,” Pania said, crossing her hands in despair as if something living had shattered here. I stood with head hanging, cursing in my mind the moment the devil had incited me to take hold of that sack. Pania pointed to the ground and said: “Look for the string down there. I guess there’s nothing else we can do.”

Then she undid her satin skirt, stepped out of it, showed me where to bind it together, and a minute later she was already picking up the flour from the ground by the handfuls and throwing it into the satin skirt which I held for her. It made a little bundle which she angrily hoisted onto her shoulder without my help. The rest of the spillage remained on the ground.

“That was my first advance payment for the work I did on the farm,” Pania said and went up the hill, while I was left standing in a white circle of flour and missed the moment when the sluice broke into a gurgle. Pania must have also heard it and stopped.

“Come over for some dumplings! Do you hear? Come on Sunday.”

Oh no, dumplings were out of the question!

Farewell, Pania! The next day I would be leaving Green Mills for my native Babylon. So don’t wait for me on Sunday. Or Monday. From now on I’ll remain ever in your memory as a white haze. Only the sluice will remind you of me from time to time, although it doesn’t seem to have had anything to do with what happened.

Much as Lel Lelkovich tried to hide his true feelings from the “old cohort,” the Pasovsky couple, let alone Kirilo Lukich (up to the day when he lost

his pince-nez), could not but see that right from the outset of the threshing, the drummer, as they called Malva, had captured the principal's fancy, and it was no laughing matter. When in the end she got on the crossbar of his bike (by the way, as she confessed later on, it was her first ride on a bike ever), the guardians of the principal's morality had nothing left to do but exchange meaningful glances and spread their hands to indicate that God knows what sins were thus committed against the school. Maria Wilhelmivna was especially worried. Herself in womanly prime, she simply could not accept the thought of Lel Lelkovich having bathed with another man's wife in one and the same pond on a moonlit night. Malva had nothing to lose, but the principal and, consequently, the school could be discredited for a long time. "What childishness!" Kirilo Lukich said and rode home on his squeaky bike (he lived on one of the farmsteads outside Green Mills). Pasovsky gave an asthmatic laugh (his was a neglected illness), while the teacher of botany, Domirel, had smelled something bad in the air and ran off to save his frying roosters: secretly from the "old cohort," it was agreed to mark the conclusion of the threshing with an evening party at the principal's quarters.

Domirel had arrived in Green Mills a year before. He was a native of Podolia, and the other half of his parentage being Turkish, he had a good knowledge of Turkish cooking, especially as regards roosters Turkish style seasoned with garlic and red pepper which he grew on the school's plot. By the time he reached his roosters, they had burned, so he had to ask Yarema for some more and start all over again. "Poor Lel Lelkovich," Domirel complained to Yarema as he was taking two roosters down from the perch,

“he can’t make an independent step without those slaves of honor who’ve forgotten their own youth.” In the meantime, the conversation that had started in the schoolyard was continued by the Pasovskys in their bed, from which they heard Domirel chopping off the roosters’ heads near the principal’s porch, and this robbed the couple of their sleep completely. Pasovsky, who had been operating the scales during the threshing, also wanted to attend the party, but he didn’t know how to get there without his wife. His unsuccessful attempts to lull her to sleep only added fuel to the flames.

“Pilip Pilipovich, now just imagine Pania arriving at the pond with that two-pronged pitchfork she uses for stacking. She could be on her way home from the mill about then.”

By the logic of Pasovsky (a teacher of mathematics), jealousy would force Pania to run her pitchfork through Lel Lelkovich — him and only him, whereas by the logic of Maria Wilhelmivna (apart from language, she taught literature, and so could draw on classical examples), it was Malva who had to be the victim of jealousy. In the end, Pasovsky’s wife got jealous of her husband’s interest in Malva without any justifiable reason, of course, save perhaps for his digression from classical examples, while Pasovsky, reluctant to put up any defense of his point, took his pillow and went outdoors to catch up on his sleep on a bench under an elm tree, from where he hoped to join the party as soon as it started.

Actually, Malva and Lel Lelkovich bathed at different shores of the pond, from which they could see each other only in silhouette and, at that, through the white mist which had settled on the pond at this time of the harvesting season. Then they met near the sluice. Malva, her hair wet from the bath, settled on

the crossbar and Lel Lelkovich (he had tried not to wet his hair, since he had forgotten to take a comb) took her to the party.

Roasted roosters Turkish style became the pride of the school, and Domirel made them only on special occasions and only for the most esteemed guests, including the woman inspector Domna Nesterivna (where could so many roosters be procured from for everyone if Yarema put eggs under only two or three broodhens!). Malva was also to be accorded the honor, so Domirel was waiting impatiently for them, the more so since roosters Turkish style had to be served hot with *horilka*.

They returned from the pond in a roundabout way through the farmyard, a huge plot surrounded by knotgrass on all sides and trampled black by people and cattle in the middle. From here, Aristarkh committed Green Mills to "battle" every morning. Right now there wasn't a single soul around; the watchmen must have either gone to the mill with their first advance of grain or were enjoying a smoke of young tobacco leaves in the stable (men are always attracted by horses) while here in the farmyard the sheep were sleeping in the folds — black and white sheep separately, and the bulls were breathing heavily in an enclosure. Their stalls in the cowsheds were too stuffy for them, so Aristarkh had them led outdoors for the night. Two of the bulls were lying and chewing their cuds, while the third, Tungus, of a Dutch breed, had impaled the moon on his horns and was standing there deep in thought and all too serious for an animal. The Dutch bull, bought for an imposing price, was given to butting, and the only man capable of handling him was Aeneas Manuiliv, the great deaf-mute of Green Mills, who was both the pride and burden to the Lemkos. Now just

imagine, such a proud tribe, but it, too, could not avoid having a deaf-mute. Initially, his name was Anan, or An for short, but as he grew up, he proved to be a deaf-mute, so he was renamed Aeneas as if he didn't belong to his tribe at all but had come from Virgil's *Aeneid* — a minor relief, but a relief nonetheless.

The meal had been ready for a long time. Domirel was hanging around the gates, and as soon as he saw them on the road, he rushed off to heat up the roosters and serve them. But Lel Lelkovich had gotten the idea of stopping and since the farmyard was empty, teaching Malva ride the bike. Malva eagerly accepted the offer, since there would be no better opportunity. Lel Lelkovich made her get down from the bike in the middle of the farmyard, and before delivering his first lesson, he decided to show her what he himself was capable of.

Picking up speed, he started doing things Pasovsky's wife would have branded foolish childishness, something for which she'd hardly pardon the principal. Malva, though, went into raptures over his performance. At first he stood up on the crossbar, and balancing on it, did a closed circle of the farmyard. Then he did a headstand on the seat, and balancing with his feet in the air, made another circle. Malva laughed, which spurred Lel Lelkovich on to more intricate tricks. But the spectator who stood in the enclosure and had so far escaped their notice could not tolerate such human impudence which upset all previous notions of the human race he had entertained back in his home country. The Dutch bull braced himself, issued a rather brief militant call, and cleared the enclosure in one leap, knocking off the upper plank of his pen. Lel Lelkovich was still standing on his head when something unbelievably

huge and ferocious came charging at him through the world turned upside down.

"Run!" was the only thing Malva managed to cry out.

Lel Lelkovich bounded off the bicycle saddle, stood for a moment, bewildered, shouted "Tungus!" and bolted off for all he was worth. With a terrifying roar, Tungus followed the fugitive in hot pursuit. The bull's eyes flashed fire which was ready to incinerate Lel Lelkovich. In a minute or so, the bull would catch up with him and pin him to the ground with its horns. Malva was struck with horror at the thought of Lel Lelkovich's inglorious end, but still didn't let go of her harvest footwear, a pair of what looked like worn yet sturdy *postoli* *. When the beast was level with her, she flung them at its white head. That was enough to bring the animal to a halt. The bull turned his eyes menacingly on her, and leaving Lel Lelkovich to his own devices, regarded the new victim he hadn't intended to harass in the first place. In this way Malva found herself face to face with Tungus at a time when Lel Lelkovich, having abandoned all hope of saving his skin, was heading at a fast clip toward the moon which any minute now would land in the area around the mill.

It seemed the beast was right behind his back. Lel Lelkovich felt its devilish breath on his neck, but it was still a long way to the moon. The only man who could have saved the principal from a brutal death was Yarema, but he was fast asleep under a stack of straw with a twisted drive belt from the thresher under his head for a pillow.

* *Postoli* — heelless shoes made of soft leather with the sole overlapping the sides of the foot and the toes and joined with a puckered seam — Tr.

Domirel sneaked out of the house from a side porch and ran to the gates. The roosters had already been served up, but the two guests were nowhere in sight. Domirel went out on the road. What the hell was going on in the farmyard? He saw a cyclist racing around the yard in circles, pursued by something huge and clumsy with a white head and a big tail that resembled a comet's. Presently Pasovsky came running toward him from the direction of the elm tree.

"Isn't that Lel Lelkovich over there?" Domirel asked him.

"Lel Lelkovich ran by that way just now," Pasovsky said, pointing toward the mill. "What you see is a woman, Comrade Domirel."

"A woman!" Domirel exclaimed in surprise. "Call Yarema here."

The threesome ran to a ditch and lay down in the weeds. Pasovsky began to cough.

"Hush!" Yarema shut him up. "That's Tungus over there."

The news made Pasovsky's cough build to a roar.

With every circle, Tungus came closer to the ambush; probably blind with fury, he charged at the ditch, but at the last moment he swerved and went after Malva as before. Malva didn't know how to get out of that vicious circle which was too tight for Tungus, so he charged straight at the sound of the coughing in the weeds. Yarema lost his nerve and dived into the ditch, Domirel pressed himself to the ground, risking getting trampled, but Pasovsky got up in his white night shirt and shouted: "Halt!"

Tungus didn't expect such a counteroffensive; his haunches went down, he frothed at the mouth, and his eyes flashed fire. The bull tried to jump aside, but Pasovsky, who hadn't anything to lose anyway, grabbed him by the nose ring and hung on to it with

all his might. Then he twisted the bull's neck with its drooping dewlap. Tungus didn't offer any resistance; worn out by now, he looked meekly at his victor. The math teacher sensed the weakness, kicked the bull under the belly with a bare foot, and chased him away. Tungus trudged off for his pen, barely dragging his feet from exhaustion.

Meanwhile, Malva couldn't stop the bike: she had no idea how it was done, since this was her first bike ride and one taken on pain of death at that. Domirel realized what was wrong, and yelled: "Fall to the ground! Don't be afraid!"

But Malva went into a new circle, and turning the bike toward the men, threw out her arms: "Catch me!"

At such breakneck speed, catching her would have been next to impossible anyway, so Pasovsky and Domirel stepped aside and Malva tore between them and flew into the ditch along with the bike. She was carried out unconscious and taken to the school, Yarema winding up the procession with the principal's bike.

By that time, a troop of levies was on its way from the mill. The men had armed themselves with whatever they could lay their hands on: wagon-ladder supports, whippetrees, yoke rods, and someone had pulled a beam from his wagon and carried it high so that Tungus would see it and not dare charge their way. The troop was led by Aristid Kindzia. Had Pania and I lingered at the mill, we would have also joined the levies.

At the sight of the host with the wagon beam, Pasovsky burst into laughter at the gates, while Maria Wilhelmivna called to him from their house: "Pasovsky, don't laugh; it will make your cough worse!"

A mail train came chugging from Odessa, its

windows flitting by like a snake; it was about one hour or two past midnight; the engineer greeted Green Mills with a merry whistle.

Before dawn, right after what might otherwise have put everyone involved on a high gig, another gig — in this case with two wheels from different britzkas and a white horse under a white shaft bow — rolled into the schoolyard. Zhurba had been stacking the whole night through; his red shock of hair was covered with awns, and his eyes were red like Tungus's when he charged Lel Lelkovich. The principal was afraid to go out to Zhurba and sent Domirel instead. The latter managed to set the agronomist's mind somewhat at ease, assuring him that Malva would be all right in a day or two, because she hadn't so much sustained injuries as suffered a nervous breakdown, and so the main thing now was good care and rest. Zhurba tried to get in to see Malva, but Domirel blocked his way so firmly on the porch and advised him so convincingly not to wake her that Zhurba retreated. It was obvious that Zhurba didn't know all the details of the incident, except that Tungus had attacked Malva and she was carried into the house of Lel Lelkovich who supposedly defended and saved her from the infuriated animal. "How does Lel Lelkovich feel?" Zhurba was curious to know. "He's all right," Domirel said, smiling. "A fine man! Well done," Zhurba said and drove away.

Come morning, rumors about Lel Lelkovich's defending the woman from death like a true hero were making their rounds. It was even said that he jumped on Tungus's back and broke him in like a wild horse. The Lemkos were impatient to see the hero, and entire delegations kept turning up in the schoolyard demanding that Lel Lelkovich come out on the porch.

Every time Domirel came out instead and accepted the praise of Lel Lelkovich who was hiding behind the door and burning with shame.

The doctor, an elderly man who looked like a *zemstvo* practitioner, was brought from Raigorodok that same day, but he had no good news for them. He found her arm was broken above the wrist and there were a number of ugly bruises on her chest. The arm could be put in a plaster cast, but the bruises worried the doctor exceedingly. On leaving the patient, he asked for her husband, probably wanting to confide something to him, which threw the men present into confusion. Neither Lel Lelkovich nor Pasovsky (the more so with his wife at his side) dared to take this part upon himself, so Domirel did it. Malva made an attempt to snicker but instantly clutched her breast in pain.

"I'm serious — which one of you is her husband?" the doctor said indignantly, and, turning to Malva, pointed at Domirel who had noticeably lost his pluck: "Is that him?"

There was nothing Malva could do but confirm his choice. The doctor took him to the adjacent room to have a word with him:

"Has anyone in her family ever had consumption?"

"No... I don't think so."

"Be more precise, please."

"Well, er-r, some of her distant relatives died of it, but there's nothing unusual about that..."

"She has all the symptoms of consumption. Only a consumptive has such burning eyes. I'm afraid the concussions might aggravate the process. Besides, we don't know how serious they are. Bring her to me after some time by all means. As for now, she needs good care, a strict regimen, honey, and milk straight

from the cow. As for you, don't despair. How old is she? Thirty?"

"Thirty."

"It's a bad age. Crucial I'd say. Does she have any children?"

"Yes, a son."

"It's a pity... for the son I mean. But there are exceptions, you know. I'd also advise you to watch out. How do you feel?"

"Me? Nothing to complain about."

"I see. But that doesn't prove anything. Now go back in there so she won't think we're keeping any secrets from her. I'll put the cast on her arm tomorrow; I didn't know this was a fracture case. It'd be good if I were wrong on the other point. But you're her husband and should know everything. Are you a teacher?"

"Yes, I teach botany."

"You're young yet, so you'll get over it."

Domirel was moved almost to tears.

"We're men, after all, aren't we?" the doctor said, indignant.

"Yes, sure."

"That's more like it!"

So that was how events had developed, starting essentially from a trifle — two people needing a bath at the pond after threshing barley, after which they were to sup on roosters Turkish style and listen to some new gramophone records which ardent music lover Lel Lelkovich received regularly by mail from the central record stock. Prior to the events described above, he had received a set of records of Utyosov's jazz band. Eventually, things settled back down to normal. Green Mills soon forgot about the incident, it was so busy with the harvest, and only the Pasovskys had their hands full looking after Malva,

bathing her with all sorts of herbs Domirel picked in old ditches and hedges which were supposed to help the bruises and stimulate the blood. In a week or so, Malva was back on her feet, she would go out to the orchard for a walk or swing in the hammock. She waited for Zhurba to come take her home, but he avoided the school, being unable to pardon her the dip with Lel Lelkovich, of which he hadn't learned right away. Lel Lelkovich, too, seemed to be waiting for that magnanimous gesture on Zhurba's part. On learning of Malva's consumption from Domirel, Lel Lelkovich lived in terror; he moved over to the staff room, so that he would even enter the building by a different porch, and communicated with the patient only from a distance, mostly through the window which Malva kept open day and night. He'd inquire about her health and then rush off on business — the school was being repaired just then. It was only Domirel who didn't forget about her; he visited the patient several times a day and put on the gramophone records for her; its needles had grown dull, so he had to sharpen the old ones.

One such evening, Zhurba arrived, bringing Malva a change of clothes and footwear in case she decided to stay on at the school in the future. He picked an evening when Lel Lelkovich and the Pasovskys had left for the club which had just gotten some barrels of Tivriv beer brewed from the new barley — fully enough to throw the Lemkos' hearts into a turmoil. The window was open, the gramophone was silent, and in the orchard, apples were falling to the ground — the famous Medvin Gypsies Kirilo Lukich had brought from Medvin thirty years before. Zhurba came up to the window with his bundle, climbed onto the edge of the foundation wall, and looked into the room.

Malva was lying supine in bed with her arm in a cast, her braids spread over the pillows, her eyes straying across the opposite wall, while Domirel, fair-haired and handsome, was kneeling at her bed and whispering something ardently passionate. Zhurba put the bundle on the windowsill, jumped down from the foundation wall, and left.

It wasn't difficult to guess what Domirel was whispering about, kneeling there on one knee, holding a whetstone and needle in his hands. It might have been a parable of a neophyte who had not yet experienced lofty, all-incinerating love, or it might have been a parable of dismay of youthful innocence addressed to a great woman he had met for the first time, or it might have been a parable of supplication and prayer, but it also might have been the monologue of a man who was conscious of the fatality of his first step toward such a woman as Malva. Had Domirel's monologue been recorded, it would probably have had such a finale:

"Malva, perhaps you did appear here by chance like a wild poppy swept by the winds from the fields into my garden, but you caught my eye when you appeared for the first time with your agronomist and when Lel Lelkovich invited you for a waltz. I was dancing with some tall Lemko girl. No one ever invites her to a dance; she's on Kuprian's vegetable-growing team, and at her side I must have looked small and inconspicuous to you. That night, however, it wasn't Lel Lelkovich dancing with you, it was me, for even then my heart had gone out to you and soared around you. I haven't the slightest idea where such feelings come from, but I knew already then that this weak woman who was close to being drunk after one mug of beer was precisely the woman in whom

everything took on such an harmonious and unexpected state of being for me: both in her sorrowfully alarming laughter, her gestures and eyes, and the color of her hair and gait and her vernal weakness — in absolutely everything that goes with a woman at that time of year and at such an age. I even liked your red-headed agronomist (Zhurba must have appeared in the window just at that moment) in the reflection of your radiance. Whenever he drove past the school, sad and preoccupied, I mentally settled on his gig beside him and rushed to your home, then we walked around the plantations, checking on your troughs, over which the butterflies swarm to this day. I was overjoyed to learn that the agronomist was nothing more than your fellow tenant, even though he is in love with you — oh well, that's life, and often, it doesn't take the course we'd want. At times it changes against our will. If Aristarkh had had an empty house to offer, would you be under one roof, let alone in one bed with that agronomist now? I understand all that and forgive you — Domirel pledges his word of honor, if my happiness is really possible and if there is room for my love in your heart. Oh with what trepidation did I wait for you to return from the pond that night and how fast my heart was beating when I picked you up all bruised but still alive. I saw it as a sign of fate, tragic as it might have been, but I vowed to love you even if you remained in a plaster cast all your life..."

Approximately at this point the kerosene in the lamp burned out, the wick flared up and started to smoke, and laughing, Malva put her other hand on Domirel's shoulder: "What would you do with me in a cast?"

"I'd take you to my parents in Dzherela."

"You'd take a frivolous woman who went bathing with Lel Lelkovich? And at night besides..."

"Why, you don't believe me, Malva?"

"I do. But what would you need such a woman for, Comrade Domirel? You could find yourself the finest girl in Dzherela and bring her here. That would be so much easier than taking on a cripple in a plaster cast. Ha-ha-ha! You're a fiery character, Comrade Domirel. They say you're a Turk. Is that true?"

"Is that why you're afraid to go to Dzherela?"

"Zhurba wouldn't let me go in the first place. Even if I wanted to."

"We could run away. Right now. This very night. To Pilipi and board a train there. Nobody would even know where we had gone, and I've still got a month of vacation left. My folks have a cow, so there'd be fresh milk for you. There's a river and a hornbear grove. Oh my, it's a village incomparable with Green Mills. A paradise on earth!"

Much as she wanted to, Malva could not upset his serious tone, so she asked him to fetch the bundle from the windowsill.

Domirel got up and brought the bundle, recalling that it hadn't been there when he had climbed through the window.

"How did it get here?"

"Zhurba brought it."

"Was he really here?"

"Yes. But he didn't want to interrupt you. I imagine that was your first confession of love, wasn't it?"

"Yes, it was, Malva," he said, the bundle still in his hands.

"See, how magnanimous Zhurba is. He let you finish... All right, untie the bundle and let's see what's in it." Domirel untied the bundle and shook out its contents — a shirt, a dress, white shoes, and some-

thing else white — all on the bed. “Well, now I’ve got everything I need to run away with you to your Dzherela.”

“How could I have missed him?” Domirel wondered, smiling.

“Now, if you really love me, go over to the Parnasenkos. There’s a hobbled horse grazing in the meadow and a gig in the yard. Hitch the horse to it and drive over here.”

“I could ask Aristarkh for a wagon to take us all the way to Dzherela. After all, I’m teaching two of his daughters. I’m sure he won’t refuse. In two days we’ll be in Dzherela.”

“Sure. But a gig is enough for us. It’d be more modest that way.”

“What if Zhurba comes out and says no?”

“Tell him it’s for me. If he refuses to give you the gig, let him come himself. But mind you, don’t go blabbing about your Dzherela to him.”

“What a wonderful grove it’s got! Malva, you’ve never seen such a hornbeam grove in your life. The undergrowth is all black, and the crowns are a dense green. You should see the Podolian hillocks! And what a loft we got. There’s hay... and imagine the rain drumming outside... Do you like rain drumming on the roof?”

“I imagine I do, but I never heard it.”

“It beats any jazz you’ve ever heard!”

Domirel carried out the whole operation with the gig a bit differently. He sneaked into the Parnasenkos’ farmyard, hitched himself to the gig, and quietly rolled it right up to the clay pit. He sat there for some time and had a smoke. Only after he had made sure that Zhurba was fast asleep did he hurry away to catch the horse. Malva hadn’t kept abreast of the latest changes: the horse was not hobbled as it turned

out, and catching it wasn't easy. The initially idyllic scene Domirel was so fascinated with — a white horse amid a wet meadow — turned into a real nightmare, because the animal would not let him near it. Besides, Domirel had got a foolish idea into his head: if he caught the horse, Malva would be his, if not, his dreams would crumble. The horse must have shied from his red shirt, or, perhaps, fate itself must have come into play, because how could anyone stake all of his success or failure in a new life on whether or not he could catch a horse in a meadow?

By that time, Lel Lelkovich had returned home from the club (the Pasovskys had done so long before!). The confirmed bachelor had probably given Pania a lift on the very same crossbar upon which Malva had sat. He rolled the bike over the main porch, silently opened the staff room, and without the lights on, lay down to sleep on the worn-out settee. He had been sleeping there ever since Malva had occupied his bed with wrought-iron stands of such odd craftsmanship that however much Malva stretched her imagination, she couldn't grasp the patterns on them. It seemed that one could look at this piece of craftsmanship all his life and fail to find any signs of good or evil in it. There were some winged creatures resembling little angels around a pig-iron tree, but the metal was of a color which made them look like little devils on occasion — a glaring disparity between material and concept. That probably explained why Malva felt so morbid in the bed, except for those few moments when the passionate Domirel was so grandiloquently making his declarations of love. At that moment, he gave off a smell of bittersweet, of the harvest fields, and of the distant land his ancestors had left several centuries before to come to the Podolian hillocks which rise as steeply as

first love and drop as giddily as the despair preceding it.

The Gypsy apples fell onto the grass with dull plops; at dawn, Yarema would come out with a basket, pick them up, bring the smaller ones on the top to the Pasovskys, and say: "These Gypsy apples are not the same they used to be, not the same at all." Those on the bottom of the basket he would bring to Lel Lelkovich (and to her, of course), and say: "What fine apples; there was never anything like them before!" Then Lel Lelkovich would get up and run to the horizontal bar to do grand circles, after which he'd make off for a shallow well in the gully to wash himself. Then the repairmen would arrive and Lel Lelkovich would be ordering them around all day long, shouting, yelling, scurrying about the attic, and cleaning out every crack and cranny for the roofers. A school is a school as long as it's got a good roof on it. He'd shout to the roofers: "Hey you up there, mark that seventh row from the edge." But by that time she wouldn't hear his voice overhead or the clatter of hammers on the roof — she'd be gone. She might already have been on her way to Dzherela by that time if it hadn't been for Zhurba and her age. The bitter sorrow of her union with Zhurba would pursue her again and again like a shadow pursuing a man. But could she really be blamed for being able to pity Zhurba, for being able even to have children from him, but being unable to force herself to love him and give him her heart as she could to the Turk from Dzherela who, in the end, had caught the horse and was now tearing along in the gig for her. Yet there was something in Zhurba which all other men lacked. Behind his quiet and sumbissive disposition, Malva divined an unfailing humaneness. Now, who else would have brought her a change of clothes and

the only white shoes she had, so she wouldn't have to go around barefoot in front of the teachers? It was only at the gates that Malva remembered her *postoli* and involuntarily glanced over her shoulder to see if the enraged Dutch bull were anywhere around.

At dawn on the day of the incident, the watchmen leaving the stables on their way to their posts for the night found the *postoli* in the farmyard and hung them on a peg at the entrance to the farm office where all lost or abandoned articles were usually hung. No one claimed the shoes, and they shriveled in the sun until they disappeared one evening. It was Zhurba who took them off the peg; after inspecting them, he threw them into the gig. He had crafted them out of Malva's boots. Now the *postoli* stood under a bench in his house. In one of them hid a mouse, constantly sticking its nose out of a hole, which made it look like a little toe to Zhurba. It was really funny to look at. Malva wore tight shoes, as all women do before the age of thirty, and there was always a callus on that right little toe of hers. The mouse squeaked in the shoe — perhaps the only sound that carried through the house that night.

For some reason, the crooks stopped appearing in the barn, probably having had their fill of the bounty of the new harvest, and the mill had ceased its grinding. There was nothing to lend an ear to nor any trace of alarm in his heart — everything was quiet both in the weeds, which he hadn't time to mow down, and in the cherry orchard, where sparrows were pecking at the last of the cherries. He smarted with the feeling of being completely abandoned, a red-headed "freak" who wasn't needed by any woman in the world (it couldn't be helped, but such thoughts revolved in his head at times). Lying in bed, he turned

from side to side just like the sheaves he had been turning all those nights to pack them tightly in the stack so it would defy the wind and rain. In another house, Domirel (Zhurba hadn't gotten a good look at him, after all) was kneeling before her, whispering something all the while. He still had a month of vacation to spare, so he might as well take her to his Dzherela; he, Zhurba, had once promised Malva to take her to his Kinski Rozdori but hadn't done so in the end.

Already seated in the gig, Malva planted an unexpected kiss on Domirel's flop of hair, and drove away.

Domirel remained standing by the gates, simply unable to reconcile himself to the thought of never seeing this remarkable woman again. He had the urge to shout: "I'll be back! Do you hear me, Malva, I'll be back!" But why shout when she had guessed his urge anyway and turned round in the gig. At dawn he set off for the railroad station at Pilipi with the firm resolve never to return to Green Mills again. Through Yarema, he passed the following note to Lel Lelkovich: "A school which cannot keep quiet about human suffering ceases to exist for me. Get yourself another botany teacher. I'll request to be transferred to another region. Domirel." When he was boarding the train, a confused, disheveled Lel Lelkovich appeared on the platform with his bike. But he couldn't elicit any further explanation from Domirel, because the train stopped at Pilipi for only a minute.

A month later, Domirel returned from Dzherela. The school was already back in shape — cleaned, whitewashed, and freshly painted. Lel Lelkovich took him around the classrooms to show off the fine repairs which had taken an entire month to accomplish. He was especially proud of the freshly painted

green roof. Such a roof — painted green by all means — had been the principal's dream for years. He believed that a green roof lent the building that exceptional solemnity so necessary to a school. He probably had a point there. Dzherela once had a church with a green roof, and after it had disappeared, Dzherela seemed to have lost something.

Domirel noticed the school roof from far in the steppe. The first thing he inquired about after the tour of the school was Malva. Since the day she returned to Zhurba, Lel Lelkovich had never seen her, what with the repairs, the harvest, and all the commonplace worries of a principal. He had not seen her at the club, in the farm office, or at harvest time either. She was probably still wearing the plaster cast; if so, that would be the worst thing of all — a twist of fate beyond help. As far as he knew, no doctors had visited her. Zhurba was probably in the dark about her illness, and in no way was it possible to warn the redhead to be careful. At this point, Domirel flared up: "Don't you dare do it! It's enough that you've blabbed about it to Pasovsky's wife. Everything she knows becomes common knowledge the next day. Mind you, Zhurba loves her. And not just Zhurba..."

"I understand..." Lel Lelkovich nodded. "I understand everything. Domirel's fallen in love. One more day and I would have applied for a new botany teacher. Now that problem's taken care of. I didn't know my botany teacher had such a wonderful soul. Let's celebrate your return tonight. I'll introduce you to our new primary teacher Inna Panna — a paragon of beauty and virtue. Here's the woman you should have fallen in love with! That is, if you hadn't invented a Malva for yourself. I regret having been instrumental in this."

"Not in the least!" Domirel said. "It happened long before Malva appeared in your bed."

"I've got a new bed..." Domirel turned around, and it was only now that he noticed the wrought-iron footboard and headboard in the trash heap by the watchman's hut. That was how the run-down bed of someone who had died might be thrown out of a house, Domirel thought. Leaving Lel Lelkovich at the porch, he went to the trash heap, pulled the bedstead out, and put it all together by the wall of the hut. Back at the porch, he said: "Dzherela has never known such piece of casting. One of these days I'll take it there." Lel Lelkovich looked at him, surprised, and said: "It's a fine thing, it is."

Malva and Zhurba were sitting in the cherry orchard, cooking fish soup of the loach they had caught that day, when Domirel, driving a new nickel-plated bike that flashed in the sun, came dashing across the dam down the hill from the clay pit. Miscalculating the speed of his stunt, he almost ran into the wall of the house. He rolled his two-wheeler into the orchard, and said by way of greeting:

"This is for you, Malva, from Dzherela. I stood in line for it for hours! Take it, I don't need it."

"I told you, Fedir, that this Domirel is an oddball."

"We'll only be able to raise the money by the end of the year," Zhurba said gloomily. "That is if you'll wait. But to take the bike without paying... I'm against that. Categorically. You're no magnate to be giving such fine presents, and we're not so poor as to accept it."

"Really, if you want, we can pay you in grain," Malva said.

"Don't worry, I'll wait. Take it and ride it to your heart's content."

Malva should have kissed both Domirel and Zhurba for joy, but once in the saddle, she forgot about them and dashed off to show herself to Green Mills. She stayed away so long that Zhurba and Domirel both started to worry about her safety. She flew through Green Mills from end to end just to prove to the Lemkos that she wasn't as unhappy with Zhurba as they wanted her to be. After the plaster had been taken off her arm, this was her first appearance in public. She was afraid to confess even to herself that it was her heart rejoicing both at the return of Domirel and at her own return to life.

No sooner had Babylon lived through a drizzly Candlemas Day than Chubar summoned Sosnin by government cable and sent him south to the Kherson steppe. While she was still in Babylon, Malva received his first letter:

"The steppe is so boundless here and such winds blast across it that I do up all the buttons on my coat to cover my chest lest my heart be blown out of it. We live in a heated freight car out in the steppe. Around this car one of the largest machine and tractor stations in all of Ukraine is to appear. It will be called the Dnieper MTS. We are already receiving the first machines which arrive here by rail at our blockhouse; we park them in the open steppe, and they're quite an impressive sight. The people here are wonderful; they do things in a big way and with understanding. It's easy for me to start the project with them, because say what you like, Malva, a free range has its effect on people. Join me, if you can and wish. Sincerely yours, Sosnin."

Malva had sent an indefinite reply then. After she had left for Green Mills, her mother kept receiving Sosnin's letters and put them unopened behind an

icon. Whenever Ruzia dropped in and tried to get at the letters and read them, Malva's mother reproved her severely: "Don't touch them. They aren't for you..." Malva did not reappear in Babylon for a long time, and Ruzia lashed out at her for leaving unread something that might have been urgent. After harvest time, Sosnin stopped writing altogether. The Dnieper MTS was finally built and soon gained great fame throughout the Republic.

Malva's boy stayed behind with his old grandmother, and I often saw him in the street. When the boy disappeared from home for the whole day, hiding in the tall weeds or going down a gully where he would climb an apricot tree and then sink into a deep sleep under it from exhaustion, Malva's mother would appear on a hillock and call out in a trumpeting voice that carried through half of Babylon: "Stash-ko-o-o! Stash-ko-o-o!" That name echoed in numberless variations when she called him at twilight. One evening, he did not respond to her call and she came to us, believing that he had wandered over to our place. The Valakhs were having supper just then, sitting in a circle around the table, although it was rectangular. She stood in the doorway, looked intently at the diners, and seeing no Stashko among them, snapped, offended: "Having your supper, aren't you? All right, so have it." Then she beckoned to me for some reason, and when I came out to her in the entrance hall, she said in a tone as if I didn't belong to the Valakhs she hated: "Sonny, Stashko's disappeared. I'm blind, you see, so would you be so kind as to go look for him. He must have fallen asleep in the weeds somewhere." I took the spoon I had come out with back into the room, told my parents I'd finish my supper later on, although I knew pretty well that nothing would be left of it by the time I returned

(I said that for the benefit of Malva's mother, so she'd know we weren't the most down-and-out people around) and left to look for Stashko. As she walked, her skirts, of which she had on more than were necessary for summertime, flapped about her feet. With her behind me, I was stepping into an increasingly denser darkness, at the bottom of which the solitary fitful light of Ruzia's huge empty house flickered.

"What if he's at Ruzia's?" I asked Malva's mother.

"Could be, but I quarreled with her, so I'll stay here while you go in and ask. What if he's really there?"

The house had two doors — one wide, which Dzhura had cut for himself and his tractor in his day and which was wrapped in constant darkness now, and the other, from which the light came, had a triangular window over it. I opened it, walked through the entrance hall, and without knocking (a long-standing tradition in Babylon), entered Ruzia's room. Ruzia stood there naked with her hair let down, looking at herself in a tall, yellowed, tarnished mirror. She held a tallow candle in one hand and was moving it up and down in an oddly cautious way as if she were afraid of frightening off the image in the mirror. It was only then that I noticed how her hair glistened like silk; it was still wet, combed in two halves with a parting she had had as long as I could remember. How could Dzhura not have loved such a woman, and how much was Klim Sinitsya missing now not seeing Ruzia in that old mirror. Noticing someone else in the mirror (that is me), Ruzia broke into a smile, and taking the candle away from her breasts which had never suckled a child and looked almost like a girl's, she said:

"Is that you?"

"Yes, auntie... Has Malva's Stashko been at your place?"

"Oh, is he already out courting young women? Ha-ha-ha!"

"No, but he's disappeared somewhere."

"I'm just back from beet harvesting, took a dip in the pond, and was looking at myself." She blew out the candle. "Come here! I'll kiss you at least. Ha-ha-ha!"

The sight of the demented woman, the fright she instilled in me, and the morbid sense of being in the house of the late Dzhura — all this made me take to my heels, although a minute before, a pair of clever eyes with only a touch of nocturnal sorrow in them had looked at me. Malva's mother followed me, flapping her skirts and imploring all the while: "Don't run so fast, boy, because I can't see anything. I can only hear. What was Ruzia doing there?"

"Sleeping."

"They say Sinitsya calls on her. But I don't believe it. That would be the devil knows what. You Valakhs must know about it. You're her relatives, after all."

"Know about what?"

"About Sinitsya."

They didn't know anything, those Valakhs, and they hadn't the slightest idea how beautiful Auntie Ruzia was after bathing and what clever eyes she had; the only thing they talked about all the time was her being crazy, although Sinitsya didn't give a credence to that gossip, proclaimed her sane, and even appointed her team leader. In so doing, Sinitsya referred to her being literate and having read books on agronomy, which made her capable of teaching others. In the end, we found Stashko back home in the barn, sleeping in a trough. Malva's mother had been away all day after going with Otchenashka to

Pritske for confession, and Stashko had looked after the house in such a fashion.

As I was going past Ruzia's house, it was already dark inside. Ruzia had gone to bed. Perhaps Klim Sinitsya really had revived her a second time for Babylon, I thought.

As it was Saturday, the Lemkos in Green Mills flocked together to drink their beer after work. Washed clean and dressed in their holiday best, they also came to listen to the divine music of Silvester's violin in the night. Wouldn't the violin remind Malva of her son this time at least? The Valakhs said that a legitimate child would have never been abandoned, let alone to the care of Malva's blind mother who had lapsed into dotage that spring. Besides, the Valakhs declared — mostly in public, of course — that had Stashko been Andrian's child and not God knows whose, they'd have taken him into their home. On hearing that, Malva's mother squared accounts with the Valakhs — also in public — by snapping out during the holiday at the swing: "You would've only badgered the boy. Better think about what to do with your own kids instead of chasing them out into the big wide world (that hint certainly referred to me). But my child's with me, and I'll bring him up to your misfortune yet. Yes, I will!" From then on the Valakhs never picked on Malva or her son in public, but at home, it was an altogether different picture. In our homes, we are brought up for perpetual and merciless trial, and what reaches our ears from that great theater is only the hum of intermissions, which everyone is granted to understand and interpret either to his detriment or advantage.

Ring, ring, ring! What the hell was going on — Babylon already had a bicycle (Whose? Why hadn't the Valakhs told me about it?). A woman on a bike

came flying right at me; her shadow fell from the dam onto the water of the pond; she glanced my way but didn't recognize me, and, to my surprise, dashed across the perilously rickety bridge, flew up the hill into Chaplich Lane, made another ring (before passing someone else on her way), and then I heard her voice up on the hill in the Singers' yard: "Mother, Mother. Open up, it's me!"

It was Malva! A whole world seemed to have returned to me along with her. Strange, but no sooner do you think about a person, involuntarily, suddenly, than that person appears. A light flared up in the window for her, the door opened, and from the entrance hall, the bell she was ringing for her son's sake carried far and wide. A door creaked in Yavtukh's house as the great Babylonian came outdoors for a breath of night air, while back in Green Mills where Malva had come from, Lel Leikovich, the profound connoisseur of the Kingdom of Babylon, had had his beer and was probably performing the steps of a pas d'Espagne with Pania Vlastovenko, while the Lemkos were looking fascinated at this unwedded pair. My work-wearied Valakhs, though, were sleeping like logs.

"Did you find him?"

"Yes."

"Poor child. First it's born into this world and then it's forgotten."

In the morning, Ruzia or Prisia (I don't remember exactly who, because both of them had been at our house) brought the news to the Valakhs: Malva had returned at night, alone, without Zhurba; she had rolled in on a bike she had earned fighting the pests around Green Mills (see, what bonuses they get there!) critically ill, with a bad cough, obviously come back home to die. Consumption, marriage, and re-

sidence in foreign parts — one thing had piled on another, and that was what she had got in the end.

After lunch, a tremendous crowd gathered at the swing, jamming the whole yard. Malva came out, greeted everyone, embraced the Valakhs as is proper with former relatives, laughed and drank, and once or twice got on the swing with the boys who had grown up in the meantime. It was so cozy with her around. I recalled Zhurba for some reason, the Parnasenkos' house on the hill, and him all alone in that house at night. It was beyond his power to win over the unregimented Babylon soul that was Malva. "Oh, you little urchin!" she said on noticing me, and laughed. "See, we're back here again."

PART II

CHAPTER I

Nobody could have expected that Yavtukh's Babylonian qualities would resurface with new force after he was deprived of his goods and chattel. First he surrendered his plot of land to the collective farm. Then he gave up the horses which he eventually wanted to replace with oxen of a gray Hlynsk breed, but only gray, believing deep in his heart that he'd reach his illusive happiness more surely with such oxen. After that, he had to let go of his wagon, which apart from its direct function, served him every summer night for a bed laid with straw mash and oat straw, and in the daytime, after a fine lunch, it was a shady refuge where it was pleasant to contemplate the artlessly simple perfection of the wheels; Yavtukh discerned an unfathomable flight of thought in the fellies and spokes which so assuredly testified to the infinity of the world, because Yavtukh was convinced that the solar system with all the planets and their satellites was patterned after a wheel too, so he regarded the wheel to be the creation of no less than the Lord of Lords Himself, if He really existed, and not of the intelligence of man whose capabilities were highly questionable to Yavtukh — man was surely more fit for destruction than creation. In the end, he had to give away his harrow, roller, separator and plow (what a plow it had been, although he hadn't yet paid for it in full to Monia Chechevichny!). When he had owned all that, Yavtukh had craved insensately to rise above Babylon one of

these days — if not to enslave it, then at least to subjugate it — and that was no laughing matter. Besides, he also reckoned on the fecundity of Prisia who was to populate Babylon with his, Yavtukh's children. His, of course, to the extent that had been true before, although he didn't rule out the Sokolyuks' contribution to this effort, much as he felt he was no mean procreator himself. All that he reflected upon lounging on or under the wagon when he was hypnotized by the wheels and, of course, by the universe they represented. At times the consummation of those dreams seemed so real to him that in his mind's eye he already saw himself ruling over Babylon from a golden throne, although he couldn't as yet think of any way to hide those dratted feet of his which were red as a boiled crayfish and constantly chapped. That problem worried him most of all: his feet were really hideous, yet he simply could not make himself wear shoes in the summertime, even had he sat on a throne, for he preferred to let them breathe in summer instead of fettering them in raw-hide or even kid leather. In a word, Yavtukh had been preparing himself for something ephemerally grand and unprecedented that had gripped his mind and heart, but then he had to suppress all that and turn into a plain old run-of-the-mill Yavtukh who couldn't make out what was really his in the Babylon collective farm — neither wagon, plow nor anything else, except his horses for whose sake, and to alleviate their lot at least a little bit, he first applied for the job of stableman and later on got himself promoted to senior stableman. But eventually, his horses stopped recognizing him and didn't whinny when he appeared at dawn, for which he once whipped them out of spite and after that, didn't care a hang about them, giving all his love to a stallion, a Don dapplegray, which the collective farm had bought for

big money with a loan from the Hlynsk bank given on eternal credit, as Yavtukh believed. As a matter of fact, he wasn't far from being wrong, as later developments showed: something got into the stallion's feed which made him sick, and in the end, he was dispatched to a boneyard. In his place, Yavtukh reared two young half-breed stallions, also dappled and a bit smaller than their sire.

Senior stableman was a high office, and Yavtukh would have probably held it to the end of his days if he had believed the collective farm to be an eternal and not a temporary thing. Every day at dawn, he had the feeling he was going to the stables for the last time. That feeling was enhanced in the morning hours when Varivon Tkachuk, the new chairman sent from Hlynsk, and the team leaders handed out the work orders for the day. There was running, cursing and yelling, after which things took their former course; a semblance of order got the better of the mess, and the collective farm continued its existence, while the government didn't make statements or hints about anything Yavtukh had hoped for. He kept looking for those hints in the newspapers every time they were brought from Hlynsk by the postman Protasik, the great Marathonian of Babylon.

Khariton Hapochka, the manager of the "postal and telegraph services," had persistently demanded that Protasik be provided with a wagon. But there was no wagon to spare, while Protasik wouldn't have had the courage to mount a horse even on the express order of Hapochka himself. So he distributed the mail on foot, covering the thirty kilometers to Hlynsk and back daily, which delayed the arrival of various decrees by a whole day. Gradually Yavtukh lost all hope of seeing his cherished decree issued, but this didn't change his frame of mind in any way. When

he received his and Prisia's harvest pay, which made up two or three bundles, he would say: "Some take for you, damn it!" But later on, after a year or two, when he and Prisia loaded a huge ox-drawn wagon with the grain they had received as pay in kind for their work, Yavtukh didn't head straight for home, but drove the wagon from one end of the village — Australia (the farthest nook) — to the other to let the contemptible Babylonians see that he, too, was worth something. It was quite a show of pride and dignity!

Still, Yavtukh remained true to himself, and no bread could placate his ambitions; he had to have either a life in paradise, or own some land of his own, upon which slavery would be much dearer to him than his present freedom. So far, he had had to put up with Fabian's harangues about a Babylon which was supposed to have gone to wrack and ruin because of its addiction to luxury. Fabian had either read about it somewhere or invented himself that luxury held the least prospects for glory. Fabian's house was cold, and so in the winter he and his billy goat came to the stables to warm themselves every evening. He came in Bonifatius's *bekesh* coat in its last stage of wear, a rabbit cap on his head, and the famous golden spectacles on his nose. They would lie down on the hay — the billy goat to chew his cud in between spells of slumber, and Fabian to chew the rag about ancient Babylon as if he had lived there and knew every single stone for miles about. His listeners were to believe they were some victorious Scythians walking the streets of Babylon after their Egyptian or Persian campaign. Their money belts filled with gold, they bought concubines for a night, gorged on young bison meat roasted for them over outdoor fires, and swilled southern wines from copper jugs — the Scythians had ruled over that Babylon

for twenty-eight years, after all. They took Babylonian women for wives there, and Babylonian women were a wonder crafted by a multitude of peoples — Persians, Judeans, Midianites, Philistines, and Scythians, of course. They were not simply women, but owners of large fortunes: the women in Babylon had their own property irrespective of their husbands'. So that's why the collective farm, as Fabian reasoned, was starting to give women and men equal pay: this is your pay, and that's your wife's. And what does equal property status mean? A woman becomes truly independent, with equal rights, and is even free to change husbands if she sees fit.

At this point Yavtukh would jump to his feet with a jerk, and to the roaring laughter of the stablemen, he would grab the whip he frightened the stallions with during their exercises and crack it wildly: "I'd kill my wife on the spot!"

"All right, take it easy; you'll get used to it," the philosopher would console him.

"I won't have mankind return to olden times."

Back home, he wouldn't give Prisia a moment's rest the whole night through. After such yarns about the Babylon women of two thousand years ago, Yavtukh wondered why Fabian couldn't make his fantasy come true but trudged off to the Tatar Ramparts with his billy goat instead, while there was such a deluge of single women in this here Babylon it could make dams burst. Taking the local dam as a point of departure and moving away from it in every direction, there were Ruzia, Yasia Bolotna, Malva, Klavdia Opishna (her husband Nikodim had been done in by the chaffcutter last fall), Melania Kalashna, a cute dish whose husband had re-enlisted in the army somewhere way off in Manchuria, etc., etc., etc. Klavdia Opishna certainly merited the highest praise. She had

a fine figure, a beautiful face, and such chubby warm hands Yavtukh almost fainted when she had hugged him last spring (he had plowed up her garden for her). Previously he hadn't believed that women could take a fancy to him. In the winter, Yavtukh had no pretext for seeing Klavdia Opishna. But the next spring, perhaps, he would plow her garden again. A plow wouldn't be that hard to procure; and as for horses, they were all under his charge.

But it so happened that his dear little kiddies got him chucked out of his office of senior stableman. First, the whip he used on the stallions disappeared from the stable, which was an ill omen for Yavtukh. The string whip wasn't much to talk about, being good only for producing loud cracks. Then two barn lanterns disappeared, and after that the senior stableman himself. All this seemed to have been a mystery, yet events followed an absolutely normal course, if we take into consideration Yavtukh's influence on his children.

The events, insignificant as they might have seemed at first, evolved in the following way. A number of sheaf binders arrived at Babylon around harvest time. Yavtukh couldn't take his eyes off them while they stood in the farmyard. They excited his private ownership mentality with their perfection and no less with their coloring. The bodies were green with red tow bars, and the sweeps were blue with yellow rakes. He simply wanted to take a sweep and draw it through his shock of hair which was usually disentangled by Prisia's comb that had a number of teeth missing. The Manila twine for the sheaf binders arrived after some delay, but when it did, the hanks impressed him no less than the machines themselves. Yavtukh couldn't believe his eyes when the machines, loaded with twine, started spewing out sheaves bound

so tightly no Babylon woman could have managed anything similar with a straw band. And here Yavtukh got the idea of hoarding the twine in the eventuality that the collective farm would fall apart and one of the machines (there were five of them in all) would land in his own farmyard. The bound sheaves were not stacked right away but stood a day or two to let them dry. So Yavtukh seized the opportunity offered by this procedure, armed his boys with knives (of which he had made quite a few for pruning sugar beets), and with the advent of night, went to the battlefield with his whole troop. The sheaves lay there like so many slain soldiers on the moonlit stubble. Yavtukh led his little marauders to where the wheat had been the densest, and said, "This was once our field, and that's why the wheat's so thick here," after which they commenced the plunder. In an hour or two, they had a sackful of twine that made Yavtukh groan as he hauled his trophy back home. Prisia and the smaller children were asleep when the troop arrived, but then she woke and clutched her hands in despair on learning where Yavtukh had been with the children. Yavtukh barely managed to calm her down from where he was sitting on the sack, a wearied and pathetic man smitten by the senseless crime he had perpetrated against Babylon. The twine was thrown into the loft and kept lying around, unpalatable even to the mice. Whenever Prisia bawled out Yavtukh or reviled him under her breath, she said: "Oh may that twine choke you and bring you down with shaking palsy, 'cause only I know how fed up I am with you." But if she had to tie a sack for the mill or truss a rooster for the market, she instantly recalled the twine in the loft — there was so much of twine it would last her a lifetime. Varivon couldn't get over the theft for a long time.

Of one thing, though, he was sure — so many sheaves couldn't have been untied singlehandedly.

In the winter, the sheaf binders recaptured Yavtukh's attention, but this time from another angle. Babylon was living through a skiing craze, and everything which could be steamed in a cauldron and bent was good for making skis. And here Yavtukh recalled the sweeps of the sheaf binders standing in a neat row in a shed. He sneaked in there, and after making sure that the sweeps were of beech, each sweep big enough for one ski, he got down to work without delay. He made a trial pair, slid down a hill on them, and keeled over on the adjacent pond with a mighty smack. However, this did not deter him from opening a ski workshop at his house. It was truly impressive to see Yavtukh steaming the boards with the factory paint still on them and then slowly bending their tips. After he had put his kids on the skis, he loved to stand by his house, watching the end products of his craftsmanship in action. No one in Babylon had such fine racing skis as the Holiy boys. Yavtukh's older boys took part in the district cross-country races on them. Nothing criminal was suspected until the next harvest when every single sweep was found missing. Varivon Tkachuk was so overwrought at the discovery he fainted; the poor man had to be carried into the shed where his shirt collar was opened, and he was brought to with water from the smithy (where the Pavlyuks kept water for tempering plowshares and scythes), while Yavtukh, who had showed up in the shed, scurried from one machine to another, calling down curses on the thief's head: "May his hands be twisted, whoever filched those sweeps. Oh my, what fine sweeps they were. What fine sweeps...! I can see them right now before my eyes..." For a whole month thereafter,

Fabian was busy making sweeps in the cartwright's shop. Yavtukh dropped in now and then to admire the craftsman's work, and in the meantime the skis were drying up in the loft of the rascal's house.

"Was that your doing, Yavtukh?" Fabian asked with a stern look.

"You mean the sweeps? For heavens sake, no. Do I want my kids to have a criminal for a father, or what?" The suspicion took his breath away, so he went about helping Fabian, trimming the teeth of raw hornbeam that was hard as steel.

Yavtukh's marauding would have gone unnoticed hadn't Lukian Sokolyuk looked out of his window one fine winter day to see several pairs of blue skis on which Yavtukh's kids were sliding down a hill. The color of the skis rang a bell with Lukian. He put on his sheepskin jacket and cap, and went out to the children. Their father was standing by his house, delighting in the sight of his romping offspring and encouraging the smaller ones not to be afraid but to go down the hill so fast they would cross the pond and slide right up to the Chapliches' whose ancestral gentry house had slipped way down the hill over the years. Yavtukh remembered all too well the time when it had stood atop the hill. Living out his years in that house was old man Chaplich, a gentleman by birth, whose kin had all died; the last heir, Domka, was carted by Yavtukh to the cemetery during the famine. The Holiys' kin, however, was alive, hale and hearty, clambering up and shooting down the hill. Oh yes, winter is a marvelous time of year: its sounds fall on man's ear with an incomprehensible music and gladden his heart. Presently, Lukian Sokolyuk, the chairman of the Village Soviet, appeared on the scene.

"Good morning, Yavtukh."

"Good morning, chairman. I stand here and my heart rejoices. For my sons, blast their hides... It's a pity your kid isn't among them. Ha-ha-ha."

"What makes you think so? As a matter of fact, there he is — the one with the sled over there."

"You misunderstood me, Lukian. I was thinking of my Mikhasik, the middle one who died. He was weak and sickly, so he joined the angels and is attending upon the Lord God now. Tell me the truth, was he yours or not? It's all in the past now, you know, and I bear no grudges."

"What an odd character you are, Yavtukh. Who would ever tell you the truth about a thing like that? Even if it were so. My Darinka is with child for the second time now, and it might not be my doing. Who would really know except Darinka herself? Nobody. But I'm the father anyway. The legal, legitimate father."

"God's punished you for what you did with my Prisia. Ha-ha-ha!"

"Even if that were true, it wasn't God but fate," the chairman laughed.

"What difference does it make?"

When little Yasko clambered up the hill right to the house, Lukian called him over. He took one of his skis, inspected it, found traces of rake teeth on it, and gave it back to the boy. Yasko stepped into the bindings, shot down the hill and glided all the way up to the Chapliches' house. That instant the blood left Yavtukh's face as he guessed the purpose of Lukian's visit.

"My kids are jacks of all trades, you know. They do everything themselves," he tried to cover up his tracks. "Fantastic things they did with your elm trees. Cutting, trimming, steaming and bending everything with their own hands."

"And stealing with their own hands, too, I guess?" Lukian said and turned to go. He did it in a way which left no doubt what he intended to do next. Yavtukh took off, caught up with Lukian and blocked his way.

"I beg you! Don't bring Varivon here. I did it, I confess. But have mercy on me, Lukian! Don't disgrace me before Babylon. I've got little kids. You don't know what's Varivon like. He won't spare me. He'll put me in the clink. My kids will be orphans."

"I could've forgiven you anything... but not the sweeps... Do you think I didn't notice that twine on your sacks?"

"But that was a long time ago!"

"Go and hang yourself with that twine. I won't forgive you those sweeps." Lukian made for the gates.

"Lukian, dear! Children! Prisia! Come here! Quick, damn it! Quick!"

"What's up, daddy?" one of the boys responded from the hill.

"Catch Uncle Lukian! Catch him I tell you. Don't let him get away! Prisia! Prisia!"

Prisia came rushing out of the house with an oven fork.

"What's the matter?"

"Children! Stop him, beg him!"

"Who?" Prisia asked, not understanding anything.

"Stop Lukian. He's gone to tell on me about the skis. I made them from the sweeps, the sweeps!"

Lukian was already next to the pond crossed by a trodden footpath, when Prisia, her bare feet stuck in *postoli* and the oven fork in her hands, caught up with him. She froze in front of Lukian, her eyes reflecting what looked like despair or an entreaty.

Yavtukh's kids came running up one after another — fine, alert teenagers with flashing eyes. Lukian realized that they could either knock him down or do him in. Everyone of the Holiys was there, except Yavtukh who was trembling by the house. Prisia pointed at the children:

"They'll work off those sweeps. Take a good look at them. Maybe they've got your blood as well, God rot your merciless soul." Regaining control of herself, she said to the children: "Now off with you!" Then she turned on Lukian: "All right, so Yavtukh filched the sweeps! So what? Was Babylon any poorer for it? Or did your Varivon pay for them out of his own pocket? When these kids join the army, they'll be the fastest men and they'll bring glory to Babylon on maneuvers. Or maybe you'll tell me there won't be any maneuvers anymore?"

"There will. But what's a sweep got to do with maneuvers?"

"Where do you think man gets his sweep and power from? From here" — she pointed at her breast — "and not from that wood..."

"How do you like that? She's already made a fool out of me."

"You think you're so clever to go running to Varivon? Who's Varivon to you? A stranger, that's all. Now he's here, and then he's gone. But we'll be living here for years. One of these days we'll be lying in the same cemetery."

"Wow, we've wound up in the cemetery now..."

"Do you know what a cemetery is? It's another village. Another Babylon. You men will be chasing after skirts there just as much. I know your ilk."

"Ha-ha-ha!"

In the meantime, Yavtukh giggled, resurrected. He heard every single word she said. What drive his

Prisia had! Glory be to her for ever and ever! Yavtukh crossed himself, because Lukian turned and made for his home, shaking his fist at Yavtukh. Prisia hurried back home, too, remembering the porridge she had left cooking in the oven. On passing Yavtukh, she snapped at him:

“You sweepless freak!”

“All right, just you wait. You’ll see me at the maneuvers yet.”

“You?”

“Not me, but my sons.”

“I’ll show you some maneuvers right now.” She wanted to hit him with the oven fork, but Yavtukh dodged, Prisia lost her footing in the deep snow and fell.

“Ha-ha-ha!” Yavtukh laughed.

Then he dug her *postoli* out of the snow, went stealthily into the house, and put them by the stove. The oven fork stood in the corner beside the bread shovel as always, and the oven lid was also in its place. Prisia was supine on the stovebed weeping quietly for the sweepless Yavtukh. With the next maneuvers, she decided, she’d teach him a good lesson with any sergeant-major who happened to be billeted in their home. It was an odd idea to have occurred to her in between the tears.

But it wasn’t Prisia who was on Yavtukh’s mind when it came time for maneuvers. That spring, he had again plowed the garden of Klavdia Opishna. He bore down on the plow as hard as if he were furrowing his own field. Both of the stallions were drained to exhaustion, but the garden looked pretty as a picture. Klavka — as he called Opishna — couldn’t praise him enough and treated him to food and drink so lavishly he could barely drag his stumps back to the stables.

Everyone was waiting impatiently for the maneuvers, especially the single women and girls who, having acquired children, failed to enter the matrimonial state. Some had lost their would-be husbands as young girls; others had seen off their betrothed to the army and had never heard from them again: they settled down in other parts, each wherever he liked, but never in their home village. The single women had long since flocked together over Babylon like storks in autumn: for the summer, they came to roost in pairs, and by migration time they were quite often widowed. Some of their mates were killed by lightning; others went up in the blue flames of moonshine; another fell through the ice-bound pond at Zhurbiv together with the horses; and still another took some ragamuffin from Pritske instead of a marvelous Babylon woman and moved over there. Klavdia Opishna had once had a man from Koziv who was so lazy she had to dump him in a wagon and take him out of Babylon so the sight of him wouldn't make her sick. She, too, was waiting for the maneuvers, hoping to entrap if not an officer, then at least a private. One day she dropped in on Malva, threw a length of expensive cloth on her sleeping bench, and said: "Malva, spruce me up for the maneuvers." Malva had one of those wonderful Singer sewing machines with a foot pedal. She had learned to sew from her elder sister, and although she had failed to make a great professional, she could oblige the fashion-minded Babylonian women and eagerly made them clothes for symbolic remuneration. Whereas the Hlynsk dressmakers charged three to four rubles a dress, Malva would do it for a dozen eggs, which was almost for nothing. Her shirts cost kopecks, and for the brassieres she didn't charge anything at all, because every time she

saw that they came out the worst. All the Babylonian women were so buxom it was next to impossible to make bras fit them, and even the bras she made for herself were unsatisfactory. Klavdia Opishna was so fussy about her commission that Malva barely managed to get the dress ready by maneuvers. Besides, she also had to think about a new dress for herself — of crêpe de chine with a Turkish pattern against a white background.

In the meantime, the Village Soviet had taken stock of all the houses for billeting, allowing not only for the comforts they offered and their cleanliness, but also for the possible human contacts with the defenders of Babylon. It was decided that the corps commander Krivoruchko be billeted with Klavdia Opishna because of her good looks and cooking skills, the high standards of which had been confirmed more than once by the Village Soviet functionaries. Lukian Sokolyuk had a cordial chat with the mistress of the house on how she should comport herself with the commander: not to smirk without reason, not to philander with the rank and file, not to be nosy about the course of the maneuvers, not to recall her worthless old lazybones Timko Hrishny who had been sent packing from Babylon as a good-for-nothing scamp, and not to blab anything superfluous about Babylon itself, which might belittle it in the eyes of the commander. Providing the lodger with food supplies was the responsibility of Varivon, and Klavdia could also count on the support of the Village Soviet on that point. The guest would probably want to be regaled with dishes of the local cuisine, such as home-made sausage and roasted turkey with prunes, which Klavdia prepared occasionally for the guests of the Village Soviet. Then Lukian wished to see her in the new dress, so she had to run

into the pantry to change. When she emerged, the chairman barely recognized her — such a woman would undoubtedly produce the desired effect on the corps commander. Malva had succeeded in accentuating all of Klavdia's charms so perfectly that Lukian couldn't take his eyes off her figure which was fit to conquer the staunchest ascetic then and there. To tell the truth, morocco boots would have lent her appearance absolute perfection, but the ideal bareness of her legs, molded on the Babylon hills by several generations of Bekhs (Klavdia's maiden surname), were not spoiled by canvas pumps. Lukian left, completely satisfied with his inspection of the house and its mistress.

Similar inspections were carried out in all the other homes intended for billeting the legendary cavalrymen who had to withstand the "onslaught of the Whites." Krivoruchko's quartermasters, who came to the village several days before the arrival of the corps, were pleased with both the homes and their mistresses whose hospitality they had enjoyed before. One of the quartermasters, a far from young captain, was so fascinated by Opishna he asked the chairman of the Village Soviet to billet him at her house, while the corps commander be given lodgings closer to the headquarters which was to be housed in the brick building of the school. But the chairman argued that the homes around the school had large families which could not take in the commander. Besides, it was still unknown how long the "defense" of Babylon would last. "But this isn't a real war, Comrade chairman, it's only maneuvers," the captain explained. The maneuvers were expected to last one or two weeks at most. And here Lukian managed to ferret out that the "Whites" intended to seize Babylon with the help of airborne troops, which would be an

expeditious operation, so everything would end within one day or night.

Evading the bomb attacks, Krivoruchko's advance guard arrived in Babylon under cover of night, and by morning had been deployed with such a degree of concealment that air reconnaissance could not spot a single trace of troops in Babylon. The only thing they spied were a number of squadrons who had entered Pritske from the direction of Koziv at dawn. So after the reconnaissance planes, bombers, called out by radio in all probability, appeared over Pritske, and the squadrons which had been discovered were dispersed in the steppe around the village. By the rules of the games, Krivoruchko had to write off these squadrons as "destroyed in action" and disengage them from the "operation." A number of representatives of the "Whites" at Krivoruchko's headquarters were incessantly checking to see that he abided by the rules of the games, and the corps commander could not hide anything from them any more than he could hide anything from the Babylonians. By the next day, they knew all the "Whites" by sight. There were about fifteen of them under the leadership of Colonel Shumeiko. The most conspicuous of them was Air Force Captain Chavdar, a tall, blond northerner from Velikiy Ustyug, which the Babylonians pronounced Velikiy Ustyuk. Chavdar was billeted in Malva's house (the Babylonians did not take in the "Whites" eagerly). He had a little airplane parked in a clover field outside Babylon, and he flew up in it practically every hour to keep all the movements and deployments of the corps in sight. In a couple of days, Chavdar was referred to as "the White" in Babylon. Whenever Malva came to Tkachuk for provisions for her lodger, he issued from the stock only a half of what he gave out for our dear Red cavalry-

men. Otherwise Krivoruchko treated Chavdar benevolently, used his airplane now and again, and invited the captain to dinners at Opishna's, which were also attended by Colonel Shumeiko, a representative of the military district, who was formerly a cavalryman but now commanded an armored unit.

Krivoruchko was absolutely indifferent to Opishna. He made bantering remarks about her efforts to please at dinner, while her dress simply made him laugh, for he certainly knew a thing or two about fashion. Her modiste, however, captured his fancy from their first encounter at the swing one evening. Krivoruchko flew on the swing in frenzied abandon, especially after he became convinced of the strength of its chains. As for flying in the plane, he was sheepish, and whenever Chavdar put the plane into a simple roll, Krivoruchko yelled from his cockpit: "Yegor, Yegor! Stop fooling around!" He didn't trust the canvas harness, out of which he was afraid of slipping. Malva also touched a responsive chord in Yegor Chavdar's heart. One fine day, he asked her permission to give her son Stashko a ride in the plane, since from the outset the boy had attached himself to the airman with a sincerity and determination of which only fatherless children are capable. Malva got off with a joke: "You'd better give his mother a ride if you want to show off so much." "I can't at night, but at dawn you're welcome to come along."

So one day when the guards were relieved in Babylon at dawn, Chavdar and Malva took off in the plane from the clover field. The corps commander was already up, went outdoors with his field glasses, trained them on the plane, and saw Malva in it. He smiled, although he regarded this pleasure ride as

a flagrant breach of military discipline. But since Chavdar had dared to do such a thing, there must have been some reason for it. Malva felt like a bird in the air (that's because of the previous flights on the swing) and burst into gales of laughter when the plane gained height and then plummeted like a falcon.

During dinner, the corps commander wagged his finger at Chavdar but held his peace. The dinner over, he told him in the entrance hall: "It's your luck Shumeiko was sleeping. You can't fool around like that on maneuvers. Let this be the last time."

Everything in Velikiy Ustyug was made of wood: the sidewalks, roadways, buildings and churches. Only the bells in the churches were of pure brass. It was said that their peals could be heard throughout the whole of northern Russia, and the first time they had rung out was way back in the days when Czar Ivan Kalita was crowned. Later on, the master builders of Velikiy Ustyug carried their craft to the capital cities where their creations are admired to this day; the famous Kizhi on Lake Lagoda was also supposed to have been built by them.

Yegor had grown up in a family of celebrated master builders. Every summer, his father left Ustyug with all seven sons to build wooden churches of rare beauty. Yegor had been a teenager when he, too, was taken along to learn the family trade. The boy wasn't afraid of heights, felt he had wings as he scaled the church cupolas, and old Chavdar could be happy to have such a fine successor in his trade. By winter they were back in Ustyug, lived on the money they had earned, celebrated Easter, and hit the road again — either to the Valdai Hills, to the reaches of the Volga, or to the Novgorod-Siversky region where wooden churches had been preferred since times of

old. The Chavdars built their last church in Baturin where they buried their father after he fell from the roof along with a loose cupola. The sons fixed the cupola in place, but without their father, the large family fell apart and dispersed throughout the world. Two of the eldest sons died in action during the First World War; another four changed their trades to raftsmen, miners, and founders, while Yegor became an airman. From the hinterlands, he kept changing his base closer and closer to the west, roving from airfield to airfield in his own aircraft. Not so long ago he had been stationed in Chuhuyev, and prior to the maneuvers at Zhitomir, by the Huiva River. He was single, so it was easy for him to just take off and land anywhere. He had had acquaintances to be sure and probably even infatuations, but all this had had something casual and unstable about it. Back in Velikiy Ustyug, he had a huge wooden house, built perhaps by those first master builders of long, long ago. His mother still made it her permanent home; she was old and unable to wander about the airfields with him, much as his life had a severe and beautiful romance of its own, appreciated perhaps only by airmen and their wives.

“If you’d like, Malva, after maneuvers we could...”

“Well, what could we do after maneuvers?”

“Get into my plane and fly straight to Huiva.”

That would have been beautiful — to be the wife of an air force pilot. He’d be somewhere up in the blue yonder, while she would wait for him, nervous and worried. He was altogether different from Zhurba who was the same man whether at work or at home. She was weighing matters all the time: could Zhurba fly off into the sky as well?

“Are you really serious, Yegor?”

“Everything is serious on maneuvers, Malva. And

this is serious, too. I'm not just some young boy, you know."

"I wish your maneuvers had taken place a year earlier." Malva laughed. "You see, I'm married. And not for the first time either. That's why I can't simply fly with you, Yegor. Not to Huiva or beyond Huiva — I simply can't."

"Yes, I've heard about that... Do you love him?"

"Who knows..."

"Do you have children from him?"

"No."

"So what's keeping you here?"

"What? He's a fine, pure man. And he flies high, too."

"Is he a pilot?"

"No, he's an agronomist. But one under God's will I guess..."

That was all the explanation she offered. Even if she hadn't had Zhurba, would she have dared ruin the life of this falcon Chavdar with her ill health? Hardly. That would have been thoughtless on her part. For all that, she adored Chavdar secretly. But could she really hide anything from the Babylonians? They seemed to read her soul in her eyes: "Our Malva's come to life with the maneuvers." Her flight over Babylon in itself gave enough food for gossip. But she didn't care a whit, because hers was very much like a serious infatuation.

On the eve of the airdrop, the corps sustained a few more bomb attacks; the representatives of the "Whites" scrupulously counted up the losses and Shumeiko confirmed them in his report to the Army commander.

That night, a telephone message came through to inform them that the invasion force had been dropped

on Koziv where they had engaged the cavalry brigade in street fighting. It was four o'clock in the morning, but headquarters was already on its feet, and runners were dispatched in all directions to raise the corps against the invaders. Neither Krivoruchko's headquarters nor the observers of the "Whites," let alone Shumeiko, knew how events would develop; everything was hurled into neutralizing the invasion force at Koziv. Chavdar and Krivoruchko flew there by plane, but no sooner had they landed than the invasion armada passed by overhead towing dozens of gliders. The gliders started to detach themselves from the tug aircraft and smoothly descended onto the steppe.

The cavalry squadrons moving at a fast trot toward Koziv had to be rediverted to Babylon by the corps commander, but this could not help the situation. A new squadron, this time of bombers, "destroyed" the cavalry on the march.

The attack and seizure of Babylon was commanded by Yiona Yakir*. Several times Krivoruchko threw his cavalry into counterattack, but all in vain. The invasion force could not be dislodged from Babylon. "It's good that it was me and not a German or some other general who defeated you. It's better to be smashed by friendly rather than enemy troops," Yakir said. "Don't be down in the dumps, corps commander, this is only a big war game." Krivoruchko, however, was nervous. When he had set off from Babylon, his horse had tripped under him, which was a bad omen.

The landing force camped for several nights in the clover field, waiting for their tug planes to tow the gliders away. The men lounged around camp fires and made friends with Babylon by right of victors,

* Yakir, Yiona (1896-1937) — commander of the troops of the Kiev military district in 1921-24 and 1925-37 — Tr.

although Babylon seemed to have gotten more used to the cavalrymen and sympathized with Krivoruchko who, though he failed to defend Babylon, presented the Babylonians with a fine herd of horses that had been "crippled" during maneuvers. For their part, the landing force presented the girls with only a couple of parachutes for kerchiefs. For this, they carried off Klavdia Opishna who had won the heart of some great hero at those camp fires. She came to Malva to bid her farewell. "Are you flying off as well?" Klavdia asked. "Yes, I am," Malva replied, laughing. "To Green Mills." Zhurba was to arrive for her on his gig and take her back to the Parnasenkos' house. Still, when Chavdar's plane made its farewell round over Babylon, Malva swept away a furtive tear. She tore the kerchief from her head and shouted: "Come flying back, Yegor!" Sitting quietly on the gig was Zhurba who loved her. He waved his cap at the circling plane, without the slightest inkling as to whom he was really waving his farewell.

CHAPTER 2

Someone's scheming in the dark, and this makes you mentally embrace the whole of Babylon sprawled on those almost bare hills, and you start seeking your probable enemy, so to speak, who at this time has also put his head on a pillow in his warm house and is thinking of you with a smirk: Yes, dear, it's me, me! But who is he — that "me"? In your mind, you move from street to street, from house to house, from face to face, but it proves a vain effort to find that silent lurking enemy, who out of the multitude of Babylonians had to choose precisely you to push off the Babylon swing into the abyss at any cost. And

you feel helpless, torturing yourself not so much because he chose you for his victim, but because Babylon had bred him to its own grief.

But he keeps on scheming in the dark. Could it be Yavtukh who bore a grudge against you for having exposed him as the thief of the sheafer sweeps? To this day, with the first snowfall, his children shoot like mad down the hills on those sweeps; yet it could have been quite different had Lukian seen the affair to its conclusion. Lukian was angry at himself for his good-heartedness: such people as Yavtukh ought not to be pitied but weeded out by the roots so they wouldn't grow into the new beneficial soil. It was a time when even Fabian was wary of Yavtukh's honey-tongued ways. "Oh my God," said the philosopher whenever Yavtukh was mentioned, "teach me patience to accept events the course of which I cannot change; give me fortitude and strength to interfere in events that are dependent on me; and teach me wisdom to distinguish between the former and the latter, as I have done so far." The philosopher chose this form of self-defense, because he knew what had happened to Socrates during the age of Pericles: in crisis, people tend to put the blame on philosophers who, more often than not, have absolutely nothing to do with it. In Hlynsk, the authorities showed a keen interest in how he had become Fabian instead of Levko Khorobry. His explanation made them giggle, and they let him go that same day, hinting that from now on he'd pursue only his duties as coffin-maker and not stick his nose into affairs that were of no concern to him.

Lukian's affairs were more complex.

On second thought his guilt wasn't all that big. It had almost been forgotten here and in Hlynsk, but now it was revived in people's memories to take

root like a creeper in the very same spot where it seemed to have ceased to grow forever and then burst into chimerical bloom. Lukian's brother Danko again resurfaced in people's memories like a wraith, and responsibility for him fell on Lukian. No sooner was there trouble in Babylon — a nail in the chaff, an outbreak of Siberian plague or foot-and-mouth diseases, weevils infesting the sugar beet plantation, or something else of that sort — than Hlynsk would remind Lukian of his brother. Reproaches were hurled at him with ever increasing frequency and unexpectedness. The distrust of Sokolyuk had even infected Klim Sinitsya, and from Hlynsk, this distrust made its way to Babylon in such distorted proportions that were Yavtukh and some others to be believed, Lukian Sokolyuk was long since supposed to have been working for the unknown foreign power to which his brother Danko had fled, having first grabbed Kindrat Bubela's fortune. In actual fact, Danko hadn't taken anything.

One night, Makedonsky arrived in Babylon, stopped his britzka at Sokolyuk's gates, and roused Lukian from a sound sleep. For the chairman of the Village Soviet, this was a commonplace occurrence, because now and then a house caught fire, somebody was about to murder somebody else, somebody would singe a hog with a blowtorch in his entrance hall so as not to forget the taste of the famous Babylon pork fat, and Lukian had to rush over there to save the hog's hide. There were many similar incidents, but to see Comrade Makedonsky rapping on the window in the dead of night, that was something that had never happened before and might not happen again, Lukian thought as he jumped out of bed.

Darinka wasn't at home; her tractor team was camped out on the bare fallow at Koziv. Lukian was

keeping house and looking after the children. Darinka came home occasionally to wash her hair, change her shirt, and fondle her children lest they forget their mother. She had won distinction for her exemplary work as a follower of Pasha Angelina*.

"Are you alone?" Makedonsky asked as Lukian lit the kerosene lamp hanging on the wall between the windows.

"Yes, I am. The kids are asleep. Sit down, I'll join you in a minute."

Makedonsky sat down on a bench and stretched out his legs over the clay floor covered with herbs. He came here alone without a coachman, and reining the horses from the box had made his legs numb from want of habit. On lighting the lamp, Lukian saw anxiety in Makedonsky's eyes, which he hadn't seemed to have noticed before. Lukian stood there at a loss, not knowing what to say until he remembered he was only in his underwear, and hastily started to dress, putting on his shirt first instead of his pants. Makedonsky noticed this and smiled.

"Well, how are you here?"

"Leading a single life as you see," Lukian said, gesturing to the bed with the children and trying to look at least outwardly calm. "You straight from Hlynsk?"

"Yes."

"You could have sent for me if there was something... er-r... urgent."

* Pasha (Praskovia) Angelina (1913-1959) led the country's first all-woman tractor team in 1933. Her appeal in 1938 to make a previous male trade the province of women as well gained countrywide support. Angelina's achievements won her the title of Hero of Socialist Labor twice and the USSR State Prize — Tr.

"Sure I could. But it's better this way. It's a confidential matter." He produced an unsealed envelope from his pocket and gave it to Lukian. "Comrade Hapochka intercepted it. Read it."

Lukian went up to the lamp, took the letter out of the envelope, adjusted his glasses somewhat undecidedly and timidly, and started to read:

"Dear brother!" He shrank back: "What's this?"

"Read on," Makedonsky calmed him.

"If you're alive and kicking, I want to inform you that I'm alive, too. I don't complain of bad health, have a good life, a wife and two Gypsy boys from her, and we're expecting a third. They're tumbling out one after the other, and you'll see — we'll beat Yavtukh yet! I've completely forgotten about Babylon, because here we've got a veritable Babel with people pouring in from the whole wide world. Your Danko, though, isn't Danko any more nor Sokolyuk for that matter — I damn that Babylon freak to this day..."

"It's him, it's him that villain!" Lukian said with a shiver. Then he read on: "But there is nothing to replace kindred blood; it burns in a man, like a fire it burns and warms him, reminding him of who he is in this gigantic world and who the mother was that bore him and gave him life. That's why I decided to write you, because I've got a lot of friends here, but I have only one brother. Every time I line up at the cage and go down to the coal face I remember you. Death isn't to be trifled with here. I just buried a friend of mine; we came here together, and now he is no more. That's why I'm writing to let you know that your Danko is shifting under the ground, bringing black gold, as they say, to the top, and ranking among the shockworkers, and so your conscience won't be nagging you on my behalf, because you and

mother were always afraid I'd be whipped to death at the Hlynsk fairs one of these days. I love horses to this day. My Gypsy mate loves them, too. And my boys look like a fine pair of foals with big blue eyes. Once I'm in the money here, I'll buy myself a horse by all means. It'll be a dappled gray. So long, your Danko."

"So that's how it is," Lukian sighed as if a bitter burden had fallen from his shoulders.

"There's no date or year on the letter, and the envelope was postmarked in the capital."

"Well, what next? Does Sinitsya know about the letter?"

"He does. Everyone in the District Party Committee knows. Hapochka brought the letter there."

"What a louse." Lukian shook the letter in the air, almost knocking the glass chimney off the lamp. Makedonsky got to his feet and glanced out of the window.

"Guess I'll be going now. I'm sorry to have troubled you. And I'm sorry for everything else, too. It's all because of the times we're living in, Lukian."

"I understand. I'm not so ignorant as not to realize that."

They went out on the porch. The horses had fallen asleep at the gates as had Yavtukh's house glowing white in the reflection of the blooming pear tree. In Sokolyuk's farmyard there stood a taller pear tree that was even brighter. The two trees seemed to be engaged in perpetual rivalry, and there was not a single year in which they yielded an equal harvest. The men went to the britzka, Makedonsky roused the horses, unwound the reins, and climbed onto the box.

"What about the letter?" Lukian asked, still holding it in his hands.

"It's yours, keep it. If anything happens, show it. And show it to everyone in this place. Everyone. Yes." He drove off. Lukian stood there for a long time, watching the retreating britzka and listening to its rattle.

"Oh, Makedonsky! What a fine soul! He brought that rascal back to me, he did! From unknown worlds, from unknown lands. On that dappled gray. I'll show the letter to everyone! To the whole of Babylon. Let them know, let them hear, let them see!" Lukian returned to the porch, sat down on it, and started to weep quietly. Yavtukh gave a cough from his farmyard. The hard times had not lulled his vigilance. He stood under the white pear tree in his white underwear for a while and then went into his house. Here and there, the first roosters started to crow.

Ever since he had found out about Danko's letter to his brother, Yavtukh had taken a keen interest in the Donets coal field. Not so much to go there himself as a miner as to send off his older offspring in a year or two — that was the idea that possessed him. One Sunday, Protasik, the great foot-traveling postman of Babylon, brought Yavtukh the *News* (Protasik didn't manage to deliver all the mail on the same day he brought it from Hlynsk, so the following morning, he serviced that part of Babylon that lay off the beaten path). Apart from the *News*, he handed Yavtukh a receipt on his failure to meet his tax in kind and yet another reminder from the Babylon Consumer Society that Y. O. Holiy was to pay his share for the first six month, or otherwise the said citizen would be expelled from the list of shareholders, which would be tantamount to denying Yavtukh the right to buy goods, canvas shoes and other things

at the local store. If this happened, it would instantly put such a family as his in desperate straits. It would mean being short of eight pairs of "devil's hide" pants, eight shirts of satin, eight pairs of canvas shoes, and the like.

"Let's take something and sell it at the market," he said to his wife. Prisia was firing the stove just then. She was all flushed from the heat and lashed out at Yavtukh like a tongue of fire: "What, what have you to take there? Me perhaps? Take a look at how people live, holding jobs and getting their regular pay. But there's nothing left for me to do but jump into the river and drown. What a wreck of a life. Even Protasik, who does no more than run errands, bought himself a new cap and a pair of creaking canvas shoes. And you've no chance to have a piece of the pie."

"What piece of the pie do you want me to have? As long as he rules over Babylon" — he motioned at the window of Lukian Sokolyuk's house — "there's not a gleam of hope for me. Varivon is a stranger around here, and so all of us are the same to him. Holiy or no Holiy — everyone's on the same level. But Lukian is a local, and he's known us inside and out for years. The very thought of it gives me the creeps! Damn it, nothing can do him in now. And you know why? He's got Darinka propping him up with her tractors. The pride of the district! Another Pasha Angelina. Oh my, if I had such a Pasha, ho-ho-ho, I'd be moving mountains!"

"How do you like that lousy shareholder dreaming of Pasha? All right, so you plowed Opishna's garden, and where's your Klavka Opishna now? Whirr — and off she flew. What Pasha can you be dreaming of with your miserable salary?"

"He-he-he, if it hadn't been for the maneuvers..."

“So what?” Prisia brought the oven fork from behind the stove.

The sight of it made Yavtukh shrink and he quickly opened the newspaper.

News probably hadn't a more grateful reader, at least in Babylon, although another seventeen households subscribed to it apart from Yavtukh. Prisia loved to listen to Yavtukh reading the paper, for he seemed to turn into another man and gain something which immediately put him on a higher level. Involuntarily she wondered how such a lettered person could still be just a stableman. Yavtukh, though, read aloud for two reasons: it distracted him from the meaning of what he read and also offered him an opportunity to speak his mind so that later on, he wouldn't get stuck in any twaddle with Prisia, with his horses or with Babylon in general, because he had caught himself fighting an urge to throw some nasty words into his speech, for which he'd not have had long to wait before being summoned to Hlynsk. Here in his own home, though, the most trouble he would be asking for was an oven fork. Take that twaddle about Opishna, for one. All right, so she had flown away, and that took care of the argument.

“Prisia, Prisia!” Yavtukh jumped up from the bench as if he had been pricked by an awl.

“What's the matter?”

“Do you remember Danko?”

“What Danko? The one from Babylon?”

“I'm a dead man if that's not him.”

“Did they catch him?”

“No, but just listen what's written here: Shockworkers of Kocheharka (left to right): coal hewers Pavlo Filonov, Ivan Holota and Dmitro Vazoev before going down to the pit. Photograph by P. Onashkin.”

He ran up to the stove and waited until the wisp of straw in Prisia's hand caught fire. "Take a look at that man in the middle. What's his name? Oh yes, Ivan Holota. Take a good look! Come on! It's Danko, eh?"

A pair of familiar eyes looked at Prisia from the newspaper.

"Could it really be Danko? The eyes look like his, and his whole face, too. But where's the beard?"

"What about his ears? Take a look at the ears. They're Danko's all right, sticking out like a tetchy horse's. Once the whole of Babylon used to laugh at those ears. He shaved his beard, that villain. What would he need it for in the mine? Remember I read you once that Kocheharka is hundreds of meters underground. Of course, he doesn't need a beard at such a depth. A beard's good to groom only in our parts. Well, has a cat got your tongue, or what? Give me a piece of charcoal and I'll add a beard to his face right away."

He did it in a trice on the hearth. One, two, three strokes — and there was a spitting image of Danko.

"Well, take a look now."

"What's the matter there, daddy?" one of the boys said, roused from sleep on the stovebed.

"You go on back to sleep. Daddy's reading the *News*."

"Some news indeed. Now I've nabbed him, eh? So he's with Kocheharka, darn it!"

"What will happen now, Yavtukh?" Prisia was worried.

"Nothing. Simply, Lukian will be in my clutches. Like this" — he showed her his balled fist — "from now and forever more."

He rushed over to the window, beyond which dawn had already broken, blew out the lamp on the table,

and ran out of the house. Lukian was washing himself just then at a washstand he had built that summer not so much for himself as for Darinka. Yavtukh greeted him politely, inquired about his health and everything else as was proper for the occasion — in such matters Yavtukh was nobody's fool. When Lukian had dried himself and threw the towel over his shoulder to go into the house, Yavtukh asked:

"Do you read the *News*, Lukian?"

"Sure."

"Do you subscribe to it?"

"No, I read it over at the Village Soviet. Here all I get are a couple of magazines. Darinka subscribes to *Rabotnitsa*, and I get *Vokrug Sveta* *. Wouldn't be a bad thing for your boys to have, too. The subscription is limited, though. But I can ask Protasik to open one for you for the next six months. Is that today's paper or yesterday's you have there?"

"Today's. Protasik brought it; still smells of the printer's ink."

Yavtukh was inordinately proud whenever he found a typo or a missing letter in the *News*. He showed the issue to everyone he came across, and then rejoiced like a little kid that he alone had found the misprint however obscurely it may have been tucked away on a page. Then he shouted: "Here it is, here. See, how it's hidden there!"

"Has it got another misprint or what?" Lukian asked.

"Shiver me timbers it has!" Yavtukh broke into sweat from excitement as he handed Lukian the paper. Lukian felt for his glasses in his pocket, but

* Names of popular magazines — lit. *Working Woman* and *Around the World* respectively — Tr.

they were missing, so he went inside. In a minute he reappeared with his glasses on.

"What page is it on? Why are you so taken with those misprints?"

"It's on the first page. The very first one. As a matter of fact, it's something to see, not to read. Take a look at this photograph."

"Well, I see it." He read, "Shockworkers of Kocheharka," and froze. Something seemed to have shot through Yavtukh's heels. Now he expected Lukian to start giving evasive answers, to disown and denounce his brother. But nothing of that sort happened. Lukian raised his eyes to Yavtukh, and gave him a keenly alert look.

"It's Danko. So what?"

"I said the same thing. But Prisia says no, no!"

"Go tell her it's him. What's his name here? Holota..."

"Yes, Ivan Holota." Yavtukh wilted. "Here we were thinking that he had made off to the imperialists. But see where he is? At Kocheharka. Right next to Nikita Izotov. That's a Holota for you! You're a real chairman, an honest one."

"What makes you think I'm honest?"

"Because you recognized your brother. You didn't forsake or disown him."

"He's my brother, after all. Blood of my blood. A brother in happiness and brother in grief."

"Save this paper. I don't need it." And with these words, Yavtukh left the farmyard.

Yavtukh returned home feeling that he had purified his soul from some filth. He rubbed his hands and glanced toward the stove, from which wafted the smell of pearl-barley gruel and onions fried with cooking oil.

"Well?" Prisia asked.

"He recognized him."

"He did?" the news seemed to make Prisia worry.

"What do you think that poor bugger could do with those ears sticking out like a stolen horse's? I caught the horse thief red-handed. And just think of it? In Kocheharka."

"A horse thief he may be, but see how he got on in life. Coal's expensive and nowhere to be found, so he must be raking in good money over there."

"Let him! One of these days we'll rise in the world, too. Just let the boys grow up a bit, and then all of them will go to Kocheharka. The whole lot of them right under Nikita Izotov's charge! No use letting them rot in Babylon. Hey, you Guards! Roll out! It's time for breakfast!"

The house came alive in the corners where a moment before healthy, sound sleep had reigned: on the bed, on the bunk by the stove, and right on the stove. Whatever else, but the call for breakfast gained a ready response. Any father could have been happy to see so many remarkable eyes open simultaneously to look at him as at a miracle-working icon: eyes as black as pitch that took his breath away; gray mocking eyes with a barely concealed wariness; moving blue eyes that were trusting in their childish way; and non-descript eyes like those on the icon itself. But right now the father was for some reason of his own interested more in the ears than the eyes of the would-be heroes of Kocheharka. None of them seemed to have Danko's ears, and this revelation filled the father with a sense of frank joy.

"What fine boys you are! If only you'll all be as hellbent when it comes to work." He reached for the bread on the shelf over the dish rack; the day before there had been seven loaves, but now there were only five. Touch wood with such Kocheharka heroes,

Yavtukh thought, as he carefully cut the bread in equal slices so that no one would be cheated out of his share at the table. Everyone had settled around the cast-iron pot with gruel, when Prisia, who always ate standing at her husband's side, reminded him about the newspaper.

"What do you need it for?" Yavtukh flared up.

"I wanted to show it to them to see whether they would recognize..."

"Who, mother, who?"

"A man... from Babylon..."

"Show it to us!"

"Eat your grub!" Yavtukh shouted at all of them as he carried the spoon to his mouth, but it didn't reach it in the end. At that moment his eyes accidentally fell on a pair of ears transparent against the window. A pair of pointed, perked ears widening downward; to tell the truth, they weren't big yet, but Yavtukh could stretch his imagination enough to see them enlarged several times and compare them with the ears that had so shocked him in the *News* that day. The little ears belonged to Ananko, the beautiful middle son who up till then had been father's favorite. Yavtukh brought the spoon to his mouth at long last, chewed on the gruel, and then lashed out at Prisia:

"Who do you think is supposed to eat this grub — people or horses?"

"What's the matter?"

"The barley's underboiled again!" He threw his spoon on the table, jumped to his feet and rushed out of the house. Ananko ran after, crying: "Daddy! Daddy!" But daddy was deaf to his call. Back in the house, Ananko was on the verge of tears:

"He's left hungry."

"Don't you worry about him. He's got a primus in

his stable where they fry the eggs they steal from the hen coop and brew raspberry tea."

"Is the barley really underboiled?" Prisia asked.

"No, mother, it's all right."

"I like it hard."

"Me, too," the youngest son, Sanko, joined in.

"Nobody's asking you, you smart aleck," Ananko cut him short. At that he also flung his spoon on the table, exactly as his father had done, and went out of the house. He was called back, but once proud Ananko got mad, he could hide in the weeds half a day without responding. Up to that time, he had been the only one father took to pasture the horses at night. Ananko was very proud of that. He was given a couple of colts to break in, but what he liked most was sitting around the bonfires at night and listening to the stablemen's yearns about Babylon. But after the incident at the table, father stopped taking Ananko with him, which made the boy jump out of his bed at night, snivel, and rouse the others from their sleep. "Is that you, Ananko?" mother would ask from her cot under the wag-on-the-wall. "Calm down, you silly. There'll be many such nights yet. Things settle down by and by with your father." The nights were dry, so ringing and moonlit he had an irresistible urge to get up and go out to the pasture. Here at home Ananko was beset by his own worries, while in the pasture, the colts wondered where their dashing rider had disappeared to.

CHAPTER 3

How difficult it is to look for a brother, especially if you want to be the only one to find him. Lukian left home, intending to be away for a day or two so

that no one in Babylon or Hlynsk would notice his absence, but it took him over three days to get to Gorlovka. In Dolinsk he mistakenly boarded a train for Kriviy Rih, from where he traveled another two days and experienced all the adversities of a stray passenger. The most horrible thing was that at all the stations, he was unmistakably identified as a Babylonian who had set out on some mysterious journey and was obstructed as no other passenger had been on the trains and at the stations. In the end, a woman he was traveling in the same sleeping compartment called him a clod, because he had wiped himself with her towel, taking it for part of the service offered by the railroad. Only then did he remember that Dарinka had packed for him a beautiful embroidered *rushnik* towel, probably still from his mother's stock. He took it out of his wicker basket and showed it to the angry woman, which sent her into an even greater fit of rage.

Oh Lordy, how difficult it was traveling to his brother, when he had to do it secretly. Other passengers were telling about the destination and purpose of their journey; they all rejoiced at the sight of a new station en route, while he had to sit tight-mouthed, heaving a sigh now and then. Although at that time his brother might be hewing coal under the ground for all these passengers, Lukian couldn't brag about it, being unsure whether it was really so, and besides, Yavtukh might have exposed him long since. That seemed more than probable, because after the morning he broke the news, Yavtukh never mentioned Danko again.

After arriving in Gorlovka at dawn, Lukian scurried from section to section, from one cage to another at the outset of the morning shift, looking into hundreds of faces but failing to find Danko's among

them. The simplest thing, of course, would have been to go to the mine office which he had come across right away, inquire about coal hewer Holota and what shift he was on, and thus terminate his search. But he was afraid, and not without reason, that in this way he might bring harm to Danko. Relying on an essentially Babylonian experience, Lukian was sure that here, too, he would be asked who he was, where he had come from, and more likely than not, made to show his documents, of which he only had a certificate issued by the Babylon Village Soviet, stating that citizen so and so was traveling to the town of Gorkovka on personal business which, moreover, had been signed by none other than himself. Although the certificate had the proper seal on it, it was still an incredibly foolish document, since what citizen could issue himself a certificate with his own signature. This fact had invited questions back in Kriviy Rih, and he had barely gotten out of that place, being saved perhaps only by the sight of his wicker basket, which instantly showed that he wasn't that important a bird. Whenever you set out into the wide world, don't think you can feel something of the lord you were back home, even if you are the chairman of the Babylon Village Soviet. Man loses many of his airs during travel, and for the haughty it's a helpful experience, so they won't capitalize on their personalities back home.

Lukian simply could not believe that working under the ground he was walking on now were hundreds, if not thousands of people whose infernal efforts seemed best illustrated by the slag heaps. One of the heaps was old, smoking only at the top, while stunted shrubs of what looked like hawthorn clung to its foot. Another heap was still all hot and seemed to be boiling inside. Now and then, trolleys rose to the top,

dumped their contents, and descended so slowly it seemed some invisible hand was holding them back so they wouldn't break loose and get smashed. Lukian lay down in the wormwood not far away and took in those giants disgorged by man out of God knows what depths. On the way over, he had heard that Kocheharka was working its seams at a depth of one kilometer. The seams were steep as nowhere else, yet the coal they yielded was perhaps the world's finest. At the thought that one of the coal hewers was his brother whom he had tried to waylay with the aid of Savka Chibis, Lukian felt ashamed of himself. Well, had he killed Danko then, there wouldn't have been a speck of the Sokolyuks left in this slag heap which loomed over the world like a monument to man. As it happened, it wasn't Lukian who had come here, but the great toiler of the Abyssinian hills. Gradually Lukian came to the conclusion that Danko wouldn't have appeared here if he hadn't joined the riflemen at the feast of the Epiphany; perhaps he'd be just a stableman now, grazing horses at night like Yavtukh, stealing eggs from the collective farm hen coop, frying them over a primus, and procreating, of course. And there wouldn't be any Ivan Holota here or anywhere else. But still, why did he have to resort to such cunning and deception by choosing the name Holota for himself? Why couldn't he have simply remained Ivan Sokolyuk. Weren't there enough Sokolyuks among the proletarians of Ukraine? So far, Lukian knew only the beginning of these transformations but not the end. He had heard once, from Fabian it seemed, that every man gets as much trouble in this life as he can bear and no more. Perhaps Danko had approached his limit as well.

"Oh drat it, you scared me out of my wits!" Lukian suddenly heard from behind his back.

It was a woman. She was dressed in pants, a miner's cap on her head, and held a halter in her hands.

"Listen, did Gray run past here?"

"A gray what?"

"A horse. He ran away from the cage. It's the second time he's done it. For the life of him, he doesn't want to go under ground."

"A horse you say? No, I didn't see any. I was looking at the slag heap. He might have run past for all I know."

Her eyes flashed at Lukian from under the cap's peak so derisively and arrogantly that his heart missed a beat: here was a Gypsy. What if she's Danko's wife?

"Of all the things to look at," she rejoined and ran off.

Behind the slag heap spread the steppe of wormwood. Gray must have made off into it while Lukian was reflecting on Danko. Still, what if she really was his relative?

"Hey, wait a minute!" Lukian came to his feet.

The Gypsy woman stopped. Her eyes looked angry and severe — almost like a man's.

"Have you taken a liking to me, or what?" she asked and ran on around the slag heap.

"What a crank!" Lukian said and spit in anger. He decided to wait for her in the same spot, regardless of whether she was his relative or not. He waited for a long time, but his "relative" did not reappear either with or without Gray. There was probably an underground passage behind the slag heap, he thought, and she and her horse were already hauling coal out of the drifts in those trolleys which had fascinated him so.

The sun, blazing hot as nowhere else, had reached

its highest point over the mines, and it started getting so hot that Lukian had to leave the wormwood steppe and seek refuge in the shade at the foot of the old slag heap. In the scrub, there was a bench, probably for an accordion player, Lukian thought, and in front of the bench was a large round patch of trampled cracked ground with tufts of grass growing out of the cracks here and there. That's probably where the miners got together in the evenings to dance and fall in love with such Gypsies as Danko's. Everywhere there's surely a place similar to Babylon's swing. He took off his boots, unwound the foot rags, made himself as comfortable as he could on the bench and didn't notice how he drifted off into slumber.

The whistle for lunch break roused him, and he regretted it, because nowhere else had he slept as sweetly as on that bench. Somewhere at the top, the slag heap was smoking, while here at its foot, it was so cool Lukian seemed to have frozen in the shade. He looked round through bleary eyes and noticed that his wicker basket was missing. His jacket was where he had left it and so were his boots, but the basket was gone. That's the Gypsy's doing was his first thought. She must have come back this way with Gray and filched the basket. He was even glad she had, because if the Gypsy really were Danko's wife and had taken the basket home, his brother would immediately guess that Lukian was here — in the basket were mother's *rushnik* towel and a new shirt Lukian had embroidered specially for Danko before coming here. He had spent several evenings on the embroidery; as for the rest of the basket's contents, it was nothing to weep over: a hunk of fine pork fat, bread, salt, boiled eggs, and a bottle of first-class moonshine distilled of pure grain by Otchenashka for

the brothers' reunion. All right, so the woman will have a gorgeous feast, if the disappearance of the basket is really her doing. She looked fine, she did! Lukian still seemed to see her flashing eyes before him. Generally, he'd be much better off without the basket now, because this piece of Hlynsk craftsmanship had been too much of an eyesore at the railroad stations he stopped at and here at Kocheharka as well. The basket was of two colors, with a hinged lid — an artifact that was certainly a rarity in these parts. Darinka had paid seven rubles for it. What he intended to bring back in it was Danko's coal, for what better present from the Donets coal field could he think of for the children? Well, now he'd have to get himself an ordinary sack for this purpose. When he was about to go, he glanced around once more like any peasant would have done in his place to see whether he hadn't left anything behind. The wicker basket stood under the bench. Lukian remembered very well having put it under a shrub. The woman must have put it under the bench. While he was asleep, she had put it there so no passerby would take it. Oh what a fine Gypsy woman! Surely his relative, Lukian concluded. A stranger would never have taken the trouble. The lid was open, but nothing in the basket had been touched. Yes, it had been a woman. Whatever else, but a man, even if he were from Kocheharka, wouldn't have been squeamish about carrying off a bottle of moonshine.

Having weighed all the pros and cons, Lukian decided to drop in at the canteen. He hoped to see if not Danko there then at least the Gypsy woman and, so he reasoned, thank her for the little joke she had played on him, which would instantly put them on a friendly footing.

It took him some time before he found a free place at a table occupied by three firemen in white canvas coveralls. Their brass helmets were lying side by side under the table as if they too were waiting in line for lunch. The firemen were just finishing lunch, drinking the juice from their stewed fruit, and one of them pushed the menu over to Lukian. The choice was modest: borshch navy style, macaroni with meat, and stewed fruit.

"The stewed fruit is warm and no good, better order yourself a beer," one of the firemen with a blazing red mustache advised with unfeigned politeness. "The borshch is fine, though. The only thing that's lacking is a pod of cayenne pepper to go with it."

"Livon, you should've tried our Hlynsk borshch with crucian carp. That's some borshch I tell you!" cut in a young man, probably a recent arrival, after he had drunk his glass of stewed fruit.

"There wouldn't be enough carp to feed Kocheharka with," the mustached man said with a smile.

He got to his feet, followed by the others, and the men put on their brass helmets reflecting the sunbeams from the windows. It didn't enter Lukian's head that they might have paid beforehand, and he thought the food was on the house here. He got up and stopped the man from Hlynsk.

"Have you been here long?"

"It's been a year now," he answered, adding, "Well, yes I came on Whitsunday and soon it'll be Whitsunday again."

So he's a believer, Lukian concluded. The two churches in Hlynsk had done their job.

"Have you run across anyone from Babylon?"

"Here? No. There are some people from Koziv and one man from Pritske. But none of yours." Then he

pointed at the wicker basket: "I guessed right away you were from our parts. They don't make such things here, and the osier's different. Have you been long here?"

"I just arrived.

"To apply for a job?"

"Oh no, I'm no good for Kocheharka. I'm simply visiting."

"Do you have rains over there?"

"More than enough. Downpours. The better to grow hay I guess."

"And here we've got a furnace. Everything's burning. Especially grain crops. Rivers dry up, too."

"Our Bug won't dry up."

"I'd give anything for a dive from Markov Cliff. Right now the potatoes are blooming. Well then, give all my folks you see there my greetings. We're the Vivtarenkos! Tell them you've met Hritsko Vivtarenko here. The truth is, I keep writing them that I'm working down in the mine, because you know how they look on firemen in our Hlynsk: as idlers and bums. But it's a serious business. You can't play with fire around here, because there's gas down in those mines." He shook Lukian's hand on parting and hurried off to catch up with his mates.

The Gypsy woman did not show up. There were not that many miners in the canteen; several groups of men were drinking beer. It was more likely that those working on the top were having their lunch. Lukian figured that feeding such a multitude of men on hot food underground was next to impossible. In the morning at the office where the miners got their work assignments, he noticed that each had had a little bundle with him, and some also carried a bottle of milk. That was probably all of their lunch. Going back to Babylon mentally, he thought that a hot lunch

underground was not only something from the realm of fantasy, but to a certain extent harmful. A true Babylonian loved to have a nap for an hour or so after a hot lunch wherever lunch time overtook him: in a furrow, by a haystack, under a wagon or pear tree at home. But what kind of nap could you have underground. That man in the brass helmet must have been one of the Vivtarenkos who ran groat scourers and oil mills in Hlynsk during NEP. They scoured the groats fine, and scoured out the pockets of their customers as well. Procuring groats, cooking oil, and grist — all that had been the responsibility of Danko. Back home from his purchasing trips, he cursed those operators for the extortionate, annually rising fees, and even threatened to burn down Bubela's windmill.

"What will you have?" a chubby-faced woman with a motley apron appeared at Lukian's side.

"Me?" Lukian asked, confused. "Everything."

"The whole complex?" (Wow, what a phrase, Lukian thought.)

"Yes, the whole complex," Lukian said, adding, "The whole complex and beer."

"One beer?"

"Yes, one." Then he cursed himself for not ordering two beers. That "whole complex" had thrown him off balance completely.

The food arrived right away. The waitress asked him to pay on the spot, probably seeing that he was a stranger, Lukian thought, as he took the change. Before she left, he asked:

"Tell me please, does Ivan Holota lunch here," and specified, "I mean not right now, but generally."

"What is he?"

"Coal hewer. A shockworker."

"We've got two thousand coal hewers and all of

them shockworkers. I guess he eats here since he's a hewer. The director of Kocheharka himself eats at our place," the woman said proudly and hurried off to another table which, as far as Lukian could judge, was occupied by the executives of the mine. The laughter, banter and arguments came just from that table. Some of the men wore glasses. Sipping on his beer (as deliciously fresh as in Hlynsk), Lukian's eyes roved over the men in search of the director. It looked as if he had found him. He was of middle age, bald and with a lean face, wearing a gray summer suit, the white, turn-down collar of his shirt over the jacket, just like with Ernst Thälmann on his portraits. He didn't drink beer, but he praised the borshch and went on with the second course. There were another three men with him, in blue buttoned-up coveralls. One of them didn't eat anything for some reason, but only savored his beer. It was precisely his attention which Lukian had aroused for no apparent reason. Probably it was because of Lukian trying to get a grasp of the maxim hanging in a gilt frame on the wall. Its message dealt, of course, with coal: "This mineral will be extremely useful, if not for us then for our descendants." Lukian took out a pencil and was already set on copying the maxim on the back of the menu when he stopped, embarrassed, as if he had been caught doing something wrong. He stealthily hid the pencil, fell on his meal, but overdid his timing and finished the whole complex earlier than the mine executives. So now he wavered over what was better to do — leave or stay? In either event he had already aroused attention, and the director shot a glance at him, or rather past him at the wicker basket: now all of four men were talking about it as if that basket had reminded them of something especially precious. For Lukian, though, the basket

had been attended with trouble. Moreover, there weren't any other large inscriptions, and ogling at the blank walls wouldn't seem proper somehow and would arouse an even greater interest in him. Overcoming his hesitation as if God knows what was at stake, he rose, picked up the basket, and went out.

Coming his way was a big group of miners, some of them in coveralls and their faces unwashed after work. It looked as if they were hurrying to have their beer, which also wasn't served every day at the famous Kocheharka. Lukian understood this to be so when the first man up front asked him:

"Are they tapping beer today?"

"Yes."

"Great!"

There were twelve men or so, a whole crew, Lukian reasoned. Quite a few of them were advanced in years and looked as strong as gnarled snags, with only the eyes flashing young in their faces. Babylon also had such perpetually young faces. Plucking up his courage at long last, he stopped a miner who had lagged behind the crew and was wiping dust off his boots with a whisk broom before the threshold of the canteen. He raised his gentle eyes on Lukian and heard him out. Yes, there was such a coal hewer Holota, the man confirmed. He worked at section number five on the crew of Maxim Tsekhmistrov, if he remembered the name of the crew leader right. Their pitmouth was behind the mine headframe near the bath houses. There was a gate through which a narrow gauge railroad ran. It was rather far away, and their shift would end any minute now. But the best thing would be for Lukian to inquire at the mine office, because they knew everyone there. Ivan Holota seemed to have come here not so long ago from Dontop, a mine beyond Khartsizk, and so he was

probably living now either in Shanghai or at Sobachivka. Living quarters had always been scarce here. All the newcomers to Gorlovka went through the shantytown of Shanghai which was a remnant of the times when the local mines had been owned by Belgian companies. The mines were growing, people kept arriving in increasing numbers, so, like it or not, they had to put up with crowded quarters. The elderly miner seemed to be initiating the novice into all the difficulties he might have to grapple with (who knows, this stranger could be a member of a trade union committee besides). Even if that were so, the miner couldn't have known that here was the chairman of the Babylon Village Soviet who lived comfortably and had a house, an orchard and a garden of his own, although the wicker basket was the only thing he had with him. Had Lukian come here for good, Fabian would have made him something sturdier and more elegant. Seeing the employes of the mine office coming out after work, Lukian decided to move on, thanked the man sincerely, and hurried off to the headframes so as not to be late.

Right by the mine, a black car passed him with the "director" sitting behind the steering wheel in a straw hat, which was why Lukian barely recognized him when he honked the horn; at his side, the man in the blue coveralls who had been drinking beer at the canteen was now sitting in a cap. They had surely exchanged a few words about him but did not stop the car. Beyond the old headframes, the car turned abruptly to the right, raising a tail of dust in its wake. Now which of them was really the director? Lukian wondered. However, this was of no consequence now. People tend to invent unnecessary problems to keep themselves busy for God knows

what reason, while here he had to prepare himself for the meeting with his brother.

The metal gate of the drift opened with a clang. Lukian approached it with a peculiar excitement and looked into the tunnel which had some fantastic structures flooded so brightly with light you could gather pins and needles in there. A little train with coal cars rolled out of the tunnel. Lukian couldn't understand what force kept moving it his way until he saw a woman standing behind the last car driving the train. She shouted at him: "Hey you there, with the basket!" What a dratted nuisance that basket, Lukian thought. The train emerged, pulling a good dozen cars crammed full with the mineral so aptly commented on in the maxim at the canteen (later, Lukian learned that the maxim was the invention of Russian mining engineer Gorlov, who had founded the first mines here and for whom the town of Gorlovka was named). After this treasure sparkling on first contact with the sun, followed the men, leisurely, filled with some demoniac power and confidence, with crimped caps, extinguished mine lamps on their chests, and picks on their shoulders. Their footsteps seemed to fill the whole tunnel with an echoing rumble. They emerged tight-lipped, black, severe. Once outside, some of them tore the caps off their heads and raised their arms as if they were about to fly, rejoicing in the sun and the white world, while others who were dying for a smoke, dropped their tools right there by the gate, gathered into small groups, lit up hurriedly, chatted, joked and laughed. A somewhat familiar laughter reached Lukian's ears from one of the groups. It must have been Danko. Lukian pushed his way through to the group, but there was no Danko, so he inquired about Tsekhmistrov's crew.

“Tsekhmistrov? What drift is he in?”

“The third.”

“They haven’t come up yet. They’ve got their hands full of muck today.”

“They’ll be up any minute now.”

“With the muck?” Lukian asked, and again there was that laughter resembling Danko’s. It came from a young chunk of a miner with dazzlingly white teeth. Confused by the laughter, Lukian returned to the gate and waited.

The miners emerged by threes and fours, without the muck, of course, and again there was a rumbling echo of footsteps as the tight-lipped men passed through the flood of light. By some inexplicable sense Lukian guessed who Tsekhmistrov was, and no sooner had the man come out of the gate than Lukian addressed him:

“Are you Comrade Tsekhmistrov?”

“Yes, I am. What can I do for you? Want to join my crew?” he asked, sizing up the stranger.

“Oh no, no. I’m looking for Ivan, Ivan Holota.”

“Who’s he asking for?” one of the miners who had joined the group asked him to repeat. Lukian turned round and seemed to have recognized Vazoev by his eyes. He had seen them many times in the *News* when he looked at Danko. Vazoev was a tall, circumspect looking man; he stood his pick against a wall, took a pack of cigarettes out of his coveralls, and asked Tsekhmistrov for a light.

“He came to see Ivan,” Tsekhmistrov explained. “How long is it since we’ve been missing him?”

At the thought that Danko might have died, pain pierced Lukian’s heart.

“A month now.”

Yes, it was over a month since the *News* arrived in Babylon, Lukian weighed up.

"He quit. They didn't give him an apartment this time either, so he got angry and quit. A fine miner he was," Tsekhmistrov continued. "At first he dealt with rock bursts, playing with death. Then he joined our crew."

"Did he go far?" Lukian asked, giving a deep sigh of relief.

"Donbas is large enough for more than one Kocheharka mine. He could have gone to the Kuznetsk Basin." Tsekhmistrov went out of the yard, followed by his crew.

"Yes, he could," confirmed Vazoev who must have been Danko's friend. "His family might be still here, though, if he didn't send them back to Tatarbunari."

"To what Tatarbunari?" Lukian stopped involuntarily.

"He and his wife are both from Tatarbunari, a village in Bessarabia. There are a lot of people from there around here. He joined them in Dontop and then came over here. Back there, a friend of his died, so he changed mines. A sensitive man he was..."

That doesn't sound like him, Lukian thought. Danko wouldn't have left a mine just because his friend died in it. Lukian tried to put together his thoughts which had been muddled by the impressions of what he had heard just now. In his mind, he went back to Yavtukh, to the *News*, and at last to his trip here. Drat that Yavtukh who had convinced him and the whole of Babylon that it was Danko in the picture. Still, the likeness was incredible. In the eyes, smile, the bearing of his head, not to mention his ears. In Babylon, Danko had been nicknamed Big-Ears. He got rid of the nickname only after he grew a beard when already a young man.

"You aren't from Dontop by any chance?"

"No, I'm not. I come from a different place."

"Who are you then?" Vazoev insisted.

"Seems I'm no one now, if... Oh well, it's a long story." And a Babylonian story at that, Lukian concluded mentally. For some reason he felt comfortable in Vazoev's company, or perhaps it was because his heart had calmed at the thought that there was a real Ivan Holota in Tatarbunari (Lukian had heard that name long, long ago!), while Danko was living right here as his true self, secretly atoning for his sins of yesterday and turning into another man, as he was dealing with a rock burst right now and courting death. The men had come here not by compulsion, but of their own free will to build socialism in Kocheharka.

"What makes you say you're no one now?" Vazoev comforted him. "Kocheharka, just like Babylon (the word made Lukian start involuntarily) is changing all over, regrouping, fusing, some leave, others arrive, while still others are winnowed out for good. Did you meet our Izotov?"

"I met your director."

"Did you talk with him?"

"I lunched with him."

"Wow! He's a fine man, a former friend of Sergo *. He can do anything. Kocheharka's held up by the Izotovs. By us. By men like Tsekhmistrov. He used to be a farmhand in Volnovakha. Then he lived a wretched existence under the NEP men. Now he's the lion of Kocheharka. He gave a good piece of his mind to the director for Ivan's quitting. The man seems to find the seams by smell. He knows all the secrets of

* Grigoriy (Sergo) Ordzhonikidze (1886-1937) — outstanding Soviet Party leader and politician; Chairman of the Supreme Economic Council (1930) and People's Commissar of Heavy Industry from 1932 on — Tr.

the underground world. A real talent I tell you. Ivan was just like him. That's why he bore the management a grudge." He stopped in his tracks: "Maybe Lyuba hasn't left yet."

They arrived at the settlement. In the twilight, it looked like a toy town with one street and a multitude of paths and lanes leading to odd looking dwellings that seemed to have been built not by man but by some miraculous birds. On and off, they kept flocking to this place and leaving it. Some probably met their deaths here, yet others came to life, among them philosophers and poets and the Izotovs. They might have been the most unselfish of men. After all, the grandeur of the human spirit is gauged not by the dimensions of houses, but by the times and by the power of the state. More often than not, palaces bred baseness which the immortal inhabitants of these dwellings had once overthrown and done away for good.

"Listen, Vazoev, how long have people been living here?"

"Here?" Vazoev looked at the settlement as if he was seeing it for the first time.

"A hundred years I guess. Ever since I've been here, they've wanted to pull it down again and again. But every time, it would come to life anew. There's water here, white poplars, and a little stream down below. The winters are simply fantastic in this place. After a snowstorm, the settlement is white all over as if it didn't exist at all, with only smoke rising out of the ground like candles."

"Hello, Vazoev!" It was the Gypsy woman carrying a pailful of water from the street water pump. The very same Gypsy who Lukian took for his relative.

"Oh, Leila! Hello!"

She had washed and changed clothes, donning an

ample, colorful, skirt, a white, low-necked polka-dot blouse, and strings of red beads.

"Who's that you've brought here?" she asked, surely recognizing Lukian.

"A relative of Ivan Holota. Is Lyuba still around?"

"What's she lost here without Ivan?" she said, adding with a smile, "I guess we've met before, didn't we, relative?" It was only now that Lukian realized how beautiful Leila was.

"Yes, we've met," Lukian confirmed guiltily.

"Has she left for good?" Vazoev asked.

"Yes." She put down the pail and said: "Come now, carry it on, and you'll see for yourself." She said it simply like that to the famous Vazoev. "I'm enjoying the luxury of living in their palace all by myself now. You can come and live with me. Ha-ha-ha!"

They saw Lukian off to the railroad station that night. Now they knew the whole story about the two brothers from Babylon. Vazoev advised Lukian not to look for Danko anymore. He'd turn up sooner or later. Either at Dontop or the Kuznetsk Basin or some other place. A miner, working underground as he did, still had his heart here among the people. If Danko hadn't had anything that was dear to him at Kocheharka, he wouldn't have written that letter. Leila said she would have fallen in love with such a man as Danko had she come across him earlier. That was probably meant to spite Vazoev with purely Gypsy cunning. On the platform, the director of Kocheharka was seeing somebody off; Lukian recognized him by his shirt. Kocheharka was ablaze with fire and smoke, toiling away without any rest at night. Lukian stood at the window, his whole being lit up with joy, his heart sensing something beautiful and eternal.

Following the example of the big cities, which picked up the fashion from Europe, Hlynsk opened a funeral parlor, thereby dealing a vicious blow to the country coffin makers, especially to the one in Babylon who was absolutely unfit for a competitive lifestyle. The thrifty Tkachuk was quick to realize that Babylon would be better off using the services of the funeral parlor rather than keeping Fabian and, moreover, worrying about getting boards, nails and black satin for linings: now the Babylonians were not content at having their box of eternal rest made of plain boards and emphatically insisted on a satin lining.

The funeral parlor was run by the Austrian Schwarz. The disappearance of Austria as a state after its *Anschluss* to nazi Germany could have contributed to Schwarz's being appointed to such a high office. In Hlynsk, he was regarded as a victim of nazism, although he himself took it with imperturbable calm, probably having grown cool to his homeland throughout all these years. There was yet another reason for his appointment. As it proved, Schwarz and his father ran a private funeral parlor in Salzburg before the First World War, so now he could put this new enterprise in Hlynsk on a European footing. Schwarz arranged for the serial production of coffins, tin wreaths, and even tombstones of blazing red Bug granite. He got together a brass band thirteen musicians strong, in which he played the trumpet (back in Salzburg he had also played the trumpet), equipped a one-and-a-half ton truck for a hearse, in which he both took the deceased to their last resting place and tore around the district, drawing up contracts for the services offered by his

establishment. His peg leg wouldn't fit into the cab, so he unfastened it for the trip. Once at his destination, he put it on back, apparently believing that only in this way could he worthily represent his establishment instead of taking to crutches which would cast a shadow on the competence of his services.

Varivon Tkachuk, who was fed up with Fabian for his constant complaints about the lack of boards and other materials which he demanded over and above the established norm every time, eagerly drew up contracts with Schwarz, depriving Fabian of his earnings and respect at one fell swoop. Fabian's folding rule, with which he had measured more than one extinguished life, found its way to the table of the chairman as a reproach for his deal with Schwarz. "That's the only thing I'd advise you preserve for history," Fabian said and went out of the chairman's office, feeling almost like one man too many in Babylon. He had only one responsibility left—he put the names of the best workers and the lazybones on the Red and Black Board. But now he seemed to have joined the latter category himself.

Yet on the third day of his unemployment, he hit upon an idea which he had to put to the test for all that. He woke up the billy goat sleeping under the workbench and addressed him as if he had really come up with an astounding discovery: "Rejoice, old critter, 'cause we've again straddled the mount of the great oddball Don Quixote de la Mancha." At that, the billy goat heaved a sigh, because he knew his master like no one else and did not fall for the joyous callings of his soul. How many times had they set off in the best of moods to have a meal at someone else's place, only to meet with utter failure and a hungry return to their empty abode. But this

time, something serious was afoot which claimed the attention of the billy goat; he roused himself, shaking off his sleep like oldish billy goats do when prodded to go on living. On the whole, the appearance of such billy goats is deceptive. Their insensibility can be feigned, and they are capable of coming to life when some idea suddenly comes over them.

Then and there, Fabian produced a church calendar which Pankrat (his predecessor) had left in the workbench, leafed through it, found something in it to make his joy rise, and the subsequent events took on the fine pace and mood which always attended the philosopher whenever he made great discoveries. Out of the trunk he took a black woolen suit he had bought from a Hlynsk tailor back in the times of NEP (now he wore it only for May Day demonstrations), put on a lordly hat he had been presented by Chaplich for the coffin he made for his father (as a matter of fact, the hat was the only article to have survived from their ruined gentry nest), stuck his feet into green canvas shoes, and thus spruced up (his golden spectacles lending him an air of respectability), made off for lower Babylon accompanied by his billy goat.

All this happened on Good Friday. He couldn't have chosen a better day for his enterprise. For all the opposition of Tkachuk to Orthodox and Catholic holidays, Babylon was preparing for Easter. A Jerusalem scent of Easter pastry stood in the air; here and there throughout Babylon, hogs squealed under the butcher's knife, reminding Fabian of the pig-sticker Panko Kochubei who must have gone to glory somewhere in the cold regions of Siberia. Everyone in Babylon had his own way of torturing hogs to death now, which explained why the martyrs went off into such agonizing squeals from time to time.

The women whitewashed the houses on the outside, some adding blue and others red to the whitewash, which lent the houses an odd, yet unusually pleasant appearance. The children scurried about with a pot of red dye for all the Easter eggs in Babylon. Those whom the pot did not reach dyed the eggs with a decoction of onionskin or yarrow, a herb which gave the eggs a rare color with a shade of blood. The dye for the Easter eggs had been brought from Hlynsk since times of old. It was always prepared by one person to be used by the whole community. The pot traveled from house to house, at times triggering off squabbles and bad feelings in Babylon; because of it, even relatives became enemies for a day or two, after which they had to make up for their spats. Fabian was amazed by the endurance of these people who could live undernourished for half a year, yet hid away a bundle of white flour for their Easter pastries.

Fabian bowed to the women who were sprucing up their houses, slightly envied the amateur pig-stickers who were dressing the Easter hogs behind the barns, and greeted a flock of children who were running across the street just then with a soot-blackened pot of dye intended for the Buhs. The children were literally stunned at the sight of Fabian dressed up in such a gentlemanly way. The women also tore themselves from their work and froze in surprise. On the whole, anyone watching these two cranks could not but smile inside at their grace and grandeur of spirit which was evident now not individually but as a single whole. The hat crowned the oddity of Fabian's appearance. But nobody as yet save Fabian himself knew what an idea was coming to fruition under that hat.

The first man Fabian chose to test his idea on was Yavtukh whose name was listed in the church

calendar that day, for Yavtukh was the Slavic version of Jeremiah. Babylon, too, had a Jeremiah — Jeremiah Huliyy. The philosopher decided to start precisely with Yavtukh, taking into consideration the man's morbidly exaggerated attitude toward his own personality. Yavtukh was taken unawares and, moreover, was immensely impressed by the philosopher's appearance, for he looked if not like Tisevicz, Sr., himself then at least like a bigtime lessee or gubernial official in charge of boundary strips and inheritances. Upon the death of Tisevicz, Sr., a similar official had come to Babylon, and Yavtukh regretted bitterly that he wasn't at least a distant relative of Tisevicz, and so could not be included in his will. But even an official in charge of boundary strips and inheritances did not have such fine golden spectacles as this dandy in canvas shoes. Yavtukh was just then building a rabbit cage. He gaped open-mouthed in surprise and wanted to ask, "Is that you?" but froze, seeing that it was really him.

"Good day, Yavtukh!"

"Oh, what a get-up!" Yavtukh barely regained his composure.

"We've come to congratulate you on your name day, that is, on your birthday."

"Me?"

"Yes, you. By the church calendar it's the day of the saint whose name you bear — Yavtukh and Jeremiah. So it's your name day. Building a cage on such a day and, generally, doing any other chores whatsoever is unworthy of a Babylonian."

"Well I'll be jiggered. I didn't know that."

"He-h! That's just it. I, for one, wanted to say some favorable words about you, but for this purpose there must be a table, something on it, and people sitting around it."

“That’s no problem. You just give a whistle and you’ll have a crowd. Listen, didn’t you mix up the day by any chance? Is it really Yavtukh and Jeremiah’s day?”

“What do you take me for, Yavtukh? I represent a respectable firm relying on written sources. Here, take a look.” He produced the church calendar and read: “God’s bondsmen Yavtukh and Jeremiah have that day on the last Friday of Lent.”

Yavtukh called Prisia to see who had paid them a call and to hear with her own ears that entry in the church calendar: Jeremiah Hulyiy and he, Yavtukh Holiy, had a right to rest and to a treat of dumplings with pluck.

First the two of them started the party, then neighbors dropped in, after which the neighbors’ neighbors followed suit, and in the end, Varivon Tkachuk himself showed up. By evening a jovial party was in full swing, the likes of which Babylon hadn’t seen for a long time. The dumplings with pluck — hot and redolent — traveled right out of the oven and onto the table, Fabian spoke a word of praise about Yavtukh, disclosing his social and historical roots, and when the philosopher started discoursing about Yavtukh’s origin from the Holiy Cossacks, Yavtukh shed a tear or two. Half of the slaughtered hog disappeared from the pantry that day, and there was no meat left even for the Easter sausages. Later on, Prisia cursed not so much Yavtukh for what happened as both of the Fabians who, as she said, were half a dozen of the other rolled into one.

Jeremiah Hulyiy, whose name day Fabian arbitrarily postponed until the next day, didn’t have a hog carcass, so he slaughtered a huge turkey; his wife put it into the oven in one piece on an iron griddle that had once been used in the kitchen of the land-

owners Rodzinskis. When the turkey was taken out of the oven, its smell carried throughout the whole of Babylon and the guests didn't have to be coaxed to show up.

Tractor driver Jeremiah Huliy, a hardworking, taciturn though ridiculously unsociable man, disappeared from the room unnoticed when Fabian embarked on his speech of praise. Yet Jeremiah heard everything (he had hid in the entrance hall), and many days later, when he met the philosopher in Babylon, he asked him in a mysterious way:

"Excuse me, Fabian, if I ask something awkward, but how do you know all the things you said about me?"

"Jeremiah, while your tractor chugs away beyond Babylon every night, I read books, and in them I find absolutely everything about you."

"What you said about me makes my wife Oliana look upon me as if I were a god. She wouldn't even hand me a towel before, but now she wants to wash my feet. I won't let her do that, of course."

"It's a bad thing you don't, Jeremiah. When a man's feet are washed, it reminds him of what he is in his home and in his district. You're the best tractor driver in the district, and your feet are worth something. Come to Protasik the mailman's tomorrow: I'll be speaking about his feet, and you'll hear what a wonderful thing feet are as long as they carry man around the world."

"Why, is his name day tomorrow?"

"Yes, tomorrow's Markian's."

"And what about today?"

"Today's my day off."

"That's incredible."

"Regrettably it's so. Babylon doesn't have a Theophan, and today is Theophan or Theophile's day."

“But what if we move farther from Babylon? I know one Theophan in Koziv. He was my coupler last autumn. And Pritske is thick with Theophans.”

“See, what an oversight.”

Presently Protasik appeared: nimble, barefoot, with a mailbag, wearing his postman's cap and a uniform shirt with collar tabs. As for footwear, he couldn't have enough of it running around as he did all the time, so the great Marathonian had to discharge his duties barefooted. He was really stepping on it. Right then he was heading from Hlynsk with some urgent mail for the collective farm office. Protasik didn't have the slightest inkling that tomorrow would be his name day or that Fabian was preparing a speech about his swift feet, one of which had six toes. “Precisely this sixth toe that sticks out is the main support for balancing the mailbag. If it weren't for that sixth digit, Protasik would be tumbling over all the time.” That's how Fabian intended to open his laudatory speech.

Next day everything went off smoothly. Khariton Hapochka, the manager of the Hlynsk post office, arrived in person on a britzka with a coachman. Protasik's feet were accorded such liberal honor that everybody who attested to it couldn't stand on their feet properly in the end and had to pass the night sleeping on the knotgrass in the host's farmyard while Khariton Hapochka slept on pillows. Protasik couldn't thank Fabian enough for the honor. It was an unprecedented thing for Hapochka to visit a mere postman. Thanks to Fabian, the sixth digit on Protasik's foot had become such a virtue of his that from that day forth, Khariton Hapochka wanted all the postmen to have six toes. Fabian produced the best impression on Hapochka as only a Babylonian philosopher could produce on a Hlynsk postmaster.

Both were pleased by the acquaintance they had made of each other, and next morning Fabian looked up the name Khariton in the church calendar, thereby laying the groundwork for a new parish. This would be an outlet to Hlynsk, and through Hapochka more distinguished citizens of Hlynsk would surely find their way into Fabian's church calendar.

So far, his attention was centered on the Babylonians. For their part, they had become so accustomed to this ritual that whenever Fabian didn't show up at somebody's name-day party, it was considered no less than disrespect for the host. Everyone, with a few exceptions, of course, was impressed by the looks of the philosopher as well as by his way of thinking and speaking at the laudatory functions. He was capable of raising the most insignificant man in the eyes of the others (say, like Protasik in the eyes of Hapochka). The Babylon executive made it a rule to attend the name-day parties in a more or less permanent composition: Tkachuk, Sokolyuk with Darinka, both of the Buhs — father and son, both of the Radenkys — Fedot and Fedir (the sons of the Radenky brothers), the three Pavlyuks who were smiths and members of the collective farm board, Ruzia Dzhura — the pride and glory of Babylon, Yavtukh (in the capacity of insurance agent) and, of course, Savka Chibis, the Village Soviet clerk. There were quite a few respected people here who could adorn any name-day party, but the most remarkable addition was, of course, the philosopher with his billy goat. It was held that the presence of the billy goat introduced something symbolic if not eternal to the parties, because if Fabian were to be believed, some ancient peoples worshiped these creatures as gods.

“None of you has such a true friend as this horned,

close-mouthed critter," Fabian used to say about him. "I am sure that the act of bringing these creatures closer to civilization has justified itself. Had Don Quixote a common billy goat instead of Sancho Panza he would surely have made fewer mistakes than he did in his lifetime, because in everyone of us there lives an instigator of foolhardiness and the worst of passions our forebears endowed us with."

The string of name-day parties continued throughout the whole winter and spring, after which followed a long hiatus right up till autumn (a strict law of child-bearing was in force in those days). During that period, Fabian wore his usual garb and was transformed into an ordinary weigher by the threshing machines where, in the eyes of Varivon at least, he was a paragon of honesty and unselfishness. In the meantime, the billy goat was also in the upkeep of the community kitchen.

* * *

Yavtukh had an utterly poor sense of bearing as far as great revolutionary junctures were concerned. He always erred and wound up among the losers, save perhaps during those few days when he was a horseholder with the First Army of Cavalry whose victory over the White Poles he would later on put down unblushingly to his credit, because at the decisive moment, he was supposed to have given the commander a fresh horse to replace his shrapnel-maimed mount. To tell the truth, no one but the commander himself acknowledged that feat, yet such an episode did happen at Brody, and it could really have had an effect on the whole operation. From the

moment the attack was launched, Yavtukh didn't take his eyes off the commander, keeping a spare horse ready for him, but there was no opportunity for him to show his worth a second time, because both the commander and his mount seemed to have been charmed against bullet and shell. So in the end, Yavtukh failed to bring glory to his name during that campaign.

But in little worldly matters, Yavtukh could be ranked among the most outstanding of men. This was demonstrated back in the days of *liknep*. Within three evenings, he learned to read; on the sixth evening he could print freely; a week later he wrote in cursive; and in a month, he was leading a group of the most dim-witted *liknep* students, including Prisia, who in the end failed to best the cunning intricacies of word formation by syllables. As for Yavtukh's not making his way in the world, he wasn't to blame in the least. It would have been attributed to the shortcomings in the very system of promotion which didn't prefer such complex and controversial characters as Yavtukh, because it was impossible to determine at least approximately where characters of that sort might land in case of this or that social complication or aggravation of class controversies. Apart from a positive effect on people, the "dispossession of land" also induced such unexpected changes in them as not a single world philosophy could predict in detail.

For Yavtukh, collectivization of the land at first evoked the uncontrollable sorrow of loss, then indifference, and later on, a feeling of contempt and perhaps even enmity toward the land. That was why he tried to disengage himself from it, eagerly spoke on this subject, and eventually, after having voluntarily insured his life, he, unexpectedly for him-

self and the Babylonians, advanced to insurance agent of the Babylon chapter.

Before Yavtukh, this office was held by an imposing looking mustachioed shirker from Hlynsk who showed up occasionally on a bicycle and pedalled back home without having insured a single soul except Yavtukh throughout his whole term in office. "What's there to insure them against?" he complained to Yavtukh, handing over the files of his "agency." "There's no plague, no malignant anthrax; if there are any hailstorms, they come at the wrong time of the year, so your job here, Comrade Yavtukh, will be easy as pie. Had I lived but half the distance from this place, I'd wish for no better job. As the psalter puts it, it's a 'place of indolence.'" Robotun * (that was the man's name) was put in charge of the Hlynsk market (Woe be to the market, Yavtukh thought), while Yavtukh started his work by putting the office in order first. He made Prisia whitewash the walls and wash the floor and the window. Then he covered the walls with all sorts of posters advertising the advantages of insurance (there was a whole roll of them; Robotun hadn't even found time to unroll them, and they had remained standing in the corner). The next day, Yavtukh got down to discharging his duties as insurance agent by dressing himself up correspondingly and as neatly as possible and by taking his place at the desk, the drawers of which held the annals of inactivity of his predecessor (various blank forms into which Yavtukh had to breathe at least some signs of life). During the first days, he was literally astounded by everything, above

* Robotun — lit. Toiler — Tr.

all by the posters which surrounded him on three walls. What disengaged him completely from his previous lifestyle was the realization that he was sitting behind a state desk taken over from Robotun, and attached to that desk was a metal plaque with an embossed inventory number — 2707. This made him realize that the State Insurance Agency didn't have that many employes like him — 2707. So he was something worth at long last.

Yavtukh decided to work the first days without any lunch breaks to prove his devotion to his job. His two course lunches were regularly brought to his office by one of his sons. Judging by the lunches alone, Yavtukh saw that his stature had grown tremendously in Prisia's eyes. The lunches were prepared with greater care than before, but damned Babylon, with the exception of Savka Chibis perhaps, didn't seem to notice the great headway Yavtukh was making, and not a single Babylonian took the trouble to drop in at the office and admire the new Agent 2707. Shvabsky, the manager of the district agency, didn't show up either, and with every passing day Yavtukh felt more and more acutely that his office and, consequently, he, were of no purpose. To crown this lack of purpose, no hailstorm or any other natural calamity visited Babylon within that period, and therefore Yavtukh didn't even have a pretext to see Trachuk who had insured the peas (especially susceptible to hailstorms) and sugar beets when Robotun was still in office. Nothing of that sort happened at the neighboring collective farms either. They had paid their insurance directly to Hlynsk in good time, forgetting about the existence of the office under Yavtukh. Yet none of this in any way frustrated the vigorous genius of Yavtukh, and unlike his predecessor, he decided to get the issue of individual

insurance out of its hopeless deadlock. His first choice fell on Comrade Tkachuk, the Babylon chairman, who really did have one foot in the grave.

To the Babylonians, it seemed he'd die any day now, but he went on living and his lean boys didn't die either. He was supposed to take dog fat to prevent consumption and gave this medicine to his boys, too. One of them couldn't take it for some reason and had died last spring as soon as the thyme burst into bloom in the meadow. But there were still three of his sons left. They had contracted the disease from their mother when they were still living in Yelizavetgrad where she had died. Tkachuk also got the disease from her. Yavtukh was resolved to avail himself of this fact, and after some agitating, he managed to insure Tkachuk's life. After Tkachuk, it was comparatively easy to persuade Lukian Sokolyuk to follow suit: whether he liked it or not, the chairman of the Village Soviet had to promote the insurance business. But then individual insurance advanced with quite a few difficulties, and, as a rule, always ended in Yavtukh's defeat because of an attendant tricky remark he heard all the time: "Why should I insure my life? It's enough you insured yours." So he had to insure Prisia's life as well. Apart from some of the executive, Yavtukh managed to insure a number of rank-and-file Babylonians: Horpinich, the cattlehand in charge of the bulls, one of which was given to butting; the watchman of the melon plantation, who could become a victim of melon thieves; a number of stablemen who had to operate chaffcutters themselves and had no guarantee they wouldn't lose an arm in the process; and another two or three tractor drivers from Darinka Sokolyuk's team. Darinka, however, refused flatly to be insured for no other reason than her hatred of the agent.

Among those whom Yavtukh failed to convince of the expediency of life insurance was Fabian who once dropped in at the agency to have a look at Yavtukh in his new capacity. The conversation turned on the billy goat whom Fabian agreed to have insured. Yavtukh didn't have any objections, but in the list of insurable items, he didn't find anything like a billy goat. And regrettably so, because Yavtukh wanted to use precisely the billy goat as a precedent to start insuring privately owned cattle. The agent and philosopher would have parted thus had not Yavtukh recalled Fabian's hut on the Tatar Ramparts which was perhaps the most ancient hovel in Babylon.

"That's what we'll insure for a starter," Yavtukh rejoiced. "We'll insure your hut, Fabian."

"My hut? What for? What need is there for that? It's been standing for a century and a half now and will stand as long again without any insurance. It's built of water-seasoned oak (in actual fact, of clay), and though it might be not much to look at, it's fire- and age-proof. That hut's like steel."

"What a shame for the great Babylon philosopher to have lived in such a hovel with a billy goat at that. It has no pantry, no front room, no real six-pane windows. Fabian, you can't even see the world from that hovel of yours."

"I see Pritske, and the whole dry valley before Pritske. What other world do I need to see? The windmills have stopped turning, and you grow sad looking at them. I see the herd going out into the steppe and then coming back home. My hut suits me just fine, and I wouldn't trade it for your 'palace,' Yavtukh."

"Well, mine isn't a damn sight better, except for the porch I added to it, but I can't insure my house,

because I'm holding this office, but your hut can be insured right away. Here, take this blank form" — he took a sheet of paper out of the drawer, put it in front of Fabian, and gave him a pen along with an inkwell he had brought from home — "and fill it in. If you want, insure it for two or three thousand rubles, pay a nominal fee of some kopecks for a start, and further on I'll take care of your hut myself." He went over to Fabian and bent down to his gnarly ear covered with a dense growth of white hair: "In a month or two, we'll burn it down accidentally."

Fabian read the printed entries in the blank form he had to fill in, picked up the pen, and before dipping it into the inkwell, scratched his pate: "Why did you choose my house?"

"Hm! What's the use of insuring a house for someone like Timka Shvaika or Khomka Lysy? They're small fry, you know, humble folk. I'd hate tapping the treasury for their sake. There'd be no result. But you're a man of some stature — the local source of our wisdom and a celebrity — so to speak. Now if I pay your insurance, I'll instantly get a crowd standing in line like for milk at the dairy."

"And who'll set the house on fire? I can't possibly burn down my own house?"

"Oh well, lightning will take care of that. It's happened to other people, hasn't it? And it'll happen to you, too. It's a natural force beyond my control. A heavenly force, I'd say."

"I'd regret losing my workbench."

"Take it out of the hut. We don't really have to burn it. And this character" — he motioned toward the billy goat — "could be left inside for greater credibility. Put the workbench under the plum tree in the shade well beforehand. As for burning the billy goat, there's really a good reason for it. We won't

burn him completely, that is, we'll leave some meat behind: you'd have to have something for supper after the fire."

"What are you talking about, Yavtukh? I couldn't burn the billy goat up even for a hundred thousand rubles. A living creature..."

"Goodness gracious! I already said he doesn't have to be burned completely. It'd be better to rescue him from the blazing hut. Why, Dubrovsky * rushed into the flames to save a cat. Didn't you see the movie? So why can't you save a billy goat. Write: I, Levko Yevlampiyovich Khorobry..."

"Won't I wind up without a house... and without any money?"

"What do you take me for? You're dealing with an insurance agent. Here's the document signed by Shvabsky. Do you know how much money I get for my job? Your hovel should have gone up in smoke a long time ago, so it wouldn't disgrace Babylon, and here you are dillydallying as if a palace or God knows what else were involved."

With all the fire of his heart which was spoiling for action under his embroidered shirt, Yavtukh zeroed in on that hovel, and the philosopher was involuntarily lost in admiration for Yavtukh in his new capacity. Fabian surrendered, filled in the blank form under number eight for insuring property (with the type of property stated — his house) which was estimated as worth two thousand rubles on the open market, and after he put his signature, resembling the most masterly penned autographs on banknotes, to the document, Yavtukh took out of his pocket a motley rag that served him as a handkerchief and

* Reference to the principal character in Alexandr Pushkin's story *Dubrovsky* — Tr.

wiped the profuse sweat off his temples (with the years, excitement made Yavtukh's temples drip with sweat).

The philosopher promised to make his first payment from the proceeds he'd get for a coffin after a funeral which the Hlynsk funeral parlor wouldn't know anything about. After that, they ran the billy goat out of the office and got down to brass tacks. Before setting the house on fire, Yavtukh was to notify him in advance so he could move the workbench out of the house, along with the *bekesh* coat and any other necessities.

Yavtukh could laugh to his heart's content to have fooled the great philosopher, while the latter, for his part, was absolutely sure that the agent of the State Insurance Agency didn't grasp the meaning of his little game. Fabian wished Yavtukh good business in his grill-windowed room and went out onto the porch. Resting there on a bench was Savka in the shade of a jasmine bush in its last stages of bloom. At the sight of the philosopher he hee-hawed:

"Got some insurance, didn't you?"

"He talked me into it, that rogue."

"Did you insure yourself or the billy boat?"

"My house."

"For how much?"

"For two... Guess I underbid."

At that Savka went off in a roar of laughter:

"What cranks our Babylon's got!"

That same day the whole of Babylon learned that Fabian had insured his hut against thunder and lightning and any other natural calamities. Yavtukh's ruse was perfectly calculated. The next day a number of Babylonians crowded into the room, and perhaps for the first time, Yavtukh felt like a man on whom something depended in this world.

In one month of work he had insured quite a few lives, twenty-one houses, seven cows, and two seasoned sows, after which came an intermission which turned into a period of doubts and meditation for the agent.

There had to be a new impulse for the business, and Yavtukh found it as soon as haying started and the first thunders rumbled over Babylon. Matviy Kuriy's house burst into flames in broad daylight. It happened while Babylon was mowing hay. The house burned to the ground, and all that could be snatched from the flames was a nickel-plated bed and a bag of pork fat salvaged from the pantry. Kuriy was handling the reaper just then, so he unhitched the horse and came racing over to the conflagration. The insurance agent was already on the spot, drawing up a document in the presence of witnesses under the cherry trees. A week later Kuriy drew the whole amount from his insurance — an unheard of thing in Babylon. Availing himself of the privileges of a man who lost his possessions in a fire, Kuriy built a new house, after which the insurance seekers swelled to such numbers that Yavtukh barely managed to handle them all and receive their first payments to the treasury of the State Insurance Agency.

The Babylon agent was spoken of in Hlynsk, and a number of times, he was called out to the regional center to share his expertise at meetings of insurance agents. In the meantime, fires broke out with increasing frequency in Babylon and the neighboring villages. Yavtukh's rashest clients sent their old hovels up in flames and drew their insurance payments at the district agency in Hlynsk. Only the philosopher, who had done Yavtukh such a good turn at the outset of his career, was overlooked. His crumbling hovel stood on the Tatar Ramparts as

before. Yavtukh didn't betray the slightest intention of burning it, but instead, reminded his customer by mail from time to time that his next instalment was due.

Indignant at this, Fabian once dropped in on the insolent operator whose prestige had risen to no mean proportions in Babylon and far beyond. Yavtukh met him rather cordially as was fit for one of his first customers. The agent's appearance had changed: he wore tailor-made breeches of diagonal and a pair of fine raw-leather boots with shiny toes. Instead of the embroidered shirt, he had on something like a service jacket, and a cap besides (it hung on a nail by the door). Almost all the Hlynsk officials were dressed in such a manner, so Yavtukh imitated the fashion, being by nature a dandy who had previously attached no small importance to dress. The philosopher was truly impressed.

"I haven't seen you for quite some time, Yavtukh."

"Yes, quite some time. I've got a number of additional villages to handle now, so I'm rushing around and doing a lot of headwork. Some go up in flames, others in smoke... Hm-m yeah..." Previously the philosopher had never heard such a meaningful "hm-m yeah" escape Yavtukh's lips, by which he probably intended to underscore the importance of his personality and the complexity of his office of insurance agent.

The billy goat could tell from the smell of the boots that here was someone incredibly familiar — was it really Yavtukh? — but still he did not recognize the agent and eyed him with some anxiety, probably afraid a similar metamorphosis might take place with Fabian, and then the billy goat wouldn't be able to recognize his master, which the horned critter didn't want to happen.

"So you're setting things ablaze, are you, Yavtukh?" Fabian asked.

"It's God's doing, not mine. I only register events as they occur. Every business of state must move forward."

"Well, when will my turn come?"

"What?" Yavtukh started.

"When will you burn my old hovel down? You promised, after all."

"He-he-he! I was thinking things over, and my conscience told me: 'Comrade Holiy, don't you dare touch the philosopher, because it might be misunderstood. He's the honor and conscience of Babylon. An example to follow! A man used to living righteously. I wouldn't advise you to do such a thing, I really wouldn't, Comrade Holiy. Now, if lightning were to strike, that'd be a different matter.' Give it some thought, Fabian, and you'll come to the same conclusion."

Fabian rose to his feet and touched Yavtukh's shoulder as if to convince himself that this was the very same Yavtukh who had sung quite a different tune at the outset of his career.

"Now mind you, don't you dare go burning it down, Yavtukh... God preserve you."

"The thunders are growing weaker, and their force doesn't depend on me."

"Sure. But if you should ever get the idea, don't do it. That's what I came to tell you..."

"You must have the chair in mind?!" Yavtukh jumped to his feet. "Is it ready then?"

"Not yet, but it's already crooning for its future master. No one's ever had such a fine chair."

"May I listen to its crooning?" the intrigued Yavtukh was all agog, and without waiting for the philosopher's consent, he put on his cap, tailor-made

in Hlynsk of the same fabric as the service jacket, locked the agency, and flicking a wink at Savka, sitting on the porch as always, led Fabian back to his tumbledown abode which a less sensible agent might have reduced to ashes.

Fabian had noticed long ago that whatever enterprise he embarked on, willingly or unwillingly, it turned against him in the beginning or in the end. On the other hand, it might have been the loftiest calling of a philosopher: to discover an idea in the humdrum course of life, so that it would be adopted and sanctified by others. Without wasting time, the ever vigilant Varivon Tkachuk had ordered postcards (exactly one hundred copies) at the district printshop, and now he was congratulating the Babylonians on their name days on behalf of the collective farm board and awarding the best workers small bonuses, which Fabian couldn't, of course, afford to do, confining himself to laudatory speeches addressed to the subjects of the celebrations. The underlying idea of those utterances was that the concerns and troubles of the earth placed on everyone of us made up the sense of our lives. Precisely these words stood out vividly under the foil patterns on the postcards, without the slightest hint as to their author; moreover, Varivon Tkachuk forbade the presence of the philosopher at the celebrations, arguing that because of them, Fabian had been neglecting the Red and Black Board which remained unfilled for weeks, supposedly undermining certain moral standards of Babylon. Meanwhile, Babylon's initiative was picked up by Hlynsk, and the District Party Committee adopted a special decision to have the initiative spread, without mentioning its founder, as before. After this idea took such a turn, the philosopher was left without

a single means of livelihood. He couldn't turn back to making coffins anymore, because the district funeral parlor under the Austrian not only managed nicely in sending the deceased off to their last resting place, but from time to time, was out of work itself, and so was forced to take up making barrels for the famous Hlynsk pickled water melons, cucumbers and cabbage heads as a side line.

This time as well, the philosopher's memory did him a good turn. His memory had retained an episode from his childhood. Once he had gone with his father, Yevlampiy Khorobry, to Semivody where, as the old man had learned, the coachman of the landowner Rodzinski had died. Yevlampiy Khorobry decided to apply for the vacancy. He was informed that the landowner was ill, but if the matter was urgent, he was available in his home study on the second floor of his palace. Despite the fact that it was terribly frightening to go up there, both father and son plucked up enough courage to climb the stairs, because Yevlampiy was dying to see himself sitting on the box of the landowner's phaeton hitched to four, and in autumn to six, horses. In this way he wanted to show the shallow-brained Tiseviczes in Babylon what a fine coachman they had lost for having once refused Khorobry that honor, putting one of the Valakhs on the box instead. This nincompoop harnessed the four not in tandem but abreast and drove the arrogant landowner (if it was Junior, there was even more of the arrogance) through our narrow streets, trampling the weeds to a pulp along the roadside. The maidservant informed the landowner who they were and on what business they had come, and he permitted them to be shown in. The landowner, Xaveri Rodzinski, was in leather slippers on bare feet and a Turkish dressing gown. He was smoking

an aromatic cigar and rocking in a chair that looked unusual to the Khorobrys. Father was saying something to the landowner, probably to prove what an outstanding coachman he would make, while Levko stood there, spellbound by that wonder of a chair. It seemed to be rocking of itself; not believing his own eyes, the boy went round it, hoping to see a servant at the back rocking the landowner. But to his astonishment he didn't see anybody there, which made the chair the more fascinating to him. It was made of bent wood coated with black varnish, and what was pleasing to the eye were the rhythmic lines and delicate finials of every detail. Besides, the chair emitted a ringing sound as it rocked.

"Well, do you like it?" Rodzinski asked, tickled by the boy's fascination.

"It's the only one of its kind — made by a famous Vienna craftsman. There are hardly a dozen such chairs in the whole world. Listen now!" he said both to father and son. Rodzinski rocked in the chair, and it came to life under him, filling the ears of those two simpletons with the enchanting music of dried wood.

"What kind of wood is it made of?" Father asked.

"Hazel."

"Ordinary hazel?"

"As you hear, it isn't ordinary. Every twig is cut at a time when the hazel sings in the wind before blooming. That is in early spring during the first drip of thawing snow."

Those damn lords know everything, it crossed Levko's mind. Oh how he had longed to rock in that chair! Seventeen years later, when the landowner's manor was pillaged, Levko also went to Semivody, intending to nab that Vienna chair, but he was too late: the chair had been taken by some crank from

Oveche who, as Levko later learned, sold it for a song at the Hlynsk fair.

The hazel twigs he selected for the chair were lithe, slender, and the most resonant — not too young, yet not overripe either; he stacked them in bundles, and after they had dried, he carried them on his back to the Tatar Ramparts. Here, he stripped them of the bark, dried them, steamed them in a vat, bent and fixed them, or as he put it, deadened the rockers. At that time, Yavtukh, without suspecting it, gave him the idea of presenting the first chair to a museum right in the capital. The eventual fame of the chairs would depend on this, because Fabian wanted to make no more chairs than the famous Vienna craftsman had done — one or two dozen for the whole world. And here was his first one!

One night Fabian had a dream: Bubela rapped on his side window and asked to be let into the house to have a look at the chair. "Well, well, let's see what you've done with my hazel." He was dressed in a *chumarka* overcoat and gray cap, holding a whip in his hand — just as he had looked on the frosty winter night that had been his last. He settled down in the chair, rocked in it, and said: "I saw such a thing at Xaveri's, but it was black." "I haven't finished it yet," Fabian wanted to say, but woke up and saw the billy goat sleeping curled up in the chair. He hurled a boot at him to chase him out of the chair. "How do you like that big shot! Some Beelzebub!" Then he got out of bed and went over to the window — the night was white under the full moon — not a single soul could be seen. Babylon was in the reign of slumber.

And then there was the living reality — Yavtukh in person, the agent, the authority.

The chair stood in the middle of the room. Still white, elegant and light with a multitude of bends and curves. Everything was of a one-tone hazel stripped of bark; the vat he had steamed the twigs in for greater elasticity stood by the stove. The agent was stunned at the sight of this creation of human fantasy. He touched the chair, it produced a ringing sound and started to rock as if it were rocking in the air. Yavtukh had a strong urge to drop into it and fly away in it. But the very thought seemed a sacrilege to him. The chair went on rocking and rocking on the sturdy polished callouses of its rockers connected by a crossbeam for the feet.

Impressed and stunned, the agent stroked the elastic, graceful curves of the woodwork, his fingers detecting not a single knot or rough spot.

“My, you are a genius, Fabian, to make such a thing out of simple hazel. That’s just the thing for the capital. All right, burn the hut down. Burn it down tomorrow.” He stopped in mid-sentence. “Yes, but what about the chair?”

Fabian burst into laughter and jostled Yavtukh out of the room. In the entrance hall stood the hazel for the new rocking chairs; stripped of bark, it was drying gradually, twig matched to twig, bundle to bundle. Yavtukh realized that Fabian was far from thinking of setting his hut on fire — what difference did it make to him what kind of a hut he created those flying chairs in. In his mind’s eye, Yavtukh was already flying in the one Fabian would build for him.

After Yavtukh, Fabian invited Varivon and Lukian Sokolyuk to have a look at the chair. On this occasion, Varivon promised to get some natural varnish. He was fascinated by the chair and could not withstand the temptation of rocking in it, which he did easily,

since his body was no more than a bundle of skin and bones. Lukian was afraid, of course, to follow his example. Then Klim Sinitsya arrived; he was no minor personality in the region, a deputy manager of the Hlynsk MTS in charge of political instruction. He liked the chair, too, but there was still Markian Valigurov, the First of Hlynsk, who had to come and proclaim his opinion. The chair was varnished by now. Valigurov could not take his eyes off it, touching it only with one finger of his right hand and refusing to sit in it, however much Fabian invited him.

Soon afterward the District Party Committee received a letter of thanks for the present, which meant that the chair was liked. Since its creator did not receive any due acknowledgment or, perhaps, was completely forgotten, Fabian decided to leave his creation in one specimen, although he knew that talent wanes without incentive.

CHAPTER 5

Prisia made dumplings with the first ripe cherries, and Yavtukh, to revive his prestige as insurance agent, which had noticeably dwindled in the eyes of the Babylonians lately, had invited the Babylon activists in good time, supposedly for no other reason than to treat them to the ripened cherries. The guests settled around the pear tree in a circle, as was proper for a treat of dumplings. Yavtukh put a jug of sour cream in the circle (just out of the cellar, the jug misted over instantly), spread an embroidered *rushnik* towel on the grass, spilled out a heap of new pear-wood spoons without a single pock mark, and placed glazed earthenware plates before each guest. Deep inside, Yavtukh smiled contentedly — our

Babylon was really starting to enjoy life, after all. People had shoes and clothing and enough to eat; the lofts were bursting with grain; no one drew on the wheat stock of the collective farm garner; pigs were butchered; the wheat was ground at water mills; and this summer, another bumper crop was ripening around Babylon the likes of which no one had ever seen before. The credit for all this went to Varivon Tkachuk — the great manager who took care of the Babylonians. Yavtukh hurried to the gate to meet him and led him to the pear tree almost by the hand, which he had shunned previously because of the consumption. With the others, he didn't try to ingratiate himself, although most of them were his customers, that is, those who had insured their lives of their own free will as well as influential people, from the agent's point of view, of course. Apart from the one and other chairman (Lukian and Darinka had simply climbed over the wattle fence as his neighbors), there were also the Valakhs; both of the Pavlyuks with their wives (the third Pavlyuk brother, Roman, had fallen out with Yavtukh and didn't respond to his invitation this time either); Ruzia Dzhura; Nastia Opishna, the sister of Klavdia Opishna who must have been a general's wife by now, judging from her absence ever since the maneuvers; and Ruban's Zosia who still hadn't lost her hopes of ensnaring the widower Varivon Tkachuk, probably craving to be the wife of a chairman once more. And, of course, there was Fabian. What celebration could do without him?

Presently Prisia brought the first bowl of the famous Babylon dumplings made of white flour and with common cherries; namely common cherries, because dumplings with *lutovka* (a local variety of cherry) aren't quite as toothsome. "Help yourself,"

Prisia invited the guests. "I've got three sievfuls of them." Before they were thrown into boiling water the dumplings had to be left in the sieve for some time so they wouldn't fall apart in the water and then simply beg to travel from the bowl into the waiting guests' mouths. There are a lot of secrets to making good dumplings, and not every Babylon housewife is able to master this refined art. Although dumplings with cherries were considered a "sober" dish in Babylon, there was something to wet the guests' whistles with, since it was Sunday. The guests were sitting there pretty as pictures and talking nicely, seemingly about nothing, until Zosia went and blurted out:

"Does anyone of you know how wars are started?"

"What, what?" Varivon opened his eyes wide and stared at Zosia whose suntanned legs he had been admiring up to that moment.

"Well, how are wars started?" she said, confused.

"Big ones or little ones?" Fabian asked.

"I couldn't sleep all night because of the dream I had. I dreamed that my Anton and all of you were burying me, while I was there at my own funeral, watching everything alive and hearing you just like I am now. Varivon was making a speech about me and my team, saying I was the first to weed the sugar beets and the first to check on them, but I knew quite well that Ruzia's team was first, not mine, and I couldn't utter a sound. Then I woke up, got out of bed and went outside. The sky over Babylon was just turning gray, and it was so beautiful around you'd wish to live another hundred years. Somewhere, from the direction of Semivody, came a droning sound high up in the sky. It droned toward Pritske and then beyond it. Didn't any of you hear it?"

Prisia reappeared with the bowl again. "I did," she said. "I had just come out to relieve myself."

"Nobody is asking you what you went outdoors for," Yavtukh shamed her.

"What's wrong with what I said? It's a call of nature. Everybody goes outdoors."

"They came in waves. One wave, a second, third... so I wondered whether it was more maneuvers. Or was it a war? That's why I'm asking," Zosia said.

"All right, now I have something to say," Fabian grew animated and tore himself from the bowl with dumplings. "I heard them, too. I see poorly at night, but I hear well in the dark. I hear how my billy goat breathes under the workbench the whole night through. When he eats too much before he sleeps, he makes me get up in the middle of the night to chase him out of the room. This time when I chucked him out into the entrance hall, I heard a droning coming from the flue just like Zosia described it here. I ran outside. What the hell?"

"Well, what then?"

"It was droning, all right, damn it. Not from the direction of Semivody as Zosia says, but more likely from Koziv. The sounds came at intervals. In three waves, as a matter of fact. My heart turned cold at the thought: 'The Germans are coming.' I don't have a radio in my hut, so I got dressed, ran straight to Savka at the Village Soviet, and told him to turn on the radio. He did, but the radio was silent. No wonder. What radio broadcasts would you expect that late at night?"

"How come you don't have a radio?" Yavtukh flared up. "I've got two now. One's in the house and the other right here up in the pear tree. Prisia, turn on the pear tree over there!"

Prisia switched on the "pear tree" somewhere on the porch: what the guests heard were melodies and broadcasts about a country in weekend bliss.

"Great, isn't it?" Yavtukh was exceedingly joyful at the radio his children had installed in the pear tree. "It's bearing fruit and speaking... Ha-ha-ha. Smart as a whip, my boys are. They'll make Old Nick for you. Do you think all those poles and wires on the roof are there for nothing? They talked with Papanin * when he got stuck in the ice. Through Morse code, as they call it. Ships out on the ocean respond to their call. If anything had happened, my boys would surely know about it. All right, here's to peace! Our Babylon needs peace. Am I right, Varivon?"

"Exactly. We need at least another three years of peace. You surprise me, Fabian. How could you have thought such a thing?"

"What, about what, Varivon?"

"About the Germans."

"I'm still convinced that the Germans won't sit quiet for long. They've grabbed Europe, untied their hands themselves, and there's only one way left for them — this way. To the East. To us..."

"Comrade Sokolyuk!" Varivon said out of temper appealing to the chairman of the Village Soviet. "I won't tolerate such talk in my presence. I'll be forced to..." Hot-tempered man that he was, Varivon flared up and stalked off. Zosia got to her feet, caught up with him at the gate, and led him back to the bowl of dumplings.

Fabian apologized for having said something out of place and got to his feet with a glass in his hand. The glass trembled as he spoke at length about

* Papanin, Ivan (born 1894) — leader of the first Soviet scientific North Pole I Expedition in 1937-38 — Tr.

Varivon and how they had followed him as a real leader who was endowed with wisdom, an ardent heart, and a fine soul besides. As for the Germans not sitting and twiddling their thumbs no matter how much we held them down with our wheat, that was a fact, and of all people Varivon, as the leader, shouldn't hide that from the people but get them ready to oppose the Germans.

"What Germans do you have in mind?" Varivon switched over to an informal tone.

"The same Germans you know about... the nazis. Who else? It's them we'll have to... Don't you listen to what the kids are predicting?" Fabian fell silent.

"Well, out with it. What are they predicting? Speak up, why have you stopped?"

"As I said... they're predicting war... and very soon... The kids heard..."

"How do you know about it? How?!" Varivon went after him.

But Fabian could not explain it. He did not know how to explain it, so he kept his peace, spilling the liquor out of the glass. Varivon, small and lean, which made him look the more menacing, waited for the explanation.

"Oh no. I won't leave it at that. And you had the nerve to send that chair off as a present to the capital. You provocateur!" He got to his feet with a jerk and rushed off.

Zosia ran after him, while Fabian was hissed into complete silence. He sat down, without having drunk to the leader; the glass he had put down on the grass tipped over. Then Lukian Sokolyuk got up and told him severely:

"Why did you have to bring up those damned Germans. You should have eaten your dumplings and kept quiet. When will I ever manage to teach you

not to meddle in politics? Some philosopher! Let's go."

"That's how wars start," Fabian said, got up with a bitter smile on his lips, and trudged after Lukian into a little street leading to the Village Soviet. The other guests also got up and shuffled out of the farmyard, dissatisfied.

The music in the pear tree stopped abruptly, and right after the Kremlin chimes started to ring, Prisia came running out of the house with yet another bowlful of dumplings she already had forgotten the number of. Seeing only Yavtukh under the pear tree, she was completely lost. "Oh my God, where are the guests?" "Drop it! Drop it!" Yavtukh yelled for some reason, and Prisia, believing that misfortune was to strike just because of that bowl, dropped it to the ground, and it shattered to smithereens. "Oh what a fool, what a fool you are!" Yavtukh raved as he listened to the "pear tree." "Why did you have to break the bowl?" Prisia spit in disgust and burst out crying: it wasn't that easy to entertain the Babylon activists — for them it was only a treat of dumplings, while she had been on pins and needles since early morning trying to show her cooking skills to the best advantage.

On hearing the chimes, the guests scurried back to the pear tree. Prisia looked at them without comprehending in the least what had happened to the Babylon activists until an alarmed voice spoke from the radio in the tree: "Attention! Attention! This is Moscow speaking. All radio stations in the Soviet Union are transmitting..." The last to come running to the tree were Varivon and Zosia. In the pasture, the children's war games had come to an end.

A drone, unusual and hostile, carried from the sky again. Stealthily, lest she offend Varivon, Zosia

raised her head — high up, in groups of three, they flew by as on parade, yet it seemed they hovered over the world like huge axes barely drifting across the sky and casting their menacing reflections on Babylon. Zosia couldn't get their exact number; she always lost count. Meanwhile, Prisia was gathering up the fragments of the bowl; her boys ran around barefoot and might hurt themselves. The whole lot of them had left to play "war" so they wouldn't bother the guests, because Father had said that apart from their fellow villagers, some important agent from Hlynsk was to be present at the party. And here the kids came running home, all alive, half-naked, one looking very much like the other, and two hours earlier than they had been told to come, each looking into the numb faces under the pear tree, each searching for the important agent for whose sake they had been sent off to the pasture. No thanks, Daddy! If you're that smart, go and try to fight a war the whole day long in such blistering heat yourself... and with the Germans besides. Malva's Stashko, for one, almost got himself killed.

As Chavdar was leading his flight of bombers back to the base after his first combat mission, he was attacked, fell behind, and barely managed to reach the red-clover field with only one engine running. It happened at midday. The merciless heat made the air ring, and every living thing had taken refuge in the shade. The agronomist Zhurba was sleeping under a wagon, out of which his horse was eating a fresh mixture of hay and straw, when suddenly a huge airplane swept over the farmyard, and barely missing a knoll on the opposite side, glided over the field, on which Zhurba had been raising seed clover for the

past two years now. In the garden, Malva was digging potatoes for lunch. She threw aside her hoe and pail, shouted, "It's landed! It's landed!" and ran to the plane which had raised a gray train of dust over the field. Coming to his senses, Zhurba also ran that way. He had lived through the depressing moment when it seemed that the plane was falling on him. After they had run up to the plane, the pilots were already inspecting the machine, which was riddled by machine gun bullets in a number of places. There were three men. One of them, probably the senior in rank, apologized to the two civilians whose house he had noticed under the wing only at the most critical moment.

"Is the house still standing?" he wondered.

"Yes," Zhurba answered.

"What's the name of this village?" the senior officer asked, sizing up Malva.

"Green Mills." Then all of a sudden, Malva exclaimed: "Yegor! Is it really you, Yegor Chavdar?!"

"Yes, it's him. Major Chavdar."

Chavdar hadn't expected to meet Malva here of all people, and in such a homey attire besides. He looked with curiosity at her husband, about whom he had quite a different opinion when he first met him.

"That's my Fedir," Malva said, confused.

"I see, I see." Chavdar took off his intercom headset. His hair was yellow-white like the dodder in the clover that had stuck to his hair, which made Malva and Zhurba realize that this landing had not been an easy one for the major.

"Are you on a visit, or what?" Malva asked.

"I've come from the war, Malva," Chavdar replied calmly. "We had just dropped our load at Peremyshl and were returning to base when this mishap took place. There were only wheat fields around and no

other place to land. And here we see a red field... and you and your Fedir."

"Are maneuvers on again?" Malva asked.

"We were bombing the fascists..."

"You mean the Germans?"

"Yes, the Germans."

"Well, Fedir, what did I tell you?"

"Stop! Stop!" Fedir yelled suddenly and rushed away to head off the crowd advancing this way from the village. "Have you gone blind, or what? This is seed clover. Seed clover!"

Some by foot, others on bicycles, and still others on occasional saddleless horses came tearing to the plane. Everyone thought this was another romantic encounter Green Mills still remembered from the last maneuvers. An airplane had also landed then and also on a clover field, but on the other side of the railroad. Presently Aristarkh came running up with his two daughters. He was a bit late, since he had been making jam of green plums in his orchard and still smelled of the plums and the orchard smoke.

"Whose plane is this?"

"It's our plane."

"Has anything urgent happened?"

"Urgent, sure... War," Zhurba said. Only then did he realize the meaning of the word when he saw how it had struck Aristarkh.

"How come? Why don't I know anything about it? Why is Hlynsk keeping silent? Let's go!" This time he went to the plane not at a run, but in a measured, resolute tread.

He greeted the crew and asked for their documents.

"I know them," Malva said.

"You do, but I don't. This is a serious matter."

Chavdar was about to unbutton his overalls to take out the documents when two airplanes appeared

simultaneously over the field as if someone had catapulted them at one and the same time. They came from the direction of the railroad. Flying nose to nose, wing to wing, and so low it looked as if they also wanted to land in the field, but a minute later they opened fire on the airplane and the crowd. Chavdar managed only to yell "Yasha" as he dropped to the ground, while Yasha, apparently a radio operator-gunner, was at his station in an instant, and as soon as the planes came back for another attack, his guns spat fire. One of the fighters shuddered in the air, rose steeply, spurted smoke, and came tumbling down into the peat bog, where it exploded. The second fighter disappeared in a little speck beyond the horizon. When Malva turned to Chavdar, he was still alive, pointing at his chest with a pale finger: "They're here, here... under the overalls... Yasha's done well... A fine fellow!"

Fabian returned from Hlynsk invested with high powers over Babylon, since because of his age and poor eyesight, he was exempt from mobilization and had revealed foresightedness. What might also have weighed in the balance was the famous chair which the authorities in Hlynsk knew about. So at this time of trial, he replaced both Varivon, who concealed his illness and volunteered for frontline service with the first call-up, and Lukian Sokolyuk, who was appointed senior drover and took all the cattle from the district to the east, having handed the seal of the Village Soviet along with all the property, lands and the unprecedented harvests they were to yield over to Fabian beforehand.

The new chairman was horribly depressed not to have received orders to start the harvest. The wheat

stood in a solid, ringing wall, while the rye had turned a rich yellow and was whispering quietly. Fabian was also quiet as he wept at the sight, because for a peasant there is nothing more horrible than to see and realize that a sickle-ripe grain crop was doomed. If the front line didn't stop moving east, he'd get orders from Hlynsk to burn the crop, and then he'd come with his most trusted men, and the horrible blaze of burning grain would be seared into his memory to the end of his days. Subconsciously, he was also preparing to burn himself in the grain.

Savka Chibis was his executive, as he had been with all previous chairmen, but every morning he had to wake him and lead him to the office, because Levko Khorobry saw poorly now, having broken his spectacles on a cement walk in Hlynsk. "Now I'm like Homer," he used to say sadly. Savka asked if Homer was a German, but upon learning that he was a Greek and a great one besides, Savka served Fabian the more loyally as a great man. He laundered his shirts, looked after his appearance, polished his boots, ordered lunches for him and, of course, for himself as well, and not just anywhere but from those homes where the housewives responded to such requests wholeheartedly. The Village Soviet and collective farm, for their part, liberally repaid the conscientious citizens for these not so burdensome services by giving away flour, honey, sugar, and even kerosene — in a word, everything that could be distributed before it fell into the hands of the enemy. Fabian was overly concerned for Varivon's children: had Varivon been here now he would have seen for himself that at such a hard time, a better chairman than Levko Khorobry couldn't have been wished for. He successfully carried out all the stages of the mobilization, chucking Yavtukh out of the agency in

the process. Of the young women and teenagers, he organized such an efficient unit for spotting the enemy that the nazis did not turn up even in small groups until the front line approached Babylon.

He ruled over Babylon honestly and wisely, but not as long as was predicted by Comrade Valigurov who chose him for this office. The famous chair might have really been a decisive factor in this choice, although Fabian had a strictly personal opinion on that point and never mentioned the chair in the presence of others so as not to bring any harm either to himself or Babylon by chance.

CHAPTER 6

Like the maneuvers, the real attack on Babylon lasted for seven days and nights. Our troops were under the command of General Ponedelnik. From time to time, he left his headquarters at the school, and rode on horseback to the Abyssinian hills with a number of generals and orderlies. From there he took personal command of the infantry counterattacks which kept hurling the Germans back beyond Semivody. The white palace at Semivody, which quartered the workers of the local state farm, was now but a framework of smoke-blackened brick that stood out menacingly against the skyline at every sunset. Yavtukh and his sons had a family trench on the Abyssinian hills. Initially with the home guard, he had been transferred to the regular army and was now with the 2nd Company of the 3rd Battalion made up of cavalymen and infantry of the 44th Regiment under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Sherengovy who had taken part in the maneuvers as a lieutenant and aide-de-camp to commander Krivoruchko. Every

night, Yavtukh sent one of his sons home for bread and milk. One pitcher of milk the Holiys drank themselves, and the other they carried to Sherengovy's command post so he could treat General Ponedelnik to the milk. Upon learning about the Holiy father and sons team from Sherengovy, Ponedelnik paid their trench a call one night, talked with Yavtukh, highly commending him for his patriotism, and asked him about the maneuvers of 1935, Corps Commander Krivoruchko, and about the airborne landing forces which had seized Babylon during the maneuvers. Krivoruchko had "destroyed" several such landing forces then, but that time, the tanks had approached from the direction of Hlynsk, forced the Chebrets River, and Babylon fell on the seventh day. Then everything had ended in a big party in the pasture; in the center of Babylon, it was continued around tables laden with meat and drink; there was an orchestra playing, and the wooden platform built for the dancing remained a favorite recreation ground for the Babylonians long after until its boards finally rotted. From the conversation, Yavtukh realized that the commander was apprehensive about an enemy airborne landing in the rear somewhere around Pritske, from which direction fresh forces were moving in by foot to occupy a second line of defense on the eastern bank of the Chebrets. Long-range batteries were getting stuck in Pritske, and their fire was adjusted by spotters from the Babylon windmills which commanded an enormous panoramic view reaching to Koziv in the north and to Hlynsk in the south. Every time the cannonade subsided, Yavtukh sent one of his sons to crawl to the very top of Abyssinia where Malva's one-*dessiatine* plot of land had once been, to look out at Babylon from there. The purpose was to check on their house.

“It’s still standing!” the scout would rejoice.

After learning that an imposing mustachioed cavalry sergeant-major from the quartermasters company was billeted in his house, Yavtukh became alarmed and lost heart noticeably, because he knew Prisia’s irresistible fancy for anything in uniform, and so three or four days later he started reminding her of himself in letters from the front line, in which, by the way, he dropped hints about the sergeant-major (“What sort of a mustachioed character do you have there?”). He appealed to Prisia to preserve the honor of their home and not barter her own conscience for a sergeant-major’s tabs, because he, Yavtukh, might return from the war a general (that’s exactly what he wrote); he had already gone into attack three times, had a scratch on his left shin, and had recently made the acquaintance of the commander. Each letter (there were three of them, in all) had one and the same ending: “With frontline greetings! Yours to the grave, Yavtukh!” The sender’s address was, of course, “Abyssinian Hills.” The letters were delivered every time by one and the same messenger—Yaremko, the middle son, who handed them over to the sergeant-major who, in turn, read them out aloud to Prisia by the light of a wick lamp with the curtains drawn across the windows. Yaremko, though, didn’t linger for a minute: he put the milk and bread into the basket, and rushed back off to the front line. The password was changed every two hours, and without it he couldn’t reach the Abyssinian hills, or even get out of Babylon. Once Yaremko was in such a hurry, he forgot his rifle, leaving it standing in a corner by the oven fork. In the morning, Prisia saw it and asked the sergeant-major who was shaving in front of a mirror by the window:

“Ksan Ksanich *, is that yours?”

He inspected the rifle and checked the bolt — the rifle wasn't cleaned.

“Your boy forgot it. And that means court-martial, ma'am.”

At that, Prisia froze by the stove. Presently howitzers spoke in Pritske, and Babylon shook and trembled as if it had the ague. The shells howled like dogs at a fire, but the sergeant-major continued shaving himself, unperturbed, not cutting a single hair off his dashing mustache. Frightened out of her wits by the cannonade, Prisia hid in a corner and piled cushions all around herself, which made the sergeant smile into the mirror.

The tank attack was anticipated the whole day through. Bundles of tied grenades and bottles with flammable liquid were prepared, and 45 mm guns were moved ahead to shoot over open sights if the tanks appeared. The tank isn't such a frightful thing, Yavtukh lectured his sons. The main thing was not to get under its tracks and not to shove your chest at its guns. Lie in the trench and wait till the brute shows its tail. Then get up and hurl the bottle right on its back, or better yet, into its damned side under the tracks. He carried on as if he had been destroying tanks all his life. Indeed, the sons had never seen their father such a hero before, especially after he had killed a nazi soldier that day. The smell of burned grain stood in the air, whirlwinds of black smoke swirled in the fire, and right before lunch, the nazis launched a psychological attack on Denikin Ditch. They advanced to the music of a band behind a standard with a black cross followed by lines of

* Abbreviated colloquial form of address for the name and patronymic Olexandr Olexandrovich — Tr.

submachine gunners who raked our troops in the ditch with heavy fire. The fainthearted faltered and retreated over the top one by one, seeking rescue in their feet. Then Sherengovy emerged from his command post and led the regiment in a counter-attack. The nazis were pushed into the burning wheat fields along with the orchestra and standard. Hand-to-hand fighting ensued. Yavtukh bayoneted a nazi whose gun had run out of ammunition. Yavtukh selected him out of the pack when he had gone over the top at the outset of the attack. Our defenders had no helmets, so they had to take them from the dead men, and now seven helmets glimmered in the sun in Yavtukh's trench. The Germans sent out orderlies with stretchers to pick up the dead and wounded. Sherengovy ordered his men not to hinder them. When the German he had run through was put on a stretcher, Yavtukh involuntarily glanced at the bayonet fixed to his rifle. "Back in nineteen fourteen, I stabbed over a thousand of them." Yaremko smiled at his father's corker and left for the field kitchen with a pail to get gruel. At lunch time hostilities were halted, and the Germans were punctual in this respect. After lunch, Yavtukh took a nap, from which he was roused by the sound of the 45 mm guns. The tanks advanced with the infantry in their wake. The guns fired at them, but registered no hits. "That's the end of us," Yavtukh said. As soon as the tanks crossed a prefixed line and were ready to burst into the attack, all three of our batteries opened fire on the leading tanks, three of which caught fire like candles. Then a number of tanks stopped, and the column started to turn back. From beyond Pritske, field guns went into action, but their shells missed the targets, bursting to the left and right of the tanks. Yavtukh cursed the gunners for the waste of ammo.

Before sunset he perched himself on an ammo box and wrote Prisia a letter, not knowing it would be his last one.

But the reader must not be misled into thinking that Yavtukh was killed. For him no bullet had as yet been cast at the arsenals of this menacing world, although no one, Yavtukh included, was likely to be charmed against sudden death. The command post was informed that the Germans had landed a large force of paratroopers in the rear of Babylon's defenses, seized Hlynsk, and now threatened the army under Ponedelnik with encirclement. For the first time the field kitchen didn't bring the troops supper. As soon as the sun set, the order for retreat was passed on from trench to trench. Everything that could move spilled out onto the highway. Hundreds of wagons, horse teams pulling guns, and the infantry of Sherengovy passed through Babylon in what looked like an endless stream. Assigned now to the 3rd Company, Yavtukh could not absent himself without the permission of the company commander, a young regular army lieutenant with a bandaged head. To Yavtukh's request to be permitted to run to his house, the lieutenant replied flatly:

"Private Holiy, you're not the only one who wants to go home. My father and mother live in Pritske, but I don't intend dropping in to see them."

"In Pritske?" Yavtukh asked, surprised.

"When we pass through, I'll show you my house."

As they marched through Pritske, the lieutenant really showed Yavtukh the house, but no matter how hard Yavtukh tried to persuade him to go and see his old folks for a minute at least, Soroka (as his name was) did not heed Holiy, but passed his own house with a proud mien. This made Yavtukh realize that the lieutenant was not from Pritske and had

invented this legend specially for him. In the morning, during an air attack of Messerschmitts, the lieutenant was killed, and Yavtukh buried him by the roadside, taking his map case and revolver with belt. Morally, he was ready to take command of the company and even had moved way up front, but Sherengovy sent a political instructor to the company. Yavtukh remembered him from the hand-to-hand fighting: he was a huge man and had hurled a German officer over his head like a pitchforked sheaf. Yavtukh wanted madly to be a company commander. He needed that rank not so much for himself as for his sons and Prisia and for Babylon, of course. How beautiful it sounded: company commander!

When he was issuing his final instructions, Markian Sevastianovich Valigurov told Malva that she was staying behind not alone but with a reliable "team" picked by the District Party Committee in case she found herself in enemy-held territory, which could happen that very night (the western part of the district had fallen to the nazis, and Valigurov had a telephone conversation with a German colonel who, as the post office assured, was phoning from Green Mills). Malva was to accept things as they came, keep a low profile in her native Babylon (with which they had already lost telephone contact), and wait for the signal from the underground center which knew her and all the others whom the District Party Committee had left here in Hlynsk District. Valigurov would also have stayed here if he hadn't been known to one and all from the days when he worked at a plant in Zhurbiv, first as a washer and then as leader of the plant's Party organization. He wanted to be inducted for active service, and after the war, if he stayed alive, he would come back here to his beloved

Valigurov Country. At the sound of the name, an unintentional smile flickered across his lips. The name stuck to Hlynsk District once Kossior started the ball rolling. One day during harvest time when he was returning from Zernograd to the capital, he stopped in Hlynsk and dropped in at the District Party Committee, where he didn't find a single soul except the cleaning woman Auntie Palagna — the whole committee was in the field harvesting. On the wall hung a huge map of the district. The personal creation of Klim Sinitsya, it was more like the map of a country, not a district. Comrade Kossior inspected it for a long time, then he took a stool, got on it, and wrote in red pencil across the whole map from east to west: Valigurov Country. The map stayed on the wall for some time in case Kossior paid another visit, but he did not come anymore, and eventually, the map disappeared as well. But the name and the idea it stood for remained. What the author of the legend had in mind remains unknown. It was lunch time just then and a devilishly hot day; perhaps the guest was simply cross at not having been met and treated to a Hlynsk meal which he had every reason to anticipate, the more so since he had heard quite a lot about Hlynsk cooking from Comrade Chubar who loved these parts. No one can guess beforehand the magical quality of a particular term, but Valigurov Country proved a very convenient notion not only for the sake of criticizing but also for praising. In the regional center of Zernograd, it became a fad to use this term even from the rostrum at meetings. For example, if the people in some district contrived to butcher hogs without delivering the necessary quantity of hides to the state, the infringers of the law were shamed: "Do you expect Valigurov Country to deliver the hides for you, or what?" Valigurov

personally made sure the law was enforced, although from childhood on, he himself had loved pork fat on the skin singed with straw by all means. But to do him justice, his strict abidance by the law had made him forget the taste of real fatback Hlynsk style, and like everybody else, he ate his fatback Valigurov style (i. e., without the skin).

He was just going on twenty-three when he was promoted to First in place of Klim Sinitsya. Sinitsya was transferred to Zernograd where his career would have ended if it hadn't been for Valigurov. Once in the District Party Committee, the young Secretary collected the best references on his predecessor he could get, and although this might have been a belated acknowledgment of Sinitsya's merits, the very fact of such magnanimity was nonetheless appreciated in Zernograd as a Valigurov-style act in the finest sense of that notion. In the region, Valigurov himself and the Valigurov style became ever more synonymous with selflessness, patriotism, innovation, and fame for that matter. For it was precisely here that the first redeveloped villages appeared, and the mass movement to harvest no less than five tons of sugar beet per hectare won Hlynsk District first place in the Republic. Valigurov villages, Valigurov sugar beets, Valigurov scope. At the age of twenty-six, Valigurov was awarded the Order of the Badge of Honor that had just been instituted, and this was no mean tribute for everything achieved since that mysterious generalization was made by a great man perhaps as a joke or as a misjudgment in a moment of displeasure. Valigurov could now be glad he had not lacked the common sense to resign himself to fate and tolerate more than one instance of ridicule before real fame for himself and his district reached him.

Everything had to be forsaken now. The wheat was just filling out, the rollers Valigurov had stored up throughout the villages stood there without any tractors, and horse-drawn rollers would be of no use in such dense wheat stands. The sugar beets burst into riotous growth after the second fertilization. When Valigurov visited one of the plantations, the sight of the rich crop took his breath away. It should have been plowed under lest it fall into the enemy's hands, but the idea had entered his mind too late. "So we leave you behind, Malva. You must destroy everything when harvest time comes around. See to it that the wheat is set on fire. That's not a very complicated thing to do: one match — and the whole field's ablaze; and let the beets rot. The enemy mustn't reap the fruits of our labor."

He spoke with a quiet ardor, mischief flickering in his eyes. In the yard, the office car was standing ready. Several times the chauffeur Trokhim came running in and glanced over to remind Valigurov it was time to leave. In the meantime, Auntie Palagna was taking down the cream-colored curtains which she had to return to the District Committee later on. She did her work in such an unhurried and thorough way, it might have seemed the office was simply being moved to the new premises which stood unfinished across the street right above the Southern Bug River. When Malva emerged from the building of the District Party Committee, Hlynsk was empty, without a single light in any of the windows, without a single living soul, as if everything had died out. From somewhere beyond the river, the dogs howled. The car drove out of the yard and passed Malva. Apart from Valigurov and the chauffeur, there were another two occupants, probably also workers from

the committee. It was about three o'clock in the morning. The Germans entered Hlynsk at dawn.

Malva still couldn't rid herself of the thought that Valigurov had failed to get out of Hlynsk, or perhaps he hadn't intended to leave it in the first place but remained behind with the underground.

At dawn, the Germans were met by the philosopher and his billy goat. He believed that a victor, whoever he might be, must be met, at least for the sake of getting a feel for who it is you have to deal with. Instead of the traditional bread and salt of welcome which is presented on an embroidered *rushnik* towel, the philosopher brought along the billy goat to mock at the victors. In the morning mist, Babylon looked like a big multi-tier city. The column stopped; a general was standing in an open staff car looking at Babylon through a spyglass.

"*Ist das Babylon?*" Is this Babylon? he asked, taking the spyglass from his eyes.

"Yes, it is," the philosopher confirmed.

"*Vorwärts!*" Forward! The general pointed to his troops, probably identifying himself at that moment with Alexander the Great when he halted before Babylon at the head of his cohorts.

It might have been Manstein or some field marshal, but whoever he was he forgot about the philosopher and was completely engrossed in looking at his column. Fabian would see him once more in the spring of nineteen forty-four. He would walk through a fire-ravaged Babylon in front of a pathetic routed troop of foot soldiers, yet with the mace of a field marshal which he held level with his Aryan nose. Fabian would recognize him, as thousands of boots squelched in the spring mire behind their field marshal, but the glitter of the diamond on his mace

would lose all meaning to them, and the field marshal himself would remind them of an idol whom the gods of war had toppled. He would remember the philosopher. The field marshal would stop for a moment, recognize the billy goat, probably from the black patch on its left shoulder, and seemingly recalling something, he would ask:

“Is this Babylon?”

“Yes, it is,” the philosopher would reply, although there wouldn’t be any Babylon left — only charred ruins and black solitary chimneys where family hearths had been.

That was all he had achieved in this country — the destruction of Babylon. “*Aufwiedersehn!*” he would say to the philosopher, and raising the mace to the level of his nose, he would continue kneading the mire in front of his pathetic troops. Later on, Fabian learned from our soldiers that this was Manstein himself who had been defeated on the Taurian steppes. The remnants of his army were being pursued by Smalko’s battalion with several guns drawn by teams of three pairs of horses to each gun. On the Abyssinian hills, the guns would probe for the weak spots in Manstein’s troops and chase them onto the sticky Podolian black soil of what had once been the river bed of the Sarmatian basin.

But so far, the enemy was pushing on. Millions of wheels assembled from almost all parts of Europe into a horrible machine of death rolled on and on. Yavtukh and his sons would have to bring this machine to a halt somewhere in the steppes. The night before, he nonetheless contrived to get to Fabian’s house for a moment, roused him from sleep, and passed on a letter for Prisia. “I’m going on to fight, Fabian,” he said. The philosopher hid the letter in his pocket and would pass it on one of these days,

if he didn't forget about it. Presently, the smoking field kitchens of the Germans passed before him. It seems they have their breakfast like any other people, the philosopher thought.

"*Fleisch. Hier ist Fleisch für die Suppe!*" the cooks shouted at the sight of the goat. Meat. Here's meat for the soup!

A number of soldiers jumped down from the truck, threw the billy goat to the ground, and one of them had already raised a hewer to cut the creature's throat when the philosopher resolutely went up to the butcher.

"*Herr! Herr!* That's my friend! He's not a billy goat! That's my friend. *Kamerad! Kamerad!*"

"*Was, was?*" asked the butcher. What, what?

"He's almost like a human being."

A German from Pomerania who knew Polish interpreted to his mates what was being said. They roared with laughter, let the animal go, and clambered back onto the truck. The billy goat got to his feet and shook himself down, trembling all over — the poor critter realized that he had been within a hairbreadth of death.

They pushed on night and day for two weeks in a row. Over Babylon hovered the rusty haze of dust, grief, and something else unfamiliar, perhaps the heady vapors of war which poisoned Babylon. The dogs looked sadly from their kennels at the strangers; they didn't bark at them, but looked with a melancholy in their eyes that comes after an earthquake. The hens hid in the weeds, not betraying their presence in any way; at night there were no cocks' crows — not the first nor the third — though they were so common before and so essential for people now. Only the Babylon sparrows didn't seem to notice any changes whatsoever as they bathed in the dust

ground by a million wheels in the pasture. The sparrows didn't care what Babylon they lived in. The crucified Nazarene had been covered with dust and aged a thousand years.

Savka Chibis sat by the door of the Village Soviet. Every night he had different lodgers arriving in their nickel-plated *Wagen*, and he was afraid they'd burn the building down. He was actually worried not so much about the structure itself as about the papers he had stowed into the loft till better times. He believed that if the papers were to perish, there would be no reason for Babylon to exist any longer, for the papers registered its entire history.

PART III

CHAPTER 1

Babylon in the early autumn of 1941 probably differed little from Babylon in the autumn of 1241 when the Mongol Khan halted before it as he led his hordes to Europe. It was Indian summer then just as it was now. The Khan's tent of Chinese tribute silk resembled a gigantic dragon clinging to the hill where the windmills stood now. The Khan expected to find a large city here — Scythian Babylon (its Mesopotamian counterpart had been lying in ruins for several centuries by that time) surrounded by walls and ramparts full of people and riches. He had pulled up battering rams and ballista to catapult the Greek fire stolen from Constantinople in its day, when he saw an ordinary steppe settlement whose name the Khan's scholars had come across in the chronicles about Darius's war with the Scythians. The great Khan still believed he was dealing with those very same Scythians. He sent out his scouts to look for their military camp in the boundless steppes, but failing to find any Scythians in the end, he ordered the empty settlement which had misled him by its high-sounding name razed to the ground. The local steppe differed from the Mongolian one perhaps only in the type of grasses into which the Mongolian ponies disappeared from sight. The Khan was supposed to have boasted that after vanquishing Europe, he would return to this place and found his new capital here. But he was not destined to return, and for several centuries, only the Crimean Tatars

kept falling on Babylon and taking away beautiful Slavic bondsmaidens.

Seven centuries later, history seemed to have repeated itself, but this time, the invaders came from the opposite direction. For almost two weeks, day and night in endless columns resembling an immense python slithering over the knolls, a new horde plodded through Babylon, probably believing that precisely here in dust-choked Babylon was the beginning of Asia, contrary to the military maps and all established notions about the world. "Babylon! Babylon!" the men in the passing enemy columns exclaimed in surprise as they read the inscription on the road sign made well beforehand in Berlin. The soldiers grew excited at this word the Christians among them knew from the Bible, while the atheists did not disillusion the gullible, for, after all, those who had been sent off to conquer the world would have to come across the biblical Babylon sooner or later.

In the meantime, *Gebietskommissar* Bruno Messmer who had arrived in Hlynsk in the wake of the troops, wrote a private letter to Alfred Rosenberg, Reich Minister of the Occupied Eastern Territories, that in his region there was an interesting settlement called Babylon. It stood on a steppe of rich black earth it would be hard to find the likes of anywhere in Europe; two little rivers — the Chebrets and the Vesela Bokovenka — wash it, both of which could be easily linked with the Southern Bug and made navigable. In Hlynsk, the land was far worse; the trees didn't grow well, let alone the wheat, and that was why Messmer asked permission to transfer the administrative center of his *Gebiet* to Babylon. He wanted to build an exclusively Aryan city there, expelling its present population beforehand. Bruno Messmer was formerly an architect who had taken

part in the designing of the Olympic complex in Berlin for the 1936 Olympic Games, so now he sent in his first sketches on Whatman of the future Babylon. Messmer visited Babylon many a time, sat down on a carpet spread out for him on the wormwood, and referred the buildings on his Whatman to the hills and rivers of Babylon. Along the canal linking Vesela Bokovenka to the Chebrets, he put an embankment, developing it with three-storey villas that had fine open galleries which were to serve as the upper part of the embankment. Then he dealt with the knolls, spanning them with bridges and putting little one-storey cottages on them. Sometimes he stayed on his carpet longer than usual, and then his guards radioed Hlynsk, from where Varya Shatrova arrived in a van with lunch for Messmer. Varya was ashamed of making those trips, or perhaps she feared the Babylonians' condemnation, and that's why as soon as she served him his lunch, she withdrew into the Radenkys' windmill (which had survived the best) and hid there, watching out of the upper window until he left. As a rule, these *plein-air* outings, as Messmer called them, took place on Sundays when the ground blazed with warmth, while the dust-choked and ravaged Babylon was slowly returning to its habitual course of life.

On November 5, 1937, Hitler had let his generals in on his plans for foreign conquest. He started by saying that the lands had always belonged to someone. Those who wanted to seize them would invariably run into the owners. So they would just have to take their chances in a war. And now that very land spread before Bruno Messmer, millions of hectares as far as the eye could see. This steppe had been seen by King Darius of Persia; the Mongol Khan had grazed his herds as he prepared for his attack on

Europe, and now he, Bruno Messmer, was here. A poor Berlin architect who had lived with almost no commissions after the Olympic Village, he could watch this land's recent owners going about their affairs in a leisurely, typically Slavic way. They threshed with flails on threshing floors or in barns, winnowed grain in barely audible flutters, and drew water from their wells with sweeps. They did everything unhurriedly, probably as they had always done: as if they had an eternity ahead of them. In the morning and toward the evening, they stoked their stoves, and then hundreds of chimneys on the knolls came to life in a single impulse as if they were competing as to which could send its smoke higher; they often had their lunch under pear trees, loved holidays, and, dressed in their holiday best, visited one another with an air of respect, not taking along anything for the hosts, as was the German custom; at times they sang sad songs without a single male voice; sometimes quarrels flared up among them, and then they seemed to turn into a different people altogether; in an instant their unhurried language became so impetuous and merged into such a single torrent of sounds, one word seemed to carry over Babylon — one incredibly long word that was undoubtedly unknown in any tongue, let alone in German which Messmer considered the ideal language. These torrents of words were accompanied by expressive gestures which, as a rule, were identical in the case of both contending parties. The two female neighbors, each staying within her own territory, first waved her hands vigorously, contriving to cram hundreds of derisive gestures with the fingers into the space of a minute. When this didn't seem enough for the two women, they turned their rumps on each other. But more often than not, the quarrels

stopped in the middle and rarely reached that wonderful culmination he had once observed while lounging on the carpet. All this proved that the people had not ceased living their customary lives in a manner that seemed to suggest that the land, Babylon itself, and the sky over it, enveloped by their smoke every evening, would continue to belong to them as it had throughout all the centuries and even millenia, and not to some German lolling on a carpet. Eventually the Babylonians stopped paying attention to him altogether, as they were all preoccupied with their eternal worldly affairs, and, moreover, some of the rogues freely scampered behind their barns, and turning their bared rumps to the Herr Gebiets, as he was called for short, fell there into such blissful reverie that Messmer spoiled several Whatmans in the interim. But there was one Babylonian pair that got on his nerves particularly. Sometime around midday, but with almost German punctuality, the pair left their tumbledown hovel without closing the door behind them, and decorously stalked through the twisted streets of Babylon. As the reader might have guessed, this was our Fabian and his billy goat going to lunch at somebody's house. Their gait betrayed such serenity and independence it might have seemed outwardly that it wasn't hunger chasing them from their bare cupboards, for they looked as if they were going to a banquet at the very least. The billy goat walked in front of his master as if he were underscoring his gentility thereby. That's probably how a sage with his staff and, invariably, a billy goat, had walked through ancient Babylon, Messmer thought. But the truth was, this sage had spectacles, which a Babylonian couldn't have had, and Messmer was glad at heart for his compatriots for this most humane invention of mankind — eye-

glasses. Anyway, the itinerant pair intrigued Messmer so much he ordered a soldier from his guard to bring the two Babylonians to him at the windmills.

Fabian was lunching at the Skoromnys just then. After the borshch he was about to get down to the dumplings with plums, when two soldiers with daggers at their belts appeared on the threshold, disrupting the fine meal. They explained to him with gestures that the *Herr Gebietskommissar* had willed that he and his billy goat go up to the windmills. Fabian accepted the invitation matter-of-factly, as if it had been long overdue. When he arrived at his destination, he bowed with reserve to the *Herr Gebietskommissar* who remained lying on the carpet.

"Friedrich!" Messmer called.

Hobbling out of the Radenkys' windmill there came Friedrich Schwarz, the Austrian from Hlynsk, who had been the manager of the district funeral parlor before the war and had enticed away Fabian's customers, thereby condemning the Babylon coffin maker to semi-starvation. Schwarz was an interpreter and slept his fill in the windmill while Messmer studied this mysterious people.

"Is that you, Schwarz?" Fabian was overtly surprised, not expecting to see him, of all people here.

"Yes, my friend. I've seen you many a time, and I've noticed that the war hasn't changed your life much."

"It depends, Comrade... beg your pardon, Herr Schwarz. So you didn't go east either, I see?"

"It's because of my foot," Schwarz replied curtly, as Messmer started to speak.

Schwarz interpreted:

"He wants to know what you are. I'll tell him you're a coffin maker. The Babylonian coffin maker."

Messmer asked him to repeat what he had said and laughed, adding that the man looked more like an ancient philosopher.

"Tell him that I am really the Babylonian philosopher Fabian."

"Fabian?!" Messmer was surprised at the name.

"The *Herr Gebietskommissar* asks where you got such a fine name."

"From the billy goat. Not this one, though. This one is an utter dunderhead. But his father was remarkable for his exceptional intellect; he died on the swing many years ago. In short, he committed suicide, something only an intelligent creature can do. For everything that is intelligent, there comes a time to think about its end. Plato dwelt on that wonderfully in his *Phaedrus*, if the Herr has read *Phaedrus*."

"Yes, the *Herr Gebietskommissar* has read *Phaedrus*, but Plato's *Symposium* is more to his liking. The *Herr Gebietskommissar* asks what university Fabian graduated from."

"The University of Babylon," the philosopher replied, smiling. "And what schooling has the Herr Gebiets had?"

"He is an architect. He wants to build a large city here. He likes the knolls, rivers and land very much. The *Herr Gebietskommissar* wants to know the background of this settlement. When and why was it called Babylon?"

"Before us, Scythians used to live here. They were a great, martial people. They had wonderful sturdy horses which they grazed in the steppes. And they invented the wheel which made it possible for them to control enormous territories. They could easily reach the remotest kingdoms to extort tributes from them, and then they returned here. The Egyptian Pharaoh had to pay them when their horses stepped

onto his soil. Several times, they also levied tribute on the Babylon Kingdom. The Scythians ruled Asia for twenty-eight years running until the King of Media had all of their chieftains slain."

"The *Herr Gebietskommissar* is interested to know how the Medians managed that?"

"He invited them to a banquet in his capital city, and when the chieftains were drunk, he had them slain. This marked the end of Scythian rule in Asia. So they returned to their native land and probably founded the present Babylon which, in the end, was not destined to become Greater Babylon: the Scythians didn't have large cities, since they were cattle breeders and grain growers; the ancient Greeks wrote a lot about Scythian grain."

"The Herr asks where the Scythians disappeared to."

"They didn't disappear anywhere. We are the Scythians... grain growers just as before. But we probably mixed with other peoples driven here by fate. And who didn't come here over the centuries! The Goths came here too in the distant past. The Herr has probably heard about the death of Alaric, the King of the Goths. But Babylon still stands. Tell him precisely that, Herr Schwarz."

"The Herr asks what happened to Babylon next."

"Next? Nothing out of the ordinary. On this very small hill where your Herr now lies..."

"My?" Schwarz took offense. "He's just as much yours as he is mine."

"Well then, on this very same hill we are now, and surely it must have been higher then, the Persian King Darius stood with his armies. It was from just this hill that Darius wanted to engage the Scythians in a decisive battle on the plain down there in front of Babylon. Before that, he had pursued them over

the boundless steppes, but the Scythians, with their horses and wagons, easily evaded the Persians. At long last the Scythians halted here and camped before the Persians. They already knew how to make fortifications out of wagons, placing several rows of them in a circle. This tactic was adopted by the Cossacks later on. Does the Herr Gebiets know anything about the Cossacks?"

Schwarz interpreted the question. Yes, Messmer knew about the Zaporozhian Sich. He had read Beauplan, and had even brought the book with him. Fabian confessed that he hadn't read Beauplan, which tickled the pride of the German pleasantly. The philosopher returned to the Scythian wagon forts, although this might have been his own invention. But Messmer interrupted him again. Before the Cossacks, wagons were used in this way by the Taborites of Jan Ziska. It was odd that the Babylon philosopher didn't know about the one-eyed Slavic general whom the Germans had defeated in the High Tatras.

"After surrounding themselves with the wagons, the Scythians kept bonfires going the whole night through, feeding them with goats, sheep, cows and even horses. The Persians were half-starving, each soldier receiving a handful of uncooked millet a day as rations, so the smell of the Scythian fires drove them crazy. Do you keep up with the interpreting, Herr Schwarz?"

"Oh yes, and I've had my lunch. I'm interpreting everything you say. Besides, it's interesting for me, too. One of these days I'll tell you about my beautiful Austria."

"When at dawn, King Darius ordered his men, who hadn't had a wink of sleep because of those fires, to attack the Scythians, the Persians found only warm ashes and the charred remains of animals in the

camp. The Scythians had disappeared like the midday heat hazes disappear in these parts. You follow them, but they run away from you. The Scythians lured Darius far inland to the woods and swamps to destroy the Persians there..."

"I daren't interpret that..."

"As you like, Herr Schwarz, but that's what happened and what will happen. On the Bosphorus, the Persians had a ferry line which the Greeks had built for them. The old generals persuaded Darius to leave this strange country as quickly as possible and return to the Bosphorus. Darius lost his way in the steppes and couldn't get his bearings for a long time. But the Greeks thought he was returning in victory and were afraid to destroy the ferry line, for which mistake they paid dearly later on. That very same Bosphorus was crossed by Xerxes when he attacked the Greeks. The Herr Gebiets must have heard of the Battle at Thermopylae?"

Oh yes, Bruno Messmer read the epitaph in German.

"But Babylon still stands..." Fabian pointed at the cluster of houses on the knolls. "Over there's my house, too. The one on the edge. A lousy hovel, to tell you the truth, but it was insured, and now the insurance has gone to the dogs. Yavtukh didn't have time to set it on fire, so now the devil himself won't set it ablaze."

"The Herr asks whose King this Yavtukh was?"

"King?" Fabian laughed, catching Herr Messmer in his outrageous incompetence. "He was just an insurance agent in Babylon. That's his house with the new porch way over there. He set the houses on fire himself and then paid out the insurance on them. If it hadn't been for the war, he'd have built a new Babylon on the insurance payoffs by and by."

"The *Herr Gebietskommissar* says it would be good to have such an agent for a village headman. Is he a communist, this Yavtukh?"

"No, but he joined the ranks with his sons and didn't come back."

"Should he return, the *Herr Gebietskommissar* would like to meet this insurance agent who burned Babylon. Ha-ha-ha," Schwarz laughed, repeating Messmer's response. "He should have burned Babylon to the ground."

"He isn't likely to return." Fabian was horrified at the thought of what would become of Babylon if Yavtukh returned and was appointed headman. That fiend would surely turn into a German right away and carry on like a petty tyrant as this shortish German on the carpet was doing right then. Fabian even discerned something in common between the Babylon kinglet Yavtukh and this arrogant Goth on the carpet. Fabian could easily imagine Yavtukh on such a carpet in German-held Babylon; he'd be lolling there in exactly the same posture, leaning on one elbow, his short legs spread far apart to conceal his shortness. Yavtukh's "reign" over Babylon could by no means be allowed, for it would spell the ruin of Babylon, this one or any other. Through his fellow countryman, Yavtukh, Fabian seemed to have gained a better picture of the outlander, divining in him a perfidious and sly character. The man's mustache lent his face an expression of self-satisfaction typical of people who wield even the slightest bit of power over others. During the Inquisition, such men were judges who smiled benignly as they condemned the defendants to the pyre. Fabian didn't know until the last moment whether Messmer would let him go free or whether he'd have him jostled off into the windmill under the crossbeam on which the *kurkuls* had strung up Tikhin

Pelekhaty in the nineteen-thirties. Of course, Yavtukh wouldn't be able to conceal his real intentions for so long: everyone would be able to see right through him. On the other hand, Fabian felt sorry for his fellow countryman, if only because he was so much like this insidious German. Yavtukh might have laid down his life by now in the fray of the Scythians with the Germans. But Fabian didn't believe that, for Yavtukh wasn't of the kind to die so soon, just at the outset of the war. If he accepted death, it would be only after he was sure of his ultimate victory. Such men as Yavtukh don't throw away their lives so cheaply.

In the meantime, the billy goat had gotten into the windmill where Varya Shatrova was hiding. Fabian also peeked in, saw Varya, and greeted her. Varya was still very beautiful. A white kerchief bound her red hair, coiffeured high in German style; the freckles on her nose made her look no more or less than a Swabian Dirndl. She was wiping German silver — knives and forks — with a towel of Hlynsk craftsmanship with embroidered cockerels.

"What does he draw here every Sunday?" Fabian asked.

"I don't know. I guess he's redrawing Babylon."

"You know quite well, you damned officer's spouse," he flung in her teeth.

The reproach hit Varya like a stone and she turned away, her freckled shoulders shaking with sobs. No Flemish woman in Rubens's canvases had such a winsome waist and such harmoniously divine lines as she.

"Varenka-a-a!" Messmer exclaimed on hearing her cry and jumped up from his carpet. She must surely have been more than a cook to him. He entered the windmill and asked in German what had happened.

Varya was afraid for the philosopher, so she turned sharply toward the door, and laughed through her tears. The alarmed Schwarz made a couple of huge bounds with his peg leg to appear on the scene just in time. Varya pointed at Fabian with a knife: "He made me laugh till I cried, because he wanted Herr Messmer to draw him with his billy goat." Schwarz interpreted what she said. Messmer, enraged at such impudence from a conquered Babylonian, chased him and his billy goat away, and ordered his retinue to get ready to leave for Hlynsk. The soldiers rolled up the carpet and carried it to the van. Varya, too, went to the van with her basket; Schwarz locked up the windmill. Happy to have made it through such a close call in one piece, the billy goat and the philosopher were scampering off down the hill, when Schwarz called out to Fabian all of a sudden:

"Herr Fabian! Herr Fabian!"

Messmer was already sitting in his car with the engine running.

"Is it me you want?" Fabian stopped.

"Come here."

Fabian turned round. The billy goat wanted to follow his master, but he shouted at him: "Scram, you horned devil!" God knows what trouble the critter might invite.

"The *Herr Gebietskommissar* prohibits you to walk through Babylon with the billy goat from now on."

"Strange! Is walking with a billy goat some breach of the New Order in Europe?"

"No, I don't see any breach in this case," Schwarz said. "I'm only telling you his order: if he sees the Babylon philosopher with the billy goat but once, the Herr philosopher will never read Plato or promenade through Babylon again."

"But the billy goat is mine; he's my property,

I even had him insured by the very same Yavtukh, and all of a sudden I have no right to walk my own billy goat through Babylon."

"It sounds strange to me, too, but I'm only the interpreter."

"I'd understand if he'd broken a headlight or something of that sort. Surely you must have noticed with what admiration the animal looked at the mustache of the Herr Gebiets. I'm convinced the fool didn't even guess he was looking at an invader. Scram, lest trouble blight you!" Fabian took his leave. The billy goat trudged after him.

Once, just before the outbreak of the war, he and Yavtukh wanted a drink badly but didn't have the money to buy *horilka*. Yavtukh almost went and paid the insurance on the billy goat, but then neither of them knew what to do with the billy goat himself. They couldn't kill him just like that! Now Fabian was faced with the same problem: what to do with the billy goat?

The Gebiets believed that by this prohibition, which might have seemed of little significance at first sight, he would deprive Babylon of something utterly customary and symbolic to a certain extent. Without the billy goat, the philosopher would lose his stature in the eyes of the Babylonians, and he would feel that his freedom had come to an end. If a slave is to be kept a slave, he must be reminded of it constantly, and the absence of the billy goat would perhaps be the best reminder. Fabian gradually grasped the essence of this prohibition, and at the risk of his life, he nonetheless contrived to make his appearances in Babylon with the billy goat. Moreover, it was only now that he realized the historic importance of the animal, to which he hadn't attached such significance before. Paradoxically, those who

prohibit something think little about the reverse effect of their prohibitions. "The Gebiets prohibits me to walk around with the billy goat, but I do," Fabian complained, which made him even more legendary than he had been. He was well received even in those homes which had looked upon this pair as a freak of nature up till then. Now they seemed to have added to Babylon's firmness of spirit, although no one could grasp to the end why that German had decreed such a petty ban, for he could have prohibited Fabian from appearing in Babylon altogether, which would have freed the Babylonians of the necessity of cooking enough for an extra mouth, because no one would even think now of refusing lunch to a man who had been subjected to such a mysterious prohibition and encroachment upon his rights. As for the billy goat, he had enjoyed some special favors of his master lately.

Danko could never have imagined that he would pass through his native Babylon in a column of POWs. Yet it happened. The women and children poured out into the street to look for their men, but to recognize him now was next to impossible. Besides, could he really confess to being Danko Sokolyuk for whom everything here had once been so dear and near? In the center of Babylon, right at its highest point, stood an unfinished two-storey palace of culture with black gaping windowframes and doorways. From afar, it looked like a fabulous castle standing out against the horizon as soon as the column of POWs marched out of Pritske. Danko thought it was only the whimsical creation of a steppe haze, yet the building was real, albeit unusual for Babylon. On the edge of the village there was a cluster of cowsheds, stables and pigsties — long

structures propped up with poles like everywhere in the countryside. The prisoners were frequently herded into them for the night, machine guns were placed at the entrance, and it was impossible to escape from those improvised prisons.

The resonant green ash trees came into sight, then the empty farmyard of the Singers. Farther on there was the Sokolyuks' pear tree and Yavtukh's, and the Valakhs' walnut trees on the meadow, but their house he did not see. Where had it disappeared to? he wondered. Danko couldn't locate several other houses either, yet the philosopher's hut that was not worth speaking of stood there amid the wild cherry trees. Tall dust-covered hollyhocks grew before its little windows, and the billy goat was standing in reverie on the threshold. "Fabian! Fabian!" Danko called, but the philosopher could hardly have heard him.

The prisoners up front were drinking water, bending over an emptying pail they passed from hand to hand down the line. Danko was in the front ranks; he was barefoot, dressed in a faded service shirt with tabs of a private, breeches tattered at the knees, his face gray from dust, and raked with thirst. There wasn't a single drop in the pail; still, Danko tried to drink from it, recalling the taste of the Babylon water; then he passed it on to the man at the end of the line who put it down on the edge of the road. The owner of the pail, a woman past her prime, ran up to it, and Danko recognized her: "Auntie, Auntie Yarina! Tell my folks that I've passed through here. Tell Lukian and Darinka. Tell everyone, everyone..."

"Oh my God! Who are you?"

"I'm Sokolyuk. Danko Sokolyuk."

The woman rushed into the column, ready to drag him out of there, but a guard slung a machine pistol off his neck and yelled viciously: "*Zurück!*" Merciless,

hung all over with the steel trappings of war, he raged, because he, the invader, also had to eat the Babylon dust along with the prisoners and sweat salt in the furnace of war.

The column approached the palace of culture, and Danko saw evidence that the unfinished work had been rushed; the barrels of lime were still standing; there was a pile of broken brick and stacks of red roof tiles. At any other time, Danko thought, none of this would be lying around for long. It would come in handy in any household, but even the scaffolding of fine new planks had been left untouched. If that was so, probably Yavtukh wasn't in Babylon anymore. Whoever else, but he'd manage to get his hands on those boards somehow. Danko saw Yavtukh's fine new porch reflecting in the sunlight, and a wry smile crossed his face. By the palace of culture stood the Zhuravskys' tumbledown house. A red geranium bloomed in the only window facing the street. There is something sad about a geranium blooming in a little window so familiar from childhood.

In that house, Maria Zhuravska, Danko's first love, had grown up. Maria had been married off against her will to a rich peasant from Pritske who had arrived for the matchmaking ceremony in a wagon drawn by gray oxen. The Zhuravskys were poor as church mice (they went on foot for high mass to a Roman Catholic church all the way to Berdichiv — three days there and three days back) and tried to imitate the Poles all the time. In the blue of the evening when Maria ran out to meet with Danko, she didn't wear any underclothes, but when she returned from those high masses, she behaved like a white-robed virgin who couldn't be approached. From her last trip to church she returned with a song she had heard in some pilgrim rooming house: *Don't Cut the*

Tall Poppies, Let Them Grow Till the Fall. With this song, she left in the oxen-drawn wagon to her unloved husband. She was really as beautiful as if she had been painted by the gods. Danko pined for her a long time until Malva Kozhushna turned up on the swing.

The men in the front ranks ran wilfully down to the pond to drink water, some scooping it up with hands, others with service and garrison caps, and still others managed to fill mess tins for their comrades, until in the end the water was so muddy, the back ranks couldn't drink it. Then the column moved on to the dam past Ruzia's house. Danko had noticed a lock hanging on the door when they were still marching down to the dam. He recalled the feast of the Epiphany that was always held at this pond, as well as Petro Dzhura. Danko had shot him then from Bubela's shotgun — he recalled everything at that moment, and above all, Malva. She was brought to the pond by the Bezkorovainy brothers, stood beside Ruban next to the ice cross, and her eyes were bound with a white kerchief. From that Epiphany on, Danko's life had taken a horrible turn. After that he met Malva only twice — the first time when she was being taken to the maternity home in Hlynsk and her nags got stuck in the mud, and the last time at the co-op where he hid in the empty garret over Klim Sinitsya's room in which Malva lived without the slightest inkling of the presence of such a neighbor. He was then short of coming to her one night and surrender himself to the co-op. Yet he did not surrender but fled at the last minute, after which he roved the land for a long time until his hungry horses brought him to Hlynsk.

He darted a glance at Ruzia's windows and started: standing in one of them behind a slightly open

curtain was Malva. A real, live Malva who was breathing and looking his way so intently that he tensed involuntarily, losing his file and standing there petrified for a moment. Malva, though, did not recognize him. His eyes had sunk, his cheekbones protruded, and his teeth gleamed with a sickly whiteness. There was something demonic in the face of the prisoner with a bristling black beard. Perhaps it was the plea of a dying man. Yes, it was a plea, and Malva realized it when he crossed his arms on his chest and his parched lips whispered something she couldn't hear. Malva disappeared from the window, but he kept on standing until a guard, covered with steel trappings, leather and gray cloth, chased him back into the column with the butt of his machine pistol. "Your wife?" the men next to him asked. "No," Danko said, and in his mind he started saying goodbye to Babylon, this time perhaps for ever. In the barn in Hlynsk where they had stopped for the night, he heard from the others how they had also seen a strange, beautiful woman standing in the window, probably looking for her husband or brother. But why hadn't she come out to the road and delivered him from captivity or bought his freedom with whatever she had left to her name?

Danko was dying in Hlynsk on the market square of a violent fever, it seemed, for the whole night through he was beset with a weird nightmare about the horses that had once saved him.

Danko dreamed that right before they got to Hlynsk, his horses started catching up with him. Ghostly and wary, they filed along the narrow edge of the road like people. One of them, an old nag with sharply jutting bones that seemed fit to have wings

attached to them to make him look like a bird, stopped apparently recognizing the great horse thief, and looked at the white bundle the poor wretch was afraid to let out of his hands for fear the horse might think it had oats in it. Danko had once stolen that horse in Oveche; he recognized it by the color — dapple gray — and the blaze that stretched from the withers down to the nostrils. He tried to mount it but he was too feeble, for he had worn down the horse and himself as well; much to his chagrin, the bundle came untied just then. Out of it spilled treasures which were of no value whatsoever to the horse: an embroidered *rushnik* towel, several undershirts of unbleached linen, breeches, a silver-studded bridle from the last horse he had stolen, and some tatters thrown in from despair when he had decided to surrender himself to Makedonsky after three years of hiding out in the villages. The horse had once worn that bridle (big-time horse thieves always choose a horse to fit their bridle, so the horse can be handled more easily). It smiled sadly with its rheumy eyes and trudged on, leaving Danko behind on the road. He recognized me, Danko thought, recalling how that dapple gray had caught his fancy and how painstakingly he had ferreted out everything about it and its master until one night, the headstrong horse was restrained by this strong-bitted bridle.

It was Fabian who had set Danko on the right path. Once Danko had come to him numb with cold and hungry. Although Fabian lived under hatches himself, he received him and fed him.

“Go and own up, Danko, and if need be do your stretch. I don’t have any other advice for you. And I don’t intend to hide you from Lukian either. You’re in such a state now they might have mercy on you. When the steppe dries up a bit, get going! You’ve got

no wife and no kids, so what the hell are you afraid of? If it's death, so be it! Better to die than live like you do."

To tell the truth, when Fabian was taken in by Prisia for some time (after Yavtukh had been seen off to distant lands for a short period) and called himself father of Yavtukh's children, the halo of a philosopher that had hovered over him faded somewhat. But we shall not succumb to the moods of the Babylonians whose whimsical inventions about the philosopher have been known long since, and we shall continue calling our Fabian a philosopher who had grasped only now that the highest essence of all philosophies ends in bread, because even the greatest men of learning have little to offer us if they are incapable of restoring childhood to children. At first Danko decided to heed Fabian's advice, but then he wavered: what if Fabian wasn't the sage he had been? Danko had once heard somewhere that in addition to their bread, children eat up their parents' wisdom. Yavtukh's family could strip a much greater tree than Fabian clean as a whistle.

The horses kept walking past him. They trudged on like Moslems to their way to Mecca. From Pritske, from Koziv, from Babylon... The horses must have recalled the spring fair and sensed its merry noise and bustle which brought to mind their carefree presence at those cheerful events where they had run eagerly as foals behind their mothers. Now they headed on toward Hlynsk. Danko guessed where they were heading and cajoled them; he blocked their way and crooned to them as gently as he could. They would stop to look at him, but being too feeble to acquire a horseman for themselves, they went on, afraid of lagging behind the others.

Danko recalled his first visits to the fair when the

Sokolyuks hadn't either horse or wagon and went on foot. The jingle of the wagons sounded like marvelous music to them — on fair days, it descended upon Hlynsk from all the roads of the universe. The wagons of the rich rolled quietly and softly like Roman chariots during triumphs, while the wagons of the poor clattered hideously down the highway as if doomed utterly. The Sokolyuks saved up for a horse and called him Martin. He was a moth-eaten creature, balky and given to kicking. The Gypsies had gotten it off their hands for almost nothing, but the brothers' joy at their acquisition knew no bounds. Having a horse on a farm means everything to a peasant. Martin wasn't fit for wagon, plow, mixed team with oxen, or pleasure, yet he had a fine hide. A great expert on hides went over it with his knuckles, pointed out the weak spots, and bought Martin for the Hlynsk bone yard. And here Martin had reappeared from nowhere and was walking rather sprightly to Hlynsk, outdistancing his more feeble counterparts. That must be a nightmare, Danko thought.

"Hello, Martin!" the horse stopped, recognized Danko, helped him to his feet, and led him into a violet dawn. The knackers must have sold him to a poor widow in Pritske. Since she couldn't get anything out of him, she resold him to some potters in Koziv where he didn't leave the clay pit for many years, mixing there the clay for his masters. Danko must surely have known the potters who brought their wares to the Hlynsk fairs. The sticky clay pit broke Martin's restiveness and he became obedient. Danko recalled the potters from Koziv — the younger and the older ones alike, all of them equally handsome, black-haired and elegant. Their ringing pitchers were very well fired and were unlike any other earthenware offered for sale. Mother bought

her pitchers only from their wagon, and Danko nagged her all the time to buy him a clay whistle, too. Their shrill, bouncy sounding whistles, shaped as horses, roosters, and little devils — without which a fair was not a fair at all — were famous along the entire course of the Southern Bug.

Next, Martin was socialized into a collective farm. A nameplate was nailed to the gate of his stall, and he was called Apollo. He stood side by side with Venus, a worthless nag who was old as the hills. In giving such names to the horses, people could mock them as much as they liked, apparently for no other reason than to vent some deep-rooted anger upon them. Yet horses, who know people better than anybody else, can easily carry their secrets to the grave. A distant toll of bells ripped the silence — the two churches that were still at odds with each other exchanged Sunday greetings. Danko wasn't much of a Christian, but the sound of the clanging brass nonetheless moved his heart. Fabian used to say that the ringing of church bells is heard even by the dead.

The horses had gathered on the market square, the most spirited having probably arrived before dawn, as they had arrived for the fair throughout the years. For here they had once experienced real happiness: here even the cruelest and most querulous masters seemed to turn into different men, hanging feed bags with oats on their muzzles, leading them over to the fragrant hay spread in the wagons, giving them purchased water to drink during the blistering heat when the price of water could soar as high as ten kopecks a pail, and covering them with rugs or even fur coats during the Epiphany frosts. Back home they didn't enjoy even a fraction of what they had here. Now they were not at odds with one another, they did

not fight or whinny as they usually did, or hee-haw at one another, but pressed close together in a tight herd, they waited for the people in complete silence. Martin did not leave Danko's side, probably seeing in him some sort of support at least. Age had deformed the horse, and the red moon lent his outlines an odd look. Danko extended the empty palm of his hand for the horse to lick. Martin touched it reluctantly with his parched lips and neighed so loudly the sound carried through the entire square. But no response followed... Farewell, Martin...

Danko seemed to smell the smoke of burning weeds in the garden and of suppers long, long ago that were so familiar from his childhood in upper Babylon. It seemed he had been descending from there to this bent wattle fence on Martin's back all his life. Back in those days, people put him on his feet and brought him back to life.

Where were they now, those people? There weren't any around except Malva in the window of Ruzia's house; a real, live Babylonian Malva. She could still probably have pulled him out of the labyrinth of death. She could have done so by coming to ransom him, begging for him, snatching him out of that doomed column. Didn't she want to, or hadn't she recognized him?

Everyone who couldn't get to his feet after that horrible night and move out of the square was shot. Presently, a guard came up to him, stood there for a while as if weighing Danko's powers, then shook his head, and put a bullet through Danko's heart. And Mother had been afraid right to the end that one of these days, Danko would be whipped to death by the peasants on this very square. "Mother!!!" he cried out as the guard stalked on to shoot the others. When the cornflowers burst into bloom again, the horses will

neigh in the white oat fields, and they'll be neighing for him, Danko Sokolyuk.

If you have a husband, son, father, or simply a friend who disappears or gets into trouble and you have even the slightest chance of making him come back or helping him, you'll invariably have to remind him of your existence under any circumstances, if you are a true woman, wife, mother, sister, or simply a sweetheart. And that's exactly what Prisia did. On hearing from someone about the POW camp in Uman—in the former quarries—she didn't hesitate a moment, but baked patties with peas, took several hunks of meat-streaked pork fat down from the loft, left the house and the children to the care of Malva's mother, and after talking Darinka into joining her, set off with her for Uman through the steppes and villages. Prisia was going to get Yavtukh, almost without doubting that he had fallen prisoner (no one knows a man better than his wife), while Darinka was going to look for Lukian, not all that sure he was there, but simply to clear her conscience. The closer they got to Uman, the more women they came across, and by and by Prisia was heading quite a sizable group of women from Hlynsk, Demensk, and everywhere: Taurian and Podolian women, women advanced in years, women in their teens, bashful, in love, going to help the betrothed they had met only after the war started. Their brief, frontline acquaintance had urged them to Uman, perhaps without the knowledge of their relations or parents.

They were let into the camp once a day in the morning, after which they were shoved out, and the dogs were set on them. If this didn't help, the guards opened fire on the women. A number of them were

killed and buried along with the dead prisoners who were carted out of the quarries every day. Nothing could keep the women away — from seven to nine o'clock in the morning they crowded above the quarries, shouting out their names and the names of their men. "It's me, Prisia! Do you hear me, Yavtukh?" Someone responded from the pit: "I hear you. Get me out of here." Some recognized their wives, pushed through toward the guards, and pointed at the crowd of women: "There she is, right over there!" But who could they really appeal to, who could they convince? Always there was one and the same answer: "*Zurück!*" Only on the third day did the women move the camp commandant, Major Prinz, by their entreaties to have the prisoners marched out of camp in formation, so the women could identify their men. For three mornings in a row, Yavtukh kept shouting from the pit: "I'm here! I'm here!" When the POWs were led out in formation four deep, there was no Yavtukh among them; it must have been another man shouting from the pit. Yavtukh might have died in that pit or not been in the camp at all. But when the column passed by, someone called her: "Prisia!" It was a tall emaciated man in a garrison cap, shoes worn on bare feet, and a faded, sweat-drenched shirt. It was Ksan Ksanich. Prisia recognized him by his pitch-black mustache above a beard which had probably grown while he was still in camp and turned gray when he was in the pit.

"That's my man," Prisia said to the commandant who was sitting on a chair in the parade ground amid his subordinates. Major Prinz took off his black-rimmed spectacles, looked intently at the prisoner, ordered him to show the arm sleeve of his service shirt (if he was a commissar, there would be a trace of a star on the sleeve), and convinced that no star

had been there, Prinz ordered to issue him a pass written out on the name of Yavtukh Holiy (as Prisia had named him). Ksan Ksanich, not believing his lucky stars, took the pass, embraced Prisia and kissed her. Prisia broke into tears and led him away. Darinka waited for Lukian or another of the Babylonian men to appear as the column four men deep marched by; wretched, worn-out, the stronger men supporting their more feeble comrades, their eyes pleading — take us, give us shelter, you see pretty well that your man's not here. Some swarthy Tatar even stopped in front of her — he was still just a boy, with fuzz covering his lip instead of a mustache, and a pair of flashing eyes pierced through Darinka.

"There he is, there! Lukian Sokolyuk!" Darinka rushed toward him, but Major Prinz went off into gales of laughter at that, followed by his subordinates. Pointing at Darinka, the major asked the Tatar:

"Her name? What's her name?"

"Darinka, I'm Darinka... and you're Lukian," Darinka whispered to him.

"Give it to her with your cleaning rods!" major ordered. A number of Gestapo men pulled the cleaning rods out of their rifles, grabbed Darinka by the hands, threw her to the ground in front of the major and were about to thrash the liar.

The major got up from his chair, raised his white-gloved hand like a great executioner, and then ordered her to her feet.

Through an interpreter he asked:

"Do you have children?"

"Yes," she replied.

He ordered them to give her the young man. But the POWs had already hidden him in the column, afraid there'd be another execution.

“Lukian! Lukian!” Darinka shouted, but all in vain. The column, severe and silent, moved on. Darinka broke into tears and then bolted off to catch up with Prisia.

To the end of his days, Yavtukh would conceal that he had even been a prisoner-of-war. He had been in an “encirclement” or “pocket” if you please, because at the beginning of the war, there had been an entire string of “encirclements,” “pockets” and the like. But the very word “captivity” injured his martial pride more than he could bear. Still, in the meantime, he had been taken prisoner, pushed into a mixed column with rifle butts, and taken across the steppe above the River Sinyukha. They were driven to a brickworks and left there to rot in tents till the onset of the first frosts. This was in a little quiet township called Panichi with a brickworks on its outskirts that was open to all the winds. There are no worse quarters than a tent for drying bricks, because it is a place of unending draughts even when there isn’t the slightest bit of a breeze.

In the POW camp, Yavtukh also found a commander for himself. This was Maxim Sakovich Teslya, the former secretary of the Hlynsk District Party Committee. In the camp, he was listed as Private Kuzma Khristoforovich Ilkun, but Yavtukh recognized him easily. In Panichi, Yavtukh voluntarily became his orderly.

In early August, a commandant from a neighboring state farm came to the camp to recruit drivers. Teslya and his orderly passed themselves off as drivers, and the commandant, Weiss, was soon to have the opportunity to satisfy himself as to the truth of their stated trade, when they stole his personal car, an Opel Kapitän, and fled two hundred kilometers from

Weiss one night. Yavtukh wanted very much to have such a car standing in his barn, and if the gas hadn't run out, his dream might have come true. Apart from everything else, his prestige in Prisia's eyes was at stake: no soldier had ever returned from captivity in his own car, which then could be comfortably kept in the barn till the end of the war. The Opel Kapitän had to be toppled from a steep bank of the Southern Bug. And the rest of the way had to be covered on foot, but the worst might still be ahead — Weiss had Yavtukh Holiy's address in his lists. His reaction might be immediate, so the two fugitives were rather afraid to go to Babylon, believing that Weiss's men were probably already there. With that thought in mind, they still went to Babylon and hid in a willow scrub. A stone's throw away, across the Chebrets, was Yavtukh's home. His house stood on a hill, and farther on came the houses of the Sokolyuks, Valakhs, Boichuks, Buts, Kadrelis, Chapliches, Stayennys and Stremennys. The latter two had been advised by Yavtukh to set their houses on fire when he had been an insurance agent, so their new houses stood there like fine palaces. On the side of the bank where he stood with Teslya was Babylon proper, or upper Babylon; and way over there on the very summit was Fabian's home, on which Yavtukh had now concentrated all of his attention. Suddenly Yavtukh grew numb and his face paled like a water lily on the Chebrets. "What's the matter, Yavtukh? Oh no, it couldn't be Weiss, could it?" But Yavtukh did not utter a sound; he pushed the willow branches aside, and set Teslya's mind at rest: "No, no, there's no Weiss. But I wonder who that lousy punk is with my Prisia over there? Dressed in my pants and my shirt no less. No, my holiday vest! Two ferret hides went for the collar alone!"

"Do you have good eyesight?" he asked Teslya.

"Nothing for me to complain about so far."

"That's my potato plot over there. The woman with the pail is my Prisia. Prisia Varivonivna, if you ever get the chance to meet her."

"And why shouldn't I?"

"Because you see a man at her side. With a shovel, see. He's no son of mine, no son-in-law's father, or brother of hers. See how they're talking and laughing as if they had married not long ago..." Yavtukh clenched his fists in rage.

"Are you legally married to her?"

"Sure. We were married in the Hlynsk church. And we even kissed the cross. She heaped eight sons on me like acorns. One died, five are in the army now, and those two, Valko and Mikhas, have driven the geese to the field. No, that's Mikhas and Sanko. Sashko, that is."

No sooner had the geese reached the stubble than they broke into a gaggle and took off into the air, with the striplings — Mikhas and Sanko — running after them.

"The geese have put on some fat already. One of them we'll roast for supper. I see one, two, three... five... eleven... nineteen. But there were twenty-nine of them when I left: seven ganders and twenty-two geese."

"The Germans could have taken them."

"If you think that, you don't know my Prisia. I swear by Babylon she's keeping that potato bug on goose flesh. He's gobbled up the roosters as it is, so now he's switched to geese. There were seventeen roosters in all. Now you watch what you're doing, Prisia. For one it's war, and for another it's fun! Now just look at them... The devil take me if they're not kissing each other! I'm going to..."

"Comrade Holiy! Don't you dare!" Teslya stopped him.

"But you saw for yourself what was going on down there."

"Yes, I did. But you're not the only one around here. You're responsible for my life as well."

"Then I'll call them! The wind's blowing their way, and they'll hear."

"And they won't be the only ones!"

After filling the pail with potatoes, Prisia wanted to take it to the cellar, but the "potato bug" appeared on the spot, took the pail from her and carried it for her. Prisia leaned on the shovel, lost in thought. Perhaps she was recalling Yavtukh.

"Ho-ho-ho!" Yavtukh shouted.

Prisia started and turned around: there was no one in sight.

The "potato bug" returned with the empty pail; now she dug the potatoes, while he picked them up. Some minutes later they kissed again, bending over the pail: without embracing each other, but sort of casually as was permissible according to garden etiquette.

Yavtukh swayed — that peck was just too much for him — and fell to the ground insensible. Teslya laughed, believing Yavtukh was putting on a show, but when he remained there with a pale face and clenched teeth, betraying no signs of life, Teslya had to run to the Chebrets for a capful of water which he poured on Yavtukh's face. When he came to, Yavtukh sat up, pushed the willow branches aside, and saw both of them sitting at a fire baking potatoes. Prisia took a potato out of the fire and started playing with it like a girl with a ball; she cooled it that way, broke it in two, took one half for herself and gave the other half to the man.

“Whether you like it or not, Comrade Teslya, I’m going down there. The potatoes are ready, so now they’ll have lunch, and after lunch, I don’t expect anything good from them. I’ll go and finish off Prisia. No, him first and then her.”

Teslya grabbed Yavtukh by the collar and forced him to sit down.

“You won’t do anything of the sort! No one in Babylon must know you’ve come back. Weiss’s men might show up any minute now.”

Yavtukh’s spirits revived. It would be a fine thing if Commandant Weiss appeared and caught that “potato bug” redhanded. Teslya seemed to have read Yavtukh’s thoughts.

“That crank must be warned somehow. I’m sure he’s a POW. What if I go? Nobody knows me around here.”

“Right!” Yavtukh exclaimed. “Go tell her that I’m here. And throw that louse out on his ear.”

Teslya crossed the Chebrets, got mired in the rusty swamp, barely managed to pull himself out, passed the hemp plot with the harvested crop stacked here and there, rested for a while by Yavtukh’s plot, and then went uphill along a footpath running through dry sunflowers. He went straight to the farmyard and stopped by the cellar with the brick entrance, beckoning the potato harvesters to join him there. They left the pail and shovel in the garden. Ksan Ksanich was lost at first, thinking that this stranger was Yavtukh, whose death he had invented. After all, he didn’t know Yavtukh by sight, having only read his letters to Prisia from the front line. The letters were petty in content — about geese, hens, and the cellar, but Ksan Ksanich had read his own version of them to Prisia — about love, loyalty, and happiness, and he read them in a lofty manner as is proper to read

letters from the front line addressed to one's beloved. Prisia was moved to tears every time.

"Is that him?" Ksan Ksanich asked her.

"No, I've never seen him before," Prisia said.

They came up to the stranger. He greeted them.

"What can I do for you?" Prisia asked.

"Are you Prisia Varivonivna?"

"Yes."

"And who's this?" he pointed at her assistant.

"Ksan Ksanich... my tenant," Prisia said with a smile.

"Well, fellow... what are you doing here in another man's garden? In another man's clothes? And with another man's wife, damn it?"

"Her husband died at..."

"Yes, he died, so we..." Prisia started to say.

"Fiddlesticks, Prisia Varivonivna. Your husband is alive and kicking. Right now he's hiding in the willow scrub, waiting for night to come. The Germans might show up here any minute, so I'd advise you to make yourself scarce as fast as you can, fellow."

"Oh, my God! My dear Yavtukh! Tell him to come quickly. Where is he, in what willow scrub?"

"Over the beyond the Chebrets."

"Ksan Ksanich, why are you standing there? Bring him here at once. Lunch is ready and we've got some *horilka*. As for another man having picked the potatoes, Yavtukh might as well be grateful."

"Let's go," Teslya said and led Ksan Ksanich to the willow scrub.

The potatoes had roasted in the fire, so Teslya pushed aside the cinders and put some hot potatoes into his pocket for Yavtukh. Neither Weiss nor his people had appeared in Babylon. But Teslya was merciless and made Yavtukh sit in the willow scrub the whole day to give him time to cool down, lest he

stir up trouble back home. Ksan Ksanich kept running back and forth between Yavtukh's house and the willow scrub with a wicker basket. During lunch, which lasted into the night, he made up with Yavtukh; when the sergeant-major recited Yavtukh's frontline letters from memory, their author was moved to tears, and eventually the gray and black mustaches joined in a fraternal kiss.

CHAPTER 2

Ksan Ksanich moved to the Sokolyuks that same day, and the next morning, Yavtukh had to greet him as courteously as possible — after all, Yavtukh was a neighbor now, whether he liked it or not. Ksan Ksanich responded to the greeting as if he were seeing Yavtukh for the first time and everything had been forgotten in the space of a night — a soldier understands a fellow soldier better than a brother. The whole day he dug potatoes in Darinka's garden with the air of a true master of the house. Yavtukh didn't hold a grudge against Ksan Ksanich; he only reproached Prisia for having taken in a boarder so quickly after Yavtukh had died in the war, and besides a far younger and abler man than her husband, which stung Yavtukh's pride. Seeing him with Darinka now, Yavtukh seethed with anger and grumbled: "You are all tarred with the same brush. I'd just love to see what Lukian does when he finds Ksan Ksanich with Darinka in the potato field!" But Lukian did not appear, and Ksan Ksanich was gaining a firmer hold on his new home. He raised his voice at Darinka's children, called the ducks from the pond in the evenings in his own way (pul—pul—pul—pull), and went about thatching the roof, which

Lukian had completely neglected as if he hadn't intended to live under it anymore. In a word, he settled in solidly, as if for a long time, probably preparing to spend the winter in Babylon, for he had even made friends with Yavtukh. Yet the new authorities noticed him and had him summoned through Savka Chibis. Ksan Ksanich didn't go to the village office, quickly packed his things for a different destination, and disappeared from Babylon. Darinka grieved for him a week or so, continued thatching the roof herself, raised her own voice at her children, and even called the ducks from the pond the same way he did: "Pul—pul—pul—pul!" That was too much for Yavtukh to stomach; he ran out of his farmyard and hollered at Darinka: "How are you calling our Babylonian ducks, you fool!" He let off such a roaring duck call — tas—tas—tas—tas! — that not only his but all the other ducks could have left their duckweed feeding grounds and come swimming to the shore. Then he asked Darinka about Ksan Ksanich:

"Has he turned up?"

"No. I guess he's headed for home."

But Yavtukh could easily guess where Ksan Ksanich had disappeared to. In all probability, he'd gone to Pilip Zhivy in Rohachin in the neighboring district, because some days later, Pustovoit, the former village headman sent from Hlynsk by the *Gebietskommisar* himself, also disappeared without leaving a trace. Frightened by the mysterious disappearance of the headman, the Gebiets sent chief of Gestapo Richter to Babylon. He unwound the whole skein thread by thread and finally got to Ksan Ksanich. Who was he? Where had he come from? Where did he disappear to? Yavtukh dodged the questions during the interrogation as much as he could, but under threat of death he had to confess everything. Scared stiff,

Yavtukh told so much he almost destroyed his dear Prisia. What saved her was perhaps the fact that she had met the sergeant-major before the arrival of the Germans. He had been billeted in her home when the front line was here, and after escaping from the prison, he had reappeared absolutely by chance and not stayed for long, because soon after her dear husband Yavtukh had returned, the very same husband who was now prepared to sell his father for fright. If Richter hadn't been a German, Yavtukh would never have tolerated such slander on his wife's part; he'd have given her a good thrashing, but in the presence of the foreigner, he swallowed his hurt pride, and from under the flap of his coat, only showed her his fist which had turned red from rage. He was also infuriated that she took Ksan Ksanich for a real hero, whereas Yavtukh had been taken prisoner much later than the sergeant-major.

"Did you sleep with him?" Richter asked Prisia.

Prisia really didn't know what to say. She darted a glance at the foreigner as if to say: "My God, could I admit such a thing in front of Yavtukh." But Yavtukh, realizing who he had to deal with, answered for her:

"Don't your German women ever sleep with other men, or with sergeant-majors for that matter?"

"They do!" Richter laughed, and that's probably what saved Prisia. So they let Prisia go, and didn't bother Darinka at all. Still, Yavtukh was ordered to watch her house day and night, and the moment Ksan Ksanich showed up (he would by all means, Richter assured) Yavtukh was to inform Richter right away. Him alone, and nobody else. Yavtukh agreed.

The Austrian Schwarz served as an interpreter at the interrogation. He sized Yavtukh up with a malevolent look and thought: This fellow will go far and

bring a lot of grief to Babylon besides. Schwarz knocked his peg leg against the floor two or three times in a row, which could have been meant as a warning for Yavtukh. Richter, though, took an obvious liking to this Babylonian, above all because of his readiness to comply with everything. The Gestapo man said that such a character could be appointed headman, but Schwarz delicately rejected the candidacy in favor of Fabian.

No sooner had Yavtukh been set free than he ran to Darinka and told her everything. Now both of them kept a lookout for Ksan Ksanich to let him know he was in trouble, but Ksan Ksanich, if Darinka were to be believed, didn't appear either in the daytime or at night — at least, Yavtukh never saw him. Richter, too, seemed to have forgotten about Ksan Ksanich. But after the attempt on the life of the *Gebietskommissar* in Hlynsk (his driver was killed, but the Gebiets came through it unscathed), the Gestapo recalled Ksan Ksanich again. Fabian who on Schwarz's recommendation was temporarily performing the duties of village headman, was ordered to bring Yavtukh to the Gestapo. "That's a bit too much for me," Fabian raged. "Savka, go and tell him to hoof it on over there."

"Well?" Richter asked, this time eye to eye, without any interpreter.

"He hasn't appeared. I'm watching day and night — not a trace or sound of him."

Richter picked up a photograph from the table and showed it to Yavtukh: "Is that him?"

An absolute stranger looked at Yavtukh from the photograph, but after a moment of wavering, Yavtukh thought it better to recognize him: "It's him, Herr Chief, it's really him — Ksan Ksanich." He

poked at the stranger's mustache: "The mustache is his; well, and the head, too, of course. It's a sergeant-major's head. I can tell those sergeant-majors at first glance, 'cause they gave me a good peck of trouble, the pox take them. Whenever I made a slip, out I went on the parade ground — left, right! left, right!" He marched across the room so smartly it filled Richter with admiration for Yavtukh. This was who should be the Babylon headman, not that weak-willed bag of bones Schwarz stood up for. But now Yavtukh was no more than a hostage in Richter's eyes.

"If you don't get him, we'll make you swing on..." and he showed him a noose and gibbet with his hand. Richter did it easily and precisely as if he had learned that gesture in childhood.

"He'll come, he'll come by all means. Where can he go? He'll rove around till the first snowdrifts, and then he'll turn up to warm himself. Yavtukh will nab him and bring him right here..." He broke into a sweat from feigning readiness and loyalty. (But in his mind, there was only one thought: You butcher, I wouldn't give away Ksan Ksanich to you for thousands upon thousands! Only let him turn up sooner, and I'll join him. I'll kill Fabian even if he's not a full headman yet, and make off. It's better to die than tremble here and tolerate the nasty look of that green toad washed clean by our rains). For some reason that was just the impression Richter's sleek face (filled on our food at that!) produced upon Yavtukh.

Back from Hlynsk, Yavtukh told Darinka everything he'd gone through.

"That Ksan Ksanich of yours will be my death."

"You'd better not go shooting off your mouth. He's no more mine than he is your wife's."

“When he shows up, tell him to come see me right away.”

“He has shown up!”

“Really? Oh damn it! Why don’t I know anything about it?”

“He’s with Pilip Shulyak in the woods. But don’t you go chattering about it.”

“To whom?”

“To your wife.”

“God forbid. Why, that woman would betray her daddy for a dozen lashes with cleaning rods. I’m not like that at all. You can torture and kill me, but I’ll keep my trap shut if I decide to. I was sure he’d be around. Don’t you breathe a word to Fabian. Do you hear me? He’s come to an understanding with the Germans through Schwarz all right. The funeral parlor’s taken power into its hands now. Who do you think sent me to the nazis today? Well, what’s your guess?”

“Fabian?”

“Yes he, that bastard. That’s what’s crawled out of the goat hide onto Babylon. Did you notice how he was afraid to walk with the billy goat at first, and now he’s stalking around like a mighty lord. Just like the King of Babylon. I would have bumped him off myself, but we’d better let Ksan Ksanich do the job. It’s easier for an outsider to take the blame.”

It was evening. After this talk, each of them went about calling their ducks from the pond, Yavtukh calling with special zeal, although his ducks came home on their own, and bursting with duckweed, had probably been quacking drowsily to one another in the barn for quite some time. Every evening, they brought with them a stray which Prisia stealthily killed for borshch, because there was nothing tastier than borshch with stray duck before her own flock

had grown fat enough for the famous Babylon roast served at autumn weddings. Stuffed with meal, seasoned with red pepper, bay leaf and a multitude of other spices, such a roast, once you've dipped one or two slices of white bread in the gravy, dispels drunkenness and injects vigor and good spirit at weddings. Even the much-vaunted Pekin doesn't hold a candle to this culinary creation of the Babylonians, but to make it a reality, there had to be a vigilant watch on the ducks whose numbers decreased catastrophically long before wedding time — borshch with stray duck was a favorite not only at the Holiys' home. In the end, everything worked out evenly: every household ate as many ducks as it had sent as ducklings to the pond, although everyone thought that he'd had at least one duck extra at the expense of his neighbor. Babylon was Babylon, after all, and there was nothing you could do about it.

Herr Schwarz arrived to instruct the new village headman. Savka Chibis came running to Fabian to tell him that the Herr District Headman was asking for the philosopher and wanted to see him immediately. Herr Schwarz knew Fabian back from the days when he was an inveterate enemy of the funeral parlor, and now he called him Herr Khorobry. He started his talk from afar, giving the headman to understand that the time had come when great coffin makers were ruling Europe, so it was just the day for Herr Khorobry to rule over Babylon. Besides, Schwarz said, he wanted his own man around this place.

“Take Yavtukh.”

“You mean Holiy? Never.”

Presently Yavtukh came running, opened the door and froze at the sight of Fabian. He came in a straw hat, embroidered shirt, breeches of diagonal cloth, out

of which he had ripped the red stripes, and brand new boots. The veritable image-of a village headman indeed.

"I'm glad to welcome you to Babylon!"

"Meet the new Babylon headman Herr Khorobry," Schwarz said, getting up on his peg leg.

"We know him as Fabian, so it's sort of unusual for me..."

"Consider that my billy goat's been put over Babylon," Fabian said. "Him or me — it's all the same."

"My heartiest congratulations, Herr Khorobry!"

It had never entered Fabian's mind to rule over Babylon singlehandedly. He had consented only so the office would not be occupied by Yavtukh, whom he had considered a traitor since the night before, and now saw how he was all set to usurp the power as sparkles of mischief flashed in his greenish-yellow eyes. Being essentially no one as yet, Yavtukh already lived in a world of different ideas about his own personality which he would be able to consider not so transitory as before, were he to become the ruler of Babylon, a "king" or a "kingling" at least. He surely realized that he wouldn't have another chance like this in his life — Babylon's history had turned its face on him this time, and had the philosopher grasped at least approximately the train of Yavtukh's thoughts, he would have found out the following: "Power must be seized wherever possible, even from the hands of this Austrian with the peg leg. Schwarz would get into his britzka and leave, and Babylon would forget him the moment the last local cur barked behind his back, while Yavtukh Holiy, invested with power, would stay here, rule over Babylon to his heart's content, bask in power and enjoy the luxuries that went with it at least once in

a lifetime after all these years of misery, and when our troops arrived (an eventuality in which Yavtukh sincerely believed), he'd come to an understanding with them somehow." Everything in him said: Herr Schwarz, I agree. When people seize power or strive for it, they don't think much about their future. Yavtukh wasn't thinking about it at all now. Schwarz, however, held this people in too high regard to deliver its destiny, even temporarily, into the hands of an overzealous Yavtukh.

"I must tell you, Citizen Holiy, I have personal distrust for you," Schwarz said in broken Russian. "I had it back in days you an insurance agent were."

"Why? Did I not pay out insurance to someone?"

"Oh no, you did, you did. You did many times."

"It's only me he didn't pay," Fabian said, smiling, although Yavtukh took it as a reproach.

"If not for war, you be in prison. For fires. Illegal fires," Schwarz added. "That's why I you distrust."

"Thanks for that much at least," Yavtukh said and left, almost knocking Savka, who was eavesdropping by the door, off his feet.

"Germans come and they will go, but world remain. So far mankind has to be rid of such men. He can do lot of harm. Believe me, Comrade Fabian."

"He can, that son of a bitch. He surely can."

"Do I gather people or give power to you quietly?"

"It's better to make it quietly. Just tell Savka what I am to him and that's more than enough."

"Savka!" Schwarz called. Savka stood behind the door, because he, too, was anxious not to see Babylon under Yavtukh's rule. He opened the door, rubbing the bump he had knocked on his forehead by accident the night before.

"Savka here!"

"That's your headman until our people come back."

Savka pointed at the billy goat.

"Him?" he asked, and heehawed.

"Herr Fabian I mean. Or how you call him here?"

"They're both Fabians to us," Savka said.

"For Germans Fabian very *gut*. One word."

"And for us, too, Herr Schwarz," Savka said.

"That's all, I think. I may go? Wish you luck!"

On the box of the britzka sat the very same coachman who used to drive Maxim Teslya and then Klim Sinitsya. He knew Savka inside out, and spent many a night sleeping on an oak bench at the Village Soviet whenever he brought Teslya there on business. When he came with Sinitsya, he slept at the Singers. From him Savka learned that Schwarz could be relied on, because the Germans had forced him into their service as an Austrian, while he hated them with all his heart for a man called Inquart * who had sold out Austria. Who that Inquart was, the coachman didn't know, but it must have been a really murderous scoundrel. The coachman asked whether Malva Kozhushna had showed up in Babylon. Because of her, he had been summoned to the Gestapo, but he didn't know anything about her underground. The Gestapo was sure that she was somewhere around. The coachman told Savka to warn Malva when she appeared in Babylon.

"Savka, we must shoot Yavtukh," the philosopher said, when they were alone—the ruler and his executive.

Savka broke into laughter, knowing as he did a thing or two about power struggle.

* On orders from Berlin, the Austrian nazis delivered an ultimatum to Chancellor K. Schuschnigg of Austria to resign and be succeeded by the leader of the local nazis, Arthur Seyss-Inquart. During the night of March 12, 1938, Hitler's troops crossed into Austria and annexed her to Germany—Tr

"I knew he was a traitor."

"You're a bigger traitor now than he is. So it's you, Herr Headman, who must be shot."

"I can be taken care of later on. But for now it must be him, Savka. Perhaps this very night."

"But what for?"

"For Ksan Ksanich."

"So Yavtukh did it???"

"Yes, him, that bastard. But how will we go about it? Who'll shoot him? What about you, Savka? As an executive of the Babylon authorities, that is, as a representative of Soviet power. In the name of the Republic..."

"What with? What am I supposed to shoot him with?"

"Here's the gun." Fabian pulled a rust-coated Nagant revolver out of his shirt and twirled the cartridge-filled drum. Savka took the revolver, aimed it at the billy goat who opened one eye wide and darted a glance at his master as if to say: what's this all about? Savka inspected the revolver once more, weighed it in his hand, and then gave it back to the philosopher.

"I can't do it... How could I kill a live Yavtukh? Maybe a dead one I could. But a live one? He'll start pleading, and begging, and falling on his knees. No, Fabian, I'm afraid I can't do it. If I could have killed anybody, I'd have been called up for frontline service. But they didn't take me, see." And he went off into a heehaw again.

"They didn't take you because of that laughter of yours, Savka. We're discussing the death of a man, and not just some stranger, but the death of Yavtukh, and here you are guffawing."

"Because it's simply funny, I tell you. How can you kill Yavtukh? Why, without him we wouldn't be

what we are, and Babylon wouldn't be Babylon. You can kill me, you, your billy goat, but killing Yavtukh would be the same as killing a bird in a nest. It gives me the creeps just thinking about it."

"All right, I'll do it myself," Fabian said in such a voice that Savka immediately had to look on the ruler with different eyes. "But don't you breathe a word to anyone. Do you understand me?"

"Sure. What's there to understand?"

"And now the headman would like to have lunch in your company. What would be the best place to go?"

"Let's try the Stremennys' home. A child's been born to Petrunia, so today they're distilling moonshine for a christening party. Wait a minute..."

Savka ran outdoors, looked at the chimney dominating one of the hillocks, and came back, his long-standing experience confirmed:

"Yes, they're at it."

"I don't think they've got much food to go with the drink. Pinching poverty there."

"Oh, you should have said what you wanted in the first place. So what is it — food or drink?"

"Both. What's a meal without a swig?"

"Well, in this case, the best place would be Yavtukh's."

"What???"

"The best food is at Yavtukh's. Don't you know what fine lunches Prisia made for him when he was an insurance agent? Simply fantastic! Sometimes he shared them with me, and I never tasted such lunches anywhere. Spareribs with gristle, and if there were roosters, the roast was so sweet you wanted to just smell it and not eat it. And what dumplings with tripe? And the biscuits with poppy seeds? And what about the borshches? Hetman Khmelnitsky hadn't

anything like them. And, without fail, there was always a stiff one to go with all that."

"All right, take me there. We must say goodby to the man properly, after all."

They arrived at lunch time. After downing a glass of moonshine, Yavtukh sank into a delicious languor under the pear tree. Just finished with his borsch, he was about to take to dumplings with cottage cheese, when the threesome appeared in the gate: the billy goat, Savka, and the new headman the sight of whom, to tell the truth, threw Yavtukh into visible confusion. Throughout the years he had grown so accustomed to revering officialdom that even if the billy goat had had a rank, Yavtukh would have snapped to attention with an expression of submissiveness and devotion on his face. As for Fabian the man, Yavtukh displayed such obsequious deference that the philosopher became uncomfortable and turned away from him. Presently Prisia came in with a pitcher, and the guest used the opportunity to avoid seeing Yavtukh hunched up there. Prisia carried a pitcher with buttermilk she had just poured from an oaken hand churn — Yavtukh loved to wash down his dumplings with buttermilk.

"Prisia!" Yavtukh almost shouted, unable to check his excitement. "You can congratulate Levko Kho-roby. He's our new chairman, that is, our Mr. Headman. Bring the decanter and rug over here; the ground is cold now, he might get boils, and our Mr. Headman is not in good health as it is. Take the one I brought back from the conference in Kiev — it's a Turkmenian rug of real wool. Mr. Headman, I used to be a big man under Lukian, God rest his soul, if he's no more, and what I'll be under you, time will tell, so help me God. Now, what's keeping you there, Prisia?"

"I'm coming!"

"How long do you think the headman has to stand on his feet?"

The thick rug was pure wool indeed, with colors so bright, they seemed newly dyed. Yavtukh spread it on the ground and was utterly satisfied looking at how Fabian reclined on it for the meal like an ancient Roman.

The billy goat poked his muzzle at the pitcher and overturned it; the buttermilk spilled over the ground under the pear tree. Any other time, Yavtukh would have chastised the bearded critter by all means and chased him away, but now...

"It's all right," Yavtukh said indulgently. "The animal's not to blame. It's Prisia's fault. Who puts buttermilk in front of a hungry animal, even if it's the billy goat of Mr. Headman himself?"

But when the headman accidentally overturned the decanter with moonshine and it started gurgling out onto the rug, Yavtukh flew off his handle:

"Damn it, you he-goat, what are you doing?"

"It wasn't him, it's me, me, Yavtukh," Fabian said, catching up the decanter. There was only a little bit of moonshine left on the bottom; the headman gulped it down in the same indecent manner he used to long before he became the ruler of Babylon. Yavtukh noted, not without malicious delight: the Germans won't put up with such uncivilized ways from the headman, so he'll rule over Babylon up till the first meal he has with them.

"Prisia, go bring us some more. But I'll hold it myself, because these are my last reserves, brothers."

The newly filled decanter, which Yavtukh held between his knees, provided a good enough impulse for a talk.

When Yavtukh sunk into daydreaming and started talking about the land, to which he wished to return if the new headman deigned to grant him permission, Fabian sensed that it was just the time to start preparing Yavtukh for his eternal rest. Out of his pocket he produced a note he had received from a Hlynsk coffin maker last night, and gave it to Yavtukh. He read out aloud: "People, beware of Yavtukh. He's provocateur. A woman of the Bug River." Yavtukh's hands started to tremble, and while he thought about what to do with the note, Fabian snatched it out of his numb fingers and hid it in his breast pocket.

"What's the matter with you, Yavtukh?" Prisia asked, bringing out a bowl of fresh dumplings.

"Nothing, nothing really, Prisia. A little misunderstanding. The Mr. Headman thought the devil knows what about me, and since I can read people's thoughts at a distance, I almost choked on a dumpling. Now hit me between the shoulder blades to knock it down. Again, and again."

Savka laughed when Prisia pommelled her husband's back. She had a big fist, and after the third punch Yavtukh really looked like someone who had choked on a dumpling as he screwed up his eyes in pain.

"Bring him some water," Fabian ordered.

When Prisia rushed off for the water, Fabian said to Yavtukh:

"Now you be careful about Soviet power, Yavtukh. On this land it's omnipresent, it's in everyone of us... Mind you, it will return!"

Fabian got up from the rug, thanked Yavtukh for the meal, and said to his executive:

"Savka, let's go and do our job."

The billy goat stalked behind them gracefully like a courtier, although he was the second in this hierarchy of power — after Savka.

Yavtukh was wary of Fabian, just as Fabian was wary of Yavtukh. The only difference was that Yavtukh was dead earnest about finding someone to execute Fabian, while the latter didn't lose hope of saving his friend. To this end, Fabian decided to shoot Yavtukh symbolically at first, listen to his final words, and only then act in accordance with all the laws of war. So Fabian had to find an executioner whose punitive mission would be believed in above all by Yavtukh himself. Fabian categorically dismissed his own candidacy, because he knew he would burst into laughter, or perhaps tears, at the sight of Yavtukh's red feet and red hands, which surely would be all atremble before his "death." Savka, too, was absolutely unfit for this purpose, because he'd start heehawing and therewith ruin the whole ritual of the execution. Fabian turned over in his mind all the Babylonians, dead and alive, and chose Tanas Nezamozhny, who has served under the Czar as a warden at the then notorious Braclaw Prison and, of course, was knowledgeable about executions.

Tanas was now over eighty years old; he saw and heard badly, but all this was of no consequence to Yavtukh's destiny. On learning from Fabian that Yavtukh had turned traitor, the old man flew into such a fit of rage he was prepared to get even with Yavtukh in broad daylight, and his old wife barely managed to hold him back. Fabian asked Tanas to come to the windmills the next day. "You might as well consider that I'm there already," said the old

man, the spirit of the prison warden resurfacing in him after all these years. When Fabian asked what Tanas intended to "shoot" the traitor with, the former czarist warden smiled into his faded beard, darted a meaningful glance at his wife, Kilina, and said: "Don't worry your head on that account. You better prepare a fine verdict. You'll read it out good and loud for me to hear, because after these Lucifers popped up here, I've become utterly deaf."

They agreed on all the details toward the evening, and at dawn Savka arrived at Yavtukh's home, roused him from sleep, and called the bleary-eyed culprit out on the porch (Yavtukh had built the glazed porch just before the outbreak of the war, intending to add a new house on to the porch soon afterward).

"What's happened, Savka, for you coming so early?"

"You are to go to the windmills right away."

"Where?" Yavtukh pretended not to have heard clearly as he chewed the end of his mustache.

"To the windmills. Fabian is expecting you there."

"Why so suddenly? He isn't a full headman yet, and here he's summoning me already."

"He's gotten orders to distribute the windmills to make them work again. So you'll get one of them."

"That's a clever thing to do! Really clever!" Yavtukh became animated instantly, and ran down the porch steps. "Which one, Savka? Which one do I get? The one on the left or on the right?"

"The way I stand here it's on the left. For you it's on the right. Yes, on the right," Savka said, turning toward the windmills.

"Aha, that's it! The one on the right, because the left one's rotted away completely. I'll be with you in a minute!"

He ran inside, pulled on a service shirt, stuck his feet into tarpaulin boots, and flung at Prisia in his rush:

"Kill a rooster, the ashen one who's crowing out of place. Fabian will be eating with us today."

"My God, what a highly-placed guest!" Prisia laughed.

"Oh you crank! Fabian's giving me a windmill." He pointed through the window: "That one to the right, Prisia. He-he, against all expectations I'm getting a windmill! So kill the rooster, bake some puffs to go with the roast — Fabian's teeth are no good, and the bread we've got is so hard his billy goat won't be able to gnaw it."

"That's a hell of a lot of trouble..."

"But it's the windmill, the windmill, after all!" Yavtukh exclaimed and ran out of the house.

As he hurried on, Yavtukh didn't feel the ground under his feet, while he was experiencing such a range of emotions as he hadn't experienced a long time. The outlines of the crippled windmills appeared on the hill. One of them, built of stone, had burned to the ground; another one was without vanes and a roof, which had been torn off by an enemy shell; and only the third bore a semblance of a windmill, although it, too, had only a vane and a half instead of four vanes. This was the one Yavtukh dreamed of now as he climbed uphill along a footpath.

Once on the hilltop, he stopped to recover his breath. There was not a single soul in sight. Yavtukh had a weird feeling standing there all by himself before those half-ruins. Besides, he recalled Tikhin Pelekhaty whom the *kurkuls* had strung up in one of the windmills.

"Hey, is anybody here?"

A senile voice responded from the ruins:

“Sure there is!”

Yavtukh’s tongue grew numb, his knees shook, and he couldn’t move the big toe in his right boot, which spelled nothing good. Supported by his Kilina, Tanas Nezamozhny emerged from the ruins hiding his right hand behind his back. What could all that mean, Yavtukh thought.

“Wait a minute, Yavtukh.”

Believing that Tanas had also come to get a windmill, Yavtukh calmed down:

“Good morning. So we’ll be neighbors... And where’s Fabian?”

Fabian came out of the windmill on the right with the billy goat. He adjusted his spectacles and greeted Yavtukh.

“Well, Yavtukh, so we get down to distributing the windmills?”

“I’d like to have that one on the right side. I could have it operating within a week if the winds start blowing... Within a week.”

“I see... You’re a freak, Yavtukh. A Babylon freak.”

“I guess all of us are Babylon freaks. Are we to blame that we were born here? You and I and Fabian and Grandpa Tanas... and your billy goat... and Granny Kilina...”

“Fie!” Granny Kilina spat in anger at having been named after the billy goat.

“Aim at him, Tanas, while I read the verdict.”

“All right!” said Tanas, raising his hand with something rusty in it before his eyes. He sighted and aimed the firearm at Yavtukh, his hand trembling as in a fit of ague. Yavtukh didn’t even stir from the suddenness of everything that had happened.

“Make it fast!” Tanas hurried Fabian on.

“All right, all right.” Fabian took a paper out of his pocket, unfolded it, and started to read:

“As it has become known from reliable sources, Citizen Holiy betrayed to the invaders POW Ksan Ksanich, a former sergeant-major who was hiding in Babylon this summer in this year of nineteen hundred and forty-one...”

“Me???” Yavtukh raged.

“Don’t interrupt!” Tanas said.

“It is not on behalf of the current power that has appointed me temporary ruler by force, but on behalf of our dear Soviet power that I conduct this trial over Citizen Holiy, Yavtukh Onikiyovich, who in this difficult hour for Babylon sold his soul and honor by betraying his country...”

“But I... Hey, people!” Yavtukh cried out. “Didn’t I fight for Babylon?”

“Be quiet and don’t interrupt,” Tanas ordered. He liked how Fabian was reading the verdict, although the old man’s hand had faltered twice by that time and he had to catch the sight again with some effort. Fabian continued reading:

“Proceeding from the above, I Levko Khorobry, considering myself a representative of Soviet power in temporarily occupied Babylon, sentence to death Citizen Holiy, Yavtukh Onikiyovich, my former friend and associate, without a right to burial in the cemetery. Let his body be devoured by the Babylon curs, and let his bones rot under the sky until they turn to dust.”

“Is that all?” Tanas asked, his wife supporting him by his arm. His strength had ebbed, the rusty firearm trembling in his hand. It was a Smith and Wessen from the days of the Crimean War, and only a strong sailor could handle such a clumsy piece of ordnance.

“Have you anything to say, Yavtukh?” the judge in the spectacles asked.

Yavtukh wanted to say that he never considered himself a traitor, but the last words of the verdict (about his bones) had struck him so strongly he couldn't utter a sound in his defense, and his brain was unfit for anything, save perhaps coming to the conclusion to flee. The numbness in his feet had disappeared, and the big toe of his right foot, which had been contused in the war, stirred to life. Yavtukh regained his spirits and smiled at the judges: "Let's go and eat the roosters first, and then you can shoot me if I'm such an enemy. Prisia's killed a rooster for breakfast. She did it for you."

"No, Yavtukh, we'll eat the rooster ourselves. For the repose of your soul. Now you say what you've got to say. Have you anything to pass on to your kids or to Prisia? To your neighbors? To the Germans?"

"Yes, I have."

"What is it?"

"What???" He turned abruptly and bolted off down the footpath so fast a whirlwind wouldn't have caught up with him.

"Shoot!" Fabian ordered.

Tanas started, fired at Yavtukh's retreating figure, but the bullet missed the target, not because the shooter's eyesight was that poor or his punishing hand had tired, but because here at the windmills he and Fabian had agreed not to kill Yavtukh: it had to be a symbolic execution, an execution for the future. The dogs broke into a howl at Yavtukh, their barking becoming more and more persistent. As a matter of fact, it wasn't Yavtukh's running away from his death through the twisting streets, but only his ghost. When he had reached his farmyard, Prisia was killing the rooster behind the barn where she usually killed the stray ducks for borshch.

"Don't kill it, don't!" Yavtukh yelled and dived into the hole of the outdoor cellar covered by a tent.

"I've already killed it," Prisia said.

The stench of gunpowder was still pouring from the muzzle of the old Smith and Wessen, when Fabian, elated by a sense of duty fulfilled, said:

"Now let's go and eat the rooster."

"A rotten heart he may have, but still he's a live man. And here I aim and my heart bleeds all over. I know pretty well that I won't kill him, but a gun is a gun, you know — like it or not, it could get the man. Back home, me and my missus decided not to kill him. Didn't we, Kilina?"

"Sure, strange as it may be. How could we kill a man who burned down our old house and paid the insurance on it to a kopeck. Without Yavtukh, we wouldn't have had a new house to the end of our days."

"A house is no more than a house, but treason is treason," Fabian said, hiding the verdict in his pocket.

"Everyone could be made a traitor now. Anyone who's living under the Germans is a traitor. When our people come back, we'll be just the same we've been before. All right, let's go."

Yavtukh sat in the hole under the tent, and though trembling all over, he was already preoccupied with how to get revenge on Fabian. Previously it hadn't entered his mind that he had such a formidable enemy in the person of the philosopher. Tanas, too, was a sinister adversary to be reckoned with! A rascal czarist murderer. Prisia came up to the hole with the killed rooster.

"Who were they shooting at over there, Yavtukh?"

"At me, Prisia."

"The Germans? So early?"

"They were our people."

"Ours? For God's sake, Yavtukh, what are you blabbering about?"

"It was for Ksan Ksanich."

"Oh, I see. Serves you right. A horrible war's going on, and you act like a jealous boy. You should've kept on fighting instead of running away to your wife and hiding out in a hole. And what letters you wrote me from the front line? My heart rejoiced in such a husband! Now sit there in the hole..."

But no sooner did the smell of the roast carry from the house than Yavtukh emerged from his hideout, and at the risk of his life, almost crawled on all fours to the porch. He opened the door warily and froze in horror. At the table sat Ksan Ksanich, with beard and mustache and dressed in peasant garb. Sitting cross-legged on a trunk was Darinka who was telling a funny story. She stopped in mid-sentence when he came in. The roast steamed in a glazed bowl, while Prisia busied herself by the stove, holding a frying pan on an oven fork and baking puffs to go with the roast. Her face was flushed either because of the heat or because of her guest. On recognizing the master of the house, Ksan Ksanich got up and bowed.

"It's a good thing you showed up," Yavtukh said, taking his place at the table. Then he recalled something and ran out to the pantry. A minute later he returned with a bottle stopped with a corn cob, and took the glasses down from the dish rack.

"As I said, it's good you showed up, Ksan Ksanich. Without you life's simply a mess here."

"I dropped in on my way. What's happened?"

"We've got a blackguard here. Have you heard about him — Fabian the philosopher? He wears

spectacles and used to gad about the front line with his billy goat.”

“Oh yes, I remember seeing him during our retreat.”

“He sold out to the Germans. As bad a tyrant as they come. He’s forgotten Soviet power completely. My, you should have seen how he used to pass himself off as an activist and philosopher. He even sent a chair to the capital...”

“What chair?”

“A rocking chair of hazel. All right, so here’s to your health and to the death of that German tyrant Fabian. I’ll bump him off if you won’t. Just like that all by myself. Prisia knows me well enough to take my word for it. The matter’s very simple. If you don’t kill, you’ll be killed. Darinka, did you tell Ksan Ksanich what I asked you?”

“I did.”

“Now, when was I there? Oh yes, last Monday. They’re plagueing the life out of me because of you. Something must be thought up.”

“What’s there to think up? A soldier’s got only one thought on his mind. That’s why we’ve dispersed throughout the villages.”

“Don’t you consider me a soldier? Wasn’t it you who read my letters from the front line?”

“We all are soldiers. But until next spring we’ll have to sit it out in the village. There are no big woods around here, so we’ll stay where we are. Take Pilip Shulyak who’s keeping to his Rohachin. Once the Germans are in the village, he’s out of it. The Germans are out, he’s in. And why not? It’s our land and our people. We’ve got support all around.”

“Rohachin’s one thing, but Babylon’s another. Babylon’s no good for this purpose. Hey, look, look! They’re coming! They’re coming this way!” Yavtukh

flurried about the room. He ran out into the entrance hall and from there into the pantry. In it was a huge wicker basket for storing flour, so Yavtukh covered himself with it. Had I been a miller, he thought, that basket would not be empty.

Fabian and the billy goat, and Tanas and Kilina arrived for a treat of rooster. The three of them sat down on a bench, while the billy goat remained standing by the door, not knowing whether he would be allowed to go inside.

“And where is the master of the house?” Fabian asked.

“Yavtukh!” Prisia shouted, standing by the stove. “Now where are you?”

She ran out to the pantry, made him get out from under the basket, and led him by force to his would-be murderers. They sat side by side on the bench, smiling, while the czarist warden, his rusty piece of ordnance sticking in his bootleg, hawked into his fist. By the looks of them they had come for a treat of rooster. Live and learn, yet you’ll never understand those blasted Babylonians to the end, Yavtukh thought. To be on the safe side, he also armed himself with a sawn-off gun which he tucked under his belt. The gun hindered him from sitting and breathing freely, what with the butt sticking into his belly and the cold muzzle into a rather delicate place which fright already had its cold grip on, as it were. But what could he do? An enemy’s perfidy must be countered in kind (now that gun is in Richter’s collection).

“This is the very same Ksan Ksanich of whom Uncle Yavtukh was so jealous,” Darinka laughed on her trunk.

“Who, who?!” Kilina yelled into Tanas’s hairy ear.

"Oh yes, I've heard that name. He was mentioned in the verdict. Wasn't he?"

"I don't remember," the philosopher said, smiling.

The Babylonians are as good in a fray as in merry-making. Without parting with his gun charged with a total of five cartridges, Yavtukh kept running back and forth from the pantry, bringing every stronger brands of moonshine; twice he climbed up to the loft for pork fat hanging down a joist in a bag which had shrunk noticeably in size that day; all the eggs laid by the hens of the Holiys and Sokolyuks were fried; and by midday, Yavtukh's imagination had run away with him so far that he had the German armies routed and their remaining forces disorderly retreating through the very same Babylon they had passed on their way east, while Ksan Ksanich, who had become God knows what military commander by that time, was capturing them with his partisan troops. Yavtukh was working him up right in front of Fabian to have the latter finished off this very night before the fiend became a full-fledged headman in Babylon. Ksan Ksanich smiled at that, giving a wink at Fabian who, for his part, winked at Yavtukh. Then Yavtukh tried to find himself an associate in the person of the czarist prison warden, but the deaf man hadn't the slightest idea of the alignment of political forces in this house and kept "ehing" and "whating" all the time, which made Yavtukh almost want to spit into his hairy ear in disgust. The ear looked very much like that of Fabian's billy goat, and the host had to chase the animal away from the table lest he mix up the ears. After that Tanas agreed to shoot Fabian, but only if Yavtukh made up a fine verdict, because, as the czarist prison warden specified, the main thing for him was not "the act of

execution as such," but a fine verdict. Yavtukh told him not to worry his head off on that account, because Yavtukh, as a recent orderly of a general, would see to it that Fabian wouldn't be subjected to lengthy torture, and there wasn't any need to fuss much with that turncoat anyway. "Soviet power will only thank me for this," Yavtukh said. It's hard to tell how events would have developed at the table and who would have fallen a victim to this plot against the philosopher if a winded Savka Chibis hadn't appeared on the threshold and yelled:

"The Germans are coming!"

The would-be executioners and victims instantly came to an understanding and quickly made off onto the porch where Savka let them out singly or in pairs. Fabian headed with the billy goat to the Germans, saying for the sake of his peace of mind: "I'd spit on them from the rooftop for all I care." Yet he had to go, because they had sent Savka for him. Ksan Ksanich trudged across the garden toward the thicket of sharp-leaf willows which blazed red above the Chebrets; the czarist warden with his wife went home, while Yavtukh slipped into his pantry and hid under the empty wicker basket. For greater safety Prisia covered him with a basket lid, letting fall a remark about the Germans: "May they rot for not letting people have a moment's peace."

"Go there and find out whom they're after," Yavtukh ordered Prisia from under the basket.

Soon afterward she returned, threw the lid off the basket and said:

"Come on out. They're not our Germans, but some strangers. They came for potatoes in seven trucks, demanding one sackful from each household."

"One sackful?"

"Exactly."

"Thank God they haven't come for Ksan Ksanich. It's always easier to deal with Germans from somewhere else." He found a little sack and went to the cellar, although he and Prisia had sized a number of sackfuls of potatoes for the Hlynsk market the previous day. The sacks were tied up and stacked in the cattle shed, waiting for Sunday.

Ksan Ksanich watched Yavtukh's movements from the willow thicket. Climbing out of the cellar, Yavtukh peeped from behind the barn and scared the hens in the weeds. The hens went off in a wild cackle, which could attract the Germans. "Come on, hush up, you fools!" Yavtukh yelled at them. He returned, threw the sack onto his shoulder and lugged it off to the village office where the trucks stood.

The sack was a flimsy affair with patch on patch (Ksan Ksanich smiled involuntarily, because he knew how many good sacks the Holiy household had). When Yavtukh came up to the trucks and threw the sack onto the ground, it burst like a puffball, and out of it spilled the potatoes, which were so small it horrified Yavtukh, and he unwittingly closed his eyes to avoid seeing them. The German who was in charge and received the potatoes from the peasants flared up and yelled something in German at Yavtukh, pointing at the potatoes. He must have yelled that the great German army had liberated him, Yavtukh, while he wanted to feed it with such lousy spuds. Nothing doing! In his frenzy, he grabbed Yavtukh by the collar, threw him to the ground, and shoving an iron knee into his stomach (or that's what it felt like to Yavtukh), ordered the poor bugger to open his mouth.

A couple of Germans came running to the scene, but Yavtukh's mouth was so stuffed with potatoes by that time and his visage with the white mustache was

so distorted that one of the Germans burst out laughing as Yavtukh turned a deadly blue and his eyes popped out of their sockets as if he were on the verge of dying.

The German in charge ordered Yavtukh put on his feet and stood under the pear tree. As the potatoes came falling out of his mouth, one of them got stuck in his throat, and he barely managed to get it out. When he came to his senses, Yavtukh recognized Fabian with the billy goat and some other peasants, but no one dared come to the support of a Yavtukh condemned to execution. This is the end of me, Yavtukh thought in horror. Indeed, who did he want to fool? The Germans? Back in the cellar, he had a different opinion about them. What a fool he was; had he picked up another sack, he'd go on living. Had he brought the potatoes in it, he'd still be alive. My, oh my! To die just because of a lousy sack. Faced with imminent death, Yavtukh had no time to deal in scholastic categories, and his thoughts were concrete, perhaps as concrete as death itself. Presently, the German in charge (he had a dagger at his belt) ordered the soldiers to bring the carbines from the truck. Am I that invulnerable? Yavtukh thought, inhaling the Babylon air. Just one shot would be enough for me.

Right then, a shot from the willow thicket made the German in charge forget about Yavtukh and turn in another direction. A gray puff of smoke rose over the blazing red willow, the German pointed there, and ordered: "*Schiessen! Schiessen!*" Shoot! Shoot! All the fourteen Germans started to fire at the thicket, although no one returned fire from there.

Yavtukh dived into a dense nettle stand which no one had ever cut down. Some minutes later, he was at home, and by all the logic of what had happened,

he should have kept running to stay alive, but Yavtukh was of a different mold than other people. Prisia helped him hoist the best sack from the stack intended for the market on his shoulder, and barely dragging along his stumps under it, he lugged it off to the village office.

Fabian was now standing under the pear tree in place of the fugitive. The German in charge had decided to shoot the village headman. In his rage, he threatened to destroy that wicked Babylon, in which the Germans were shot at and fooled. But there came Yavtukh with a huge sack it was simply astounding how a man of a puny build like his could handle such a weight. He dropped it to the ground, untied the strings, and showed the contents to the German who hadn't seen such fine potatoes in his whole lifetime. He took one potato in his hand, weighed it on his palm, and showed it to the others so they would see what fine potatoes grew here. Then he slapped Yavtukh on the back: "*Gut! Mo-lo-dets!*" Good. Well done! The German pointed to the truck. Fabian rushed over to Yavtukh to help him load the sack. And only the billy goat remained standing under the pear tree. These creatures understand everything literally, and are prepared to see any event to the end.

The soldiers were elderly men from logistical troops. The one in charge asked the name of the village and wrote it down. He said that to the south the potato crop had been poor, while Babylon was simply a potato paradise. As Fabian surmised, Babylon would not be able to evade yet another potato "contribution" if rains did not start in the near future and cut off Babylon from the highways. Before he got into the lead truck, the German in charge looked for a long time at the willow thicket fading in the twilight.

Ksan Ksanich was found lying in the thicket between the stones some paces away from the Chebrets. He was still alive, and it was decided to take him to Hlynsk during the night, since it was extremely dangerous to do so in broad daylight. Nobody knew whether the local hospital was open there, but here, he was beyond help. Yavtukh threw a present — two drowsy roosters — into the wagon for the doctors. Right before Hlynsk they started to crow and roused Darinka who had dozed into slumber at Yavtukh's side.

CHAPTER 3

Our unit serviced a liason group at the headquarters of the South-Western Front. I flew a PO-2 (insistently called a U-2 to this day), the legendary biplane which in many respects had no equal during the war. Pursuing them, the Messerschmitts sometimes fell victim to their own perfection, ramming, in the early days of the war, into Podolian and later on into Poltavian hillocks. A former "civil airfielder," I was promoted to PO-2 pilot from motor mechanic, and immediately flew Captain Hlushenia, who called himself a special missions officer, although no regulations had such a status for a headquarters officer. But by this exceptional status, Hlushenia gained somewhat in stature in my eyes. He really flung himself into the most dangerous parts of the front line — what were called "hotbeds" in the large and small pockets our troops found themselves in at the outset of the war — which no plane but ours could penetrate. It could be said that I became the personal pilot of Captain Hlushenia, who was an utterly earthbound, even cautious man, although exceptionally brave

above the earth — to tell the truth, at an altitude of no more than one hundred to one hundred and fifty meters. Whenever I tried to raise the ceiling, Hlushenia yelled from his cockpit: "Hey, what the heck do you think you are doing?"

Once at dawn, he woke me and said that we were to fly into the enemy rear to Kirponoss. Hlushenia unfolded a map with such a dense network of markings it could have belonged to a great general. He found Lokhvitsya on it, and then poked his finger at a green belt of woods. As the map read, this was Shumeikova Grove—not even a wood but an ordinary grove where Kirponoss' headquarters, cut off from our main task force by Guderian's panzer, was holding all-round defenses for several days now.

We took off, skirted Lokhvitsya the Germans had occupied by now, and approached a woodland resembling Shumeikova Grove in outline. "Well done!" Hlushenia shouted. We touched down, and rather finely, by the edge of the grove. But except for cowherds and cows we didn't meet anyone else. I had never seen such a large herd in a little wood. As it turned out, the residents of the neighboring villages were hiding their cows here from Guderian's troops who were set on destroying the cattle to the last head, and it was not that easy to hide a cow in a village. "The damned animals bawl like mad in the barns!" the cowherds complained. The place we landed was called Diakiv Grove, but for some reason it wasn't even mentioned in Hlushenia's map, for which omission he blamed the czarist military topographers. So this little wood probably wasn't marked on the German maps either, for otherwise they would have payed a call on the cows for *Suppe*.

To our good fortune, there was an old man among the cowherds who knew about Shumeikova Grove. He

explained how we could best fly there past the Germans, that is, without being spotted. To be on the safe side, Hlushenia decided to take along the man who, to my surprise, agreed willingly: "I'll fly at least once before I die!" But I hinted to Hlushenia about the viciously limited possibilities of our puddle-jumper which barely stayed in the air even without an old man on board. Its wings were ragged; the engine was long past being serviceable; it wouldn't start from the cockpit, so every time Hlushenia had to turn the propeller and only then climb into his cockpit. Even several forced landings in the enemy rear could not shake Hlushenia's confidence in what he thought to be a really lucky plane. Yet a burst of an enemy shell ten meters from the plane proved enough for it to go out of control and, unresponsive to my guidance, choose for itself the nearest sunflower field where it landed, sending Hlushenia into raptures, most likely for the last time, because the sunflowers, absorbing our fall as they did, were already ripe and their dry stalks rent the skin of the plane completely, especially on the lower wing. Depressed by our mishap, we sat tight in the sunflowers till evening, and reached Shumeikova Grove in the night.

We were taken to the "generals' spring" where we met Kirponoss and a number of other generals. They were cooking *kulich* gruel in a kettle over a bonfire, so the first thing they asked us was whether we had any salt. There was some in the plane, but who could have known that people needed salt here. Hlushenia handed Kirponoss a letter he read right on the spot, for which purpose dry branches were added to the fire. From the letter it followed that we had come for Kirponoss, but the plane was stuck in the sunflowers and could hardly be gotten off the ground on its

torn wings. The general had seen us falling, thinking the plane would burst into flames. He guessed that it had been sent for him, and so now he only smiled indulgently like a man who didn't need anything anymore. He favored his right leg, walking with a cane; this was his second war injury, the first wound being inflicted during World War I — also by the Germans, and also in the right leg. "Why did you have to come in such a frail crate?" the adjutant reproached us when Kirponoss threw the letter into the fire. The adjutant must have been worried about himself, too, and had expected a larger plane. "No other kind can land here!" Hlushenia replied.

After burning the letter, Kirponoss ordered that we be issued rifles (we had only pistols on us) and asked the adjutant to take us to the group under Potapov who held defenses by the sunflowers.

Thus Hlushenia and I landed in the very hub of what turned into tragic events, while our plane stood in the sunflowers with its cocked nose. In the meantime, the enemy was closing in on us, pressing on all sides and using loudspeakers to tell us to cease our senseless resistance and surrender on honorable terms. During the lull in the hostilities at lunch time, a certain Brigadier-General von Heisswasser addressed General Tupikov through a loudspeaker in German (before the war, Tupikov had been military attache in Berlin and knew German). The nazi general bragged that if we didn't surrender he'd call out bombers to destroy the grove and us along with it. But Shumeikova Grove continued to resist. The ditch running around it served as a trench for us, and Kirponoss, accompanied by the adjutant, walked up and down it with his cane. He wore a helmet, with all the ensignia of a general.

Under the cover of night, the Germans pulled the

plane out of the sunflowers, placed it in an open field before our trenches, and fixed a plywood shield with an inscription on it: "Kirponoss' Plane." I don't know how Kirponoss felt about it, but for Hlushenia and me both the plane and the inscription turned into a real torture. After night fell, we burned the plane, plastering it with bottles of flammable liquid, which sortie cost Hlushenia his life.

Hlushenia was buried not far from the "generals' spring," without speeches or any other military honors. Here the dead were buried modestly and quietly, wrapped in a waterproof cape if he possessed one. "A brave courier he was," Kirponoss said about him. "Why did he have to go messing with that plane? He should have left it standing there. Such trifles don't have any effect on me." From these words I learned what Hlushenia had really been — a front-line letter carrier. But this in no way deflated his stature in my eyes, and I put into my case his map which really looked like the map of a great general.

We slipped out of Shumeikova Grove in a little group which the Germans let through intentionally, probably believing that Kirponoss himself was with us, because when we walked into an ambush in a village (either Hrechana or Solomyana Hreblya) and were surprised on a narrow dam with an impassable swamp on either side, the first question we were asked was: "*Wer ist hier Kirponoss?*" Who is Kirponoss here?... We were carrying the wounded General Potapov, the commander of the legendary Fifth Army which had held Korosten for almost a month and a half when the enemy was already at Kiev. The general was put into an ambulance (the German Major was still sure it was Kirponoss), we were searched, disarmed, and Hlushenia's map was shaken out of my case. The Major unfolded it, lit it

up with a flashlight, and exclaimed, surprised: "*Oh, ein grosser Offizier!*" Oh, a high officer! He ordered me to stand aside. I was escorted to division headquarters, and while Hlushenia's map was studied, I chopped wood for a day for their kitchen and dressed a first-calf heifer whose owner, a village woman, was hurling every imaginable curse of local extraction at me as if I were dressing her heifer of my own free will. I managed not to spoil the hide, with which I was able to cajole the vituperative woman at least.

Then the number of the likes of me increased; we were driven on foot to Mirgorod and crammed into the grounds of a flour mill where we started to die of hunger in a week. In the meantime, the orgies of the invaders didn't cease in the neighborhood on the far side of the River Khorol. We heard the demented Germans shout with the fireworks at night, "Vivat Guderian, Vivat!" although, as it turned out later on, Guderian wasn't there: he had hastily turned his panzer troops toward the east only to meet with catastrophe which had begun in the steppes around Poltava.

Babylon remained standing on the same hillocks that were settled back in the days of the Taurians, with the same windows of three and, in the larger houses, of four panes, and the same Chebrets meandering among the stones just as it used to, yet there was a different spirit in the air which gave Babylon a faded look, and its sunset-tinged windows which had once smiled so cheerfully with the receding colors of the day, gazed now upon the world gloomily and watchfully.

Twilight was falling, the people returned from the

fields, everyone carrying something on his shoulders: some an already sprouting sheaf of rye, its mouldy smell spreading far and wide; others a basket covered with beet tops in case a German intercepted the man ostensibly taking the tops for his cow while in real fact he was hiding beets that would go for moonshine or, as the Germans called it, *Schnapps*, the nastiest smelling dram of liquor (any German swilling it reeked as badly, which made him not as pure an Aryan as he pretended to be); still others carried a hempen bundle with God knows what things in it, even cartridges that were found in the trenches (also a fine thing, I tell you, especially if you've got something essential, say, a .375 rifle of 1896 vintage); and there was a stooped old Babylonian granny barely pulling along a fagot she had gathered twig by twig above the Chebrets and tied with a gray towel. The old woman had to go uphill; she stopped, sized up the gradient of the slope, and cursed the outlanders: "May you never see any good! May you roast alive over this brushwood." Then she shuffled up the hill where her ragged hut stood. It was only by the hut that I concluded that this was Otchenashka. I took the fagot from her — it was more of a load than I'd expected — and carried it to her hut. At first she shuffled alongside, her ample skirts rustling, and then she ran ahead of me and looked me in the face.

"Who are you? Aren't you the Valakhs' pilot?"

"Yes."

"Their house was destroyed when the front line was here. Headquarters was in it, so the Germans went after it. The stove is the only thing that remained of it. They went off to the east with Lukian driving cattle. And you, falcon, did they shoot you down or what?"

"I fell down myself."

"Oh did your pals fall down over Babylon! Our birds were light and wooden, while theirs are steel. One peck, and our was no more and burst into flames. Did you burn, too?"

"No, I didn't."

"We should've made steel birds. See, you have to hoof it from now on. Where to? To that stove with the funnel? To carry brushwood? Tell me what force fell before the German, damn his rotten soul? There's no wind, no strength, everything's numbered with the dead. Who's to blame for it?"

"We're to blame, granny."

"And it had to happen just when we started living decently. There was grain enough and to spare in the garner, the windmills ground only fodder flour, more and more people went there to make semolina, white sacks with the finest ground flour stood in the pantries in neat rows — take all that and enjoy life, Otchenashka! But now there are no more windmills, no more winds, no more money."

The elm trees stood on the Singers' hill still bathed in the colors of twilight; the crossbeam was there, but the swing between the trees was gone. Babylon had completed its flying through the air.

"Is Malva around here?"

"Oh my God, I don't advise you inquire about her. They came to search her house two or three times already. The old woman swore that Malva went beyond the Dnieper with our troops. But I saw that poor soul myself just as I'm seeing you now. Once I was coming back from Pilip's wife late at night when suddenly I saw Malva. Don't breathe a word, she said, and burst out crying. Wait a minute, I told her. You're the Singers, aren't you? You kept in with the Germans and sold their sewing machines here

through your agents. So go now and plead for the Singers. They thought I was twiddling my thumbs in the windmills all these years. I was sitting there all right and thinking about everyone. I've got a head which can think about everything in the world. Malva's on the run now, but I'm thinking about her, too. And where are you heading to?"

"I'm going to my farmyard."

"The stove's cold there. Come to my place. I'll heat it up nice and warm and make some *kulish* gruel. We might be living under an occupation regime, but we've still got to eat. Especially if a man's coming back from the war. People have gotten stingy and nasty. There are some who won't give you water to drink. You can't be blamed for what's happened. Mind you, don't go blabbing about Malva. She surely must be worth something if the nazis are looking for her. Take a look at me — I'm going around freely and nothing happens to me. Why the hell would they need me? But Malva's gotten in their hair somehow. They're looking for some Ksanich fellow Darinka brought from a POW camp. He held the front in our parts. Well, that's about everything I know."

"Are there any police here or a headman?"

"The police are in Hlynsk. Thank God, He spared us their presence. But the headman they appointed was such a dog he plagued the life out of us. He was worse than the Germans — some Schtuss of Schtuz from Pritske. He used to go home on horseback. They say the Germans killed him, not knowing who it was. It happened late at night. Probably they were no more German than you are. He really got under people's skin, robbing them of their beets and grain. So the 'Germans' bumped him off right there on the road. That's why Ksan Ksanich is being hunted."

"Who'll be the headman now?"

“Yavtukh wants to be headman. Holiy * that he is he'll fleece us to the last stitch as well. Half of his sons are on the front line; he, too, came home from the war, but he's as much German now as the real ones. He jabbbers away in their tongue. Maybe he was a spy before the war... Well, sonny, that's what freaky things happen. A spy insured our houses, burned them down, and there we were sitting and keeping mum. His kingdom has come to ancient Babylon, as the Scriptures say.”

I went past Ruzia's house which stood right by the dam. The day was already declining, but there were no lights inside the house — it was probably empty. I forgot to ask Otchenashka about Ruzia, who was my closest relative in Babylon. Ruzia Dzhura was a celebrity before the war. She had been a famous field team leader and went to speak in the capital on behalf of Hlynsk District. Now the Germans would rake in the sugar from her beets, having put the sugar refinery at Zhurbiv back into operation. On my way home I came across a caravan of wagons with beets from Babylon. I jumped into a deep ditch, from which I heard Yavtukh driving the lead wagon and humming a sad, endless song. It was one of the songs the Babylonians liked to hum along the road. Listening to it and recognizing Yavtukh's voice, I almost shed a tear and was about to jump out of the ditch and greet him (he and my father were friends, I was friends with his son Yasko who was the eldest in the family. Yasko was serving in Mari, a town where it was so hot that resin melted and you could boil eggs in the sand — or at least that's what Yasko wrote me in his letters). In a word, all these factors were in favor of my greeting the first Babylonian I came

* Holiy — lit. naked — Tr.

across on the road. But I didn't do it. I still couldn't imagine Yavtukh under the given circumstances or believe this exotic Babylonian to have turned "German." In the meantime, I caught myself at the thought that of all the Babylonians he was the one I wanted to see most. He must surely have been another Yavtukh, quite unlike the one I knew, an utterly mysterious man now. At Piryatin we were stopped by a man who started demanding to see our documents. There were two of us, two POW escapees, so we pulled him down from his horse and were about to make him breathe his last, when he said:

"The Germans are in there. I wanted to head you off, so you wouldn't die in vain."

"Who are you?" we asked.

"A headman," he said. "Newly appointed. I only got the job yesterday."

We parted in peace and even thanked him, which we regretted later on, because there proved to be no Germans in the neighboring village, and we had to steal through a swamp, nearly perishing in it. The headman had simply fooled us when we grounded him under his horse. He was the first headman I had to deal with. In any event, I couldn't reveal myself to Yavtukh for all his friendship with my father and my friendship with Yasko; besides, the tune he hummed that day wasn't exactly a merry one.

When I was on leave, Yavtukh couldn't have enough of admiring my Aeroflot uniform, which we cadets contrived to transform into a marine uniform through every imaginable trick, especially by making our trousers bell-bottomed. "Oh, what trousers!" he wondered, and tried my cockaded cap on his sons. "Study hard, you numbskulls, if you want to fly," he said to his stunned sons (Yasko was already serving in Mari by then). When my puddle-jumper was crash-

landing, I recalled this episode at Yavtukh's where I had come not so much to see Yavtukh as to show myself off — a future civil airline pilot, perhaps the only one in Babylon at that time. Funny as it seemed, those bell-bottomed trousers Yavtukh was so fascinated with could have easily cost me my life at any point now. Yavtukh wasn't the only one who remembered them, and nothing could have made Babylon forget them; as for the invaders, it would have been enough just to give them a hint about the appearance of such a Babylonian, even if he hadn't flown that high with Hlushenia.

From the burned site of the Valakhs' home with the soot-blackened stove and chimney resembling the co-op locomobile, my childhood memories (how many tales had I heard on that stove in winter!) took me to Ruzia's house across the very same dam, on which the ghost of Bonifatius (remember?) had contrived to climb on Savka's back when he returned home late at night after supping at Ruban's. Right then I, too, was gripped by sudden fright on this dam: what if the ghost of the Carmelite really roamed through Babylon to this day? How could the ghost know that Zosia hadn't been here for years, because Ruban was sent from village to village, so Zosia followed him with the children, and no one knew where she was now: probably she was hiding out somewhere here in the district or had left for the east. Of all people, Ruban's wife could expect no mercy in Babylon. A flock of white ducks was spending the night on the pond. On the eve of the war, father had written to me in Mirgorod that he had decided to have white ducks and had taken thirty ducklings from an incubator, so these could have been our ducks. I called them — the flock stirred to life, a drake quacked and led the white string into the

reeds farther from harm's way. Sooner or later, someone would coax the flock to the shore.

And there was Ruzia's house so familiar to me since childhood. Of all the windows, I found only one with an air of domesticity about it; the embroidered curtains hung like white sorrow. From behind the curtain patterns, I saw a pair of lively eyes that weren't insane at all nor frightened, but pierced my heart and put me on guard because of their wariness. Then a hand pushed the curtains aside, the eyes looked at me with surprise and trust, and another hand pointed to the door.

I went up to the door, stopped in front of it and waited — a huge lock was hanging on the door. How come? Who was locking up Auntie Ruzia? What for? She must have reached her limits of reason if she had to be locked up. I had heard from someone that the Germans were shooting the insane. So that must be Babylon shutting her up to save her.

I felt both awkward and sorry standing there in front of the door, without being able to help her in her grief or dispel the sorrow of her white-curtained windows. Still, who was unlocking the door for this poor woman? Wouldn't it be better for me to get out of here?

"Feel around up there with your hand. There's a key on the window over the door. Unlock the door and come in."

I did as I was told; after all, I had forced my presence on the host and so it was too late to retreat. I greeted her, while she, with a sweep of her white shift, ran inside to look for matches.

"That Ruzia's really scatterbrained to leave and take the matches with her. Wait a minute. I'll get an ember from the stove and give us some light somehow."

Yes, she's in a bad state, I thought, if she's slandering herself. That's the limit.

"It's not enough that she locks me up in here, so she hides the matches from me lest I light the lamp. Come in, come in, don't be afraid. I'll get an ember right now."

She ran behind a partition, from where I heard the sound of a clanging hearth lid and of an oven fork scraping aside the ashes. A minute later, she brought an ember on the lid, put a piece of cotton wool on top, and said: "Blow on it." I blew on it until the cotton wool caught fire, with which a wick lamp fed by falseflax oil was lit. The air in the room smelled like a field.

"Well, well, and who would you be? I don't seem to recognize you. You look like someone I know, but I can't make out who. It must be you — the eldest Valakh boy?"

"It's me, Malva... Malva Orpheivna."

"When did we see each other last? Back in Green Mills, wasn't it?"

"When we were threshing in the schoolyard, remember? You stood at the drum then, while I raked aside the chaff. There was Lel Lelkovich, Domirel, Kirilo Lukich in his pince-nez. He lost it in the chaff..."

"And the Pasovskys were there..."

"...and the Pasovskys... Maria Wilhelmivna and Olexandr Stratonovich the math teacher."

"He died, the poor man, of asthma before the war. During the final exam he died. The asthma choked him."

"Well, and what about Lel Lelkovich and Domirel?"

"They went to war... on the first day. Only Kirilo Lukich stayed behind. He's old already... been a teacher since the *zemstvos* were organized. I had a

lot of trouble with him. He didn't want to leave the farmstead and move to a new village. His orchard alone was a *dessiatine* and a half. It became the property of the collective farm, and we moved his house to the new village. Of course, the old man didn't want to leave his hereditary nest: fields of rye, oat and wheat were waving all around — a paradise for birds, cattle, and pigeons of which he had about three hundred. But I couldn't back down. Now I daren't show my face in Green Mills because of those farmsteads."

"I see life's not so sweet for you here either."

"At least the people here are of one mind with me. They don't hold a grudge against me. They only lock me up..." Malva smiled. "Ruzia locks me up in the morning and unlocks me at night. She'll be back from beet harvesting any minute now. Imagine how surprised she'll be to see the door unlocked. Why are you standing? Sit down and tell me your story. Where are you from and what are you going to do?"

"It's a long story, Malva... Orpheivna."

"Oh come on, drop that patronymic Orpheivna. Just call me Malva. We're relatives after all. They say you were flying?"

"Not high... on a biplane. I was brought down. I mean my plane was."

"Somewhere around these parts?"

"No, around Poltava beyond Kiev."

"From the encirclement?"

"Yes, exactly, Malva... Orpheivna. We stood our ground there to the last round of ammo. Along with the generals, we rushed to the final assault. Pilot or no — everyone joined in. The assault was led by the Secretary of the Central Committee Burmistenko. I was in his group. There were five groups in all, and none managed to slip out. Burmistenko was killed

right in front of my eyes. We didn't even have a chance to bury him."

"What about Kirponoss? Did he turn traitor?"

"Who told you that?"

"People are saying so. It was supposed to have been in the German newspapers. He surrendered his army and then gave himself up."

"I saw Kirponoss myself. I brought him a message. I don't know what was in it, but after we were shot down near his headquarters, he personally received the message from us. That was at dawn; he was with us for another day, walking around the trenches with a cane after he had been wounded. The next day, near sunset, he died at the 'generals' spring.' There is a spring by that name in Shumeikova Grove, where the generals drank water, so the men called it the 'generals' spring.' A mine exploded while he was drinking water. A stray mine. He was buried right there. I myself drank water out of the spring when we arrived. If my plane hadn't been shot down, I would've taken Kirponoss out of there."

A thumping of feet came from outdoors.

"That's Ruzia," Malva calmed me down, and rushed out to meet her.

Ruzia wore a black dirty padded jacket girded with a belt, boots, and a warm kerchief, while her eyes reflected both fright and a smile. The Germans had put the sugar refinery back into operation, forcing all the people to dig beets on the plantation in day-time and clean them to the light of lanterns at night. The commandant came about twice or three times a day, while *Gebietskommissar* Messmer showed up every week, bragging he'd call a meeting of beet grovers in Hlynsk to be attended by someone higher-up; the best of the best workers were to be presented with watches. You bet! Such beets, Ruzia said, were

worth half of their Germany. We grew them for ourselves. The beet roots were as big as horse heads, the diggers' hands grew numb getting the beets out of the ground, and here that damned slavemaster simply passed by in his white gloves and clucked his tongue with delight.

"That's what soil we gave away to those Germans!" Ruzia raged, pulling off her boots on the bench. She couldn't get the boot off her right foot, so Malva came to her help, which was a rather moving sight to see. Malva pulled hard and fell on the bed; she went off in a gale of laughter, while Ruzia, barefoot now, weeped on the bench.

"Come, come, enough of it, you shockworker. Go wash your feet, have supper, and give a thought to my relative here. He's from the road and hasn't had a meal either."

"What do we have for supper?" Ruzia asked.

"Dumplings with beets... and roast. Unsalted, though. We've got no salt."

Both women went behind the partition where Ruzia washed herself, while Malva laid the table for supper, bringing the dumplings, the famous roast duck, Babylon style, and an uncorked bottle of beet moonshine.

"It's from our distillery," Malva said with a smile, putting the bottle on the table. "Ruzia's been catching colds and coughing, so I keep her going with this brew. She's digging away in the field, while I stay here... under lock and key."

Ruzia joined us, drank her glass, and got down to the dumplings. In an instant her cheeks flushed, she became animated, and sparkles lit up her eyes.

"Where do you intend to live?"

"I don't know yet."

"Your white ducks are here on the pond. Severin

got them in Hlynsk. He put them under my charge, but I can't make them come to my call. Either they've run wild or don't understand our tongue. Some Chinese variety..."

"Oh yes, father wrote me about them."

"About the ducks?"

"He wrote me about everything. He was such a prolific letter writer I barely managed to read all of his letters. He wrote about you, too."

"What did he write about?"

"About the decoration you got for harvesting beets, and about you almost marrying some newcomer to our parts."

"Enough about that. He was a settler from Te-rebovlia. First he built me a stove and then this partition here. He was a fine man, kind, quiet, and a big master at stove building. Must have fallen in love with me or with my fame perhaps. Well, he lived here for a while one winter and left. Then I heard he's with the Germans, chief of police in Hlynsk. See, I took him in, but he could've been their spy long ago. Malva knows him; he used to build stoves in Green Mills too."

"And what stoves, I tell you! They were simply grand. You should've seen how he painted them. There wasn't a single stove or a single painting on it that looked alike. The Lemkos were fascinated by his work. And my, was he handsome. My Zhurba even got jealous of his interest in me. Just like that. One fine day he left us for Babylon."

"Does he drop in now?"

"He does. He came to make up with me. Get thee behind me, Satan, I told him. Don't you dare cross my threshold! How could I possibly let him in when Malva's here? I wouldn't have anyway, even if she weren't around. So he didn't show up anymore. Just

passed on his best regards through Yavtukh. It made me sick just hearing it. Once he came to recruit our boys to the police, but not a single one fell for it. They're carting sugar beets, and, well, you know how it is — some have to dig, others have to cart, but none of them will join the police for love nor money. Well, and what will you do? Think you'll have to dig beets too? What if I take you on my team?" Ruzia laughed.

"Don't rush that business about your team, Ruzia. He's got to find a place to live at first," Malva interfered.

"Someone will take him in. There are lots of young women around. Now I've got Halka Kapelyushna on my team. She's young, beautiful, got an award for beets. There's another one — Oniska Paliy. You should know her; she's one of the Paliys that live over at Huntsvoty. She has no husband either. Built a new house before the war, and has a kid. He's only three years old, but already grazes geese. There's another suitable party — Todoska Yustimchuk who's about Malva's age. So what? Our young man has already cut his eyeteeth. He reminds me a lot of Andrian when he was a young man. Doesn't he, Malva?"

"I don't remember Andrian at that age. I had never visited the swing at that time. Ruzia, don't you really want to know where our guest has come from?"

"As if I don't see it myself. He's come from the war; everyone's from the war now. If they couldn't stand up for us, let them at least be taken in by us. Or do you think they'll just be loafing around? That's something the Germans don't put up with for long. Bang-bang — and the loafer is no more. You've got to have a refuge, and sort of a cover."

“Sure, but not here, not in Babylon. Here the nazis will nab him on the second day. Whether he’s at Halka’s or Priska’s or Oniska’s. As soon as they catch wind that he was a pilot, they’ll go after him right away. But for sure the boy can be of use to us.” At this point, Malva stopped abruptly, darting a warning glance at Ruzia lest she blab more than she should, from which I surmised that in this house, they knew something which it was too early for me to know yet.

Could it be the underground, from which my new war would begin? Did underground resistance really start simply like that, during supper in the company of such domestic, delicate and strange creatures who couldn’t even pull their boots off properly and fell down in the process? I had seen great, stern generals who, after having exhausted everything they had for the resistance, consciously went to meet their deaths, while here, these two defenseless women were far from any thoughts of surrendering. I looked at them in amazement: where did such audacious faith and human indomitability come from?

We agreed that no place would be good enough for me in Babylon, although it literally swarmed with candidates for my affections. The best thing for me would be not to linger a single day, but leave for Green Mills to the Lemkos, the more so, since Otchenashka had seen me, and that meant the whole of Babylon would know about me the next day.

Malva put on her boots and coat, covered her head with Ruzia’s kerchief, and took me beyond the village. On the way, she told me about her first underground in Hlynsk.

For two weeks in a row, the enemy troops had marched through Hlynsk, turning it into an inferno

of black dust, stench and pandemonium. For two weeks there wasn't a moment's peace in Varya Shatrova's house for the German officers who were either attracted by its green roof, the finesse of the window lintels, or perhaps by the hostess herself. Malva couldn't have expected all this when she had chosen the place for her first safe house, and now she had to pass herself off as Varya's sister or her neighbor. Fortunately, there were the quarters of the old Snigur behind the wall, so she and Varya moved in there, but the officers couldn't be kept out of there either and started inviting the handsome women to their nocturnal orgies. One of the lodgers, a general whose corps had been transferred to Hlynsk from Paris, took a fancy to Malva (who called herself Nastia) and bragged he'd sent a car for the Fraülein as soon as the corps finished its march and billeted for the winter after the end of the war, which he predicted would be over within a month or a month and a half. He had confused Paris with Hlynsk, of course, and received a flat refusal from Malva, after which he didn't dare show up in the quarters where Malva had taken refuge from his advances. However, the Gestapo which appeared right after the corps, showed a far greater interest in Malva. In the center of Hlynsk, all the prominent places had notices pasted up about the search for Malva Kozhushna, a dangerous Bolshevik who had been left behind for subversive work against the Third Reich. Varya tore one such notice off a pole and brought it home. It had a photograph of Malva which had been printed in the district newspaper before the war.

Malva didn't leave the house for a whole week until Schwarz came hobbling into the farmyard on his peg leg one morning. He ordered Varya Shatrova to dress herself as finely as possible, and get onto the

britzka. He took her to the Herr *Gebietskommissar*. She had no choice but to go. She returned home with the rank of cook, which depressed her immensely, whereas Malva was sincerely overjoyed at such a display of trust in Varya, although, to tell the truth, Malva hadn't as yet any idea how this trust could be turned to the benefit of the underground. The sudden searches that swept through Hlynsk forced Malva to look for a new refuge, and she made off for her native Babylon.

Beyond the village, Malva stopped and listened intently into the night.

"Of course, that was a foolish thing to have done," Malva continued her story. "Valigurov bungled something. I can't stick my nose outdoors now. Why should I have been left in my own district? He told me: 'You know the people here, so it'll be easy for you to handle matters.' But the people know me better than I know them. I bumped into Otchenashka, then into yet another chatterbox, and my underground went to the dogs. I'm sitting under lock and key — and that's all there is to my underground. They seized Yaroshenko in Hlynsk. He was left behind, too. Must have blabbed about me; otherwise the Germans wouldn't be after my hide. Babylon couldn't have betrayed me. But Green Mills could. I chased them out of their farmsteads. Kirilo Lukich would be the first to settle his old scores. But here — that's out of the question. The Babylon *kurkuls* have dispersed throughout the world and don't dare show their faces anymore. Maybe they will later on, but not now. Haven't heard about them so far. They say Tereshchenko's son came to the refinery before it went into operation. He stuck around a day or two and went back somewhere to Prussia where he lives. As for our own magnates, there are none. The older ones

have probably died, while the younger ones finished their schooling, made their own way in life, and are fighting for Soviet power like everyone else."

"Any news about Lukian?"

"None. He and the Valakhs drove the cattle away. He was the group leader for the whole Hlynsk District. I should have gone with them, but Valigurov made me stay behind. Without arms, without people, without anything. Besides, he left that Yaroshenko man to my grief. A specialist in radio he was supposed to be. A radio operator, in short. Now what could he radio about? That the Germans put the refinery in Zhurbiv into operation? That the Jews are being executed in Hlynsk? That the Gebiets intends to call a congress of beet growers next year to have the same harvests Soviet power used to grow..."

"Ruzia grew those beets."

"Sure she did. Who else? No power can raise beets without such a woman as Ruzia. There are crops which are worth nothing without women. For me Ruzia is an entire state. If she's locking me up and hiding matches from me so there won't be any smoke coming from her house, that's the way it should be. Which means that there exists a state, and she, Ruzia, thinks not so much about me as about her state. That's why I feel so good with her. It's quiet that way. Safer that way, so to speak. I feel as if I were born in her house."

"Do you have anything to defend yourself with in case you're exposed?"

"What do you have in mind?"

"Come on now, I mean do you have any weapons?"

"No, not a one."

"Absolutely none?"

"Absolutely."

“Then take this. How can you do without anything?”

“What is it?”

“Our ordinary eight-shot TT pistol.”

She took it, held it in her hand, and gave it back, confused.

“I don’t know how to shoot.”

“Didn’t they issue any guns to the chairmen of the Village Soviets?”

“Maybe they did to the men. But I’m a woman. Where could I’ve carried it? In my bosom?” Malva laughed. “Where really? And besides, what would I need it for?”

“How do you intend to fight then?”

“How? Do you think I know how? If I knew how to start, would I be here at Ruzia’s? Maybe the picture will be clearer later on. Valigurov told me to sit tight first and not to stir. Then the comrades from the center will locate me, assign me a mission, or even drop paratroops. I’ll wait for a while yet, and then I’ll get things going on my own. Me, you, Ruzia — that’s already a little organization, isn’t it? If it’s any trouble for you to be with us, just tell me, I won’t take offense.”

“Why should it be any trouble, Malva?”

“Well, you’d have to come here from Green Mills and report what’s going on there. Green Mills has a railroad on which trains move to the front line. Sullyng our hands over one nazi, even if he were a hangman, would be senseless. The nazis would retaliate by murdering our people. But derailing a train — with guns and tanks and all the works — that would be a different matter. An accident, you see! Who could they retaliate against for an accident? There’d be victims and no culprits. So have a good look at the railroad and what it carries, who it

carries, and how it's guarded. And whether the trains pass through at night. I think they do. In a word, I send you to Green Mills to reconnoiter. I'm sending you officially. When can I expect you to be back?"

"Would two or three days be good enough?"

"What? In a month, and no sooner. Settle down first, live there for a while, and have a look around. Maybe you can even get a job on the railroad. Why not? It wouldn't be bad to be a trackman or something of the sort."

"I'll try."

"There was a good man working there — Mikola Rak, a senior train guard. If he's still there, it'll be easy for you to get a job through him."

"What Rak do you mean?"

"The husband of Pania Vlastovenko, our shock-worker. You should know her. She was Lel Lelkovich's flame."

"Didn't she leave?"

"No, she's here. The celebrity and glory of Green Mills. You can pay her a call — she's one of ours. But don't breathe a word about me. The Lemkos mustn't know I'm here, because they've got their scores to settle with me. Otherwise I would've gone to them long ago."

We didn't notice how we had approached the windmills. From here, I was to go by myself. We had already said goodby to each other when headlights cut through the dark from behind the Abyssinian hills, streaked across the crippled vanes, and moved on. We barely managed to run into the nearest windmill, climb the stairs to the loft, and hide.

"What's shining there?" Malva pointed to a joist.

"It's an owl."

The truck neared the windmills and the light snatched the owl out of the darkness. The bird flapped

its wings in fright, followed by a second and then by a third. It was an open truck. Judging by the voices jabbering something about windmills, the truck was full of soldiers. We only hoped they wouldn't stop here. But the fiends did stop, tumbled out of the truck, and came up to the windmill. One of them said that these windmills reminded him of Westphalia, but there, they were huge and had millers living in them on the ground floor. The soldiers trained their flashlights on the ruined windmills, but someone, probably the one in charge of the troop, honked the truck horn, so the soldiers immediately ceased their inspection, got into the truck and left in the direction of Pritske.

I hid the pistol, and Malva sighed with relief. We went down and stood there for quite some time to make sure they wouldn't turn toward Babylon. Not knowing the way in the night, the Germans could have lost their bearings. Malva said I had kept myself well in hand, while she was still trembling. "Let's stand here for a while until I calm down," she said. After some minutes, she said by way of parting: "Go on. I'll drop in at mother's place to see my son." She must have done that every night when her son was asleep. Then she watched him from Ruzia's window across the pond in the daytime. At the thought of it, I had the urge to turn around and go back to her. Malva shouldn't have been visiting her son. But a mother remains a mother even in the underground.

CHAPTER 4

It was Sunday in Green Mills. If not for the war, it might have been a merry beer day, when the Lemkos rolled a couple of kegs of Tivriv beer made of local barley into the club, and the musicians played late into

the night, alternating the Pas d'Espagne with the Cracoviénne and at the very end, striking up a lively square dance which made life brighter for the whole next week. But now the Germans were stationed in the club for the second month running, although they were supposed to have come for a couple of days to guard the railroad by which the Führer himself was to arrive to greet his troops. The high windows of the club were sandbagged to the middle, and in two of the windows, on the red-tiled roof, there were machine guns aimed, for some strange reason, at the cemetery across the road from the club. There were boulders in the cemetery, a white chapel and thickets, from which the Germans expected anything. Those Lemkos who had been inside the club, like Silvester Makivka, said that everything in there remained as it had been before the war: the stage, scenery, and the curtains, which our botany teacher Domirel had painted with colored pictures tracing the history of Green Mills that culminated in a ceremonial procession of the best beet growers headed by Pania Vlastovenko. Domirel also wanted to paint the walls, but war interrupted his work. He joined the ranks, and everyone hoped the local Siqueiros wouldn't die in action. Domirel was especially good at painting the Lemko women who strode across the curtain as if they were alive. The German soldiers divided the women pictured among themselves, giving Pania to their Captain "Evil Joachim" (as they called him behind his back) probably to gain his favor with such a sacrifice. But Evil Joachim was a firm character and prohibited any contacts whatsoever with the living prototypes represented in the painting, demonstrating thereby his own exemplary staunchness against the charms of these "bondwomen of the Reich," as he called them.

Evil Joachim turned out to be a violinist. He carried an old violin in a case around with him. Once, after he had heard Silvester playing (deprived of a club, Silvester played for the Lemkos by his cottage every evening), Evil Joachim had him brought under escort to his presence. Now Silvester went to the club as if to work. Both violinists made beautiful music, but the divine sounds reaching the Lemkos from the club only made them the more gloomy, because they thought Silvester had gone over to the Germans. When he, exhausted and jaded, returned from the club, they called him a "limping devil," and the most embittered villagers set the dogs on him. Silvester was already set on running away from Green Mills and would have done so if he hadn't had his sister, a cripple just like him, on his hands. Evil Joachim would make no allowances for the fact that she was the sister of such a musician of genius. So at the fixed time, Silvester limped to the club again and again, cursing his violin and his bitter fate. He counted the number of the Germans, ferreted out everything he could about their armaments, at times even intercepting their passwords which they changed from time to time, although he did not intend to attack them, but did it just in case the information might come in handy at some point during the war. Silvester had never been in the army because of his limp, and the only time he'd seen the bandmaster's staff of a military orchestra was during the maneuvers in 1935 when the corps under Krivoruchko passed through Green Mills on its way to Babylon. The bandmaster held the staff with two horse tails high over his head, while he showed off on a prancing white horse in front of the corps, which, too, was an impressive sight.

So by Silvester's count, there were exactly one

hundred Germans guarding the railroad. They sent details out every night, and each detail took along a number of Lemkos as hostages. First they took just the men, but eventually the village headman started sending women as hostages as well. The hostages had to walk some meters in front of the Germans and be the first to run into danger. Pania Vlastovenko also did her rounds as a hostage until the Captain recognized her as "his" Kätchen, led her up to the stage, ordered the curtains lowered, and asked her: "Is that you?"

"Yes," Pania replied.

"*Karasho! Gut!*" the Captain said.

He sent her home, and next evening came to her with his violin, accompanied by a young soldier who brought sheet music in a folder.

"I want to play for you," Joachim said, looking around the new house which wasn't even whitewashed yet.

Pania had moved into this house from the farmstead just before the war. Her husband, Mikola Rak, rose to the rank of senior train guard on the railroad. At the outset of the war, he had accompanied the troop trains and didn't return to Pania, leaving her with a daughter going on six in the unfinished house. Pania's mother had died while they were still living at the farmstead.

When Evil Joachim arrived, Pania was about to go to bed, so now she stood near her sleeping child with unplaited braid, her hair so black it made the eyes smart to look at her; on the hearth of the stove a wick lamp glimmered dimly. Joachim realized that Pania wanted anything but to listen to music; besides, there was the sleeping child who might be woken up by that music. But once Joachim crossed the threshold of another home, he immediately claimed to be its

master. While the young soldier with the sheet music and submachine gun stood by the door and stared at the handsome woman, the Captain opened the violin case, took the instrument and bow out of it, settled on an oak bench, and putting the violin under his chin, drew the bow across the strings. The violin whimpered a sob and fell silent.

"I play for you about Tyrol Frau." Pania kept her peace and stroked her daughter's hair. "I play without sheet music." He started to play, and did it in a really moving way, but woke up the daughter. Pania took the girl into her arms, pressing her close, and listened. She had to listen.

Just at that moment, a motorcycle stopped by the house (the Germans kept parked five or six motorcycles with sidecars and two covered staff cars near the club). A minute later, a helmeted soldier with a submachine gun hanging down his neck ran into the room, and shouted: .

"Paratroopers!"

Evil Joachim couldn't put the violin back into the case fast enough; he shoved it in the wrong way, and forgetting about the "Tyrol Frau," rushed outdoors.

Half an hour later, a battle ensued that lasted almost the whole night through. Pania didn't sleep, listening to the shooting which seemed to move away, and somewhere around midnight, shifted to her former farmstead. All that had been left there was an orchard, brushwood, and a wild farmyard... and now our paratroopers were there.

Pania thought about her husband Mikola. She wanted to believe that Mikola was at the farmstead. Mikola did regular military service with the engineering troops, building a railroad somewhere in the blazing south of Asia, and if he had ever been parachuting, he'd certainly have bragged about it to her.

The trucks and motorcycles kept rushing back and forth from the farmstead to the club, bringing in the wounded and dead. Trucks arrived from Hlynsk and from somewhere else, and by the trackman's hut stood a railroad hand car which had brought medical orderlies. The headman, Khoma Chornovukh, along with the miller Aristid Kindzia, rushed about the village in a wagon the whole night through, taking pillows away from the Lemkos for the wounded Germans. The headman also dropped into Pania's home: "Listen, Pania, could your Mikola be among them by any chance?"

"How do I know? How many of them are there?"

"They were supposed to have dropped ten. But they're fighting like a hundred."

Pania also gave away a pillow, hoping it wouldn't be for Mikola if he were there. The thought of Mikola took an ever growing hold on her and evoked in her heart a beautiful feeling she had never experienced toward him before. It must have been pride. Then, unexpectedly, it crossed her mind: if Evil Joachim the "violinist" were to be killed today, it had to be done by none other than Mikola — yes, exactly by him, if he still loved her.

At dawn, when the fighting ceased, two soldiers came for her on a motorcycle. One of them was the same man (a sergeant-major, as Pania learned later on) who had come running for the Captain the night before. The sergeant-major looked as if he had emerged from an inferno. Pania was seated in the sidecar and taken to the farmstead. Both soldiers were quiet throughout the trip, and so was Pania who distractedly plaited her hair which the oncoming wind had tousled. As they passed the pond, the sun was beginning to rise, and Pania saw what looked like a man's shadow on the pond. It was the roof of

the sluice gate casting a humanlike shadow on the water. When she had been a girl, Pania liked to climb on the roof and jump from it into the water. Now the pond had grown shallow, for the Germans had drained it (every Saturday they caught fish with nets). So the sluice seemed taller. Without the water swirling around it, the pond had the look of something dead.

Pania was taken to her former farmstead. A bonfire was smoking in the farmyard, around which soldiers crowded, all of them in helmets and with submachine guns, eating, drinking vodka out of flasks, dividing among themselves Northern Palmyra cigarettes (Mikola sometimes brought them home from his trips), tin cans and some other trophies. The officers in the black trench coats stood by the black cars aside from the haggling men. Most likely the officers were waiting for Pania's arrival. The Austrian Schwarz was with them. His funeral parlor had taken care of Pania's deceased mother before the war. Schwarz had attended the funeral repast at this very farmstead, and knew Pania quite well, but now he pretended not to recognize her. Pania guessed that Schwarz had been brought from Hlynsk as an interpreter. Khoma Chornovukh and the miller Aristid Kindzia were also there. They kept to their wagon, in which they had been gathering pillows the whole night through. The sergeant-major led Pania into the depth of the orchard. The officers followed them.

The paratroopers were lying under the pale cherry tree. The leaves had fallen off the tree, and Pania easily found her favorite branch on the sunlit side where the cherries ripened the fastest. The slain men were laid in a row on their backs side by side; their belts and boots had been taken off. The ankle strings on some of their long johns had come untied. All the

paratroopers were young, with rich shocks of mostly fair hair which seemed to have grown into the yellowed grass, or rather merged with it, and there was only one head with blazing red hair (just like agronomist Zhurba's, Pania thought) that had a lonely curl to it. He must have been their commander. His cheeks were covered with stubble that had probably appeared after his death. At his feet there was a flannelette foot rag, dry and white as if it had just been laundered. His gray eyes stared past Pania at the branches. Pania looked more intently into the eyes: no, it wasn't him, it wasn't Zhurba.

Their parachutes of blue silk, with white shroud lines, were thrown into a heap nearby. It seemed to Pania that there were more parachutes than bodies. It was only now that she counted the dead: there were nine of them. She couldn't count all the parachutes, because everything was so entangled in the heap. Yet with a purely female instinct Pania sensed that there must be a tenth man somewhere. Could it be Mikola? But where was he? Involuntarily she looked around the orchard, pensive and secretive in its autumn appearance, at the pond glittering with the colors of dawn, and at the reeds, which a breeze had stirred to life. Could he be in the reeds? He could have been sitting there quietly under the water and breathing through a reed stalk, or he might have drowned and his body would surface amid the water lilies several days later. She was set on going to the pond every day, calling for him, and waiting. In the meantime, the shock of red hair blazed in the grass in the morning sunrays.

Richter, who had arrived from Hlynsk during the night, watched Pania closely and gave the headman a barely discernible sign. Chornovukh, a smallish, brisk man, Pania's former farmstead neighbor and

recent team leader, was now scurrying about like a wound-up puppet (he's sold out completely, Pania thought). He took her by the arm, led her closer to the dead men, and whispered in her ear:

"Bend down, bend down, Pania. Don't be afraid. They're dead. Show Herr Richter which one is our man among them."

Pania freed her arm from his hold — there was no need to support her; she could stand on her own two feet very well.

"What do you mean by our man? They're all ours. They all are in our..."

"Take a better look. One of the men here is from Green Mills. Now, you can't be blamed that he... he was forced. He was under orders. Point him out to us," Chornovukh pleaded, taking her by the arm again and squeezing it, which could have been a covert sign intended for her alone. Pania stood there, looking at the shocks of hair and into the faces. If she understood Khoma Chornovukh correctly, the man she was supposed to identify had to be her Mikola. But he wasn't there; had he been there, Pania wouldn't have been able to keep herself in check. It would have been obvious to all that she had recognized him. She even regretted keenly that Mikola was not among them — so great was her appreciation of their death and their feat. One of them, an Uzbek or Tatar, a very young man with a fuzzy black mustache, lay in an easy and proud position, as if he were alive. A bullet had pierced his breast pocket. He was spared the agony of death, and his eyes still had the stamp of surprise that life could be cut short so abruptly.

"No, no, don't look that way. That's not him. He's an Asian... His eyes are as slanted as those of our Domirel. Better take a look at the third man, Pania.

Isn't that our agronomist Zhurba? Fedir Oksenyovich Zhurba. The hair... eyes... everything. Take a look at his hands, Pania. There on that thumb he had a boil right before the war. Remember how the boil came to a head on the thumb of his right hand? Take a look at the right hand."

"There was a boil... There was..."

"That's exactly what I was telling the Herr Oberst: eight are strangers, and one is our man. Fedir Oksenyovich, the agronomist. Thank God he's got no relatives here. They live in Kinski Rozdori which is over the hills and far away, so you won't be giving much away by recognizing our Zhurba. Take a good look at his thumb. It's him, isn't it?"

Zhurba had made shockworkers out of them, while he himself had the gift of remaining in the shade, unnoticed, unsettled in his life, hapless in his own way, or, perhaps, happy in his own way. But Pania wouldn't give him away even if he were dead.

"No, it isn't him," she said.

"That's what I think, too!" Aristid Kindzia came up to them and said. "Khoma, why do you have to slander the man? It looks like him — sure. But still it isn't him, absolutely not him."

"In that case, we'll have to search for the tenth man. Ten parachutes were found, but we've got only nine bodies here. Herr Oberst over here says that they wouldn't have been dropped without a local man."

The tenth... So that explained why Pania felt so keenly that Mikola was somewhere around. Perhaps he was sitting in the reeds right now, looking this way and seeing his Pania. A shiver ran through her body.

"Well?" Richter came up, seeing that Chornovukh was in despair.

"Her husband's not here. This orchard was theirs once, that's true. But the master of the orchard isn't here."

"That's too bad. Where is he?" Richter asked Pania.

"Who? Mikola? How should I know?"

"Sniper!" Richter stressed the last syllable in a strange way. "The tenth!" He raised a rifle with an odd gadget on it: a telescopic sight. "That's his rifle, isn't it?"

Pania spread her arms in a gesture of ignorance. Richter was interested to know whether her husband was a communist. Pania said that he had been a train guard, but whether he was a communist or not she didn't know. He was so tight-lipped he wouldn't have told her about it.

"And she herself, is she a communist?" Richter asked through the interpreter.

"Me? With such an orchard?" Pania said.

At this point Schwarz quickly limped up to Richter and told him in German that the orchard was too big, and because of it Pania couldn't have been accepted into the Party. The orchard was socialized. Schwarz had buried her mother, so he knew some of the details of Pania's life.

When the Germans left the orchard, Chornovukh went after Kindzia first and then after Pania:

"You're a fool, Kindzia, a strait-laced fool. What difference does it make to you whether it's Zhurba or not? I can see myself that it isn't him. Still, it looks like him. If they want him to be ours let him be ours. Now where can we get that tenth man, where? Maybe he's been sucked in by the rusty swamp, or maybe he's having his breakfast in somebody's home right now, while you keep rubbing in that no! no! no! of yours. No punishment would be good enough for such nitwits as you. Here the

village is within a hairbreadth of peril. That Richter won't give a damn if he has to rub us all out to the last resident, burn Green Mills and raze it to the ground to find that tenth man. The devil take you Lemkos! You're not even capable of bullying a lousy German! And this here train guard's dame makes a long neck in front of the Oberst! What if that tenth man is your Rak? Keeping mum now, aren't you?"

"Stop yelling in front of the deceased."

"It doesn't make any difference to them. They've had enough of yelling as it is. Fought like lions, they did. Scored seventeen satans dead and two truckfuls wounded. What a horrible night. But Richter's no fool. Without a local man, the paratroopers wouldn't have been dropped. Who knows about these farmsteads, thickets and springs back in Moscow? You have to think with that noggin of yours" — he pointed at his head. "The enemy's sly, but we must be even slier, or otherwise the hens will peck us to death. Just look what boys they are! And all of them grounded. Just one little mistake — and curtains. Somewhere mothers, wives, and children will be waiting for them. Oh, my oh my!"

"Hush!" Kindzia tensed suddenly. "Did you hear?"

"It's a motorcycle clattering."

"No, it's not." Kindzia was used listening to the noise of his mill and could discern the finest sounds in the devilish din of the steam engine. His ear instantly picked up something in between the clattering of the retreating motorcycles. "It sounded like someone cying out on the pond."

"Maybe it was one of these?" Pania looked round at the dead.

"Hardly." Chornovukh took off his cap. Kindzia did the same. The three of them stood there, listening. The leaves dropped softly off the walnut trees.

"I might have been hearing things," Kindzia said.
"Could be, especially after such a night. Let's bury them here on the sunny side of the hill. We can't throw them into the well as we've been ordered."

"Did they have any documents on them?"

"Nothing. Only a radio, clean sheets of paper, and a couple of small booklets on agricultural cooperative societies."

"What does a co-op have to do with all that?"

"Ask me another question. One of them must have known something about the subject."

"Could it have been the storekeeper?"

"You mean Heliy Mikitovich?"

"What parachute could hold Heliy Mikitovich?"

"That's true. For him two parachutes wouldn't be enough."

"But war eats weight away," Kindzia remarked.

"Put the parachutes into the wagon, Kindzia, while Pania and I choose a burial place for the boys." Turning to Pania, he added: "It was your orchard, so find a good place. Let's go, Pania."

Once they moved aside, Chornovukh whispered in a patter:

"God knows whether Kindzia can be trusted or not. The tenth man could be hiding in the sluice."

"When I was brought here," Pania said, stopping, "I thought I heard someone coughing over there. It threw me into a fever. Imagine if the Germans had heard it..."

"In those helmets they're deaf as doornails. Don't stop. Keep on moving just like you were. I heard a sound as I was driving here with Kindzia. It was a moan. Kindzia asked me then: 'Did you hear anything?' 'No, nothing,' I said. 'All right, I guess I was hearing things.' But I wasn't hearing things. It was a moan."

"It's Mikola. I sensed that he was around. I knew it last night, and felt so miserable. And then that 'violinist' had to come dropping in. That's my grief visiting me, I thought."

"What violinist? Silvester?"

"Oh no, not him. It was their violinist, Evil Joachim."

"He won't come to your house anymore. Last night he was bumped off. By the sniper. So what do we do about Kindzia? Tell him everything, or let him take the parachutes to the club? This here is a nice place. Right under this pear tree. Is it a *spasivka* *?"

"No, it's a Fine Lady pear tree."

"Well, so what do we do about Kindzia? I don't want him to know about the sluice."

"Why?"

"Kindzia's got a mill."

"So what?"

"He'll betray your Mikola or whoever it may be... to keep his mill. I know that miller's mentality through and through. The hell he'll keep it! Let him take care of the parachutes! All right?"

Pania was frightened by all this talk, frightened for Kindzia. Could Aristid really have become a stranger to them in just one month?

"All right then," she said.

"Let's go. Don't lose heart! Come on, you're a shockworker."

Kindzia had put the parachutes into the wagon and wanted to take Pania along, but Chornovukh had weighed the pros and cons of this eventuality as well. He said he was afraid to be left alone with the corpses. He told Kindzia not to lose any time but

* A variety of apples or pears that ripen by *Spas*, the church feast of the Transfiguration (August 6) — Tr.

return as quickly as possible with some help and tools, because the burial place was on high, dry ground and the grave had to be a big one. In addition, he gave Kindzia a warning about the parachutes.

"There are ten of them so deliver ten. Mind you, the Germans are a precise lot. They'll count them. It's a pity — the silk is fine, and kerchiefs made of it would last forever. Wouldn't they, Pania?"

Pania wondered how the men could have dropped on such flimsy webs. Kindzia darted a searching glance at her and left. His wagon clattered down the hill and then grew quiet by the pond. He must have stopped to water the horse. Yes, exactly. A whistle came from the pond as Kindzia called the horse up to the water. Presently a breeze swept down and ruffled the hair of the dead men on the grass. Pania had a feeling that they would get to their feet now and ask her: "And where did Mikola disappear to?" Kindzia took his time watering the horse, as if he were set on continuing Pania's tortures. Khoma's patience also gave away.

"What's the matter with him? Oh the bastard, he's guessed..."

They ran down a footpath, then along the pond, and there was the wagon standing in the wade-in where horses were watered; on the dam stood a pair of boots with clothes beside them, while Kindzia had climbed into the sluice in his long johns. While Chornovukh was taking off his boots, Pania waded to the sluice in her dress. The horse walked onto the dam and stopped near the boots like a guard.

"Who is it?" Chornovukh asked from the dam. At the last moment he remembered he couldn't swim, so now he remained standing there barefoot. "Is it your husband?" he asked Pania.

"It's Lel Lelkovich."

“Is he alive?”

“Looks like it.”

They pulled him out, put him on the blue silk, and covered him with what might have been his own parachute. The silk was all in tickseed, as was his service shirt. On his belt was a knife for cutting shroud lines. Chornovukh pulled the knife out of its sheath and threw it into the pond — to have one less piece of evidence. Pania burst out crying, at which Chornovukh snapped: “Oh you damned Lemkos, the only thing you do your whole life through is cry. Have you ever seen a German cry?” Pania recalled the pale cherries which Lel Lelkovich loved so much to be treated to on his visits when her train guard (not yet a senior guard at that time) was off on another of his trips on a freight train. The freight trains rolled miles and miles away, and many a time did Mikola miss the cherries.

Kindzia drove the horse. Right before they got to the village, he turned the wagon to the mill. “Well, what did I tell you?” Khoma whispered to Pania. They carried Lel Lelkovich into the loft, and only after that did Aristid take the parachutes to the Germans.

The guard did not let Kindzia through into the club. A higher-up had come, so now the Germans were busy going over an operation. Almost hysterical shouts came from the club, and Kindzia thought that such clamorous people wouldn't be able to overcome us. The guard counted the parachutes; one of them had blood on it; at first the guard wanted to give that parachute to Kindzia, but then he decided otherwise and threw it onto the heap.

Lel Lelkovich was the last to slip out of the encirclement. He made his way through the thicket when the sluice, quietly letting the water through, caught his eyes at dawn. The Germans who had

surrounded the orchard on the hill still kept hollering, "*Rus, zdavaisal!*" Russians, surrender! But there was no one left to surrender. And here there was silence and this sad looking sluice that was so familiar to Lel Lelkovich. The water was already ice-cold, but inside the sluice, it was warm, even cozy. If his matches hadn't gotten wet, he could have had a smoke. Then the Germans had started to comb the orchard, while he remained in the sluice which was a safe hiding place. Now and then, trucks and motorcycles shuttled back and forth across the dam without giving him any trouble, and he giving them no trouble. And then a burst of automatic fire, stupid, unexpected, or accidental perhaps, cracked from the motorcycle tearing across the dam at full speed. Some gallant German, happy to have remained alive after the clash, simply wanted to have fun by mocking at this sorrowful looking sluice. After that, a wagon rolled across the dam past the dying Lel Lelkovich. In all probability, it came from the village. "Most assuredly so," Aristid Kindzia confirmed. "We were taking the last wagonful of pillows for the wounded. May they rot on them!" At this point Lel Lelkovich smiled through his pain. He told Kindzia that he had hidden a rifle with a telescopic sight in the hollow of a Fine Lady pear tree back in the garden. "If I die, see that it doesn't disappear." "Most assuredly it won't," Kindzia said, although he knew that the Germans had found the rifle. They had lighted the hollow with a flashlight and found the rifle in there. For some reason, they had an odd weakness for flashlights, being afraid of our nights, and so Lel Lelkovich fired at those lights the whole night through. After all, the dead could not have warned the living about the sniper's whereabouts.

So now, ranked in truly German fashion, birch crosses stood row on row by the club (Lel Lelkovich could see them through his little window) in the front garden amid dahlias that were in a riot of bloom as never before. The dahlias couldn't have known in any way that they were thriving at the graveside of the invaders. On the crosses were helmets. Eventually they found their way into the farmyards, and the Lemkos watered their hens and turkeys out of them. Time would take care of that, but so far these steel attributes of Krupp spoke only of the futility of any attempt to guard oneself against death in war. The gaping holes in the helmets showed that their recent wearers had had to deal with a sniper. The one and only hole in the captain's helmet (right over the forehead) proved fatal.

In this way, Joachim Weimarskind (the child of Weimar, or what?), army serial number 3071400, passed to his rest. Silvester, as a former bookkeeper, found it easy enough to remember the number, which up till then had been a mystery to him, but now gave him a certain idea about the enemy army (Silvester didn't know that all these numbers which had been hanging from their wearers' necks and were now affixed to the crosses were enciphered and didn't have any intelligence value whatsoever). Silvester was summoned to the funeral. He played Bach, and after exhausting his repertoire, switched over to merry Lemko tunes (also funereal), but was misunderstood by the sergeant-major and almost paid with his life. After the funeral, Silvester made his way to the mill, to the "tenth," to inform him of some secrets about the German army (about Weimarskind's serial number in the first place) and to play on the violin for him. In the meantime, the Germans had their funeral repast, swilled the Tivriv beer Weimarskind

had brought the day before, and made trips out into the front garden the whole night through, although they were not as carefree as previously, since they were afraid of the "tenth" man. At the funeral, the sergeant-major vowed to the deceased to catch the "tenth" by all means, because sooner or later he had to show up in Green Mills, or, as the sergeant-major put it, *kommen nach Hause...* come home, that is. Making my way to Green Mills to find the "tenth," I was of the same opinion: he would invariably come home, for no Lemko, whoever he may be, will pass his home or his village without stopping, even under pain of death.

On one such night, while the invaders were still trying to track down the "tenth," I knocked on the door of Pania Vlastovenko's unfinished house. Pania ran out onto the porch in a night shirt and barefoot; her unplaited hair fell down her shoulder in a sorrowful looking way and for some reason reminded me of the music I had just heard passing the dark mill.

"Is that you, Aristid?"

"No, it's me. Open up, Pania."

"Who is it?"

"Open up now. Don't be afraid."

Pania opened the door, although she could just as easily not have done it, and flashed like a white shadow from the entrance hall into her room. I went inside, while Pania searched all around for matches. "I hide them from my daughter Marushka. I'm afraid she'll burn down the house," she said. At long last she found them in the ash pit and shook the box — there were only two or three matches in it. "Don't light the lamp," I warned her. The moon peeped in through the window at the bed Marushka was sleeping. It was only a quarter moon, and the few rays

that had penetrated the room got entangled in Pania's braid.

"I'm from Babylon," I said, feeling I had to say something by now.

"You've just come from Babylon?" Pania asked, surprised.

"Yes."

"From so far, and at night. There was a landing party here last night. Surely you must have heard about it..."

"That's the only thing they're talking about now in all the villages."

"Are they looking for the tenth man in Babylon, too?"

"They are. But I ran away here."

"Could you be the tenth? I don't seem to know such a Lemko as you."

"For them, anyone can be the tenth. Me or you, for that matter. If anything goes wrong, they can shoot every tenth man."

"Quite a convenient arrangement," Pania said. "So they invented the tenth man."

"No, Pania. This time it's no invention. There was a tenth man. They say it was supposed to have been Zhurba. That's why I paid you a call. Has he let anyone hear from him? You were a shockworker and Zhurba's best field team leader, so I came to see you. I went past the mill. It was dark inside, and a violin was playing in the loft. Whose violin could it have been?"

"Aha, strange things are always going on there. A man's been strung up in that mill, so people fancy they see and hear odd things as they go past. It's haunted. People used to hear a violin there before the war, too. And the old folks say it was so before the Revolution. I've heard it myself, since I go there

during the day. Well, at least I did once... Now the mill's abandoned. What do you want from Zhurba anyway?"

"He's come from friendly territory. We need him for liason and for everything else. We don't intend to sit here twiddling our thumbs. We are preparing for struggle, Pania, so for us such a man as Comrade Zhurba..."

"Did you really believe that our Comrade Zhurba could jump with a parachute?" Pania asked, sincerely indignant. "Why, he was afraid to jump down a strawstack. Once we played a trick on him and shoved him off a stack, and as he was falling, he yelled as if he'd been knifed. A fine tenth paratrooper you've found in him. Why, he was afraid of falling from his own bed."

"But still, someone recognized him, didn't he?"

"Zhurba wasn't among the dead. Whoever else, but I would've recognized him. He's got such red hair you won't find a redder head in the world. The Germans have got redheads, too, to be sure, and there is one of them in the village, but he's no match for Fedir. Did you ever see him?"

"Zhurba you mean? Yes."

"As redheaded as they come, isn't he?"

"Sure, a redheaded devil. But his hair could've been cropped. That's usual for soldiers."

"But these men hadn't had their hair cropped. One of them had a face that looked like Zhurba's. But that was all there was to it. As I see it, there wasn't a tenth man at all. The Germans invented him. Richter did. Now they say he was a sniper. What kind of sniper would Zhurba make when he was afraid of women? Sometimes when he saw me home after the courses, he was afraid to take me by the arm, let alone get close to me, and trudged on somewhere

behind my back. To tell you the truth, he was a good agronomist. There's no harm in giving him credit for that. Still, who are you?"

"Me? Well, who am I? I could be the 'tenth' if you like... I really wish I were..."

"That's very simple. Go to the club right now, and they'll shoot you with pleasure. Or they might hang you. They're hanging in Hlynsk right now. How do you happen to know me so you could turn up on my doorstep just like that at night?"

"I cut your pictures out of the newspapers and showed them to our boys. Even bragged about my acquaintance with you. It might have been ridiculous, but that's really what I did."

"Oh yes, lots of soldiers wrote me letters. From the Finnish front. My Mikola picked on me all the time because of those letters. Constant jealousy and quarrels. One gallant captain got the idea of marrying me. 'Dear Pania,' he wrote, 'I care for you infinitely...' And here I didn't straighten my back once all summer long and my hands got numb in the field. Zhurba was a man who had to have every beet root accounted for. Now everything's gone to the dogs. Did you write me any letters?"

"Remember I drove my granny's old cow down the field road when you and Lel Lelkovich came dashing on bicycles. He up front and you behind him. Lel Lelkovich fell into the pea field, while you tore by so dangerously close to the cow's huge horns that I (and the cow, too, I guess) got the shivers. The cow stalked on, but you stopped and laughed at Lel Lelkovich. It happened in the evening when you were going to the sugar refinery. Lel Lelkovich wore white trousers which got stained green from the peas."

Pania recalled Lel Lelkovich's white trousers and laughed, although differently as she used to — now

it was a sorrowful laughter. Pania covered the window with a cloth, carefully struck a match, saving every single one she still had, and lit the wick lamp on the hearth of the clay stove. The light was wan, just as wan and sad as Pania was in it. She turned round to her bed, took a black woolen kerchief from the bedhead, threw it over her shoulders, and remained standing like that, looking intently into my face. Hard as she tried, she didn't recognize me.

Then I reminded her about Kuprian, the pale cherry tree in the orchard above the pond by the old farmstead, how she burst into tears under the cherry tree, and how she had brought the bread to our home in that lean year. When she and Lel Lelkovich returned from the movies on their bicycles late at night, I stood under the mulberry tree and cried for jealousy. A boy that I was, I was jealous of Lel Lelkovich's interest in her.

"You don't know anything about King Mina either, do you?"

"About what King Mina?" Pania asked, surprised.

"Well, about the king of the ants. Remember how the ants attacked you under the mulberry tree? That same summer on the beet plantation."

"Oh-h-!" Pania laughed. "Yes, I do..."

"Well then, the ants had a young king at that time — Mina."

"Do they have kings, too?"

"I invented him for your sake and for mine, so I could get into your hair and stay with you for a little bit at least. In my mind, I was there the whole day through. I became an ant, King Mina, and stayed with you one day and one night. Then it took me the whole summer to get back home."

"To Babylon?"

"No, to the ants that lived under that mulberry tree."

"Well, did you get back?"

"King Mina tumbled to his death. He took off into the air on a cobweb and fell off it. And here I've come after so many years, thinking that the tenth man had showed up at your place and you'd take me to Zhurba."

"Had Zhurba appeared here, he wouldn't have gone past my house."

Mikola set off to the east and left her alone with just their daughter to guard the house. He didn't have time to thatch the whole roof, so the room she was in now was the only part of the house that was covered, while the other two rooms had no thatch over them. If I were good at thatching, she'd hire me, because once the rains started, the house would be ruined. There was one man fit for this job, but he left with Aristarkh to the east. A draught came through the cracks on the door, probably from the two roofless rooms, and the light from the lamp was about to die any moment now. Pania put it in the smoke vent, took a hair pin out of her braid, pulled up the wick to let the lamp soot escape into the vent, and stuck the pin back into the braid. Now the braid smelled of kerosene. Right then I thought: really, why not let Pania hire me as a thatcher. Is it that difficult to thatch a roof? What if the "tenth" shows up in the meantime? Zhurba, or perhaps Mikola himself.

"I agree."

"Agree to what?"

"To thatch your roof."

"Can you do it?"

"In Babylon I... If only there's some straw. I'll make the sheaves and it's down to work."

"I've got plenty of sheaves. Did you see them in the farmyard under the shed roof? My senior guard set up such a whopping big house with five windows I thought the man had gone nuts. He wanted to outdo all the Lemkos. So now I've got this trouble on my hands."

"I'll thatch it somehow. What man has done, man can do."

"Tell me, young man, were you really in love with me?" Pania asked, smiling. She had large eyes, brown and sad. There seemed to be little birds fluttering in them. I was afraid of scaring them away. Presently Marushka stirred in her bed — and the little birds took off with a flash of their wings and faded into the darkness. Marushka was too big for her bed. Her legs, toes downward, soles black and worn, stuck out of the grilled bed frame.

"Any news about Lel Lelkovich?"

The little birds came flying back, and, alarmed, played in her eyes.

"He left the first day of the war. And Malva's gone. People say the Germans stopped them somewhere around Uman, a whole train of refugees; some were turned back, others were shot. I was supposed to go with them, too. Malva came running to me twice, urging to leave. As a celebrity, she said, I'd be the first to be shot when the Germans came. But then my Marushka got dysentery. So I didn't go. The Germans haven't shot me so far; they chase me off to the beet plantation instead. They want sugar, too."

"Pania, don't believe what anyone says about Malva."

"Did she come back?"

"Just between you and me, she did. They're looking for her."

"The Lemkos hate her because of the farmsteads."

She chased them out of their cozy nests. Oh what gardens and orchards they had. And what have we got here? A new village, a desert, unfinished houses, and wind all around. She and I have got our..."

I had second thoughts about telling Pania that it was Malva who had sent me here. Besides, the paratroopers had spoiled my plans. I simply had to find Zhurba to have a live link with friendly territory. Everyone was positive that the tenth paratrooper was a local. Who in Moscow would have known about the farmsteads, the brushwood around them, and the railroad nearby. When the rumor about Zhurba reached me, I immediately gave it credence. No one knew the farmsteads better than Zhurba. It was him I had to look for.

"Shall I make a bed for you?" Pania asked. Judging by her voice, the news about Malva had surprised her.

Had my grandmother been alive, I would have gone to her to spend the night. She had built a house in a new place and died just before the war. "How can I live in this desert?" she had complained all the time. Her house was also unfinished, so right after her death, the Lemkos dismantled it to finish their own. Timber was scarce in the steppe, while her old house had such fine oaken posts, door jambs, and girders, which explained why the house came down without delay. The Lemkos didn't tolerate anything unfinished and "unlegalized," as they put it. Small wonder Mikola Rak worried so much for his house with five windows. If not for Pania, the stove would have been the only thing left of the house by now. As it was, a number of rafters had been filched from the roof over the two living rooms. Who did it and when Pania didn't know. She fluffed a large pillow, stacking the smaller ones on the trunk.

"The mill's still not working. Kindzia can't put it back into operation, because Aristarkh was supposed to have taken some of the drive gears with him when he left. What are drive gears? The mill's there, but we haven't got any bread in our homes. What a crank that Aristarkh was! They say he took those gears to Hlynsk and threw them into the Bug River, so that neither we nor the Germans could use them. The Germans get their bread from somewhere else, but we're without any. I've got pumpkin porridge with millet. I'll bring you some," she said, making for the stove.

"How's Aristid Kindzia doing?"

"Fine, because he's a miller."

The porridge was tasty; the pumpkin it was made of was sweet and not at all stringy. When I finished eating, she snuffed the lamp, took the cloth off the window, and the moonlight fell on the bed.

Unused to sleep with such a big pillow, I couldn't fall asleep. Mice squeaked in the two unfinished living rooms. The stovebed was still hot, so Pania had to turn from side to side on it. From afar, trains crept up to Green Mills and rolled through it at full speed without any whistles. A girder creaked over the house.

"Pania."

"Don't be afraid, it's always creaking. I've already gotten used to it."

"You had a radio when you lived at the farmstead. Where is it now?"

"What do you need it for?"

"I want to hear what's going on in the world. Where do you think our troops are right now?"

"I turned it in. There was an order to that effect, so I turned it in, just like Kirilo Lukich and a number of other people did."

"It's a pity you did. Is Kirilo Lukich still around?"

"Yes. He wants to open a school. He's always going to Hlynsk by bike to get everything set up. Old man that he is, he's still cycling away."

"Is it true that his wife is a German?"

"Yes, she's from around Zhitomir. There used to be a German colony there. His daughter and son, though, are communists. They're not here. But all of his grandchildren are. My, how the trains keep on rolling and rolling the whole night through."

"How could you have turned in that radio?"

"Oh, you and your radio! Go to sleep now. We get up early here."

"All right, I'll sleep. Do you have a ladder?"

"It was also filched along with the rafters. We'll borrow a ladder from the neighbors."

For several days now, I had been thatching Pania's roof. I seem to be watching myself as a detached observer after some thirty odd years, and I find the scene ludicrous and painful. If I kept on thatching in such bits and pieces, it'd probably take me till the end of the war to finish. I took a sheaf, divided it into four equal parts, and then tried to bind two parts into a little sheaf. The straw was dry and brittle, as were the straw bands, which simply couldn't be tied. My hands were all in bloody scratches. Pania was busy on the beet plantation: otherwise she wouldn't have tolerated such a lousy thatcher around. Still, by some great power of tradition, my peasant instinct made me stop and wonder why my hands were bleeding and why the thatch was so shaggy, why it was so difficult to tie the sheaves to the purlins, and why I was so ill at ease.

How many times had I admired the superb finish of the Babylon thatches, especially the roof ridges, each with a distinct pattern and style of its own: either smooth, as if molded of red clay, while in fact it was of couch grass, or with fretwork ornaments that looked as if they had been cut of wood, or else with little beams fixed to the ridges so tightly no wind could blow them away. How they were all done, I had never seen and hadn't learned to imitate. There was no thatcher in Green Mills now I could visit to seek advice. I thought about Kindzia. Yet the mill roof was covered with tiles. Kindzia must have been an expert in tiling, but it was unlikely he knew anything about thatching. There was yet another man: Kirilo Lukich. He knew how to pile up and top stacks of straw, so surely he knew how to thatch. But going to a man who cycled to Hlynsk every day — that was the last thing I could think of.

From the little window in the mill loft, Lel Lelkovich watched the thatcher and could have given him a bit of advice (he learned about him from Pania) but the time wasn't ripe yet. By now, even Marushka tried to come to the aid of the thatcher as she saw him tormenting himself over his work and shoving his scratched fingers into his mouth. Over and over again she shouted: "Hey, Mr. Thatcher! Mr. Thatcher! The sheaf's come untied again!"

"Oh rot!"

"What's going to rot!"

"The sheaf, of course."

She kept climbing up and down the ladder. A fair-haired girl, Marushka was a spitting image of Lel Lelkovich, judging by her eyes, little nose, and laughter — slow, slow, to the point that it seemed cunning. Back from the beet plantation by evening, Pania looked at the thatch, smiled, and thought:

Goodness gracious, what a thatcher! While my hands ached the whole night through, Pania slept like a log. What with that blasted thatching, I couldn't figure out whether I still loved Pania or not. Every next night, I was set on making her a declaration of love, but with the thatching progressing so slowly, such a declaration was simply out of question. Besides, come evening, Pania washed herself, changed her field boots to pumps, dressed in a lilac skirt and white blouse, threw a black woolen kerchief on her shoulders, and disappeared somewhere, leaving the thatcher to look after Marushka. Pania came home late, every time sadder and more worried. She forgot to heat the stovebed, so I did it for her before she arrived. I liked to hear the fire crackle in the stove, stealthily feeding it with the spoiled sheaves to cover up the traces off my inaptitude.

"Is it true that you don't wet the sheaves?" Pania asked after one of her mysterious visits.

"What for? They'll get wet enough when the rains come."

"Try it."

"All right, if that's what you want."

Wow! Did the job move on after that! The sheaves were like silk; the straw bands like whips which could be easily tied; and it was simply a joy to bind the sheaves. Besides, Pania gave me a *yurok* to tighten the sheaves with, showed me how to tie the knots, and I myself found a board for aligning the sheaves, although this invention was already over three thousand years old.

Sitting in the mill, Lel Lelkovich rejoiced, as did Marushka, who hoisted the sheaves one by one on her shoulders and brought them right to the roof ridge for Mr. Thatcher. Well, as for me, I was an altogether different man now. No longer did I mumble under

my nose as I did before when somebody greeted me on the street, but doffed my cap and bowed politely like a great craftsman. The golden surface of the roof grew in size, pleasing the eye with its smoothness, as if it had really been stitched of silk.

Returning from the beet plantation and seeing her house grow pretty as it took on its final shape, Pania was involuntarily filled with respect for the thatcher, fried him the last egg she had (the hens' autumn hiatus had just set in) and even borrowed half a bottle of moonshine from her neighbors, hinting to them that all craftsmen had to drink.

"Where do you go every evening, Pania?" I asked, probably under the influence of the drink.

"To the Germans at the club," Pania said in a tone which made me conclude unwittingly that she went there.

"Do they know I'm here?"

"Why not? Let them know. You're a thatcher. Don't I have a right to hire you?"

"Do you really go to the Germans?"

"What's wrong with that? I'm still beautiful, aren't I?" she turned on her heel so abruptly it made the wind swish around her in the room.

"You are... that's why it wouldn't be proper... for you being seen there..."

"What of it?" she said and left as soon as Marushka fell asleep.

Pania returned late, long after midnight. Without lighting the lamp, she undressed and got onto the stovebed I had heated for her. What a slut, I thought of her. A famous shockworker, and here she visits the Germans. She the wife of a senior train guard who takes the trains to the front line, and the mistress of Lel Lelkovich who's in the trenches there, too. How could I have fallen in love with her? I, a greenhorn

shorty, and now the best thatcher in the world. Tomorrow I'd make the ridge, and that'd be the end of it. I'd clear out for sure.

"Is King Mina already asleep?" she asked from the stovebed.

I kept silent, my teeth set. Was it really worth my while to become king of the ants for her and now her personal thatcher? Not once did Pania ask me what my real name was. She only knew that I was a Valakh from Babylon, but along the Southern Bug there were as many Valakhs as poppies in the wheat fields. Take any village, and you've got a Valakh — and more than one. Once people from Wallachia came wandering to Babylon and settled down here. The settlers included Turks, Tatars, Serbians, Bulgarians, and Wallachians. They had chosen and divided up the names between themselves, so the Wallachians were simply called Wallachs. Never mind, once the rains start pouring, that lightminded Lemko woman would recall me, sitting snugly in a warm house with a roof over her head. I would keep my peace for the time being. But when you're not indifferent to a woman, whatever feelings may rack your heart, still something inappropriate is bound to escape from this tangle of emotions.

"Who thatched the house before me? I mean the part of it in which we're now."

"Mikola did."

"It would have leaked, so I re-thatched it. Tomorrow I'll finish the ridge. Well, how are the Germans like? Is it merry with them?"

She came over to me and sat down on the edge of the bed, beautiful as never before.

Begone! — the thought flashed in my heart and faded.

"Did you put it under the pillow again?"

“What?”

“Your pistol.”

“Yes.”

“I made the bed today and saw the trace on the pillow. A distinct trace. The Germans might come here and see it, you know. Don’t put it there anymore. You’ll have a tough time denying it.”

“I’m leaving tomorrow. It would be good to get some couch grass. We make wonderful ridges with couch grass in Babylon. They last forever.”

“Who cares about couch grass now? We’ve picked every single blade of it on the plantation. It’s horrible to think how much work we’ve put into those beets.”

“The Germans need sugar beets, too.” (What a burden of reproach man can put into words!)

“Today the Gebiets came from Hlynsk. He stalked around in his white gloves, sniffed a beet or two, and left. You see, he’s the overlord. The outlander! He came to have a look at his slaves. If it were up to me, I’d let those beets rot. They want to turn our labor against us. That’s how things are, King Mina.”

“The Lemkos are a sly folk. Let them think up something.”

“What can the poor wretches think up? If they do, they’ll just be sorry for it later. Some of the beets we dig up, others we dig in. There’s hope winter will freeze them in the field.”

“What did you remember King Mina for?”

“I pity him, that poor greenhorn. He can’t even hide his gun properly, and leaves an impression on the pillow. But the enemy’s horrible and fiendishly cunning, hearing everything and seeing everything. Carelessness and boyishness might spell your end. Take the paratroopers, for one. They chose the landing area themselves. They shouldn’t have done that.”

"Is there any news about the tenth man?"

"The Germans are still looking for him. Did the village headman see you?"

"Yes. Yesterday he stopped my wagon. He liked my work and wanted me to thatch his leaky roof."

"See, I brought you luck. Did you agree?"

"I said I'd take my pay home and then come back. If he asks, tell him you paid me in fodder. I hail from Shargorod, so don't get it mixed up. There's a little village near Shargorod."

"Be careful with him. He's an unreliable sort, keeping one eye on the east and the other on the west. Can you be trusted with everything?"

"It's been a great joy thatching your roof, you know!"

"It's no sin covering the roof for a poor soldier's wife. My Mikola's over there, after all! And you had to work off your love. Sure, did you think otherwise? But never mind, King Mina, that's only a joke, simply a joke. Don't take offense, although until yesterday morning... or this morning at least, I could have thought anything of you. All right, you are from Babylon and you're one of the Valakhs. So what? Why did you appear all of a sudden like that? Because of love? What love is there to talk about when there's war all around! Boyish fantasies! Could be, and it was. But oh, how many years have passed. What had King Mina to do with all that? Yet there was one man who believed you."

"Who?"

"Lel Lelkovich... the 'tenth'."

"Oh, so it's him!"

"He remembered you from history class. So go tell Malva he's here. He's waiting for her... and will be waiting, if she really came back, if she really exists..."

"She does, Pania."

"That's good. It's good she's around and will come here. And you... you could've concealed that from me, couldn't you?"

"Sure, I could. I could've concealed everything. Absolutely everything, Pania. What with the times, people shy away from their own shadows. But still, could I have concealed it from you all the time, I wonder?"

"That means we've got some decency left in us, if we trust each other and ourselves."

"When do I have to leave?"

"Right now. He's dying. But don't tell Malva anything about it."

Pania wept quietly. I looked at her dense black hair, and the sight of them added to my heart's sorrow. All these years, Pania had loved Lel Lelkovich, she didn't cease loving him. It was only as King Mina that I had succeeded in getting into her hair, and nothing more. But wasn't that enough? The tenth man was dying. The last man of the landing party.

Beyond the gardens, I looked round at her house. It would remain standing without the ridge, because it was unlikely I'd ever come back again. Pania stood in the door, a tall, sorrowful Pania bidding me farewell. I waved my hand and kept going, while she remained standing in the door. The mill loomed black in the fields. Lights came from inside, the door was wide open, and only the little window in the loft was dark.

I had to go past the mill. It was full of men hammering and banging away, scurrying around, and busying themselves at the locomobile. I looked inside: there was Aristid Kindzia, Yarema the school watchman, and Kirilo Lukich astride a millstone, chisel in hand, pounding it with a hammer. Silvester was

sitting with his violin case on the steps leading to the loft.

The Lemkos were repairing the mill.

They wanted to make the mill run. For themselves and for the Germans, of course. Yes, for the Germans, too — the invaders had ordered them to do it. Was Lel Lelkovich really dying in there? If so, the Lemkos were surely wonderful people to have started these repairs, the fuss and all-night vigil that went with it. They wanted to be with him; or perhaps they had brought a doctor, and behind the window (covered with a sack), carbide lamps were on, as a complex operation was in progress. Everything else below was a show staged by the Lemkos for the enemy. But what was Silvester doing here with his violin?

Once you had to cover thirty-five kilometers to Babylon, and in a roundabout way, the distance was much longer. By the mill stood bicycles and a number of wagons. The Lemkos, though, didn't like Malva Kozhushna enough to run any risks for her sake, whether on bicycle or wagon. If she managed to come in time, good for her, if not, so be it. Lel Lelkovich would do without her, although it was his greatest — if not last — wish to see her. Those who had gathered here had taken a far greater risk. What if the Germans turned up and decided to inspect the loft? If Malva failed to come in time, I would be to blame, not them. Besides, I still had to get to Babylon through the blocks the Germans had thrown up on the roads and bridges in their hunt for the tenth man. Aristid Kindzia came out and wished me luck. Under the circumstances, what else could a miller do when the mill (that much I saw for myself) was not working yet? Had it been going, Kindzia would have thrown a sack of flour into the wagon and sent his customer off to Babylon. "Most assuredly so," Kindzia

said. But as it was, he wished me Godspeed. Kindzia's hand was dirty with oil, he wiped it on his pants before extending it to me. A moan upstairs sent the Lemkos into action. Only Silvester did not stir on the steps. Once everybody left, he would play for Lel Lelkovich in the dark mill. He would play until Lel Lelkovich fell asleep. As our Fabian insisted, music emanating from an honest heart can cure. But the Lemkos knew about this without the philosopher. Wonderful folk, those Lemkos!

CHAPTER 5

Right beyond Green Mills, the dense Podolian night mantled the sky as if it had crept up from Tauria where the nights are as black as the autumnal plowed fields at this time of year. This impenetrable darkness was the only ally of the tenth man, I thought, stealing through the swarm of enemies whose number my imagination multiplied prodigiously. My only consolation was that they could not turn our Podolian night into day prematurely to catch the tenth man in an open field under an open sky. Let their famous Doctor Faustus come to their aid and make something similar to a German night, but not to ours. I only hoped it wouldn't explode because of my nerves, which were as taut as the violin strings of Silvester who was surely playing to Lel Lelkovich at the mill now lest he die, because his death would sever the only link which could tie the underground with friendly territory.

It was a long way from Green Mills to the Huraliks' Forest, but the sounds of the violin seemed to reach my ear. It was strange to realize how human imagination could preserve and bring nearer sounds

which kept me from feeling so lonely and fearful in a forest I had known since childhood from the first spring when we boys had flocked out here to destroy crows' nests. Then, the forest had seemed a paradise to me, where everything bloomed and grew exuberantly and the crows bred in the millions, so you could hardly keep up with destroying them all. Some shadows shied away from me, as they crossed my path to warn me. They did not look alike and seemed volumetric, corporeal, alive, each reminding me of someone without whom this forest would be a strange place now. Presently Valya Tsibulska broke out of the birch thicket and called to me like an evil spirit clad in white. But where was she calling me to? And there was Mikola Huralik, a school pal of mine and the son of the forest ranger, pointing at something from his hideout under an oak tree. What was he pointing at? I looked that way — there was no one there. The forest was an impenetrable wall of darkness, out of which appeared the forest ranger himself — Olexandr Pilipovich Huralik in a crested cap with horn in hand; he stood there a while, shook his head, and disappeared.

The dry clicks of breechblocks (five or six clicks) cut my fantasies short. "Halt! Hands up!" So that's where they were lurking. Behind the willows on the other side of the dam. The sky had drowned completely in the pond, and I seemed to be standing in the middle of the sky, whereas in actual fact I was standing in the middle of the dam on which I had once confessed my love to Valya Tsibulska. It was winter then. A film, *Peter the Great*, had arrived at the sugar refinery, and since we had lessons in the afternoon, our entire class decided to go to the movies in the evening. Everyone walked across the ice-bound pond, but Valya had new boots on and the

ice was too slippery for her, so I volunteered to take her across the dam. My confession wasn't going too well somehow; Valya was in a hurry, because we were late as it was, and when I had almost gotten to the gist of the matter, Valya went off in a gale of laughter and ran down the slope of the dam. As it turned out, Mikola Huralik had made his declaration of love to her on this very same dam exactly a week before and failed as well, although he was a great adept in mathematics and had his father's forest to his credit. The willow trees were covered with hoar frost, Valya wore a white kerchief on her head and also seemed to be haloed with hoar frost. I felt so good, and my feelings for her were so pure I wouldn't have been afraid to die for them at that time.

"Get your hands up!" the same voice shouted from behind the black willow trees.

I had heard the clicks of so many breechblocks, but only two figures detached themselves from the willow trees. One figure was stomping across the dam so loudly it rumbled, while the other was trotting behind to keep up with the pace. It was the police. Most likely from Hlynsk. That much I could figure out from their bearing and tread. Richter drilled them on the parade ground every day. I could have fired at both of them, but the men behind the willows wouldn't have let me get away alive. Or did they think perhaps that I wasn't alone and the rest of us had stayed in the forest? Yet I was all alone. Had Mikola Huralik been with me, I would have treated them altogether differently. Huralik was a wonderful shot and practiced in the forest. I raised my hands, not empty, though, but with the TT pistol which I had kept ready all the way. My only choice was to raise my hands.

The policemen were now in front of me, the muzzles of their guns shoved against my chest, trying to identify me. The huge man seemed to be Zamarchuk, the new chief of the Hlynsk auxiliary police made up of local traitors.

Valya Tsibulska came here from a little town without her mother. Her father, the chief physician of the local hospital, either didn't have time to bring up his daughter or indulged her in everything. Given such freedom, she matured early and dated rather openly, while we, her peers, were still at the stage of pure love with regard to her. She made Kulibabchuk, an employee of the refinery, fall in love with her. He was a blond young man with prominent cheekbones and beautiful gray eyes. Their affair didn't last long, though, and Kulibabchuk married Polina, a red-headed beauty from Zhurbiv, who had turned many a boy into men before.

"Who are you?" Zamarchuk asked.

Well, you tenth hero! Looks like your battle has ended pretty quickly. Lel Lelkovich, the real tenth man, would have never been as foolhardy as to go onto the dam in the first place.

"Me?" (What could I become at this critical moment? Kulibabchuk? What if they knew him? Before the war he had worked as a shipping clerk. Yes, they could have known him. I could be anyone else but him. Besides, it would be too great an honor for him: there was still something left of my feeling for Tsibulska).

"I'm Huralik."

"The forest ranger?" Zamarchuk (it really was him, as I saw) recoiled from me. His look was as gloomy as the night.

If they were locals, they surely knew the forest ranger. It would be surprising if they didn't know the famous Huralik

"I'm Huralik's son... Mikola."

"Where are you bound?"

"To the refinery... for the night shift."

"What's your job? What are you doing there?"

"Me? I'm a washer."

"So you're going to steal sugar?"

"Where does a washer see the sugar? That's where the boilers are." (How wonderful that Pavlo Ivanovich, our chemistry teacher, had taken us on excursions to the refinery. The experience was coming in handy after so many years.) "I deal with water... warm water, and wash the beets. Haven't you ever seen it being done?"

"So you say that you're Huralik?"

"Sure."

Without turning round or batting an eyelid, Zamarchuk called:

"Huralik! Come here! On the double!"

What the hell? Was it really Mikola Huralik? Our great mathematician, the connoisseur of celestial mechanics for whom the teachers predicted the future of either a Kepler or Laplace (Mikola bragged that he'd discover the orbit of the extinct planet Phaeton mathematically). Up to this minute, I had been sure that the Huraliks weren't at the forest range anymore, because by all my reasoning, they must have left. The man moved slowly, probably having heard how I had identified myself.

He came up, stopped, and looked intently into my face, making me shiver all over. No, it wasn't him after all. The Huraliks had some relatives living in Zhurbiv. What if this was my chance? This Huralik

might as well identify me as Mikola, the son of the forest ranger.

Come on, Huralik, be a pal, I pleaded in my mind. Don't betray me. You're still young. He seemed to have guessed my thoughts and wilted.

"Well, is it him?" Zamarchuk asked.

"I've never seen him in my life," Huralik said, standing there guiltily.

Zamarchuks' face spread in a grin, revealing his white teeth. He had caught me in a lie with his own Huralik. I'd have surely been caught if I'd identified myself as Kulibabchuk or anyone else. He nodded to his shorter subordinate who, adroit as a centipede, started to prowl me over. First he stuck his fingers into my breast pockets and shook out some cigarettes and matches (Pania had bartered them for eggs, and that was all the pay I got for the thatching) after which he reached for the lower pockets — that was curtains for me, because I had a second clip from the TT pistol in there. He screamed wildly, but it was already too late.

"The tenth!" Zamarchuk recoiled, fired blindly, and quickly drew back to the willow trees.

Centipede dropped to the ground as did Huralik (he didn't even get a chance to take the rifle off his shoulder), while I, blinded by the flashes, couldn't see where to run and remained standing over the two. "Huralik... Huralik..." No response. As far as I remembered, I had aimed at Zamarchuk. Centipede was silent, too.

The men behind the willow trees joined Zamarchuk, scrambled up the hill along a footpath that ran steeply from the dam, and after regaining their courage, fired in disorder either at the dam or to call for help from the sugar refinery. The only response

they got from there was the hoot of a dinky little train which might have arrived from Pilipi just then. The Germans had opened the refinery some days ago, so the train was bringing in lime, coal, and sugar beets from Pilipi. The hoot was listless, as if the train were tired after the journey. Before the war, a far better train used to run along the refinery's sidetrack. Apart from freight cars, it had its own passenger car and sold tickets to Pilipi which was seventeen kilometers away. From there started the main line of the South-Western Railroad and the big stations.

The Huraliks' homestead used to be a truly paradisiacal nook of nature designed for man. The gentle curves of its silhouette stood out on a knoll immersed in greenery. At times, when you got out of the dense stand of oak and saw the homestead, you involuntarily stopped to admire the idyllic scene of buzzing bees, cackling hens, and barns from which the smell of wood and hay wafted. The apiary consisted of closely grouped beehives which were carried into the open when the first willows bloomed; their flowers made the bees as yellow as brass. The bees here did not seem to buzz like they did everywhere else; rather they rang in the air. The Huraliks — father and son — were afraid of bees, so the apiary was looked after by the mother, Katerina Hrihorivna.

I rapped on the window. A dog whined in the entrance hall. In the window appeared a frightened woman, the mistress of the house it seemed, and looked warily at me.

“Katerina Hrihorivna! It's me... remember?”

“They've left.”

“How long ago?” (What an absurd question!)

“The day everyone left.”

“And who are you?”

“A new forest ranger is living here. Do you want to see him?”

“No, no. I came to see the Huraliks.”

“They left.”

I regretted that they had, but on the other hand, a load seemed to have been taken off my mind. There was the same well with the sweep, barns, wood arranged in neat piles, and haystacks just like before. The woman left the window, and instead there appeared the head of the forest ranger — disheveled hair, a fear-drawn face with the streak of a black mustache across it, an utterly ill-disposed visage. I found it hard even to imagine him in the crested cap which Huralik had worn all these years.

“Who are you looking for?”

“Has Mikola, the forest ranger’s son, turned up here?”

“No. What do you want him for?”

“If he shows up, tell him a friend of his dropped in.”

“What friend? From where?”

“He knows.”

I left the yard, moving away from the odd face in the window. The dog was still whining in the entrance hall. The police might come here for Mikola. I had to get out of the forest fast. Somewhere, not far away, the refinery pond spilled into the rusty swamp. There had to be a brushwood path nearby. Mikola told me once that when frost bound the road in winter, it was used by wolves out hunting and by poachers. Mikola and his father often went there to waylay the wolves and the poachers, too. The new forest ranger probably didn’t know about the path, whereas for me, it could be a wonderful escape route now.

Mikola believed there were swamp ghosts in those thickets. Presently, I really saw one covered all over with slime and looking at me with a pair of flashing eyes. He stood there a while, shook his head, and splashed on toward the brushwood path. But the strangest thing was that he was barefoot. His boots, tied by their white straps, hung over his shoulder. Mikola hadn't told me anything about ghosts with boots. Anyway, where the hell could a swamp ghost get boots? All that must have been the product of my sickly fantasy and imagination. For all that, it was a fine fantasy, because it showed me the way. The path was really a shoddy affair, unsteady and sinking into the mire here and there — in a word, a wolf trail. But to the ghost, it didn't matter at all. It was only in one place that the road sagged under him as if he were really a living being. My situation, though, was more complex — one careless step and I'd go to my eternal rest. A flare burst right over the steepest point in Zhurbiv; the splutter of motorcycles reached my ears, and into the chorus of the Zhurbiv dogs there burst a sound utterly strange: German shepherds. Once, in the Khorol swamps, I had heard their howling, and it chilled me right to the marrow. These dogs must have come from Hlynsk. To add to my bad luck, the ghost had disappeared somewhere. How could I trust a ghost after that? The brushwood path had come abruptly to an end. Through the darkness I heard only the purling of a stream that had broken itself a pathway through here as well.

The German shepherds picked up the scent and moved to the forest ranger's house. I heard people shouting. In all probability, the forest ranger, his wife and children had been led out of the house. The house or something else dry must have been set on

fire, because the forest and swamp lit up instantly and I saw dry ground only a few paces away on the other side of the stream. I crossed it, and walking through the forest undergrowth, reached a wet meadow.

Presently dawn came, and I saw horses. Horses from Zhurbiv. After slushing along that wolf trail, the horses looked like a mirage to me. It was a sizable herd that seemed to have been alarmed. The foals got to their feet and stretched like little children after sleep. There was only one white foal in the whole herd, but I didn't see its white mother, just as I didn't see any night watchman around. Probably the herd was driven here in the evening, and then somebody came for it in the morning.

Among the old, work-worn nags which were absolutely indifferent to my appearance, there still were some wary, quick-eyed horses just fit for a rider like me. There was a bay, for instance, which was perhaps the first to notice me and snort in alarm. I went to him, coaxing him to come up. He did, but then he reared and made off. I went to the second, the third — the same thing. The whole herd was thrown into alarm. The German shepherds were already barking by Cheremsk where I had seen the swamp ghost (perhaps the one from Mikola's childhood tales) while here I was running around in the herd, pleading with whatever rheumy-eyed nag would respond to my call — but all in vain.

The forest ranger's homestead was on fire. Huralik had built a lot, so there was plenty to burn. The dogs had come up to the swamp, lost the scent, and could not pick up the brushwood path, barking in this direction, having probably caught the scent of the horses on the meadow. I failed to catch a horse in the end and ran off in God knows what direction,

cursing the horses which had taken so much of my precious time.

Presently, I came upon the refinery platform scales standing to one side of a field. There were two huts under one roof — one for the trucks, the other for wagons. As yet, everything was quiet and there were no wagons about, but they would appear any minute now. From here I could get to the first village, while the hunters would be looking for the tenth man in the forest. A strange, subconscious joy flooded my soul as I stood in front of the scales.

Before the war, I had heard a lot about these scales from the Babylonian peasants. I don't know how it was at other refineries, but this was supposed to have been a place of the most flagrant swindling, a site where constant conflicts between the collective farms and the refinery burst out. Babylon and other collective farms sent here their trusted men, incorruptible and by all means knowledgable about the procedures of weighing. Of the Babylonians, Fabian held out the longest, but by the end of the season, he, too, was supposed to have jibed with Theophila, the woman in charge of the scales, and was recalled from that post. After that, Yavtukh was sent to replace him. He showed his skill to the best advantage, and perhaps thanks to him, Babylon had set a record beet harvest that year. For the first time!

But next autumn, Yavtukh who had been sent again, fell in love with Theophila (she was beautiful and single besides). So he started giving in to her swindling and was also recalled with disgrace at the height of the season. Whenever the scales were mentioned, Yavtukh kindly recalled Theophila, considering her a "deadly woman" which, to his mind, was the loftiest praise.

Now only the platform for the wagons was oper-

able. The hut was locked (on trust) by a spike shoved through a staple — before the war such carelessness would have been simply intolerable. I closed the door behind me and for a few minutes was getting accustomed to my new refuge. After that I took off my cap and coat covered all over with beggar-ticks and burrs, and hung it on a nail near the door. The immured mirror reminded me of Theophila. I sat down on a chair in front of the scales and pretended to be God knows what — a weigher. Once the first wagon appeared, I would take off on it myself, I decided.

But it was too early yet — there were no customers, no Theophila, the refinery was only beginning to stir to life after the night, the Germans were mopping up the forest, their efforts punctuated by short bursts of automatic fire and single, haphazard shots. Meanwhile I was looking at the scales, trying to grasp their mechanics. I released the beam and the scales swayed lightly, sensitive to the slightest movement of the counterbalance. The scales raised the wooden platform outside in front of the window as lightly as a feather. But would it work as well when the first wagon with beets rolled onto the platform? In the desk drawer, I found a number of books with blank forms of receipts, a pencil stub, and a sheet of carbon paper that had been used over and over again. The receipts were of prewar vintage, with the following entry columns: collective farm, state farm, name of deliverer, weight — gross and net. The weigher must also have been of prewar extraction, for who else would have had the idea to keep these receipts?

Somewhere from beyond the forest came the sound of loaded wagons creaking across the dam. They were either from Zhurbiv or Babylon, because no other road led here from Babylon across the dam. They

stopped, their creaking dying away, probably being checked. The checking took quite some time, while here at the scales every minute was precious: I wished life would begin as fast as possible; there had to be some action and tracks, tracks and tracks to confuse the sleuthhounds. The wagons were set in motion again, rolling uphill from the forest. The peasants from Zhurbiv filed past the scales on their way to work. Words and snatches of phrases reached my ears. The conversations revolved around one and the same subject — the shoot-out on the dam.

“No, my friend, no, it wasn’t just one man. There was a fine company of them... Zamarchuk says that one man fired the gun, but in fact there were twenty or thirty...”

The friend was not simply a friend, but a man of gold: “It’s a pity Zamarchuk wasn’t done in. He’s a bastard, as bastardly as they come. Last Friday he made me pull my pants down and I spilled out a good thirty pounds of sugar. I put it behind my pants over the long johns, but still the bastard found it. He simply sniffs it out with his nose.”

“He’ll get himself into trouble one of these days, he will...”

“Was it the same Huralik?”

“Oh no, it wasn’t him. Would the real Huralik have joined the police? Who would have taken him into the police in the first place? Huralik’s Forest! Huralik’s son! Good heavens, no! They’d only be too glad to lay their hands on him and burn him alive.”

“It was a beautiful nook, wasn’t it?”

“Sure. Those bastards don’t spare anything.”

“The weigher’s not around yet.”

“Because there’s nothing to weigh. Omelyan, do you remember what this place used to look like at this time of year?”

"Of course. Endless lines to the scales."

"Listen, Omelyan, doesn't the present weigher remind you of anyone?"

"You mean that mustached character?"

"Yes, him."

"No, I don't think so."

"Remember, Omelyan, there was a certain Teslya in Hlynsk. The Secretary of the District Party Committee. A shortish man. He spoke at a meeting in our refinery. I was dragged to it then..."

"Such a tight-lipped type as you?"

"Yes. I was a shockworker at that time. In the washing section..."

"Well, and..."

"It's him. I swear it is. The spitting image of Teslya."

"The weigher?"

"Yes, the weigher."

"Sh-h! You didn't see or hear anything," said Omelyan, who was also an elderly worker. "What things a man can make up."

Those were the sorts of conversations I heard. The wagons were already coming downhill this way (the refinery stood on a hill bounded on three sides by a pond, that is, by the Chebrets which was dammed in these places). I heard the drivers shouting at their horses. The weigher would show up any minute now. Was it really Teslya? The refinery smithy came to life, then the dinky puffed somewhere near the roundhouse, probably preparing to depart for Pilipi. The refinery whistle went off — a preliminary whistle, to be followed by the main one just like before the war.

I heard that after this whistle, the commandant, Klaus, took up station with a whip at the entrance gate and lashed at everyone who was late. The

women and girls burst into tears, the men took the beatings wordlessly, and only the mechanic, an elderly man, snarled out once, for which he was beaten to a pulp.

Then the main whistle went off.

Presently, the weigher appeared. A middle-aged man of medium height, in tarpaulin overalls that had seen wear, boots so covered with dust it made me wonder where he could have been walking, and a cap, its peak pulled over his eyes. He walked in a truly fine and sedate manner (you bet — a weigher, after all!), and quietly whistled a tune (what a time for whistling; now I'll keep you shut in this here hut till lunchtime, and your feigned carelessness will come off right away!). He stopped in front of the door, suddenly cut short his whistling, probably having noticed that the spike was missing from the staple, then opened the door, and seeing me behind the scales, came in nonetheless. His penetrating eyes looked at me with barely disguised surprise, while his face broke into a smile which wasn't very careless. I simply wanted to see that face, without a mustache and with dimples in its cheeks.

"So you've already been doing some weighing, have you?"

"Not yet... they're just coming now..."

"These are from Babylon. Early birds." His two golden front teeth lent his smile a somewhat cunning and, perhaps, sly nature.

"Were you sent here to work as my partner, or what?"

"Me? No, I just dropped by to see Theophila."

"Who's that?"

"Theophila? She worked here before the war."

"Oh, I see... Theophila. Yes, she worked here, or so they say. Cheated in weighing. She your relative?"

"Yes. She and my father are relatives of sorts."

He darted a glance at my coat hanging on the nail, raised the peak of his cap, and again the two golden teeth under his yellow-flecked mustache flashed in my direction in a smile which wasn't as friendly as before.

"You been long here?"

"Not so long."

"Do they have dogs there?"

"Who do you have in mind?"

"The Germans. Who else."

"Yes, they've got dogs."

"And what if they come here?"

Through the window, I saw Yavtukh in the wagon up front. He wore a padded jacket and cap, and directed the horses toward the platform. Behind his back a loading fork stuck out of the heap of beets. He hadn't gotten down from the wagon yet when he shouted into the window:

"Good morning!"

"Hello, hello!" the weigher hastened to reply.

He gestured me into a corner, sat down in front of the scales, deftly moved the counterbalance, and after noticing something on the scales, shouted to Yavtukh:

"Holiy, you so and so, get your horse off the platform!"

Could Comrade Teslya carry on like that? I wondered.

Yavtukh drove the horse off the platform, yet weighed himself with the wagon—I saw him standing on the very edge of the platform.

After securing the scales, the weigher wrote out a receipt and extended it to Holiy through the window. The latter looked it over critically, and mumbled something under his nose before stepping off the

platform. Judging by his behavior, he was not on good terms with the weigher.

Seven wagons had arrived from Babylon. Some of the wagoners looked unfamiliar to me, but Fedir Yamkovy I knew inside out. He was dressed all in military garb, and judging by the way he handled the wagon he must have been bringing beets for the first time, because he couldn't drive the wagon onto the platform properly — either the front or the back wheels missed it and he kept lashing his horses across the eyes.

"Is everything all right now?" the weigher asked.

"Weigh it! Who cares? The sugar isn't ours anyway!"

"Wow, what a load," the weigher remarked, and then filled in the receipt form. "Is this your first trip?"

"Yes."

"Your surname..."

"Yamkovy... Fedir, on my father's side and my mother's side, too — oh the hell with it all."

He was a harsh but kind man. I had worked as a horse driver on a harvester with him one summer and earned more work-day units than I ever had before. His wagon had already rolled off the platform when the weigher called him:

"Hey, Yamkovy, you've forgotten your receipt!"

Yamkovy turned round to the window: "Why, are they still handing out receipts even now? Oh my!"

Yamkovy ran up to the window, took the receipt, folded it in four, and put it in his breast pocket, on which there was a trace of a badge, probably a PPKhO * badge. In Hlynsk before the war, Yamkovy

* Abbr. for *Protipovitryana-khimichna oborona* — Air and Gas Defense — Tr.

had set a shooting record firing in a gas mask. I turned away so he wouldn't recognize me. But harvest operators probably don't remember their horse drivers as well as we do them. Besides, it had been long ago. At that time, Valigurov was Party Secretary in Hlynsk.

After all the customers had been serviced, the weigher gave me a wink and drummed the table with his white fingers. Then he took a tobacco pouch — a real pouch of pig skin — out of his pocket, along with a lighter and a little book of cigarette paper made out of a piece of newspaper. He tore off one page and nibbled its edge with his golden front teeth like real smokers do to make the edge stick together better. His first draw set the paper on fire under his mustache, but he expertly blew out the flame.

"Germans they may be, but they can't make a decent newspaper. It burns like powder. Have a smoke." He gestured to the tobacco pouch. Watching closely how I rolled the cigarette, he seemed to be satisfied with the deft way I did it. "It's burning all right!" he said after I had lit up. The cigarette had really burned black.

He took another look at my coat on the nail.

"Oh my, what a coat! You could've at least cleaned the burrs off."

"There was no time for that."

"How did you get into this hut?"

"I knew about the platform scales before the war."

"Wow, what an old acquaintance."

"I used to bring sugar beets here."

"Where from?"

"From Babylon."

"And where do you intend to go now?"

"Back there, I guess."

“Do you know them?” he pointed at the men on the wagons.

“Inside out. Who doesn’t know Yavtukh? I recognized Yamkovy as well. Once I was a horse driver with his harvester.” I had an almost overwhelming urge to add: “I know you, too. Aren’t you Comrade Teslya?” But nothing seemed to have remained of the former Teslya. When he took off his cap, he was completely bald, whereas Teslya had a fine shock of hair. Just like Chubar, the Chairman of the Council of People’s Commissars.

“What camp are you from?”

“Where did I escape from, you mean? From Uman. From the quarries.”

“Private?”

“Yes.”

“We had a shoot-out here on the dam today. Some policemen got killed.”

“Who did it?”

“Such fellows as you. Who else.”

What color were Teslya’s eyes? I couldn’t remember his eyes. To know such a thing, you would have had to see him at closer quarters once at least. Like I was seeing him right then — his eyes were ruddy with a twinkle. Why had he said: “Such fellows as you.” Surely, he must have guessed.

“Here’s a key for you.” He put it on the table. “Take this away” — he gestured to my coat — “and go to the pond through those backyards, see?” He led me up to the window. “There you’ll find an old bakery standing above the pond. It’s got a black smokestack on it. There’s a narrow door in the side wall. Lock yourself up and wait for me. I’ll be relieved around six. Duty, you know, brother. If anything goes wrong, there’s a hatch leading to the loft. It’s in the corner of the little corridor. Don’t

forget to pull the ladder up after you. Understand? Some weigher, you..." he said with reproach, hanging his cap on the nail and taking his place behind the scales again. Presently, the wagons from Raigorodok rolled up. "And throw your coat into the pond, so there won't be any trace or scent of it left. Be careful not to run into the police from the refinery on your way."

I went to the bakery through the narrow backyards, then crossed the main and, as a matter of fact, one and only street. By the refinery gate was a guard in civvies but with a rifle. Another one stood by the wicket of the house in which the former director, Solovyov, used to live. Behind the walls was a little courtyard, a fountain, and several linden trees — now the domain of Commandant Klaus. Out of the building of the former firehouse, another man with a rifle emerged and crossed the street, probably to relieve the guard on duty. In the meantime, I was walking down the street to the bakery, carrying the coat on my arm. Still, Teslya used to have a rich shock of hair, I thought. The front entrance of the bakery was boarded up; opposite it grew wilting weeds, and a footpath with stone steps led to the narrow side door.

The room still smelled of slaked lime. The grilled window looked out onto a steep knoll, which explained why daylight was creeping into the room only now, while uphill, morning had broken long ago. When the bakery was in operation, this room was probably used to store flour or ready-baked bread. The two-ring stove must also have been installed recently; its flue let out the smoke through a wall where an elbow pipe of white tin that had not yet burned on the surface could be seen. Along the inner wall, which was the driest, stood two iron cots, opposite the window there

was a little table, and on the stove, a tea kettle and some other simple kitchen utensils. In a dark corner stood a round wicker basket with a corked bottle of a pail and a half or even two pailfuls of moonshine. By the stove was a basket with potatoes and some onions, and on the table, a saucer with salt. That was about everything there was in the room. There were wood and matches as well as salt. Had there been water here, too, I could have boiled some potatoes and enjoyed life even in this hole. But there wasn't a drop of water (at that moment I had forgotten about the pond which was right at the threshold of the bakery).

On the whole, this wasn't a bad place, if the weigher had anything to do with war. The approaches to the bakery were wonderful and its living quarters were concealed from the human eye, although they were near the residence of the commandant. This factor, too, was of no mean advantage.

My misfortune started with the bottle, which I approached with mug in hand and the most modest intentions. Just at that moment it had to happen — the dinky went off in a shrill whistle, and the bottle slipped out of my hand. What could have otherwise satisfied my desire with a small dose turned into such a pool of stench I had to hurry out of the room. On the pond, the mist was clearing and I heard a pike on a prowl jump out of the water in the reeds. I sat down on a little stone where the residents must have washed their shirts and boots. The refinery had come to life by now; the hammers were banging on the molasses vats: the vats, riddled by bullets and shells, were being patched up. Something heavy, probably a tank by the batteries of diffusers, was being lifted, and I heard the voice of the crew leader shouting: "Heave ho!"

I went back to the house to pick up the pieces of glass and threw them into the very same basket into which the bottle had fit so comfortable before. Never start making yourself at home with a bottle. Presently, the master of the house arrived. He walked across the puddle my way and looked intently into my eyes: "You're the tenth man?"

What could I tell him? The tenth man was dying in the mill at Green Mills, and I was perhaps the same kind of man as this weigher. But I had no way to evade the question.

"I'm the tenth."

"You were badly trained over there," he said with a voice that brooked no objection. "You're not the only one around here, you know. There are many of us like you. Yes, many, mind you. And here you lead your tracks to the refinery, thinking only about your own hide. A greenhorn, that's what you are! Take Holiy who's carting beets for the Germans — he'd never do such a thing. Now off with you to the dinky."

I pointed at the basket: "Because of that blasted dinky the bottle slipped out of my hand."

Seeing the coat on the cot, he ran up to it, grabbed it, and once outdoors, threw it into the pond.

"What are you doing? I've got a clip there!"

He jumped onto the stone, picked up the coat, and handed it to me.

"Get it. And make it quick!"

Then he threw the coat farther away from the shore.

Not far from the scales stood the dinky under steam with a number of empty flatcars. The first flatcar had a crew of loaders on it. It looked like the dinky had left the station ahead of time and stopped here intentionally. The elderly machine driver kept his

hand on the handle of the brake valve, and the door to the cab was open. No sooner had I put my foot on the steps than the dinky puffed, creaked with all its body, and rolled on to Pilipi.

The driver pointed at the iron seat. I settled down. Huffing and puffing, the dinky raced at full speed down the rickety track, the stoker feeding coal into the firehole all the time. His iron shovel scraped in the fuel tender; inside the firehole, it roared like an inferno.

“Good work, Ilarion!” the driver said with a smile, keeping his eyes on the track.

The forest I saw from the cab window drifted toward us and looked now like a huge bonfire with blazing gullies and patches of oak stands resisting the advent of autumn. On this side of the forest, the leashed dogs drove the herd of horses in front of them. The Germans barely managed to keep up with the dogs. The stoker came into the cab and whispered something to the driver. The latter nodded in response. Sweat rolled down the stoker’s face, drenching his eyes, but when he wiped his face and looked my way, I involuntarily got up and gasped in surprise. Ilarion turned out to be Yasha Shmorhun, the famous barber who used to have his shop at the refinery and was so respected by my school pals. Even the sternest advocates of school hygiene couldn’t do anything with our unruly mops of hair which this inventive barber ennobled so remarkably well. He did it practically for nothing, although he was a top-notch master in his trade, cutting the hair and shaving the director of the refinery Solovyov himself and even the authorities from Hlynsk, which aroused acute jealousy among the Hlynsk barbers. His shop already had a radio at that time, and Yasha

impressed us with his knowledgability. Besides, he always had "live" information close at hand, which made sitting in line waiting for our turn and listening to his stories a supreme pleasure. It was somewhat difficult to imagine the former life of the refinery without Yasha Shmorhun and his barber's shop which, besides everything else, was a sort of a club we boys considered it a great honor to visit. Yasha had known us then only perhaps by our mops of hair, so he didn't recognize me now.

"Think I'll go and add some more fuel," he said aloud, and his iron shovel scraped again in the tender.

"Go and help Ilarion," the driver said to me. "Let the sweat drench you a bit. There is quite a nasty German in Pilipi. He doesn't tolerate idlers. '*Arbeit! Arbeit!*' that's the only thing that counts with him. You don't have overalls on you, or a decent face into the bargain. He might pick on you."

He looked at my hands, which had perceptible traces of my thatching efforts at Pania Vlastovenko's, and said:

"How did you almost fall into their claws, brother? You can't do that, you can't. That's Germans for you, brother. No joking with them, brother. If you got anything on you, don't carry it about. Put it in here." He pointed at the iron box for tools and tow. "The Germans are nasty and see through everything. Don't be afraid, it won't get lost with me."

What could I do but empty my pocket. Then I went to the tender, took the shovel from Yasha, and got down to tossing coal into the firehole. Yasha stood at my side, stirring the embers with an iron rod.

Pilipi did not admit us, because a freight thain was standing on a sidetrack. The sealed freight cars had yellow circles with red thunderbolts on them.

One car had guards, and a flatcar had antiaircraft guns on it.

"They're carrying gases," Yasha said.

"Oh, come on," the driver mumbled.

"It's gases. A yellow circle with thunderbolts means gases. See how many guards they've got. And everyone is provided with a gas mask. Where did you see guards with gas masks?"

"Yes, it must be gases," the driver agreed.

Ten minutes later, the station semaphored clear for the freight train and it started to roll out. Then our dinky was admitted. On a platform stood a German who was called Vapno* thereabouts. The limestone was brought to Pilipi not only for the refinery in Zhurbiv, but for other neighboring refineries as well, and Vapno supervised its unloading and distribution.

The whole day through, we loaded limestone, carrying it on handbarrows from heaps and up the steep ladders propped to the edge of the flatcars. There was no letup for a smoke or rest — Vapno was here and there and everywhere.

He was really a nasty, malicious German. Twice he turned me and Yasha back from the flatcar and made us load more limestone on our handbarrow. Yasha was afraid of him and started every time he made his presence felt. "Ilarion!" Vapno hollered as soon as Yasha stopped for a respite.

"Why is he picking on you, Ilarion?"

"Guess he likes my name," Yasha explained, looking with sorrowful eyes at me, and added to make it

* Vapno — lime (Ukr.)

all a joke: "However you rename a Yasha, he'll stay a Yasha. Listen, did you get your haircuts at my place?"

"Of course I did."

"I see there's something familiar about you."

"I recognized you right away."

"Oh damn it. Everyone recognizes me, even children whose hair I've shorn but once. I simply can't stick my nose outdoors. I hide here in the dinky, but they still recognize me. People don't seem to understand anything. If there's an Ilarion, let him be Ilarion. But no — it's Yasha, Yasha everywhere I go. 'Mom, Mom! There goes Yasha!'"

"Did you ever cut our weigher's hair?"

"You mean the one who's operating the scales? What do you need to know that for? Did you hear what happened on the dam today?"

"Yes, I did."

Again I asked him about the weigher. What if he really were Teslya? The very first Party Secretary of Hlynsk.

"He drifted in here not long ago. At first he was on repair jobs, then when the sugar beets started coming in, he switched over to the scales. His name is Vasil Andriyovich... surname Zhuravel. He's the one who stopped the dinky. He rooms with Tarasov, Boris Ivanovich, a tight-lipped, stern man. Maybe he isn't Tarasov or Boris Ivanovich at all, but he's surely a regular military man. I can see it in his bearing. Before going to bed, he takes a dip in the pond. I visit them. They've got a fine bottle there. If you don't mind, we'll drop in after loading the limestone and take a nip."

I must have smiled all too wryly when he mentioned the bottle.

"Don't you believe me?"

"Why not, Ilarion, I believe you. But the thing is there's no bottle anymore. I smashed it today."

"You what?"

"Well, it happened accidentally."

"You mean the one in the wicker basket?"

"Yes, the green bottle."

Ilarion looked completely crestfallen. He suffered from terrible insomnia, and that bottle was supposed to have kept him going.

We got back to the refinery late. On the steep grades, the dinky, so spirited in the morning, puffed and tossed around in its own steam, although Ilarion was dripping with sweat by the firehole as before. I was lying on the limestone, feeling neither my legs nor arms, staring into the star-studded sky.

By my side the other loaders lay like corpses in their white coveralls, their bodies merging with the limestone and resembling white boulders. I was more and more worried about the weigher, the barber's shop, and the people who were hiding out in the refinery.

The forest looked quiet and wary now. Near it, the dinky slowed down, and one of the loaders, an elderly, lean man whom everyone called Uncle Petro, whispered to me: "Isn't that for your sake, sonny?"

Near a kilometer post dug into the side of the embankment, stood the weigher. I recognized him by the cap pulled over his eyes. He must have signalled the dinky to slow down.

"You alive?" the weigher asked me sharply.

"Thanks to you, Vasil Andriyovich."

"Oh, you already address me by my patronymic. Where did you find that out?"

"Ilarion the stoker told me."

"A blabbermouth, that's what he is. I hope you didn't blurt out about the tenth man."

"I kept mum about it, but he must have guessed it himself."

"How was Vapno? Did he pick on you?"

"He plagued the life out of me. Didn't give me a chance to breathe."

"A real German he is. Our German."

"Vapno???"

"Sure, Vapno, Vapno. He's from Vienna. Was a socialist, a deputy to the Austrian Parliament."

"What makes him so nasty then?"

"That's so you'd know what the New Order is all about. Is the train with the gases still standing there?"

"It left."

"They're hiding it. Something must not be going well if they're shipping in gases." Suddenly he fell silent, and gazed into my eyes: "Were you dropped to get at this train?"

"Nobody dropped me, Vasil Andriyovich. And I'm not the tenth paratrooper. The tenth is dying in Green Mills right now, if he hasn't died already. Well, as for the other nine, you know — they died in action at the former farmsteads."

"Tarasov's a wonderful man. He was the first to say that you weren't the tenth."

"I became the tenth on the dam today. Then you confirmed it. The men on the dinky think that's who I am as well."

"Everything squares now. The tenth man would never have gone to the dam, and he wouldn't have come to the refinery. Did you see the horses in the meadow?"

"I did."

"The real tenth would've caught a horse and made off as far as possible. Why didn't you do that?"

"I couldn't catch a horse."

"Oh come on, you simply weren't shrewd enough to think of such an idea. Besides, you lost your Red Army soldier's identity card. The Germans found it by the horses. Is your surname Heyba?"

"The first time I hear it." I told him my surname. "And I had no identity card on me. I don't know who lost it."

"So who's that Heyba then?"

"I have no idea." (Here I recalled the swamp ghost).

"What if there were more paratroopers? Not ten, but eleven?"

"Ten parachutes were found in Green Mills. Ten. That I know for sure."

"The eleventh could've been dropped here. With a radio. At times this is done on purpose to preserve communications in case a group fails."

"Then where's this Heyba?"

"He disappeared without a trace. The Germans mopped up the forest, searched the refinery, burned the forest ranger's homestead — no trace of him. What if he made off on horseback?"

He turned onto the path leading into a field. Against the line of the forest loomed a stack of unthreshed grain. Near it was a threshing machine, steam engine, a water barrel, and not far away in the stubble spotted with newly sprouting wheat, grazed the horses. It could have been the same herd I had seen on the wet meadow the night before. I involuntarily looked for the white foal but did not see it.

"Klaus chases us out to thresh at night. We can't do anything but obey. What do you know about threshing?"

"Everything. In Babylon I..."

"Are you really from Babylon?"

“Sure.”

“Well then.” He put his hand, light and sensitive, on my shoulder. “It’s too late to back out now. Keep on being the tenth paratrooper. I must show them” — he gestured with his head in the direction of the thresher — “a man from friendly territory. I simply must. Call yourself Heyba or whatever you like, but you’re the tenth man. You and your friends were dropped here to destroy the gas train. It’s been around for three weeks now. You were dropped just in time. But a bit offside. The navigator erred. Nine men got killed, but you slipped out of the trap. Let’s go!”

I barely kept up with his pace. The signs of my weariness after loading limestone and the uncertainty of my situation as a whole were showing. Why all this deception? I puzzled.

He stopped and looked intently at me again as if he wanted to make sure I got his message right. I realized he needed that tenth man badly, very badly now. Not so much for his own sake as for those he had grouped around himself. People might really have lost faith. That’s why he wanted to throw a stone into these backwaters and rouse people to some drastic action. Well, say, against the enemy trains which kept rolling ceaselessly to the front line along the railroad. I was gripped by yet another feeling when I felt his searching gaze on me: could he be one of the men from the first landing party which, if the rumors were true, had been dropped over Huralik’s Forest a month before? And perhaps the second party had been dropped just for his sake. All this would become clear later on, but for now...

I recalled the “swamp ghost” who had led me onto the brushwood path this night. Couldn’t he have reached the horses and startled them before I appeared?

I told Vasil Andriyovich that I might have seen Heyba in the forest that night. He startled the horses on the wet meadow, because when I ran up to the herd, there was nobody there anymore, but the herd behaved as if someone had alarmed it. I failed to catch a horse in the end, while he could have succeeded and made off God knows where to.

“Are you talking about these horses?”

“Yes, they’re the ones.”

It was the same herd, but in a different place. I hadn’t seen the stack there. Where could it have come from? I couldn’t have missed it in the middle of the field.

“The stack was here all right,” Vasil Andriyovich said. “I came across it a month ago. The thresher, though, was brought only today.”

A month ago... yes, exactly. If Pania Vlastovenko were to be believed, the rumors about the first landing party reached Green Mills a month ago. The second party dropped on Green Mills could have been a reinforcement. Everyone was killed, except for the “swamp ghost” and Lel Lelkovich.

The figure of a man, his shadow lengthened by the moon setting over the forest, detached itself from the stack. He took his cap off (maybe a prearranged signal) and led us to the lighted side of the stack.

A number of men were lying on the straw. Judging by the greasy coveralls on some of them, they were from the refinery. Nearby, on the threshing floor sparsely overgrown with wheat shoots, a frugal meal was laid out: bread, pork fat, some onions, one knife for everyone, and the familiar mug from the bakery.

“Make your acquaintance!” Vasil Andriyovich said (in my mind, I already called him Teslya).

The men got up unhurriedly, approached me, and shook my hand wordlessly. One shortish, lively man

with a mustache looked attentively into my eyes. Could it be Heyba? Involuntarily, I darted a glance at his boots. A white strap was sticking out right above his bootleg. The tall man, in all probability Tarasov, who had brought us here, left for a moment, produced a quart from the stack, uncorked it, and stood it on the threshing floor (what a tiny bottle compared with the one I had smashed back in the bakery!). He put it on the ground firmly lest it overturn. Darting a glance my way from under his eyebrows, Teslya smiled with his gold front teeth.

I told them everything I knew about the landing party and the skirmish with the Germans, without concealing anything about the tenth man. What they took especially to heart was that on the third day, I got down to thatching the house of Pania Vlastovenko. At this point in my story, I heard a kind snicker from my listeners, and only Tarasov sternly knit his brows and didn't miss a single word. "Just a moment, just a moment!" he exclaimed now and again. When I told about the episode on the dam, Tarasov made me take out the pistol and literally enact the scene with the raised hands. "Be careful!" Teslya remarked, when I cocked my gun. Tarasov still didn't seem to believe I had been on the dam all by myself. But I had yet another proof in reserve: the horses of Zhurbiv. Nobody would believe that I had failed to catch a horse. Then the shortish man with the mustache took off his boots, rather adroitly, I'd say, and in a jiffy (again I took note of the white boot-strap), and ran up to the horses. He looked exactly like the "swamp ghost." All the men got on their feet and watched him with bated breath. Whatever he did, however he coaxed and sneaked up to the horses, he only threw the herd into alarm and returned without a horse. Probably no one was as distressed by his

defeat as Tarasov. "That's horses for you," he said with reproach. "And we've been putting some hopes on them." Still, the real Heyba might have caught a horse.

From the village, wagons arrived with women and some men who had been working on the beet plantation the whole day through. It took quite some time to adjust the tractor drive belt to the thresher, since the belt kept slipping off, and so the threshing was started only around midnight. I was to handle the straw with another two elderly men from Zhurbiv. The conveyor was pushing the straw so fast we barely managed to rake it in. Sleep overcame me at dawn. When I woke up, I learned that Klaus had been here in his car: he was satisfied with our work and praised Tarasov who was in charge, after which he left for Green Mills which was also under his supervision. Klaus bragged that they had apprehended the tenth man somewhere at Dakhnivka near Hlynsk. He was supposed to have escaped from Huralik's Forest on a white horse. Huddled in the straw as I was, I missed that great lord Klaus, but then I cleared up one essential thing for myself related to the white foal which had lost its mother. Yet another thought came to me: we'd never grasp to the end by what objective laws we choose, out of all the paths that lead to death in war, precisely the one which later on proves to be the road to life. Had I caught the horse, I could have met the same end as the "swamp ghost" who was surely Heyba. A horse lends courage and audacity, but it makes the horseman conspicuous — especially a white horse. Besides, I could hardly have come here on horseback and met Comrade Teslya. I was more and more inclined to believe that it was him, or perhaps my heart simply desired it to be so.

Ruzia returned home from the beet plantation late in the evening. The autumn evenings approached suddenly; shaggy and seemingly creeping right out of the ground, they did not steal on quietly as they do at other times of the year. She opened the door and called from the dark entrance hall into the dark room: "You alive, Malva?" In the daytime, the window was covered with a blanket, and when Ruzia arrived, Malva lit a wick lamp with hempseed oil and attended to her like a mother. The first thing she did was pull off her boots, which moisture had swelled to such an extent that they seemed to have grown fast to her feet. Malva could not execute this procedure properly: she either pulled Ruzia down to the floor along with the stool or plumped on the floor herself with a pulled-off boot in her hand, which sent both of them into gales of laughter. At what other time could they have such a good laugh than during this procedure, although the noise could expose their cover, since the dam was nearby, and the women returning from the beet plantation could be crossing it just then. After supper Ruzia fell exhausted onto the bed standing in the living room. The bed she received as her first bonus for a bumper sugar-beet harvest was plated with nickel all over and looked like an exotic machine in the dark. In it, Ruzia felt like a human being again, as she brooded over the past. She wondered how recent it had been and what glaring changes had occurred in her and Malva's life in such a short time span. "Will this be forever, Malva?" she asked from her nickel-plated bed. Just then Malva brought an old whetstone from the entrance hall to grind the knife Ruzia used to clean the beets (however much she ground the knife, it would be blunt by the end of the

day). She didn't enter into conversation, knowing that once Ruzia got warm in her exotic machine, she would instantly drift off into slumber.

Malva then took the whetstone back to the entrance hall, changed into Ruzia's worn-out garb, locked the door with the same lock Ruzia used to shut her in for the day, and quietly moving out and about Babylon, she reveled in her freedom and gave her heart a rest from life of seclusion whose greatest and most detestable enemy proved not fear as she had thought before, nor hopelessness or defenselessness for that matter, but loneliness and the gray humdrum of one and the same observations and feelings. Loneliness sapped her spirit most of all, devitalized her, and severed her final connections with the surrounding world, even the flimsiest and imaginary ones like the steppe cobwebs of which Ruzia brought home fewer and fewer on her clothes. Only at liberty did Malva feel all the beauty of the surrounding world, albeit lawless, oppressed and wary, but still incredibly near and dear since childhood.

Once as she walked down the street, Fabian and his billy goat appeared from around the corner. "Hello, Ruzia! What brings you out so late?" She bolted away from him, but he followed and caught up with her. "Who are you hiding from, Malva? Am I not of the same spirit as you?" Thus, seemingly by accident, she had acquired an ally — about the only one except for Ruzia.

The Skoromnys were still coming to after the horrors of captivity from which they had returned not so long ago. Every week they went to Hlynsk to register. At dawn they had to visit Hlynsk again, which was the same as going out to meet their own deaths. As the line in front of the registration window dwindled with each passing day, Konrad Richter held

up the Skoromnys as an example for the others to follow. "*Gut, Babylon, gut!*" he exclaimed every time as if he were surprised to see them coming back again. They simply had to come, what with their host of children, wives, farms of sorts, and Fabian who had vouched for them with his life before Schwarz and all the local rulers there. So they kept coming.

On the way to Hlynsk, the senior Skoromny, Yevmen, walked up front, while Nichipir trudged behind as if he were going to meet his death. On the way back, the picture reversed: Nichipir left his brother God knows what distance behind — it was autumn, there was a lot of work to do, the children had to be cared for, and so Nichipir hurried lest he lose precious time, while Yevmen, outdistanced by several kilometers, thought every time: brothers sharing the same fate as they did, they still couldn't return home properly as the given circumstances required. Babylon was observing all this from the beet plantation, the thresher, and through their windows, wondering why the Skoromnys were returning from Hlynsk in such a manner, as if they had quarreled on the way. Really, why couldn't they stay closer to each other on their way back? Malva thought, observing them through the window when they crossed the dam in a pair at dawn, and singly at evening. Yevmen was a tall, lean man who had been wounded in the leg and limped. He walked with a cane, and on his way back, his gait was like that of a complete cripple. Every time he crossed the dam, it took a lot of effort on Malva's part to suppress her urge to rap on the window and call him. He seemed to sense it, and stopped for a rest just at the point from which he had to limp up the hill, but Malva drew back from the window into the room, thereby breaking off the thread linking them. I won't get

anywhere with these Skoromnys, Malva concluded and stopped frequenting the street on which their father's house stood which Nichipir added on to before the war in a way that made it look like a single building.

One night Malva came across Yavtukh. He stood in the middle of the street with a bundle he couldn't hoist on his shoulder much as he tried. Presently she came up. "Ruzia! Ruzia!" he pleaded. "God Himself has sent you. I'm completely pooped." She could do nothing but give him a hand. "Is that you?" Yavtukh almost fell down on recognizing Malva. "They said you were supposed to be around, but I didn't believe it; even now I took you for Ruzia." He put the bundle back on the ground, and tried to earn the confidence of this woman. Not knowing how to do it, he told her about his adventure, although later on he couldn't forgive himself for such a rashness, being afraid, even convinced, that Malva would be apprehended in the end and give him away. He was returning from Zhurbiv where he had stolen a sack of sugar. At first, it was a sizable sack of some fifty kilograms or so, but fending off the guards, he lost his sawn-off gun in the forest, almost paid with his life, and had to spill half the sack's contents right onto the ground to make a fast getaway. Yet, what he had left, he was prepared to share with Malva right now: she probably also wanted to drink sweet tea brewed with raspberry springs. "Where am I to put it; in my bosom, or what?" Malva joked. Where he got his strength from Yavtukh had no idea, but he hoisted the bundle on his shoulder, and said. "I'll bring you some sugar in the morning." And he did — a bowlful to Ruzia's house, although up till then Malva had been sure that no one except Ruzia and Mother knew her whereabouts.

After these nocturnal sorties, almost the whole of Babylon eventually guessed whom Ruzia was locking up in her house. The women on the beet plantation whispered about it more openly with each passing day, feeling sorry equally for Malva and Ruzia, who would be in bad trouble should the Germans swoop down upon her house. Malva could escape and make off anywhere she pleased if she had to, but for Ruzia it would be the end. Everywhere, warnings had been posted: for every concealed communist — death, for every concealed Jew — death, for every concealed Bolshevik — death. There were still other forms of death listed, and each could fall on Ruzia. At the same time, however, she evoked a peculiar fascination in the Babylonians. Every woman working with her on the beet plantation considered it an honor to lunch in her company, treating her to their patties or some other tidbits, while her own patties of poppy seeds, beets and cranberries (all these ingredients mixed, of course) were referred to as “Oh, aren’t those the Singers’ patties?” Ruzia smiled with her deep eyes which hadn’t a single trace of despair or cunning: “Go on, eat them, they’re mine all right.” What use was there for justifications and cunning when they knew and understood everything.

Malva’s son was perhaps the last to learn of his mother’s presence in Babylon. Playing at war, the children blurted out everything their parents were stealthily whispering about. Stashko wouldn’t believe them, and asked his grandmother whether it was true that Malva was hiding out here in Auntie Ruzia’s house. Growing up at Grandma’s, Stashko, following the example of the grownups, had gotten used to calling her simply Malva. He did it behind her back as well as to her face whenever she came from Green Mills with Uncle Zhurba whose hair was so red and

shaggy the boy couldn't have his fill of admiring it and secretly called him "Golden Uncle." Zhurba was afraid to sleep in one bed with Malva in the boy's presence, so Grandma made him a bed of straw on the floor. Stashko asked to sleep there, too, and felt grand at "Golden Uncle's" side. But now, Grandma punished him for the foolish fib about Malva, which made his desire to learn the truth burn ever brighter in his heart. With the persistence of one fooled, Stashko, in league with his playmates in the war games, set to spy on Ruzia's yard, which hadn't aroused the slightest interest in him up till then.

He made his way to the yard, looked into the windows, and called out, "Malva, it's me," taking, of course, certain precautions as a "Red Army man." As for the "Germans," they simply carried on impudently by the other windows, yelling in chorus: "Stashko! Stashko! Come over here, on the double. There she is, there she is! Standing in the corner!" So Stashko ran that way and pressed his face to the window, but there wasn't any Malva. What horrified Malva was the fact that they talked about her not as of a living person whose feelings might be hurt, but as of some dumb object of their inquisitiveness. Unwittingly it crossed her mind: the only thing lacking now were the real Germans. In the children, she recognized their parents. There was Yavtukh's youngest son, who was Stashko's age; as for the others she did not know, it did not surprise her any, but here was her son, the blood of her blood. In such a fashion, your own dear son could land you in trouble, although he had come here with the best of intentions.

Foiled and offended, Stashko returned home. One night, he seemed to have seen Malva in a dream,

sitting on the bed in a white kerchief and breathing on him as if she were alive. But when he awoke, she was gone, as if she had melted in the darkness. He told Grandma about his dream. This time she did not scold him, but the next day she took him to Ruzia's house, got the key from the little window overhead, and after opening the door, said to him: "Now go look for yourself, you silly." Malva had prearranged this visit with her mother and hidden in the loft in an old winnowing machine which Petro Dzhura had lugged up there, having taken out its innards first. Impressed by such confidence on his grandmother's part, the boy undertook an intensive search. He looked into every nook and cranny in the house and loft, even knocking the winnowing machine covered with cobwebs all over, and failing to find his mother, grew awfully sad. He couldn't grasp why the boys whose mothers were here in Babylon had played such a cruel trick on him.

After locking up the house, Grandma took the boy home, or rather, was led home by Stashko, because since Malva's appearance in Babylon, her mother had gone completely blind. "Let them say what they like, but don't you believe it," Grandma said. "What mother wouldn't come to see her child if she were here?" This precaution was necessary for the Kozhushnys. Stashko might blab out the secret to the other children who, in turn, might tell it to their parents, and in the end, the thread might reach Hlynsk and Konrad Richter (the Kozhushnys couldn't have known that the thread was well on its way as it was, and their precaution was too late). Konrad Richter had already dropped into the Kozhushnys' home once and asked for Malva Kozhun-a-a-a, as he pronounced her name.

“May my eyes fall out if I’ve seen her since the beginning of the war,” Malva’s mother swore, not failing to remind him of her family’s long-standing relations with the German firm Singer, for which her husband and Malva’s father Orpheus Kozhushny had served as agent for so many years. “Perhaps Herr Richter has heard about this agent who traveled around the world with the machines of the firm,” she said. “For this, Babylon calls us the Singers to this day. Mind you, Herr Richter, that means something, because Babylon chooses names for people to stay with them longer than they live, right down to the seventh generation.” Pointing at Malva’s son Stashko, she added, “He, too, will die a Singer.” The old woman thought that all this had impressed the Gestapo man. He said he knew of such a firm and whispered something to the interpreter who ran off to the car and brought a long candy in a colorful wrapper. He handed it over to his chief who gave it to the descendant of the Singers. At that time Malva really hadn’t been in Babylon, as she was hiding at Varya Shatrova’s home in Hlynsk. The boy didn’t know what to do with the candy. The old woman didn’t lose her head in this case either. “Come on, eat it. It’s somewhat of a present from our relatives.” But when Konrad Richter drove away, she grabbed the candy out of his hand and threw it into the slop pail: “God preserve you, my child, from such relatives. That fiend came for Malva’s soul.”

At dawn that day, she lit the stove to give Malva the usual smoke signal that everything was all right here and she could live calmly through another day. Suddenly Fabian appeared by the window out of the gray, dense drizzle that resembled smoke. The fire

from the stove lit up his bespectacled face and head covered with a sack beyond the wet windowpane. Fabian was rarely seen in Babylon at such an early hour. She came out to him. He was alone, without his billy goat. "Granny," he said, without greeting her, "our paratroopers were dropped at Green Mills today. There are searches throughout all the villages. The Germans might also come to your place. Tell Malva to get away from here. And right away, Granny, this minute. Let her come to my place or go anywhere else, but she can't stay here any longer, not here..."

"She isn't here, Levko, and won't be. You should know she left with our people."

"Granny, it's a matter of life and death, and here you are prattling as if you haven't anything else to say."

"Indeed, I haven't!"

She closed the door behind him, feeling her legs give way and her hands unable to twist the straw to feed the fire in the stove. Barely finished with making the fire, she started to wake Stashko to take her to Auntie Ruzia to "borrow salt," because it was only now she was supposed to have noticed she hadn't any left. Day had broken by the time they were ready; the villagers were crossing the dam on the far side of the pond on their way to the beet plantation. Empty wagons rolled down the hill; it seemed they had dropped out of the sky and smashed to pieces, because you couldn't hear them anymore from then on. Presently, a truck, then another one drove up to the gates almost quietly.

Last time Konrad Richter had come in a car, but now he jumped out of the cab of a truck to issue an order, and his men in their wet black trench coats that made them look like slugs instantly filled the

yard, surrounded the house and barn, and didn't neglect the gully either, as if the greatest evil were lurking there.

Watching them through the window of Ruzia's house, Malva realized perhaps for the first time that she was really something if such a force was flung against her. The Gestapo men behaved as if they were expecting armed resistance. Even the latrine built of sunflower stalks in the garden merited their cautious inspection.

While the search was on, Richter stood under the elm trees and looked at the crossbeam of the swing (Savka Chibis had taken down the swing and hid it in the loft of the Village Soviet or the village office, as it was called now). The German simply could not understand how these people, who built such frail latrines of sunflower stalks, had contrived to push so thick a pine beam to such a height. The beam had noticeably sagged under its own weight, and Richter involuntarily thought that swinging on it was utter madness. No, he'd never understand these people whose psychology he had studied so diligently long before he stepped on their soil. The Gestapo man was furious that there was no Malva Kozhushna this time either. The gendarmes brought the old woman and the boy out of the house and stood them before him. The old woman did not expatiate on the Singer firm this time — she kept silent. Richter was also silent, looking the boy over. Stashko stood before him barefoot, innocent, still sleepy, rubbing his eyes, but his forelock had a twist of defiance to it. At this point, Malva saw or rather sensed Konrad Richter start as if an electric current had run through his body. He raised his hand and hollered something in German to the gendarmes, pointing at the boy. Two men in black

trench coats grabbed Stashko by his hands and led him out of the yard.

He didn't resist, not knowing yet where he was being led to, or probably hoping Grandma would save him. But once at the truck, he started to twist, snapped at the fingers of the gendarmes with his teeth, and tore himself lose in the end. Richter burst out laughing at the sight of this amusing struggle, but when the boy bolted off to the gully and disappeared down it and the gendarmes were about to rack the gully with automatic fire, Richter again hollered something to them. He probably needed the boy alive, because a number of gendarmes went down the gully, brought Stashko, tied him with a rope that must have been intended for Malva, and threw him into the truck like a reed. Richter raised his white-gloved hand and pointed the old woman toward the beam. "Matka! Matka!" he said in broken Russian, which was to mean that if Malva did not come to him, he'd hang her son on that beam. He gave her three days to make up her mind.

Left under the elm trees where all this was to happen in three days, the old woman called down on the nazis the vilest Babylonian curses which had once made the Valakhs and the other enemies of the Singers wilt. This time, however, her curses were impotent. Getting into the cab, Richter called her once more, "Matka! Matka!" and showed three fingers again. They froze on his raised hand, and it seemed as if his malicious laughter had escaped precisely from the tips of these fingers.

Malva came running to the truck. She pushed the black creatures aside, or, perhaps, they themselves made way for her — the old woman did not see that, but anyway they did not hinder her even when she

got onto the truck and started to untie Stashko, after which she gave the rope to the gendarmes, this time to be used for her. They were about to tie Malva up when Richter put them to shame: why should they do that? She had come to them of her own free will, and he, great connoisseur of the psychology of this people that he was, had counted exactly on such an outcome. After all, they were Germans, a gallant people in regard to women, even if the woman in question were Malva Kozhushna herself. Astounded by her calm bearing, Konrad Richter ordered them to move on, got into the cab, while Stashko, having jumped from the truck, stood on the ground, looking at his mother with surprise and rapture, still unable to believe that it was she, Malva. The last time he had seen her, she was altogether different. It was at the outset of the war, when the battles were already raging beyond Babylon. Stashko had never seen her as beautiful, kind and affectionate as then. But now on the truck there stood a completely gray woman, gray and stern. The drizzle had washed away the features of her face, but there was no trace of tears on it, and when the truck sputtered to life, she said to him: "Go tell Grandma to bring me something to throw on my shoulders. Quick." A *hunya* coat was brought out to her, the same old checkered coat she loved to wear whenever she came visiting from Green Mills with Uncle Fedir (the "Golden Uncle"). She threw the coat over her shoulders, and thus, scantily dressed and with a bare head, she remained standing on the truck, holding onto the tarpaulin of the cab, while the gendarmes sat down in two rows behind her back; black and haunched, they hid their faces from the drizzle. To Malva's mother's mind, they were hiding their faces from God, because there were so many of them against one defenseless woman whose bearing

showed contempt and an unsubmitiveness that was absolutely her own.

The old woman was fascinated by her, but this feeling was superseded by a crushing sense of helplessness in the face of fate and the inevitability of what she had a foreboding of and what she could not prevent. When the yard was empty and she remained standing there with Stashko, the two of them, orphaned and lonely, the old woman pounced on him: "Why are you standing there like that? This all happened because of you. Why are you standing there? Run off somewhere, call the people, maybe they'll free her. Come on, don't stand there like a stone!"

"Where should I run? To whom?" Stashko asked, confused.

"Where to? To the beet plantation!" She waved in the direction of Babylon where the people could have been at this time of day. It was not that far off.

Stashko ran off. In the meantime, the trucks were growling and roaring madly on the dam, unable to get out of the mud which the wagons had turned into a sticky mire, while in her mind's eye, the old woman saw people armed with whatever they could lay their hands on — shovels, prongs, pitchforks, and even scythes — as Babylon in one body was moving down the road to save Malva. Oh no, no, Babylon wouldn't surrender her to those black degenerates as simply as that. By that time, Stashko had already run out of Babylon and saw the people. They alone could free his mother, if only he didn't fall before reaching them. Luckily, the trucks had bogged down in the mud on the dam, and he heard them roaring, growling, and alternately whining to each other. The blasted trucks got out of the mud after all, crawled uphill, and were already approaching the road lead-

ing to Hlynsk, but he, too, had almost reached his destination. The people on the beet plantation had noticed him; some were straightening up and exchanging remarks with one another — he had been recognized. They couldn't but have recognized him, because whenever the swing was hung up between the elm trees, they flocked to his farmyard, flew in the swing higher than the trees, and flushed from the excitement, thirstily drank the water he brought for them from the well in the meadow. No sooner would the pail empty than there was the usual call: "Stashko, water!" Stashko derived great joy from serving these people, and kept running to the well which Grandpa Orpheus had dug in the meadow, because he hadn't had enough strength to sink the well into the hard ground on the hill by the house.

Stashko saw now that there really were a lot of people here. Over there was Auntie Ruzia with her team, the women sitting and cutting the tops off the beets. On seeing Stashko, they grew silent. And not far away from the road was Uncle Yavtukh loading the beets into a wagon, and the other men at their wagons did not lag behind him. Of course, they didn't know anything about what had happened in Babylon. Stashko ran up to the group of women where Ruzia was, and barely catching his breath, he uttered: "The Germans took Malva... They're coming with her this way... Grandma told me... to tell it to you..." He kept on muttering something else, but they all were silent, and so was Auntie Ruzia, who looked aside as if this didn't concern her in the least. He then ran to another group, telling them that the Germans were taking Malva away on the trucks over there. But again there was no response, and the people looked mutely from under the sacks and bags with which they had covered themselves against the drizzle.

Appealing to the women all the time, Stashko saw through his mistake, and bolted off to the wagons where the men were with their loading forks — here was all the power and all the hope. He ran to Yavtukh who froze for a moment when the boy stopped before him, heard him out, looked at the trucks, and then went back to loading the beets. Neither did any of the men by the other wagons rush to head off the trucks, while Nichipir Skoromny (both of the brothers were there) even raised his voice at the boy: "Don't shout, you fool. We're not so blind as not to see it ourselves!" They leaned on their forks and looked silently toward the road. Stashko realized that these people couldn't save his mother anymore, and he, too, stood in despair, because up till then, he had an absolutely different idea about them — or about the Skoromnys at least. His eyes involuntarily stopped on the fork of a drenched man who was so utterly confused at Stashko's sight that the fork dropped out of his hands. Without a second thought, Stashko picked up the fork, and raising it over his head, ran to head off the trucks. The man went down on his haunches from bewildered surprise. Polished to a glimmer by the beets and set on a long handle, the fork really resembled a weapon, although it was an ordinary loading fork with buttons on the ends of the prongs which couldn't be even run through a sugar beet, let alone a German.

"Halt! Halt!" Stashko yelled, threatening with the fork. The Germans in the truck either didn't see him or didn't pay any attention to him. Astounded by his action, the people straightened their backs, unhurriedly pulled the bags and sacks off their heads, and stood up full length with their forks, shovels, prongs, and beet knives made of worn scythes — a formidable, pitiless weapon that chopped off the beet

tops just like that, especially in the morning when it wasn't yet blunt. Malva was the first to notice the little boy raving so. She didn't recognize him for the drizzle, and couldn't understand why someone was running this way with a fork. Then he was seen by the gendarmes who sat in the second row facing the beet plantation. They exchanged some remarks and snickered. One of them got to his feet, put his rifle to his shoulder, and rent the drizzle with a dull shot. Something alive seemed to have snapped over the field. The boy ran on a number of paces, dropped the fork, without which he instantly seemed to have grown smaller, and then fell face down on the ground. Malva cried out — it must have been a mother's soul sensing the death of her son — and glancing around at the murderer, saw the white puff of smoke still clinging stubbornly to the truck and the almost complacent face of the gendarme who looked as if what he had done just now distinguished him from the human race and lent him weight in his own eyes. He just threw the empty cartridge onto the bottom of the truck, stood the rifle at his feet, and sat down again like the others, gray and unremarkable. Malva turned away in disgust, her thoughts reaching out to the boy who had fallen. If she were to be shot that day, she would never know who that little daredevil with the fork was.

Back on the beet plantation, something unbelievable went on: women, men, teenagers who grazed cattle on the harvested beet field — everyone from neighboring and distant parts of the plantation who but a minute ago were peaceable came running up to intercept the trucks with whatever arms they had. The Skoromny brothers were first. Malva recognized the tall figure of the elder brother, then the younger one; they shouted out something menacingly. If

Konrad Richter recognized them, too, she thought, he'd get even with the brothers at the registration window the next day. But Richter kept silent in the cab, showing no alarm. Had he but issued an order, all this host, which truly produced a formidable impression for its variety of arms and garb, would have dispersed after the first volley. But he didn't issue the order — there were still so many beets left unharvested! He said something to the driver instead, and Malva immediately felt the oncoming drizzly wind on her flushed temples. The Skoromnys stopped, seeing that they would be unable to head off the trucks. The empty cartridge rolled on the floor of the truck all the way to Hlynsk, jangling by Malva's feet until she stepped on it with her boot.

Stashko was put in a wagon on top of the beets and taken to Babylon. In his wake stretched a line of partly loaded wagons followed by the entire humbled host which moved on as if it had just won a battle. At the far side of the dam, the procession was met by Fabian. He looked at the dead boy, not recognizing him; then, walking beside the wagon, he looked again and recognized Stashko by his motley shirt with a blood stain on the chest. Fabian went to the head of the column and led it to the street where the Singers lived, for no one knew at that moment where to go or whom to tell about this life which had been cut short so early.

During the night, the nazis came back for the Skoromnys (Richter must have doubted that the brothers would appear in Hlynsk of their own free will after all that had happened). The five or six Gestapo men who had come in a truck didn't find the Skoromnys in, so they started going around the neighboring houses with flashlights, rousing the dogs

and throwing Babylon into panic. The Skoromnys kept a wagon on the ready, and as soon as they heard the truck on the dam, they made off in the opposite direction to Pritske where, as it was learned the next day, they had shot at the police. Babylon didn't hear anything more of them until the following spring, when both of them died in the steppe raid led by partisan commander Naumov who clashed in battle at Chuprinka and then tore past Babylon on horseback, leaving only a number of gravely wounded men who died soon afterward. The Gestapo men entered the Singers' house that stood in the same neighborhood as the Skoromnys'. They recognized the house and the yard; two of the men went inside — all the doors were open, since in Babylon the house where someone lay in state was never closed to let the soul roam freely anywhere it pleased and to let other souls in to bid their farewell, above all Malva's soul. "What must his mother have felt when she saw this death!" Malva's mother thought out aloud.

Stashko was lying barefoot on a bench, not in a coffin as yet, but already dressed up, his head resting on a white embroidered pillow, and a new child's sailor cap with anchor and silk ribbons on his chest. An icon lamp crackled lightly in a corner under the icons, the smell of lavender and something else as sorrowful stood in the air, and a row of old women dressed in black dozed sitting on a bench. They awoke, thinking that their fellow villagers had entered.

"There seem to be people, but I can't see who they are; I'm completely blind today. They killed the boy just for fun. What child wouldn't have tried to free its mother? So here he lies so humble to the eye, not needing God nor God needing him, but, in fact, here lies a hero to say the least: he roused Babylon against

that foreign scum." Malva's mother said this so sincerely and ardently that those who could see were too slow to stop her. Finding no Skoromnys here, and probably having recognized their victim on the bench, the nazis cleared out of the house. The old woman again sank into recollection on the origins of her Babylonian kin, of what people and branches it had come from, until the dozing mourners stopped nodding their heads either in agreement or sympathy, because her kin really was famous, having always added something of its own to Babylon even when it became related through the Singer firm to those Lucifers that had just been in the house, and now that kin had come to an end on the bench. In their dreams, the mourners seemed to see Malva, barefoot and wearing her motley *hunya* coat, as she came into the room, bent over her son, and wept quietly. This vision held until the third cocks' crow, when Fabian brought a little coffin with a lid. He came with a man the old women did not know. They thought it might be Fedir Zhurba, the "Golden Uncle" the Gestapo was looking for throughout the neighboring villages as the tenth paratrooper. He kissed the old woman's hand and told her he knew everything that had happened. Then he stood over Stashko, yet no tears fell from his eyes. Who could he be? "Is that you, Fedir?" the old woman asked, moving the palm of her hand down his cheek in an attempt to recognize him. "No, no, I'm not Fedir. I wanted to see Malva, but I was too late. You don't know me." He didn't ask anything more and left. It was Teslya. With the first wagons leaving Babylon he got onto Yavtukh's wagon and drove back to Zhurbiv to the scales. During the funeral, people whispered that Fedir Zhurba had come to bid farewell to his stepson, after which he was supposed to have left for Hlynsk to free Malva. When people

are overwhelmed with grief and have nothing to lean on, they rely on legends of their own making. Good times do not breed such legends, because they are not needed then.

CHAPTER 7

In Hlynsk, Malva felt as if she were in a distant and strange country. Sometime around midnight after the first roosters had crowed and the nazi investigator had completely sapped her strength, making her unconscious, she was brought from the Gestapo and thrown into a huge damp cellar. In this very cellar, Skoropadsky's men and the Germans had murdered the first Young Communist Leaguers during the Civil War. Malva seemed to hear their voices out of the murk and couldn't understand whether all this was the product of her morbid imagination or the cries of people killed long ago, or the pleading voices of the living addressed to mothers, fathers, and, perhaps, to her. Yes, they were addressed to her. "Mommy, mommy dear, don't leave me alone here; I'm awfully scared." They're children, Malva realized. Whose were they and why were they here? She couldn't see either their eyes or their bodies, which must have been scattered in the corners of this musty hole, but heard only their moans and quiet weeping as if they were no more than the souls of children. Perhaps Stashko's soul had also come flying here, for no sooner did Malva think of him than a boy's voice asked her from a distant corner:

"Who's there? Who?"

"It's me," Malva answered. "Don't be afraid of me, boy. It's me..."

"I'm a girl," she heard in response. "What time is it?"

"Going on two," Malva said at random, not knowing how long she had been lying there half-conscious.

"It can't be," the girl objected. "It's later. Three o'clock maybe. Grisha Yarover starts hollering every night exactly at three. Grisha, cut it out!"

"Oio-io-ioi!" Grisha cried somewhere in the opposite corner of the cellar.

The soul with the boy's voice started stealing up to Malva, stepping over the sleepers; some of them started in fright.

"Where are you? Where are you?" she whispered somewhere close by.

"Here, here," Malva whispered in the same manner, extended her hand into the darkness, came across a child's hand, utterly childlike and warm with long thin fingers, embraced the girl, smelling her hair, hearing her excited breath, and fondling her thin shoulders. The girl's name was Rita, that is Margarete, her surname Edelweiss.

There were seventeen children — seventeen boys and girls. The youngest had been distributed throughout the villages, while the oldest ones were separated from their parents, driven into this hole for the night, and in the morning, were led to Hlynsk under armed escort and forced to take apart the little houses in which they had been born and grown up. Their parents were kept at the collective farm on the outskirts; it was better there, because the farm had warm stalls in the cowshed where they could sleep properly, while here was a brick floor and the scary darkness, to which Rita couldn't get accustomed. "Oi-io-io-ioi!" Grisha Yarover cried.

They didn't know anything about their parents for the second week now. Previously, the parents had been sent to dig carrots — a wonderful job, since carrots were so sweet, and the parents used to pass

on a pail or two to their children; but now the parents were surely assigned to some other job, maybe in the quarries not far from Hlynsk. Yet the people of Hlynsk didn't forget about the children. Probably during the night or at dawn, women sneaked into the huts that were being dismantled, and left behind bread, onions, and at times even pitchers with milk. Yesterday some kind soul had put behind the door of the late Monia Chechevichny's house a basketful of patties with sugar beet filling. There were seventeen patties in the basket.

"Did you ever eat rye patties with beet filling?"

"I grew up on them," Malva said. "They taste better when you add cranberries and poppy seeds to the filling."

"It's a real treat," the girl seemed to recollect. "Patties from white flour don't taste that good. Mama baked patties with beans, fish, and jam. Or with cherries when they ripened. And where are you from?"

"I'm from Babylon. They killed one there yesterday."

"They're killing already?" the girl asked, horrified. The children had been told they wouldn't be harmed. After pulling down the huts, the children were to be taken out of Hlynsk. Were to, the chief of police didn't say, but in any case, they wouldn't be much worse off than in this horrible cellar. That's why they were in a hurry to get their recent hovels pulled down. There weren't that many left, only five or six more. The Germans had decided to raze the whole street. Grisha Yarover had had his fill of crying by then, and the girl, warmed at the side of the unknown woman from Babylon, fell asleep. Before that, she said that her father had gone to Babylon by cart practically every week, and had gone there eagerly.

She had dreamed of going with him, but hadn't managed it in the end.

Malva had also dozed off when a metal bar crashed on the other side of the door; a strip of light snatched the children lying on the brick floor out of the darkness. They got to their feet one after another and went toward the light somewhat hurriedly, almost at a trot, everyone afraid to be late and, for that reason, to be left behind.

"Let's go," Rita said. Malva got up and followed the girl but was stopped by the gendarme at the door. It was the murderer of the day before. Malva didn't recognize him at once, and upon recognition recalled the scene of the murder — the boy's scream dissolving in the drizzle, the loading fork, then the shot, and the hideous smiling face of the murderer. Even now she didn't know that this was the murderer of her son. He ordered Rita to catch up with the rest, and then turned to Malva:

"Good morning, madam. My chief wants to see you in his office again. I'll take you to him, but first step in there." He showed her to a side room. "There's water and everything else you need. Spruce yourself up; the chief likes beautiful women," he said and laughed.

Malva was sure he was mocking at her, but nonetheless she entered the room which was rather big and had a little window right under the ceiling. Must be the guardroom, she thought. There was a tub with water, a mirror on the wall, and a number of towels, one of them embroidered, hanging on a crossbeam. A trestle bed stood by a blank wall. Malva washed herself, went up to the mirror, and wasn't in the least taken aback to see herself completely gray. The door opened and the gendarme looked in. Seeing that she had no comb, he produced his metal comb and

gave it to Malva. She held the comb in her hand and gave it back. The gendarme apologized, hid the comb in his pocket, and led her off uncombed.

He took her through Hlynsk in the direction of the Bug River. On the market square a number of prisoners were digging gallows into the ground. One of the prisoners, an elderly man, Stepan Dudko, the chairman of the Village Soviet of Oveche, recognized Malva, bowed to her, and then shook his head in grief. On the far side of the square, the little wreckers were starting on another hut that had to be pulled down. They fell silent on seeing Malva escorted by the gendarme. A car drove up to the building which had been so dear to Malva. Konrad Richter got out of the car; a guard by the wicket snapped to attention, and then opened the wicket for him. Then the guard let Malva through. Many a time she had entered this building before, but it was only now she noticed that the wooden steps were worn in the middle. She must have missed it before, because Auntie Palagna had covered the steps with a rug and put a wet rag for wiping one's feet on the bricks below.

Everything here reeked of death. Malva even caught the smell of it in the perfumed soap Richter used, a soap not of local manufacture, with a barely perceptible scent of lily of the valley and some other flowers. In this antechamber of death, Malva's eye fell on the table's inventory number stamped on a white tin plaque: 22. The table was familiar to her; it had a green cloth cover and lion shaped legs, yet she had never noticed the inventory plaque before. Perhaps it hadn't been there at all. This was unlikely, because the plaque was fastened by two nails with rusted heads, while the number stood out distinctly as if it had been stamped only recently: 22... 22... 22.

What madness, Malva thought; probably that's how it starts, and again she repeated the number in her mind.

Now, who are you on this soil? Malva thought of her nazi adversary. Even the table had been plundered. The plaque on it is ours, and the nails it's fastened with are ours. The only thing that's yours is the number 22! And then Malva grasped why it had stuck in her mind. The nazis had attacked us on the twenty second, on the twenty second of June. That's why she couldn't rid herself of the obsessive numeral.

Five or six cartridges held together by pins were lying on the table. Richter pointed at them and asked something through Schwarz.

"The chief's asking whose cartridges these are?" Schwarz interpreted.

"Which?"

"The ones on the table. They're yours?"

Their black voids were aimed at Malva. How could she know whose they were?

"The chief believes the cartridges belonged to the tenth man from our landing party." (That's exactly what Schwarz had said — "our landing party").

Malva, however, pretended she didn't know anything about the paratroopers. What paratroopers, where, when?

22... 22... 22... Malva kept repeating the number on the plaque, creating for herself some small zone of independence and of almost subconscious existence unaccessible to them.

"The tenth man was heading for your place. Did he get there?"

"I don't know any tenth man."

"He was at your house last night. These cartridges were picked up by the chief on the dam. It was your husband Fedir Zhurba, wasn't it?"

“Fedir? Could it have been him really???”

“The chief thinks so. He has evidence. Material evidence. Here.” Schwarz got to his feet, picked up a well-thumbed notebook, and gave it to Malva. “Take a look. It’s got a list of the teams which brought in bumper harvests, as well as the sugar-beet yields for the past few years. We found it in Green Mills at the Vlastovenkos’ farmstead.”

“That isn’t Fedir’s hand. I recognize some of the people from the teams, though. No, that’s not his notebook. His was different, old and tattered. How it got to the farmstead, I don’t know.”

“But I just told you... with the tenth man. He was dropped by parachute.”

“Fedir was dropped? Why, he was afraid of airplanes. When the shockworkers were given a ride on a plane, Fedir refused for fright. What kind of tenth paratrooper would he make? Think of it... You’re a clever man, Schwarz. Who’d take Fedir? He was even afraid of climbing up a tall strawstack.”

Schwarz talked with Richter, probably telling him verbatim what he had heard from Malva. In the meantime, Malva was again engrossed in looking at the inventory plaque. After hearing Schwarz out, Richter got up from behind the table to see what she was so interested in. He intercepted her gaze, walked up tempestuously, covered the plaque with a finger, and asked through Schwarz:

“Was this your table? Your number?”

Schwarz knew whose table it had been, but he interpreted the question.

“No, it wasn’t mine,” Malva replied. “I had a little table. In Green Mills, at the Village Soviet. Without a plaque.” Malva fetched a sigh as if she were surprised to have sighed in the first place. Schwarz interpreted her answer.

Richter smiled and again settled in his black arm-chair with dragons on its tall back. It must have been brought from the hospital; Volodya Yavorsky had died in that chair. Malva recalled the dawn when the Hlynsk roosters had crowed as they did now, but she didn't seem to hear them now just as Volodya hadn't heard them then. That happens before death, Malva thought, straining her ears and hearing that the roosters really were crowing somewhere beyond the open window.

Richter took a piece of paper from the drawer and put it in front of Malva. Then he handed her a pen.

"Write," Schwarz interpreted Richter's order.

"What am I supposed to write?"

"The composition of your underground District Party Committee."

Without a second thought, Malva dipped the pen into the inkwell, and wrote in a sprawling hand: Malva Orpheivna Kozhushna.

She gave the paper to Schwarz. He read it, astounded by her frankness.

He translated to Richter what she had written. After Richter's unusually calm remark, Schwarz returned the paper to Malva.

"The chief asks you to go on writing. He's glad to see you understand the gist of the matter. It's really no use concealing anything."

"I don't know anybody else."

"You don't have to. Just write."

"When he left me behind, Valigurov proposed that I recruit you, Schwarz. He said you might be very useful for the underground. But as you see, I didn't have the chance to do that. If you insist, I can add your name." She bent over the paper and raised the pen, wavering.

"*Pisat, pisat!*" Richter shouted. Write, write!

Malva wrote down: Friedrich Schwarz, interpreter, manager of the district funeral parlor before the war.

"That's all!" Malva said. "I don't know anybody else." She handed the paper to Schwarz. He looked at it for a long time, and then translated to Richter what was written on it.

"Tell him I didn't have the chance to recruit you," Malva said. "I simply didn't have the chance. Tell him just that."

"I will," Schwarz said submissively, getting up on his peg leg. Richter heard him out and shook his head, probably approving of the frankness of Schwarz, who could have kept silent about it all.

"I told him," Schwarz said to Malva as if a heavy burden had been taken off his mind. "Did you really intend to do that?"

"What?"

"To recruit me?"

Malva kept silent.

"Consider that you've done it. Don't think it's sugar and honey for me with them. I believe it isn't so sweet for my country either. Just as it isn't for yours."

Then he started to say something to Richter, which Malva did not understand. Judging by how engrossed both of them were in the conversation, she realized that they were talking about her as someone who was already absent.

"What's your last wish?" Schwarz suddenly interpreted Richter's question.

"My wish? What wish could I have? Oh yes, there is one!" it escaped her. "Free the children from Hlynsk. The ones who're spending their nights in the cellar. It's damp and cold there; the kids are hungry. Their clothes are tattered and infested with lice."

"I'll tell him that right away. Indeed, the children are not to blame. I know about them."

Richter heard Schwarz out calmly, even with a shade of sympathy on his face.

"My chief is moved by your kindness. But you should plead for yourself. By the laws of his country you have to be..."

"I'm ready. Tell him that."

"I did. The chief asks: what about the District Party Committee?"

"What committee?"

"The underground committee you've been heading?"

Richter explained something to Schwarz at length, and Schwarz interpreted:

"The chief believes that the smartest thing for you to do is to remain in the underground. He doesn't see any other option for you. I don't either," Schwarz added in a patter. "An escape could be organized for you. Tonight perhaps..."

"What for? I have nowhere to escape. I'm already at home. Let him escape."

"Come off it, Malva. You understand what this is all about. You're a clever woman, after all. I've known you for a long time. Since the day in spring when a son was born to you. I was a steward at the hospital and didn't have the big lamp the doctor needed then. You were brought in at night. There was panic, shouting, and a lot of fussing around. Thank God, your son's growing up now. Think of him. I'm telling you this as my personal advice. How old is he?"

"Ten."

"How the years fly!" Schwarz said, aghast.

A tear grew in his eyes.

"Also, was?" Richter asked the interpreter. Well, then?

"*Sie ist bereit.*" Schwarz answered. She agrees.

"I told him you agreed," Schwarz interpreted for Malva. "Now hear me out about what comes next. Once a month you have to report on the work of the underground Party Committee: you can come here, or if you want, the chief's men will come to your secret address. The chief asks whether you have such an address?"

"I have."

"Here, in Hlynsk?"

"Yes, here."

"The address, please."

"The cellar I'm kept in with the children. I'm prepared to die along with them. So let your chief send his men there."

"You shouldn't do that, you shouldn't," Schwarz said, completely at a loss. "You and me mean nothing to this man. One word of his, half a word — and up we go on the gallows. Who's going to fight then? Who, when everyone's been hanged?"

"It won't be you, Schwarz!"

Schwarz must have told Richter that she had no secret address, and that she agreed to come to the Gestapo.

"So we'll make it the first day of every month," Schwarz interpreted what Richter had said. "In the evening. My people will be informed about it. The password will be on this paper here."

Richter took a piece of paper, wrote something on it, and handed it to Malva. She didn't read what was written on it.

"Hide it," Schwarz said.

Malva folded the paper in four, and asked:

"Is that all?"

Schwarz was noticeably confused. He didn't know what else would be demanded of her. Everything was settled, or so it seemed. She had the password, she had agreed to collaborate, so now there was a whole month for her to think everything over. Schwarz put it down to his credit having saved this woman who really could have wanted to see him as her ally. In his heart, he thanked Valigurov for suggesting the idea to Malva. When she was about to get up, Richter stopped her with an abrupt gesture.

Schwarz interpreted:

“Your mother told me last time about your family's long-standing ties with the German Singer firm. I checked on it. It was true. The family I come from has a certain relation to this firm. My granduncle invented for this machine a unique needle which could sew equally well cambric, English cloth, skins of Herzegovinian sheep, and chrome-tanned skins of Mongolian horses. There is no other such needle in the world. Your father surely knew that. The Gestapo also has something similar to this needle, a unique creation due to the genius of our Führer. In our machine, it's a needle which can pierce any hide or material regardless of what it's made. So I advise you treat this unfailing instrument with respect. I understand it's a difficult thing to do. You probably considered yourself an honest person — that much I could see just now from what you've written on this paper, but the paper has to be filled to the end. In a month or two months, even in ten months if need be. We're also interested in the underground Regional Party Committee, and so on. You've been invested with trust, for which I grant you your life. Go on living, but we must have something in return for the trust. Isn't that so?” Schwarz barely kept up with the interpreting. “Tonight you will be let free. I'm

expecting you the first day of next month in the evening. Prove that you have a right to live. One of our philosophers, well not so much our as yours — you must have heard of Immanuel Kant — said that man understands everything by the end of his life. You might as well know that your life could have ended today. That's everything I have to tell you." He got up. "As for making it easier for you and so that your people will trust you, that's something we'll take care of. We'll continue looking for Malva Kozhushna. But don't let that scare you. That's our internal affair. Good luck."

Thumping with his peg leg, Schwarz saw Malva to the door where she was met by the murderer gendarme who took her to the Hlynsk jail.

As she learned later on, she had been put on death row. In the cell, there were five or six prisoners, none of whom got up from their bunks when the door closed behind her. Only one, an elderly man wearing the uniform of a railroad worker, greeted her, saying: "Come in, come in, don't be afraid, you're among friends. There's no spare bunk here, but that doesn't matter. We haven't much time to loiter here anyway. Did you see whether the gallows were ready or not?"

"No, I didn't notice?"

"All right then, make yourself comfortable."

The old man twirled his mustache, cleared his throat, and said to Malva:

"I'll finish my story now, and then we'll look after you. Oh my, such a young beautiful woman, and already in the inferno. Fie, what an unreliable thing life is. Sit down." Turning to his listeners on the bunks, he said: "Well, are you listening? So, where did I stop? Oh yes, so I was working on a shunting

engine when the supervisor of the traffic service summoned me. At the South-Russian Railroad Society, they used to call the engineers mechanics. Mister Mechanic — that had some ring to it! Well then, he called me out and said: 'Mr. Mechanic, take the first freight train for Fastiv.' So out we rolled."

"From what station?"

"From Zhmerinka."

"Well, and what happened next..."

"So we're on our way. My mood was fine, the locomotive was brand new, and I was in charge of a long, long train. It was night; potato fields were blooming on either side of the track. This was my first run as a mechanic. Well, I thought, I'll show them how to drive freight trains. But then there was a hitch at a little station. The semaphore was closed, and our train was redirected onto a sidetrack at full speed to let the mail train following us pass. I took my train to the sidetrack. But it was only a dead-end siding, and all my attempts to keep the train on it were in vain. The brakes didn't hold; the locomotive smashed into the bumper, and tore into the potato field. I lost my head, grabbed an oil can, got out of the cab, and for some reason started to lubricate the axle box out of which smoke was belching. Presently, a door creaked open in a house a little way off, and out of it came a woman. She crossed her arms and said: 'Hey-y-y! Mr. Mechanic, aren't you ashamed to go driving your locomotive through the potatoes? Don't you have enough railroad tracks for that?' So that's how I met my future wife Odarka. Her husband was killed by the Germans during the First World War. I was a young mechanic, you see. And from then on, I didn't go tearing into other people's potato fields. It just didn't seem proper somehow." Turning to Malva, who remained standing by the door, not

knowing where to go, he said to her: "Well, and how did you land in here, my dear?"

Who were these people? One of them was dying on the lower bunk. His face looked familiar to Malva. Had there been a little more light in the cell, she could have made out his face. A thread of light fell on the opposite corner onto a little pail covered with a wooden lid. Why had she been thrown into this cell with the men?

"Are you all from Hlynsk?" Malva asked.

"Some are. I'm one of them," the engineer said. "After I retired, I built myself a house here by the river, and worked part time at the railroad. Does the name of Grandpa Morozenko sound familiar to you?"

"So you're the father of the Morozenko who's a hero of the Finnish war?"

"Exactly, and that's why I'll swing on the gallows. Sit down. Don't just stand there like a guest."

"And who's that?"

"It's Comrade Hapochka," he indicated at the dying man on the lower bunk. "He's also from Hlynsk. Khariton Hapochka."

"What did Comrade Hapochka do to get thrown in here?"

"They found a radio set at his house. Didn't hand it in. It was battery charged and could pick up Moscow. So they beat the daylight out of him, poor Khariton Hapochka, the czarist postmaster. The rest are young people," he motioned to the bunks. "There are five of us here. You'll be the sixth."

Malva went up to Hapochka, bent over him, and whispered:

"Comrade Hapochka, Comrade Hapochka. It's me, Malva Kozhushna. Remember my letters from Kostroma? Back from the days of long ago. You couldn't

have forgotten them, could you? Comrade Hapochka..."

He opened his eyes, gazing vacantly at Malva.

"I don't know. I didn't see you. I don't know anybody. What Kozhushna are you talking about? What Malva? There are a lot of you around. But I don't know anybody. I'm the czarist postmaster... Khariton Hapochka..."

Malva recalled how Valigurov had told her at the District Party Committee that night about Comrade Hapochka's having been left here to perform auxiliary missions. He was not a member of the Communist Party and, as a matter of fact, the district newspaper once publicly censured him as a former czarist clerk. But now things had changed. A pair of cold eyes looked at Malva out of the dark.

Then they recognized her, turned human, took on a sparkle, and spoke to her. A feeble hand motioned her to come nearer. Hapochka moved a little on the bunk to let Malva sit down.

"Yes, yes, it's me, Khariton Hapochka," his lips whispered quietly. "Are you really Malva Kozhushna? The one who wrote letters from Kostroma once?"

"There's only one of me."

"Yes, it's you, the one from Babylon. You used to write so beautifully about Kostroma. Will these devils get there, too? I don't care what they do to me. But you're still young... still so young. Just the time for you to be living and developing Green Mills. Was it Green Mills that sent you to your death here?"

"No, I came on my own."

"On your own?"

"It happened just like that. They wanted to take my son, so I gave myself up."

"You're brave. I wouldn't have come to those murderers and vandals."

"I'm a mother, Comrade Hapochka. A mother..."

"See what they've done to me."

"I see."

"Bend down closer. I want to ask you something."

She bent down to his feverish face.

"Did you know Maxim Teslya?"

"Sure. I knew his wife, Ivanna Ivanivna, too."

"They say he's here in the district. Maybe even in Hlynsk."

"Teslya?"

"Yes, Maxim Sakovich Teslya from White Lebedin. I read his last letter a long time ago."

Either Khariton Hapochka has been stacking your letters away for posterity, or you've been keeping silent. And here, brother, hungry horses have shown up. They walk through Hlynsk, on and on... Where to? To Shargorod, to Litin, as if they were expected there. No one stops them, no one needs them, and so the road has to be cleared of them now and again.

Besides, there are the children to worry about. Every morning, on my way to work, I see how they drag to school with dejected eyes, and the sight of them is as painful to me as if it were I who deprived them of this spring which no one will ever return to them. I had hot breakfasts and lunches sent to the schools for them, but the food stocks are dwindling, and in some schools they've run out completely. So I sent Malva to Kharkiv to Comrade Chubar who promised us some rail cars of soybean seed. I expect them any day now. I don't intend to sow any soybeans, of course. That's out of the question, what with the children's plight. I'll grind them and distribute them to the children, after which, let my betters do whatever they want with me. A teacher sent me a letter from Oveche: "Come take a look at

how the teachers eat up the children's meat at our school." So I went out there and investigated the complaint. The local chairman of the collective farm proved to be a great adept at keeping to letter of the law and had the children issued a scrap of meat, while he didn't give the teachers even that scrap, as if they could live on God's unction alone. How could they have kept from eating the meat, even if it was the "children's meat," that is, meat intended for the children. Now they've got two kettles — one for the children, the other for the teachers, and I had this system introduced in all the schools. So keep in mind this lesson, Maxim — for what can be higher than a teacher!

I write you from the field, sitting in Darinka Sokolyuk's tractor cabin. She sends you her best regards and remembers you fondly. We're sowing and sowing beets...

Uncle Klim, Father left for the Volga area for seeds a long time ago. He can't get a rail car there, so he's stuck at some station with another two of our villagers: Uncle Yakiy Pidkova and Auntie Khristina Verbitska. Maybe you also heard about her, our field team leader who had her pictures in the newspapers. Father told me about you, about Hlynsk, and your co-op, so I'm writing to you for him, because that station is a long way beyond the Volga and locomotives go there rarely. God knows when they'll be back; we're waiting impatiently for them, because sowing time has already come. Mother sends me bread from Kramatorsk; it's shortbread, sometimes white, and utterly delicious. But I don't eat it myself. I take it to school and give it to Ksenia Khomivna our teacher, who divides it equally among us. We have two hot meals a day — in the morning and at lunch-

time; they cook so well here I don't feel hungry. The collective farm butchers an ox for us every week. Father's sure to get mad on that account when he comes back. Don't you have any old oxen there? The meat is good when you boil it for a long, long time. I live with Marisia, Khristina Verbitska's daughter, and we get along fine; she also says hello. Halka.

Dear Klim,

I'm back from the Volga and have gotten down to sowing. Do you still remember our sleepless nights and our worries at the co-op? It's easier to destroy than to build anew. It looks like we'll have to go through this stage as well to know the value of the land and bread. In the Volga area, there are a lot of our people who came back during the resettlement. There are entire Ukrainian settlements, as a matter of fact. There are piles of grain here, but getting a rail car for it is a much bigger problem. I don't know what Halka's written you, but Khristina Verbitska here says hello; you see, we've been friends since childhood. Khristina is a wonder of a woman! I've never been so happy as with her. So that's what your old Teslya's been up to! What do you think of that? I believe that nothing rules us so wisely as life itself. Maxim.

Hapochka died quietly, without any convulsions or laments, probably the way all great postmasters die. What surprised Malva most was his memory for people's letters. Through them, he had built a world of his own from which he departed quietly.

"Now there are five of us again," the engineer said.

It was only toward evening that a thread of light stole through the darkness of the cell and lit Khariton Hapochka's face. Wized, worn out by hardships of

life and the wordless pangs of death, his face with its golden mustache and expression of concentration still seemed inquisitive, as if trying to grasp the reason for his untimely death. Malva's appearance in Hlynsk could have been the ultimate reason for his death. For it was precisely because of her that he had gone through such horrible tortures the night before. Yet he did not give her or anybody else away. Then all of a sudden, there she was, a living Malva Kozhushna.

"Be careful," the engineer whispered, freeing a bunk for Malva. "One of the five men here is a stool pigeon."

CHAPTER 8

Konrad Richter, the Gestapo chief of what was now called the Hlynsk *Gebietskommissariat* (how outlandish that sounded to our ears!), had a professional habit of collecting empty partisan cartridges which were left behind at the sites of skirmishes or, as a chronicler would have put it, which were left on the fields of fray. Sometimes there were two or three shots, at other times more, but whatever the number, Konrad Richter, as a rule, drove to the sites of the shoot-outs, thoroughly studied the positions of the warring parties, took an interest in literally every shot of both sides, and ordered his subordinates to collect every partisan cartridge they could find so he could get a precise idea about the number of our people involved as well as our weaponry. Then he scrutinized every cartridge under a magnifying glass, spending quite some time at the effort, sorted them, threw away the unnecessary cartridges, leaving only those which were more or less interesting to him as a professional. The only thing he derived solace from

was the fact that so far, his *Gebietskommissariat* did not have to deal with empty gun shells, although the range of the other weaponry he came across was rather varied, and the number of owners was increasing. Judging by the cartridges from the latest clashes, there were already seven or eight culprits. There were rifles of czarist vintage, Soviet ten-shot SVT semiautomatic rifles, a Nagant revolver, a TT pistol, and something else mysterious, which the Gestapo chief probably took for a heavy Maxim machine gun at first — and this might as well have reeked of an attempt to attack Hlynsk. Yet upon a more thorough inspection of the cartridges, which were more deformed than usual, Richter concluded that this was some radically new piece of ordnance which his catalogue of Russian light weapons did not list. Great secrets, however, are revealed mostly by chance. Between Babylon and Zhurbiv, the Gestapo ran into an unknown man who fired back with what sounded like a cannon. The unknown man escaped under the cover of night, but lost his weapon (probably having abandoned it because he had run out of cartridges for it). The Gestapo men brought it to the chief, having, of course, concealed from him that the owner of the firearm had managed to get away. The chief had never seen anything like it before, since it was a usual rifle of czarist vintage with its barrel sawn off almost right to the chamber. Out of the chamber, he took the cartridge which the man hadn't had a chance to throw away, scrutinized it under the magnifying glass, compared it with the cartridges he had earlier referred to the Maxim machine gun, and exclaimed for joy: "Vivat!" That is, he rejoiced that the partisans didn't have a Maxim but rather this bizarre firearm which so deformed the cartridges. The great Germans had failed to invent anything similar,

whereas these subjugated people had easily adapted an ordinary .375 rifle for underground purposes and could now walk around Hlynsk with such "cannon" under their coats even in broad daylight. He already had a number of such cartridges on his desk, so now he added this one (he fastened them to the table cloth with pins), and instead of the tag inscribed "Maxim" he supplied it with a new tag. He didn't know that in Hlynsk it was simply known as a sawn-off gun and no more, so he wrote in German — *Taschenkannone*. Pocket Cannon. Such reasoning didn't bring him much comfort, because instead of one Maxim, which was truly a formidable weapon, Hlynsk could spawn countless pocket cannon, dangerous not so much for their shots per minute or range as for the number of their owners. One of them — now dead, if his subordinates were to be believed — he crossed out in his mind, but how many of them were still left? He bawled out his subordinates for failing to identify the man they had killed the night before. What if he was one of the suspects he was looking for whose cartridges were lying in a neat row on his desk?

Richter didn't know, nor could he have known that this had been Yavtukh from Babylon, a man who would appear in this very same office literally a couple of days after his "death" and see with his own eyes not only the neat rows of cartridges but also his sawn-off gun hanging on the wall as a sample of the formidable partisan weaponry which the Gestapo could not but reckon with. When Richter tried to fire from it in the backyard of the Gestapo, it almost tore off his arm and sent the dogs in Hlynsk into a fit of howling. Well over six feet tall and broad-chested, he didn't consider himself such a small German, although nature had done him out of a good set of arms, for his were long and thin. After the trial shot,

he concluded that only giants could handle such short-barrelled cannon. That autumn Yavtukh, like quite a few other Babylonians, had been stealing sugar from the refinery at Zhurbiv. The refinery police hunted down the "crooks," took away the sugar, and gave each man apprehended as many lashes with a cleaning rod as he had kilograms in his bag. To defend himself, Yavtukh had invented this weapon and took it along, convinced he wouldn't live through more than ten lashes. At the refinery, everything went off without a hitch, and he was on his way home with a heavy bundle of sugar he had bartered from the workers for a pair of fine boots (a general's, or so he said), when suddenly a truck of Gestapo men showed up. On hearing their "Halt!", he bolted into a roadside forest, and while they were unbuttoning their trench coats and getting their guns out, he fired at them without aiming, since getting stuck in an unequal fight was the last thing he wanted. The Gestapo men jumped from the truck, dropped flat in the ditch, and opened such withering fire on the forest that Yavtukh stopped thinking about his life. The only thing he worried about were the boots and the sugar. Had he dropped the sugar, the boots would have been spent for nothing, and that was something Yavtukh couldn't have gotten over. So he took to his heels and, naturally, didn't notice where and when he had lost his sawn-off gun. The Gestapo men found the gun on a footpath with their flashlights, and afterward, whenever Yavtukh visited the Gebiets' office he darted horrified glances at his former weapon. Yavtukh recognized it instantly on the wall amid the "trophy" weapons, the samples of which Richter was enlarging constantly. Yavtukh had scorched the stock of his gun, which gave it an almost factory-made look. "A fine specimen," Yav-

tukh said to imply that he had had nothing to do with it in the recent past (a man was unlikely to praise his own sawn-off gun under such circumstances). "*Ja, ja, Russki poushka.*" Yes, yes, Russian cannon. Richter laughed, and added not without a conceited ring to his voice that Corporal Kurt had managed to kill the crook. Yavtukh nodded and kept silent. Of course, had they been equal, Yavtukh wouldn't have tolerated such a falsification of history and would have told this Aryan that no way in hell had they managed to kill the Babylonian, since he, alive and healthy, was right here in front of him.

Richter poked his extraordinarily long finger into the row of cartridges under which stood two letters: TT. Yavtukh counted the cartridges in a flash — there were nine of them held together by pins on two sides.

"That's who we must catch — those two Ts," Richter said, and added with firm conviction, "Babylon! Babylon!" which was to mean that the man to whom the double T referred was directly connected with Babylon. All the cartridges were from one and the same pistol, he added, as could be confirmed with his magnifying glass: all the primer caps were hit not in the center but a bit offside. Richter gave such great importance to his laboratory findings that he was so kind with his Babylonian visitor as to take a cartridge out of the neat row and give it to Yavtukh so he could have a look at its cap through the magnifying glass. Yavtukh didn't notice anything special about it, but he yessed Richter with such acquiescence it seemed he was seeing the very owner of this pistol through the glass. He had guessed all right who it must be, and its owner was really directly connected with Babylon, but Yavtukh tried with all his might to dissociate himself from that double T:

“Herr Richter, if that man shows up in Babylon, I assure you he’ll be in your hands that very day. But for this purpose I have to have some weapon at least. Without it, neither my men nor I can seize the criminal.”

“Take your pick!” Richter said, pointing at the wall. There was a .375 rifle with a chipped stock (a bullet trace), an SVT semiautomatic rifle Yavtukh knew well from his frontline experience (it was an unreliable thing and jammed the moment the tiniest speck of dirt got into it), a Nagant revolver with a chain at the grip (an unusually attractive gun and legendary besides), but Yavtukh fixed his eyes on his personal creation. “You’re too small for this weapon,” Richter said with a smile, sizing up Yavtukh first and then taking the gun down from the wall. The cartridges for it Yavtukh could get from Herr Manzhus, the chief of police. Yavtukh did not expect such a turn of events, since now he would have to carry the gun through Hlynsk to the market square where Savka was waiting for him with a wagon. He would be seen by his acquaintances, for some two hundred Hlynsk residents were busy cobbling the roads the tanks had ruined; all these people knew him well and would see him with a gun now. What opinion would those sufferers have of him, the famous Babylonian, who had just been armed by the Gestapo? Just thinking about it sent Yavtukh into such a panic he began to sweat like a frightened mouse. Considering him his support from now on, Richter extended his hand to Yavtukh, but that instant he pulled it out of Yavtukh’s grip with disgust and started wiping it with his handkerchief. Richter never shook hands with Yavtukh after that, but only greeted him verbally, although in all cases Yavtukh’s hand was as dry as an Astrakhan sea roach.

On seeing Yavtukh armed with a gun, Manzhus got to his feet with a jerk at his desk. To Yavtukh it seemed that the chief of police was at first frightened to see an armed visitor, but after learning what was what, Manzhus started slapping Yavtukh's back on the shoulder from which the gun hung. "That's great, Mr. Holiy, great to see yet another famous soldier join our ranks," Manzhus said. "So how many cartridges do you want? A hundred, two hundred?" Oh my, the last thing I need to add to this misfortune is a sackful of cartridges, Yavtukh thought.

"Make it ten!" Yavtukh said categorically, which came as a complete surprise to Manzhus.

"So few?"

It'd be more than enough to finish off the likes of you, Yavtukh wanted to say, but explained instead:

"Does anything really depend on the number of cartridges, Mr. Manzhus? Everything depends on the number of shots. Sometimes one accurate shot can..."

"Did you recognize me, Mr. Holiy?" Manzhus asked, getting back to his desk.

"I wouldn't say yes, but something rings a bell," Yavtukh answered. Sure enough. Yavtukh remembered him. Shortly before the war, he had turned up in Babylon as a mason who built remarkable peasant stoves. Just then, Yavtukh had burned several houses in a row to pay out the insurance on them, and since a number of new houses had gone up on the insurance paid out the year before, the demand for master stove builders was great. In the old houses, the stoves were not in very good shape, either. As it was, the older stove builders had died out. For the younger ones, there was no chance to master their skill, since the construction of homesteads had been negligible for a long time — Babylon had been building mostly

barns, cowsheds, pantries and the like; until the insurance genius of Yavtukh made Babylon and the neighboring villages think about dwellings. Thus the eager activity of one called forth the necessity for another, in this case, a master builder of stoves. Yukhim Manzhus was among those who had been resettled a hundred kilometers away from the state border; but he didn't settle on the one hundred first kilometer as many had, but traveled all the way to the Lemkos. He built a number of stoves in Green Mills, but quarreled with the Lemkos, who supposedly underpaid him, and moved on to Babylon. Lukian Sokolyuk checked his documents thoroughly — Manzhus held a passport which gave him the right to have a registered domicile one hundred kilometers from the border. Babylon had no grounds to deny him refuge for all the redoubled vigilance prevailing at that time.

He lived at Otchenashka's house, paying her for board and lodging, and built remarkable stoves indeed. The vaults he made of blue brick; he embellished the stoves' front walls with cornices, and instead of one niche, he built several — for salt, matches, and even for brushes and whisk brooms to clean the stoves with. For those who could afford it, he painted the stoves with peacocks, roosters, or with designs patterned after traditional Babylonian embroidered *rushnik* towels. Yavtukh also wanted to have his stove rebuilt, since the children had worn it down horribly and the vault was on the point of collapsing. One day, he and Prisia made a tour of the houses in which the famous master builder had left his stoves, and chose a beautiful sample for themselves (the choice fell on the Skoromnys' stove which was a truly unexpected creation for the likes of Babylon). Its front part looked like an uninterrupted

wall embellished with traditional Babylonian wall paintings. There was a clever built-in air vent and a huge hearth, while the stove itself was like a cozy two-story room where, instead of the usual stovebed, steps of red brick led to the second story. The sight of it simply made you want to take off your boots and climb the steps to the warm stove. Although it was a June day outdoors, Yavtukh, with the permission of the master of the house Straton Skoromny, took off his boots and climbed with pleasure up the steps of his future stove. Moreover, he lay down there for a while in his clerk's suit to get the complete feel of all the advantages of such a stove. "I'll have it done," he said, going down the steps. But that very day, Pilip Makedonsky took an interest in the master builder, which blasted Yavtukh's chances of getting a new stove built. The fellow landed in what had once been the famous Braclaw Jail for being a German agent, as rumor had it. The owners of the stoves he built regarded his creations suspiciously, and some people even gossiped that all the stoves would explode one of these days because of the mines the rascal had immured in them. A number of stoves were supposed to have exploded in Green Mills. In Babylon, however, nothing of the sort happened and the stoves stand to this day, although not everyone was destined to return to them after the war, and some would never climb the steps to their wonderful stoves — for instance, Straton Skoromny, whom Yavtukh buried with his own hands by the Sinyukha River. As for the master stove builder, he was spared by the devil, and was now sitting in the uniform of black cloth which Greater Germany had made for its auxiliary police force. Oh my, to manufacture beforehand such deeply black cloth just for this bunch of traitors, Yavtukh thought. At that moment, his con-

science was in such a state that it wouldn't have allowed him to try on the black uniform even mentally. Still, Yavtukh wouldn't have minded having a stove like the one Straton Skoromny had.

"Mr. Manzhus," Yavtukh began after he had pocketed the cartridges. "Your stoves still evoke admiration in Babylon, and though you've attained the higher ranks now, would it be possible for you to... Oh well, excuse me if I sound a bit rude, but for a real Ukrainian, a stove is just the same as an altar to a Christian. It's a place of warmth, comfort, rest, and healing. And if the stove's beautifully built, it's also a pleasure to the eye. I'd like to have a stove with those red steps, Mr. Manzhus. It's as exquisite as a temple with steps you have to climb to get inside."

Manzhus was moved by this speech. His eyes lit up, while his little mustache à la Hitler bristled with a smile (previously, he had had quite a human mustache, Yavtukh made a mental note).

"Do you have any Marks?" Manzhus asked.

"I've never even seen one. In Babylon, our old money's still in circulation."

"Keep quiet about that money. It's been done away with once and for all. If you pay me with these" — he took a wad of Marks out of his breast pocket and extended it to Yavtukh — "I agree to build you a stove. For one thousand Marks!" Manzhus laughed, taking the German money away from Yavtukh.

His contemptible laughter cut Yavtukh to the quick, but he said with restraint:

"Say what you like, but our money was far bigger in size and looked more impressive. Did you ever have a thousand ruble note? I held one in my hands on several occasions when I paid out the insurance on the houses that burned. But to ask one thousand

Marks just for a stove? And at a time when I don't have a single Mark."

"You'll have the money soon... since you've embarked on this road... Mr. Holiy."

"What road do you have in mind?"

"What road, you ask? Do I have to explain that to you? Does Richter give out guns to the first man he comes across, or what? You'd better not be thinking about stoves, but about Siberia. When our troops come back, no one will forgive you this gun which you received from the hands of the Gestapo."

"But you... you're armed yourself!" (He's probing, the bastard, Yavtukh thought).

"And what did you think? That Hlynsk could do without a Pilip Makedonsky perhaps?"

"Are you really Comrade Makedonsky?" Yavtukh bowed involuntarily, being close to the point of believing that it was really he, even finding a semblance in Manzhus's face. But the sight of the mustache made him discard his assumption and he added, preparing a way out for himself: "I was joking, of course, Mr. Manzhus."

"Don't joke, because that may be him in my person. Change of power doesn't mean anything yet. Under the Germans, too, one can remain a patriot — and even a Makedonsky — if here" — he pointed at his heart under the black cloth — "beats a real heart. I'm convinced that were Makedonsky in my shoes, neither you nor I — well, I can speak only for myself in this case — would be any worse off. When I got this chance, I jumped at it without any second thoughts, although as you know, I had reason enough to go over to them. Well, and did you waver?"

"I did. Very much as a matter of fact." Yavtukh was completely at a loss, not knowing who he was really dealing with.

"And what made you take this step?" Manzhus went to the door, looked down the corridor, and closed the door again.

"As you can see, I'm in the same boat as you."

"Can you be trusted, Comrade Holiy?"

Yavtukh kept silent. In his heart, fright and conscience contested with each other, but fright was obviously getting the upper hand, and Yavtukh couldn't give a definite answer to Manzhus (who wasn't either a Mister or Comrade — and that was the rub that really threw Yavtukh off balance). Manzhus waited, drumming the plywood top of his desk with his fingers. It sounded as if the fingers were tipped with tin. At that moment, Yavtukh couldn't remember what metal bullets were made of. Still, he squeezed out an answer, perhaps the only possible one under the given circumstances:

"I can be trusted, Mr. Manzhus. But not right away just like that..."

"There's no time left and it's impossible to wait. Tomorrow may be too late already. Come closer. Don't be afraid. You don't have to be afraid anymore."

"Oh yes, yes." Yavtukh stood the gun to the wall to relieve his soul of it a little bit at least.

"Apart from me and you, not a single soul must know of this. Otherwise it's death, and torture."

"Speak out as long as I'm alive."

"They herded about two hundred Jewish families from neighboring townships to this place. You've probably seen them cobbling the road."

"I did. I said hello to them, and there are a lot of my acquaintances. From Hlynsk, too. Leyba Markovich, Abram the sausage maker, and Matvei the barber — in recent years when I was in the state's employ, I used to have my hair cut only in Hlynsk.

And what wonderful sausages Abram made! I haven't eaten better sausages anywhere in the world (Yavtukh hadn't been farther than Hlynsk, save perhaps for his well-known odyssey in the 1930s, when sausages were the last thing on his mind anyway). Are they really going to be shot? Don't the Germans need sausages? Or have they brought along their own barbers, too?"

"Yes, they'll be shot. Maybe tomorrow."

"Do they know about it?"

"They do. I told them. It's already impossible to avert their death. There's an order by some Keitl to the army and all garrisons. These robots can execute orders to be sure."

A very young policeman ran into the office. He saluted and reported:

"Chief, we've apprehended a woman in Green Mills who refuses to identify herself as Malva Kozhushna. We brought her here. Shall I bring her in?"

"Oh, my God," Yavtukh sighed. To meet Malva Kozhushna now would be too much for him. Manzhus seemed to have read his train of thought.

"Bring her in half an hour later."

"Yes, sir. She looks just like Malva Kozhushna from the picture you showed me."

"All right, I'll look into the matter."

"That's the woman from our village," Yavtukh said, when the policeman's footsteps had receded behind the door.

"I know. It's the third Malva they've brought in. Still, I don't think Malva is anywhere in the district at all."

"And what about that double T at Herr Richter's?"

"Go tell about it, quick..."

"Tell who?"

"Herr Richter, of course. We stand on knowing less than we actually do. The less we know, the less they'll know. I guess you understand me, don't you?"

"I was a general's orderly, after all."

"The children might be shot together with the grownups. I'm positive about that. How many children could hide in Babylon?"

"When?"

"Tonight. At dawn, it may be too late."

"As many as you say, Mr. Manzhus."

"Do you have a wagon?"

"Savka's waiting for me on the market square with horses."

"Is that the one who's always laughing?"

"He stopped laughing after someone told him the Germans shoot madmen. Now he's dumb as a fish."

"Stick around here till nightfall, and then... Do you know where the Proletarian Tavern used to be?"

"At the old water mill. I had my meals there many times. Those were the days, they were!"

"Stop your wagon there and get the children. Put the little ones on the wagon and let the teenagers walk."

The old mill stood close to the building of the District Party Committee in which *Gebietskommissar* Bruno Messmer had his quarters. It flew a flag with a swastika and was closely guarded.

"But there are guards, Mr. Manzhus."

"The children will be brought there by guards."

"German guards?"

"No, mine. Now go. I'll wait for you by the mill at eleven o'clock."

"I've got no watch. Guess I'll take my bearings from the sky."

"Here's a watch. Hide it."

Yavtukh put it into his breast pocket and heard it ticking there. Then he made for the door.

"Your gun!"

"Oh yes, I forgot." He took the gun, not noticing even now that it was a training rifle with a drilled breechblock.

Yavtukh left Hlynsk in the dead of night. The guards really led the children out of the mill, and Manzhus himself carried out the smallest child in his arms and sat it in the wagon. The sleepy child drifted off into slumber on the straw after a minute or so. Then, without so much as a word, the older children got into the wagon, deftly clambering up the spokes and fellies. They crammed the whole wagon, and Savka had to move up front. The teenagers waited until the little ones settled down, and seeing there was no more room in the wagon, followed it in a humble group. All this took place some one hundred meters from the *Gebietskommisariat*. The procedure was executed perhaps all too openly, which made the helmeted guard standing by the gate with a sub-machine gun whistle a number of times in the most unambiguous manner, as he suspected what was going on. That was a signal which meant that it was high time to do away with this tribe. Manzhus locked the mill in an ostentatious way, waved a farewell to the guard by the gate, and walked after the wagon. The light was on in a number of rooms of the *Gebietskommisariat* where supper was perhaps drawing to its close and soft music was drifting out of the windows. Here in Hlynsk, Yavtukh had heard that Varya Shatrova was the cook for the Gebiets (or simply Gebis, as people called him now). Messmer was enraptured with Hlynsk cooking and, maybe, with the cook herself. "Oh, what a slut! What a slut!" Yavtukh spat in rage, as if her treason

was greater than his own. He immediately charged his gun and felt himself a brave soldier again. Manzhus gave him his last instructions, in which there was more of despair and pain than wise advice. This made Yavtukh realize that for Manzhus, the main thing was to get the children out of Hlynsk and off his hands, and what would happen to them later on, he had no idea. "As for the boys, I'm not worried; they'll go grazing cattle, driving horses, and will get used to Babylon. But with the girls it will be more difficult. They'll have to be distributed among reliable people. Take that littlest one who's fallen asleep into your home. She's sick and will die in the care of strangers. Her mother's a fantastic young beauty from Raigorodok. Take the child in and you won't regret it. One of these days, she'll grow into a beautiful girl and you'll get a fine son-in-law into the bargain, Mr. Holiy," Manzhus whispered into Yavtukh's ear so that the policemen wouldn't hear him. "Oh my, oh my," Yavtukh sighed.

Outside Hlynsk, the policemen bid Yavtukh farewell and remained standing on the road for a long time while Yavtukh caught up with the group of teenagers following the wagon. He put the gun on his shoulder, and taking on as recklessly warlike an air as possible, led them to Babylon. Yavtukh seemed to have become part of some episode from ancient history which he knew only vaguely, although he had heard about ancient Babylon and now had his own idea about the migration of entire nations to Babylon. The old people were probably left to die in some other Hlynsk, while the children were taken farther on through the plains of Asia. The passages could have lasted years, and they entered Babylon as grownup people. These children, however, would reach their destination in a single night, but they would grow

older by dozens of years. Besides, would Babylon accept them? What if it chased them away along with Yavtukh? He dreaded Prisia most. That devil of a woman mightn't grasp his historic mission and could well chase him out of the yard with these hapless souls which in his mind he had already accommodated throughout the homes of Babylon. The children marched on, their little pants flapping; they held on to Yavtukh and his gun, for every tree by the roadside seemed to them a black monster which the most alert boys kept pointing out to Yavtukh: "Yipes! Look, Uncle, it's hiding over there." That "yipes" sounded so dear and so Babylonlike to Yavtukh's ear that involuntarily he thought that one way or another all people owe their origin to Babylon. Yavtukh saw that it was either a tree or a dogrose bush, but nonetheless he took the gun off his shoulder, cradled it in his arm and was really prepared to fight to the death for these children. A fine and lofty feeling welled up in Yavtukh's heart as if he were some king or general leading an entire people. One boy got tired and started to lag behind; Yavtukh made Savka stop the wagon and pick up the feeble boy. "Giddap!" Savka urged the horses on, looking round now and then to see whether Yavtukh was keeping up with his troop. "He's coming," Savka registered every time, because now had come the final, decisive lap of their march when Yavtukh, by all the notions Savka had of him, should have run away and left this noisy troop in Savka's care. Yavtukh merged with the crowd of teenagers and could not be identified, save perhaps by his gun on which the stars shattered in sparkles and fell to the feet of the children.

"Wake them up, Savka!" Yavtukh ordered, when they approached the windmills.

Savka pulled at their flops of hair and shirt collars, rousing them from sleep: "Hey-hey-hey! Wake up!"

Babylon was still drowsing in its predawn haze and appeared to them like in a miraculous dream. The white cottages hugged the hillocks, forming steep narrow streets. An entire people could be quartered in the labyrinth of these little streets.

"Halt, Savka!"

"This is our Babylon, children. Here you'll have to live through the war and become one with the Babylonians. The people here are different, like everywhere else. Some are kind, sincere, generous like Savka and me here. Others are the devil knows what — cruel, stingy, good for nothing. Every people has its freaks, and this one has them, too. I'll take you to the best homes where you'll live in clover. Your fathers and mothers will be visiting you from Hlynsk; not frequently, though, but once in a while they'll visit you in your dreams, fondle you, bring you presents, and that'll last till the end of the war when our troops come back and chase the Germans out of Hlynsk. Anyone who finds a new father or mother and likes it here can stay in Babylon until he grows old like Savka and me. We, too, were brought here when we were about your age."

"Ha-ha-ha!" Savka burst out laughing.

"Savka has had a hard life. He came across bad people who beat him and starved him, so that's why he's laughing at all that now. But I had it good here, living on easy street and rocking on the swing. Now I've got eight children, eight sons, four of them on the front line, the other four back home. So I can't take all of you in, only one."

"Take me!" said a curly-headed, brown-eyed boy of about twelve, stepping up to Yavtukh. He wore

pointy-toed shoes, probably his father's, since they were too big for him, and on his back he carried a tarpaulin knapsack with a pillow, a blanket, and a winter cap. It was the son of Chaim Rabinovich, the famous Hlynsk baker whose plaited buns lavishly strewed with poppy seeds always smelled like Easter bread to Yavtukh. Maybe if I open my own bakery in Babylon, I'll make him a baker, Yavtukh thought, pressing the boy's head to his chest.

"I'd take all of you in, children, if I could," he said. "But Babylon's a big place and there are a lot of good people in it. Get going, Savka. Let's start with Fabian's house."

As they moved on, Yavtukh said to the boys:

"Fabian is our famous philosopher. Though he's poor as a church mouse, he's got the soul of an angel. He lives with a billy goat. A third occupant won't be any bother to them; they'll make much of him. If one of you wants to live in a paradise, you can stay here."

None of the imps wanted to, Yavtukh noted angrily in his mind as his eyes stopped on the boy who had grown utterly weak on the trip and now, roused from sleep, was holding on to the wagon with both hands.

"You, sonny, will go to the philosopher. The whole of Babylon feeds him, so they'll feed you, too, for that matter. You'll call him Uncle Fabian, and if anyone asks you who you are, you'll say that you're Levko Khorobry's son. That's his real name, and a highly respected one in Babylon."

"All right," the boy said, and went with Yavtukh to rouse the philosopher from sleep.

The billy goat came out of the hut, stretched himself after his slumber, recognized Yavtukh, and went off to the front garden that had run wild.

“See, what a clever billy goat!” Yavtukh said to the boy. “Now you stay here while I go for the master.”

Yavtukh didn't reappear for a long time. The billy goat, after having done what he had to do, came up to the boy, sniffed him all over by way of acquaintance with the latter-day son of Levko Khorobry, while inside, the master of the house was hearing out the long and sorrowful story of the children. Fabian came out barefooted, which he never allowed himself to do before the locals (he held that Skovoroda * lost a lot in the eyes of the people when he occasionally appeared before them barefooted), his tussled hair resembling a mop, yet his golden spectacles more than made up for these deficiencies in appearance.

“Scat!” he chased the billy goat away from the boy and took him by the hand. “We'll make it, we will,” he said quietly, and two tears rolled down his cheeks from under the spectacles.

Yavtukh hurried back to the wagon, afraid lest the philosopher change his mind. If he had barely managed to talk the famous philosopher into taking a child, what could be expected of the others?

“Now off to Otchenashka!” Yavtukh ordered Savka.

Bruno Messmer had stopped appearing by the windmills and indulging in his lunches there. The ground had become colder, and now even Fabian's billy goat was reluctant to lie on it without finding at least a flimsy bedding of hay or leaves first. Messmer's prohibition had gradually lost its significance for the Babylonians. The philosopher walked around Babylon more and more freely with his billy goat, for which reason the number of in-

* Skovoroda, Hrihoriy (1722-1794) — famous Ukrainian philosopher, poet and enlightener — Tr.

vitations they received for lunch dropped noticeably, and some families didn't invite them at all, because now they were three, not two as before: tailing them all the time was a boy, the son of Hlynsk photographer Ziama Chodas, Judas, whom Yavtukh had brought from Hlynsk with the other children. He was named Yuras, and entered in the house register as Levko Khorobry's son, which didn't make the boy any bolder. He stole behind his foster father as if he were afraid of giving him away before all of Babylon — if a child had been deprived of one father, it lives under the constant fear of losing the next one as well. Fabian proved to be a very kind man. He cut the boy's hair and bathed him every Saturday, made him a new shirt out of his holiday shirt, which instantly lent the boy a different ethnic appearance, although his eyes betrayed his race. In them was so much poignant sorrow for his Hlynsk, his parents and home, that Fabian failed to alleviate it much as he tried. The billy goat wasn't a great help either, although when Uncle Fabian stayed away from home for the whole evening, Judas could have his fill of telling the billy goat his impressions about the wonderful life he had had in prewar Hlynsk. Then the stories took on a sad ring. Judas heard the billy goat weeping in the darkness (the billy goat was no more than sighing, of course). He had guessed before as well that his listener had also fled here from some township or, perhaps, even from Hlynsk, and pretended to be a billy goat, while actually he had a human name and everything else that went with it. On one such evening of revelations when the billy goat had burst into tears under the workbench, the boy asked him what he had been before the war and who he really was. The billy goat kept silent, pretending he had fallen asleep, but the next morning, Judas saw

the deep sorrow in the billy goat's eyes and a barely perceptible smile on his snout, which made the boy conclude that here was perhaps a great man who either couldn't or didn't want to reveal his identity to the little fugitive from Hlynsk. The boy waited for this to happen, but the billy goat stuck to his guns with the obstinacy of a persecuted man. He kept taking the boy for lunch to the same homes where he used to take Fabian. The philosopher didn't mind, because he knew that the generosity of the Babylonians would decline as the war dragged on, so he chose leaner meals for himself, sending the boy and the billy goat to those homes whose generosity had been proved over his entire lifetime. Fabian grew weak and thin, yet his sensitive heart could rest easy with respect to Judas. Only one thing worried him: Messmer might show up and see the boy with the billy goat in Babylon. One intent look at the boy could bring disaster upon all the children and adults of Babylon alike. That's why the lunch hours were exceedingly alarming for Fabian who had to keep an eye both on the borshch he was eating, lest he swallow a hair, and on the road running from Hlynsk which, at this time of year, also resembled two hairs cunningly sneaking through the gray wormwood toward the windmills.

Once Messmer arrived at Babylon in an Opel followed by a van full of guards. The soldiers led a photographer out of the van. He put up a tripod, fixed a box camera to it, and then put his head under a black cloth which he surely had used before. Messmer wanted a panoramic view of Babylon, and this could be made only by a professional. Upon seeing the photographer by the windmills, Babylon was thrown into a panic. "They're taking pictures! They're taking pictures! Hide the cropped ones!" the

neighbors warned one another. No one doubted that the Germans were looking for the little fugitives whose hair had been cropped. Later on, the "cropped ones," though not of the times described above, would remind Babylon of the Jewish children. The photographer took pictures of Babylon from different points which Messmer chose for him. The van drove the photographer with the tripod from place to place, and it looked like the guards were hurrying him, but his head remained covered under the cloth for a long time as if he were looking for someone in Babylon. After an hour or two, they left Babylon, and the children, now out of their hideouts which were prepared well beforehand for such occasions, felt free again.

Only little Judas, who was having his lunch with the billy goat at Ruzia's home that day, could not calm down, for he had recognized the photographer as his father by his motley cap and tripod, and also by his habit of keeping his head under the cloth longer than any other photographer did. Once he had asked him in his studio: "Father, what are you doing under there so long?" To which his father replied in jest: "Making money, son. The faster I stick my head out, the less I get paid. Every great trade has its secrets. No one sees what I'm doing under the cloth. Maybe I'm taking a nap under it." But today, Father had overindulged in his secret of making money, and every time he stayed covered for so long Judas thought his father had died under the cloth.

The whole night through, Ziama Chodas developed the plates of Babylon's panoramic views, for which purpose the Germans were so kind as to let him work in his studio, where everything reminded him of other times, of his dear home, his wife and son. His wife Betia was huddling in the manger of a Hlynsk

cowshed that night, without an inkling of what a great master Ziama felt himself to be in his own home. Nothing had been touched in it, nothing had been plundered, everything was in its place as Betia had left it when she was the last to leave the house. Ziama had been completely confused when they were ordered to leave the house, take their most essential belongings, and go to the market square. "This is the end," Ziama said, took his son by the hand and went to the square. Betia, though, locked the house and the studio, and even lowered the blinds on the windows. The studio was state property, and Betia didn't know who to give the key to. "Throw it away," Ziama said, but she did otherwise and kept the key. Then Ziama was summoned to Messmer, ordered to open the studio, take everything he was told to take, and driven off to Babylon. Ziama didn't know and couldn't have known what Messmer needed the panoramic views of Babylon for. The only thing he suspected Messmer to be interested in was their children.

It was already cool in Babylon, the sky was a frosty blue, the panorama was clear and deep, and his old Zeiss box camera surpassed itself in clarity of picture. It captured every single tree, every house, every window. In one still he even saw the chains of the famous Babylon swing on the elm trees. The chains were broken, one touching the ground, the other swaying in the breeze. Under them stood a child staring right at the camera lens. You silly, what was there so interesting to see! His Judas would have never done anything like that, seeing who had brought his father to the windmills. In another still was a different boy running across the street. A tall lean boy. Could it be the son of Abram the sausage maker? Yes, exactly, it was Abram's Grisha. His

figure was blurred, since he was running at a clip, but the camera captured the white-striped pants by which Ziama recognized the boy. On his feet were huge boots which were abnormally enlarged by the camera. There were some other people in the background, rather fitful, alarmed shadows of people. Maybe one of them was his Judas. Maybe. But no expert, no connoisseur of human races could have recognized him. The father was both joyous and sad. Joyous, because his son hadn't fallen for Messmer's trick, and sad, because the father would never see his son in the panorama to convince himself that his boy was alive.

Ziama took his time. In the parlor, a guard was dozing in a customer's armchair with a high carved back. At midnight, punctually on the hour, he was relieved by another guard who knocked on the door of the darkroom where Ziama was practicing his photography witchcraft, and asked: "*Jude! Bist du hier?*" Jew, are you here? Ziama didn't intend to make a getaway, since he was afraid for the life of his son. He was by now sticking the prints, enlarged to the size his customer had demanded, on the plate glass.

It was a wonderful piece of craftsmanship! The air over Babylon was transparent as crystal. Let the damned Schwab know that a great photographer had lived in Hlynsk. Ziama went on sticking the wet prints to the glass, each print as perfect as the other, each detail registered distinctly and clearly; the huts on the hills in the foreground looked pitifully decrepit, their windows sunk into the ground, whereas on the hills in the background, the houses flocked together, giving the impression of an uninterrupted many-tiered structure exactly like a scene from the Biblical Babylon painted by Pieter Breughel the Elder. Ziama

had seen it on the Easter cards arriving in Hlynsk during NEP along with the contracts for Dutch chaffcutters which were resold by one of the Chodases, Motia Chodas, a local moneybags. The richer Chodases left as soon as their businesses started to droop, while their poorer kin remained true to their native Hlynsk and dominated many a trade and craft for a long time afterward. Hlynsk had a street of the Chodases, with hovel hugging hovel; the cemetery had a patrimonial quarter of Chodases, with row on row of gravestones — plagues did not spare even the richest of the family whose only pay-offs to the epidemics were perhaps the more imposing gravestones; and Hlynsk had a gully of Chodases with the finest deposit of red clay the township was built of. Now the clay was free, whereas previously, the Chodases had charged five and occasionally even ten kopecks a wagon. The clay was probably the same as in any other local clay pit, but since it had cost money, the demand for it was great, and everyone wanted to build his house of the finest clay. Iona Chodas amassed an ample capital from this clay and left for America, supposedly on the very same steamship on which Scholom Aleichem sailed across the Atlantic. The people around Hlynsk did not strive for immortality, and so the Chodases who ran the local photographer's studio were far from rich. The Hlynsk Jews even had a byword to this effect: "As poor as a Hlynsk photographer." For all that, they considered themselves great masters, and the panoramic view of Babylon seemed like a finale to their career.

On one print was the house of Ruzia. Ziama could not recall for a long time why he knew this house. The Babylon folk were not among his customers and gave his studio a wide berth. Then Ziama recalled that he had once photographed Dzhura on his Ford

tractor in front of his house. Dzhura died shortly afterward, but the photograph hung fading in the studio window for a long time until Pilip Makedonsky noticed it once on his way to work. Makedonsky hadn't the slightest knowledge about advertisement, and Ziama had to explain at length why he had displayed Dzhura in the studio window. Ziama was about to stick the print to the glass, when he looked more intently at it and, horrified, burst into tears.

In the entrance hall stood a seemingly sleepy billy goat with closed eyes, and from behind the door jambs, holding the billy goat by a horn, Judas was looking out. There was his cropped head and alert eyes looking at his father. Ziama wept. Then he erased the head on the negative and made a second print of Ruzia's house. He left only the billy goat in the dark frame of the door and the hand holding on to the horn of the billy goat to hinder the silly critter from getting outdoors. The hand was barely visible, but now it was the dearest thing the father had in this volatile world. How little a father needs for happiness.

At dawn, they were led to the Chodas gully beyond Hlynsk. Ziama had been anticipating that they would be shot exactly there. They were made to climb a huge earth embankment and permitted to stand where and with whomever they wished. The Chodases huddled in one group. Ziama took Betia by the hand. "He's alive," he said, smiling. Then he asked them to pass on the word to Abram that his Grisha was alive, too, as were perhaps all off the children.

Messmer sat in an armchair which must have been brought during the night and put on a rise by a dogrose bush with blazing red fruit. Nearby, Schwarz was hobbling around on his peg leg, noticeably bewildered, since he knew many of the doomed by

sight, and some of them had worked at his funeral parlor: carpenter Waxman, two of the brothers who played baritone horns in the band, and the tailor Izia Fersman. Schwarz did not see the funeral parlor dressmaker in the crowd; she had managed to escape and was now making dresses for the women in the Hlynsk underground. The Austrian had done everything in his power to save these people, but Messmer had turned down all his pleas, probably because he was afraid of Richter.

Feeling that their masters would die that day, the dogs in Hlynsk howled, the sheep bleated, and the cows, driven out of their sheds to join the herd, lowed stentoriously. Konrad Richter, who was in charge of the execution, gave his final orders to the gendarmes, Gestapo men, and the auxiliary police. On either side of the earth embankment stood the Gestapo men with the dogs. The dogs sat silently on their haunches, knowing everyone of the doomed, as they had guarded them on the streets of Hlynsk before that. Their ears pricked up, they were ready to pounce at any instant upon those they had for their enemies by God knows what laws. Everything was ready; Messmer sat in the armchair, staring sullenly at the photographer holding his wife's hand. Suddenly Richter noticed something, ran up to Messmer and talked with him animatedly, pointing at the doomed. It was the children. Only now Messmer saw that there were no children except for one or two teenagers who had been brought with their parents from Raigorod a couple of days before.

"Where they are is something I'd like to ask you, Konrad!" Messmer replied sharply, leaning back in the armchair.

At first Richter stood there utterly confused, then his eyes roved over the crowd, he pulled his Walther

out of its holster, and ran off to the group of policemen.

"Manzhus!" Richter hollered.

Manzhus snapped to attention.

"Yes, Herr Chief."

"*Wo sind the Kinder?*" Where are the children?

"I don't know, Herr Chief... they weren't there. I didn't see any."

"*Waren sie nicht da?*" Weren't they there?

He gave a sign to the Gestapo men.

"*Zieht ihm die Hosen ab.*" Pull his pants down.

Manzhus did not resist as two Gestapo men carried out the order promptly. Richter's suspicion was not confirmed. From his armchair Messmer looked on indifferently to the way Manzhus was being degraded. It seemed he even made an effort not to burst out laughing. Manzhus pulled up his pants and buckled his belt. Richter took his chin and straightened his neck, and looked critically at the line of his nose and ears. They, too, betrayed no sign that Manzhus was of Semitic origin. Still, he motioned Manzhus to join the crowd on the embankment: "Bolshevik!" Manzhus smiled in a somewhat derisive and submissive way as if he were prepared for the inevitable; he went to the crowd and took his place right in the middle by the photographer. "Mr. Manzhus, he's alive," the photographer whispered, pressing Manzhus's hand. Manzhus pulled it away and kept silent, probably thinking about his own predicament.

The wedge of a flock of storks honked over Hlynsk despondently. Messmer raised his head. Two sagging strings drifted above the steppe, the leader towing them across the sky by some eternal law discovered perhaps by Euclid himself. For some reason Manzhus still believed he'd die a natural death in his native Terebovlya and be buried there on the slope of a hill

where the Manzhuses had been buried from time immemorial. Only a couple of days before, when Richter had asked his advice about the execution site and chose the Chodas clay pit over which the swifts shrieked, Manzhus had not argued. He heard that Hlynsk had been built of the clay from that pit.

The leader of the flock took the wedge across the sky; nothing distracted Messmer anymore, and Manzhus could catch his eyes at last. For a moment they looked at each other. It was on Messmer's consent that Manzhus had saved the children after all. It would cost him nothing to save Manzhus. He'd only have to make one gesture, one move of his hand. But the great architect seemed to have turned into stone in his armchair and dropped his eyes.

"Konrad!!!" he yelled, not able to sit in the armchair any longer.

"*Feuer!*" Richter commanded.

Manzhus fell down with his face turned toward the armchair. Messmer found his death beautiful. He didn't want this witness to remain alive.

Several days later, after having learned from his subordinates who it was that had been killed on the beet plantation, Konrad Richter realized what mistake he had made in setting Malva free, but he concealed his blunder from his subordinates, and with Teutonic self-control waited exactly a month, after which he arrived in Babylon in a black limousine, had Malva's mother brought to him, and inquired about her daughter with the tone of a man who wasn't indifferent to Malva's destiny. He said that Malva hadn't any need to hide; her son had been killed simply by accident; the murderer was punished by being sent to the front line, and so Malva could feel free here, live at home as before, and look after her old mother,

because winter would soon set in, and it would be hard on the lonesome old woman, since the winters were harsh here, as he had heard. That's about everything he asked of the Singers. If they wished, they could be registered *Volksdeutsche* — both mother and daughter — in recognition of Orpheus Kozhushny's services rendered to Germany, and that meant food rations, respect, and a future no one in their Babylon dared even dream of. Richter sent her off to pass the message on to Malva.

"But you shot her. How can I pass anything on to a dead person? Schwarz, tell him that in these parts, the living don't talk with the dead; we can only talk with the living, like, for instance, I'm doing now with you, Schwarz."

"No, no, she hasn't been shot. It's only for the Bolsheviks that she's been shot. Shot and buried... at the boneyard for horses. If you want, Schwarz here will show you her grave. There's no Malva in it. She's been in Babylon for the past month. But why does she have to hide? She doesn't have to risk her life when she can live calmly, be happy even, and receive food rations."

"So you want me to believe that my Malva didn't visit her mother for a whole month? Is her heart made of stone, or what? Or has her heart and soul been torn out of her body? Think hard about that. Come on, tell him, Schwarz, tell him."

"She's a Bolshevik!" The Gestapo man flared up, which made his insidiousness look the filthier to Malva's mother.

"It should've been me yelling, not you," the old woman said politely.

Savka took the old woman to her house, and all the way she kept mumbling to herself: "Now he's going to tell me whether my Malva is dead or alive! I see

his filthy soul inside out. And look at Schwarz, just look at what he's turned into."

Schwarz contrived to pass on to Fabian a note with the categorical introduction: "destroy upon reading." The note was as follows: "Warn Malva to get out of here either to Shulyak or Ksan Ksanich. The man here is preparing roundups and bringing in the police from a number of districts. Get the children out of Babylon, because they might be recognized, and that's death for them and you both. Everything else is fine. They've been given their gruel all right at Moscow, and as for the future, we'll see, if we're careful. Me."

Although caution has long been an indication of courage, Fabian didn't heed Schwarz's advice, not only to keep Schwarz more firmly in hand, but to show Malva the original note. Fabian believed he was simply born for the underground, because he really didn't have the slightest fear of death or of Konrad Richter. If he was afraid of anyone, it could only have been of Yavtukh, but that was an altogether different, essentially Babylonian fear, in the labyrinths of which the philosopher had felt himself at home long ago. For who had seen his Athens better than Socrates, even if it had been through the soul of his own wife. Truth is, Fabian didn't have such a hellbound wife as Socrates had in Athens, but he had had enough of Yavtukh through whom he seemed to be able to capture every mysterious movement that occurred in Babylon.

CHAPTER 9

Malva, for all that, came to Hlynsk in the summer just at harvest time in the evening when the clatter of the threshing machine, which the police guarded every night against the partisans, had died down. A number of threshing machines had been destroyed around Hlynsk — in Oveche, Chuprinki and Bila Hrebliia, so the nazis guarded this one rigidly. Bruno Messmer kept tearing from one village to another, demanding grain, grain, grain — for the army which was pushing on to the Volga and Stalingrad then. Bruno Messmer issued an order to have the chief of the Gestapo punish by death anyone who carried off but one kilogram of grain, every gram of which belonged now to the Reich, just like everything else on this earth. The order was read out at meetings of peasants, posted at the village offices, and disseminated through leaflets, but the amount of grain in the garner didn't increase, which enraged the invaders. They closed down all the working steam mills, even the windmills, and staged show executions throughout the villages, but all this only fortified mutual responsibility among the peasants and sustained their hatred of the invaders. Here and there, partisans showed up, disarmed the police posts, burned the threshing machines, and distributed the grain stacked in the garner. The Reich could not possibly feed itself with the remaining flails. Only the threshing machine in Hlynsk seemed to be protected by someone. With the onset of evening, Messmer liked to open his window, fronted by a barbed wire fence, and listen to it — in the daytime, it could not be heard, but in the evening, its din reached the *Gebietskommissariat*, calming him and promising yet another quiet night out of the few in the "Hlynsk

Hell," in which Messmer and his entire troop lived with an ever mounting alarm. At a meeting which Goering held in his headquarters at Vinnitsya, not in his capacity of Reich Marshal but as Hitler's man responsible for question of the economy, Messmer was called a dreamer who had been put in office in the world's best chernozem area, while the wheat he got from that soil wasn't enough to feed his retinue and guard in Hlynsk. Moreover, Messmer had set his sights on a new Babylon instead of razing to the ground the one that existed and planting the area thus cleared with sugar beets for next year. After that, Messmer gave up his architectural ideas about the would-be Babylon of the Aryans and started looking more realistically at things and at Babylon itself, turning in his own eyes into an ordinary, stupid *Gauleiter* like all the other ones he knew in the neighboring *Gebietskommisariats*. They shot, hanged, destroyed, and didn't give a whit about the future development of these lands for the victors, that is, for themselves.

A number of times, he had asked Richter about the bird the Gestapo chief had set scot-free, given a password, and extracted a promise that she would come to them with valuable information about the Bolshevik underground. Richter said that everything indicated that the woman had disappeared from the district, because if she had stayed here, his men in the villages would have surely come across her tracks. Assuming she had left the district, who was heading the underground then? Messmer countered. Who was derailing trains, burning threshing machines, disarming police posts, and, bitter as it might be to admit, threatening Hlynsk itself? We're sitting behind barbed wire not like victors but like prisoners, Messmer said. Even the clatter of the threshing machine

can be listened to in the night through an open window, but in the daytime, I'm afraid to go near it, because I'm not sure who's running it: the peasants for us or the partisans for themselves? If this continues, Konrad, you and I will have to leave our posts and ask to be transferred to the front line. He asked the chief of the Gestapo whether anything like this had entered his mind.

The conversation took place during supper, with Varya Shatrova serving at the table. The Gestapo man was obviously indignant at such candor on the part of his superior in the presence of a servant who had appeared in the household on Schwarz's recommendation. The identity of Schwarz hadn't been clarified to the end: nobody knew him in Salzburg; no Schwarz had ever run any funeral parlor there, so that must have been one of his legends. And here in Hlynsk — that had been checked — he was a boss and enjoyed the luxury of a car, while people of much higher rank had to be content with a horse carriage. Richter started a dossier on Schwarz which, among other things, had this entry: "An Austrian who hasn't anything German or Austrian about him, and his pronunciation reminds me of the snorting of an old horse. Has the advantage over us in the knowledge of the local people and roads. Messmer considers him a godsend, but I sense a disguised enemy of the Reich in him."

The following day, Malva knew the content of the conversation Varya had overheard. It was passed on by Schwarz, who from the day Malva had mentioned his name in her desperation, had seriously considered himself a member of the underground, that is, one of the men named by Valigurov, although the latter had actually forgotten about the Austrian, probably because Schwarz was not a Party member. In the

meantime, his services had been inestimable, and Malva's reappearance in Hlynsk, belated as it had been for the invaders, was made not without Schwarz's inquiries and assistance. Schwarz felt Richter would expose him any day now, and so he urged Malva to act decisively and immediately.

Although Malva was not directly involved in the subsequent events — she was considered too frail a woman for a raid on Hlynsk — her name and hatred and password were with the men of Ksan Ksanich who ventured a desperate operation: the seizure of Hlynsk. The partisans, disguised as a threshing team which usually returned from the field at this time every evening, entered Hlynsk on ordinary wagons for sheaves, reached the center without firing a single shot, and swooped down on Gestapo headquarters, the *Gebietskommisariat*, and the police barracks which surrendered with practically no resistance.

In one of the wagons, they brought to the forest the chief of the Gestapo, who was captured barefoot and without a belt when he tried to escape. Messmer was not found in Hlynsk; he had left for Shargorod with a number of Gestapo men for a meeting with the commanders of the *Sonderkommandos*. The partisans trudged the whole night through behind the wagons loaded with munitions and provisions. They arrived in Hrabisko at dawn and treked another five kilometers through forests. Malva waited for them till they came, and when they did not show up as expected, she went to rest inside the forest ranger's hut where she had come from her underground hideout many a time throughout that summer.

Ksan Ksanich roused her from sleep, although she wasn't really sleeping. The sight of the Gestapo uniform he was dressed in made her recoil for fright.

Except for his mustache and ears, he really looked like a Gestapo man. His boots were a wreck — the night raid must have been truly taxing.

“Was the information correct?” Malva asked.

“Yes. Messmer’s gone to Shargorod, the police were out, there were seven or eight of them in the barracks, the rest were guarding the threshing machines in the field and the garner in the backwoods — in a word, they were out. But this one” — he motioned with his head at the door — “was in. I interrupted his supper.”

“Is he alive?”

“Oh yes. Pretends to be an angel, although he shot the people. I saw how it happened from the window of the hospital. The Gebiets was sitting in the armchair... and this one was doing the shooting. Then he walked like a wraith and finished off the ones who were still alive.”

“Did we have any casualties?”

“None. We fell on them like a bolt from the blue. Went through the whole of Hlynsk on wagons. Without any reconnaissance, without anything at all. They hadn’t the chance even to squeak. We went right from the threshing to the feast. Pilip Shulyak won’t believe we took Hlynsk. He, for one, tried to take Rohachin, but failed.”

“Take that filth off your head!” Malva pointed at the cap with the eagle.

“A good idea. I was wondering why I had a headache.” He put the cap on a shelf. “Might still come in handy.”

Counter to peasant custom, Malva did not cover her gray head with a kerchief; she put on her boots, although she didn’t know Richter was barefoot. When Malva entered the room, Richter recognized her, jumped to his feet from the bench he sat on with

folded hands, and bowed low to her. His face was covered with a stubble that had grown during the night, his eyes had sunk and looked pleadingly at Malva. She couldn't hold his gaze, and gestured for him to sit down. He thanked her. What has he to thank me for? she thought. He wants to live. But didn't all the others want to live, too? What about the ones he hadn't yet murdered — didn't they want to live as well? To be, to live, to laugh, to rejoice, to fall in love. He folded his hands again in a pious manner; these hands seemed to embody innocence itself. How many lives could yet have passed through these hands? And how many deaths... By what laws could an ordinary man — so helpless, unhappy, perhaps desperately unhappy at this moment — have turned into a murderer and lived as a murderer for years. Live consciously and with conviction, legalized by the Reich and by God besides... by such an obedient and cruel God.

“Wasser.”

“Give him some water.”

Ksan Ksanich went out into the entrance hall and returned with a quart of water.

Richter drank the water, said his thanks on returning the quart, and again turned his dully pleading eyes on Malva. His eyes of an unnatural blue pierced her so deeply she simply could not stand them. Only recently, these eyes had looked upon the world differently, perhaps believing that they alone could embrace it and enforce their will upon it.

“Are the children still here?” Malva asked.

“Yes, here in the forest.” Ksan Ksanich glanced at the ticking wag-on-the-wall. Every time she left the forest, Malva had the habit of pulling up the weight lest the clock stop in her absence. “They're sleeping.”

“Bring them here when they get up. Let them arraign him for trial. The Hlynsk children. The children whose parents he murdered...”

The murderer understood what was going to happen, or maybe he felt it intuitively. Fear distorted his face, swept through his coldly blue eyes, and his stiffened lips moved: “Kozhu-na-na! Kozhu-na-a!” He slid from the bench about to fall on his knees.

“Sit down!” Malva ordered.

Richter jabbered simultaneously in all the languages he knew and didn’t know that he had simply been abiding by the laws of his country. If not him, someone else would have done the same in his place. By the laws of the stronger, by the laws of the victor.

“And what about the human being! Does there still exist such a thing as a living human being for you or not?” Ksan Ksanich flared up. “The *Mensch*, as you call him, God damn you!”

The wag-on-the-wall ticked on. Malva imagined the imminent trial of Richter. The trial by the children who had pulled down the homes in which they were born. The trial by the orphaned, the trial by the families now destroyed. Malva went outdoors. The forest lived its perennial life, although a hornbeam forest was equally austere and black even at this early hour when it was but slightly gilded by the rising sun. She wanted to walk into this wall, dissolve in it, and turn into a hornbeam forest — so overpowering was her grief for Stashko who wouldn’t be attending the trial.

The winds howled in the loft of the windmill, making it sound like someone weeping. At this time of day, Silvester’s violin should have been playing — it must have finished its song, because it was not heard.

Had Lel Lelkovich, the tenth paratrooper, survived after all? If she knew he had, she would have gone to him right now. When she was leaving Babylon, she decided to go only to him and to the school. Where else could she take her troop of children? If he wasn't there, Yarema would be; if Yarema weren't around, there'd be Kirilo Lukich; someone had to be there. With the Lemkos, the school couldn't have been empty. If only they didn't run into any Germans. In the club, the lights were on in one window — enough to conclude that the Germans were in there. They were still guarding the railroad.

We led the children toward the school across ditches and ravines that hadn't been there before as far as we could remember. We started out with nine children, two of whom had to be left behind in Zhurbiv because they were so weak. The rest were now falling to the ground, getting up, and clambering on, eager to see the wonderful Green Mills which had to be reached in such a long, roundabout way over the course of three days and nights. Once they got there, they saw it was a village like any other — dark and dreary. Still, it looked different.

A train chugged through Green Mills from end to end, throwing sparks into the night sky and illuminating the windows of the club, the clatter of its wheels throbbing in the ears for a long time afterward.

"Is this a town?" Rita asked.

"No, it's a village."

"So why do trains run through it?"

"Why make such a fuss about it?" Malva replied, irritated. "Let them roll."

The night was so pitch-dark it hid the sky from our view. Malva was keeping an eye on the smallest child so it wouldn't lag behind. We couldn't find the

school for the dark, while Rita simply had to know everything. By the club we heard commands — not German, but sharp and short, in all probability military commands. We stopped: what other people besides us had come to Green Mills? The children dropped to the ground, afraid to be spotted from the club. “Get up! We’re almost there!” Malva said, and whispered to me: “We’ve run right into a trap... and there’s no school. What if it’s been destroyed?” “It was here the last time,” I said. Suddenly a light blinked and died. “There it is, over there!”

We saw the school and the hut of the school watchman. The wind rustled the fallen leaves in the orchard. We went into the yard. In the watchman’s hut, a dog whined feebly — a “preschooler” to be sure. The children huddled in a little group and waited; our indecisiveness along the entire way had made them wary and dejected. Suddenly one of them said: “A violin!”

“What violin? Stop inventing things. It’s the leaves in the orchard.”

“It’s a violin playing! Don’t you hear it?”

“Something’s playing in your head — that’s what it is.”

But as soon as the dog quieted down, we all heard the violin. I said to Malva: “Lel Lelkovich is here. Go and knock on the door. He mightn’t recognize me.”

She went to the side porch and knocked on the door somewhat nervously; she could have done it in a calmer way.

“Who’s there?”

“I want to see Lel Lelkovich.”

“Who are you?”

“What difference does it make? Is that you, Yarema?”

“Yes, it’s me... Go to the other door.”

“What other door?”

“The front door. This one is nailed up.”

Malva went to the front door and waited there a long time. No Yarema or anyone else appeared. Malva was standing over there, while here I was with the sleepy children who were so worn out they’d drop any minute. Yarema was heard shuffling inside down a long corridor, he turned the key in the lock at last, and came out onto the steps. He bent so low I was afraid Malva wouldn’t be recognized in the end.

“Did you forget me already? I’m Malva Kozhushna.”

“Oh, what a guest! But they said you were...”

“I’m not alone,” Malva interrupted him.

“Of course, on such a night as this one. Come in! Who’s with you there?”

The knowledge that they’d be going to school had changed the children completely, breathing strength into them, and chased away sleep and fatigue. Quickly, so quickly Yarema didn’t have a chance to look around, they filled the corridor. “Stay here!” Malva said, and we followed Yarema through the thick darkness. I wondered just how he could move in such long strides in the darkness. He opened the door into a light, let Malva and me through, and then entered himself. Malva couldn’t stir but kept silent, just as I did at her side. I understood her pretty well, because a strange feeling had engulfed me: here he was, the tenth paratrooper.

Lel Lelkovich leaned on crutches that were still new. One of his feet was in a boot of yellow box calf, and the other was a stump, the trouser leg tucked behind his belt from above the knee. A thin neck stuck out of his white shirt; his face was also

thin and sharply-angled, and only the eyes and calm smile reminded one of the former Lel Leikovich.

"Well, come in, come in."

Probably nothing changes as little as a man's voice — Lel Leikovich's was the same low, kind and articulate voice I remembered.

Malva came up to him, and they kissed each other, while I didn't move, a pupil standing before his former history teacher, not knowing what to do or how to greet him until he stepped toward me on his crutches.

"And who's that?" he asked.

"It's Valakh from Babylon. Once the little devil from the *korovai* fell to his share."

"Oh, I remember! *Mene, Mene, Tekel, Peres.*" He laughed so sincerely and kindly as only teachers can laugh of the failures of their former pupils. I burst out laughing, too, and so did Malva, maybe for joy that we had come here, or maybe it was the laughter people stifle their grief and bitter lot with. Only Yarema was somewhat solemn, calm, and obviously alarmed by our arrival.

"There are children here," he said.

"Whose children?" Lel Leikovich asked guiltily.

"Our children, Lel Leikovich. From Babylon."

"Where are they? Call them in!" he ordered Yarema in the tone of a school principal.

Yarema left the room. On the table lay a violin and a bow, surely Silvester's. While we were entering through the front door, Silvester must have slipped out of the "nailed up" side door, and more likely not alone, as the abandoned chairs indicated.

"Moscow is still standing," Lel Leikovich said.

"The Germans are bringing back trainloads of wounded. Snow has fallen there. We're down south

here. The autumn is going on far too long; I don't remember anything like it."

"What units are here now?"

"They're Magyars! The others have been driven to the front line."

Yarema returned alone — the children had fallen asleep. Lel Lelkovich motioned to the carbid lamp, Yarema took it from the table, and we followed him into the corridor. The children were lying on the floor as if they were dead. Lel Lelkovich stood above them on his crutches and told Yarema to bring straw and whatever blankets he could find into the office — after all, the children had come to a school. What would they think of us? I went with Yarema to the strawstack, and then into his hut for blankets; the dog kept on whining; a train rolled through Green Mills, now in the opposite direction, to the East, puffing laboriously up a rise. "It's got tanks," I heard Yarema say from under the bundle of straw on his back.

At dawn, snow fell; winter had come; smoke escaped from the slanting stack over Yarema's hut as he made breakfast for everyone; behind the wall, Lel Lelkovich thumped around with his crutches, went out onto his porch in a white sheepskin jacket and cap, and called Yarema. Yarema ran to the barn, led an old white horse out of it, helped Lel Lelkovich mount it and, taking the crutches from him, stood by to see that the horseman didn't fall down. "Malva! Malva!" She ran up to the window, obviously fascinated by the horseman who was just then leaving the schoolyard to look for another refuge for the children for the winter months, and after the winter, events would show what to do with them next.

It was the same Lel Lelkovich who had danced with equal skill both the liveliest and most elegant

dances of the Lemkos at the club for so many years. Back from his trip, he said that no one had dared deny his request, and he was promised the children would be taken care of through common efforts. Malva couldn't check herself, came up to him, and burst into tears. I recalled the threshing machine in the schoolyard and everything else I knew about her and Lel Lelkovich, and it crossed my mind that were life to obey and submit to them, these two people could have united in a great union long ago, ever since that memorable summer when I had been comparing everything here with our immortal Babylon.

The hostages were driven on to Hlynsk the whole day through. The semi-mythical Babylonian grannies brought up the rear of this death march, and behind them German shepherds the color of the dust stirred up by the crowd choked on their leashes. Some of the grannies couldn't bear it any longer, fell to their knees, raised their hands, sinewy and black like the earth, to the sky, and then a shot would make all the heads turn in the crowd which wanted to cover this last stretch as fast as possible. The nearer they drew to Hlynsk, the more frequently the single shots rent the air; gradually the crowd got used to them, and those up front did not glance back, scuffing through the dust and choking on it. Not the slightest breeze stirred in the field. The dust cloud followed them and crept into Hlynsk along with them. As they walked down the main street, the hot stones of the cobble burned the children's feet, so everyone who was barefooted — both women and children — tried to get to the edge of the street, but the gendarmes pushed them back onto the cobble, and the whole crowd quickened its pace, the barefooted overtaking the shod. On the porch of the building of what had been

the District Party Committee, a flag hung limply — from afar the scene was very reminiscent of the past, but as soon as a light breeze wafted from the Southern Bug, the silk fluttered, and Fabian saw a swastika on the flag — the building housed the *Gebietskommissariat* surrounded by a high barbed wire fence on all sides. The building itself did not look neglected; it was whitewashed and the porch painted gray.

The crowd stopped close to the market square. The children dropped onto the cobble that had been washed by the prisoners the day before, and the mothers started feeding their infants.

Messmer emerged from the building with an interpreter, a young, elegant woman with a Gretchen hairstyle. He told her something, and her tenor, affected by smoking, announced in an impersonal, detached way:

“The men go into the Church of the Ascension, the women and children into the Church of the Savior. That’s what Herr Messmer has ordered.” He nodded his head in confirmation.

The wives said goodbye to their husbands. Yavtukh began clamoring like a swan on leaving Prisia with his fledglings — the youngest sons. On their way, someone else’s child, a complete baby, had been shoved on the Holiys. Prisia sat it on her shoulders, holding its legs with her hands. Then Yavtukh carried him on his back along the whole way. He was angry that besides his own burden, he had to carry yet another one on his last path. Now he kissed the boy on the forehead as if he were his own son — what should the child be blamed for, after all!

“Goodby,” Prisia said. “If anything...”

Yavtukh burst into tears. There had to be a reason why the men were being sent to the Church of the Ascension. Either they would be burned in there or

shot that night. As he was walking out of Babylon, he saw how his house burst into flames like a candle. Fabian led the men to the Church of the Ascension. Yavtukh pushed through the crowd to him and took him by the elbow: "The bastards won't even let us die together."

"Vandals, that's what they are. What can you expect from them?" Fabian said, and asked: "Where's Savka Chibis?"

"He wasn't at the crucifix on our way. Either he ducked out or they killed him. Your billy goat, though, was there. He sneaked off into the hemp when we passed the Buhs' house. And they say that critters have got no brains. I wish we had something like it."

The coolness of the church chilled their souls, but why wasn't there any pain or surprise in the eyes of the Gods at the indifference people had met with wherever they had sought empathy? The door was then closed on the men — how easy and simple it was to turn a church into a prison. All of them, save perhaps for the philosopher, had frequented this church, bowed in prayer, whispered their supplications, and listened reverently to the church choir — and now they dropped to the floor along the walls, forgetting God and forgotten by Him. The last time Yavtukh had been there was during the Easter vigil when he had had the Easter bread made from the grain of his own field blessed. The church had smelled of the souls of the deceased who flocked from the cemetery, of the sweat of the plowers who had recently stepped out of the furrows and brought with them earthly perpetuity, and generally, of the immense overpopulation of the world which would resemble the church during the Easter vigil one of these days. Before he blessed the Easter breads, the Bishop of

Kamyanets-Podilsky (he had come for only one service) spoke wonderful words about bread: "There will be everything — machines, electric stations, cities on the seas and even under the water of the seas, yet bread will remain the eternal luminary of life." Then Yavtukh had touched the chasuble of the bishop as he was blessing the Easter breads in their wicker baskets and bundles. Yavtukh's fingernail had caught on a golden thread, and to the snickers of the believers he barely managed to tear his hand away. That golden thread followed him all the way to Babylon. So that's what the sign had meant: he was to return to this church, but this time as a hostage doomed to death. If his fingernail hadn't caught on the thread, everything might have been different. All this he retold Fabian in a whisper, to which the philosopher said: "Throughout his life man must beware of ill omens and cut his nails whenever he repairs to a church lest he pull a thread out of a bishop's chasuble by accident, because this isn't so much a sin as a cause for a grin."

The windows in the Church of the Ascension were too high to reach and see what was going on in the Church of the Savior: what the guards were like, and how they discharged their duties. A Slavic soul is such that once it lands in prison, it instantly contrives to escape. On the square, countless numbers of axes went into action. "They're putting up the gallows," Fabian said.

Hlynsk awoke at dawn as soon as the gods phosphoresced on the walls. Worn down, Yavtukh lay huddled asleep on the floor. As a sunray fell from the high window on his red legs and reached his face, he snatched it and threw it aside like the golden thread from the bishop's chasuble.

On the square, the gendarmes and policemen fell

in, German commands resounded, followed by the voice of Messmer who spoke on the invincibility of the Reich and the providence and genius of the Führer. Someone was led out of the Gestapo headquarters. Then came a command, after which they approached the Church of the Ascension in military tread and stopped before the door. Fabian roused Yavtukh from sleep; Yavtukh jerked to his feet like someone who had been scalded. A gendarme opened the door, stopped on the threshold, and pointed to the square: "*Bistro!*" Quick!

Yavtukh tried to hide in the church and fled behind the royal gate, but a policeman from Oveche found him there and led him out by the collar. The women and children emerged from the Church of the Savior. Varya Shatrova stood under the gallows.

She stood there without stirring, as if she didn't recognize anyone from Babylon, and looked at the swifts carrying on over the embankment.

Varya was ordered to stand up on a bench under the noose where the hangman, a lean elderly Gestapo man in white gloves, was waiting for her. He lifted the noose over her head, put it around her neck, and tightened it. Then he jumped down from the bench and gave her a moment to bid farewell to the world. Varya moved her neck to set the rope right and then her eyes found someone in the crowd; a tear glistened on her left cheek.

"Farewell," Varya whispered. Her voice failed her; her eyes searched for someone else in the crowd. She said something else, but no voice was heard. Messmer gave a sign to the hangman who knocked the bench from under her feet.

Then two Gestapo men led Schwarz up the platform. His cheeks were covered with a black stubble; his shirt was stained with blood. He was shown to

get up on the bench. Schwarz tried, knocked the bench over, and fell on the platform. He was helped to his feet and upon the bench; the hangman in white gloves drew the noose about his neck. Schwarz looked for Fabian in the crowd, broke into a smile, and said farewell with a barely perceptible nod of his head, not a single word escaping his lips. Someone wept in the crowd; it was a woman. Schwarz had an old wife here in Hlynsk, so it must have been her crying. Messmer gave a sign, and the same procedure was repeated. Schwarz's only leg twitched convulsively. A Gestapo man carrying a hammer and plywood board came up, took a nail clamped between his teeth, and fastened the board to the peg leg. The inscription on the board read: "Austrian dog."

"Now go back to your Babylon and croak there!" Messmer's damnation followed the crowd retreating from the square. "Croak there everyone of you!"

Malva's mother was picked up on the road (along with a number of other dead), brought to Babylon, and buried beside the grave of Orpheus Kozhushny.

The Babylonians kept to the blackened ruins of what had been their homes, to their cellars, and to the footpaths leading to the hemp plots and the river. Practically every day Fabian visited the victims, reassuring them and urging them to live on for all the sad vicissitudes. He went around Babylon with his little "deputation" (Savka and the billy goat). At the sight of the dead, blackened ruins over which the smoke still hovered, Fabian frequently shed a furtive tear. Savka Chibis put him to shame — how could a great philosopher show himself a sniveler before the people? To which Fabian said: "I am a human being, Savka."

To forget his troubles a little bit at least and carry

away his soul to another world, he read Adam Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz* for them in the original every evening. The billy goat slept wonderfully to this reading. But there was one doubt he had been burdened with for some time now: wasn't his master a foreigner himself? A true Babylonian had to stick to things that were his own. In the morning, when the threesome walked through Babylon, the billy goat saw how the people drew closer to his master in their woe, and he sensed that in his person, they had not an average but a great man and consoler. Much as the billy goat's feelings bordered on worship of his master, they held sway in his heart only for a fleeting moment.

The bombardment of Babylon started at dawn. Heavy artillery fired from the east, from a great distance, since its reports were out of earshot, while here, Babylon shook as if it were seized by a fit of ague. The Babylonian barns which served the Germans for sleeping quarters went up in flames, the "gentry nest" of the Chapliches was razed to the ground, the shells encroached closer and closer upon the Tatar Ramparts, forcing the philosopher and his billy goat to abandon their hovel and move to the cemetery into the patrimonial vault of the Tisewiczes. Fabian reasoned that if he were killed, there would be a ready burial place for him. He chased the billy goat out. The poor critter chewed the air for fright and didn't comport himself as worthily as his sire — Fabian the Billy Goat — would have under such circumstances. While he stood outside with his eyes clapped shut for fright, his master lay on the white sarcophagus of one of the Tisewiczes, preparing himself for death.

Presently, the vault started to fill with women dressed in black, with men and children. Fabian realized that he was seeing things, but to his amazement the ghosts seemed to be alive and milled around like human beings — all the people he had buried throughout this war; but the strangest thing was that he didn't find Stashko in this silent crowd. Could have Malva reburied him in Green Mills to have him closer to herself? He asked her mother about it — she should have known where the soul of her grandson was resting now, but the old woman did not breathe a sound, standing there, entreaty in her eyes. That was the moment Fabian came to believe in resurrection, hearing, or rather guessing the entreaty of the resurrected: "Take us to our murderers. The time of trial, the time of liberation, the time of reckoning has come." "But let me out of here first," Levko Khorobry said, getting up from the sarcophagus. The crowd parted, and when he came out of the vault, the first thing he saw was the murderers.

Their columns stretched from Pritske through Babylon and on to Semivody. Spring was at its height; the Babylon chernozem turned into an impassable black ocean of dirt at this time of year; thousands of feet waded through it and got their boots stuck in it. It was hard to tell who marched in boots and who was barefooted by now, and at the head of this gray hydra stalked a field marshal, holding a mace level with his nose, although the mace couldn't change anything now. Fabian saw it was the very same field marshal whose troops had pushed through Babylon not so long ago for a night and a day and yet another two weeks in a row, rolling toward the east in thousands of trucks.

The field marshal recognized the philosopher and

his billy goat, stopped for a moment, and seemingly recalling something, asked Fabian:

"Is this Babylon?"

"Yes, it is," Fabian replied, although there wasn't anything left of Babylon but charred ruins.

"*Aufwiedersehn!*" the field marshal said, and raising the mace to the level of his nose, he continued kneading the mire in front of his pathetic troops as if he were at a parade before his death. In the distance, he saw the green of the sprouting wheat, probably believing it was hard ground, looked round at his column, raised his mace, and pointed in that direction. Yet at that moment, the soul of Yavtukh who had been shot dead for that sprouting wheat last autumn flew up over Babylon, blocked the field marshal's way, snatched the mace out of his hand, and pointed toward another road — the miry road leading to Zhurbiv. Of all places, they would surely have drowned in this field of sprouting wheat, yet for Yavtukh, even the death of his murderers could not compensate for the great price of this living field which he had sown for Babylon during the autumn nights.

Who knows what a living Yavtukh would have done in this case. Maybe he would have pleaded: "Herr Field Marshal, Herr Field Marshal! But that's grain for making bread, don't you see! *Brot, Brot*, as you call it. How can you plunder it so early in the spring?" But that eternal peasant the philosopher saw in his imagination now had to act more decisively and just as the resurrected Yavtukh had. Immortal is the land, and immortal is the Yavtukh on it, Fabian thought. He will live on in his sons, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, and his thread will be spun in the people until a love for the land exists and

until the bearer of this love lives — the peasant — perhaps the most complex and controversial of all the social products of humanity. Before his death, Prisia said: “Remember my words: this devil will outlive Babylon itself.”

EPILOGUE

The philosopher was dying; none of the Babylonians came to his deathbed; as a matter of fact, he didn't expect them to come, because since he had gone completely blind, he maintained contact with Babylon only through his billy goat. Occasionally he appeared in public, holding on to the goat's horn notched by the rings of years. The son of Fabian the Billy Goat didn't have such huge curving horns as his father, nor did he have a brilliant intellect to match his father's, but that didn't prove in any way that his tribe was degenerating — it was only returning to its normal, natural state, to which his father had been a happy exception. The philosopher conversed rarely with the descendant and recalled him now only because he had a feeling he would die, and there was not a single soul around he could address before his death.

“That's it, brother,” Fabian said, hearing how the billy goat sighed under the workbench on the shavings the new coffin maker Savka Chibis had left behind after he had been working on a coffin for the philosopher for several days in a row. “After me, Savka will settle in this hut, and I forgot to ask him not to chase you out. Anyway, you've been a guide to me, although many a time you led me into the pond instead of taking me across the dam first and then going to your watering place. On the whole, you

got something from that genius Fabian. Do you know when I first discerned the presence of intellect in you? It's when those Babylonian bullies, who always got a kick out of making fun of me and of helpless creatures generally, cut off your beard and you didn't appear in public until it grew to full length. My eyes were still good then, and I could see how you went to the Chebrets to look at yourself, and how you suffered without the beard. That's when I saw the flash of intellect in you, silly. But God denied me a fine beard, and that's probably why I didn't become a great philosopher. What's the use of telling you all that anyway, if you don't know those philosophers. Better get up, my dear, and take me to Babylon. Today's Sunday it seems; we'll go to the swing. I have to bid farewell to the people. Where are you now? Oh, you're on your feet already. That's a good boy."

They went out of the hut and walked down along the street; the warm dust under Fabian's feet reminded him of his childhood. "Do you know what Socrates said about death?" the philosopher continued. "He said that the soul in a body is like a soldier at his post; it is not permitted to leave it without the commander's order, nor stay there longer than is deemed necessary by the one who posted the guard."

The billy goat, indifferent to this tirade, led him onto the dam where they took a rest, listening to the babbling waterfall and inhaling the coolness wafting from the water, and then he took him along the pond through the scented air of hemp and the first cucumbers. They reached the swing and the Singers' farmyard by a footpath. There wasn't a single soul around, nor even the slightest breeze which rippled the air when someone was taking a turn on the swing. A shadow fell from the elm trees; Fabian let go of the billy goat, lay down on his back in the shadow

and recalled the thousands of merry days he had had here at the swing throughout his life. He regretted not having found himself a mate on the swing — he didn't care too much about it, but with the increasing burden of the years, he had become hopelessly indifferent to the fair sex, and so, was leaving no offspring behind in Babylon or anywhere else. Thus he would be departing from the immortal crowd to join the wonderful gathering of souls he had served with his skills for several decades ever since he had assumed the gloomy yet indispensable duties of coffin maker. Not a single coffin maker nor autocrat can entertain hope to be the last to die. After him, an eternally young crowd will be going on and on along Appian Way, and Orpheus Kozhushny's swing will be used by a new Babylon, burned, destroyed, and shot to death, but built anew from ruins and ashes.

The philosopher could not see what Babylon looked like now, but he could imagine it from the stories he heard, from the regales, the smell of bread, songs, new customs and new whims. The vision of consciousness becomes keener when the eyes have already lost their sight. He realized that all the frenzy of his life and all his running around Babylon had made no sense — he could not remember any unfinished cause except one: he failed to enjoy a merry and carefree life in the renamed Babylon for a little while at least.

Babylon was not destined to earn the bitter worldwide fame of Lidice, Oradour or Kraguewacu, yet within the Republic, its name had a certain ring to it. Its tragedy had not left anyone indifferent — neither here nor in Zernograd or in the capital. Babylon received everything it requested — brick, iron, slate, asphalt, cement, glass, or rubber for machines; in a word, Babylon's agents were running around state offices, ministries, and directorates, re-

questing in one place, demanding in others. The very word "Babylon" had a miraculous effect on the ears and stirred the most callous, because apart from everything else, who of the mortals didn't want to get briefly into contact with eternity: Babylon! When freights stenciled "Babylon, Ruban Collective Farm" or carrying such caterogical warnings as "Carefull", "Handle with Care!" or something else of the sort arrived at the railroad station of Hlynsk, the local residents seethed with envy. "They've bribed the whole country," the people said of Babylon. The friction between Hlynsk and Babylon became ever more overt, especially after Babylon had built its own airfield for the mail planes and crop dusters. Whenever rains soaked the tiny Hlynsk airfield, all the mail and passengers from the big cities arrived in Babylon. And when Babylon built a plant for processing pork fat, along with a slaughterhouse and sausage factory, Hlynsk completely lost its emotional footing, and for the sake of balance, obtained after much trouble a number of unique enterprises, including a new automatic sugar refinery, although it threatened the old Zhurbiv plant with closure. Lest Babylon make headway too steeply as it already had, Koziv was joined to it, then the conceited and equally backward Pritske, and in the end, yet another little village — Veseli Bokovenki located eighteen kilometers from Babylon proper. From that day forth, Babylon was called Veseli Bokovenki, not by decree as yet, but eventually such a decree was passed, and Babylon was renamed Veseli Bokovenki if only because the old name was supposed to have exhausted itself historically and socially. In this way, Babylon was done away with, and Hlynsk calmed down, because who in his right mind would call an entire district Veseli Bokovenki? After all, there was something

discrediting in the name: Veseli Bokovenki *, merry lie-abled, and on the whole, the word *merry* had now gained a different shade than it had one hundred or even fifty years ago. It became synonymous with something not serious, unstatesmanlike, although Fabian always insisted that merriment was that heaven under which everything thrived except anger.

So the great Babylonian philosopher was dying in Veseli Bokovenki under the famous elm trees in the company of a billy goat, who was but the son of Fabian the Billy Goat, and for that obvious reason, could not grasp whose death he was witnessing. At that time Veseli Bokovenki celebrated its victory over Babylon on its own airfield. One after another, the airplanes took off — from the largest, the famous PO-2, which could land here to the little “Bees” resembling golden-winged dragonflies. The best workers were given plane rides. The workers were to get a bird’s eye view of Veseli Bokovenki to engender their profounder respect for it. The view that opened from above was truly impressive. The dammed river of the same name had flooded the Chebrets, resembling a huge sea with a fleet, docks, lighthouse, and a water front stretching for eighteen kilometers, along which turkeys strolled now, while their masters shoved and pushed in the line, waiting for their turn to get a ride. One plane almost caught on the elm trees — the chickens squawked in the weeds, the billy goat jumped over the wattle fence and bolted off for fright, and the swing started to sway in the wind whipped up by the plane. In his imagination, the philosopher climbed on it and started to swing. But with whom? Oh yes, it looked like Yavtukh’s Prisia.

* Lit. Merry Side — Tr.

This had happened only once in his life, remember — after Epiphany when Yavtukh had disappeared from Babylon for some time. There had been such a sin on Fabian's part, and had Yavtukh not returned home, the whole life of Levko Khorobry might have taken a different turn.

The guard left his body, the soul burst out of its prison, and stopped belonging to him. The brain still functioned; he realized it without fear — perhaps only Hrihoriy Skovoroda had died as serenely. Fabian died in the eighty third year of his life; he left no written works after him; and the capital registered on his bank account amounted to one ruble (the minimal initial deposit). No one could draw the money out, so from now on, a two percent annual interest would be accumulating on the account. His hut was claimed by some distant relatives, but the chairman of the Village Soviet rejected the claim: in this hut, perhaps the only one of the old world to remain, the chairman decided to open a museum of local history.

I am only a man, and among the myriad sins of mankind there is my guilt as well. The Romans used to say: *mea culpa*, which meant through my guilt, my fault. I simply say: my guilt, without any Latin extenuations or reserve about fault, because my greatest guilt came about precisely because of faults — mine and others'.

My country, I am prepared to answer to you as a citizen, just like you are answerable to the world for me and millions like me. In this mutuality we are one, although you are everything, while I am nothing without you. You are one for everybody, because he who wants to have two countries will wind up having none. As long as you exist, we are

eternal. We held out and prevailed because of you, the loftiest of concepts ever created and comprehended by man. My guilt does not consist in that, given the opportunity to die for you, I am still alive. My guilt is different: it lies in your suffering, in the death of the millions who saved my life.

When a flock of swans honks overhead, I think about those who are not among us, but I don't search for their restless souls in the skies as some poets are wont to do — letting the souls have the skies, while indulging in earthly joys themselves — I am far from that. With people, just like with birds, the errors of the leader of the flock are gradually reflected in the flock as a whole, in everyone who has wings and, in a difficult hour, is capable of piercing the air for others, the feebler ones, looking alertly into the perfidious void darkened by the mist of watching out for death in the middle of the night. The philosopher's guilt lies perhaps only in his ability to fuse the past with the future, to see his land as a unity, an integrated whole, at one with the great and the small, in the grandeur of the dead and in the humdrum of the living, as Pericles saw it at Panticapaeum: "It is a wonderful land, and the people could settle there, but what would they do about the cemeteries in which their great ancestors were buried? Without them the people could decline even there."

If with the passing of the years, I do not lose the ability to smile, I will go on to write about Veseli Bokovenki, but so far, I can ask you only to take a ride in the plane with Stepchenko and his exemplary workers, look at this land from on high, and remember for all eternity that here stood Babylon and here lived its people; when they were better off and their souls strived for great heights, they could fly only on the swing under which death had so recently

overcome Fabian the philosopher, registered as Levko Yevlampiovich Khorobry in the records of the Church of the Ascension in Hlynsk. Still, I regret that Veseli Bokovenki won't have such a character, a man who was the embodiment of lofty ideals and selflessness to this author. His soul has freed itself of the guard and ascended to heaven, just as Plato wrote; but if the ancients are to be believed, the soul of a philosopher does not disappear immediately; it can go on living without a guard for three thousand years.

With this, we end the story of Babylon, realizing that what has been said here is far less than what has been omitted, but let us be hopeful that even as it is, this book will be useful. Still, if I may be so bold, I shall end it with the words of an ancient chronicler who wrote in the year 6581 (1073): "So the end to every book: if it is not dear to you, do not create another." For it is only people who can return to people, and herein rests the indestructibility of the universe.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Vasil Zemlyak (1923—1977) was born into a peasant family in Vinnitsya Region of Ukraine. Upon graduating from secondary school, he studied at an air school. During the last war he commanded a partisan unit. After the war, he graduated from an agricultural college and worked on a state farm. Later he worked with newspapers, and in the 1960s, was editor-in-chief of the Dovzhenko Film Studios in Kiev.

He wrote screenplays to the films *People of my Valley* (1958), *The Novellas of the Red House* (1964), and *The Daughter of Stration* (1965).

Vasil Zemlyak published his first short stories in 1945. Among his most popular stories are *The Stone Ford* (1957) and *Lieutenant-Colonel Shimansky* (1966). His novels *The Swan Flock* and *Green Mills* (Zeleni Mlyni) won him the Taras Shevchenko State Prize of the Ukrainian SSR for Literature.

Васи́лий Сидоро́вич Земляк

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