

**Vasil Zemlyak**

**THE SWAN FLOCK**



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SWAN  
FLOCK**

A NOVEL

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*Василь Земляк*  
*ЛЕБЕДИНА ЗГРАЯ*  
Роман

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Our old and utterly sinful, yet in a way unfading Babylon — which has nothing in common with the Mesopotamian Babylon except its name borrowed from the Euphrates valley — stands, as it has since times of old, on the banks of the Chebrets River. The Chebrets, a little-known tributary of the Southern Bug, is almost inaudible during floods and restlessly murmuring during droughts. Throughout the whole of summer its high banks are inundated by the bleak blue of wild thyme, probably the smallest of all flowers and the one from which the river derives its name. The Chebrets lures groves of ash, elm and haggerberry to its shores and disappears in them, but not for long — right beyond Babylon it comes gurgling out from under old elders, and further down flows freely to the not too unfamiliar parts of Zhurbiv where it is impeded by a dike, and then runs through a wormwood steppe to Hlynsk where it spills into the Southern Bug — a place we shall pay a visit to by all means.

Along the waterway, hopelessly mired by reeds and rocks, there are a number of hills which seem to be at constant odds with one another. The old and new parts of Babylon cling to them, linked into a single whole by a rather decrepit dike which is gnawed away by floods every spring and must be heaped up anew. That spring, the dike withstood the flood for the first time perhaps, forming quite a large pond by which the feast of Ivan Kupala\* was recently celebrated. In

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\* St. John the Baptist's Day (June 24)

winter, when the pond was solidly frozen over, it became the site of the feast of the Epiphany, a merry and unforgettable holiday on ice. Just like in Poland in the old days, every household here considered itself a "maritime state" because it had an outlet to the sea big enough for putting up a wash-raft and growing hemp by the water's edge. When the hemp shot up, striving to outdo the neighbors' crop, one of the local oddities, Fabian the billy goat (the name itself throws some light on his personality), always picked out the highest and densest part of the hemp plots for his lair. In it he not only found refuge from the stinging afternoon flies, but also contemplated privately on this hempen realm whose background seemed to be without the dimension of time.

There were two Fabians in Babylon — one a billy goat, the other a man, a famous local coffin-maker and sage whose services a number of the Babylonians could not avoid in one way or another. Judging from his birth certificate, he had been named Levko Khorobry \*, but his real lineage was said to go back to the Babylonian sages, although he had not a shred of evidence to this effect. So, according to the data of this zealous connoisseur of local history, our Babylon once was a two-tiered town encircled by ramparts, some of which have survived into modern times; it had two towers — northern and southern, on which guards stood watch day and night. And in the center of Babylon, the closest to the vault of the sky from which everything appeared in a somewhat different light, there supposedly stood what was called a Solar Stone just like the one the ancient Incas had; this stone told the flow of time — months and years, although how that was done has remained a mystery for posterity

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\* Levko Khorobry (Ukr.) — lit. Leo the Brave

on both continents. You may hear a host of other details about this ancient settlement which was said to have been founded in the times of the semi-mythical Taurians who had been ousted from the warm Pontic shores by alien tribes and forced to move on to another homeland. Fabian was loath to believe that an entire people could have disappeared without leaving a trace, so he speculated that the Taurians could have changed into some other people and might reappear one day. Let him have his way. Why discourage the man, the more so since vanished nations have not that many advocates of their resurrection.

Meanwhile, Babylon squandered its former grandeur; its towers and two-tiered outlay have long since disappeared; in place of the Solar Stone there stands now a sun-bleached crucifix erected by the order of the barefooted Carmelites who held sway in these parts until Cossack Colonel Bohun expelled them. There is nothing gained by saying it, but Babylon tottered and fell into decay; its last cannon disappeared somewhere, having not so long ago been fired on Epiphany against the imaginary foe, although the real foe was maturing right here in the heart of Babylon.

Not without reason did the ancients say of the perishability of the universe: "Time flies by, and everything is unstable and transient in the world." Only the hardy residents of Babylon, in whom the blood of peoples distant and near has long intermixed, remained the same, and only their souls did not cool toward their native Babylon as if the ravages of time had left it unscathed. And if anyone at the famous country fairs in Hlynsk inquired as to the origin of such fine horses or oxen, or of such handsome men, he would be answered with a sense of personal pride: "We're Babylonians," as if the man he had asked had

indeed come to the fair out of God knows what antiquity.

That's what Babylon was like. At times it would burn to the ground for no reason at all; at other times it would proudly show off its tin roofs gleaming on the hills amid the thatch of the poorer homes; at times it would breed oxen with horns so long that they couldn't pass each other on the road; and then it would bring them to naught and start breeding sinewy little Mongol horses of the type on which the invaders had once come to these parts; at times its hills would teem with working windmills; and at other times, when it was scorched by the Taurian winds, it would switch to grindstones, live under hatches and turn to begging furtively; but even then it would clamp down on its beggars lest they get out into the wide world and disgrace a great people. And if a tramp did slip out, he would have to keep his mouth shut about where he had come from, or as a last resort he would name Chuprinka or Koziv or even Hlynsk itself as his birthplace.

Say what you like, but its affinity to the Solar Stone and to everything else that had long ago passed away — which for all that was capable of stirring the imagination of the proud Babylonians to the end of time — has left an enduring imprint.

We do not know for sure what the founders of Babylon\* were after when they appropriated such a pretentious name for their settlement. Was it to pass through the very Gate of God, with all the best they had in their hearts at that time? Probably it was so, or perhaps those unknown people wanted to rise high above the surrounding world. Now we involuntarily call them to mind whenever a flock of swans honks

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\* Babylon in Assyrian means the Gate of God — V. Z.



overhead from the murk of night like the unconquerable human soul itself, overcoming the fatigue of a long migration or calling triumphantly, measuring the autumnal skies in sagging strings. And although people will always regard beauty as something unusual, our local philosopher insists that in times of trial they themselves are somewhat reminiscent of a flying flock of swans. Could it be because of their subconscious aspiration for something that is lofty to the point of incomprehensibility, precisely that which makes it unfathomable to the end at times? It is quite natural for everyone to have his own gauge on the essence of this, but no one can claim indispensability or omnipresence. The reason why we value one another is that we think differently about identical things. Someone might not be impressed by our Babylon at first sight, but why should we put this indifferent or unobservant person to shame, the more so since Babylon itself will lose none of its luster because of that. Without having gained either the glory or the splendor of its great predecessor, nonetheless it stands, while the other exists only in legends and myths whose exaggerated purport, we think, is obvious enough to all.

The Solar Stone could have confirmed the advent of the third decade of this restless century. But let us start with little things, which, perhaps, will lead us up to the discovery of the great things one of these days. In the attempt to bring this chronicle up to date, we will nonetheless refrain from being in a great hurry, bearing in mind that a daring effort may also be slowly paced — although we will strive with all our hearts to see it to its end.

# PART I

## *Chapter 1*

For some time now, those of the Babylon girls who felt themselves doomed to maidenhood began finding husbands for themselves on a swing. This simple device was invented by the late Orpheus Kozhushny, once a permanent local agent distributing the sewing machines of the German firm "Singer," which had representatives all over Europe, and so, for the sake of prestige, could not be without its agent in Babylon, probably having mistaken it for the Babylon in Mesopotamia. In one of his letters, a clerk of the firm asked Herr Orpheus whether the famous Tower of Babel was still intact. Herr Orpheus answered in the affirmative, reasoning that this would have some bearing on his career. He roamed about the world, selling as many of "Singer" products as he could. They said that he had gone as far as Siberia and farther than that, visiting Manchuria on several occasions. But every time he came back to his native Babylon, in which he failed to sell a single sewing machine, his family would be augmented by yet another baby girl, one of whom was called Malva.

When Orpheus grew old in the pursuit of his salesman's trade, the firm, having achieved unprecedented prosperity in Germany by that time, forgot about him. His girls were growing up, one prettier than the other, but suitors were few and far between for such brides-to-be, since Kozhushny had nothing to add to their name. That's when the wily agent got the idea of building a swing in his backyard so his girls could handle the prospects themselves. Kozhushny had five

or maybe six daughters in all. The middle one who was the prettiest, so it was said, eventually fell out of the swing with a land surveyor who was staying at their house; fortunately, neither was hurt. After the boarder finished his survey, he married her and took her away never to return to Babylon again. But probably the highest amplitude which the swing ever reached with the Singer girls, as they were called, was with the men of Budyonny's Army of Cavalry. They took one of the girls along on their Polish campaign, during which she married some great military commander. Nobody's heart could remain indifferent to the fluttering winglike maple board suspended on four ropes.

Since the appearance of the Solar Stone, Babylon had not come up with any greater invention — that's a fact. The swing was sited splendidly right by the edge of a precipice between the two hoary elm trees which had dominated Babylon's skyline since times of old. Later on, when Orpheus was no more, the swing became the responsibility of the Village Soviet, and its clerk Savka Chibis was put in charge of it. It was taken down for the winter and put up with the first breath of spring. The opening ceremony was attended by everyone who strived for the heights between the elms. Here they caroused, frolicked, and sailed over Babylon, and if anyone met his end falling off the swing, it was not considered death in the usual sense of the word. Even the local philosopher Fabian — of all people — longed for this easiest of all the possible versions of death. As for the billy goat, the swing simply baffled him as the wonder of wonders which he would not be able to grasp to the end of his days.

Malva swung over the precipice the longest — with anyone who was in love with this romantic place and

unafraid of the abyss below it — up to the time she swung into the heart of my uncle Andrian, a tall, almost helplessly kind man with a forward-falling flop of hair. Oh my, was there crying and lamenting in the home of the Valakhs (my family's name) when he announced his choice. Just going on forty-one, my uncle was not exactly a young man anymore; his hair had turned gray in a German POW camp, he had seen much of the world and its people, and he parried all the biting comments about Malva rather categorically: "In Europe, they don't even consider such things."

He was given the smaller half of the house, and a separate entrance was made in the blank sidewall. Andrian added on a little porch with a red roof, white-washed his part inside and outside all by himself, built a stove with a plank bed along one of its sides, so he wouldn't be dependent on our heating system, and brought his wife Malva to a home with full board and lodging. They lived quietly, beautifully, my uncle didn't let a single hair fall from her head, although in the other half of the house the couple was obstinately not recognized. Every week they went to his father-in-law, rocked on the swing, and had a meal of fish dumplings Siberian style. After those visits, Andrian would lead Malva with his arm linked through hers (the manners he had picked up in Europe), and returned home in a pugnacious mood. He partitioned his horse off from ours in the stable, refusing to harness it with our horse; he threatened to divide the yard in half and everything else around the house, and we all guessed that this was the doing of the sly, wily salesman who had old, unsettled scores with our family. Our grandfather Levon had once snatched up the lease on one *dessiatine* \* of land which Kozhushny

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\* *Dessiatine* — Russian unit of land area equal to 27 acres

had rented before that from Captain Siroshapka, a great seafarer. While he was roaming the world's seas and oceans, he had his land leased to the local peasants, preferably those from Hlynsk, since they were more punctual in paying the rent and, the main thing, had no delusions whatsoever as to whom the land belonged, because they never worked it themselves — they leased it in turn to other local peasants. Captain Siroshapka joined the Revolution along with the crew of his frigate which was sunk, and our prudent grandpa died from typhus — on one and the same day with grandma. Siroshapka's land was socialized, and soon afterward parts of it were allotted to the Valakhs and the Kozhushnys; for some years the plots — both ours and theirs — lay idle, neither tilled nor sown; but peasants are a spiteful lot and harbor old grudges for ages.

By and by Andrian sided completely with the Singers and insisted on getting from grandpa's inheritance half of the orchard around the house and half of the meadow, precisely where the prolific walnut trees stood, because Malva, you see, came from a lineage which, besides everything else, loved to crack nuts in winter. Andrian threatened that if they would not give him at least three out of the seven walnut trees of their own free will, the trees would disappear one night, because he would chop them down so that no one would have those goodies. That autumn the blasted walnuts were plentiful as never before, dropping from the trees, and the outer shells fell off all by themselves, later on to our grief, to waft a smell of winter fairytales from the loft. The winter was severe that year, the trees froze and wilted, but hardly anyone believed that this was not the doing of Orpheus and his son-in-law. There was not a single day that curses were not called down on Kozhushny's head. The

curses also rebounded on the "Singer" firm, which was held responsible for having trained such an agent to the great misfortune of the Valakhs.

Time went by and death drew nearer; old Orpheus was hit in the chest by a horse one day; he suffered a week or so and took his last sleep, while his over-zealous son-in-law, having lost his adviser, calmed down and drew in his horns, although he would still grab the pitchfork during the occasional brawls with his neighbors. But one time he and my father had it out near the ice-covered well. Andrian had just come home from a night shift at a sugar refinery in Zhurbiv where he was making some money on the side. Father, who was watering his blind Chestnut, had asked his relative: "I wonder who your better half was swinging with last night?" The swing was taken down in winter, so father was, of course, making a transparent enough allusion to Malva's faithlessness.

My uncle made much of his Malva; he wouldn't let her touch cold water, but since he wanted to be well off, he frequently took on additional jobs. A jack-of-all-trades — currier, carpenter, adept builder of stoves, he earned perhaps the widest fame for his wells, of which he had dug quite a few in Germany and then, later on, in and around Babylon. He took Fabian or some other men who were not bound to the land as helpers and tapped the eternal water sources in the earth's interior, which at times were at stupendous depths. They said that he could foretell where a source would break into the open and where it was useless to search.

If water couldn't be found somewhere or other, he was called for. At times people came to him from distant steppe villages in areas of the fiercest aridity. From a steppe dweller he had gotten to know in the POW camp, he had learned a long-forgotten technique

which the Scythians were supposed to have used when they made the southern steppes habitable. He looked for water with the help of straw. On the site chosen for the well, he put straw or, better yet, bundles of bulrush. At dawn it seemed he could judge by them what was taking place underground. Lest all of the bundles absorb the dampness equally, he chose dewless nights. The dampest bundle pointed to the cherished water source. Sometimes this wizardry had to be repeated for several nights in a row and the testing ground shifted from one place to another. In the lowlands things were easier, because there the trees and grasses showed everything, but on high dry land it was difficult to find the water source and it was more difficult to get at since the red-soil layers of the south had to be dug through. And inside the shaft, there was nothing more frightening than that patch of sky which shrank overhead from day to day as if it would vanish altogether. But then as a reward the happy moment would come when suddenly the source in the eternal silence would start beating like the very heart of the earth, and in an instant it would reunite Andrian with the sky against which Malva Kozhushna was rocking on the swing.

When he stayed away for too long, Malva did not exactly pine away for him. She attended the merry-making at the swing in the evenings and took up the habits of her recent maidenhood. Neither did she shun the wild abandon of Gypsy parties when they pitched their tents by the Chebrets River — merry, sumptuous camps of ironbound wagons, silken tents and mettlesome horses: every tribe of man, let alone the Gypsies, has had its ups and downs throughout history. In those days they roamed the world freely, drifting into Babylon from Bessarabia or even from as far away as Serbia, and every summer it was a different party.

They claimed to be an honest and proud people, unlike what Babylon held them to be. Much as Malva was lured to the unknown places of this world, she remained living behind our wall, much to Andrian's delight. Back from his well-digging trips, he would love her even more, oblivious of everything as if his soul were soaring into seventh heaven. "My God, what did Europe do to the man?" we wondered in our part of the house. We refused to see that it was Malva who did it, not Europe.

Before she married, of the local men she cared only for Danko Sokolyuk, in whom she had also found something of a Gypsy or Serbian. These traits cropped up in the Sokolyuk family quite unexpectedly and from some unknown source, and that streak was what fascinated Malva most. She probably never loved our Andrian — gray-haired and handsome, conspicuously Germanized in his habits, a giant of a man — but had married him more to wreak her vengeance on the Valakhs. Nonetheless, she blossomed with him. Though she was not very tall, she could make herself look taller with the help of high-heeled shoes when it was necessary; she had rather unusual eyes, blue and deep like Andrian's wells, and what seemed to be a trained gait — a purely innate acquisition of hers, since no one had ever trained the Babylon girls to walk beautifully, which, as Fabian held, was perhaps the most important thing for a woman. Malva was not a sniggering type of girl, but on the swing she could laugh so irrepressibly and infectiously, with such frolicsome undertones, that unwary men lost their heads over her laughter alone, and married men took that laughter home with them, probably to share some of it with their wives. There didn't seem to be a single man who didn't secretly dream of swinging wildly with her despite her reputation. Only children, against



which Babylon's womenfolk could protect themselves expertly with purging herbs, might have made her settle down. In the first year of their marriage, Andrian had built a high walnut cradle with fancy borders, similar to those he had seen in Germany. It stood in the sunniest part of the room and waited for the light which in the end was not destined to shine into it.

Working for a rich client on a dryland farmstead, of which there are quite a few along the Southern Bug River, Andrian and his hand Fabian dug what was probably their deepest well ever. He dug all the way down to the earth's eternal cold, got badly chilled there, and soon afterward was laid up with galloping consumption. A doctor who was brilliant in the field of consumption was called in all the way from Berdichiv. After examining him the doctor had nothing encouraging to say, but hinted to Malva that she might consider herself a widow-to-be — Andrian would live six weeks to six months, no more. Such brilliant men cannot keep their mouths shut even when they make the cruelest of discoveries. The verdict was cast in spring when the apple blossoms were shedding their petals.

But he kept on living and loving her even more madly and jealously — something only the doomed are capable of. His former composure had disappeared without a trace, and he began picking on Malva about things that had never happened, things he had never paid any attention to before, extracting confessions from her and threatening to take revenge for everything as soon as he could get out of bed. Exhausted more by jealousy than by consumption and confined to bed, he used every possible trick to get hold of her and beat her black and blue — we heard that beating which she took without uttering a sound. Then he

would holler in despair: "Begone, my Babylon curse!" and swear her out of the house. For a long time thereafter he would be all alone, sometimes even for days on end, during which time he would not let his relations get near him. "Gloating, aren't you?" he said to them. "I can just imagine what you'll be gabbing when you see her coming back!" And indeed, she did come back, but not for long. Andrian tried to prove to me that he himself had advised her to move to the Singers lest she contract consumption.

One day we heard Andrian knocking on the wall by which he was lying. I was sent to him; we maintained a friendship secretly from the others and I did not share the enmity toward Malva which was being fanned in our half of the house. At his side sat Fabian wearing his gold-rimmed spectacles and reading aloud in a foreign language from some book which, as I found out later, was Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz* in Polish. That's how I came to bring them their first supper for two, while the third guest, the billy goat, was standing in the yard regarding the new pattern on the moon which hung low over the windmills.

The older relations seldom paid visits to Andrian, probably being afraid of consumption. I, however, did not care, and Fabian said once between his readings of *Pan Tadeusz* that I would make a great doctor some day. For the time being uncle Andrian was enjoying my far from medical services. I brought him his breakfasts, lunches and suppers. He had separate plates and dishes which no one touched except me and Fabian's billy goat who frequently visited us to listen to some clever conversation or enjoy his master's recitals from *Pan Tadeusz*. To keep from taking the leftover food back home, I gave it to the billy goat. He delighted in mother's borshches, some-

times ate the dumplings right out of the bowl, and simply could not understand how anyone could possibly think about death with such gorgeous food around. Meanwhile, uncle was thinking less and less about it as he lay in his bed in a dignified way. He was always washed and clean-shaven by Fabian; he wore a white shirt that was never rumpled and was quite emaciated by consumption and love. It seemed that only recently he had been bringing Malva the first water from his wells, which made her have unusual dreams — she could recount them down to the minutest detail, for which Andrian loved her all the more.

I noticed that he was ashamed of his illness and went outdoors in his white shirt only at night when he would stand near the house staring for a long time at Babylon Hill where his Malva now lived. After midnight we would hear him shuffling toward the house in his boots, and for a long time after that, probably until dawn, the lights shone out of his windows, keeping the bench he had built soon after his marriage out of the dark. To tell the truth, I rarely saw him sitting on the bench with Malva, although she sat on it quite often when uncle left for distant villages and stayed away for a month or two. I grew very curious what my uncle was doing at night because he would not have been sleeping with the light on (at that time kerosene was not a thing to be squandered for nothing; it was rarely delivered to the co-op and had to be used economically). Once I sneaked out of the house and spied on him through the window: he lay in bed with his arms behind his head, staring into space. I stood there for a long time, but he didn't move at all. His attitude bespoke some great and enduring human sorrow. He probably tore himself away from these nocturnal thoughts only to

turn up the wick of the kerosene lamp standing on the chest where the books Fabian had brought to the sick man were lying. I was magnanimously allowed to look at the pictures in those books. Pan Tadeusz was my favorite knight, but even he was second after my uncle, whom no one could match in my imagination.

In addition to me and Fabian, Klim Sinitsya, a member of a co-op in the village of Semivody, visited my uncle. He came in the evenings in a one-horse wagon and stayed with Andrian late into the night. He was also a tall, lean man, with half an arm missing. He had a handsome swarthy face and big kind eyes with a gleam of a smile in them. He was dressed in breeches and a blue corduroy shirt girded by a belt. Klim smoked a lot, but talked little, for the most part when he answered Andrian's questions. My uncle must have known him from the times when he was more talkative, and so he forgave him his current taciturnity, being very proud of those nightly visits. Every time Klim brought the sick man a glazed ceramic jar full of honey recently drawn at the co-op, a pound of butter shaped like a cake and wrapped country-style in a white damp cloth, or a loaf of cheese which had been made at the co-op's cheese dairy.

"Well, boy, you can expect me to be fit as a fiddle any day now," uncle would boast to me the next day after Klim's visits. "Klim has brought me some more medicine. Want some fresh honey?"

He poured some of it into a clean bowl and said:

"Take it over to the Valakhs so they won't go thinking I'll croak without them. A whole co-op has come to my aid. That's what kind of a man Klim is, boy... Any other man wouldn't give a fiddler's damn for me, would he?"

They had been friends at Tereshchenko's \* sugar refinery in Zhurbiv where they had gone for seasonal work right before the war. Klim operated the cutters, while our Andrian was a stoker in the boiler room. When grandpa found out that a local landowner, Tysewicz by name, intended buying a steam engine, he apprenticed his son to the boiler room so he could learn a trade and then land a good job with Tysewicz. Zhurbiv was not far away, some ten *versts* \*\* from us, and so every holiday the boys went to visit grandpa. Apart from a son, he had three girls of marriageable age. But none of them struck the heart of the young seasonal laborer, which did not upset grandpa in the least — he was not too happy about the rebellious frame of mind of his son's friend. And when he found out that Klim's father was a poor man from Koziv, who traded in red and white clay, he completely cooled toward the young man, although grandpa himself was trying to claw his way out of poverty like a cat that had slipped into a wet clay pit.

Klim, though, was not visiting Babylon for nothing: he had found his heart's desire — a single girl named Ruzia, a distant relation of the Valakhs. She was a moody, closemouthed beauty, the only daughter in the family. She fell in love with Klim recklessly and zealously. When he did not appear in Babylon for a long time, she would visit him at the factory in Zhurbiv on the sly. Ruzia's parents, however, were against their marriage and quickly, against her will, found her another match, a certain Petro Dzhura from the village of Pykhiv. Dzhura was more than ten years her senior, and she always addressed him distantly to

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\* Tereshchenko, Mikhailo — Ukrainian landowner and capitalist of the early years of this century, trading chiefly in sugar in Russia and on the world market

\*\* *Verst* — Russian unit of distance equal to 0.66 miles

this day. He got the job as operator of the landowner's steam engine which had just been delivered from Odessa, landing grandpa and Andrian in a foolish position, because as it transpired, Andrian had not the slightest bent for machines and got no closer to them than the length of his stoker's shovel; he couldn't tolerate the smell of machines and, as a matter of fact, was even afraid of the steam engine when it burst into frantic motion. Soon afterward the steam engine perished in the fire which was set to Tysewicz's manor, but this did not discourage Ruzia's husband who proved to be an enterprising and dauntless man. He got Ruzia's parents off his back quite neatly — both of them were buried on one and the same day (later on it was rumored that Dzhura had poisoned them), sold their property — oxen, sheep, and an ash grove bordering on a meadow, and before long ordered a tractor all the way from America. To the great astonishment of the Babylonians, he tilled his own land with it and then entered into partnership with the owner of a threshing machine in Koziv; every harvest season, they rushed from village to village threshing grain — one making money to buy a thresher, the other a tractor — so that each could work on his own in the next season.

Ruzia, left by herself with all her sorrow, became more and more estranged from the spouse she didn't love. She began to draw the curtains across the windows even in the daytime, shunned the company of others, and of all her relations, only Andrian visited her while he was still feeling well. Ruzia's house, which was quite spacious and had big windows, stood in a damp depression across the dike not far from our home; and it was hard to believe that while Dzhura drifted from place to place in search of work for his Ford tractor, somewhere in the murk of that house

there lived Ruzia, who had only recently been a Babylonian belle and Klim Sinitsya's first love. The strange thing was that now Klim never mentioned Ruzia, just as Andrian was silent about Malva, although the former's heart must have fluttered like a bird whenever he passed her house — he was still unmarried, while Ruzia's bleak house stood as a reproach to everyone.

That day Klim Sinitsya visited his friend around midnight — the co-op was taking in the harvest in fits and starts and he could not come earlier. He didn't bring Andrian the usual medicine, but only a string of quail he had bagged in the wheat fields they were harvesting that day. Dried clots of blood spotted the wings of the quail. Andrian gave me the string and asked to make him some roast for breakfast. He looked bad that night. He breathed heavily; just then a smothering sultriness was raging, but it was already late to go to Siberia. Fabian had told him the consumption didn't like Siberia and disappeared there within one winter. Klim had smiled wryly at such a belated revelation.

Our half of the house was asleep when I left my uncle's quarters with the game. All of a sudden I saw a black apparition that resembled a woman. I had completely forgotten about Ruzia and thought it was death that had come for my uncle. Klim's horse snorted frightenedly. The apparition disappeared down the fir-lined footpath leading to the dike; luckily for me, the door to our entrance hall was open as always, and I rushed headlong into the sleepy house in which our large family lay sprawled out on the hay, along with some of my father's relatives who had come quite unexpectedly from a distant "kingdom" I did not yet know — a "kingdom" some thirty-five kilometers away from Babylon.

Klim stayed for another hour or so, then finally I heard his wagon clattering toward the dike, beyond which it rolled up Babylon Hill, and from there it should have turned toward his home, to Semivody as always, but this time the clatter of the wagon died away earlier than usual — by the swing or perhaps in the Singers' yard. Yes, exactly... And then the wagon rolled once again toward its usual destination.

In the morning when I brought uncle his roast quail, I saw Malva standing at his bedside. She stood like someone at the bedside of a corpse, wiping away her tears with a corner of her handkerchief, and I had the feeling that the "Scythian Czar," as Malva had once called him for God knows what reason, had stopped loving her the night before. Putting the hot roast on the table, I ran out of the house to inform my folks of Andrian's death and saw Ruzia dressed all in black. She was walking up the fir-lined footpath in dismay like someone bereft of reason. It was difficult to determine how the deranged manage to find out about the death of their dear ones. Ruzia was going to see the man who had once brought Klim Sinitsya to Babylon, and who, later on, was among the few who did not forget to come and open the window to let a little light into her murk. Standing on the porch for a while, Ruzia went timidly into the house, although she knew for sure that Klim would not be there just then: she feared meeting him above everything else, because it would be a meeting of love for which she was already unfit.

In the morning the bell in our little old church tolled for the repose of the departed's soul. The church was visited now and again by a priest from Hlynsk (our own priest Soshka had died during Lent). Sweeping the shavings off the workbench with a habitual gesture, Fabian stuck the folding rule into



his bootleg, carelessly closed the door of his house which was never locked anyway, and set off in the company of his friend along the backstreets of Babylon in the most probable of directions. He never took the measurements of his clients beforehand like his predecessor old Pankrat had; nonetheless, no one's death took him by surprise, because he regarded it as a predestined fact, against which any to-do was absolutely useless.

Previously, the deaths had been announced by Soshka himself, who did not want to have any extra man in his parish's employ and so, from time to time, combined his high priestly duties with those of a sexton. But now these duties had been taken over by Savka Chibis, the Village Soviet clerk, for one reason alone: the Village Soviet was just as concerned with the Babylonians' deaths as with their births. At times Savka rushed events, mostly in regard to the richer residents of Babylon, which put the philosopher turned coffin-maker in a rather awkward position. Maybe this time crazy Savka mixed up everything too, because it had been observed that even the most doddering Babylonians rarely died at harvest time. They simply never dared to kick the bucket on the job. That's the reason why Fabian's home was desolately empty and the period of unemployment so long at this time of year, although the Babylonians would not be surprised in the least if one fine day the death toll should sound for one of them... No, there was no mistake this time. Fabian was crushed by grief for his friend, but his duties summoned him to Chaplicheva Hill where the Valakhs had been living since times of old.

On a street not far from the Valakhs he espied Ruzia. Dressed in black, upset and timid, she walked the same way as he did. In her hand she carried dahlias for Andrian. They were a deep-red color, al-

most black and with dewdrops of sorrow. "Now I've been orphaned completely, Levko," she said.

The female half of Babylon — just as influential as everywhere else — was treated by both the Fabians with a certain amount of bias. The one was past the age when he could have chosen any of the Babylon belles for his wife, while the other interpreted the philosopher's solitude in his own way and harbored a feeling against the womenfolk that bordered on contempt.

The women paid the billy goat back in kind. Some of them openly jeered at him, which put him on guard, while the all too obviously pregnant women crossed themselves and raised their eyes to the sky whenever they met him in the street, at the Village Soviet or anywhere else.

Of all the women, only Malva Kozhushna seemed to be nice to him and even greeted him as if he were the philosopher himself, never failing to ask him: "How's life, Fabian?"

Andrian lay rigid in his bed, severe, stilled, dressed in a white shirt, his long body stretching from end to end.

He was buried without any fuss, quietly, like they bury great men over whom it is not proper to wail. His coffin was borne on the pallbearers' shoulders, and in his wake two boys led his horse with a black ribbon in its mane. For some time father had been looking after the horse, which had perceptibly waned in the care of another master, but nonetheless it still behaved independently as it had in Andrian's days and trotted along gracefully, unaware that from that time on it would pass into female hands.

Dressed in black, Ruzia was smiling all the way, but when Klim Sinitsya greeted her with a nod of

his bared head, she recoiled from him and disappeared into the crowd. Malva burst into tears only at the cemetery when Fabian drove the first nail into his friend's coffin lid. The picture of Malva, into which he had put such a lot of his talent, was not on the lid. At first the "Scythian Czar" wanted to have her picture there, but then he changed his mind. Klim Sinitsya did not stay for supper and left for the co-op in the one-horse wagon. When everyone got tipsy at the funeral repast, Ruzia started to sing the long forgotten song "Oh when the violets were in bloom."

Of all the mourners only the horse wept in sorrow in the stable, refusing to eat the hay that had been put in the rack for it. I, too, could not come to grips with the thought of never ever going to Andrian's half of the house anymore, in which, despite his illness, something incomprehensibly wonderful always took place for me, especially when all his friends visited him in the evening.

The following day all of Andrian's belongings were burned: his bed, underwear, and the white shirts he never wore to threads, because he hated to see his clothes patched. They were burned in the middle of the yard on the ergot which Andrian's children should have been running around in. Apart from Malva, whose idea it was, the burning was attended by Fabian. He was perceptibly embarrassed and grieved to see that Malva hadn't the sense to offer him Andrian's shirts which still looked good enough to spruce up Fabian's wardrobe, while the older shirts could have been left behind as a memento of his friend. Neither would the Valakhs have let anything go to ruin. Well, as for the billy goat, he regarded all this with an even more practical eye — among the belongings of the deceased he did not find anything suitable for himself. Fabian came to save at least the books he had been

bringing for his friend. The inquisitorial woman wanted to burn them as well, afraid they would spread consumption throughout Babylon. And when Fabian, burdened with the books on whose pages the traces of Andrian's fingers had not yet dried (despite his European upbringing, my uncle licked his fingertips every time he had to turn over a page), asked her rather tactfully how she would live now that she was all on her own, Malva glanced sideways at Andrian's embroidered neckband burning up in the flames, and said: "If I were to die of consumption, someone would also burn me like that." The item which smoldered the longest in the flames was Andrian's tarpaulin coat, the one in which he had dug his wells. And deep in my heart I was glad that Malva could not burn them, because wells are the last to be devoured by flames...

To Fabian, Babylon's humanity was frequently reminiscent of a flock of swans, sometimes with a leader, sometimes without, although in fact a flock of swans could not possibly exist without a leader or without a leading pair. Some daredevil always has to stand out from among the rank and file; at times it happens only when the flock has to be forewarned of death lest it perish in an impenetrable fog or crash against the cliffs or veer too far toward the north, the direction in which young birds always strive in their first migration craze. At a critical pass, something similar also takes place here in Babylon, when every particular era brings forth its daredevil or its leading pair. Yet there was something that made Babylon different from a flock of swans, something very essential that must have come to the philosopher's mind when he was at the burning of his friend's possessions that day.

Swans abide by an inviolable, almost fatal monog-

amy, the predestination of an individual as such: should one of the pair die, the other must follow suit. In Babylon, however, an individual was free from this bond: should one of the pair die, the other did not necessarily have to throw himself down upon the sin-ridden earth; he or she still had the hope of choosing a new friend for themselves, or of finding a new love at Babylon's swing, which perhaps might be even greater than the previous one, and if this failed to happen and some pair disappeared completely, its place was taken by another. However, Malva had no hope of finding a mate any time soon because no one wanted to be burned like her Andrian.

At this point, our philosopher smiled involuntarily at the thoughts that had crossed his mind as he created Malva's full-length figure on the elm-board coffin lid. Although he carved her from memory, there was something bewitching in her figure shaped out of an airiness imitating the best of Flemish art, and in the unruly curves of her thighs which the carver had overdone a bit, and in the face, in which he had succeeded in projecting a chastity and humility that were contrary to the truth. Andrian rejected her at the last moment, and now this creation leaned against a wall in Fabian's house. Hen-swans may die along with their partners, but Babylon's widows remain for others. Malva was lost in reverie; the fire flushed her cheeks as she scraped it together with a poker to make it do its work as quickly as possible, as if in this way it could free her from her last matrimonial obligations.

Fabian, with the billy goat trailing behind him, returned home with quite a sizable bundle of books which contained no wisdoms appropriate to the occasion. He was depressed and lonely as never before. A great sadness had seized his heart when he

reached the highest point of Babylon and stopped to rest at the crucifix, where the whole world seemed to be lying at his feet.

Down there below Babylon led its ordinary life; empty wagons rattled, hurrying for another burden of sheaves and returning loaded from the fields, creaking and groaning like some old codgers struggling up a hill; in a number of barns flails were hammering away like mad as if those industrious threshers were bent on working themselves to death; somewhere, probably on Matviy Husak's farm, Panko Kochubei was gelding overmature hogs which squealed till they got hoarse, as if it could help any; wisps of farewell smoke rose above the bonfire of Andrian's belongings and floated toward the crucifix like particles of a soul toward an old comrade; the saddened billy goat stood under the crucifix with head bent low; and on the threshold of the Village Soviet, Savka Chibis was sitting and laughing for no apparent reason... Ruzia wasn't enough for them, Fabian thought, so they had to make a nut out of Savka as well, after which it will be probably my turn.

"What are you laughing at, Savka?" he called out from across the pasture.

Savka glanced at the two oddities under the crucifix, one of whom he had long considered a crank.

"What difference does that make to you? Maybe I'm laughing at Babylon. You're no Village Soviet official to go around knowing everything..." And he went on laughing...

Huddling in the woodshed, I cried when Malva was leaving our farmyard. I cried not because there would never be another woman as good-looking as she among our kin, but probably because the Valakhs would never ever have another such Andrian to win her back from lecherous Babylon, and she would

become the adornment of different kin or some other home. It would have been easier for me if she had died from consumption along with uncle and we had buried them on one and the same day. The old women of Babylon insisted that she hadn't long to live herself, because if the husband died of consumption, the wife would be soon to follow. Before she left, she carried the pillows without their pillowslips to the loft to air, then she gathered her belongings into a bundle (the most valuable things had been taken to her mother's place well in advance), locked the house, crossed herself looking at the door behind which she had not seen much happiness, and went to the stable for the horse. The horse had been in our care for some time now and we considered it pretty much ours. The Valakhs had their snub noses pressed hard against the window panes to see whether she would have the nerve to take away the horse, probably hoping he would balk. But he came obediently out of the stable and trudged behind her on his halter as if Andrian himself were leading him. At the prospect of losing not only a helper much younger than he but also a guide on the road, our blind Chestnut whinnied in his stall and grieved over the loss for a long time thereafter. Undoubtedly, this was the greatest rape of the Valakhs, even greater than the death of Andrian, because our field now lay untilled, whereas Malva had no need for the horse. You should have heard the curses Babylon invented to this effect: "Oh, let him carry her upside down around the whole wide world!" "Better she find herself under his horseshoe nails one fine day!" (the horse had never been shod, though). I wondered where all that malice had come from. Father alone kept his silence; he drew a pail of water out of the well and doused the dying embers lest the draft from the windmills cause a fire. Watching him

do all that, I saw in him the great concern of a man who would not let his deprived charges be destroyed. When the saddened Valakhs gathered for supper, which, as always, featured corn flour gruel flavor with hempseed oil, father took out his clarinet (the only prized possession he had had when he became a farmhand after doing a stint as a serviceman in a special operations units) and played a bright ditty for us. We should have been delighted not to have Malva Kozhushna living behind the wall anymore. But we felt no joy. The toil-worn Valakhs could not but feel that they had rid themselves of some peculiar soul which they had scarcely come to know. Later on we would be reminded of that soul only by the burned-out ergot that refused to heal and by the cobwebs that spread unhindered over the little cottage window.

## *Chapter 2*

Klim Sinitsya was born not too far away in a place that could be easily seen from Babylon Hill on a fine day, especially in autumn when the air was still and clear. It had formerly been the town of Koziv, remarkable not so much for its size as for its crowdedness, its white bell towers, the ruins of an old fortress, and the local fairs which had once raised the town to European prominence. Eventually, these events would be recalled only in the saying "As drawn-out as the Koziv fairs." At these fairs the Sinitsyas traded in red clay, inexhaustible deposits of which were to be found right at the doorstep of their cottage which they painted orange every spring to advertise their wares. When Klim had grown up, his father drew him into this far from easy trade. They worked the clay by hand the same way dough was kneaded, then let it



dry in the shade lest it crack, and took it around to the outlying villages, bartering it for grain, because the Sinitsyas had never had a plot of land to their name. They would have prospered in their business were it not for the rumor about the two rebels from Koziv that was making the rounds of the distant villages where the Sinitsyas sold their clay — father and son were allegedly painting villages and even whole towns red, not without reason. The two hawkers were summoned to the village magistrate without having the slightest inkling what kind of a reputation their merchandise had earned them. They were threatened with confiscation of the clay pit for the benefit of the treasury, and with banishment to Siberia to join the bears there if they did not stop their red agitation campaign. So the Sinitsyas had to look for another way to make a living. But later on, when the first revolutionary committee got interested in them, they did not forswear their merits, for which the father was appointed chairman of the Poor Peasants' Committee right there in Koziv, while his son enlisted in the First Army of Cavalry when it passed through Koziv on its way to Warsaw. Klim Sinitsya's long strong legs, hardened by all the clay he had carried around on his back, were splendid for a horse. The men in the squadron made fun of his legs because they were so much like Budyonny's whom Sinitsya considered to be the world's best horseman after Napoleon's Marshal Murat. Klim could have made a great headway with those commander's legs of his were it not for a nasty White Pole who chopped off a chunk of his left arm right up to the elbow during an engagement at Brody. Nevertheless, Klim managed to get his revenge, running the Pole down and knocking him off his horse. Afterward, try as he might, he could not find the other half of his arm on the battle-

field, a fact he bitterly regretted as it had Ruzia's engagement ring on it. So now he went around with his half-empty sleeve tucked into the pocket of his breeches, and some co-op wit was quick to nickname him the One-and-a-Half-Armed.

Previously, the co-op had been run by Innokentiy Mstislavovich Sosnin, an intellectual and highly educated man who corresponded with some great personalities from the capital. He considered one of them his close friend and even called him none other than Karl Karlovich. When Karl Karlovich was relieved of his high office, this somehow affected Sosnin as well. He left the co-op immediately and repaired to Moscow to help get his friend out of trouble. We don't know how his loyalty paid off, but he never returned to the co-op. His room in the former palace of the Rodzinskis remained vacant for a long time, because the co-op members hoped Sosnin would come back some day. When Klim Sinitsya opened the room upon taking over from Sosnin, he found a gun that had not been cleaned after the last hunting trip and a small library Sosnin had brought from Semivody at the time he organized the co-op which had later been supplemented by volumes from the Rodzinskis' library. The new manager discovered quite a few Polish editions which were to remain unused, for Klim Sinitsya did not know Polish and even held it in hostile disregard because of his mutilation.

The walls of the room he had entered were decorated with inlay. It was on the first floor and had a Venetian window looking out on the orchard and the park lane. There was also a balcony overlooking the courtyard and the village on a hill beyond it where some of the houses reminded Klim of his "revolutionary activity," because in their time the Sinitsyas had visited these parts with their wares. The walls in the

room were covered with maxims, some of which the new lodger found quite agreeable. Sosnin wrote them on the spur of the moment without any system or consistency whatsoever, and stuck them onto the wall in the most conspicuous places to have them always at hand. Over the balcony, across the breadth of the glazed window, was the following inscription: "If you have a home in the city and in the country as well and want to stay in the country, sell your city dwelling quickly, because it might end up the other way around." But of all the maxims, the one that went to Klim Sinitsya's heart was this: "The land must be weaker than the farmer, because if in this contest it gets the upper hand but once, the farmer will perish \*."

Among the countless maxims Klim did not find a single one he could use for the benefit of the co-op. At first he went to the books of his genteel predecessor in an attempt to find some appropriate slogans in them, but reading those great Utopian cranks proved of little use for all the miseries of the co-op which many a time, even in Sosnin's days, had been on the verge of bankruptcy and was not far from it now. Quite a few people had joined the co-op by mere chance, and after failing to make a comfortable living or any glory from it, they had left to strike it rich on their own private plots of land which anyone could have for the taking, without worrying too much about how this would affect the common weal. The co-op's wheat fields stood unthreshed and the mice were greedily gnawing at the sheaves. The sugar beets

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\* The maxim is from the Carthaginian philosopher Mago whose treatises on agriculture were very popular in ancient times — V. Z.

were still in the ground and were wilting away, and there was not the slightest hope of saving them, while a plague had descended upon the large sheep farm which Sosnin had had set up. From there the plague spread to the privately owned flocks and brought them down, thereby swelling the number of the co-op's enemies, of which there were many as it was. Back in his day, Sosnin joked that sheep had once devoured people in England, and here they were threatening the co-op. Klim, however, was in no laughing mood; he quickly had the sheep slaughtered, that is those that were still alive when he took over, then he had several vats of tallow melted, and the meat went to the co-op kitchen. He sought advice from Fourier himself on this matter, but on failing to get any, he blamed Sosnin for his fascination with the sheep, by which means he had intended to bring fame to the co-op.

Under just such unfavorable circumstances, Malva Kozhushna popped up in the co-op. One evening she tied her horse, with its little pillow for a saddle, to the front porch of the co-op office and went up the steps, holding a switch in her hands. She wore the red boots Andrian had bought her with the profits from one of his last wells, and a black shawl of gauze under which she was purity itself; her face was flushed from the ride, and a millet ear had stuck to the green gown she wore which fit smoothly to those ideal curves that had so conclusively captured the imagination of the philosopher when he re-created them for his friend's elm coffin lid.

Klim was reading the last of Fourier, sitting in his shirtsleeves turned gray from constant washing in the co-op's laundry. He was so thrown off balance that instead of being pleased to see a late guest — at home and offering her a seat in the deep leather armchair

in which Sosnin liked to have his tea, he himself plumped into the armchair out of sheer embarrassment. They said that Sosnin used to invite the female hands who joined the co-op for seasonal work to tea. But ever since Klim had moved in, not a single woman, God forbid, had crossed the threshold of his ascetic room except the old woman Sipovichka who came to clean up once a week. His solitude made the girls snicker and the old matrons suspect things, but he could not imagine a co-op leader's being otherwise and took pride in his singleminded love for the estranged Ruzia, secretly hoping that some day she would regain her sanity and leave that abominable Petro Dzhura to join Klim in the co-op. Then all of a sudden there was Malva with a millet ear sticking to her gown and the red switch she used on her horse. Their conversation, had it been taken down word for word, would probably have sounded like this:

"Why did you come so late? All decent people are in bed by now, but you are still traipsing about like some madcap. Out looking for some new adventure, aren't you? If so, this is the last place to..."

"First of all, I didn't traipse, I rode on my horse... Once as a girl when I was out grazing my father's horses with the boys, I used to tear around like mad, but Andrian's horse is just as meek as Andrian was. You don't believe me, do you? He must have learned it from his master. Is it all right that I tied him to the front porch? Who knows, he might leave a pile of manure there, and then you'll catch it from the co-op—not so much because of me as because of my horse... Ha-ha-ha!..."

"There're tired people sleeping nearby, so don't laugh so loud. You look fine in your fancy gauze shawl, like innocence itself, but I know quite well what a card you really are, and tomorrow the whole

co-op will be gossiping about your visit to the staunchest man in this place. So make it snappy and tell me what you want, then get on your horse and get out of here. And don't you go running your eyes across the walls, 'cause you won't understand nothing of it anyway, except perhaps the maxim about the land and the farmer..."

"A real man must have lived here once. I like his style. My Andrian demanded only vows from me without leaving a single inscription or letter behind, but that night when I came to him and he was still alive, he told me that I would be happy only with one man, with the friend who'd been true to him to his grave. Well, that's why I came or rather rode over here. And you know, the ditch down there is full of dead Denikin troops, and there's even a general buried with them..."

"So that what it's all about! For the likes of you Sosnin would have probably rumbled up the creases on his pants which, if the co-op members were to be believed, he ironed every other day. I wouldn't blame him for that. But as far as I'm concerned, I'm made of different stuff. I was kneaded of red clay, and the stories about it are still around. So make yourself scarce. I'm sending you off for the sake of the co-op, for the sake of Fourier and Saint-Simon; let me finish the fight for the lofty truths of love and revolution. Now as for what your Andrian said in his agony, don't let that go to your head, because I can still see him standing before my eyes, lonesome and pure as his wells."

"On my way here I imagined music coming out of the halls of this palace, lighted candles in chandeliers and women in silken dress. But life here is just as drab and joyless as everywhere else. There's not a bit of difference..."

"The grain's rotting in the sheaves, sheep are dying, the *kurkuls* \* have given them the plague..."

"You go around in such a lousy shirt it makes me want to pull it off your back and wash it down by the river... That night when you came to see us for the first time with whip in hand, I thought you'd come to give me a good beating. I'd heard so much about you from Andrian I imagined you to be God knows what kind of a hero. When I was still a girl, I heard a lot about your love for Ruzia, but judging from what I see now you're just a dowdy, careworn, ordinary man, no more than a crank moulded out of clay. Ha-ha-ha!" Malva gave a great laugh. Free and sensuous woman that she was, she was kindled by her ride through the stubble steppe on her way to the Roman grandeur of this place where she had hoped to find a different life.

"No one likes us, there're all sorts of rumors about us being besieged by the enemy. We live modestly and quietly, we don't keep a brass band, we don't hold banquets or wax our floors, and even the co-op's gates are not open to everyone. I was shot at twice from the Denikin ditch at night on my way from Hlynsk. But one day we'll break out of the siege and then we'll start a new life. Right now we've already got more than there ever was at the Rodzinskis' manor. There's a British steam engine, a Belgian thresher, cows straight from Holland, a cheese dairy of our own, a poet of our own, and this spring the swans even came back, even though they'd gone for a few years and there'd been some dirty talk that they wouldn't ever get near the co-op."

He led her to the window and showed her the park lake where the swans stood out dimly in their sleep.

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\* Ukrainian equivalent of *kulak*

“Why is it you smell of sheep tallow?”

“I’ve been skinning sheep for days and melting tallow, because the co-op’s short of hands. That’s why I have to set aside my leadership and get down to work like everybody else. I thresh, stack sheaves, walk behind the plow, and what I haven’t yet done is set myself a quota for harvesting beet, because this job calls for more than just five fingers, you’ve got to have seven at least.”

“All my life I’ve dreamed of living in such a palace. It seemed so beautiful and mysterious to me when I was a child. Maybe I should join the co-op. Andrian regretted he had not joined it...”

“I know, he told me. But it’s too late now... Malva, we need brave, selfless, unselfish people. It’s an association of volunteers just like the Zaporozhian Sich of the Cossacks was. We don’t really want to accept single women, let alone women like you. It’d be too much of an honor for someone as flighty as you. So you’d better stay put in Babylon; we’ll all be better off that way.”

“Excuse me for coming so late. I didn’t want a lot of people seeing me around. Will you ride with me? I’m afraid of those Denikin dead. When I was going past that ditch, I got a creepy feeling that they were rising out of it one after another. You’ve got a horse and saddle I guess...”

The fragrance of the harvest fields, the slumbering thistles growing over the Denikin dead, the horses pricking up their ears and sniffing each other by way of acquaintance, the black shawl fluttering in the breeze — who knows what all that might lead to?

The co-op’s poet, the conscience and glory of the co-op, lived right over Sinitsya’s room in the attic of the palace. Klim took a fisherman’s oar that stood



lonely in a corner, went to the middle of the room, and knocked the oar against the ceiling.

In the daytime Volodya Yavorsky made cheese, and at night he wrote poetry. Sosnin was fascinated by his verses. The new co-op leader, however, had been deprived by God of the gift of appreciating them, although he could not imagine the co-op not so much without the poet as without the cheese-maker, since, by Klim's reasoning, the poet did not so much bring glory to the co-op with his verses, which were occasionally published in the local newspaper, as with his red wheels of cheese, because the co-op was the only one to trade in cheese along the entire course of the Southern Bug River. Some minutes after the oar had been stood in the corner, an alarming shuffle of feet was heard on the stairs and Volodya himself appeared in the doorway. He looked no more than a boy, dressed in a red worn-out shirt and tight trimmed breeches which looked like hussar's pants, fitting closely to the poet's legs. He wore red women's boots which he had designed to look like a man's. To this end, Volodya had shortened the high heels and boot-legs, which still betrayed their original nature. In them he looked like a Spanish grandee from the Middle Ages. He also had an unruly shock of hair. His eyes gleamed with severity and independence of spirit, while his nose bespoke an aggressive psyche. It had perceptibly been made crooked in the struggle for freedom, yet in such a way that it did not spoil the portrait but harmoniously blended with it, indicating that the future of this young co-op member would not be that easy. His bearing had a boyish modesty to it, which could probably have been explained by his shyness in the presence of the woman. But when Malva, on seeing a live poet for the first time, suppressed a snicker with the palm of her hand, he

took on an extremely haughty pose and said to the co-op chief with an independent air:

"If you needed me, you could have gone up to my room. Comrade Sosnin did that quite often, Klim Ivanovich..."

Klim Sinitsya apologized to him, because he really did not want to offend him in any way.

"Remember I told you once about a friend of mine who dug wells?" he said. "That's his widow, Malva Kozhushna. She came from Babylon toward night. I have to be in Hlynsk in the morning, so could you saddle a horse and go with her at least to the wind-mills or, better yet, all the way to Babylon?"

"I'm afraid of the Denikin men," Malva confessed sincerely.

"What Denikin men?" asked the poet expecting to be subjected to yet another humiliation.

"The dead ones," Klim Sinitsya said smiling at Malva. "In the ditch."

Volodya regretted that the Denikin men were dead, because he would like to have shown this beautiful woman what a poet was worth in battle. When Sosnin was leaving the co-op, he gave Volodya a saber and scabbard to look after, so the poet was hoping he could use it at last.

Back in the attic he fastened the saber to his belt, pulled on his old Budyonovka cap, and although the night was unusually warm, put on a knee-length leather coat which he had got from Sosnin as well, and went to the stable to saddle the horse. Peering into the night, he was ranging for a battle to test himself as a soldier. But by the time he woke up the watchman at the stable and led the horse, which was kept in a separate stall, out and took up the stirrups to fit his legs, because he was shorter than Klim, his militant spirit had waned.

Sosnin's horse, which he had paid dearly for, danced spiritedly under the balcony. The horseman, equipped for a saber charge, called out too loudly:

"Hey, where have you disappeared to? Come on out!"

Klim Sinitsya appeared on the balcony and saw the rider near the porch. The horse had come to life under Volodya, prancing restively, and Klim regretted having sent the boy to accompany Malva instead of going himself.

Malva came out of the house, picked up the pillow her horse had thrown off its back, and fixed the pillow for a saddle. Already mounted, she remembered she had forgotten the switch and raised her head to the balcony.

"My switch must be somewhere around there," she said. But Klim did not go look for it.

They rode alongside one another. First the horses got used to each other, snorting and anxiously pricking up their ears to the sounds of the night. Then a conversation started between the riders who had nothing in common save perhaps for the darkness and the smell of the stubble around them.

She was touched that he, Volodya the great poet, as Klim had called him, had not refused to be her companion. They rode so closely that Volodya's horse had to snap at Malva's to neutralize the atmosphere that was springing up between the riders.

Beyond the co-op fields was the Denikin ditch which had once served as trenches. The horses trudged on more warily, rolling their eyes in fright at every rustling sound in the scrub, and in vain did the poet reach for the saber hilt, in vain did he look intently into the darkness — there was not a single lousy Denikin trooper around, although the sense of fear did not leave either of them. At one place, the horses

shied from the ditch and then, of their own accord, carried the riders away in a trot. They passed the Abyssinian hills where the black whirlwinds originated and scuffled with the ground on their onward course, then they left Bubela's farmstead behind and stopped at the windmills. Malva took the hand of her companion which was gripping his reins. She said she would never forget his chivalry, and that on her next visit to the co-op, she would come upstairs to see him. She wanted to see where he lived since she had never been higher than first floor, and, besides, that had been in the house of her former landowners. Volodya promised to take her up to the very spire of the house — on a gazebo from which the whole universe could be seen in daytime. She regretted not being able to come in daytime, because she was afraid of gossip, but at night it would be even more interesting in that gazebo. To which the poet could not say anything, because he had never been there at night, being quite content with his attic.

Volodya rode his horse back home at a jogtrot, as if he were afraid to dispel the peculiar feeling he had had upon parting with this wonderful woman. He had an urge to laugh at how that feeling had appeared so unexpectedly. It saddened him to realize that it was as shifty and flighty as dandelion seeds — a slight puff of wind and the seeds scatter into oblivion. He wanted very much for them to strike root in him at least a little bit so he could carry that feeling to his attic and keep it with him for a while. But there was the ditch again, and again there was not a single Denikin trooper or a single living soul he could challenge to combat, because that feeling was screaming to be bolstered by some little feat at least. Presently his horse stopped, dug its forelegs into the road and pricked up its ears, while the horseman

involuntarily drew out his saber on which a distant star flashed for a fleeting moment.

"Who goes there?" he called into the black scrub, his saber raised high over his head.

"Denikin men," a voice replied through a snigger — quite an unsavory trick for such a serious occasion.

"What do you mean Denikin men? There aren't any anymore. Who are you for?"

"For Czar and country... And you?"

"Now come out and reveal yourself!"

"How could we possibly do that? We're ghosts. And who are you? Just another ghost or a co-op man?"

When one of the spirits stuck his head out of the ditch to have a look at the person with whom he was dealing, the horse reared and its rider almost bit the dust — for the first time he believed in the existence of powers against which his saber was worthless, and he scrambled from the battlefield at such a breakneck speed that his horse galloped past the co-op gates and stopped way down by the wade-in at the pond where the peasants soaked their dried wagon wheels and the co-op herd was watered on its way back from the pasture. Only when his feet were soaking wet did he realize that he had no use for the saber which he barely managed to sheathe. The horse also cooled down and grew calm. The hero whistled softly to it the way you whistle to a horse to make it drink.

His feelings for the Babylon widow had scattered before the wind like dandelion fluff; only a tiny sliver remained stuck in his heart — a hitherto unknown suspicion the widow had aroused in him and which he himself had just now corroborated by discovering that ghosts really did come to life in the ditch and could even be seen. He wondered whether he should tell Klim about it or keep his peace, the more so since Klim did not believe in the existence of

ghosts, whereas Sosnin had said that all the great poets did and wrote their most outstanding works about them. The white swans skimmed across the water on the lake like wraiths, pure and majestic; for their sake, perhaps, Volodya stayed in his attic room and kept to the stuffy cheese dairy so that no one would know that he was writing poetry on their wings, that these birds had made him a poet.

By then Klim was already beating the rail to wake up the co-op for work. He was chiding himself for being so thoughtless as to have made the cheese-maker accompany Malva. Remembering that he was running out of varnish to coat the wheels of cheese with, he took out a notebook and wrote in it: "Apply to the Dutch communists for red varnish." Presently the cheese-maker dismounted. As he led his horse by the bridle, his soaked "moccasins" gave off a chumping sound and his long saber trailed along the ground. Klim Sinitsya smiled. "Where've you been so long, boy?" he asked. The poet replied all full seriousness: "Shh... don't shout... I went with that woman up to the windmills. Then I went back all by myself along the ditch, my hand on my saber hilt, when all of a sudden the Denikin men popped out of the ground. Of course, they weren't Denikin men at all, just plain counter-revolutionaries who wanted to waylay me, but I didn't give them the chance to get their claws into me..." What followed was a brilliantly recounted skirmish during which the cheese-maker hacked left and right as if he were Oleko Dundić \* himself. Volodya forgot who he was talking to and carried his fantasies too far. Klim made him draw the saber, blew at it lengthwise, and said: "This saber has never been used, and I would advise you to hand it over to our museum."

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\* Oleko Dundić (1893—1920) — a hero of the Civil War

Since the museum existed only in Klim's imagination, the saber was given back to the cheese-maker who sheathed it and dejectedly led his horse to the stable. By now he had lost the last trace of the night's peculiar feeling, which he had wanted so much to preserve.

The co-op yard was turning into a bedlam of mooing cows as their calves were taken away from them for the whole day until they returned from the pasture, of horses whinnying and, after having had their fill of oats, picking fights at the watering place, and of people shouting, because every morning it seemed that the co-op would go to pieces any moment and not survive the day, although the day before everything had seemingly been put right. The poet was intimately familiar with the reasons for the clamor in the co-op yard every morning and made his way to the cheese dairy without the slightest fuss, proudly and beautifully as never before as if he were conscious of his great achievements. Today he would make unsurpassable cheeses, and tomorrow he would take the ripened wheels from the early spring batch to Hlynsk.

Around midday, when the new batch of cheese had been cooked, moulded into shape, and stacked in the basement of the cheese dairy, and Volodya Yavorsky's team left the sultriness and stench of the dairy to rest in the shade on the grass, Klim Sinitsya paid a call. He liked the smell of the dairy, although it was not overly pleasant, but in this case he abided by the principle of one Roman Emperor who held that *pecunia non olet* \*. The cheese dairy, initially set up by Sosnin to meet the needs of the co-op alone, gradually became its greatest source of income; apart from

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\* Money has no smell (Lat.)

Dutch cheese, it also put out sheep cheese (when the sheep had not yet been hit by the plague). To make up for the co-op's expenses, the products of the cheese dairy were taken to the fair in Hlynsk. Here the varnished cheeses were looked upon as a wonder, something which brought the co-op far greater fame than the verses of the young cheese-maker. The more Hlynsk's NEP \* profiteers tried to find out the secrets of the cheese dairy, the more zealously the co-op guarded them, lest it lose its monopoly status in such a rare business. Outsiders were strictly forbidden from entering the dairy, the only exception being made for the co-op leader, who was accompanied by the cheese-maker at that. Sosnin had liked to come here when the wizardry of cheese-making was in progress, while Sinitsya was more interested in the end product — ripe cheese shedding the first "tears." This time as well Sinitsya counted the red wheels that had ripened on the racks, signed the document empowering the cheese-maker to sell the product, and then tasted a little piece from a wheel specially cut for this purpose. Sosnin contrived to eat up a whole wheel in a number of tastings, but Klim Sinitsya tried only a little piece, praising the cheese-maker every time. This day, however, he didn't say a word, although the cheese simply melted in his mouth, for it had been made of the first spring milk. On leaving, he casually mentioned Malva:

"Where'd she get that habit of tying the horse to

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\* NEP — abbr. for New Economic Policy introduced by the Soviet state in the 1920s for the period of transition from capitalism to socialism. It was meant to strengthen the economic alliance between the working class and the peasantry, provide them with a material stake in the development of the economy, and give certain leeway to capitalism while retaining control of the economy for the proletarian state



the front porch? Why was the horse standing hungry the whole night and gnawing at the porch? Besides, the co-op members might get the idea that she was visiting me. You'd better tell her to forget her way here."

With that he left for the threshing machine at the co-op's farthest survey mark. There the steam engine shrieked madly all day till night, calling for more sheaves, while Sinitsya's reminder lingered in the ears of the poet.

That evening the poet was in a strange melancholy mood he had never felt before. Late into the night, the white birds did not calm down on the lake, skidding to and fro like apparitions. He had noticed before that these sensitive creatures seemed to be able to identify with his mood. He regretted having accompanied Malva only as far as the windmills the night before and not up to her house as a gentleman would have done, because if he'd wanted to go and see her right now he wouldn't have known where to look for her in Babylon. Also, he found out that Sinitsya had forbidden the watchman to give him the mount, because he would, so to speak, have ruined the horse and himself to boot. Such a precaution on Sinitsya's part seemed simply stupefying to the cheese-maker, because he would have gone to Babylon a long time ago had it not been for the lack of a horse.

He had not yet finished writing the first verse dedicated to her when she came galloping up again on her light-bay. She tied the horse to the porch and, on seeing the room of the co-op leader dark, went up the stairs to the attic with a kind and easy feeling. True, she stopped involuntarily at Sinitsya's door, caught her breath, and moved quietly on, afraid lest she wake the sleeping co-op chairman. But the caution proved needless. Sinitsya was by the thresher, and since there

was only one operator in the co-op to replace him, he would hardly be back soon. In the attic she felt herself free, unrestrained, and laughed resonantly as the poet recounted his skirmish with the "Denikin men" of the night before.

Some antics of the Babylon boys and nothing else, Malva thought to herself. It must have been the So-kolyuk brothers. They had a field on the Abyssinian hills where she, incidentally, also had a plot of one *dessiatine*. Sometimes they spent the night there during harvest time, so when they saw Malva going that way, they must have waited in ambush either to scare her away from the co-op or simply to have some fun. But swinging a saber for her sake was a bit too much, although Malva was flattered to know that such a great poet had fought with the "ghosts" because of her. She remarked in jest that one of them must have had black hair and a beard and the other fair hair and spectacles. But in the heat of the battle the poet simply could not make out their features: after all, they were ghosts and featureless...

The watchman stood his ground and, in the end, did not give him the horse, so Malva had to return home by herself. This time the ghosts made their presence known on the Abyssinian hills as she rode past them. "Hey, Malva, stop!" But Malva pressed close to the light-bay's mane and urged him on as fast as he could carry her. Danko had tethered his horses with a steel chain for the night (a precaution of all great horse thieves), and now he could do nothing else but burst into laughter as he stood there on the slope. The laughter, though, was not at all kind. Not long ago, Malva would not have bypassed the Abyssinian hills. But now she was given to frequenting the palace, which could be seen from everywhere in the daytime, but was barely visible after sunset. That night, a

malice of hitherto unknown proportions with regard to the co-op was provoked on the Abyssinian hills; it was roused in Danko's heart, and that meant trouble for the white palace.

### *Chapter 3*

The last time Babylon burned to the ground was twenty years ago, just around harvest time when these generally blessed parts were occasionally invaded by the Taurian droughts from the south. The droughts caused headaches, the windmills on the hills stopped turning, and on the dirt roads there rose phantom dust castles peopled perhaps with the extinct Taurians who had founded Babylon. In those seemingly motionless vaults shaped out of some miraculous substance, tall black whirlwinds would eddy and, tearing loose from the earth, they would fall down beyond the violet horizon. Babylon burst into flames precisely at such a time on midday, when the peasants working on the steppe were about to celebrate the reaping of the first sheaf at the outset of a cheerless harvest season on the landowner's field.

The fire broke out in the home of the Sokolyuks and instantly spread to the neighbors, from where it proceeded to gobble up the thatched abodes of the poorer peasants. The fire did not even spare the tin roofs in its path, which it wrapped into white scrolls, light as feathers, and sent in flames up to the sky. The reapers rushed to the conflagration with scythes as if the calamity had been caused by none other than the Turks or the Tatars who frequently destroyed Babylon in times of old. But now and then we are unfair toward our old foes. The real incendiaries were apprehended in the clay pit, a place safe and secure in

its own right under such circumstances; they were tied up properly and, along with their father Mikola Sokolyuk, were marched off to the district police officer in Hlynsk.

One of the incendiaries, Danko, was ten years old at that time, and the other, Lukian, was about the same age (the difference being some ten-odd months). At the interrogation, the burning of Babylon was easily reconstructed with the aid of switches. It was revealed that the real culprit in the tragedy was the neighbor's cat. It had gotten into the habit of visiting the Sokolyuks' weed patch and eating the hens' eggs there through the whole of God's summer until those urchins had gone and tied a kerosene-soaked wick to its tail. The scorched cat chose the closest loft for its unprecedented revenge.

Now the incendiaries were thirty years old with the same difference in age, but they would hardly dare burn Babylon the second time, although once in a while they did get such an urge, especially Danko.

It was harvest time again, but they couldn't get to their crop which, just like their neighbor Yavtukh Holiy's, was scattered about in different places. One patch was near the village of Chuprinka, the other near Koziv, and the third, the largest of them — which Goodness knows why — was way over at Abyssinia, the name of a score of reddish hills which before the land distribution must have belonged to the Lord God Himself. Their mother had cursed the German surveyor Kenda like mad and her compatriots from the *volost* committee to boot for having parceled out such a patch for her family, but thanks to the efforts of her elder son, Danko, the Abyssinian hills gave a surplus return in seeds. Now the barley was falling from the drooping stalks which resembled Yavtukh's mustache and it was time to mow the crop, but their

mother was on her deathbed and the younger son, Lukian, was afraid to be left alone without Danko. Besides, their mother had willed that both of them be at her bedside when she died. Although the sons had a premonition that she had saved up something for them, they could not make her speak out ahead of time. Her tenaciousness irritated them, especially Danko who could not stay at her bedside all the time and feared that his younger brother would be the first to take advantage of her revelation.

So as not to lose any time yet be at hand, Danko threshed the barley which they had brought in from Chuprinka at night. His rumbling flail woke everybody up at dawn and had a lulling effect toward the evening. The flail did not stop beating even at midday when every living creature hid from the sweltering heat, save perhaps Fabian the billy goat who, in the sweat of his brow, trudged over to Yavtukh Holiy's place for his lunch. Time and again Danko sprinkled the threshing floor to make it less dusty and moistened the sheaves, then again it was back to work with the hard restless flail, inside which some tortured, overworked creature seemed to be groaning. "Our Danko's gone completely out of his mind," said their mother who wanted quiet above everything now.

The younger brother held his tongue, knowing only too well the reason for Danko's perseverance. Some people made a living by keeping bees, others by working the bellows in a smithy, while others had the winds turn their windmills, but in this household the flail seemed to be the only instrument of livelihood. At one time Lukian had taken to breeding pigeons but soon realized he could just as well breed sparrows — today they seemed to be yours, but tomorrow they took wing and chose another master for themselves. No wonder Fabian made fun of him in this connection,

probably having also his billy goat in mind: everything that was capable of moving, he said, could not belong to anyone in particular. Lukian, however, did not drop this enterprise altogether, keeping a large flock and a couple of rare pigeons to breed just for his pleasure. He did all the other chores around the household: milking the cow; looking after the hens, which still had the habit of laying eggs in Yavtukh's weed patch; herding the ducks, which were reluctant to leave the pond every evening; retting and beating flax; tending the Turkish tobacco for Danko; looking after the melon garden, which was an irresistible temptation for Yavtukh's kids, as well as the vegetable garden; planting seedlings, making sauerkraut for winter — all this had also become his responsibility ever since his mother had been laid up in bed.

The field work was done all by Danko, and he busied himself with it from snowfall to snowfall, convinced that this would put them more firmly on their feet. Such work saps man's energy, especially around autumn, so the younger brother had yet another responsibility: to bring hot lunches for Danko. Lukian went about this chore with a great deal of concern lest the lunches cool on his way to the field. Danko always wondered how he managed to keep the food hot and after every such treat, he respected him the more. The secret behind it was simply in the towels Lukian wrapped the pots in when he carried them to what seemed like the end of the world — to Chuprinka, which had bred only poverty from time out of mind. "Where are you from, old fellow?" "Chuprinka." A Babylon beggar would rather have had his tongue torn out than confess where he hailed from.

Lukian did not leave his mother's bedside. He sat on a little stool and embroidered a shirt with a red

cross-stitch pattern. The shirt had been made the day before by a Hlynsk tailor who serviced the more or less well-to-do residents of Babylon and those who went all lengths to attain that status, because the greatest shame for any Babylonian was to appear in public in a raggy shirt. This is not to say that pants were neglected altogether, but the shirt remained a sort of a status symbol for the local bigshots and will probably remain so for all time: Now let me see, what kind of a shirt are you wearing today?

Lukian had a great gift for embroidery. Half of Babylon was wearing shirts he had embroidered, and even their neighbor Yavtukh had one which Lukian embellished with a great deal of inspiration before their feud. At that time Prisia had not yet showered Yavtukh with baby boys, so Yavtukh had worn that shirt ever since.

A fatal cross-stitch was to mark the moment when Lukian and Danko became orphans... The red ball of thread on the floor tumbled over more and more unevenly as it grew smaller, and when Lukian took off his spectacles to wipe them, it had some respite like a living creature. To help his nearsightedness, Lukian had recently got himself a pair of spectacles on the advice of Fabian, who proved by personal example the great advantage of what he considered to be the most humane invention of man. But his mother could not get used to them.

“I wonder how that ever got stuck on you?”

“What do you mean, mother?” asked Lukian, raising his spectacles at her.

“That blindness of yours.”

“Makes no difference to me. I’m used to it.”

“It’s probably ’cause your umbilical cord was cut near a book. Someone shoved a prayer book into the

midwife's hands by mistake. It had an incredibly tiny print."

"You mean the book Danko's used up for rolling his cigarettes?"

"Yes, that villain has smoked up such a memory."

Danko, as Lukian had just learned, had his umbilical cord cut near a spoon, which explained his insatiable love for food and, consequently, for work. You never knew how you'd pop out into this world.

"And where could his horse-thieving have come from?" Lukian wondered.

"The Sokolyuks have nothing to do with that. That's my fault. It was once a malaise with my kinfolk. My grandpa was killed by the *chumak* wagoners, because he stole their oxen along the *chumak* trek..."

"Oxen?" Lukian was surprised and at the same time glad for his brother, because from now on he would not be as lonesome in his freakish habit as he had been before.

"Grandpa had hunted all over for dark-brown oxen. He was simply cracked on that particular color. Now I wonder what Danko's cracked on?"

"Color means nothing to him. It's something else."

"What else then? Money?... I haven't seen any."

"It's the feeling of adventure, mother. Haven't you ever noticed what Danko looks like when a stolen horse neighs in the stall? Then he's kind as kind can be."

Strangely enough, the horses of Babylon could live in peace, because by some unwritten horse-thieves' laws, they did not stir any wicked passions in Danko's heart. His victims, however, were picked from far-off villages. At that time, he was raving about a horse he had seen at the last fair in Hlynsk. He already had all the particulars a horse thief might need: the horse was in Oveche, a small, rich village, and his



master's name was Larion Batyuh, who lived in a house with a wooden cockerel on it.

"Call that madman," mother said without a trace of anger in her voice, while she thought to herself: At some horse fair they will whip him to death, and you, Lukian, will have to take his dead body back home... What a shame!

The ball of thread stopped turning over under the bench where the cat was intently watching for the point when it would stop completely so it could get its claws into the needlework. Lukian rushed out onto the porch.

"What's up, brother?" asked the black-bearded Danko from behind the sheaves he had stacked tightly around the threshing floor lest a single grain fall into the ergot around it.

"Come quickly, Danko!"

"What do you think, it's all that easy to die? I'll finish threshing this sheaf first and then I'll come."

"Your umbilical cord really was cut near a spoon!" Lukian blurted out in response to his brother's impassivity.

"Near what?"

"Near that jagged spoon you've been eating with to this day."

"And what about yours?" Danko was curious to know.

"Mine? Near a prayer book, if you're that interested."

"Well, that explains why you're such a holy little squirt!" Danko laughed. Getting out from behind the sheaves, he stopped Lukian at the porch.

"Is that all she wanted to say?"

"Why, aren't you interested to know why you are what you are?"

"What I am, eh? Well, well, I'd love to hear that...,"

he said and gave the "holy squirt" a good clip on the back of his head. A spirited fight ensued on the porch, ending, as usual, in peace. But death would not wait, and when they entered the house with filial humility and grief, they had no mother anymore. On the floor, the cat was absorbed in some ill-timed play with the ball of thread, rolling it over with its paws as if it were a burning cinder.

Mothers do not like their children to see them die. The brothers were very ashamed for the fight they had picked on the porch. The boys had always loved to get into a scuffle for no reason at all, but their mother's rolling pin would restore peace in a jiffy. Now, though, it would just hang on its string near the dish rack even if they were pommelling each other to death. Every home must have its peacemaker. For that reason alone she should have lived.

No sooner did they light the candles under the icons than their father's spirit came flying to her deathbed and closed her eyes with a white *rushnik*, an embroidered towel, because they didn't have the sense to do it themselves. Their father had been strangled in the clay pits for the landowner's hoard, which had fallen into his hands when the manor was despoiled. He was strangled with a halter. Some insisted that he had given the hoard to his murderers, and even called each of them by name; they were supposed to have become rich instantly. Still others looked for the hoard in the clay pits on St. John's Eve to this day, to which the mother would say to her sons: "Let 'em." Their father had been buried in the boys' absence, because they were both soldiering on the Austrian front at the time; so now they put a candle in front of his patron saint, St. Nicholas the Thaumaturge, too. When they lit the candle, Danko stood in front of it rooted to the ground.

“They killed Mikola Šokolyuk for nothing. There wasn’t any hoard...”

“No, Danko, it wasn’t for nothing... There is a hoard. But it’s bewitched so no one can get it. It’s been bewitched ever since they killed father.”

“Lukian, my dear little brother, why have you kept your mouth shut about it?” Danko went after him.

“I swore I wouldn’t touch it... I swore that to her,” he said, pointing to the deceased.

“What?” Danko grabbed him by the shirtfront.

Lukian felt a numbness in his heels as if he were standing on an anthill.

“Let go of me... I see murder in your eyes...”

“I’m popping out of my skin to make buckle and tongue meet — can you see that too?”

Something dropped down the chimney with a bang. It must have been the house hobgoblin reminding them of his presence. In the winter, he warms himself by sitting on a crossbeam with his bare hairy feet dangling down the chimney. A hobgoblin has to be barefooted to move soundlessly about his domain. Today, chimneys are no longer built in entrance halls but in living rooms, and hobgoblins, those kind spirits, settle there reluctantly. That is why happiness dwells less in the new houses than in the old ones. Danko let go of his brother’s shirt and took on an amiable demeanor.

“I knew mother had something saved up for us... But how cruel of her, may God forgive me for saying so, to keep mum so many years!... Hurrah!!!” He shook his fists in the air like a madman.

“Danko, gold is vindictive, especially in our beggarly Babylon. Swear right here in front of our dead mother that you won’t lose your head when the gold hits your eye.”

“I swear by the cross that I’ll be meek and accept

your authority over me from now on and forever, because you've already got something I haven't."

"Sure, Danko, now I alone carry the secret within me. But... wait a minute, I'm wrong. There was Fabian eavesdropping in the entrance hall. He hid there, the bastard, and listened."

"You mean Fabian the man?" Danko asked, horrified.

"No, the billy goat. I chased him away with a broom."

"So there's a third one in on it, that's bad..."

"But, Danko, it's only a billy goat!"

"Makes no difference. A lot of things happen in this world, you know. What if it's not a billy goat but Fabian himself turned into a billy goat? What then?"

"Come on, what are you blabbering about, Danko? The last sorcerer alive was the great Mamai \*."

"Don't you go around believing in everything you hear... So, where is it?"

"Under the *spasivka* \*\* pear tree."

No sooner had they come out of the house than they met with trouble.

On the sacred place under the pear tree — which could be seen all the way from Hlynsk when it burst into bloom and stood in a halo of white for a week or two — was the billy goat lying on the ground and chewing his cud like all ruminants do after lunch. The brothers stopped dead in their tracks at the sight. That was too much of a coincidence even as far as Fabian was concerned. They had the urge to ask him: "Isn't that you, philosopher?" But he would never have told them the truth anyway.

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\* Cossack Mamai — legendary hero of numerous Ukrainian folk lays

\*\* Pears that ripen during Lent (*Spas*) of the Assumption (in August)

The billy goat's eyes did not betray the slightest trace of intelligence. Apparently he had just had his lunch at the home of Yavtukh, who had gone to reap with Prisia, taking along all his kids for gleanings, while this critter had come to lie in the shade of this particular pear tree, although there was another one just like it in Yavtukh's yard. Why hadn't he stayed there instead of coming here and pretending to be a know-nothing fool lying on the gold? The reaction that followed was immediate, as should have been expected under such a concatenation of events: Danko left to get the flail. The scoundrel under the pear tree did not have the slightest inkling of what would have happened had not his master appeared just then with a folding rule tucked in his bootleg. Fabian was never summoned: he just seemed to know when to appear on the scene. Incidentally, so did the billy goat.

"Did she die?"

"Yes, she did," said Danko and froze on the threshing floor, with flail in hand.

"Little kids don't let you sleep, and big kids don't let you live," said Fabian, hinting at Danko's habit of stealing horses. "So it's better to join our forefathers than be on the rack..."

He went into the house, while the Fabian that was resting on the gold was visited by a dragonfly. It settled on the tip of his horn and fluttered its wings from the oppressive heat. The Sokolyuks had never seen such a golden winged beauty. Stealthily they exchanged glances, taking this for a sign.

Fabian was immediately joined by the orderlies of death, whom no one ever appoints, but who had been in Babylon since time immemorial just like the ones who receive the newborn. Some were responsible for the beginning of life, others for its end, yet no one dared to combine these two functions in one person.

The semi-mythical old women of Babylon knew their job, having taken care of more than one deceased. They strewed the floor of the house with walnut leaves to keep away the flies, lit the candles to all the great martyresses starting with St. Barbara, sang songs over the deceased, and during the respites in between whispered about something very important to them. They fell silent whenever one of the sons came into the house to stand at his mother's side, after which they hastily picked up a new song and at times, instead of a mournful one, started a merry tune, albeit in a sad manner, while the sons attributed this to the subtlety of the ritual and felt a certain relief in their filial sorrow.

Meanwhile, the wheat stalks were shedding their seeds and no one's death could distract such a zealous personage as their neighbor Yavtukh from the harvest. He came to the deceased that night and brought Prisia with him. Both of them stood there silently, an irrepressible hatred for the Sokolyuks bubbling under Yavtukh's hairy chest. He had put it in his head that both of the Sokolyuks were alternately interested in Prisia, and Prisia in them, also alternately, and this occasion being the last chance for reconciliation, Yavtukh seized the opportunity to come over. He was of medium height, hairy like the dog grass growing on his field at Chuprinka, and white-whiskered. Besides, as a reminder to the reader, his arms and legs were red like a boiled crayfish because of his hatred for the Sokolyuks which he had suppressed inside himself all these years. For all that, there was something pleasant about him, especially for the billy goat, as the reader might have observed above. Prisia looked beautiful at his side. She was full-bodied, mournful, smelling of the harvest field. Prisia wept quietly lest Yavtukh hear her, because he

might get God knows what ideas again. In the doorway, he asked Lukian:

"Did mother bequeath you anything?"

"Why do you ask?"

"She *had* to bequeath you something..." He giggled slyly into his fist and pushed Prisia out of the house.

Danko was skinning a bull calf near the barn by the light of a lantern hanging down from a joist. Either the scent of blood or the light had attracted bats which were so agitated they seemed to Yavtukh to be flying out of his hairy chest. Back home, he went after Prisia, beating her up for no reason at all when they were still in the entrance hall, just because he had a constant psychical urge to beat her in case she did something wrong in the future. He slept in the new wagon under the pear tree for the rest of the night. It was the one and only tree in the yard; that year it did not bear a single fruit, and this only boosted his hatred for the Sokolyuks. The bats came flying in from their foraging grounds and quietly settled on his chest where they folded their tired webbed wings.

On the wagon a sleepless eye was opened from time to time, but throughout the whole of the night it did not spy anything special in the Sokolyuks' farmyard, where a small window alertly kept watch on the wagon right up till dawn. Some time before sunrise Danko came out of the house with a round wicker basket. He walked up to the pear tree, stood on the sacred place in what looked like sweet reverie, put down the basket, and then, stealthily like a jaguar, climbed up the tree. He intended to shake the ripe pears off the tree lest the people who would gather for the funeral later in the day would be tempted by the fruit. The thump of falling pears made the second eye on the wagon open as well. Yavtukh got down, stretch-

ed his legs, and for some reason also clambered up his barren *spasiivka* pear tree and started shaking it in anger. Not a single pear fell down. This made Danko laugh from the branches of his tree. Yavtukh was ashamed to climb down, the more so since there was no reason to, so he sat there for a long time until Prisia called him for breakfast. Then the little hedgehog of a man jumped to the ground and went into his house.

During the funeral procession my father, the best musician in all of Babylon, walked with a clarinet in front of the mixed band and played something surprisingly merry for the deceased Sokolyuk. She had been his matchmaker, so it must have been the last solo number he played in her honor. Only at the cemetery did he play a sort of requiem for her. All the other musicians kept silent, for their clumsy brass, rendered horribly out of tune during the spring weddings, was unable to reach the bouncy perfection of the clarinet. It was only the tambourine which in some places reminded everyone of itself as the most ancient of human instruments. This particular tambourine was made of the skin of an old billy goat which had held sway in Babylon at the very turn of the century, long before the appearance of Fabian. That was probably why Fabian was listening to it with special interest. Time and again his mind reached into the inconsolable future when Babylon would have yet another tambourine and he, just like his predecessor, would remain only in thumps and jingles and, perhaps, in the combs which would be made from his horns for Babylon's womenfolk. The billy goat caught himself thinking that whenever he visited the cemetery, he always reflected upon his infamous end. At such moments he would grieve quietly over his own



fate, while it seemed to Babylon's residents that he was mourning them. What naiveté of the humans...

Having mumbled words of gratitude to the folks who had left their harvest chores and come to the funeral of his mother, Danko thought it would be good to visit the grave of his father at the old burial grounds to pay due respect to his memory. But his alarm for the hoard drove him relentlessly away from this inhospitable abode of the souls, where that very night Mikola Sokolyuk would find out from his wife that he had not laid down his life for nothing, because the hoard would be his sons'. Despite the fact that Danko hurried home from the cemetery, leading his younger brother under the arm while trying to be mournful for propriety's sake, he was overtaken by the sly, alert old women of Babylon, who probably had not been to the cemetery at all, but thought it best to hold the funeral repast not in the house where the spirit of the deceased still lingered, but in the courtyard under the pear tree — exactly what Danko was afraid of. Yavtukh was already there with Prisia. Prisia ruled over the feast wearing a white apron, while the ever wronged Yavtukh settled down precisely over the spot where the hoard was hidden, which seemed to make his red legs burn from the glitter of the gold flashing from under the ground. Just imagine Danko's state of mind under such circumstances, the more so since there was no way to move Yavtukh from that particular place and have a more reliable character sit there instead. Yavtukh might have realized the intent of such a move, and the whole business would have turned from bad to worse. So Danko settled opposite him and tried not to look at his neighbor who was simply basking in the gold, until Yavtukh, tired of sitting as he had been, deftly curled his disgusting legs — a well-known sight in

Babylon from early spring to the spells of late autumn frost — up under himself almost like a Tatar. Danko expended a lot of effort trying to remain outwardly indifferent to those slight changes in Yavtukh's position on the gold.

A lot of those invited and uninvited gathered, for the Babylonians were great adepts at eating and drinking at other people's expense. Since there were not enough tables available to serve such a large crowd, two long runners of unbleached muslin were unrolled on the grass, and grieving Babylon sat down around them. There had been every reason to expect precisely such a feast, although the deceased had not been very well off. Her bequest was right there for everyone to see, excluding the unpaid installments for the gang plow and something else as well (at this point the old women exchanged whispers in a most secretive way about the mysterious painted trunk that contained the unheard-of riches of Pan Rodzinski which Mikola Sokolyuk had laid down his life for). That evening the first signs that the "bearded orphans" had already raised the lid of the trunk appeared as they lavishly heaped roasted and boiled food around the pear tree. The vapid old women were simply at a loss as to what to grab first: the roasted pigeons, the chunks of broiled veal with young potatoes, or the glazed jugs with *horilka* \* which quickly turned the funeral feast into something merry and carefree.

Yavtukh was the first to get drunk, and the Sokolyuks took him by the legs and arms with great eagerness, intending to dump him over the wattle fence into the tall weeds he had let grow in his farmyard, but Prisia begged them not to, the more so since Yavtukh had become gentler and kinder and offered

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\* *Horilka* — Ukrainian vodka

no resistance. He was carried away and put into the wagon which still smelled of the cartwright's workshop. There he fell asleep and broke into a stertorous snore that sounded like a hoopoe's call, until he recovered his wits and remembered Prisia. He raised himself up from the wagon, called her in an angry voice (his residual consciousness was probably sustained by his hatred for the Sokolyuks), then slumped back into the wagon and did not disturb Prisia in ruling over the funeral feast any more.

Later on Fabian lost his bearings, and immediately his friend who was always devoted to him on such occasions appeared at his side. He took the philosopher home to the Tatar Ramparts, where they, at least until some other event, would live an easy and care-free life, without any worries for the future on the part of either one. But this time the billy goat was not leading the philosopher very steadily, because the mischievous old women had made him tipsy by adding some *horilka* to the sour cream he was treated to — they loved to make fun of the billy goat, believing that he was the incarnation of the devil of Babylon himself, for, after all, he was a humble creature and at the same time infinitely proud as far as the honor of both Fabians was concerned.

Then the grannies of Babylon started clambering up the hills. Once the charm and adornment of Babylon and the cause of many a fight among the young men at the fairs, some of them could not find their way home. So they cursed the deceased and the hills of Babylon to boot. The last to leave were the distant relatives who believed that funerals were held for the sole reason that they meet and not become estranged altogether. Among them was Panko Kochubei, the Sokolyuks' uncle twice removed. Prisia, and some of the other women, cleaned up everything, rolled up the

cloth, and washed the dishes. Then she went over to Yavtukh who had quieted down in the wagon.

"What a bunch of..." said Lukian reflectively, when the brothers remained all by themselves near the house. "Those old biddies were some sight I tell you! You wouldn't think the present Babylon got its start from them, eh, Danko?"

"Did you see where Yavtukh made himself comfortable? I was nearly blinded from the shine of his legs in the golden glitter. If he'd just reached out, it would have been there. I think the perfect time to get it is now while Yavtukh's lolling in the wagon. What do you think, Lukian my boy?"

Lukian was afraid that Yavtukh might have pretended to be drunk — after all he hadn't drunk any more than the rest that evening. "How much do you think it takes to get that little squirt drunk?" Danko said with a smile. He thought that they wouldn't have a better chance to dig up the hoard for a long time to come. His eyes glowed, and there was as much excitement in his voice as if he were talking to a stolen horse. Lukian agreed...

Hoardings are unearthed in complete silence, probably no less somber than the silence in which they are hidden away. The merry jeremiad of the funeral repast had died away in their ears; the withered moon snatched out the black windmills in the distance, which always yearned to fly away somewhere but in the end remained anchored to their hills. The orphans sat on the *prizba* earth foundation around their house waiting for the roosters of Babylon to call out to each other. By popular belief hoardings had to be unearthed at midnight, and the best chance for this solemn rite to succeed was on the night of the feast of Ivan Kupala, right when the pearly fern burst into bloom. That night had been wasted away on the

swing, after which, just as during the times of the pagan god Perun, they had jumped over bonfires (Lukian had scorched his pants then, and, as a matter of fact, neither he nor Danko had known anything about the existence of the hoard at the time). Sitting by the house, they were agitated, solemn, filled with sorrow and hopes. The first rooster to crow was Yavtukh's, after which midnight was proclaimed by the older feathered tribe of Babylon, and only then did their rooster come to life (the belated reflex was probably accounted for by Danko's having stunned him with a flail the day before). The brothers got to their feet and went to the pear tree which for so many years had been a favorite place for all sorts of regales and get-togethers for family and friends.

The deeper they dug, the more their hopes waned. Besides, they came across rotten sticks now and again — pieces of roots that had been chopped before them. Danko would grab a piece and inspect it to see whether it was fresh, even smelling it for some reason, intoning all the while: "Our old man's blowed it, he did, durn his hide. We've lost, Lukian. Someone got here before us..." "It was Yavtukh for sure," Lukian whispered tragically. "Doesn't it seem to you that everything he has just comes right out of the blue?" "Yeah, to say nothing of the kids," Danko joked, hinting at his part in the appearance of Yavtukh's sons into the world. True, this had not inflicted any harm on Yavtukh whatsoever. What's more, he'd gotten several extra *dessiatines* of land for the boys during land distribution. If it comes to that, the Sokolyuks could make Yavtukh a great landowner, something they really did not want in the least. But apart from his children, Yavtukh was not that well off. Still, the hoard could have fallen into his hands, because it became easier to dig, which could have meant that

someone had been there before them. Judging by the roots, it must have happened right after the hoard was buried. Danko was sweating like a pig (from hopelessness), and Lukiano (which was what his brother called him in moments of great despair) had dropped his spectacles into the hole, and without them he couldn't see a thing. Both were deeply convinced that Yavtukh, who had gotten his hands on the hoard a long time ago, could now afford to sleep serenely in the wagon with the shaft detached to make sure no one stole it.

"What's that?" Danko asked with a start, hearing the shovel strike against metal. He himself was wielding the ax, hacking at the roots.

"It's rust. But that's hardly gold," Lukian whispered in awe.

Further on their movements were delicate and careful as if what they did not possess yet were a living creature with feet, hands and eyes, so far closed, and a chest that was already breathing under the earth.

"Careful, Lukiano, don't dig to the quick..."

At no other time had he loved his dear brother so tenderly. Danko drove the ax into a root and started to rake the earth with his hands.

But when both of them were standing on the trunk with the ironbound lid and the once chimerical happiness could not fool them anymore, Danko sowed the seed of yet another doubt by saying: "And now imagine, Lukiano, that this old trunk is empty, that it has been gutted before us..."

Previously, Lukian had never thought that the anticipation of wealth could be so horribly alarming. He had an urge to hit Danko for his incredulity. The hole smelled pungently of fresh earth, gold, and the mold of rotted roots which had probably been chopped through by their father, as the sons could now easily

guess. The moments of happiness were so overwhelming that the brothers had not the slightest desire to stop them and haul the hoard over the top.

"First you go take a look at how things are up above," Danko said and sat down on his haunches to have a smoke in the hole. From overhead came the slightly audible rustle of the old pear tree, the symbol of their ancient and once great lineage which could either come tragically to an end that night or burst out with new vigor.

"Well, how is it up there in Babylon?" Danko asked from the hole.

To which Lukian rejoined:

"It's dark..."

Somewhere in the distance a storm was brewing, the moon had sunk into the black skeins of the clouds, the windmills had disappeared in the flight of the night, there was not a single chink of light on the hills — sleep had engulfed contemptible humanity, and neither for these two was there any reason to hurry. People in their state must give some thought to the future, which looked more uncertain now than ever before to both of them, because they did not yet realize what they would be in a couple of minutes. When they were still children, they had heard a lot of spooky stories about hoards. Babylon had quieted down as if in wary anticipation of what would happen to them when they opened the lid.

Lukian looked into the hole where Danko was chain-smoking and scheming something treacherous and horrible. Lukian had a creepy feeling; he was prepared to foresake everything for the chance to stand in the farmyard on the morrow with a sieve in hand as he had before, calling the pigeons and throwing them a little handful of grain so they would not forget their master.

“What are you thinking about down there, Danko? Don’t you plan anything ahead...”

“What do you think, Lukian, will I be able to stop stealing horses when I’m rich? Or will that happen only when they catch me and beat me to death? That’d be a fine punishment...” Danko was on the verge of tears down in the hole.

“Where did you get that habit from anyway? Our family had ox and pigeon thieves, but no one ever stole horses. Maybe you’re a Gypsy. They say that Babylon’s women were led astray by the Gypsies more than once.”

“I don’t feel any Gypsy blood in me. And I don’t give a hang for the Gypsies when they come around here. You just can’t understand some of the wild forces in man. When you go hunting for a beautiful horse, you worry and suffer so much in one night it makes you humble and serene for the whole summer. When you vent that pain, you feel such relief it makes you feel like you were born anew. If I had gone on with my studies I would have become a great man by now. But instead everything’s fixed on horses. You know I don’t gain anything by it. Malva was the only one who got anything out of it — a present or two. But it’s marvelous to hide somebody else’s horse in your stable. The owner is looking around for it at all the fairs while you fondle it, water it, talk to it until it gets used to you, after which you part with it in the night, being sure you’ll meet it again at a horse fair. Oh, Lukiano, you don’t understand how it feels. You can’t live in this world as such a holy squirt, a man has to have a passion for something. Do you want me to take you along some day? It’s such an illness that if you come in contact with it once, it’ll stick with you till the end of your days.”

“No, Danko, I’m all in a dither when a stolen horse



neighs in the stable. It's strange that Yavtukh hasn't caught you red-handed yet."

"But for me that neighing is like a song, wild and alarming. At such moments I don't give a whit for Yavtukh, and even Malva means nothing to me. The only thing I want is quiet and a good swing. Every horse is a treasure. Come down here, I can't manage by myself; I hear it breathing..."

"I'm afraid of you, Danko."

"How could you think I would pull anything on you?"

"I didn't mean it, really. You throw away the ax and then I'll come down."

Danko got to his feet, handed the ax to Lukian who threw it toward the wood yard where they had been chopping wood for many years, then they heaved the hoard out of the hole, cleaned off the dirt, and carried the trunk alive and warm to the barn. Danko closed the door and lighted the lantern. The skin of the bull calf that had been butchered for the funeral repast hung on the joist; the old women of Babylon could not remember the last time they had eaten such tasty veal, and what a lot of pigeons had been killed for the roast. But that was only the introduction to the funeral repast of forty days which the brothers intended to hold for all of Babylon. Danko found a little crowbar, tore the old, brazen lock from the hasp, and, before lifting the lid, said:

"Let's pray to God that He defend us against any disaster and against the evil eye. Lest the gold befuddle our reason, I beseech the Almighty on my and your behalf, and no later than next Sunday we'll light candles to Him in both of the two churches in Hlynsk — the Church of the Ascension and the Church of the Transfiguration. And let's not forget our own whitewashed church as well..."

By then Yavtukh was already standing by the barn in his undershirt. During the funeral feast he was the first to notice the golden glitter on his feet, and realizing that this was the hoard, he had pretended to be drunk. No sooner had the repast ended than he could not find a moment's peace, watching every movement his neighbors made, and not without reason. Now he had found himself a peephole (a knot had fallen out of a dry board, and when the light went on inside, Yavtukh immediately saw the hole).

Danko wanted to shout, tear his hair from joy and roll in the straw. However, he found enough strength to take on a solemn air, while Lukian's breath failed him during that ritual moment, after which they could afford not to care a fig for all of Babylon. From now on Babylon would be under them, if fate did not throw them into some horrible abyss, the nearness of which Lukian almost sensed.

"Well, glory be to our father, Mikola Sokolyuk!"

Danko opened the lid and was struck dumb, while the shocked Lukian broke into a mirthful laughter like a child.

In the trunk lay firearms and cold steel carefully oiled and packed without a trace of hurry. It was the family collection of the Rodzinskis. Swords in silver scabbards, Turkish scimitars, Cossack muskets, a brazen *bunchuk* \* with strands of horse hair hanging from its top end, a Hetman's mace, silver stirrups, and the steel hauberk of some lanky prince. Beneath that medieval rubbish were weapons of later epochs: a Smith and Wesson gun, two Tula pistols, a shotgun, and a copper hunting horn with which the huntsmen summoned the hounds. The horn was corroded by blue rust in a number of places.

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\* *Bunchuk* (Ukr.) — a Hetman's standard

All this they laid out on the straw, and each of them picked the weapon he liked most. Lukian took the shotgun and the horn, and Danko a damask sword, a spur, which he fixed deftly to his boot, and a Tula pistol. The Hetman's mace, adorned with precious stones, was still lying on the straw as something unneeded, although it aroused the greatest excitement in Yavtukh, who was more knowledgeable about valuables than those two fledgling knights. In the meantime they, too, noticed it when they started repacking everything into the trunk. The mace handle bore the Latin inscription: *Konieczpolski*.

Danko tucked the mace behind his belt like Hetman Konieczpolski must have done in his day, closed the lid, and then both knights sat down on the straw to ponder on their affairs, which seemed to be much worse than they had been up to that night. Mikola Sokolyuk was called no more or less than a jack-legged fool who had laid down his life practically for nothing, so to speak, and their sainted mother bore her share of deprecations, too, albeit in softer tones. The funeral feast in her honor could have been arranged more modestly and cheaply had it not been for their expectation of the hoard, which had turned into a real disaster. They did not know what to do with it or where to dispose of all this rubbish which had perhaps been of some value in the palace of the Rodzinskis, but here, in this barn after the first moment of ecstasy, was not worth a copper farthing.

Yet the man standing outside the barn was of a different opinion. Yavtukh was stunned not only by the luminance of the precious stones on the mace, which made the barn brighter, but by something altogether more important: his life would be impossible with such armed neighbors whom he was watching now not so much with hatred as with envy.

He imagined what Prisia's reaction would have been had she been standing at the peephole, seeing that one knight was more handsome than the other. But at this point something completely unforeseen happened to him. He caught a chill standing barefooted in the cool dew and broke out coughing, much to his misfortune.

It seemed to the Sokolyuks that someone was suffocating or being strangled. There could be no doubt: Yavtukh was abroad! They blew out the light and stood still for a moment in the dark. Lukian imagined that it was his father who was being strangled with a halter in the clay pits. They got out of the barn as quickly as they could and went around it, but by that time Yavtukh had managed to get back to his yard in his white underwear. The two knights hurried there as well, but not with the best of intentions. Yavtukh could have darted to Prisia, but that would have given him away, so he remained where he had been put that night — in the wagon.

The wagon with the detached shaft stood, as always, in the middle of the yard, and when the brothers sneaked up to it they saw Yavtukh in his white underwear. He was lying on his back, his fair mustache scattered about his face, whistling through his nose while the Big Dipper drifted quietly above him. This put an end to the excitement, and the intruders felt a bit awkward for their sortie. But had they not been roaming now in other worlds and been more attentive, they would have seen that Yavtukh's feet (the toes of which stuck straight up like those of a corpse of a great actor) were wet with dew. Yavtukh thought about this with horror and had an urge to hide his wet feet, so he turned on his side toward the intruders and tucked his feet into the hay. Instead of the whistling, there followed a thin, and then later, an odious rattle of a snore which sounded as if his throat

had been cut by the damask sword. Lukian was the first to lose his nerve and walk away from the wagon, after which Danko trudged quietly away, imagining that the white apparition was not Yavtukh but the devil himself — the eternal persecutor of all treasure hunters. Throughout the rest of the night Danko fought the Turks on the old ramparts of Babylon, near the southern tower which was nonexistent by now; Lukian, however, slept soundly without being haunted by a single dream.

The robbers were apprehended in the barn, on the straw. They slept with all their knightly trappings on after having inflicted God knows what harm to mankind that night. Lukian gave up immediately (he was not of the brave type, having served only with a chemical warfare squad during the war), while Danko tried to put up some resistance with the mace of Koniecpolski in his hands. When two carbines were thrust to his breast, he exploded in laughter and raised his hands. They were disarmed and a search was made, after which all of the weapons could not be shoved back into the trunk, either because it had become smaller or the weapons had increased in number.

Yavtukh's wagon stood in its usual place, and near it, munching a mixture of hay and straw, stood the lathered horse on which Yavtukh had galloped to Hlynsk and returned with a detail of militiamen. The operation was supervised by the chief of the Hlynsk militia Pilip Makedonsky \*, who insisted on calling himself Philip, thinking that this might add something to his already high status.

Darinka the herds girl, who was about to take the Sokolyuks' cow off to the herd, was invited as a wit-

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\* Lit of Macedon

ness for the charge sheet. Since the cow had not been milked yet, Lukian did the job lest the milk burn. Having entered the herds girl's name on the charge sheet, Makedonsky told her that before their property could be confiscated she, up to now a homeless girl, would become the sole mistress of their household. Danko handed a bundle of keys from everything that was locked over to her, while Lukian begged her to keep an eye on the melon patch and the pigeons which might run wild in his absence. "Don't forget to throw them a handful of grain every morning, and chase Yavtukh's kids out of the melon patch, 'cause they won't let a single watermelon get ripe. All of them are fine varieties and I'd hate to see the seeds go to ruin..." Then they were ordered to hitch the horse to the wagon, load the trunk, and sit on it for Babylon to see that they had not been arrested for nothing.

As the prisoners were being led out of the house, Yavtukh stood at the threshold, his rump blistered from the horse ride, smiling slyly but without malice: his Prisia, so he thought, would bear sons only by him from now on, since she wouldn't be running to the Sokolyuks to borrow salt or matches the moment he left the house. It was enough that three or four of his eight kids resembled Danko or Lukian in one way or another. Presently Prisia came running out of the house and froze upon seeing both of the Sokolyuks perched on the trunk, under the escort of the militia.

"Oh God, what have they done?"

Yavtukh did not venture to explain but only smiled saucily into his barley-colored mustache which now did not droop so much as before.

The Sokolyuks hoped they would be taken to the Village Soviet where their uncle Panko Kochubei would get them out of this mess. But as it happened their uncle was not at work. Bonifatius wasn't there

either; at the crack of dawn he had gone to his field which he had somehow managed to enlarge to two *dessiatines*. The Village Soviet clerk Savka Chibis, who was in the habit of laughing at everything and without any reason at all, told Makedonsky where he could find the chairman at this time of day: he was gelding hogs either here in Babylon or in the neighboring village to which he was invited, because no one could equal him in this refined trade.

The indignant Makedonsky got into his britzka again and drove over to one of the wealthy Babylonians to have a snack. In all probability the generous host was Matviy Husak, the owner of a windmill and a sizable apiary. He loved to boast from time to time that it was allegedly the wind and the bees that worked for him, thinking naively that both these forces had absolutely nothing to do with Soviet power.

The breakfast proved to be a dragged-out affair, so the prisoners were allowed to get down from the trunk and go relieve themselves (under the circumstances, there was a great need to do so). Since they behaved quite decently and did not show any attempt at escape, they were allowed to lie under an old mulberry tree and treat themselves to its fruit, although this could not in any way be interpreted as a commutation of their guilt. This privilege had been enjoyed by all the prisoners before them while their further fate was being decided at the Village Soviet, that is while Bonifatius was writing out the papers for their transfer to Hlynsk.

The ants, which took a liking for the place under the sweet mulberry tree, stirred in alarm and immediately reminded Lukian of restless humanity, although Fabian held that ants, considering their high level of organization, had come from another planet. Lukian wondered whether they had prisons, and if

they did, had they brought them along or adopted them from people here on Earth. He noticed something among the extraterrestrial visitors and smiled. There were two guard ants, remarkably brisk and alert, who were escorting a third critter hauling something white with all its might. Its burden was far bigger than the bearer and resembled an airship. It was just an ordinary chrysalis, from which a queen would probably hatch, for why else would those two warriors be guarding it. Lukian noticed that some of the little airships were transported underground without any escort whatsoever. The critters hadn't even been born yet, but inequality was already there...

Makedonsky returned, not quite so severe and incorruptible as before, his Mauser dangling slightly above the ground at his side. It seemed just the right moment to let them go in peace, but their uncle twice removed (what a pity he wasn't once removed) did not appear after all, while somewhere far away the hogs were squealing as he deprived them of their masculinity. When the prisoners were again settled on the trunk, Savka Chibis broke out laughing as if to say what fine kin were going to ruin while Panko Kochubei was ennobling the hogs for the famous Babylonian pork fat. Kochubei wonderfully combined this talent with his position at the Village Soviet which, in the chairman's absence, was taken over by Bonifatius. The habit of laughing at the most tragic of moments had earned the clerk the name of Crazy Savka, for every Babylon must have its madman to make the picture complete — it simply must have one, even if none exists in reality.

Beyond the windmills, Pilip Makedonsky put the Mauser on his knees — who knows what ideas those two brigands might get on the steppe. But they sat humbly on the landowner's trunk holding the gravest



piece of evidence against them — Konieczpolski's mace which, as one of the escorts hinted, immediately made them political prisoners. It did not matter that he was a Polish Hetman who had absolutely nothing to do with Babylon. The escort said that the foreigner only complicated the matter even more, because all our hetmans had been done away with long ago.

The heat was murderous as it had been twenty years ago when they were driven to the district superintendent of police for having burned down Babylon. A zealous ant that had gotten under Danko's shirt while he was still at the mulberry tree was now stinging him mercilessly because it did not have the slightest desire to travel with him to the prison in Hlynsk. But Danko could not hunt it down, because God knew what reaction the owner of the Mauser would have to this gesture. Somewhere far off, on the tilled fields of the co-op, a black whirlwind rose in the air and spun in their direction as if trying to head them off. What if it blew Pilip off the britzka! But the co-op whirlwind was wearing out and, without reaching the britzka, flopped down in the middle of the field and settled like the spores of a struck puff-ball. What remained of it took on the shape of phantom castles, changeable and flighty, in which the Sokolyuks would live from now on and suffer for all those subjugated and unsubmitive generations which had risen in black whirlwinds one against the other that night, spelling out disaster for the brothers.

When they passed the dear Abyssinian hills, Lukian quietly burst into tears and Danko started humming a song lest the convoys hear his younger brother. For it was precisely tears that started all the trouble for political prisoners. Probably at that moment Danko imagined himself to be almost a revolutionary, and Lukian should have known better — not to weep but

to go to his death bravely and proudly. No wonder the boys called him Lukian the Holy Squirt. The Gypsy nudged the Squirt so he would pull himself together. Recovering his wits somehow, Lukian started to listen intently to the melody and soon realized that it was a song without lyrics, a lament of grief for the Abyssinian hills...

Farewell, Abyssinian hills! Without Danko, you will again turn into a scorched, reddish sanctuary of whirlwinds. No longer will you hear the delicious laughter of Malva Kozhushna, who loved to visit you when her Andrian was digging wells in the distant steppe villages. When he fell ill with consumption, his *dessiatine* of land on the very crest passed completely into the hands of Danko. Now Malva would not have anyone to laugh for, nor would there be anyone for her to sneak to through the white lilac-scented nights...

On the slope overgrown with weeds which were just turning crimson with the awakening day, Andrian's hobbled horse was hopping along in search of a pasture, and on the very crest of the hills, Malva was reaping her overripened crop of rye. On seeing the Sokolyuks sitting on the trunk and with an escort besides, the first thing she did was break into laughter — now, what was that show all about! — but then she froze, because during the funeral feast the night before Danko had promised to help her bring in her rye with the first dew. She had come, as they had agreed, before sunset, flushed by the long ride, and having waited in vain for her help to turn up, started to cut the rye with a sickle herself. Her *dessiatine* on the crest yielded not so much grain as independence for Malva. ("Where are you off to, Malva?" she would be asked. "To my *dessiatine*...") How many a time did Andrian's proud mount fight Danko's worn-out nags

hobbled for the night so they would look into the sky less and graze on the slope that belonged to no one instead. On recognizing the Sokolyuks' nags, the horse now raised its head and neighed farewell, probably bearing them no malice any longer. Malva remained standing petrified, not betraying any recognition of the Sokolyuks. What if they had killed one of Babylon's moneybags last night for the sake of that trunk on which they were sitting, she thought. A host of assumptions swarmed into Malva's mind. She knew of Danko's passion for other people's horses, and if someone's infected with one disease, he might as well have another, more horrible one. As it was, Malva had enough infamy of her own to go meddling in theirs besides. She pretended not to know the Sokolyuks and resumed reaping the rye, bending closer to the ground.

Lukian cast a glance at Danko who suddenly fell silent on the trunk, seething with fury. After all, it wasn't that long ago that both he and Malva had been lying in the wagon, the horses fighting in the weeds, while the Galaxy invited the weary to travels they had not yet made... In the meantime, Andrian's horse had hopped through the weeds until he had gotten to Danko's plot of full-eared oats. Infuriated, Danko jumped to his feet and hollered:

"Get that horse out of there, God blast your soul!"

That was something else screaming inside him...

He did not sit down until Malva went to turn the horse away from the oats. She took him by the halter and led him along the boundary strip to her plot. When Danko sat down, he said through a hardly suppressed fit of sobbing:

"That's it — I've had it with her from now on..."

"It's not the dog that shuns the bitch," Lukian said with a smile.

"Would you look at that — I swear!" said Danko and made the sign of the cross over his throbbing breast.

The horse yielded to sorrow on Malva's plot for a while and then shuffled toward the oats again.

He did not hop lest he be seen from the road.

Danko no longer picked on Malva, because she would not have heard him from this distance anyway, and the horse, all the while they could see him, was freely battenning on the oats. It did not matter so much that he would eat it as that he would trample and ruin it senselessly. That took care of the events they had met with on the road: Malva bent low to the ground the whole time, while the horse started to hop in the white oats for some reason of his own.

"Now Fabian's our only hope," Lukian said quietly to his brother.

"The billy goat?" Danko asked, jolted out of his own thoughts.

"Why him? I mean Levko Khorobry himself."

Danko broke into laughter, which put Makedonsky on the alert. Those who contrive to escape always pretend to be carefree. Why should they laugh otherwise?

For all that, there's nothing in the world like our Babylon. Where else would you see such a smart-looking philosopher whom the billy goat was now gracefully leading along the winding streets for breakfast at the Sokolyuks? Neither Fabian had any idea as yet what had happened to their hospitable hosts of the previous night. What they had reckoned on was only the leftovers from the funeral supper, in which the Sokolyuks had outdone many of Babylon's moneybags. Such a regal feast as that under the pear tree had never been given by anyone. The pears fell

into the sour cream of their own accord. They were fished out by their stems and thrown to the billy goat who devoured them with great relish. Besides, quite a few unemptied decanters of liquor had been left behind on the embroidered *rushnik* towels. And who else would have come up with the idea of treating the whole of Babylon to what amounted to an almost regal helping of roasted pigeons! The very thought of heading for such a breakfast made your mouth water with delight.

Standing behind his fence, Yavtukh (it was Sunday, his special day) grasped the train of thought of those two rogues, one of which he so passionately desired to have for his own, and slyly smiled into his disdainful mustaches which hung down like two feeble ears of barley from a stalk.

“Have you come to your senses yet?” he said by way of greeting, hinting at the libations of the day before.

“You were hauled off in a far from decent state yourself, you know,” the philosopher parried with a stinging rejoinder.

“Ha-ha, there’s not a man alive who can get the better of Yavtukh!” said Yavtukh, and got to the point immediately as if there would never be a better chance to broach the subject: “You can just write that critter of yours on my name. You don’t need it after all, honest to God you don’t. It’s simply a shame—such a great philosopher in the company of a billy goat! What do you get from him? He’s a rascal all right—lunches at my place, and has his supper at the Radenkys. He’s only a disgrace to you... I’d give you a ruble for him into the bargain. A ruble today is something backed by gold. Two’d be too much, but I’d give you one. Here!” He pulled a ruble note from behind the fence, having kept it ready in his pocket.

"I couldn't sell a friend."

"What if he croaks one of these days? An animal doesn't live that long, you know! A brief moment and then it's curtains. He's not exactly young anymore. Look at how many rings he's got on his horns..."

"No, Yavtukh, I know the beggarly likes of you and I'd hate to see my billy goat end his life in bondage. I didn't buy him out of slavery just to sell him back. He'll stay with me."

The character in question deigned to look only at the upper half of Yavtukh and could easily stretch his imagination to guess what was below Yavtukh's waist. There was such a tangled maze of patches down below that Prisia was probably the only one who could make out what was what. So wouldn't it be better, thought the billy goat, if he'd buy himself a new pair of pants. He led the philosopher farther, hoping to find some princely tidbits of the night before under the pear tree. Yavtukh, realizing what a bitter disappointment was in store for them in the empty farmyard of the Sokolyuks, laughed wheezily behind their backs. The philosopher, for his part, thought that it was far better to be a simple billy goat than a lousy middling-wealthy peasant. And he sincerely warned his friend:

"Quit visiting that turncoat, or your goat's soul will kick off for nothing. The fact that I'm friendly with him doesn't mean a thing. The more I hate someone the less I consider him my enemy."

The leftovers from the funeral feast proved to be so inexhaustible that the breakfast, partaken of without the hosts, lasted until the evening, with a short respite for lunch. In the evening, both went to the co-op to rescue the brothers. After long considerations the philosopher decided that the best thing for the Sokolyuks would be if the co-op leader himself pleaded

for them. Therefore, the billy goat was leading his friend there, finding his bearings with remarkable ease.

The Fabians did not complain of their health, but both suffered from one and the same malady — a poor sense of direction. In the billy goat's case, the malady intensified during days of ravening hunger, mostly in winter and early spring, when all the goodies of this wonderful world were hidden from him under lock and key in the cellars and barns. The emptier the billy goat's stomach, the harder he bore the violent malady and always made for the opposite direction from his home which was constantly empty. If he had to go north to get home, toward the windmills, for example, he would stomp south instead, knowing full well that he was going the wrong way. With Fabian the man, the malady affected him in two cases: in a big town the points of the compass shifted in a most peculiar way for him in relation to his native Babylon; the second case was already quite widespread by that time, so there's no need for dwelling on it. Luckily, the malady did not visit them simultaneously, so the healthy one could always help the sick one, which, of course, in no way prevented the chronic progress of the malady, but only provided for its aggravation.

By the way, it's high time we tell about the Fabians in greater detail, in particular about Fabian the philosopher, because we'll be meeting them time and again. We'd like to add only that by the time the two defenders of the Sokolyuks got to the co-op, it had already succumbed to sleep. The only light was in Klim Sinitsya's window, which made the philosopher rejoice. The billy goat, however, had to spend the night at the front porch, because he could not climb the steep stairs, the number of which exceeded the usual rate for Babylon.

But presently Malva again upset the happy opportunity to do justice to the philosopher at long last and tell briefly at least about his life. Having reaped her plot and batted the horse on Danko's oats, Malva returned home, took a dip in the Chebrets, put on her green gown and boots, and came galloping up to the co-op later than usual. She was quite surprised to see Fabian the billy goat at the porch. That meant his master was here as well. She did not rouse the billy goat from slumber, but climbed the stairs as quietly as she could on her way to see the poet. There was no one in the attic, so she did not linger there but went downstairs and walked across the yard to the cheese dairy. An iron wheel had been lying in the yard God knows how long, and Malva tripped on it in the dark and almost fell down. When she opened the door, the poet was more confused than surprised at the sight of her. The mouldy smell of the cheese seemed unbearable to Malva, probably because she was not used to it. The cheese-maker was working in a cap, a white coat and galoshes, apparently too big for him, because he was treading carefully not to lose them. His famous footwear was standing by the threshold, the red tongues hanging out of the bootlegs, while his clothes were folded neatly on a stool. A very young co-op girl, probably a seasonal hand who had joined the co-op for the summer, was helping him in glossing the varnish on the wheels of cheese.

They were getting ready for the fair. In the meantime, the billy goat by the threshold woke up and recognized the rather sad horse from Babylon; much as the poor critter tried he could not understand why the horse was there in the first place. He remembered very well that his master had come here with him on foot. As a matter of fact, the billy goat had practically carried him on his back, toiling in the process as never



before. On seeing the little embroidered cushion on the horse, the billy goat again tried to fathom all the intricacies of this life and wished very much to see his master on this cushion during their trip back home, instead of having to lead him to Babylon again. Incidentally, strange as it may seem, there are still a lot of people around who envy the life of a billy goat.

At dawn the poet took his invaluable merchandise to Hlynsk. The red wheels of cheese were packed in baskets and covered with tarpaulin. Malva, light and pure as the tender dawn, was waiting for the poet near the Denikin ditch, as they had agreed. Her eyes beamed with happiness, and no sooner had the wagon stopped than she got onto it almost with the ease of a girl. She wore red boots, a dress and a *plakhta* \* under which she could easily hide her knees as she sat in the wagon. She smelled of wild thyme or of some other herb. Neither of them wanted to speak, because for them the silence was more explicit than the most passionate of words.

On the very approaches to Hlynsk, Volodya boasted of his saber which he still kept hidden under the straw. Who knows what might happen on the way after he had sold the cheese and was sitting on the pouch with the co-op's proceeds. Horrified at the thought that the saber might land him in prison, Malva rapidly covered it with straw and became timid and quiet for some reason. Volodya had not noticed that she was agitated when they were passing the Hlynsk prison, but he did not see that in one of the little windows there was a frenzied Danko Sokolyuk, his bitter but as yet helpless rival. "Who's that fellow?" Danko asked his brother.

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\* *Plakhta* (Ukr.) — an apron-type woolen cloth, woven in patterns or plaited, wrapped around the waist

Malva flashed a glance in the direction of the window and dropped her eyes, afraid they'd meet with those of Danko who appeared behind the grated window in his captivity like a reproach.

Their wagon pushed its way through the crowd at the fair toward the stalls, most of which were vacant, and stopped at one of them with a red roof. Malva helped the cheese-maker unload the baskets, then the shelves were laden with the red wheels of cheese, one of which fell down and rolled over the threshold and onto the market square sloping toward the Southern Bug. Malva barely managed to catch up with it to the laughter of the crowd. She blew the dust off the cheese and put it on the highest shelf. That wheel of cheese was probably the reason the crowd immediately surged to the little stall. The cheese-maker put on a white apron and took to weighing out a whole wheel for one customer and a little piece for another, while his assistant collected the money from them.

Presently none other than Comrade Teslya, the Secretary of the District Party Committee, came up with some tall lady — in all probability Varya Shatrova, who was gossiped about even in the prison. He chose the best wheel there and asked for it to be weighed. Before Teslya put it into his basket he held the wheel in his hand for some time, scrutinizing it against the sun as if it were some miracle, then he paid and led his lady to the poultry rows with their silenced, trussed fowl. The crowd around the co-op stall became larger than anywhere else. Malva could barely manage to count the money as the red wheels of cheese vanished one after another. Behind the prison bars Danko was tongue-lashing the cheese sellers for offering their merchandise so cheap. "If I could just get my hands on our old man, I'd show him a thing or two. Oh, pappy, you've really cost us

a bundle," Lukian said to that, trying to reach the window which proved too high for him.

When everything had been weighed and sold, the sharp managers of the stall folded up their scales, stacked the wicker baskets into one another, which reduced the space they occupied in the wagon by a half, arranged the straw comfortably in the forefront, and drove out of the fair, heading home not past the prison, as Danko had expected, but turning toward the old water mill where what was called a proletarian tavern had been opened up some time ago. Let us leave them there and tell the life story of the philosopher from the eternal Babylon, for what Babylon could manage without a philosopher, and with his own billy goat at that.

#### *Chapter 4*

The billy goat was considered the philosopher's property, although it happened at times that the philosopher was not far from considering himself the property of the billy goat. The first time this paradox had occurred was when that beauty of an animal was being led to our Babylon by a common homemade cord. It looked as if the billy goat were leading the man, although it should have been the other way round. The inquisitive residents of Babylon were not moved so much by the shift of roles or even by the appearance of the billy goat as a such, as by his name, which very much resembled a human's. It would have been more fitting to give a name like that post-humously if not to something essential on earth, where everything worth naming has already been named, then, at least, to some place on the invisible side of

the moon with which the billy goat maintained constant spiritual contact because of his weakness for celestial bodies in general and for this eternally fickle ball of a planet in particular. For more than once it illuminated his way back home from his nocturnal rambles, and more than once it helped him sneak into other people's gardens under the cover of night. Despite his remarkable name, which the billy goat could have gotten quite by chance, he did not display any of the arrogance inherent in these self-confident creatures who are given to exaggerating the services they render to mankind. The authorities in Babylon did not harass the winged goat tribe in any way, taking the peculiar local terrain into account. Goats have long had a reputation as mountaineers. You must have noticed that no creature climbs higher on the alpine pastures than a goat — they're like birds.

At first Fabian had no illusions whatsoever as to his status among the incorruptible company of ruminants. To make himself likeable to the Babylonian shrews, he changed the color of his coat depending on the season, preferring light hues. In summer he was fallow-gray, with a black patch on his left shoulder blade (that mark was a constant mystery to him, as well as to his elects). His sagacious eyes were the color of raspberry and cherry and, to tell the truth, sometimes took on a nondescript tinge and gave you a perfectly blank stare. This variable flaw of the eyes was made up for by a beard which alternately thinned and faded like that of an old codger, then curled and revived in ashy-blue hues with noble streaks, after which no one could deny that beard an inborn wisdom which, all jokes aside, Fabian the billy goat really possessed.

As for Fabian the man, he didn't get the name right away; we have already mentioned that the name

entered on his birth certificate was Levko Khorobry. He was a remarkable man, constantly poor, and therefore had the same philosophical frame of mind as the billy goat, whom he had bought in Hlynsk, literally for a song. As a philosopher he had no printed works to his credit; yet neither did the great Socrates write a single line in his life, which, however, is no reason not to consider him a philosopher. The lack of written works made him attach greater importance to his utterances, which he used with tremendous discretion. He lived on the very edge of Babylon (some time later on we will visit his unpretentious abode) in the neighborhood of the windmills, yet he never used them for grinding grain, because grain was something he did not hold in his pantry, and bread had not been baked in his home since his mother had passed away long ago. During the Revolution, which was not as bloodless here as elsewhere, Levko Khorobry immediately sided with it — and without any hesitation at that — but he did not render it any particular service, because his philosophical talents surfaced a bit later at the height of the last land distribution when philosophers had to give way to agrarians.

This crank publicly renounced his plot for the benefit of the community and urged others to do the same, which instantly cost him his reputation as a normal resident of Babylon, although he had been given to some deviations of this sort previously. For instance, some time before selling his one and only horse, which was famous for never having been harnessed, he bought himself (for the price of a whole horse!) a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles — an act which Babylon took for a flagrant outrage upon common sense. After the death of Babylon's old coffin-maker Pankrat, Levko Khorobry transgressed the limits of what was permitted for a man as

advanced in age as he was, and before he realized it, he had filled the gloomy vacancy. But there was nothing strange in this since every philosopher traverses to the heights of eternal thought along unexplored tracks all his own.

His new office gave him more free time than he had had before, so he threw himself into reading the Holy Scriptures which Pankrat had left behind on the workbench, and then went over to secular philosophical treatises, for which he had a remarkable liking and patience. He procured the books of this kind mostly in the billy goat's birthplace of Hlynsk, and that reading landed him in utter poverty, first material and, eventually, intellectual, as was quite explicitly evinced by his purchase of the billy goat, which Babylon regarded precisely as the "height" of philosophical reasoning. Nobody could understand that it was not poverty of reasoning that had contributed to this odd move, but rather the irremediable want of the philosopher and his passionate desire to get out of it at any cost.

Driven to despair by his niggardly earnings as a coffin-maker, he had long been turning over in his mind an ingenious venture which would make him rich, the more so since it did not bind him to any commitments as a coffin-maker or philosopher, that is, it would not change anything in his previous happy-go-lucky lifestyle, which he held to be the only possible one for such an unburdened personality as Levko Khorobry himself. Armed with spectacles as he was, he could not help but notice that a host of goats were kept in our glorious Babylon, whereas no one had given a thought to a billy goat, and so the recalcitrant critters had to be dragged all the way to Hlynsk, a township which was quite civilized by that time, and the money had to be left behind practically for nothing

there, while it could just as easily have found its way into the attenuated pockets of the philosopher, who had to have no more than a lousy billy goat for this purpose. Afraid that this splendid idea might be stolen by someone else, he secretly saved a small amount of capital from his coffin-making business (that summer a number of wealthy clients had come his way all at the same time). During the very first autumn fair he repaired to Hlynsk to materialize his crafty intention, thus depriving Hlynsk of further earnings and presenting his Babylon with a *fait accompli* of his unprecedented shrewdness or, perhaps, sagacity, depending on how the events developed. Fortunately, the billy goat he came across was in his prime, as testified, for one, by his horns, the rings of which easily enabled the philosopher to establish the age of his new friend whom his previous master simply wanted to get off his hands for the winter and asked such a dirt-cheap price the philosopher's head spun in amazement.

It was hard to tell now who was leading whom by the cord to our beloved Babylon, which from now on would have one beggar less or one moneybag more, but it is common knowledge how Eastern Orthodox philosophers reward themselves for a successful market deal. Our protagonist could not bless his fortune enough in buying such an animal practically for a song and, beside himself with joy, he went on a spree in the tavern, while the billy goat, cursing his previous oppressor, realized that he had fallen into kind, considerate hands and at long last would enjoy the freedom he had strived for since birth. To make a long story short, when they were still on their way back home, they achieved the highest level of spiritual rapprochement which proved that they had found one another for good reason.

Since the billy goat was called Fabian, this rare name quickly stuck to the philosopher as well, with the aid of Babylon's wits. After some time, the name Levko Khorobry remained only in the withered memories of Babylon's residents and in the bound files of the Village Soviet. Anyone else would have flown in the face of such license on the part of the Babylonians and invariably appealed to the Village Soviet for help, but our philosopher found his new name quite apt, to say the least, and even absolutely necessary, because he was convinced right from the start that every true philosopher had to have some unusual name above all else which in itself would single him out from the crowd and kindle man's thought. Plato, Socrates, Seneca, Spinoza, Skovoroda... And after a long interval came Fabian. Don't you feel how the very sound of these remarkable names fires your imagination as if they were some grand temples of thought. Therefore, the purchase of the billy goat proved absolutely justified in this respect. As for the imagined profits the philosopher had anticipated when embarking on this venture, he suffered utter defeat, because the billy goat did not bring in a single coin, and he always found out about the critter's sinful ways *post factum*. The most revolting thing was that afterward some residents could not thank him enough for the billy goat, yet the philosopher could not make any paternity claims on them even by Roman law, which he tried to cite on seeing how his business was going to ruin, although in all of the Village Soviet inventories the billy goat was listed, as before, as the property (for memory's sake) of Levko Khorobry.

The inventories stated the billy goat's color (in its most stable variant), cost according to fixed prices, weight determined by eye, and the improbably high annual profits derived from the billy goat for the



levying of taxes. The secretary of the Village Soviet Bonifatius simply loved details in documents. He was a fanatic in this respect, even turning a blind eye to the fact that he was a distant relative of Fabian's who begged him to refrain from exaggerations in the column "profits." Bonifatius had no sense of humor or, perhaps, he had had too much of one when he listed the profits from the billy goat, and so the poor philosopher had to pay in excess for that truly useless creature. But was this really the first time philosophers had become the victims of their own brilliant ideas? Yet now Fabian had two things which no one else in Babylon could even dream of: spectacles with gold frames (the 14-karat mark was stamped on the left earpiece, and everyone could have a look at it, because the philosopher eagerly took off the spectacles in such cases) and the billy goat which not only made a name for the almost anonymous philosopher, but also forced Babylon to regard the philosopher himself differently. He was not so propertyless as before, because frankly speaking, a man has worth in this world if, apart from fame, he also has something palpable, like a billy goat, for instance, which in case he fell on dire straits he could sell at an auction to pay off the constant little debts that harass each and every philosopher who remains unacknowledged to the end by his ungrateful compatriots. What is lacking for such an acknowledgement is at times a common billy goat which instantly raises the stature of a philosopher in the eyes of his contemporaries, making him less lonesome on the field of strife.

Some more words about the profile of Fabian the billy goat. While his beard lent him a certain element of wisdom, his horns spoke of his immense power and valor. Their bone was clear, the color of mother-of-pearl, and their ever young tips shone through like a

green plum. Small wonder no one dared annoy him when he stalked to the watering place at the pond around lunchtime, or when he walked to the wind-mills in the evening to meet the Babylon herd which he headed and gracefully led into glorious Babylon.

He almost never missed that solemn moment, because, unlike his master, who kept in the background because of his inborn modesty and foresight, the billy goat considered a life without feats of daring as disgusting. He had the ability to appear on the scene at the crucial moment, and then he was simply regenerated before one's very eyes. He loved to look down on the herd from the heights where the wind-mills stood as it flowed through the valley below. A romantic dust cloud rose over it whenever there was a drought, which probably reminded him of a weary host of soldiers returning to the nocturnal Babylon after a battle. When the herd was late, Fabian magnanimously indulged in waiting for it, after which he would take his place at its head and lead it into Babylon like some Assyrian general who was conscious of his dignity and foresightedness. Then he saw how the gates were opened respectfully (that was something he liked tremendously, although he knew it wasn't done for his sake), but in his daze he did not see the rest — how the herd gradually melted away behind him, for the poor critter did not like to look round. He proudly stalked on through the upper streets, convinced that he was leading someone, although, in fact, he was going on alone without his troops. At such moments he looked tragically comic like someone who had performed a great deed for nothing.

He would stop and heave a philosophic sigh, closing his eyes and thinking to himself what a treacherous bunch he had just been leading, and how he must

start all over again. Then he stomped through the very same streets which still smelled of dust and the vapor of spilled milk, again feeling himself to be an absolutely common billy goat who had to be concerned now not so much for loity verities as for an occasional supper in one of Babylon's farmyards which were being locked up against him and the rest of the devil's tribe for the night. That was the kind of unjust treatment he got. But the next evening Fabian would go to the windmills again because he could not live without even such transitory power over the herd.

The billy goat knew the ins and outs of all the farmyards in Babylon and their defensive capabilities — something which could not but be reckoned with, because he had to go to any lengths for the sake of his continued existence, sometimes at the risk of his life which at moments of black, hunger-plagued despair, was not really much to lose. All this made him curse freedom as an invention of sated creatures. In the yard of Matviy Husak, a man of means, for instance, the billy goat loved to steal the potatoes which were boiled for the pigs in cast-iron pots and put out to cool every morning. He delighted not so much in the potatoes themselves as in the salt on them and the seductively sweet steam that rose from them. The pigs squealed sharply in their pens and went mad at the smell of the potato steam and the sight of their acquaintance giving himself up to the pleasures of it. But Fabian did not heed them as he was deaf and blind at such moments. This would all end with Husak or his wife catching him unawares at the pots and beating the hell out of him. He swore never to set foot in that yard again, but could not do without salt, and his feet carried him there of their own desire for yet another pommelling which he evaded every other time and occasionally less than

that. At moments of mortal danger, the billy goat developed a speed in accordance with the object his persecutors were armed with.

The billy goat could lunch fearlessly only at Yavtukh Holiy's, yet another oddity of Babylon, who had long ago contrived to win over the billy goat, that is, gradually appropriate that wealth for himself and thereby rise from being a puny middling-wealthy peasant to a higher property status, because the very notion of "middling-wealthy peasant" aroused disgust in him. In the long run, however, that would mean the enslavement of the billy goat and the certain financial gain he could derive from him. In their drive to make it big, all those poor buggers seemed to be very much alike, probably because of their blindness.

The lunches took place in the shade of the pear tree where the whole family gathered. Without suspecting any wrong, the billy goat attended them with a consistency of a homeless bum. After lunch he liked to take a nap along with Yavtukh, the latter slumbering on the wagon, and the former on the ground beneath the wagon, where he barely could squeeze his horns in, which made the wagon seem to have one more pair of wheels but, verily, without a single spoke. The billy goat liked the atmosphere reigning in this family of many children which had over sixteen acres of land somewhere at the end of the world, while in the village they had their own footpath running toward the river, their own wash-raft, a scrap of meadowland with a guelder-rose bush, and right near the meadowland, a plot of fantastically tall hemp in which the vigilant Yavtukh frequently lay in ambush to spy on his neighbors without any apparent results. For all that, the billy goat regarded Yavtukh as a rather likeable man who did not deserve to be betrayed. Yavtukh presented an especially touching sight on holidays.

He did not hurry to church like the others, nor did he frequent his cronies, matchmakers or relatives, since then he would have had to reciprocate by inviting them to his home, and that would entail expenses which Yavtukh could not afford, not so much because of his poverty as of his stinginess. He found a better method of visiting with people.

Every Sunday he put on an embroidered shirt, over which he pulled a black beaver vest — the only item he had managed to snatch from the landowner's wardrobe in his time. He donned a straw hat he had woven himself. Dressed in such a flashy manner, he took up position behind the fence and could stand there motionless as a fence post for as long as he saw fit, pretending to be God knows what kind of high-falutin farmer. But, in fact, his pants were in the last stage of decrepitude, and his legs were chapped and always red like a boiled crayfish. All this was carefully concealed behind the fence. However, he could show off his clothes from the waist up as much as he wished, and when he greeted passersby with reserve and self-esteem they probably imagined that he was attired in nice wide trousers, cowhide boots, and a fine three-colored woolen sash that the rich of Babylon used to wear.

It made the billy goat laugh to look at that turncoat from under the pear tree in the yard where he lounged waiting for lunch, but that didn't bother Yavtukh any, because he knew that the billy goat couldn't expose this little trick of his which was meant for the gullible. Neither did Yavtukh bother about his neighbors, his rabid enemies, from whom he had no intentions of concealing his lower part, the more essential flaws of which were known perhaps to Prisia alone. Yavtukh saw that her boys, increasing in number in the farm-yard as they did, bore no resemblance to him, and this

heightened the prying suspicion which he checked in his heart with great skill, waiting for the opportunity to exact bloody vengeance on his neighbors, which he did all right. The guilt of the Sokolyuks could have also been compounded by the fact that the pregnant Prisia was eyeing them all too immoderately, begging God that if He were to send her another boy, to let him look like one of those handsome men for whom she harbored more than a purely neighborly feeling, although she thought Yavtukh to be rather agreeable, not denying him his due as husband and father. That's exactly what Yavtukh intended to verify accurately with the next boy... But the main thing for the time being was to take possession of the billy goat who was exhausting Yavtukh's last dregs of patience.

After every lunch and sweet nap under the wagon, that rascal never failed to return to the abode of the philosopher who had seen through Yavtukh's far-reaching intentions long ago and, suppressing a smile from under his spectacles, was waiting for the denouement. The philosopher had no desire whatsoever to lose a friend for the sole reason of raising yet another lousy middling-wealthy peasant to a different social status. Nobody could have foreseen, the philosopher included, that one day Yavtukh would pay dearly for hanging around the fence in his deceptive apparel.

The reader already has some knowledge about the relationship of the Fabians with the Village Soviet. At the end of every year, the philosopher paid the tax for the billy goat in cash. It decreased with the billy goat's age (a vile contrivance of Bonifatius!). That would have been all there was to it if not for the special favors the chairman of the Village Soviet Panko Kochubei bestowed on the billy goat. Kochubei wonderfully combined his high office with his old

trade, and instead of a revolutionary weapon, which chairmen loved to show off in those days, he carried somewhat different attributes of power in his bootleg: a steel awl and a huge two-edged knife feared by all transgressors of law and order; even Bonifatius eyed those tools with apprehension. Figuring that he would not be in the Village Soviet for any length of time, the chairman, just like before being elected to this office, was not averse to gelding hogs in Babylon, and after some time butchering the very same hogs, but verily not free of charge. He was a virtuoso gelder but needed an audience for inspiration, and this he had in the person of the billy goat. The latter never missed a single performance, rousing himself from sleep at the crack of dawn to hurry to the bonfires which flared up on the eve of holidays first in one, then in another corner of Babylon.

The fragrant smoke penetrated the empty home of the philosopher with deadly force, inflicting on him the most dreadful of torments which could only have been devised for a man who was always observing Lent, not from Christian convictions, but of necessity. For all that, not a single scamp had the sense of inviting the philosopher for a piece of the fresh meat after which he so ardently craved. That was the least possible degree of rudeness toward a man whose services would be enlisted by the owners of the hogs sooner or later. When the billy goat, his coat permeated with the smell of smoke, came home, the philosopher chased the vegetarian out to the cold entrance hall where the poor critter had to air himself the whole night through. Probably in this way the philosopher took it out on the billy goat for the stupidity of the Babylonians whose hogs gave off such a seductive smell, especially when the breeze wafted the smoke in the direction of this unprotected abode.

There was also another aspect in the relationship of our pair to the Village Soviet. When the pond was icebound, the billy goat, deprived of a watering place, frequently visited the Village Soviet where he could drink from an oaken cask in which water was changed every day. The chairman did not chase him away in spite of the protests of the proud Bonifatius. Moreover, the billy goat drank right out of the cask just like the chairman, while all the other residents of Babylon were permitted to drink the tasty Village Soviet water only from a copper mug chained to the cask. The billy goat was very proud of that privilege and for some time even regarded himself to be second in command after Panko Kochubei until Bonifatius showed him who was who and broke him of the habit for a long time thereafter. The Carmelite was sly enough to do it without any witnesses to his rude treatment of animals.

The billy goat no longer dared to drink the Village Soviet water in Bonifatius' presence, which belittled him in his own eyes and made him feel second-rate. However, he continued to attend all meetings and gatherings as before with the obstinacy of a dunce, believing that he was adequately representing both of the Fabians at such times. The billy goat was not only not chased away, he was eagerly let in on the greatest of Babylon's secrets, while Kochubei got so used to his presence he wouldn't begin a single important meeting without him. "Let's wait for Fabian," the chairman would say with a smile, and no one dared disagree, although they all knew which Fabian he had in mind. Probably what carried weight in this case was one delicate circumstance. When the class secrets of the Village Soviet became common knowledge all over Babylon the next day, the billy goat would take all the blame as a rule, which none-



theless did not prevent Kochubei from allowing this outrageous gossip to attend all the confidential meetings. As regards Fabian the man, he was considered even less reliable and kept in the dark about big politics, and this was one of the gravest mistakes of the Babylon Village Soviet which, in keeping with the perennial principle that there are no prophets in one's own land, did not divine its future heroes.

### *Chapter 5*

At dawn, the clatter of a wagon woke up the Sokolyuks in the Denikin ditch. One of them wanted very much to see who was going past. The horse reacted instantly to the eyes peering from the brushwood. It stopped in its tracks, snorted alarmingly, and pricked up its ears. The eyes belonged to a black-bearded man who immediately disappeared behind the brushwood. Klim Sinitsya drew his revolver, jumped down from the wagon, and shot into the sky, which could have been a signal of warning for the co-op. Then he shouted:

"Come out of there! I see you... or it'll be death to you all!"

In response there was only a deathly silence interrupted by the rustle of frightened mice in the ditch. And all of a sudden there came the toll of the iron rail from the co-op — the summons to mortal combat with the bandits.

"You heard my order, didn't you," said the co-op man, now with a conscious superiority in his voice.

At first one of them emerged with raised hands, followed by the other, probably the one whose restless eyes had been detected by the horse. Cowed and

pathetic-looking, both of them did not know what foot to step on from embarrassment.

"Got any weapons on you?"

"None..."

"None at all?"

"None at all..."

"What've you got then?" Sinitsya asked again with distrust.

"Lice, Comrade Captain," the black-bearded said with a smile.

"Lice? What are you jabbering about, you fool?"

"Yes, lice from Hlynsk. 'Pon my word..."

Klim Sinitsya looked at the one who surrendered first.

"We've been locked up in the Hlynsk clink... just cut loose tonight. That explains the lice..."

"Onto the wagon, both of you!" Klim Sinitsya ordered, guessing that they were the ones on whose behalf Fabian had interceded the previous day.

He had them sit back to back at opposite ladder-beams, and having separated them in such a way, took his place at the front of the wagon and drove them to Hlynsk. The toll of the rail stopped at the co-op, but it had raised such a clamor there couldn't be any doubt that the co-op had rallied for a raid on the bandits. The troops, armed with pitchforks, scythes and flails, would in all probability be led by the cheese-maker with his unsheathed saber. Klim Sinitsya looked around and saw the crowd of levies spilling out of the co-op gates. The first ray of sunlight flashed on the lethal blade of the cheese-maker's saber. At this sight Klim Sinitsya thought that no army was worth anything without a drum way up in front. He did not stop them, nor did he give them any signal — let them comb the Denikin ditch, they might find the real bandits there.

The two fugitives had turned into "Denikin men" out of despair when they had anticipated a pursuit. At first they did not know where to go. One of them insisted they return to the co-op and give themselves up, while the other refused flatly. The sneezewort in the ditch was so dense you could hide in it until the Protection of the Holy Theotokos \*. They could have hidden there for some time and then left wherever they pleased. Would anyone really look everywhere for them? And they hardly qualified for a death sentence. And why, Makedonsky might as well have been asked? For digging up a landowner's trunk which their daddy had sunk under a pear tree for God knows what reason? Or could it be for the mace of Koniecpolski, who had impaled quite a few of their ancestors, as they found out from well-read people there in prison? Since the ruling power was unjust, so they reasoned, they had decided to save themselves from it, which they had done that night. Now they would certainly be shot if Comrade Sinitsya would not take mercy on them and let them go in peace. Since the man in the front was silent, they asked him in the most passionate fashion: What would he say to sparing the lives of two dogged characters who would get off the wagon so quietly he would neither see nor hear how it happened?

Sinitsya had shoved his revolver back into his pocket, but this in no way slackened his power over them. He still could not believe them unquestioningly. If the weapons had been dug out, they had probably been meant for use. Against whom did those two captives want to set forth?

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\* Church holiday (October 1), otherwise known as Mary the Protectress' Day

Lukian asked permission to raise his legs because they had grown numb. Danko, though, wept quietly facing the reaped steppe; his legs had also grown stiff and were useless for escape. Eventually, he, too, was allowed to raise his legs onto the wagon. "See what came of our escape, Danko," Lukian whispered. Danko had completely lost heart by now.

In the distance the outlines of Hlynsk appeared against the sky, first the two churches, and then all the things that make such towns look impressive from afar. At close range they lose some of their glamor but still do not cease to be what they are, with the eternal day-to-day course of life which sustains them in this world.

Hlynsk was a miry town in autumn, suffocating in dust in summer, and unbelievably cold in the winter months because there were no woods nearby; the homes had to be heated with straw, which did not yield much warmth, and what little warmth it did yield could hardly be kept through the middle of winter when the cruel cold set in, explaining the appearance of the pithy saying "As nippily cold as Hlynsk." The town stood on hills. The residents dug for red clay in and around them, and in some places they got deeper down to white clay. So now from afar the steep slopes of the clay heaps looked like chalk mountains which breathed cold even in summer. Because of its innate poverty and impregnability, Hlynsk was considered a free town for a long time, although it had neither the famous Magdeburg Right which Babylon enjoyed during the reign of Grand Duke of Lithuania Jagiello, nor any other high official document. It had nothing but the thousand hills on which the free children were born, and the colonies of bats that roosted in the clay heaps. Hlynsk offered refuge to anyone ready to sacrifice his life for a flash

of freedom, or to those who could not settle in a better place in this paradise of a world. Having had a taste of trouble, the residents of Hlynsk became proud, hardy and resourceful in everything; they were remarkable for their talents and skills, while the women of Hlynsk were famed as unsurpassed housewives. Their inventions — Hlynsk patties with beans, Hlynsk rolls, raised tripe Hlynsk style, and borshch with crucian carp — are regarded to this day as matchless treats of national cuisine in our parts. The concentration of freedom-loving and, consequently, talented people eventually brought Hlynsk to the top; it attracted tradesmen and artisans, and around the turn of this century Hlynsk equalled Carthage in size, though it had neither slaves nor an aqueduct or a senate, and no one threatened it with destruction. Approximately at this time Hlynsk caught the eye of the local *zemstvo* \* or, to be more precise, the magnates who were scattered around the town in their estates and manors. They founded their own assembly patterned on its more famed counterparts elsewhere, built a prison, a school, a hospital, and instead of the solitary little wooden church which the first settlers hastily erected from their personal donations, there appeared two churches almost at one and the same time within a year: the cornerstone of the first was laid on Ascension Day, and the second on the feast of the Transfiguration. The churches were secretly at odds with one another. More than once did the Archimandrite of Podolia come here to pacify the parishioners, give them sermons full of appeals not to put the Christian faith to shame by squabbling, and urge the disobedient to emulate the example of the parishioners of the Hlynsk synagogue.

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\* *Zemstvo* — elective district council in Russia, 1864—1917

But the enmity lasts to this day; the poorer parishioners attend the Church of the Ascension, and the more well-off the Church of the Transfiguration, each sending informants to the other. In his sermons Father Zhabokriy calls Father Infantiy a Stundist \*, while the latter brands Zhabokriy a Uniate cretin. However none of this hindered them from embarking on a joint venture during NEP, when they ran a tavern popularly known as the Tavern of the Church Fathers, where they displayed their mutual passion for booze which steered the outfit into utter bankruptcy, after which they never engaged in any joint undertakings of this kind.

Klim Sinitsya used to bring his purple clay to Hlynsk and saw for himself what took place there. It was the most crowded, noisiest locality on the upper reaches of the Southern Bug at market time. But Hlynsk was most famous for its horse fairs which reached fantastic proportions at times. Horses would cram the entire town. At times such a neighing and fighting would flare up that the residents of Hlynsk became horror-struck at the thought that one day the horses would rebel against the brutal highhandedness and destroy that wicked town in which they had to part with their former keepers and pass into other hands, mostly toward the end of their lives when their vigor and mettle had been sapped. Horse thieves, whenever they were apprehended, were not spared in Hlynsk.

Later on, the NEP operators, probably figuring that Hlynsk was an abyss capable of swallowing up everything, started to haul in merchandise from all corners

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\* Nickname for a member of an evangelical movement in Ukraine

of the world. Yet the local usurers did not twiddle their thumbs to be sure, and they sold all those wools, satins, calicos, fustians, harnesses, plows, chaff-cutters, and even horse-powered drives for threshers and chaff-cutters on credit, something which could not be afforded by their visiting rivals, or foreigners, as they were called locally.

The artisans stuck together and had their rows at those fairs. Wagon wheels, yokes, rakes, flails, mortars, troughs, pails, casks, flour baskets, sieves and the like — all this made up one row; homespuns, wools, carpets, embroidery, feathers, and bags of wool were in another row; then came row upon row of other goods — from earthenware, leatherware and blacksmith's wares to iconostases and paper flowers that lent the fairs a solemn and festive air.

Hlynsk reached a new stage in development when it became a district center with a district chairman — Chuprina from the village of Chuprinka. Accordingly, everything else also appeared in it: its own post office run by the former czarist postmaster, Khariton Hapochka; its own militia with the incorruptible Pilip Makedonsky; its own consumers cooperative, district court, and district offices for insurance, raw material procurement and finances; as well as its own bank which had no revenue returns from the country's capital and survived mostly by taxation, confiscations, insurance, and profits from the sausage industry for which Hlynsk had long been famous.

However, the heart of Hlynsk and the whole area was the District Party Committee headquartered in a neat cottage overlooking the Chebrets River which spills into the Southern Bug at this point. The cottage had a friendly look to it under its green roof. It had small windows, making it warm in winter and cool in summer, an open porch, white chimneys with rooks

nesting in them, a lilac alley, and a little courtyard in which it was pleasant to lie on the ergot and listen to the eternal fall of the water on the wheel that once used to move the machinery of the little mill, but after it burned down the wheel ran idle and stopped only with the frosts on Epiphany when the Chebrets froze all the way to the bottom in these parts. The district had some seven or eight communists who came to the cottage for Party meetings. Klim Sinitsya had the longest way to go, but he appeared the earliest of all and returned to his co-op only at dawn because the meetings started in the evening and lasted late into the night — a habit from the times of the Party's great clandestine activity. This was the first time he had been summoned to a morning meeting, which made him feel a bit uneasy and even alarmed at heart.

That day Hlynsk was true to itself — the cocks crowed, the herd lazily trotted into the steppe, the tethered goats grazed on the wastelands, the flails thumped from barn to barn, but all this was grossly deceptive, because farther on there was a completely different and unusual Hlynsk breathing of alarming times. Downtown near the militia headquarters, the levies scurried back and forth armed with muskets, hunting rifles and even flintlocks, and those who could not get their hands on firearms were not squeamish about various cold steel dating from the Battle of Grunwald to our days. As Klim Sinitsya could see from his wagon, the levies carried the weapons proudly under their belts because they would not fit into any pocket, which in no way whatsoever affected the warriors' noble morale, but only testified to its overwhelming presence.

"See what you've done," Klim Sinitsya said to his fugitives, believing all that rumpus in Hlynsk had been stirred up on account of them.



The culprits sat in the wagon more dead than alive because they recognized some of the weapons the levies were armed with.

Khariton Hapochka, the former czarist postmaster, hurried from his post office to join the glorious host. He was armed with a sword befitting his office.

"What's happened, Comrade Hapochka?" Klim Sinitsya asked.

Hapochka suspiciously eyed the fugitives in the wagon as if wondering who they were, and said confidently:

"Why, don't you know? Last night two Babylon criminals escaped from prison. Now we're moving in on Babylon."

Klim Sinitsya had little trust in the loyalty of this levy, and he involuntarily thought that Hlynsk would be in a tight spot if it had to rely on such defenders as Hapochka. The co-op man scornfully smiled down on him. The latter could not stand the insult and drew his sword, raising it high in the air, which was to mean: "I'll chop the head off any goddam counter-revolutionary with this here sword." The two culprits in the wagon instinctively drew in their heads, while Sinitsya burst into laughter, because after such a grave display, Babylon's security looked even less effectual to him: the postmaster really could wield a sword and was only waiting for the opportunity to wreak ruin with it.

Sinitsya did not stop by the agitated warriors, being more concerned for the fugitives. Soon his wagon left the dust and stopped opposite the cottage of the District Party Committee. There he got down from the wagon, opened the gates, steered the wagon with the fugitives into the yard, and ordered them:

"Get down."

They got down, and for a long time confusedly

cleaned each other of the straw in which they would have preferred to hide from Hlynsk.

The flag over the porch drooped from the pole — there was not a breath of wind. The sky was filled with dust stirred up by the herd; the mill wheel turned idly; the ergot in the courtyard had been mowed down yesterday or maybe today and was now wilting in heaps; near the woodshed stood the scythe; the red signboard was also in its place, not covered with dust as was the case with other offices, because here it was wiped every morning.

“That, boys, is our District Party Committee. Now you two watch each other, while I’ll go in for a few minutes,” Klim Sinitsya said and went inside with his little whip.

What the hell does all that mean? Lukian wondered.

Sinitsya took his time, during which Danko kept quietly urging his brother to make a run for it:

“The wagon springs are light, the horse is good, we’ll beat it to my friend in Talalaiv, and from there we’ll make for a big city and no one will be the wiser. You heard yourself what kind of a reputation we’ve got. My God, did you see how many of those men were armed with the weapons from our hoard? But it was great, wasn’t it, looking at those fine knights from the side? When I looked at the postmaster I nearly came unglued... Come on, Lukian, make up your mind...”

Klim Sinitsya appeared on the porch, this time without his whip, commended them for their restraint, and ordered the brothers to follow him. The corridors here were narrow and the floor boards creaked; the walls were covered with posters which made the Sokolyuks’ hearts sink completely, since all of the posters screamed — strangle the NEP men, strangle the *kurkuls*, beat and beat all the filth; previously the Sokolyuks had had no idea that Soviet power had so

many enemies. The brothers were escorted to the secretary of the District Party Committee and introduced in the following manner:

"Here they are. I came across them in the ditch near the co-op. They were sleeping. They're quite decent and obedient fellows. Dug up their father's hoard, hoping to find gold..." — at this point the co-op man smiled unaffectedly — "but found the Hetman Koniecpolski's mace. Our militia thinks he was a Ukrainian Hetman for some reason. Maxim, phone them and say he was a Polish Hetman and those two fellows are no more related to him than you and I are. I'll take all the weapons for the co-op museum. It's a rare collection, and I won't have it lost."

Maxim Sakovich Teslya — a very calm, composed and naturally kind man — studied both Sokolyuks for a long time, first Danko, then Lukian, and having no more substantial arguments against them, said:

"As it is, they're not guilty if Hetman Koniecpolski was defeated and his mace captured, but why should they have broken jail then?"

"I started going blind in there..." Lukian said pleadingly, while Danko supported his point with a tragic nod of his head.

Maxim Sakovich was not only kind, but to a certain extent cautious besides. All hopes for the Sokolyuks' release were set in those dimples of his, which appeared on his cheeks whenever he smiled. They deepened perceptibly when Maxim Sakovich asked the Sokolyuks to sit down, went over to the wall on which the telephone hung, rang up Makedonsky and ordered him in a remarkably calm and soft voice to get himself over to the District Committee, take the prisoners away, return their horses and wagon, and release them immediately. The levies were to be disarmed. Sinitsya winked at the Sokolyuks when Teslya said

into the phone that he personally wanted to have a look at the mace of Koniecpolski. At these words the promising dimples appeared on his cheeks again; Lukian quietly shed a tear under his spectacles and swept it off the temple with a shrug of his shoulder. In the meantime, the horse in the yard had eaten up one pile of ergot and had pulled the wagon over to the second pile.

The Sokolyuks were released. They were given back the horses which had grown perceptibly thin on prison rations, the wagon, and the empty trunk as proof that they had not been held for nothing. Pilip Makedonsky was meek and kind; he apologized for all their sufferings, supposedly caused by the fact that the class enemy wasn't napping, and on parting advised them never to land in that abominable institution from which he, too, derived no pleasure whatsoever but only sleepless nights.

They moistened the wheels at the ford and set out for home. Both of them had but one desire — to get out of Hlynsk as fast as possible, that fair town having lost all its previous romance for them. Darinka, who had brought them some food to the jail, was sitting on the trunk and steering the horses which had also had their share of tribulations, while Danko and Lukian, intoxicated by freedom, sat side by side on the bare ladderbeam, with their legs dangling, still wearing their boots, moldy from jail. Farewell, Hlynsk! Today they would wash away their sins before mankind in the trough, put on clean shirts, and go to the swing after lunch as if nothing had happened to them. Damn you, Hlynsk, and glory to Teslya who resides there! The pleasant smell of the road wafted from under the wheels.

Klim Sinitsya returned from the co-op late in the evening. He had gotten a haircut and shave at the

barber's and was a bit tipsy after the evening meal at the Green Water Mill (the mill had burned down during the Civil War; all that remained of it was its frame overlooking the Chebrets, and the workers' cooperative had used it to build what was called a proletarian tavern to offset its NEP counterparts). In his day, Sosnin had had an open account at the Green Water Mill since he provided it with cheese from the co-op dairy, and Klim Sinitsya had preserved these relations with the tavern, but unlike his predecessor, he methodically kept track of every single kopeck he spent on himself there, for which the proprietors of the proletarian tavern called him "the clay deuce," since they didn't make the slightest profit off of him. This didn't bother Sinitsya in the least, because he not only sold the co-op cheese to the tavern, but brought there several vats of sheep tallow for baking Hlynsk biscuits which were a little bitter, yet melted crispily in the mouth all by themselves. On the whole, he returned from Hlynsk in the best mood ever, deriving the greatest joy from having rescued innocent people.

The night was beautiful. The bats of Hlynsk, which roosted in the clay heaps, accompanied him for a long while, circling right over the wagon, while some of them strived to fly into the horse's ear, which made it bob its head as if it were shaking the bats off its black mane where they tried to roost instead all the time. Back in Hlynsk, sleep had engulfed the levies who were shamefully disarmed and derided by Teslya with his seemingly inborn talent for all the finer points of authority. Chuprina, like all the locals, held his office due to Maxim Teslya's flexible and trained reason. The District Party Committee was ever more perceptibly becoming the brains and nerve center of the whole district which now resembled Noah's Ark. Teslya had

not yet decided what to take on board the ark and what to leave behind to the mercy of fate.

After freeing the Sokolyuks, Sinitsya and Teslya had discussed everything imaginable, even love which they had never touched upon before. The subject was evoked by the noise of the wheel at the Green Water Mill which in itself was a place of intimacy. Teslya had his meals at the proletarian tavern, and today he even had a drink on the co-op's tab. Previously he had been considered an abstainer, and this new trait of his was favorably received by the waiters at the tavern.

Teslya had arrived in Hlynsk not so long ago. So far he lived alone without his family and was quartered at the house of a beautiful lady, Varya Shatrova, who as he later found out, had previously been married to a czarist navy officer. Her maiden name was Snigur. There was an entire street with Snigurs to which Varya had returned as a Shatrova. Teslya's wife with her two children had stayed behind in Kramatorsk, and was in no hurry to move to Hlynsk of which she knew only from her husband's letters. Teslya believed that any corner of the world was beautiful if you understood it and took root in it.

Sinitsya did not breathe a single word of his sorrowful tale about Ruzia. To him the story seemed to be too old and irrelevant to be recalled in the proletarian tavern. But he did mention Malva Kozhushna. She had come to the co-op suddenly the day before; once he had been friends with her husband who recently died before his eyes, so to speak. "Now tell me, Comrade Teslya, what love can there be under such circumstances? I sent her away from the co-op..."

From the cottage of the Snigurs a footpath lined with sunflowers ran down to the river. Every day at dawn Varya Shatrova and her lodger would walk

down it to bathe in an inlet concealed from Hlynsk by a growth of willows. Varya, who was tall, carried a towel around her neck and seemed to float over the sunflowers while the shortish Teslya would be hit in the face by some of them. They would walk down together but bathed separately, forced to hide from gossipy Hlynsk. But who could really hide from Khariton Hapochka, that derelict from czarist times, who immediately wrote to Teslya's wife in Kramatorsk about their bathing at dawn. Once Varya had caught Sinitsya's eye when she and Teslya had come to the co-op stall to buy some cheese. Sinitsya remembered her pretty freckled face and her figure which was somewhat unusual for Hlynsk. So now he could easily imagine what that woman looked like in the river inlet, and that made him smile involuntarily as he put himself in Teslya's place: if Varya was covered with freckles all over, could he really resist falling for such a woman, even if she had been a czarist officer's wife before? She'll reduce him to cinders, that devil of a skirt, she will, and then there'll be no more of our Teslya neither here nor in Kramatorsk. As for Sinitsya, nothing seemed to threaten him, save perhaps Malva's switch, the touch of which he still seemed to feel on his chest...

It was marvelously quiet in the Denikin ditch. The elders were standing in a white shroud of late blooming flowers giving off an overpoweringly pungent smell. Klim Sinitsya thought about Malva and her switch, and laughed for no reason. That was because Teslya had touched a chord in his heart which smarted...

At the front porch the horse with the little cushion that served as a saddle stood secured by a cruelly short rope. This was beyond any of Sinitsya's expectations, and only now did he admit to himself that

all the way from Hlynsk he had wished to see her here, in his room. It was even strange that she had not come running out onto the balcony by now; she was probably sleeping on the sofa in the niche. He fondled the horse which must have been missing a man's hand, let out the rope so the animal could lie down should its mistress tarry here, and ran his fingers through its cold dew-dampened mane. Were it not for the night watchman, he would have preferred taking the horse into the stable and putting it at a hayrack. It was only now that he understood the smile the watchman had met him with. Go in, it was supposed to mean, Malva's been waiting for you since evening.

He recalled the sharp smell of the elder in the ditch. On closing the door, he took the matches out of his pocket — by now his most alarming moment had probably passed, after which his heart became empty and unsettled. There was no one in the room except for a Karl Marx with a medalion on his neck, wakefully looking at him from the niche. For the first time Klim realized that this was Marx as he was in his young years and hopelessly in love. The match began to burn his fingers, but he went through the darkness with that tiny flickering light to another door, opened it as quietly as possible, and went out onto the balcony.

The horse stood by the porch, quiet and sorrowful. The light from the little window above fell on the iron wheel which lay uselessly in the courtyard and looked tiny from such a distance. In the attic the poet was reciting Lermontov's *Demon*. He recited with feeling and gesticulated, because from time to time the figure of the poet, excited and grand, appeared in the beam of light falling on the wheel.



## Chapter 6

Both of the Sokolyuks had known Darinka from the cradle, so to speak. Danko had become friends with Darinka's father while grazing the horses for the night, although Danko was considerably younger. In the pasture the young were always drawn to the older men. Yet all of them together elected their leader. He had to be not a scarecrow but brave and — the main thing — fair to everyone, including the youngest herders who clustered around the bonfire like night moths, listening spellbound to the older men's yarns which alternated with true stories about Babylon and its neighboring "tribes." Darinka's father was leader for a longer term than anyone else. Many a summer did he lead the herders in nocturnal engagements against The Lanky, The Flapped Caps, The Dead Flies and other "tribes" which, instigated by Pritske, a bigoted and unruly village, drew Babylon into protracted wars, caused seemingly by nothing at first sight, but actually waged for the very same honor and freedom of which, on second thought, no one endeavored to deprive any of the warring parties. For no sooner was summer over than the enemies would calm down and Babylon would freely send its match-makers to the outlying villages and take the most beautiful female representatives of those warring "tribes" to its hills.

The leader fell for a Polish lady who had been widowed early — Jasia Zakrewska from Pritske, whom he brought to Babylon along with her daughter from her first marriage. Jasia soon died of typhus, leaving the leader with what looked like an undesirable Darinka. But the stepfather took a parental liking to the girl; she called him father, and since he did not want her to stay home alone, he took her with

him on his night watches in the pasture. Soon she, too, cantered around on his Chestnut to father's delight. He thought the world of her, and from time to time he would say to his combatants: "Just you take a look at my Darinka!" She swooped down on the enemy along with the grownups — she'd make a fine leader herself some day. Once they had a bitter fight with The Dead Flies. One of them hurled an iron-tipped stick at the leader, and they couldn't get him to the hospital before he died. After this Babylon appealed to its residents and neighbors for a lasting peace. If any squabbles did flare up, they were mostly fist fights, or the strongest of the herders grappled. These matches brought fame to Danko Sokolyuk who was beaten only once by some dunce from Pritske; none of the others could get the better of Danko.

Darinka kept driving her Chestnut to the night pasturing for some time afterward. The grownups taught the girl to smoke, swear like a boy, and coached her in all the "feats" of a herder's life without worrying too much that they might spoil her. But one night when Darinka did not appear at the pasture, everyone missed her, realizing that they had liked her for the disposition she had inherited from her father, and that the mischievous tricks they had taught her were but an empty amusement after the former battles of glory. Darinka, along with Chestnut, or rather because of Chestnut, was taken up by her distant relatives in Pritske. They proved to be wicked and greedy people, and the following summer she ran away from them. She did not find her father's house — the neighbors had pulled it down for the wood which they used up in a single winter. All that remained of her household was the cherry orchard which, reluctant to grow wild, burst into bloom every spring.

All her trials and tribulations won her a high

rank — she became Babylon's chief herder, changing her help and choosing clever, obedient boys for the job. Had she had her Chestnut, which the blasted relatives had taken from her, she could have seriously vied for the position of leader. She seemed to have reconciled herself to her fate, only knitting her brows, bleached by the summer, whenever she returned to the village with the herd. Down in her heart she reproached her daddy for having died so absurdly and not fighting against opponents fit for a great leader. He should have fought those whose cows and sheep she was herding in ever increasing numbers as if they were bred by some indefatigable and insatiable creatures. Soon there would be so many sheep they'd gobble up Babylon along with every man and beast alive. Darinka kept wondering why those sheep flocks never got mixed up. Every one of them had its own leader, absolutely unlike the others. She couldn't penetrate the world of these musical creatures who heard their leaders at the slightest reminder and followed them like someone charmed.

Darinka had pleasant freckles scattered all over her face, but her little nose did not lose its charm for all that — the freckles became her. She had long eye-lashes that were always drooping, making the eyes under them look like evening dusk in which the first star had flared up, adding to the sky's blue. Darinka had a figure supple as a sapling, but her gait resembled a boy's, with those broad steps that make girls lose much of their beauty. She had yet another flaw, probably because of having smoked in childhood — a husky, albeit rather pleasant voice; that also might have been one of the reasons why a hardly noticeable black fuzz had appeared on her upper lip. Darinka, however, did not try to conceal it, but was proud she had inherited it from Jasia Zakrewska who was a

beautiful and haughty woman. As for her voice, Darinka did not care, since it did not cause her any trouble. In some of the homes she was called Darinka, in others, probably because of her voice, Darina, although at that time she was no older than the other Babylon girls who were called Marfusias, Pizias, Dizias or even more tender names. She shunned the girls and made friends with the boys. If it came to a fight, she would take on any of them, and of all the strapping lads, she was afraid only of Danko Sokolyuk perhaps — actually not so much of him as of his black beard which, so she felt, could tickle anyone to death. Her favorite philosopher was Fabian — she could listen to him endlessly. As for Fabian the billy goat, she tolerated him only in the presence of his master; in his absence, however, she took him for one of the sly incarnations of the philosopher, and, to tell the truth, was a bit afraid of that cunning creature to which she had the urge to say once in a while: “Fabian, turn into a man, will you...”

Darinka brought the Sokolyuks food while they were in prison. Once she even managed to pass on a file concealed in the bread. On Petro Dzhura's recommendation she approached an expert on jail breaking who had put the file into the bread. That character lived in Hlynsk and considered himself a jack-of-all-trades. The file had cost Darinka a pretty piece of pork fat, but for her it was all nearly a subconscious game of something unusual she had never known before. She really wanted to see the Sokolyuks freed, and as she drove them home and sat on the trunk she was not ashamed of Babylon, because what she did even made her feel a beautiful elation in her heart. Darinka had no one to pour out her devotion on, so she gave it all to the Sokolyuks. But their gratitude lasted them only on the way from Hlynsk. When the

road from captivity ended, they instantly became different, especially Danko. They became so petty and niggardly in her eyes that it crossed Darinka's mind whether it was really worth it to have let such people loose.

No sooner had Danko unhitched the horses than he went to the loft. There they kept pork fat in a little sack hanging down a joist, so he, that deuce of Babylon, ran off to see how much pork fat Darinka had squandered during their absence. She had not even taken a single bite of that pork fat. She'd brought it all to them while they were in prison in Hlynsk. Nonetheless, when Danko came down from the loft, he slapped her on the rump, and said:

"Lukian, see what a fine bottom she's reared on our pork fat."

Instead of standing up for Darinka, Lukian burst out laughing. Then he started calling the pigeons, and when they came flying from everywhere and alighted on his hands, shoulders and even on his head, he was so overjoyed that he completely forgot about Darinka. Carrying on as if she didn't exist, the patron of the pigeons ran off to the melon patch plundered by Yavtukh's children, while Danko, put on guard by the disappearance of the pork fat, rushed to the meadow, convinced that pork fat was not the only thing pilfered. Since his father's days a small elm-tree grove had grown in the meadow, and there Danko found several of the lankiest elms missing. Everything pointed to Yavtukh, who could have started with the pork fat and wound up with the elm trees, because Darinka could not have possibly carried off a sackful of pork fat all by herself.

In the grass next to the grove, a number of linen runs were spread — Prisia was bleaching them on the Sokolyuks's meadow to let the grass grow on hers in

the meantime. Danko was about to throw the linen from his meadow onto Yavtukh's, but at that instant a number of the older Yavtukh kids popped out of the hemp in a militant mood. The most convenient names had been chosen for them — Todos, Antos, Ivas, Stas — which their daddy mixed up all the time. Making Danko get lost just by their looks, the guards of the linen resumed their ambush in the hemp and kept quiet as if they were really lying in wait for a thief. In the meantime, their mommy was dolling herself up for the Sokolyuks' arrival while daddy was having his after-lunch nap on the wagon under the pear tree. He would be in for a fine shock when he woke up to see his neighbors scot free.

Yavtukh had almost managed to seize the elm grove — without any confiscation. Right now Danko wanted to know only one thing: where had Yavtukh hidden the stolen elms. In the melon patch Lukian almost burst out weeping from despair: the largest water melons he had singled out before his arrest had disappeared, while the whole plot was such a mess that Lukian could easily imagine the piratical attacks of the Yavtukh kids. The pears and apples had also been neatly picked, and what remained were only the late varieties which the kids had left for autumn.

At every step the Sokolyuks found themselves robbed if not by Yavtukh himself, by his children. The only thing the Sokolyuks could do now was complain to each other or to their uncle twice removed, Panko Kochubei, whose life had not taken any abrupt turns during their absence. As before, the uncle was chairman and was at the same time ennobling hogs, hoping to butcher them some time before Easter next year.

When the Sokolyuks passed the Village Soviet, Bonifatius came out onto the porch and greeted them

as if they were just returning from the windmills. The Carmelite was not so much startled by the fact that they had been released — that was obvious and did not worry him in the least — as by the trunk that had been returned to them.

“Hey, what you got in that trunk?” Bonifatius asked from the porch.

Instead of an answer Lukian rapped the lid with his knuckles, which was to mean that the trunk was empty. But on the other hand they had a girl sitting on the trunk — he pointed at Darinka with an eloquent gesture.

When they reached their house — one from the melon patch, and the other from the meadow — Darinka was not there anymore. Instead, Fabian was sitting on the bench. He had not passed on any files to them, but he was the one who had gone to Klim Sinitsya to intercede on their behalf, because otherwise they would have been in a tight spot in Hlynsk for a long time. Fabian shamed them about Darinka, saying that if he were in their place, he'd have let the girl stay with them till better times. She wouldn't have stayed for ever, nor would she have eaten them out of house and home, but would have contributed her earnings from herding to the common pool. Lukian wanted to go and bring Darinka back, but Danko stopped him:

“Hold it, brother, it seems you're not the only one around here.”

With Yavtukh still sleeping, Prisia took the opportunity of sprucing herself up and made for her neighbors. Near the farmyard she met Darinka.

“Are you leaving?”

“Yes.”

“What a pity. I'd gotten used to you... My boys like

you, too. I thought, let her settle here... my boys are mighty fine... like one, like the other..."

"You'll get over it, ma'am," Darinka said with a smile.

"Wow, what a sharp tongue you've got," Prisia said with reproof.

Stung to the quick by the haughty girl, Prisia returned to the pear tree, stood by the wagon for a while and, convinced that Yavtukh was fast asleep (which pointed to a rainfall), quietly pushed aside a board in the plank fence, then put it back in place and ran off to the Sokolyuks.

Fabian was giving Danko a haircut before his bath, making him sit down on a little stool near the window for that purpose. The younger Sokolyuk was busying himself at the stove, heating a huge cauldron of water for his brother. Darinka had been a smart girl and had filled the cask with water up to the brim. A green frog was swimming in it, diving to the bottom each time Lukian scooped up the water with a copper quart. Darinka used to fill up the cask during the night or at dawn, and so she had brought the frog from the well. She had kept a wonderful house: she had washed and laundered everything, the embroidered *rushnik* towels on the icons looked like new, field flowers were everywhere; the floor was plastered with golden-colored clay; the hearth and chimney were whitewashed anew — the house would retain Darinka's maiden presence for a long time thereafter.

A huge willow-wood trough, which once could hold both of the Sokolyuks at the same time, was already ready at hand. In that trough several generations had been washed, including the first Yavtukh kids. At its outset Yavtukh's family did not have its own trough, so Prisia had gotten used to this one with the tin patch in its bottom. Nothing is comparable to a



willow-wood trough when it is properly steamed through. Then it smells of willow, and the kids seem to grow in it right before your eyes. There are also troughs made of linden, elm and maple wood, but they come to life slowly, which makes them inferior to a willow-wood trough.

Prisia came into the house as casually as she once did when asking to be lent the trough or some salt. She remarked that the trough had dried up and sat down on the bench, showing off her nice tanned feet in their little *postoli* \*. Danko, wrapped in a towel, looked at them and smiled for no apparent reason. They disconcerted Fabian as he plied his barber's trade, while Danko stuffed an unbent wisp of straw into the stove which promptly puffed out a streamer of smoke into the room.

"Show him how to do it properly, Prisia," Danko turned to her, and that was enough for her to jump up from the bench. Taking his place at the stove, she said:

"See, you bundled off such a fine girl, and now there's no one to bathe you. Ha-ha-ha! What a helpless lot you men are without us women!"

In the stove the fire broke out in a crackle seconding Prisia's laughter and Danko's heehaw that followed. Danko roared until Fabian gave him a clip on the nape of his neck to make him sit still.

"My Yavtukh bathes in the pond, he's not such a lordling as you," Prisia said for some reason, although she knew quite well that Yavtukh did not bathe in the pond, since he was afraid of contracting felon.

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

“One of these days your Yavtukh will be bathing in tar for them,” Fabian remarked, trimming Danko’s shaggy mane.

Prisia did not say anything in response. She quickly heated two pots of water and filled up a third. The hot water made the trough soft; a willowy smell floated in the air, and the steam made St. Nicholas the Thaumaturge shed tears in the icon corner. Lukian rushed out of the house to fetch some more water — this time for his own bath. Yavtukh was sleeping his fill in the wagon, while his kids were tumbling on the linen cloth spread out in the meadow. Lukian scooped up the water with a pail and was carrying it up the hill when Yavtukh turned on his side and faced the Sokolyuks.

While Lukian was sitting on the chopping block out in the yard, having his hair cut by Fabian, Prisia was washing Danko in the trough in the house. She said in passing that Yavtukh had squealed on them not out of malice but from jealousy, after which he was sorry for it, while she, Prisia, had missed them dreadfully which didn’t mean she took an interest in them like Malva or anyone else... Neighbors must live in peace and concord, she remarked, for they’re almost like one family. Her tales about the cheese-maker were met with a snicker by Danko. With Danko around, it would be only a passing affair for Malva.

Emerging outdoors hot and clean like a Gypsy on a holiday, Danko said to Lukian with a smile:

“Go have a bath, brother, and then we’ll celebrate our ablution.”

The suds were emptied into a bucket; the trough was again cleaned, washed out and steamed. Prisia was a beautiful sight standing there over the trough, and Lukian was ashamed to undress in her presence. She threw some herbs into the water and asked:

"Is my Yavtukh still sleeping?"

"Yes."

"All right then, bathe quickly...."

The Gypsy had been coarse and greedy, while Lukian was gentle like a youth.

"It's time both of you got married," she said, "or otherwise you'll end up being perpetual bachelors. My boys are already catching up with you."

Danko knocked stealthily at the windowpane as a warning that Yavtukh had woken up under the pear tree.

He looked at the sun which had slipped over to the windmills by now and realized that he must have slept longer than he intended. So he decided to vent his anger on his wife and called for her uproariously. Then he recalled that she was supposed to be bleaching the linen in the meadow, quickly hitched up his horse, threw a two-pronged pitchfork onto the wagon, and rushed over to open the gate.

What in the hell was going on! The elder Sokolyuk was sitting side by side with the philosopher by the house, and presently his younger brother emerged and greeted the flabbergasted neighbor with a nod of his head.

Confused and bewildered, Yavtukh returned the greeting as if he were seeing things, but then when he caught sight of the ironbound trunk on the wagon, his eyes became completely dim, because he could hardly have imagined that the trunk was empty. When he came to his senses, he spit out at them:

"Hey, you devils! Welcome back home and good luck, as they say... I was just dreaming about you... Fie on you, may good never come your way!"

By this time Prisia was returning from the meadow, and for Fabian this round-the-world trip was probably the only trip of all those he knew he could never

fathom to the end of his days. He was absolutely positive that she had not come out of the house through the door. That intrigued Fabian so much he got to his feet and went inside to verify for himself at least if it could really have been possible.

The billy goat was sleeping in the entrance hall; the bed under the window was made up in the grandest of fashions, with a whole mountain of pillows piled up as usual — the biggest at the bottom and the smallest one on top, but there was not a single trace of a hasty escape. The baffled philosopher went up to the still misted icon of St. Nicholas the Thaumaturge and crossed himself, although previously he had never been given to ingratiating himself with the gods since he had almost completely renounced his religious beliefs by now. When he came out of the house, Prisia, fresh, pure and faithful, her head covered with a white kerchief, was already sitting in the wagon and in an hour or two they would be returning from the field on a huge pile of stacks held fast to the wagon by an elm pole which had once been a tree in another man's meadow. From that high pile of rye Yavtukh would be proudly looking down onto the sinful earth, while Prisia would be lying on her back throughout the whole journey, looking into the sky out of which the day had taken much of its color by evening. If in nine and a half months (boys, as a rule, are carried longer) a boy were born to her, Prisia would remind Yavtukh when and how it had all started: right there in the field on the wagon toward evening when they carted the rye from around Chuprinka. Didn't he remember how he had helped her climb up onto the wagon and how the horses below had snorted understandingly. "That was the day we overturned twice with the stacks." After some hesitation Yavtukh's face would crinkle into a smile and he would believe her, loving

the youngest boy no more or no less than the others. And should God send them a girl, he would be beside himself with joy and call it Malva lest that beautiful name disappear from Babylon. But Babylon hardly believed that Yavtukh could have managed to produce that many boys all by himself. For all that, it held such an acquisition in respect, knowing that the boys would stand him in good stead in the future, whereas girls had never been in short supply in Babylon.

The Sokolyuks celebrated their return from Hlynsk hilariously. The party included both of the brothers and both of the Fabians. They sang late into the night and beat the cymbal for which a stove lid was used. Those devils probably tried to lure Prisia out of her house, but Yavtukh kept a vigilant eye on her and did not let her take a single step out of the farmyard. The billy goat tired of such orgies earlier than everybody else and prodded the philosopher to go home, but presently one of them, Lukian it seems, got the fantastic idea of shutting the billy goat up in the trunk till morning so that he would not be getting under foot. The threesome grabbed him — the billy goat did not resist, realizing that it was useless anyway — and carried him to the wagon. They opened the trunk and threw him onto the sheepskin coats Darinka had brought to Hlynsk in case the Sokolyuks were exiled to a remoter place. The billy goat could not have imagined a better bedding in his wildest dreams, and no sooner had the lid been clapped down over his head than he stretched out on the coats and sunk into peaceful sleep without any alarm for his future fate. If the Sokolyuks had managed to break jail, he would get out of this trunk somehow. Besides, the lid had a number of chinks, and the billy goat had not only fresh air to breathe but also a number of shafts of light from the star-studded sky to behold.

Further on, events unfolded in their logic order: having forgotten about the billy goat, Fabian clambered up the Tatar Ramparts all by himself. That was a risky undertaking, because in such cases it was the billy goat who took him home as his master held on to his left horn showing the rings of the billy goat's advanced years with ever increasing clarity, and in such a fashion the philosopher could get anywhere. About halfway he thought of the billy goat, but hard as he tried he could not remember where the critter had disappeared to. Deprived of his friends' support, he lay down to rest a while on the turf right in the middle of the hill and sunk into untroubled sleep right there. The Sokolyuks had also caroused to the limit, one of them falling down on the bench and the other diving into the pillows.

This time Yavtukh got the better of Prisia. When her big bust, which he appreciated more than anything else, breathed sleep, he got up quietly, dressed, crossed himself in the direction of the icons shining through the darkness with their stolid eyes, and some moments later was pushing aside the board in the plank fence (each of them had a personal secret passage to the neighbors — Prisia's was for borrowing something, and Yavtukh's was for warring against them), and not without a certain degree of risk to his life he made his way to the farmyard of the Sokolyuks.

The trunk stood on the wagon. Yavtukh could not believe his eyes — by all good and holy the Sokolyuks should have taken it away, which they didn't, of course, simply forgetting it from joy. In his imagination the mace of Koniecpolski shone with all its rubies, and, besides, he hoped to find something else in that trunk, at least a sword which would not be a bad thing to have, especially now that he was again to come face to face with his neighbors. At the wagon

Yavtukh sat on his haunches for some time. Mushka the dog came running up and licked his hands. Yavtukh had never whispered as gently to any woman as he did to that dog:

“Mushka, my little dear, it’s me, don’t you recognize me?...”

Having coaxed it into silence, he could now act more decisively. Yavtukh climbed onto the wagon, fussed there for a while, and then cautiously opened the lid. From inside the trunk a devilish smell hit his nostrils, and instead of the Hetman’s mace — still clear in his mind — there was an almost human face looking at him. Then huge cold horns and a tail, which he surely must have added in his imagination, materialized out of the darkness.

“The devil!” Yavtukh screamed and fell down from the wagon.

The scream, or probably Yavtukh’s spill, roused the dreamer on the bench from sleep. He opened the window and, seeing a stranger by the wagon, hollered at the top of his voice:

“Lukian, Lukian, we’re being plundered!”

When they got out of the house at last, they only found the billy goat stretching himself in the trunk.

“How did he get in there?” Danko wondered, while Lukian spread his arms in amazement.

“There’s something fishy going on,” said Lukian. “There must have been two of them; one could never have stuffed that billy goat into the trunk.”

They took the trunk down and shook the billy goat out of it. The critter limped back home. On the hill he came across his master, stood over him in utter despair, then woke him up, and led him in the usual manner.

Yavtukh got home barely alive, and when Prisia asked what had happened, he said:

"Hush! I've just seen the devil. It looked absolutely like a human being — goatee, eyes, ears and huge curved horns. I was almost scared to death!"

"Maybe it was Fabian's billy goat?"

"Look, don't you think I know the difference between a billy goat and the devil..."

Would the world really go to wreck and ruin some day? she thought. Would there remain only Yavtukh, and would the likes of the Sokolyuks come to an end? At that moment she was thinking about them, both of them at the same time, although she had to fondle her dear Yavtukh who was still trembling at her side after his encounter with the devil. When at last he broke into a snore as if his throat had been cut, she stealthily got out of bed — its run-down state called for Fabian's intrusion, but Yavtukh was postponing the repair till better times — and sat down on the bench near the window facing the Sokolyuks' home. She took delight in watching the mellow light of the full moon flooding the dreamy old farmyard with the wagon, barn, the two windows facing it, and the trunk in which her husband had seen the devil. Now the trunk had been turned over and the devil dumped out of it to go and save his master, while one of the Sokolyuks had lain down in the yard to catch up on his sleep on top of the sheepskin coats shaken out of the trunk along with the billy goat.

She was about to go back to Yavtukh when suddenly she saw two horsemen riding along the highway by the village. Yavtukh, sleeping in the wagon as he did, saw them many a night, but for Prisia this was the first time, because whenever they passed her house she always reached the window too late.

On hearing the clatter of hooves, Danko got up from the coats and rushed to the gates in his underwear, but the horses started at the sight of the giant dressed



in white and galloped down the street past Yavtukh's house. His horses whinnied in the stable, something they never did without reason. Yavtukh was on his feet in a flash.

Danko was about to run into the street after the horsemen when Yavtukh appeared near the gates. Danko looked terrifying in his white underwear, and Yavtukh, having lived through one scare already, crossed himself fervently and sat down under the gates, breaking into ill-natured laughter. He must have been laughing at something very sacred, because Danko stopped in his tracks in despair and then toppled the gates off of the hemp bands by which they hung onto the jeerer, and tramped off to his coats.

"May good never come your way!" Yavtukh cursed and, creeping out from under the gates, started to put them in place.

Lying on the coats, it was Danko's turn to laugh as he gazed into the sky over Babylon. In the heavens he recognized the constellations of dawn which he had watched many times from the Abyssinian hills. But he was in no mood to sleep.

He put on a linen shirt, pulled his new creaking boots onto his feet, and threw a sheepskin coat over his shoulder — he dressed like that whenever he went to see Malva on the swing. Lukian slept quietly and serenely like a child, his fair shock of hair pressed against the white pillow. Danko did not wake him, but quietly kissed the sweaty forehead, for now he had no truer person than his brother.

Yavtukh was still fussing around the gates, scheming how to take revenge on Danko for having toppled them so rudely and crassly. One day they'd come and overturn his wagon with him in it, ruin his house and his whole life into the bargain. The creak of Danko's new boots was the last straw for Yavtukh's nerves.

I'll have to defend myself against them while I've still got the time, he thought.

He went into the house, removed a brick from under the stove ash pit, and took a sawn-off gun wrapped in a rag out of his cache. Prisia paid no heed to him as she was breast-feeding her youngest, one-and-a-half-year-old baby boy Yasko, to whom she gave the breast longer than the others. The wagon with the packed rye stacks had been standing in the yard the whole night, so Prisia figured that Yavtukh had left to unload it. Nonetheless, she was subconsciously alarmed. Prisia knew about the cache, so she rushed over to it and, removing the brick, thought with horror about Yavtukh, whose revengeful nature she knew only too well. She did not run after him since she wanted to stay alive for the sake of her kids. Yavtukh was a man who could easily shoot his own wife between the eyes, for that puny body of his harbored a knavish and unruly spirit. Had he really found out that she had been bathing the Sokolyuks today? But she had only done it so they would make up with Yavtukh! The Lord God alone could have divined the train of thoughts that raced now through the mind of the bewildered woman.

Babylon Hill was still sleeping in a blue mist when Danko got to its top. The heap of white cottages, which flocked together at night to exchange whispers and had not yet scattered before dawn, clung to one another — roof to roof, thatch to thatch, lending the scene something eternal and grand. In olden times these hills were inhabited by the Taurians, followed by the Tatars and Turks who held sway over this sunlit place, then along with the Poles came the Jews who were probably reminded of their former homeland by the hills, but eventually all this wore away, mixed up, and became allied with the irrepressible Cossack

element. Out of the mixture of peoples and passions there appeared centuries later that beautiful wonder Malva Kozhushna, who for some years now had been swinging seemingly carefree over the Babylon world, exciting the hearts of many a man. The big Danko was now tramping to her like a weedy boy, clambering up Babylon Hill like one possessed, although he had not been granted any rights to her either by church or civil authorities, and when he arrived there he was no proud Danko anymore. The only thing he had brought with him was an entreaty.

He did not find them at the swing, although while climbing the hill he was convinced that they would be there, because he had not seen their horses in the farmyard. Her cottage stood there with a dreamy look, its curved courtyard and shadows of trees on its bluish-white walls; the live draftsmanship of nature seemed to make it not indifferent to Danko's feelings. He approached the window with that vague foreboding horse thieves experience when stalking their prey, and knocked on the windowpane at random, believing no one would respond. Malva, serene and unruffled, appeared at the window and opened it, exuding a warmth Danko knew so well. He put his hand on her hot crown — she drew back. She was wearing the little necklace with several strings of beads, which he had once bought for her in Hlynsk; her fair tresses scattered.

“Is it true?”

“It's true, Danko...”

The string of red beads burst apart and the beads trickled into the burs under the window. After that the window closed, and Danko stood there for a long time, petrified and helpless in the face of a woman's treachery, clenching the hot tokens of his love in his hands. He stood in his embroidered white sheepskin

coat the warmth of which Malva should have remembered. He had bathed in the willow trough for her sake and still smelled of the camomile which Prisia had poured into the trough when she was washing his hair, joking that she was doing this for Malva's sake...

He flung the handful of beads at the windowpane and for some reason strolled to the swing on which he had cradled his love.

He rocked slightly to and fro, pushing one of his feet off the hard-beaten path. He still believed Malva would join him and would have rocked so in his bewilderment for God knows how long were it not for the horse whinnying in the barn. Danko's heart missed a beat. He remembered how Andrian's horse whinnied, because he was an adept in these matters down to the last detail. However, it seemed he was hearing this horse for the first time.

The sleepy chickens and the heavy smell of hay packed tight in the loft made the barn stifling in the darkness. The co-op horse stood saddled and unfed, nervously blinking and probably sensing trouble, while its neighbor, that is Andrian's horse, rummaged behind the hayrack, engrossed in seeking some live wisps of hay in the leftovers.

Danko could not tolerate any carelessness when it came to horses. He threw some hay into the hayrack and slackened the saddle girth on the horse — it was Klim Sinitsya's mount which the cheese-maker probably stole off with for his nocturnal outing. At that instant Danko suddenly felt his old habit surface — he could not have asked for a better chance for a new adventure, and before dawn that horse could have disappeared God knows where had it not been the co-op's property.

Danko left the stifling barn and went up to the

window again, because now he had a different explanation for the silence that reigned in the house. Rapping on the windowpane more persistently now, his entire appearance seemed to say: "Where are you, you filthy creatures? Come out here both of you before my eyes." What added to his boldness was the fact that he had not succumbed to the temptation of stealing the horse and had come in a victory over himself in the first place.

In response to that threatening rap on the windowpane there appeared in the window a proud and, as Danko thought, rather handsome young man in a white shirt, with a dissheveled shock of hair, who silently sized up the uninvited guest, and said with a smile:

"They're sleeping and I'd advise you not to annoy them anymore."

That naive "they" made Danko laugh; he adjusted the sheepskin coat on his shoulders. Undoubtedly this was the young man Danko had first seen through the window in the Hlynsk jail. He recognized him by the shock of hair and the fine carriage of his head.

"So wake them up!" he ordered derisively.

"Just a minute," replied the cheese-maker.

He disappeared behind the window, then some moments later the front door opened with a bang, and the same young man came bursting out of it, but this time with a saber raised for attack. Alert and bare-foot, it seemed, he was approaching Danko in a rather rash way.

He'll take my head off, that nut, thought Danko, and in the agitation of the moment he took to his heels to a nearby destination — the swing.

But the next moment it seemed unsafe, because the saber was drawing nearer, being waved in the air like in a cavalry charge as if its master were galloping

on a horse. Danko involuntarily recalled the charge of the Austrian cavalry on the Western Front, when he had almost paid with his life — fortunately enough, the horse had tripped under the Austrian dragoon who pursued Danko. The dragoon fell out of the saddle, and Danko finished him off with a rifle butt. However, from this madman blinded by love there was no other salvation than escape. Without a second thought, Danko dived from the swing into the precipice overgrown with sneezewort, bramble and other growth that was nasty to the touch.

The cheese-maker had to check himself from following suit, although he had no intention of chopping off his opponent's head. The young man laughed at the sight of the white sheepskin coat slipping off the shoulders of the fugitive and sailing smoothly behind him until it caught on a wild apricot tree. Danko landed on thorns and something else disgustingly warm.

That was Yavtukh lying in ambush waiting for Danko to mount the swing with Malva — just then, he thought, would be the best time to knock him off the swing when it reached the highest point in its trajectory. That was his initial intention, but then he got a bit queasy about killing Danko, so he consciously let himself go limp and dozed off under the apricot tree. Awakened with a start, he was completely confused as to whether it was really worth wasting the only cartridge he had on Danko or saving it to ward off some greater evil. This train of thought warmed Yavtukh, leaving less room for his desire to kill Danko.

All of a sudden something incredibly heavy and clumsy fell on him, squashing him with such force that Yavtukh did not even have a chance to cry out but just fired into the air almost instinctively, not so much

in self-defense as to summon help. At first he had no doubt that it was the devil himself dropping on him, for he had seen with his own eyes how the devilish sheepskin coat had dropped in his wake and got caught in the apricot tree. He thought that this was the end of him, but the devil emitted such an unearthly scream that Yavtukh had nothing left to do but collect the last of his wits and try to get out from under the shaggy horror which proved to be none other than Danko Sokolyuk. Help was not likely to come, so Yavtukh remained true to form. His practical reason evinced a foresight which would do justice to anyone under such circumstances. Pretending that he had not recognized Danko, Yavtukh hollered on a cue evidently not his own:

“Bandits!... Denikin men!... Help!”

Danko was struck all of a heap — what in God’s name, what Denikin men? Yavtukh seized the opportunity, slipped from under his strangler, jumped to his feet, and bolted into the thicket with such dexterity that pursuing him would have been hopeless not just for Danko but for the devil himself. When a man is left so stupidly amid his enemies, with his only shot gone, all his power rests in his feet then. Danko tried to get up, but his feet would not obey him, so he remained lying on his back under the apricot tree. Hard as he tried he could not understand how his sheepskin coat had gotten stuck on top of the tree, because he remembered pretty well that he had fallen with the coat on his shoulders. His face burned either because of the thorns or because Yavtukh had singed it with his shot. The sheaf of fire still stood before his eyes. But while Yavtukh’s vitality was simply incredible for Danko, he was more stunned by the fact that from now on he and his brother would have to deal with an armed Yavtukh.

The puff from the shot rose over the precipice and, seeking an outlet, hovered over Danko. For some reason it looked like a squashed Yavtukh: hands, legs, head on a short neck, and even the same threadbare pants. While Danko was lying on his back, Yavtukh was taking on an ever greater semblance of himself. Danko had a premonition the rascal would come to life any minute now and go off into a gale of laughter at his grounded enemy; but Danko would never permit that. He took a deep breath and blew mightily at the puff — it swayed for a moment and floated away, deforming Yavtukh beyond recognition.

The two lovers, roused by the shot, quietly led the horses out of the barn, jumped onto them, and rushed out into the street at such a fast stride that Yavtukh barely had time to step back into the sneezewort. The co-op horse, which had foreign blood streaming in its veins, snorted at the scent of malevolent flesh nearby and carried the rider uphill as fast as it could, while Malva's horse lagged behind, its blood being not that excitable, so Malva used this opportunity to shout in the direction of the sneezewort, convinced that Danko was hiding there:

“Don't fool around, Danko! Come on out!”

In response came a contemptuous snicker from someone petty in spirit and puny in body.

My God, what has become of Danko, thought Malva pressing against the horse's mane, as she sped after the poet through the street.

Then Danko, maimed, wretched and betrayed, limped past Yavtukh who could hardly keep from greeting him with “Good morning, neighbor!” Yavtukh suppressed a giggle, because as it were he had won this battle, though he had paid dearly — he hadn't a single cartridge anymore. He emerged from the sneezewort and, affected by the victory he had just



gained, went fearlessly after Danko who was clambering up the hill.

Yavtukh had conclusively convinced himself by now that he had had no intention of killing Danko, and even sympathized with him, because, after all, he could have probably have guessed like no one else what went on in Danko's heart. The betrayed always side with the betrayed. It was only at the toppled gates that the hatred of the Sokolyuks flared up in him with new force — as it was, the two opponents would remain true to themselves as they had been all these years. Lukian stood on the porch, looking out for his brother whom he could have waited for in vain had Yavtukh fired not from fright but aimed at his enemies a little bit at least when they came falling down on him out of the Babylon sky...

## *Chapter 7*

Malva accompanied the cheese-maker to the windmills where they parted without dismounting; the watchman Tikhin Pelekhaty, who had gone through all this in his time, chanced to become the witness and patron of their love. Looking down from his little window above, he observed that the night was always short for lovers, while every windless night seemed to be an eternity for Tikhin Pelekhaty. The windmills hardly creaked at their straps then, which made time almost stop in its onward flow.

But it was a different matter with a lusty breeze abroad — from Moldavia or from Turkey in the hot south, or a stiff valley wind from Hlynsk or somewhere else. Then all the four windmills on the hill would burst into action, attracting customers from Babylon

and the neighboring villages — merry, wily, witty farmers ready to give the millers a sly wink to have their share ground without the peck of grain they would have to pay as a fee for the service. On such days time slid by imperceptibly, and he had a sense of fulfilment with the winds blowing, although he was only a watchman of windmills he did not own.

But in calm weather the nights were shortened only perhaps by other people's love rides. Wow, what a green plum Malva had lured away from the palace of the Rodzinskis! All the farmers visiting the mill gossiped that he was a Young Communist Leaguer who had come to Babylon with some aim in mind, and that when he married Malva, he'd settle down for sure and set up a co-op of his own. He'd open a cheese dairy and certainly confiscate the windmills, because power over Babylon was wielded by those who ruled over the winds. Take my word for it, boy! But don't you boast of something you don't have yet. For many years now the watchman had been looking intently down on Babylon from this hill, but he did not see there a great desire of people to join the co-op. At times even a poor wretch who should have joined up long ago came here with a borrowed sackful of grain on his back, ever hopeful of building a windmill of his own. As for the wealthy, their attitude was all too clear. All of Babylon was filled with a wanton drive to make it big, multiply, strike deep roots, and make enemies — the land distribution had estranged people, arousing in them the nastiest of mentalities that had been dormant for centuries, only to rise to its all-time high now. That mentality showed best here at the windmills whose owners would have divided the wind among themselves a long time ago had they known how to do it. "There's no crueller elemental force than man's greed... Take my word for it, boy," the watch-

man argued with the young man in his mind, not daring to come down to them lest he disturb the couple.

That night Malva was more at ease with the poet, calling him by the informal "you," which she had not done before. She had come riding here in an absolutely homey fashion — barefoot, without a kerchief on her head, and without the little cushion she used so save herself from saddle sores. One leg crossed over the other — not every Cossack could sit so skilfully on a horse; she must have learned to balance on the swing — she was taking one of her best impressions of these morning hours with the poet home with her from the windmills. Her knees were so wonderful they could seduce anyone, not to mention that greenhorn with the saber. The millers eagerly ground her grain without the usual peck. The night watchman, however, had never seen Malva behave like some of the frivolous female customers visiting the windmills who seemed to guard their honor zealously in public, but could be more or less easily lured away from the crowded windmills into the nocturnal steppe overgrown with wormwood.

The watchman had no home in Babylon, so he lodged there only in winter at the house of granny Otchenashka. His employers wanted him to live at the mills, for which they paid him every month regardless of whether the winds blew or not. They paid him either in flour or in the grain they received as a fee, and above that the watchman had some extra gain from the flour that remained on the millstones. Otchenashka did not let his earnings go to waste. She had strong legs, and so everything was taken to Hlynsk, after which she came back to the windmills with matches, tobacco, salt, groats for gruel, and freshly laundered shirts. At times she passed the night there. The old

man smoked his pipe all night long, and as she could not stand tobacco smoke, they slept in different windmills — he in Bubela's which was built of stone and was therefore fireproof, and she in the windmill of the Radenky brothers, which smelled of resin like a new house because it had been built just recently.

In the wormwood a breeze was building up. The Radenkys' windmill creaked, being more sensitive than the rest. The old man went down to check on his "household," readjusted the straps, then built a fire, poured some water from the cask into the pot and was about to cook some porridge when gunshots in the Denikin ditch distracted him from his habitual occupation and made him again climb up the loft of the main windmill.

The "Denikin men" were running through the ditch toward the no-man's steppe. There were three or four of them for that matter — yes, exactly four, one tall and clumsy, who tried hard to hide in the ditch, tripped on something, fell, and getting up, was the last to scamper off with a hunched manner about him. Tikhin involuntarily recoiled from the window as he recognized Kindrat Bubela in one of the "Denikin men." They had left their tethered horses in the thistles to which they were now running one after another. The others jumped into the saddle and dashed off into the gully, while Bubela's horse — a bay with a white blaze — got free of its tether and would not let its master get near it. Bubela was raving mad, sneaking up on the horse like a cat, then rushing at it all of a sudden in leaps and bounds. When this did not work he coaxed it endearingly, pleaded, clasped his hands before it like before God until the horse gave in to his entreaties.

Pelekhaty ran to the ditch right across the boundary strips and sown fields, along the track, which the

co-op horse had left in the dew, past the no-man's steppe interlaced with cobwebs and bramble, past the centuries of animosity that had seethed over the possession of the steppe from the days of Cossackdom — the Cossacks kept it for pasturing their herds of horses while the community insisted on having it tilled for grain crops. The young man was still alive; his unsheathed saber glistened in the road, a tear was running down his cheek, and his proud shock of hair was lying debased in the dust... Thinking that Pelekhaty was another bandit, the young man declined his help and attempted to spit in the old man's face.

"It's me, me! Don't you recognize me?" pleaded the watchman, sheathing the saber for some reason. Then he heaved him up out of the dust, slung him over his back, and carried him toward the sound of the booming iron rail which Klim Sinitsya was beating just then to wake the co-op, this time more insistently than usual, perhaps sounding a signal of alarm.

The co-op surged in the courtyard. Water was fetched, as were towels, embroidered with red roosters; the victim's chest was bandaged, and his saber unfastened, the saber he had rushed at the "Denikin men" with to his grief. When he was lifted onto the wagon with a bedding of oat straw, his eyes searched for someone in the crowd and, on recognizing the watchman with his unusually long and drooping arms, lingered on him with a serene look. Then he was hurried off to Hlynsk where an outstanding doctor might be able to save him.

Tikhin Pelekhaty, filled with pangs of conscience for his master, tramped off to the windmills. There Otchenashka waited for him. The month had ended, so she had come for his earnings and simultaneously brought the old man a freshly laundered shirt and, as usual, all the other victuals.

“Either I’ve gone blind or everything’s gotten mixed up in front of my eyes...”

“What’s the matter, my dear Tikhin? Come on, tell me, you know quite well that Otchenashka knows how to keep her mouth shut. I swear to God right now I will.”

“I saw them from the window in the loft...”

“The deaf don’t hear, and the blind don’t see. That’ll make you feel easier at heart. Also, mind you, we haven’t that much longer to live.”

“No, I’ll go report them. My conscience can’t keep silent.”

“Think about the wagging tongues, my dove. No joke, that’s a big force. What’ve we got to do with all that? We’re guarding the winds, and nothing else. I pray to God for you, dear Tikhin, and with your help, I’ll be all right too.”

In response to the prayer, Bubela appeared in person, but he bore absolutely no resemblance to what he had looked like on the steppe; he had even changed his horse. He was in a straw hat and a fine shirt worn outside his pants, girded with a tasseled silken sash. Bubela measured the wind with his raised finger, then he came up to the bonfire and saluted the porridge cooks with Sunday greetings.

Otchenashka got up and bowed, while Tikhin, stirring the porridge with a ladle, uttered through his teeth:

“There won’t be any wind today... Right now there’s just a vagrant breeze from the valley.”

“What happened there in the ditch? Hear anything?”

“I was sleeping. Didn’t hear a thing... The windmill’s soundproof, you know. Besides, I’m hard of hearing.”

“And did you hear anything, Otchenashka?”

"I was in such a hurry to get here I forgot to listen."

The watchman practiced his sorcery over the porridge, added some salt to it, put out the burning dung a bit to let the fire die gradually as his Sunday master stood there shaking his head. Then, leaving his horse to graze, Bubela went into the windmill. Inside, he climbed the stairs, pressed his face to the little window, and everything appeared before his eyes with crystal clarity: the ditch, the highway above it, the no-man's steppe glowing lilac with the blooming thistles, and beyond it the white co-op palace with its spires rising out of the mist. The watchman saw a shadow in the window and started to fuss around the pot taking it off the tripod. Otchenashka, kneeling down to face the steppe, decided to whisper her prayer to the end, while the slight breeze raked through the wormwood more and more alarmingly, scrambled up the vanes of the windmill in vain, lacking the force to move them and send them flying into infinity.

The sleuthhound did not arrive in Hlynsk as fast as desired, but it immediately confirmed the hints of the watchman and took up the scent running into the no-man's steppe that had lain in fallow for several years now, from the time of the last land distribution. It had grown wild with an impenetrable forest of thistles and bramble. The bryony had wound its way amid the thistles. This was a breeding place for snakes, bumblebee, and the painfully stinging botflies. Then too, from time to time "Denikin men" rose from the dead here. That field was from two hundred to three hundred hectares, but no one could explain why it had not been cultivated for so long. Throughout all these years parts of it had been allotted only to Yavtukh Holiy and a number of other families with many

children. But when the co-op attempted to seize the idle land, Babylon rose in protest, asserting that it had been the community's land since time immemorial. Sosnin (it happened during his office) gave up, while Sinitsya held that the steppe would be an extra burden for the co-op, which was already in dire straits.

The dog quickly found its bearings in that devilish thicket, but soon lost the scent and started to sneeze, which indicated that the culprits must have strewn their trail with tobacco dust. However, in their haste they had lost a rope tether, new and probably used for the first time. Makedonsky was overjoyed at the find and transferred his quest to Babylon, hoping to find there the owner of the tether in a somewhat different way. He had the most probable opponents of the co-op summoned to the Village Soviet, and, to the cunning laughter of Savka Chibis, who had brought the rascals in his capacity as clerk, asked each one in turn, pointing to the tether: "That yours?" This was a miscalculation, because none of the summoned recognized it, except Fabian the billy goat who dropped in without being summoned, sniffed at the tether with interest and sneezed twice, explicitly verifying thereby that the tether had traces of tobacco powder the criminals had used against the trained dog. By the way, Yavtukh took a liking for the tether. He alone assessed the find with an expert eye and eagerly wished it were his, although he did not fail to consider the odious consequences such a wish might have for him. He held the tether in his fingers for a while, heaved a deep sigh, and said: "No." He could only guess to whom of the Babylonians this fine tether might have belonged. During the first interrogation Fabian the billy goat made friends with the dog, because he, too, felt that he possessed quite a talent as a sleuth, easily picking up the scent of his master



when the latter set off on his rambles through Babylon without his hoofed friend.

As it proved later on, the tether was the product of the Hlynsk ropery. The father and son who had half a share each in the business did not disown their product, but since they had so many customers on every market day, they could not possibly mention anyone who had bought it even at gun point. But, in fact, they had distinctly remembered the blond-browed big landowner from Babylon, who no earlier than during the next to last market day, had bought a sizable batch of their merchandise — halters, hobbles, and a number of tethers of the make Makedonsky was interested in. But who would scare off such a desirable customer from the ropery, which had not yet been closed for the sole reason that no signs of hired labor were revealed there — not counting, of course, that the father was exploiting his son, and that was a purely family matter. Anyway, Makedonsky threatened that he would have to close down their business if they could not name that mysterious customer of theirs. But this had absolutely no effect on them. They could imagine the chaos the surrounding world would plunge into should anyone think of closing down the last ropery in Hlynsk.

The following night the rich of Babylon came into the farmyard of the Singers. They rocked on the swing for some time, and then, humbly and cautiously, approached the window in a tight group — without any weapons and what seemed like without any malice. They rapped on the window: once, then twice. The old mistress of the house emerged out of the darkness and peered through the window. Standing there was Kindrat Bubela — she recognized him by his blond eyebrows; behind him was Pavlyuk with his

three sons — in her younger years, when her Orpheus had gone off on distant journeys through the world as an agent of the Singer company, Pavlyuk, still a young man then, had set his sights on her but was saucily rebuffed; the Skoromnys huddled on one side, feeling ill at ease; there were some others — she could not make them out in the darkness. On seeing her, Bubela pointed to the door. She went over and opened it. She stood before them in a linen shirt and white *namitka* bonnet, her arms crossed over her wilted breasts. The sight of her made Pavlyuk spit out quietly — where had the beauty he had once known disappeared to? Only now did she recognize both of the Radenkys — Khoma and Fedot — and sneaking up behind them was Yavtukh, whose god-mother she happened to be. There were yet another two men at the gates, who made up something like a guard. The woman seemed not to have noticed them at all. She asked her godson:

“What do you want, Yavtukh? All decent people are asleep by now.”

“Why ask me?” Yavtukh became small, hiding behind the Radenkys. “I don’t want anything, I just, er-r, came along with them,” he said with a shrug of his head in their direction.

“Wake up Malva. We’ve got some things to settle,” said Bubela, wiping his sweaty brow with the palm of his hand.

“She isn’t home... rushed off to Hlynsk in the afternoon... You must’ve heard what happened... They cut down a fine boy. And what for, blast their vile souls?”

“As if you didn’t know what for?” said Bubela, his eyes blazing.

“Come on, Kindrat, tell me what’s up! Maybe I’m old and foolish and don’t understand anything...”

“They’re fighting over Malva, but we’re having to

take the rap," Bubela hinted. "That's why we came to say... on behalf of all Babylon... Isn't she home really?"

"I told you, she bolted away on horseback. The first roosters have already crowed, so she should've been home by now. She never spends the night anywhere but home. Do I have to stand here or can I go?"

"What's the use of standing around? Go on, and may God be with you."

The old woman closed the door and shuffled into the house. They were not themselves as they stood there. They had come to Malva to demand that she get out of Babylon, that she go to the co-op or anywhere else before it was too late and she brought some new disaster upon Babylon. Because if there had been one co-op man, there'd be others to frequent this place at a time when the whole of Babylon was seething with hatred for the co-op, fearing the very breath of it. Babylon would go against it, and the guilt might fall on innocent people, say, on those who had come here on Babylon's behalf. They made sure that the stall was empty and the horse gone. While the match was burning, Yavtukh spied a forged snaffle hanging on the harness post, and pocketed it. The snaffle jingled so accusingly that afterward he wondered how he could have disgraced himself so in such noble company, to which he had long striven to belong, but every time felt that he was not in the same boat with them.

From the gates they dispersed in all directions by twos and threes, while Yavtukh had to go to his horrible street overgrown with sneezewort by himself. A thistle had thrived there since Yavtukh's childhood, and when it burst into bloom, the whole street smelled of honey. But now the street's indigene looked like Danko Sokolyuk in his unbuttoned sheepskin coat.

Yavtukh could not turn back, for what would Babylon's bigshots think of him then? He went straight at Danko, but it turned out to be the thistle. Yavtukh spat at the ground with contempt, and then made up his mind not to be afraid, although fright always gripped him by the stomach, but had an outlet in quite a different place...

In the middle of the street, the stolen snaffle jingled ever more ominously in his pocket, and before he realized it, the fright in his guts had gotten the better of him and made him break into a run — Yavtukh in one guise was running away from another Yavtukh, probably the one who had posed as a "Denikin man" that night.

Come morning the news spread all over Babylon: Tikhin Pelekhaty had hung himself in the main windmill. The night was windless, there was no grinding to be done, and no one stood in his way. When Fabian arrived there to take the measurements for the coffin, the old man, already taken down from the noose, was lying covered with a cloth in the windmill. The candles were burning, and Otchenashka was surreptitiously whispering her prayers over him. In taking the measurements, the coffin-maker did not see any traces of violence or struggle on the deceased, the death having been caused by his own free will. Just as Fabian was about to leave and shoving the folding rule into his bootleg, Otchenashka stopped him, took him by the hand and led him up the stairs to the window under the roof. She looked frightening on the steps and led him almost by force. At the top she listened intently to see whether there was anyone around, and quietly told him:

"Take a look, sonny. But take a good look. Do you see anything there?"

A grand panorama unfolded before him, yet Fabian did not see anything distinctive or unusual in it: the co-op ricks, the white palace showing through the mist, the fallow land without a single living soul, and closer to the windmill the geese herders crowding the stubble fields to let their flocks peck the ears of grain. There seemed to be nothing that could excite Otchenashka. That's because she's been left all alone here with the hanged man, thought Fabian. Under no circumstances should this have been allowed. The coffin-maker himself wouldn't have agreed to stay here all by himself for anything, although he had known the deceased quite well for many years and had visited him for a taste of his porridge.

"Well, sonny?" asked the old one.

"I see geese, herders. Well, what else... I see everything from here. The fallow land, Abyssinia..."

"But he saw them."

"Who, granny?"

"As if you didn't know who? That's why he died such a death," she said and left. He stayed at the window for a long time until the appearance of the brisk Babylon grannies dressed in black—the sempiternal orderlies and supervisors of extinguished lives.

As Fabian was planing the coffin, he could not get rid of the feeling that some savage wraiths were closing in on him. When Bubela arrived, he was working on the lid already. Fabian did not even hear him stop his carriage and cross the threshold. He inspected the coffin, tapped it all over, praised Fabian for his diligence, then he took out his purse and paid the craftsman as much as if he were buying it for himself.

"He was a fine man, so let's arrange a fine funeral for him. Why not? They're slaughtering a bull-calf at

the farmstead; the Radenkys are distilling *horilka*, and we'll invite all our customers to chase the sorrow and fright away from the windmills. Let him rest in peace... By the way, Levko, couldn't you combine this job" — he pointed at the coffin — "with his. The work's easy — wind or no wind you get your pay. To put it short, you could be the windmill watchman. Think about it, Levko, 'cause we have to look for someone anyway."

"All right, I'll think about it. But later. Right now it'd seem as if I were taking a live man's place."

"I understand. I'm not saying it has to be right away. First we'll bury him and forget about it; then a wind or two will blow. And after that you're in. We'll come to terms, if you're willing."

"I'll think about it."

"Well, well, give it some thought. By the way, where's your billy goat?"

"Lunching somewhere, that fiend."

"I don't remember seeing him around our farmstead lately."

"Oh, he's got enough to attend to in Babylon."

"Did you take the measurements properly?"

"I couldn't do it without measuring first."

"All right, finish up... God help you... The old man could still have been alive. But it looks like that was his sign in the heavens. All of us will go up, and Fabian will take the measurements for all of us one of these days. Ha-ha-ha. And then someone else will pare a coffin for him..."

"That's something I'll take care of myself. If a man's heart doesn't want to die, he won't pay his debt to nature. That is, unless he's strung up on a crossbeam by force..."

"What are you driving at, Levko?"

"At the fact, Kindrat Ostapovich, that I can't accept

your money for this coffin. Tikhin was a friend of mine, and I don't make a profit on friends."

"Have you made yourself a fortune or what?"

"No, I'm always short on cash, but not that kind of cash..."

"Money doesn't smell. Why do you have to spend it on a man whose funeral we'll pay for ourselves?"

"That's generous of you, but still, Kindrat Ostapovich, take the money back."

"Do you take commissions ahead of time?"

"Yes, but it's a strange arrangement with the coffin standing ready in the loft while the man keeps on living. There are different kinds of foresight, you know..."

"If you're so superstitious about money, take my measurements and consider this a down payment."

"I don't measure the living."

"How do you go about it then? By sight?"

Bubela's eyes unexpectedly tripped over the carpenter's ax of the coffin-maker, and gazed at its edge. The ax lay on the workbench amidst the shavings; Fabian had inherited it from Pankrat along with his other tools. Bubela nervously stroked his bushy eyebrow with his fingertips and then glanced through the window to see whether his horse was standing by the carriage.

"I'm of such age that I can already afford to think about a shell for myself..."

"All right. Go over to the wall. Right here. Bonifatius has got his mark there, so you might as well have yours too. Stand straight. Drop your hands. Take off your hat; you'll have to part with it anyway. And raise your chin. Like that..."

"Why should Bonifatius be in a hurry?"

"After a fight with Zosia he came running here, saying he was going to kill himself. So I took his

measurements. But then they made up and are living just as before." Fabian stepped back and sized up his customer with a smile under his spectacles. "You'll look fine. Bonifatius turned pale when I made a notch over his head. But I like you. You'll go right on living, Kindrat Ostapovich..." He took up the ax, got onto the edge of a bench, and made the notch in the wall.

The client's eyebrows were drenched with sweat.

"Is that all?"

"The coffin will be ready by Mary the Protectress' Day. Or maybe even earlier."

"I'm in no hurry, Levko." He walked away from the wall and shot a glance at the notch. "See, how simple everything is in this unstable world. There was a great Bubela, and now it already seems he's no more. Wasn't that you had in mind?"

"I don't get you, Kindrat Ostapovich."

"I'd advise you, Levko, to think about your notch as well... So long!"

"The first coffin I ever made was for me. I'm keeping it in the loft. What kind of a craftsman would I be if I hadn't taken care of my own shell... A real sarcophagus is ready and waiting, if you please..."

## *Chapter 8*

With each passing day the dust raised by the Hlynsk cattle herd was changing in color from warm to somber hues. Autumn was imperceptibly creeping up. Nature brooks no duplicity in its closed cycle. No sooner do the warm regions of the world stir to life and the first wedge of a crane flock hangs over Hlynsk, as if measuring its path to the south with a string, than in Hlynsk itself, on the wind-swept market



square (not so long ago it was swept by the peg-legged Austrian Schwarz), the dogs start their autumn rut — a sign that summer has come to an end, that the children of Hlynsk have had their fill of playing in the dust, that the lull would end and the fair would draw crowds from everywhere. Then for some time Hlynsk would seem to be the hub of the universe, breaking all conventional notions of boundaries and distances.

But so far, the lazy, piebald Hlynsk herd was slowly moving out onto the steppe from this little-known capital. The sheep were bleating in a panicky and foolish way as if they were being driven away forever, and the calves, separated from the cows, trotted with spiky muzzles on their snouts to prevent them from reaching for the wholesome milk, which by the very same eternal laws of nature should have been theirs.

Pilip Makedonsky was walking to work with his ever present Mauser pistol. He was heavy and tired, and seemed to have been moulded out of clay that very night for lack of any other material, after which life had been breathed into his soul, and at the last minute a Mauser fixed way down below his right hip as a warning. When the rains would start to pour and everything would seem to be swallowed up in a vicious mire, the Mauser would have to be pulled up a bit, and the menacing, mystical effect of that threatening weapon would be lost on the local petty-bourgeois public unlike now when it dangled almost to the ground. He walked, as usual, in the company of Malko, a small dog which, sauntering behind him at a respectful distance, was puffed up with a sense of valor and what appeared to be a feeling close to self-sacrifice.

The autumn's first rutting encounter was raging in the empty market square set with countless stalls built

during the NEP. A mangy bitch, which in better times would not even have been worth turning one's nose up at, was the cause of a scuffle among some huge curs which Malko had known since they were puppies, for small of size as it was, it had quite a few years as a dog to its credit. Scenting the rut, Malko forgot about its master and, without a second thought, flung itself into the churning maelstrom of passions. While the huge dogs were engaged in a deadly fight between themselves, Malko whirled like a top around their elected flame, making its master go into such raptures over the trick that he would have forgotten about his high status in Hlynsk if not for the Babylon billy goat which, in all his chastity and innocence, had popped up in the square. On recognizing his old friend, Makedonsky smiled involuntarily and almost greeted him.

For the second time now, before setting out at dawn to Hlynsk for the inquest, Panko Kochubei was making the rounds of the wagons accompanied by Bonifatius to make sure that both Fabians were there. In times of distress for Babylon, interest in them increased considerably, because one added some wisdom, which has the peculiar habit of evaporating from man in moments of despair, while the other was the embodiment of serenity for the Babylonians. "We're here!" replied the philosopher from Danko's wagon. The Fabians introduced some animation to these trips to Hlynsk. Funny as it may seem, the hushed crowd on the wagons subconsciously entertained the hope that everything could really be blamed on the billy goat had there been a way to prove his complicity in the crime against the co-op. Someone even suggested: "Why do they think in Hlynsk that a billy goat can't shoot? That Babylon goat can do anything..."

On the way to Hlynsk everyone was unusually inventive, brave and witty, knowing how to defend themselves and what to say at the inquest, but the moment they confronted the incorruptible and menacing Makedonsky, their tongues grew numb, dried to the palate, and their brains turned to jelly. Some of them had attacks of diarrhea, and while in its throes, there was no chance of saying anything smart in one's defense. Matviy Husak, for instance, was so beset by it that he said such frothy nonsense about Babylon Makedonsky himself had to stop him.

At the inquest Kindrat Bubela conducted himself more calmly than the rest. He took a bagful of rusks with him, as well as several pieces of pork fat, an extra pair of boots and a sheepskin coat, because the inquest proceeded very unevenly, alternately moving away from and drawing closer to his personality. When he was asked: "Would you please tell the inquest commission about your attitude toward the co-op, citizen Bubela," he would reply one and the same thing every time: "I've absolutely no grudge against it and live in peace with it." Yet Bubela sensed from the whole course of events that the inquest imperceptibly zeroed in on him as the driving force in this episode. The thing that was most damaging to him was the death of the windmill watchman. Now he realized that he had miscalculated, probably even fatally; but on the other hand he was somewhat relieved that the inquest commission had lost the most compromising of witnesses forever. So Bubela made transparent hints about Danko and his long-standing relationship with Malva to reduce the case to a usual love affair and revenge provoked by jealousy. But quite unexpectedly for Bubela and for some of the others, Yavtukh passionately started to defend Danko

who hitherto had been his bitterest enemy. He bowed to the inquest commission as became an innocent and polite man, and swore by all his eight children (in this case he wasn't running any risk should he act against his conscience) that he, Yavtukh, was telling the truth and nothing but the truth. During the inquest he kept insisting that he had been sleeping like a log that night because all day he had carted sheaves from the field and the wagon had overturned twice with him on top, and that had meant double work; besides, Prisia bound such big sheaves, which unlike the pitiable bundles of the Skoromnys or the Bezkorovainys or some of the others, would overtax anyone. But he'd hate to deceive the inquest commission by withholding that on the fateful evening — up till midnight — his neighbors had been wildly carousing and hammering away at a stove lid with spoons, apparently resorting to this outwardly innocent trick to lure his Prisia out of the house since they had long had affections for her. In their reveling the Sokolyuks were backed by both of the Fabians who never missed an opportunity to have a good evening meal anywhere, since they had no plot of land of their own and lived from hand to mouth. Both Fabians were present at the inquest and the commission could question them if it wished.

Then everyone fell quiet. Yavtukh also grew quiet in front of the inquest commission, after which he went over to the gist of the matter: after their riotous carousing in the evening, the Sokolyuks were sleeping on sheepskin coats in their farmyard and surely did not hear what went on that night. Now, would it be possible to suppose that people who had just been released from jail and celebrated their freedom so uproariously should have wished to land there a second time? Asked why he had not roused them from

sleep when he heard the first shot in the gully, Yavtukh answered even more convincingly:

“Me wake them up? They can go to hell! I’d wish they’d sleep till doomsday.”

That was all Yavtukh had to say regarding the gist of the matter. As for the “Denikin men,” he had heard that such had turned up in Babylon, but what did he have to do with them, when in 1919 he had fought them at Chuprinka for several days on end in the cavalry under the division commander Krivoruchko. To prove his point, he had brought along a paper signed by Comrade Hoffman, the commissar of Krivoruchko. To tell the truth, the paper had been ruined by woodworms, because he had kept it in a small box beside the large chest in his house, but it was not counterfeit in any way, the inquest commission could rest assured of that, because he, Yavtukh, simply loved to keep everything as proof. In addition, he asked to be forgiven if he had erred before the commission or used a loose expression, since after all, his legs were tight, as well as his guts and the rest of his body. Those were the symptoms of diarrhea, from which there wasn’t a single opportunity to escape in all of Hlynsk.

Unlike the others, Yavtukh emerged from the inquest looking like he had won, and made straight for the wagons where the horses were munching greedily on the oats in their feedbags. Under the wagons a council was being held by the Babylon bigwigs to which Yavtukh also claimed to belong for some unknown reason, although his wagon was comparable to theirs only in that its shaft pointed arrogantly in the same direction — home, toward Babylon, while his horse didn’t even have a feedbag, picking up leftovers from the ladderbeam, and he himself had to make do on cucumbers from the kitchen garden and bread baked of unbolted flour.

“Well, how was it in there, Yavtukh?” asked the Radenky brothers, one of whom, Fedot, was Yavtukh’s crony from the days when he had been a poor peasant.

“I showed them what we’re worth!” boasted Yavtukh undoing the bag with the cucumbers.

He sat down under his wagon, cut the cucumbers in halves, sprinkled them with salt of a color close to dust, and after rubbing one half against the other, ate them with as much relish as if he had just now stepped out of the furrow he had been plowing. Nothing was so exhausting as an inquest at which you had to help out your bitterest adversary to avoid ruining yourself.

As has already been stated, the Babylon community was headed by Panko Kochubei, which means that at this juncture he alone was responsible for everyone, guilty and innocent alike. No one could leave the group without his permission, and everyone had to be ready on the mark, because they did not know who would be the next to be questioned by the inquest commission. The only exception to the rule was Fabian the billy goat who was permitted to ramble through Hlynsk and call on his local relatives tethered in the meager pastures. But if he stayed away too long, one of the nimblest men was sent to bring him back to the militia station in case he was wanted for a confrontation or something of the sort.

When the mustachioed militiaman came out onto the porch and called out the name of one of the Babylonians, the billy goat would get to his feet and move hastily — albeit retaining his sense of dignity — toward the porch, every time evoking greater delight in the militiaman. The sullen crowd would become animated and merrier, while the militiaman would shed his severity, and in the end meet every one of the billy goat’s approaches with a kind human snicker. Thanks to the billy goat and some other optimists,

Babylon outwardly conducted itself with dignity and did not lose heart, although there were no grounds for optimism.

Bubela insisted that it was better to undo one man rather than the whole of Babylon which Hlynsk had frowned upon with enmity for a long time. The course of the inquest was followed by the very district chairman Comrade Chuprina from Chuprinka, whose hostility toward Babylon was well known. Emulating the great men of the past, he had repeatedly urged that Babylon be razed to the ground. Now he had a plausible pretext for this purpose. The insignificant village of Chuprinka was represented here by a district chairman, while the proud Babylon had no one in Hlynsk to stand up for it or help it in distress. Thus they had to rely on themselves without expecting any help from Chuprina from Chuprinka. These thoughts matured gradually and gained a conclusive hold on everyone in the wagons and under them. The inquest commission itself seemed to be waiting for such a countermove on the part of the Babylonians. Their choice fell on Danko Sokolyuk.

Danko sensed this when they were still driving out of Babylon. His uncle twice removed, Panko Kochubei, hinted that Babylon had exhausted itself, that the people's nerves would not hold, so someone had to atone for everyone this time, for which Babylon would unfailingly give proper due to the memory of the great man and patriot. Danko was glanced at with sorrow and sympathy, and during the journey he was spoken of as a hero who had been chosen not by them but by fate itself. At first Danko had not the slightest fear in his heart, but when the wagons stopped in their usual place, the martyr's crown of thorns dropped from his head and he was himself again, possessed of all the vulnerabilities inherent in

man. The inquest had not started yet, but when he wanted to take a walk with the billy goat through the awakening town of Hlynsk, his uncle twice removed stopped him: "No, Danko, you have to stay here; you might be the first one to get called in." Danko flared up as he realized that the uncle was afraid he would run away. That was a psychological miscalculation on the part of Panko Kochubei who had a wonderful knowledge of hogs but knew little about the proud nature of man. The doomed cannot stand to be deprived of their last moment of freedom. Danko could not divulge that this morning he loved Malva more than ever before and wanted to go to the hospital to bid her farewell. He had a great urge to thank her for not having betrayed him at the inquest. "All right, uncle," said Danko and returned to the wagon. He lay there on his back, chewing on straw stalks. In his mind's eye he saw Indian summer on the Abyssinian hills, the nights he had spent there with Malva, and her laughter filled his head to the brim. Probably no other woman could laugh as softly as Malva and leave that laughter suspended in the air as if it were almost alive. They said that she had confronted Makedonsky as calmly as Yavtukh had.

The billy goat was standing by the wagon just then, engrossed in thought at the sight of the wheel, which to him was perhaps the greatest and most unfathomable creation of the human mind, but nonetheless he was the first to react to the appearance of the mustachioed militiaman, as if he had been waiting to see whose name would be called. The mustachioed representative of law and order, who, as the Babylonians believed, knew everything in advance, surveyed the silent crowd, obviously looked for someone in particular, and, stopping his eyes on Danko, proclaimed impassively:



“Citizen Sokolyuk Danko Mikolovich...” — and corrected himself — “Mikolaiovich.”

The billy goat made for the porch and a quiet snicker arose from the Babylonians, who could now breathe easily for the first time, assuming that their agony was coming to an end. The billy goat, not yet worn out by the sweltering heat, was approaching the porch so graciously and with such ecstatic elation that he evoked spontaneous delight even in those who hitherto had doubts as to his intelligence. Stopping before the mustachioed militiaman, he looked him up and down with his billy-goat gaze, and then took on a militant pose, arching his back and making it clear to the mustachioed that he would force his way into the inquest if he were not be let through freely. The mustachioed did not know that the billy goat had been schooled well at the Babylon Village Soviet, where he was used to being treated with more respect, and precautiously closed the door before the horned creature. The billy goat lost his nerve, turned round slowly as quadrupeds usually do, and went away; instead, Danko limped up to the porch, because when he had fallen into the gully, he had sprained his leg and under other circumstances should have been lying still in bed.

“Bid farewell to the people,” whispered the mustachioed, when Danko got up to the porch.

“Kind people,” said Danko, turning to them. “I say that I didn’t shoot at the co-op man. Here’s the sign of the cross on that: I didn’t shoot him!!! But if you so desire my death, I’ll go...” Out of his pocket he drew a bundle of keys — for the house, for the horses’ iron tethers and for something else, said “The keys!” for no apparent reason, and threw them to Lukian on his wagon. Pushing aside the mustachioed militiaman, he disappeared, maybe for ever.

The horses were snorting into the feedbags, the foals, tired from the journey, were lying in the ergot, and someone was heard drinking water out of a jar. Then the philosopher got to his feet, set his spectacles aright, and seemed to hesitate for a moment as if making up his mind. Bubela knit his blond brows, as he pierced the philosopher with a sullen look from under the wagon: Now, what's he up to, that beggar? Fabian felt the flesh on his back creep.

"Let them call for the windmill watchman. He knows who shot the boy..."

"What are you blabbering about, you fool? What watchman?" said Panko Kochubei and came out of the shade where he was just about to have his breakfast, holding a hard-boiled egg in his hand.

"You yourself know damned well what watchman I mean."

"Why trouble a dead man in his grave?"

"Otchenashka is alive. Let them call for her."

"Now you see for yourselves that he's a nut," said Bubela, getting up from under his wagon. "His billy goat's got more brains than he does."

"Everybody knows that."

"Yeah, ever since he renounced his claim..."

"And swapped a horse for spectacles..."

"A philosopher indeed! Ha-ha-ha!"

And they started to make fun of him with sardonic, horrible and wild laughter.

The mustachioed militiaman ran out onto the porch and said that they were interfering with the inquest. The bespectacled Fabian looked around in confusion, bowed to the people as if he were apologizing before them, then he walked up to the wagon, twisted a wisp of straw in his hand, and started to clean his boots of dust. Dressed for Hlynsk in his Sunday best, he buttoned the collar of his blue satin shirt, adjusted

the tassles on his belt, checked to see if he had a handkerchief in his pocket, and then asked Lukian:

"Where's the District Party Committee in this place?"

"What do you need the committee for? Don't you see they're all one bunch. Even the uncle is on their side..."

"I'll go see Comrade Teslya."

"It's at the end of the street. By the old mill."

Panko Kochubei nearly choked on his hard-boiled egg, which made Yavtukh break into utterly inappropriate laughter under his wagon where he had everything spread out by now: bread, salt, and cucumbers.

"Make him come back," said Bubela more in the form of a plea than an order.

But neither Panko Kochubei, who by then had forced the egg down his throat, nor Bonifatius tried to stop him (they alone had the right to do so). Leaving their food under the wagons, the men surrounded Lukian, all of them fearsome and merciless. Bubela grabbed Lukian by the front of his embroidered shirt and it ripped somewhere along the seams.

"Don't touch me," said Lukian, pushing Bubela away.

"Why did the coffin-maker go over there?" Bubela breathed heavily.

"I don't know," Lukian said quietly.

"The hell you don't, you bastard." And with all his might he pushed Lukian who reeled and went down in a pratfall under the wagon.

"What did you do that for?" A pale Bonifatius rose in front of Bubela.

Bubela grew small, realizing that he had patently overestimated the unity of his ranks, and tried to back away from Bonifatius, but Bonifatius blocked his way. All the years the Carmelite had been at the Village

Soviet, Bubela ground his grain without the peck as a fee, and now he could not pardon him such ingratitude.

“You’re ugly as a baboon! I can’t imagine how Zosia sleeps in the same bed with you! You’re the freak of Babylon!”

What followed next defied all the Babylonians’ notions about Bonifatius. He raised his hand on Bubela himself. Bubela’s cap fell off his head and the next instant he almost found himself at the feedbag of the Pavlyuks’ horses which were quietly munching on their oats. Pavlyuk and his sons were having breakfast under their wagon; the horses, however, were not unhitched, they shied from Bubela, and the Pavlyuks screamed under the wheels. Regaining his composure, Bubela rushed to his wagon, grabbed the brush out of a pail of axle grease which he kept in the back, and advanced on Bonifatius with it. By now Lukian was on his feet, detaching the whiffletree from the wagon; Yavtukh had abandoned his miserly feast and was making up his mind what to arm himself with and whose side to take in the fracas which, so he believed, was inevitable and even indispensable for the inquest; the Radenky brothers had armed themselves with ladderbeam supports and took up defensive positions at their wagon; Pavlyuk and his three sons had by now gotten to their feet; Matviy Husak was hastily taking the neckstraps off the shaft; the Skoromnys, who had hitherto had the reputation of being quiet and excessively peaceable people, were readying for battle; and the Bezkorovainys were in a hurry to get the bridles off their horses... Panko Kochubei had gotten out from under his wagon and was in vain urging the wrought-up community to make peace.

The battle flared up, ruthless and irrepressible. Bubela was swinging his brush with the axle grease,

sparing neither new shirts nor faces. Lukian fought his way through the crowd in his direction, clubbing anyone who came his way with the whiffletree. The Radenky brothers fought like lions until Bonifatius scattered them. The Skoromnys — father and two sons, who were even ashamed of eating in the presence of others, let alone fighting — were now settling some old scores with the Pavlyuks, wielding their fists so heroically that Panko Kochubei, still on his wagon, was enraptured by the sight. The bridles of the Bezkorovainys were bearing down on the heads like slings. Yavtukh was fighting with a cherry whip handle; having sided with no particular camp, he alternately pounced on friends and foes alike until Matviy Husak lashed him with the iron chains from the neckstraps for inconsistency, which made Yavtukh instantly side with Bonifatius, that is join the poor whom Bubela kept marking with his grease mop until someone whacked it out of his hand.

Seeing that peaceful means would yield nothing, Panko Kochubei pulled the shaft out of his wagon, raised it as high as he could, and was about to bring it down on the heads of those imbeciles, aiming in the first place, of course, at Bonifatius as the most probable aspirant to the office of Village Soviet chairman. Understandably, the hornbeam shaft would have knocked the tar out of more than just Bonifatius were it not for an unexpected blow dealt to the chairman by Fabian the billy goat from the rear. He flew into a rage and picked up Panko on his horns just at the moment when the shaft was raised for the blow. In all probability the billy goat had not recognized the chairman in the heat of the moment, because otherwise he would not have allowed himself such a thing. In this way — retreating and charging — he picked a number of other hotheads on his horns, including

Bonifatius who was about to conclude that the fight had ended in his favor.

After the demented community had vented its fury and finished fighting, a sort of a relief settled under the wagons, hilarious laughter burst out in one corner, then in another, and only the old Pavlyuk was moaning under the wagon, unable to push his old hernia back into place. Someone suggested they should make up so as not to return enemies to Babylon. Yavtukh wanted to respond to the suggestion with enthusiasm, but since during the fray he had torn his pants in a most conspicuous place and could not address the people, he had to sit under his wagon for the rest of the day. The fight did not earn him great glory, and in both camps he was spoken of with equal contempt as a double-dealer. Later on, when they were making peace in the tavern, he was not called to any group, and so had to loosen his purse strings, which made his face take on a tragic look.

Teslya was already at work, standing at the washed window and taking in Hlynsk with all of its morning colors, sounds and rhythms which, for a long time after Kramatorsk, he could not get used to.

He had just been observing the proud, beautiful mongrels, obsessed, brave, and extremely handsome in their demeanor. But they would inevitably be caught one after another by the poundkeepers, put in cages, and then, as if for spite, driven through the whole of Hlynsk to the pound where they would come to their senses, whine thinly like hornets in the heat, and only the bitches, the cause of all madness, would behave with contempt in those coops, sitting quietly and grandly on their haunches and looking at the essentially miserly lot of mutts they had bound their destinies with. In the pound there was quite a different

set of laws than the ones that had taken shape for them in the Hlynsk of NEP times. Not so long ago they had enjoyed a free life. If they were drowned in the Southern Bug, it was when they were still blind pups. Even the poorest household could not do without them, but now the war against the dogs had become a fad, and the poundmen were so keen on plying their trade that they burst into farmyards with their crooks in broad daylight and grabbed some of the hapless creatures before the very eyes of their masters. Then, at the pound, the color and weight of each cur was recorded, along with its name, if it had one, as were the name or nickname of its master, as if it really had anything to do with history. Following the autumn ruts, a number of fur-lined coats appeared in Hlynsk. And Maxim Teslya alone did not fall for this fashion but kept on wearing the shabby greatcoat in which he had arrived from Kramatorsk, although it had long been incapable of holding the least of warmth over his soul.

On the steppe the winds banded together as if they came from the black manes of horses; the birds of passage banded together to cry out suddenly over Hlynsk from the abyss of the night; and here domestic geese strove to rise into the sky, filling Hlynsk with the battle cries of feeble-winged creatures. At such moments he would also get the urge to hit the road.

He would call Khoma, a coachman employed at the District Party Committee, and order him to hitch up the horses. By the dimples on Teslya's cheeks Khoma guessed that they would have to make a trip to the co-op, which he did not look forward to. There he would have to reharness the horse from the britzka to a rack wagon and join Teslya in stacking the sheaves of wheat. Sometimes this went on for days on end. Khoma would completely forget that he was dealing

with the secretary of the District Party Committee and take the liberty of shouting at Teslya in the presence of the co-op members until Klim Sinitsya put an end to this sort of impropriety by reminding Khoma that he was only the coachman at the District Party Committee and not its organization bureau manager, Ruban. The manager, sensing Teslya's laxity, sometimes ventured to raise his voice at Teslya, although he treated him with respect, valuing Teslya for his self-control, quiet disposition and rare ability to stay on good relations with his subordinates without lapsing into familiarity or condescension. As for Sinitsya, he was impressed by Teslya's foresight, caution, and philosophical frame of mind; but, as a rule, such men as he could not make the best of any of these qualities in their private lives and at times committed gross errors. Generally such people are impractical, but their public function consists of taking it upon themselves to be the brakes of history at its sharp turns lest everything go topsy-turvy. Such people are endowed with wisdom, and power does not spoil them, even though an organization manager or District Committee coachman might take the liberty of shouting at them once in a while. For all that, Klim Sinitsya had an ever growing respect for Teslya, seeing in him an ideal secretary of a District Party Committee in such a place as Hlynsk.

Teslya spent the night at Klim's home, in his room, while Khoma slept in the stable loft. Late into the night the secretary and chairman would deliberate on the world revolution and what effect it would have on Hlynsk District, while Khoma and the co-op night watchman were countering it with all sorts of arguments. In the morning both parties would meet in the co-op canteen and silently slurp the *kulish* corn gruel seasoned with rancid sheep tallow. Khoma made the



sign of the cross, as if to show that he wished to be saved from such food, but Teslya reproved him pointedly: "Khoma Lelkovich, you're forgetting that you work in a District Party Committee." Khoma would apologize, but the next morning, the whole scene would be repeated.

Teslya received Fabian not without a certain degree of bias, but after inquiring about the personality and intentions of his visitor, he became perceptibly softer, and the dimples on his cheeks grew deeper. He heard the philosopher out attentively, hinting that he, Teslya, was not interfering with the course of the inquest, although he was not indifferent to it either, because here was a case of political and class nature, and the enemy, whoever he was, had to be punished.

"We're sitting on a powder keg, my friend. There's only a scattering of us, seven communists and one candidate member in the whole district. As for Hlynsk, you see for itself what it's like. It's got everything: former Denikin and Petlura soldiers and NEP men galore. And who owns the farmsteads, windmills, sawmills and oil-presses in Hlynsk? Everyone's lying low, lurking and waiting.... Stir them up, and there'll be no end to the trouble. Private ownership, more than anything else, has a strong grip on people. Even if you haven't got it, even if you're only dreaming about it. I see you're a clever man and you understand what that could lead to. Either the co-op gets the upper hand, or we'll breed a new bourgeoisie, and that'll be curtains for us. Now you, Levko Khorobry, where will you choose to be when the battle breaks out?..."

"I've got nothing to lose, Comrade Teslya. I saw that of all fetters, the heaviest to bear are your own, and got rid of mine. I renounced my claim, sold the horse, even the billy goat has in fact never been my property, since it belongs to all of Babylon. I've got

such a heart, Comrade Teslya, that if I were plastered with money it wouldn't last me till the end of the day, because I'd give it away to people and turn into the very same Levko Khorobry again. The only man in Babylon who doesn't lock his gates at night, 'cause he's got none, and who never closes his door unless it's cold is me, Fabian. But apart from that, Babylon has the Radenky brothers who own a new windmill, Yavtukh Holiy who's raked up land for his kids; there are the Skoromnys and the Bezkorovainys — I won't go into details about the whole of Babylon, but all of them are striving to get some place out there under the wagons..."

Bubela, lying on his back, coughed intermittently under the reach of the wagon. His head rested on the little bag packed with boots, a sheepskin coat, rusks, and pork fat that smelled of the loft and mice. Bubela had never met Teslya, he only knew that he lodged at the Snigurs with whom he was well acquainted, and this fact alone put his heart at ease. More than anything else Bubela was afraid of a confrontation with the victim. Involuntarily he smoothed his blond eyebrows with saliva, for probably no one had such conspicuous eyebrows as he. Everything else, the rope tether that had been found included, worried him less. They had summoned Leiba from the Hlynsk ropery, but he had spread his hands in a gesture of ignorance at the sight of the tether. Well done, Leiba, well done, Judaic sage! Glory to you for all times to come in this world! What Christian would have been capable of caring so much for his ropery? Bubela was ready right then and there to give a hundred Yavtukhs for one Leiba.

Yavtukh had procured a large needle from somewhere, probably from Bonifatius who believed that

anything might come in handy on a journey, and hid himself under the wagon in his underwear to mend his pants in case he were called before the inquest commission again. That's what a beggar gets from thrusting his nose into a brawl.

"Yavtukh!"

"Sorry, but I can't get up. What you want?"

"Don't disgrace Babylon. Here, take some money and buy yourself some cloth for a new pair of pants, a good-for-nothing though you may be."

Yavtukh's face grew long, his eyes blinked dazedly, the needle went running like a shuttle, for no one could have imagined how much he loathed those pants and how ashamed he was to wear them in public. During the night it was a minor nuisance, but in the daytime it was a real torture. They kept him from thinking freely, breathing and walking in this world, which made him look even funnier. But putting them on for the last time he would appreciate their real value, because he didn't have the slightest idea what would be in store for him if he put on new pants. The thread slipped out of the needle eye and, excited as he was, he couldn't get it back through again.

"I'm coming, I'm coming, Kindrat Ostapovich," he mumbled over and over again.

Danko was led out, told to get onto the wagon, and driven off somewhere under escort this time. Bubela sent the Radenkys over to the mustachioed militiaman on the porch to find out what was happening. Danko was to be brought face to face with Yavorsky at the hospital. Yavorsky would identify him, and that would be the end of the matter.

And here money was being handed out for a new pair of pants.

"I'll give it back," Yavtukh jabbered. "It couldn't be any other way, could it? I'll give it back by all means,

I will. In these matters I'm more reliable than anyone else..."

"You're a funny sort, Yavtukh. Pray to God that everything will turn out all right. Do you think I can only afford to buy one pair of pants? That's nothing for me. Wear them to your heart's content... What do you think, will he recognize him or not?"

Yavtukh kept silence. For however miserable a man might be at heart, he will invariably try to regain his human poise in front of a killer. What he lacked was that little tug of willpower to fling Bubela's money into his face; his strength failed him, and he hated himself for it.

Malva sat at the feet of the wounded young man, wearing a white smock and hospital slippers. She had not left his bedside all these days, except for the couple of hours she had been called to the inquest. The poet gave a laugh on recognizing Danko and recalling the white sheepskin coat detach itself from its master and fly into the gully.

"Did you find your coat then?" Volodya wondered.

"I did... On the wild apricot tree. Got stuck right on the top. Could barely shake it down."

"Did you really believe I wanted to kill you?"

"It would have been better if you had than leaving me to go through all these tortures now. How could I have been in the ditch ahead of you, if I were lying unconscious in the gully?"

"He wasn't with them... No, he wasn't. Write it down, Comrade Makedonsky. That's my final word."

Apparently, it was hard for the young man to talk. Danko got down on his knees by his bedside and burst out crying like a little kid. The guards barely managed to drag him out of the ward. He had noticed that there in the hospital, the young man had grown a fluff of a mustache, probably on the impulse of love, and his

shock of hair, sticking out irrepressibly as before, was ready to withstand any suffering whatsoever for the sake of Malva. Then Danko realized what had made Malva fall in love with the audaciously spirited young man. It was the nobility and grandeur of his soul.

They returned to Babylon without Kindrat Bubela. His wagon and horses were taken home by the Radenkys. Bubela had asked them to look after the wagon and the windmill. Actors by nature, the Radenkys wrung a tear from their eyes on parting. But in fact both of them thought that now the winds would work double time for them, while Bubela's giant would stand nearby with drooping vanes. In the Sokolyuks' wagon the billy goat was sleeping, exhausted not so much by the inquest as by the journey to Hlynsk. The philosopher should have been sad at having lost the position of windmill watchman, but crank that he was, he was more worried about Teslya's finding it difficult to lead an entire district, above which almost the whole of the Galaxy spread for millions of kilometers.

## *Chapter 9*

The dawns in Hlynsk break suddenly as if a gust of wind sweeps them there along with the smells of the reaped steppe. The poet never missed these moments when he, with some help from Malva, would get into an old armchair with a dragon's head on its back (the armchair had been found in the hospital loft and was placed near the window by permission of the doctor). In Hlynsk the trebly young cockerels pitted their vocal abilities against each other, forcing their wearied elders into silence. It was funny hearing a second-part performer's voice crack when, having sensed his

vocal talent for the first time, he unexpectedly let out a squeak on the highest note and then tragically stepped down from the stage. Those flunkers reminded the poet of his childhood in the orphanage and his first verse, which had seemed such a wonder to him, although no one in Hlynsk would acknowledge his poems until the day the former co-op chairman Sosnin visited the orphanage, heard the verse, and divined a poet in the boy. The poems were about the orphanage, about the girl Fedortsia, and his love for her. Sosnin took the poet with him to the co-op, and left Fedortsia behind in the orphanage. After growing disappointed with the poet, who constantly lauded the white swans in the co-op lake, Sosnin sent him to Kostroma to attend courses in cheese-making, probably figuring that this trade was very much akin to poetry. Back from his honorary exile a year later, the cheese-maker found Fedortsia was no longer in Hlynsk. Besides that, the orphanage had come apart because its many overage charges could not be kept in hand. Fedortsia had left for some big city. She was of fair complexion and light as dandelion fluff, so the wind could sweep her away anywhere it pleased.

At night when the hospital quieted down and plunged into a fitful sleep, Malva would get into the armchair, make herself as comfortable as she could in it, curling her legs beneath her, and start reading aloud a book by Maine Reed which had been found in the loft along with the armchair. It was said that Count Arnautov, the founder of the hospital, had died of asthma in that armchair. The Maine Reed must have also been his. She read until the patient grew tired and fell asleep from her reading. The kerosene lamp fumed, so Malva would appear in the corridor the next morning with traces of lampblack on her nose.

That dawn everything happened as usual. As Malva helped the sick man into the armchair, a whole chorus of roosters raised their voices over Hlynsk, and the poet asked her:

“Malva, why are the roosters silent?”

Then the world, Hlynsk included, turned head over heels before his eyes; the poet started to thrash the air with his arms; at Malva’s cry Varya Shatrova, the head surgical nurse, rushed into the ward and pointed Malva toward the door. But Malva understood that gesture as an order to summon the doctor.

The doctor was a native of Mirgorod and was descended from the famous Shamrai family of physicians, one of whose forebears was supposed to have administered to Gogol’s father himself. This was Shamrai’s first job after medical school. He lived by himself in a little room behind the apothecary, which explained why his room always smelled of medicines. The smell forced him to take out the window sash and cover the opening with gauze to keep out the flies. The doctor slept without any underwear, a habit he kept from his student days when he had had to save on fresh linen. This nakedness of his earned him the nickname of the Martian in Hlynsk. Varya Shatrova, who frequently had to wake the Martian to attend to a serious case, had already gotten used to his habits and was not scandalized by the sight of him in the buff. No one knew how the head nurse woke the Martian, but when Malva entered the room she would not believe her eyes so, before waking him, she covered the sleeping man with the sheet that had slipped to the floor, and only then did she whisper over him: “Doctor, doctor, wake up... Volodya’s feeling bad... He doesn’t hear the roosters...”

In the courtyard the bats darted to and fro like mad and shied away from the tall figure of the

Martian in his starched hospital gown as if he had really appeared in the dingy hospital from another planet. Malva had long been afraid of bats and sauntered bent over behind the doctor, protecting her head with her hands. Schwarz, the peg-legged Austrian watchman, was presently opening the gates for a pair of huge dark-brown oxen. They had brought a sick man from the village of Nekhvoroshcha, and now, tired from the journey, they stood rooted to the ground. In the front sat a driver, a young man with a shock of hair, and behind him his employer was lying on his back in white straw out of which showed the black, crooked toes of his bare feet. To Malva it seemed that this wagon, which was slow as eternity, had brought only the feet of the farmer.

The cockerels sounded as if they were mourning over their patron. When the orderlies appeared in the ward with the stretcher, the doctor first had them take away the armchair with the dragon's head as if it had been the cause of death. The armchair could barely be pushed out of the ward, its rachitic legs catching constantly on the doorframe. The orderlies both had mustaches and looked like twins. They had taken care of different sorts of people, but never a poet. That is why they carried him solemnly as if to some pantheon of immortality.

The Martian was but one year older than the cheesemaker, and when the latter had appeared in the hospital he did not deny him anything, allowing Malva to stay at his bedside. Yet now he realized that this liberty of his must have been the cause of the worst. There is nothing more disconsolate than lovers anticipating a parting.

Then the orderlies brought in the belongings of the deceased: Pushkin-style pants, a leather jacket shot through on the chest, and boots with dried-out tongues



hanging out of them. She had to take all this from the hospital with her. That was the rule. The doctor glanced sympathetically at Malva, who was about to bundle the poet's belongings which amounted to almost nothing and were of no use to her at all, and then with a slightly bitter feeling, he went to attend to the sick man from Nekhvoroshcha.

The dark-brown oxen, obedient, wise, each in its part of the yoke, lay down near the wagon, taking up almost half of the yard. Should their master die during operation they would have to carry him home that very day, so they had to have a good rest. The driver, it seemed, was indifferent to his employer's fate; he was sleeping in the wagon with his hands spread out, dressed in a polka dot shirt and canvas pants patched on his knees. That gave Malva the idea of making the wretch happy, because he was certainly a poor farm-hand. But the oxen gave her such a reproving look from under their yoke that she did not dare leave the bundle in the wagon and had to carry it through the whole of Hlynsk. What if yet another poet were to grow up wearing these clothes one day?

It was Sunday — market day in Hlynsk. From villages far and wide, wagons came rolling in one after another laden with pigs, sheep, trussed roosters that were through with their crowing, and lots of other goods. The caravan of wagons from Nekhvoroshcha, drawn by dark-brown oxen similar to those in the hospital courtyard, creaked past. The Babylon caravan appeared on the road like a mirage — Malva recognized it from afar by the carpets and hazel grouse that covered the wagon beds, as if this alone was to show the caravan's identity with the immortal Babylon. Malva did not have the slightest desire to meet the Babylonians, so she took off her boots and went straight across the field. Someone on the wagons

recognized her and called her, but she did not betray any sign of hearing the call. Begone, you murderers! I don't want to know you to the end of my days.

The wagtails, locally known as ox herders, darted out of the stubble in front of Malva, picking up her most difficult and untracked of paths with remarkable ease. The stubble was low and prickly, and while Malva rustled through it with bare feet, the wagtails would run up to her, flutter off, and get ever more excited — they had noticed the blood on her feet and probably wanted to give her some kind of warning — until they guided her to the freshly tilled co-op field where they left her on her own, because these smart little birds had lots of other affairs to attend to.

The birds saw Fabian the billy goat in the glow of the morning, walking with the philosopher. The two characters looked as if they had a good meal the evening before and a good sleep besides, so now, late for the market, they trudged leisurely through the field, having nothing to lose anyway. The wagtails knew the pair and eagerly watched over them on their way to Hlynsk, and especially on their way back from Hlynsk when they always lost their sense of direction. At such times the wagtails would guide Fabian right up to Babylon, after which they returned to pass the night in the mute field, because they loved silence after a fussy day.

As Hlynsk had never had a poet of its own, his remains were not passed on to the co-op which had already chosen a place of eternal rest for him in the co-op park, near the marble gods by the lake in which the white swans excitedly glided back and forth, ready to depart for the torrid lands. It was good that the co-op was not able to carry out its intentions. Someone

said that the moment the birds sensed the absence of the poet they would never come back, because like people, they cannot love and breed without a patron.

The poet was buried in the square in a communal grave of the outstanding revolutionaries of Hlynsk. His name was to be engraved on the granite marker, most likely on the sixth line after *volost* commissar Naumenko who perished in Babylon but was buried here in his native Hlynsk.

Along with the Babylon brass band, which was perhaps the only one in the whole district, the funeral in Hlynsk was attended by both of the Sokolyuks, who, not caring much for the co-op anyway, had their own ends to gain from the occasion. Their point of interest was Malva. Danko hoped to bring her back to the Abyssinian hills, if not of her own free will, then by abducting her from Hlynsk. The poet's death had instilled new hopes in Danko. His love and hate of Malva had mixed into a peculiar whole, into some irremediable suffering which bore down on him with mounting force; the poor wretch was on the verge of suicide, and envied the poet when he learned that he had died in Malva's arms. He whispered to his brother that he, too, wanted to die such a beautiful death. When they were about to carry the bier out of the District Executive Committee, the Sokolyuks squeezed through the crowd to the coffin and took up their positions at the head of the deceased, beside Malva, as if they were his close relatives. This was done on the advice of Fabian who had come in the same wagon with the Sokolyuks. The brothers stood with a look of grief and penitence which made it seem that no one was sharing her affliction as sincerely as they, and Lukian even moistened his spectacles and asked Danko for a handkerchief, either because he had none of his own or because he had forgotten it.

As there was no gun carriage, the coffin was placed on an ordinary wagon without ladderbeams, to which three horses were hitched abreast. Behind the coffin the Young Communist Leaguers led the poet's saddled horse decked with black ribbons; it still favored its left foreleg perceptibly where it had been grazed by a bullet. The mourners struck up the song *They Bear the Cossack and Lead His Horse*. Sinitsya carried the flag and hurried, because he could not change the hand carrying the flag.

As it was, circumstances turned out favorably for the Sokolyuks. The brothers took Malva by the arms and led her through the whole of Hlynsk. All her attempts to free herself were in vain. Danko's face took on a look of complete humility and worldly innocence, while Lukian lamented glibly:

"Now, what will happen, Malva? They killed such a fine boy. Maybe he'd have lived to be a national genius... But you, Malva, are an ordinary woman like everybody else..." He lapsed into silence, because at that moment both of the churches that were at odds with one another started ringing their bells.

Maxim Teslya took this as an outrage upon the name of the co-op poet, and ordered the militia to silence the bell ringers. One of them stopped after a while — the one at the Church of the Transfiguration, although its largest bell, ringing in a rich bass, could not check its heart from beating. But the other bell tower, at the Church of the Ascension, subscribed to utter disobedience and filled Hlynsk with requiem tidings. The old bell ringer was playing for a poet for the first time in his life; he seemed to be demented in his fervor, while all of his being strove for the heavens until the bell ropes were torn out of his hands. Then the tambourine, the passion of revolutionaries, came back to life, followed by a high musical figure executed by

my father's clarinet, which the band, horribly out of tune after the weddings, could not grasp, and so each musician had to draw on his own inspiration in the true sense of the word.

When a crowd had formed in the square and the members of the Poor Peasants' Committee from the neighboring villages started shouting "Death to Bubela!", the Martian pushed through to Danko and sized him up from head to toe. Danko stiffened and grew rigid all over. His blood froze and his ears rang — his whole heart sensed something unpleasant. When the Martian disappeared into the crowd, Danko asked Malva who that man was.

"It's the doctor," Malva replied, bent down, picked up a handful of earth, and threw it on the coffin, feeling only now that she was the poet's wife.

The funeral feast — at which Chuprina from Chuprinka made a wrathful speech addressed to local counterrevolutionaries and those at large — was held at the proletarian tavern at the expense of the co-op.

Teslya was thinking about his personal affairs that evening.

He paid the Snigurs (Varya's maiden name) for his lodging and meals and lived in a separate room. All the time he had the feeling that one fine night, Shatrov would appear from his "oblivion." Varya made fun of Teslya's visions, convinced that Shatrov had died, since the battle cruiser on which he was serving had been sunk off Kronstadt back in 1918. Besides, she assured him that Shatrov was of poor parentage, being the son of a Petrograd coachman who had made it to the rank of a naval officer quite by chance. None of this put the lodger's heart at ease. Varya had a son by Shatrov. He was a handsome lad by now. To keep him out of the lodger's way, old

Snigur resettled the boy into his half of the house across from the entrance hall where he was still living. The officer's boy remembered his father and looked daggers at Teslya who did not make any moves at rapprochement, as he had his own children in Kramatorsk to think about. His wife enclosed their letters in hers, and Teslya was extremely delighted by them, especially the first scribbles of his daughter. His wife did not want to leave the plant in Kramatorsk, while he could not leave Hlynsk.

The suppression of NEP was followed by difficult times; it was heralded by that first shot at the co-op. The old countryside was living out its days. The *kurkuls*, already expecting to be snuffed, were selling out bit by bit, and the fairs in Hlynsk were swelling like never before. Teslya might soon be forced into a confrontation, heated and deadly.

By the tavern the water mill wheel drummed away alarmingly, the sound carrying through Hlynsk in the quiet of the night; there had been nothing like it in Kramatorsk where Teslya had worked previously. To him Varya Shatrova and that wheel were perhaps the greatest adornments of Hlynsk. In both he discerned something eternal and perpetual, which poets were likely to find in their imaginative dreams. Or, perhaps, it was only his poetic vision gone astray, which he would have to do away with.

The co-op caravan hit the road late that night. The poet's horse, which by custom could not be mounted for three days, trotted sorrowfully behind a wagon, pricked up its ears and looked with alarm into the night, starting at the merlins and owls taking wing from the Denikin ditch. Malva imagined she saw the poet riding the horse; for some reason he was bare-foot, which must have meant that his soul was returning home. Malva involuntarily recalled his boots, but

he wasn't wearing them, because the souls of the deceased probably roam the world barefoot.

Klim Sinitsya sat at her side, his feet dangling down from the ladderbeam, and mumbled glibly all the time:

"Did you see how we buried him? I wonder what would have become of him later on? Have you got any ideas about that? Think of it, they destroyed a cheesemaker of such genius! Just like that, for no reason at all. Did you love him at least?"

"Yes, I did, Klim Ivanovich."

"And he wrote: 'All the gold of my passions I give to the co-op!' That's until you came riding along on your horse... Well, now, what are you going to do at the co-op? What if I take you to Babylon? If you want, I can get you a job in Zhurbiv at the sugar refinery. The harvesting season's just begun. I don't want you hanging around reminding the co-op members of their loss."

All the way, one of the Babylon wagons kept sneaking behind the co-op caravan, hesitatingly lagging behind and disappearing in the darkness, then reappearing out of the night and clattering close nearby, at which Malva's warm shoulder pressed closer to Klim Sinitsya, as if seeking defense and rescue. That wagon seemed to be rolling through her heart until, at the road junction, it turned toward Babylon.

When a poet dies, something that others fail to see also dies with him. Faceless, monstrous wraiths crawled out constantly from the ditch. Klim Sinitsya did not pay any attention to them, and the horse did not shy, because it had blinders on its bridle and saw only the road in front of it. In the tilled field the wagtails were sleeping after a fussy day — and they, too, remained unnoticed by anyone. But Malva seemed to see

those birds — sleepy, ruffled, and calm, like little lumps of earth... Surely she must have picked up that vision from the poet.

## *Chapter 10*

The narrow dormer in the attic looked out on almost all of the co-op — farmhouses, fields, roads and ditches, with which the co-op had cut itself off from the world of private ownership, or, to be more precise, with which the old world had shut itself off from the co-op. The weeds ripened in the ditches, their seeds a threat to all in equal measure. Only now did Klim Sinitsya realize that the weeds could be held in check while they were still green.

The other window, a half of it bricked up, faced the old park inhabited by noisy rooks that filled it with a constant crowing of dissatisfaction. In the dense undergrowth of the park hid the lake which was a refuge of silence and sorrow for a number of white statues standing by the water. Probably at one time the undergrowth around the statues had been cleared away, but now the marble gods in the thicket looked doomed and even ominous. During his term in office, Sosnin wanted to bring them into the sunlight, closer to the palace, but he had failed in this good intention, while Klim Sinitsya simply had no time for them. The weeds alarmed him more than the gods.

The siege of the co-op took on threatening proportions. Not a single night passed without the co-op's being visited by audacious guests. The clover ricks were set on fire; the thresher belt was torn to pieces; sand was poured into the fuel, and next morning when the locomobile was being warmed up, its innards started to sputter and clatter, and it was broken for



a long time. Petro Dzhura, who used to operate the landowner's locomobile, was called from Babylon to have a look at the machine. He found the trouble, and the locomobile once again shrieked for the sheaves to be fed into it, urging the co-op members into their unknown tomorrow. Sinitsya reasoned that as long as the locomobile worked, the co-op would stay alive.

One night the swans left the lake. One swan from that year's clutch could not take off from the water, so the whole flock circled over it, invitingly honking from the sky until it took wing into the dawn. Maybe it had only been called to meet sure death, but as it were, that was much better than waddling up the hill to captivity. Now the wooden birdhouses built for them by the co-op were occupied by domesticated geese. They crowded into them and gaggled without any sense and reason, probably having mixed up both the cardinal points and the seasons and everything else in the world except the voices of their masters who every evening called them home like ducks: chuck-chuck-chuck!... They obeyed and waddled up the hill in a white line. Their obedience seemed bewildering to the gods in the park, who before that, at the sight of the swans, had had an opportunity to form quite different concepts of freedom.

Malva seemed to live above the gods, filled as she was with dejection and spiritual purification. When the glow in the park died away, the gods came out of their hideouts in all their nudity, Byzantine perfection, and disgrace besides, to which they had been subjected by the ravages of time and man. There was not a single unimpaired soul, almost all of them being crippled, yet even in their cripplement they had preserved their pride and indomitability of spirit.

Every day Malva worked, joining the rest in the field, picking up sheaves behind the winged sheaf-

binder; then she worked at the thresher, and after the day shift volunteered to stay for the night shift, without admitting that she was a bit scared to spend the night alone in the attic. In her dreams the cheesemaker appeared in his red boots and read Lermontov's *Demon* aloud to her. The co-op members had guessed her fears, but when they hinted that Klim Sinitsya was living just one floor below, she responded with a smile — not of cunning but with an obvious tinge of irony.

The winds had coarsened her complexion; she became stronger and felt surer on the land; at first the co-op members treated her with prejudice, and some even with enmity, believing that the co-op had lost Volodya Yavorsky because of her. But gradually they changed their mind and made friends with her. Malva's eyes became a deeper blue; her face was tanned; and already it betrayed but a slight touch of grief, while her gait acquired a beautiful haughtiness — probably nothing mirrors the inner grace of women as much as the way they walk.

Bubela was still locked up in Hlynsk. He had been confronted by Otchenashka and afterward by the philosopher himself whom Otchenashka had called insulting names during the inquest, praising her own probity with regard to Babylon in general and to the deceased Pelekhaty in particular. She must have been either bribed or intimidated. In the meantime, Malva had a visit from Bubela's wife Parfena who went down on her knees, begging Malva to have mercy on her innocent husband. She came to the co-op in a springy carriage, accompanied by a huge dog that waited for its mistress beyond the co-op gates. Malva promised Parfena that she would ask Klim Sinitsya to intercede, since with the poet dead, she carried no weight in the case.

With the advent of night someone's shadow roamed about the co-op park, prowling among the white gods, but not risking to come out of the dark and climb up to Malva's room. That was Danko who came down from the Abyssinian hills into the park from where he could see her. At times Klim Sinitsya, his empty sleeve flapping in the wind, would come out of his room onto the balcony. When he saw that the lights were still on in the attic, he would return to his room, take the oar standing in the corner, and lightly tap it against the ceiling. At all times it was to mean one and the same thing: Go to sleep. He was more and more convinced that great love was eternal in the long run, so he seemed to have prepared himself to outwait eternity...

In the cellars of the cheese dairy, the last batch of cheese which Volodya had made in his time from the summer milk had ripened. The red wheels had been lying on the racks for seventy-one days. When Malva saw them, she wanted to grasp the secrets of this trade which was rare for our parts. She asked to be transferred to the cheese dairy. Although the work there was not backbreaking, the stench was heavy all summer, and so no one volunteered to work there either in Volodya's days or now.

Everyone was returning from the last autumn fair to which the co-op had taken the last batch of cheese Volodya had made. Danko, too, had bought himself a wheel weighing some three-odd pounds and was taking it home in a feedbag. Malva had weighed the cheese while the co-op cashier counted the money. Danko had walked around the fair for some time afterward, but when he returned to the co-op stall, he found it empty.

He bypassed a goodly number of the wagons on their way back home. Then he hoped to catch up with the co-op wagon with the empty wicker baskets in which the cheese had been brought to the fair. Instead, he caught up with Yavtukh and Prisia and their children — the older boys had started school, and so Yavtukh had taken them to the fair to buy them some footwear for the winter. The boys recognized uncle Danko as he was passing their father, and screamed with one accord: "Daddy, come on, daddy, let's outrun him!" Yavtukh, urged on by the children, gave a tug at the reins, but Prisia tried to calm him down: "Oh no, your father's no match for uncle Danko." Something seemed to have inflamed Yavtukh, and his horses along with him; to the encouraging screams of the kids he outdistanced Danko. Fascinated by Yavtukh, Prisia smiled in what looked like a beautiful way, pressing the boys to her side lest they fall out of the wagon.

Malva came home late, so when she got up in the morning, her eyes were slightly puffed from lack of sleep. She kept smiling to herself and seemed to avoid any encounter with Klim Sinitsya who was bustling around the yard. The cashier had gone into raptures over Malva; they had sold the cheese quickly, and the take was larger than ever before. Then to crown the day, there had come Teslya who bought what remained of the cheese — a wheel and a half or so — and then invited them home with him. They downed one drink, then another one with the cheese, and struck up a song — that's the whole fair for you, Klim Ivanovich...

The day before, Klim Sinitsya had received a letter informing him that one-year courses in cheese-making, just like the ones Volodya Yavorsky had once attended, would soon open in Kostroma. But this time they

would be run by the state, with the greatest cheese-makers for instructors, including some from Holland, whom we had to outrank on the world market eventually. The director and commissar of the courses patently overexaggerated the role of cheese-making in the world revolution, yet Sinitsya was not in the least surprised by the tenor of the letter when he saw the director's name: Innokentiy Mstislavovich Sosnin, the founder of their co-op. The letter in his hand was a carbon copy, and Sinitsya did not find any post-scripts on it, neither for his pupil, who was no longer among the living, nor for the co-op. Sosnin had become either indifferent toward them or something else had caused him to forget about his creation. But in any case a good candidate had to be sent there to avoid any complaints. A couple of days before, he would not have even thought of Malva. But when he went to the cheese dairy, Malva was bustling there all by herself, whitewashing and cleaning it after the summer. He told her about Kostroma and the courses.

"The co-op will be sending you money every month... You can leave your belongings behind; nothing'll happen to them. And then we'll see. If you don't come back, good luck to you... I'll take your things to your mother. Somehow, I've gotten used to your living on the floor above me. I feel you haven't gotten over your love, and it's only now I see that it really existed... Excuse me if I were too harsh or inconsiderate toward you at times. I have been, yes I have..."

Having seen Danko off to his field work, Lukian took to heating the stove at the crack of dawn; he had learned from mother that the more gradually this was done, the better the bread would be. After the sheaves of straw, which still smelled of Danko, Lukian threw some cherry wood onto the bottom of the oven, then

he rolled up his sleeves and started kneading the dough that had just risen in the trough. As the dough became more compact, his thoughts drifted more quickly than the sullen clouds he saw through the window: somewhere the Turkmenistan-Siberian Railway project was getting started, as was the Tractor Works project, and lots of other worlds only rumored about in Babylon, but here he was having to patter about day in and day out in the ancestral hut he would probably never get out of, wasting away his life at Danko's side, with the kerosene lamp, the oaken kneading trough in which, from generation to generation, some leaven was left on the bottom lest it die and stop fermenting, making people take to unleavened bread. In olden times it was perhaps only fire that was sustained in such a way. For you had to think not only about yourself but also about your neighbor or, to be more precise, his wife, so that you wouldn't have to run all the way to upper Babylon for some leaven. He finished the kneading, and was about to clean the dough off his hands when the watchful Mushka suddenly started yapping and rushed to the gates. Lukian ran out onto the porch, with dough all over his hands.

Near the gates stood a britzka with some unknown woman wrapped up in a cloak. In the front sat a mustachioed coachman wearing a high lambskin cap and a homemade hooded jacket; the horses were casting sidelong glances over their blinders at the annoying Mushka and restlessly shifting from leg to leg. Lukian involuntarily hid his dough-covered hand under his mother's old apron which was tied around his waist, and ran to chase Mushka away.

The woman stepped out of the britzka as casually as if she had been riding in it all her life. It was Malva Kozhushna — in simple boots, a warm checkered

gown, a black woolen kerchief, and an oversized cloak of green canvas with the long sleeves rolled up; it had obviously been someone else's. Lukian dreamed of having such a cloak for rainy weather, at least one for himself and his brother. Apparently, Malva could not have made a single step in that cloak had she not pushed aside its flaps with her hands which she clasped behind her.

"I saw smoke coming out of your chimney, so I thought you must be at home..."

"Come in. You used to visit us. Danko isn't home, though. I'm alone."

She seemed to have expected that and said to the coachman:

"Wait a while, Yukhim. Who knows whether I'll be seeing him again."

"Are you really leaving Babylon for good?" Lukian asked.

"Could be... It's not the only place in this world, is it?"

Lukian looked at the bundles piled up in the britzka and nodded with understanding.

"I see the cloak's too big for you," he remarked.

"It belongs to Klim Ivanovich," said Malva, laughing.

"How is it living in the co-op? Are you still up in the pigeon loft? Or have you moved downstairs?" he smiled through his spectacles.

"Where to downstairs?"

"To Klim Sinitsya's room... Where else? You're single and so is he. You are, aren't you?"

"No, Lukiano, I'm not single..."

"Come on, Malva... Only the gods are immortal, and that's because they never existed at all."

"No one understands poets. Neither czars nor common people. Volodya was killed... And what did





guest had taken off her cloak, set right the coals in the stove with an oven-fork, went up to the kneading trough and carried it from the bench to the hearth — Lukian should have known that dough rises faster near the heat. He hurried to the pantry, brought a quart of moonshine Danko used as a cold tonic, put out some Antonivka winter apples — huge and transparent like sea pearls, which Yavtukh's kids had not managed to steal, filled up two glasses, and, recalling that he had no bread in the house, rushed about to bake a *pidpalok* \*. While he was preparing a place at the bottom of the oven, Malva cleaned the bread shovel, scattered some flour on it, and made a *pidpalok* in no time; strangely enough, the dough did not stick to her fingers, she knew how to ward it off with flour, and in a minute the smell of bread wafted through the house. She took out the *pidpalok*, tapped it with her knuckles, and placing it on the table, broke it up into several parts — the bread steamed, adding to the tasty smell.

Yeah, there's something to that Malva all right, thought Lukian after they had clinked their glasses.

How finely and easily she had entered his day, gray and oppressive like a wave that had sunk to the bottom of the sea, and now it had suddenly broken the surface and burst into a rainbow of colors. It seemed that she was the mainstay of all happiness in Babylon; and then when she was gone, life turned gray, bitter and stale like unleavened bread. She confided in Lukian that she was going far away, beyond Moscow, to attend the same courses Volodya Yavorsky had once been to. She was the only one from the co-op to be sent. See, what an honor!

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\* *Pidpalok* (Ukr.) — thin loaf of bread made of scrapings from a kneading trough

“Don’t tell Danko I was here,” she said to Lukian on parting with him at the gates. “And warn him to keep away from the *kurkuls*... So long!”

The oven bottom sparkled when Lukian raked the cherry-wood coals out of it. The loaves of bread turned out big, broad like the shovel, the size only Malva could have baked. When Danko came home, he did not believe that his brother had done it all by himself. Browned humps stuck out of the bread crust on all sides, making them good to rub fat and garlic into. It was the best supper Danko ever had, and a deserved one at that, for he had made it to the rooftop of Abyssinia that day.

The same day Klim Sinitsya took Malva to the narrow-gauge railroad station. The train running out of Hlynsk was small, almost toylike. When it started to roll out of the station, Malva burst out crying, while Sinitsya stood there with a whip in his hand and smiled, not knowing that she was leaving Hlynsk not alone — she had felt the poet’s child under her heart.

In the first letter she would send him she would write: “I had heard from Volodya that Kostroma was far away; you had to travel there on several different trains; and the winters there are white just like the Kostroma cathedrals. Yes, they are, exactly, Klim Ivanovich. As for Sosnin, he’s the same man who founded our co-op. He doesn’t believe me that Volodya’s no more and that I was his wife, so write him about it, Klim Ivanovich... I didn’t bring my sheepskin coat along with me and it’s hard to get one here. I need it badly, because the winter’s so cold that the moment you spit, the spittle freezes in the air...” And the letters would come flying and flying from cold white Kostroma — warm, kindhearted, simpleminded, discreet letters from Malva Kozhushna.

After she left no one settled in the attic. The co-op stopped delivering red cheese wheels to Hlynsk, and so cheese disappeared from circulation there. Klim Sinitsya regretted it, although his heart seemed to be more at ease now. For some nights the alert figure still kept appearing in the bare garden and rustled through the fallen leaves, but convinced that the attic was empty, it forgot its way to the palace. Sinitsya knew that it was Danko Sokolyuk. Making his daily rounds of the co-op, he saw him out on the Abyssinian hills breaking them down to the layer of red clay so the ground would accumulate enough vigor and strength from the winds in winter.

The solitary plowman on the hills looked small and tenacious, greatly resembling an eternal field demon. At the foot of the hill stood his wagon, its shaft pointing into the wet sky as if it could still find some hope there. When the drizzle started, cold and lashing at this time of the year, the plowman would pull a sack over his head and then he merged completely with the reddish ground, which made it seem that there was no one behind the plow and that the horses were breaking up the barren field all by themselves.

It was only around lunch time that Lukian would come stalking by across the boundary strips of other holdings, as he struggled against the wind like some bird, carrying a gray bundle in his hands, his heavy boots still heavier from the sticky mud — he was bringing a hot meal for the plowman. While Danko ate under the wagon, Lukian would pull the sack over his head and continue plowing the barren field; the two of them relentlessly bent the bow till early October when the snow started to fall. They also plowed Malva's plot on the very crest of the hills.

Snow had covered the Denikin ditch and adorned its thickets with white caps, solemn and sorrowful. Only the jimsonweed stuck out its globose prickly fruit as if it were sad for having failed to scatter its seeds. There was a serenity and whiteness that hurt the eye to the point of tears and emptied the soul. Steam rose over the horses; the sleigh that had survived from the days of the landowner's sway ran easily along the snow — the scene a weird creation of winter fantasy. That Sunday Klim Sinitsya was going to Hlynsk with an inexplicably alarming and warm feeling. Malva seemed to have moved to another planet, distant and unreachable. He was going to the Hlynsk post office to send her a sheepskin coat.

It smelled of straw smoke in Hlynsk.

Pilip Makedonsky hurried to work in a fur-lined cape that was too long for him. The ground wind turned his flaps up, revealing the glowing red fur; part of the lining could have been the pelt of his little dog which the NEP men had stoned to death during last autumn's rut in hatred of its master. The stalls of the NEP operators were tightly boarded up, and some of them had their iron shutters drawn down, probably for ever.

In the market square that night, the wind had torn off the roof of the co-op stall, the racks of which wouldn't be displaying the red wheels of cheese, which was of no less than European fame, any time soon.

Sinitsya took the parcel to the post office and handed it over to the postmaster. Khariton Hapochka asked what was in it, put the seal of the Hlynsk post office on it, and remarked casually that the coat might get lost on the way because postal service nowadays wasn't what it used to be under the Czar, you know.

The bell towers of the two churches which stood on different hills and seemed to be at cross-purposes

with one another all the time were silent, covered with hoar frost, and, in all probability, ready to sound the alarm any minute if need be. Maxim Teslya, an early riser, shoveled a path through the snow from the porch to the gates of the District Party Committee. The water mill wheel had frozen into the ice and did not drum, making this part of Hlynsk somewhat unusual. The river was also icebound, and now little and sprightly people in tanned black and white sheepskin coats scurried across it like a mixed-up crowd of chimney sweeps and millers.

Not so long ago Teslya also used to walk across the icebound river. He was probably the first to venture to cross it when the ice still sagged and crackled underfoot. Now the ice had grown deeper and exploded in bursts during the frosty nights, rousing Hlynsk from its winter hibernation. Sinitsya drove right into the snow cloud which Teslya had raised at the gates. The snow crystals sparkled in the air for a long time. In Hlynsk a severe winter had set in, followed by a shortage of fuel. The straw rick in the yard of the District Party Committee was stripped to its foundation; a fox had run across its white cap that night.

Teslya finished shoveling the path and then took the co-op man inside for him to warm up after his journey. It was well heated and snug inside. In the corridor a huge ficus felt itself quite at home. It had not fit in at the home of the Snigurs, so that autumn, before the frosts set in, Teslya had it brought here to stay until spring. He himself had also moved into the committee's building, something he should have done long ago.

Klim Sinitsya's horses, covered with motley rugs to keep warm, stood half a day in the courtyard of the District Party Committee, while their master, along

with Teslya and some other men — who peered out at the world from time to time through a little spot thawed out of a curious white flower on the windowpane by one of the men's huffs — were racking their brains about how to create a new Babylon in place of the old one. When the spot was covered with rime, one of them would go up to the window again and blow at it. All this continued till dusk fell, and then Teslya lit a copper kerosene lamp with a paunchy chimney.

“We can't retreat at any cost, even if it means giving the rest of our lives,” Maxim Teslya said firmly.

Outside a snowstorm howled and roared. The horses found a quiet nook for themselves. Teslya set the men's minds at ease by saying that there was still a little haystack in the yard and that there wouldn't be anything horrible if they brought the straw into the house and spent the night at the District Party Committee. After all, they had to finish imagining the construction of this tremendous edifice, which had to be not a myth but a living reality for ordinary people.

## PART II

### *Chapter 1*

When Savka Chibis takes down the swing for the winter, the little elm trees growing above the gully get as cold as if they were dead. That's the beginning of the late Babylon autumn to which we would like to guide the reader's attention from unheated Hlynsk, the more so since such shifts in time have been ventured before us. For the Sokolyuks, at the time of year we have in mind, day relentlessly piled upon day like furrows falling one upon the other. There was no rest, no letup; the usual course of life seemed to have narrowed for them, while in their thoughts the worries of Babylon receded into the past. Day and night wagons rolled to Zhurbiv. Laden with sugar beets, they rolled on desperately and dolefully, and behind those wagons drawn by their feeble horses, the men waded through the mud. It looked like autumn was being buried in an endless funeral procession, but no one lost heart at the funeral; no one grieved, because all this effort was going to turn into money for backbreaking labor. The Sokolyuks did not sow their own beets as they had no female hands to tend them, and the distant whistles of the sugar refineries kept reminding the brothers of their blunder. Even Yavtukh, of meager means as he was, contrived to cover the sides of his wagon with canvas and hauled several wagonloads of beets to Zhurbiv in a trice; now he would have piles of cash pouring like manna into his home. There is a saying that at least a little

bit of shrewd intelligence must be put into any kind of work. So that was why Danko was now plowing deep into the Abyssinian hills to plant his plot with beets, and as for female hands that would have to be taken care of that winter, sometime after Epiphany when the matchmakers would be sent out to the would-be brides picked by fate beforehand. So far the Sokolyuks had no particular elect in mind. As before, Danko had been slinking like a wraith among the white gods in the co-op park for some nights now.

Late at night he would return tired and covered with mud. He washed up in a hurry, ate, and without taking off his clothes, slumped in the middle of the room onto the crumpled straw which Lukian brought from the barn to heat the stove with before daybreak. You might have taken off your boots at least, Lukian reproached him silently. After Danko was already half-asleep, Lukian could barely manage to pull them off. Then he washed them, put them under the chimney to dry, and in the morning waxed them to make them waterproof. For all that, Danko was never once moved by this consideration, taking these services for granted. What a character that brother of mine is, Lukian thought wryly every time he took care of the boots. Both of their heels were bent on one side — to the left, and their toes were turned to the right from walking up the Abyssinian hills and along the furrow in one and the same direction. You would simply have to take care of the boots of such a man even if he were not your brother.

Lukian did not sit around twiddling his thumbs either, especially when, in addition to everything else, he had to bake bread, which happened by the end of every week. They ate a lot of bread; for Danko alone one loaf a day was barely enough; besides, Fabian made his appearances for supper, and Prisia came



running over to borrow some bread practically every other day, and was absolutely unreliable about returning it.

The smell of supper filled the whole house, inflicting an excruciating torture on the tomcat Tyran and the dog Mushka who was peeping through the slightly open door with the white of its eyes all the time. But that evening the God's creatures had been completely forgotten because the brothers could not make up their minds, either jointly or separately, as to the outcome and consequences of their decision about the girl who herded Babylon's cows, a decision they had arrived at apparently under the direct influence of Malva's visit. Still, Lukian was more inclined to think that a third person in the home wouldn't be that bad; there were two mounds of cushions on the bed where no one slept anyway, so what difference would it make; if a person's got a place to sleep, it's almost like having a place to live; the only thing was that she was a girl who might do more than glance sideways at one of them, and that worried Lukian most of all; but weren't they old enough to keep their senses about them and stay out of trouble. Danko thought through it all with greater prudence as was proper for an elder brother; he wouldn't stand even a hint of a flirt with Darinka either on his part or on Lukian's, for both of them would have to regard her as a domestic and, God forbid, nothing else. Thus they had come around to the idea and hammered it into their heads. After they had gone to sleep — Lukian on the stovebed, and Danko on the straw — they had the peculiar feeling that next night they would have another person to talk to — she'd be lying on the bed, while the pillows would be looming not where they were now, but on the chest, because one pillow would be enough for her to sleep on.

In the morning Lukian drove Nanny Goat, as the brothers called their smallish cow, and her gentle calf with nice white legs out to join the herd. Without giving Darinka either a chance to whistle boyishly or say anything offensive about the Sokolyuks, he bowed to her and said as politely as he could:

“Darinka, you know that the two of us have been left to ourselves now like two rings on one finger, and there’s no one as dear to us as you.”

Darinka burst into that beautiful boyish laughter of hers.

“My, what fine kith and kin we make — it’s like a fence pole being cousin to a wattle. If you want a piece of my mind, there’s nothing dearer to you than Prisia. They say half of her kids are yours.”

“That’s all rubbish invented by Yavtukh. Prisia couldn’t be any dearer to us than she is. But you can, and that’s what Danko and I want you to be.”

“What do you mean?”

“Simply, come and live with us for good. Well, how should I put it...”

“As a domestic?” Darinka asked with a frown. “Nothing doing.”

“Simply come as Darinka.”

“For whom? For you or for Danko? I could never love you, and I’m afraid of Danko. And what would I need the both of you for? The world’s a big place and I’ll choose someone I like when the time comes.”

“So is that the kind of person you really are, Darinka?”

Her eyes flashed at him and she left, while Lukian, dumbfounded by her malevolent look, closed the gates.

Danko had already left — he was an early riser. Lukian dressed warmer, because he had only had his embroidered shirt on when he had come out to see Darinka, and went to the Tatar Ramparts to seek

Fabian's advice. Once legions of Tatars had met their death here. Fabian's hut was immersed in sneezewort, dog rose and a denser thicket of weeds than Lukian had ever seen. The kitchen garden was overgrown with huge sunflowers, their seeds pecked out by the sparrows that had darted over Babylon in swarms throughout its entire history. The empty sunflower pods were a wonderful testimony to Fabian's affection for these perennial residents of Babylon. The window of his hut offered a fine view of Pritske and of the villages beyond it, of which Lukian knew little.

"My God, how high up you live."

"A fortress used to stand here, and when the Carmelites burned it down, my ancestors built this house. It must be three or four hundred years old, or even five hundred for that matter."

Knowing that Fabian was given to exaggerating, Lukian did not argue with him, the more so since the philosopher was engrossed in a very serious matter — creating a crucifix for the Pritske church. He had promised to execute the commission by dedication day and, having already received a modest down payment, he could not be late. He was just then carving the mouth of God's Son.

"Do you believe in Him?" Lukian asked.

"It could be that there really was such a man. By the way, he's got a lot of things in common with our folk, a plague upon them. But then the apostles came along and distorted that image. In general, Lukian, there's nothing more horrible than apostles. They exaggerate and pervert everything. Beware more of the apostles than of the gods. Did you bring anything along with you? I'm too lazy to walk down the hill."

Lukian put a bottle of *horilka*, a slice of pork fat and a beautiful piece of bread from yesterday's batch

on the workbench. Fabian immediately stopped his act of shaping God and got two glasses from an old dish rack. The unfinished Son of God might well have envied their breakfast during which, among a multitude of world problems, they found time for Darinka. Fabian agreed to have a talk with the girl, because he knew that he had an almost bewitching influence on drifters.

That very evening Fabian walked from the Tatar Ramparts up the hill where his billy goat, dreamy and pensive, was already waiting for the herd which was raising the dust and looked from afar like a Tatar host as the sheep walked in all too serried ranks.

"Where have you been hanging around, you goof-off?" Fabian asked, but understandably, he did not receive an answer; there was only a roguishly ingratiating look in the billy goat's eyes beseeching the philosopher not to hinder him in performing his duty: to head and lead the herd into the village with that grandly solemn gait of his, a gait which he alone was capable of amid that spiritless mass.

So when the herd reached the windmills, the billy goat left his master and took his place at its head, while Fabian waited for Darinka who was returning with some of her helpers at a considerable distance from the herd. She was leading a calf by the rope, probably one that wanted to break off from the rest of the herd all the time and spend the night in the open field; every herd has a number of such freaks that have not yet felt a wolf's fangs on their hides.

"Lukian came to me and asked me to have a talk with you. So this is what I want to tell you: you must go to live with those two fiends. You'll surely take a liking to one of them, 'cause you can't tend the Babylon herd all your life. That's just what prevents any of them taking you in lawful marriage. But by and

by everything will settle down. Malva Kozhushna's drifted away from Danko for good, and Prisia's sins are nothing but Yavtukh's inventions, so you're the only claimant to the throne there. Give an ear to a worldly man who may, for all I know, feast at your wedding one of these days, if you invite me, of course..."

Fabian could have saved his breath. After the talk with Lukian, Darinka started imagining how she would keep house at the Sokolyuks; how she would slice cabbage to make sauerkraut, pickle apples and water melons, milk the obedient cow, do the wash, heat the stove, with her face near the merry, hot flames, water the flowers, and, in the end, feel she was mistress of the house just like the most noted housewives in Babylon; and she even imagined how on Sundays, dressed in her holiday best, she would sit on a rug in the wagon together with the brothers, or with one of them at least, drive to the fair in Hlynsk or even go to church on Ascension Day. At this point Darinka recalled that she did not know how to pray, but that was no problem really — she would ask Otchenashka to teach her say the Lord's Prayer. She was enveloped by a wonderful feeling she had never experienced before, and it stayed with her throughout the whole day... But now with every step, enmity toward the Sokolyuks was roused in the girl's heart as the herd moved closer to their house.

"Well, when will you come to us, Darinka?"

"Maybe never!" she answered.

But autumn and poverty drove Darinka to the Sokolyuks in the end. She came to them during dedication day, in torn *postoli* and with goose pimples on her bare knees. She put her belongings — all of them fit into her herder's bag — into the corner, and said in that guilty boyish voice of hers:

“Happy holiday! Here I am... How about you, have you changed your minds?”

The brothers gave the girl a fitting reception. They recalled the frog she had brought with the water by accident when she had kept house for them; it had lived in the cask for a long time, but no one could remember where it had disappeared to...

Darinka's domestic chores started when Danko, feeling superior, immediately gave her a lot of work to do and set about sprucing himself up for dedication day which was noisily marked near the bell tower. He opened the trunk, took out a pair of yellow box-calf boots that had been worn but once, and an old-fashioned set of garments he had inherited from his father, then shamelessly started to change in front of her. He thereby wanted to remind Darinka that here she was only a domestic and not a girl in whose presence he had to feel ashamed. Lukian was polishing his old cowhide-leather boots just then and blushed with shame at his brother's insolence. In defiance of Danko, he took his fresh shirt and pointedly went out into the pantry to change. This made Danko laugh and he intentionally pulled down his underpants, without so much as hiding his sinful flesh.

“Fie!” Darinka spat out and bolted through the door.

When Lukian returned from the pantry, the girl was gone. He went angrily after his brother who was standing in the middle of the room, his underwear changed by now, with the dirty pair lying at his feet.

“What a swine you are, Danko! A lot of nerve you have getting ready for dedication day.”

“Why are you trying to boss me around?” Danko angrily pounded his hairy chest. “Why, you moon-

blind jerk!" Then he went and slapped Lukian on the face hard.

Lukian did not back down but whacked Danko on his shaved neck, and a brief but spirited scuffle ensued, after which Danko found himself upside down in the trunk with his feet sticking out of it, while Lukian hightailed it for the entrance hall without his spectacles. It all happened at such lightning speed that both broke into laughter without nursing a grudge against each other.

Darinka, however, leaning in the barn against the harness post, thought they were making fun of her and started to weep even more bitterly. The leather straps smelled of horse sweat and something unpleasant, probably the horses' bloody weals. For some reason Darinka recalled her Chestnut, the years of her childhood. In her mind's eye the nights in the pasture passed by like in a pleasant fairytale, she recalled Danko, who at that time was perhaps the kindest to her, because of all the mop-headed arrogant boys he was the only one who did not make fun of her. But now she could not recognize him. What had made him so different? She wiped her tears and, filled with anger, resolutely entered the room. In a minute she had her belongings stuffed into the bag and told them:

"I'll be damned if I'll ever work for you!"

Lukian rushed over to her, begging and pleading, grabbing her hands — he knew how sick he was of this hut. Danko was still undecided what to do, standing there with a sullen look, but on hearing his brother's entreaties, he brightened up and approached Darinka. He came up to her and froze. Never before had he looked at her at such close range. In her eyes blue flames were blazing, every little freckle on her comely, slightly turned-up nose seemed to tremble,

lending her whole face a remarkable charm, her fluffy upper lip pouted with anger and was gentle, smooth and hard. He said sincerely:

“Darinka, forgive me. My Goodness, I completely forgot you were in the house, really. I was so used to the two of us being alone...”

Lukian determinedly got hold of Darinka's belongings, while Danko took the rebel girl by the hand as courteously as he could and sat her down on a bench. She almost involuntarily raised her eyes to the little portrait of Taras Shevchenko draped with an embroidered, yet dusty *rushnik* towel, and something echoed deep in her heart: *hired girl* \*. No, at that moment Darinka did not feel like a hired girl. It seemed to her that she had subdued the brothers by her wrath, and from now on she would either feel like the true mistress of the house or otherwise leave it for ever to roam among people, good and bad. She pulled her hand out of Danko's with a jerk, got to her feet, and for some moments stood there proudly, filled with dignity and a sense of power over them. Both of the brothers turned away to hide their confusion, if not their submission, from her and from each other. They went out of the house with an unsure feeling either of shame or of alarm.

On reaching the street, they went along tight-lipped, each thinking about Darinka in his own way. Their neighbor Yavtukh stood behind his gates as always, dressed in the embroidered shirt and black vest which Pan Rodzinski had not worn out in his day, and he had pulled on his sheepskin jacket on besides. Yavtukh slightly bowed his head to the Sokolyuks in greeting. They responded with a smirk. On holidays

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\* Allusion to Taras Shevchenko's poem of the same name



and Sundays Yavtukh stood thus like a post behind the gates, showing off his embroidered shirt and black castor vest, but one of these days he'd come by some pants (he had bought a *hunya*\* for Prisia with the money Bubela gave him) and a pair of boots and a two-colored sash. And you could be sure he would buy everything else in the end. But as it were, the lack of all this did not hinder Yavtukh from considering himself a highfalutin farmer. True, he never lent anything to anyone, but for his part he did not know what borrowing was since he had everything he needed: a five-share plow, a winnowing mill, a wagon, and everything else indispensable to even the smallest of farms. Yavtukh had grabbed a pretty piece of land for his kids, and now he was impatiently waiting for them to grow up so he could chase them along the furrows as well. As soon as this happened, Yavtukh would outstrip many a farmer, and they, poor buggers, would bow and scrape before him. On this day, while Babylon was celebrating the feast of St. Michael, *gorging itself on food and drink, having absolutely forgotten the sacredness of the occasion and the sanctified whitewashed church of the patron saint on the northern slope of the hills near the cemetery*, Yavtukh bid his time behind the gates longer than usual and, hiding his poverty as much as he could, he dreamed of the days when he would install formidable machines in his farmyard that would grind up the conceited Babylon and bend everything to his, Yavtukh's will. If only the kids would grow up faster — to work the land, of course.

His vigilant eye was watching the Sokolyuks' farmyard every single hour of the day. He even sat down for lunch opposite the window commanding a good

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\* *Hunya* (Ukr.) — coarse gray woolen coat

view of their farmstead. Small wonder the brothers used to say: "That fiend'll keep his eyes peeled on us till they pop out of their sockets." Yavtukh knew how much of everything they owned, right down to the hens and roosters. This morning he had been completely taken by surprise to see Darinka there. "What? Why?" he raged. "But that's exploitation of another person's labor, isn't it?" God blast my soul, he thought, why didn't I use my brains before and take Darinka in myself? When the Sokolyuks had passed his farmyard, Yavtukh, despite the fact that he was loath to have anyone see his ragged pants, quietly pushed aside the plank board in the fence and, looking around to see whether anyone was in sight, he thievishly slipped into his neighbors' yard. After opening the door to the entrance hall, he appeared on the threshold so unexpectedly that Darinka started from fright. "Is that you?"

"Yes it's me, deary, you bet. And what are you doing here? Hiring yourself out? For those studs, those misers who starve themselves and will send you to your grave in no time... Better come over to my house, not as a domestic, but simply... Well, as a nanny to my kids."

"What do I need your kids for? One of these days I'll be having my own."

"Out of wedlock, with no bridal crown and wedding feast?"

"So what if I'm already the mistress of this place?" she said and paced affectedly the room.

He looked at her strong, dexterous hands. Oh my, what a lot of work those hands could have done for him if he had had the sense to seize them for himself! How many beets they could have grown to be hauled off to Zhurbiv! And that meant money and clear profit.

Yavtukh went back home to seek advice from Prisia, whom he would not allow to go to the festival. He felt really wretched and gave her a beating for no reason, as if she were to blame for Darinka's being with the Sokolyuks and not with them, the Holiys. Prisia, barefoot and half-dressed, came running out of the house. To get away from Yavtukh's fists she dashed off to the Sokolyuks dressed just as she had been for puttering around the stove. The most remarkable thing about her in such cases was that she never cried, but always laughed and complained about her Yavtukh, warning Darinka against such a fate as hers. Prisia's legs had turned beet-red from the cold, her breasts barely fit into her blouse; her face was puffy, and this made it glow with kindness — she was four or five months pregnant. It was warm and cozy in the Sokolyuks' home, and she was reluctant to leave it; but Yavtukh came in after her almost immediately, bringing her boots, sheepskin jacket and kerchief. He asked her to forgive him, pulled the boots onto her feet, dressed her, and took her home, lamenting about his fate in the process:

“God forbid that anyone should have such a wife as mine. No sooner do you take her out of your house than you've got a little knocker on your hands...” He spat with disgust.

For all that, he led her away with such Babylonian chic that you would have thought both of them had been visiting the Sokolyuks. In the meantime, the people at the festival had struck up a song.

“Prisia, do you remember what you sang to me when we were grazing Tysewicz's sheep, confound them?”

Prisia had a beautiful voice, and quietly started to sing near the gates:

As I tended the herd in the pasture,  
Red poppies I picked in the wheat,  
But time has plucked their red petals  
Like suitors who plucked at my heart.  
Of all I will choose the most handsome,  
A Cossack, brave, worthy and fine.

“What’ll she find there?”

“Who?”

“Darinka! Or do you always think of nothing but yourself?”

“Get lost, Yavtukh!”

“Don’t you give me any of that lip of yours! See, the kids have already gotten into a fight.”

Something in the house dropped with a thump, clanked, and burst into smithereens.

“The pitcher!” Prisia exclaimed and rushed to the door.

Yavtukh snapped reproachfully behind her back:

“As the old cocks crow the young ones learn. Haw-haw-haw!”

The paunchy pitcher of beans was standing on the rack right under the ceiling, and when the urchins started a pillow fight, they hit it. The beans had spilled all over the floor and now the eight kids and their mother started picking them up one by one. Something of the sort happened all the time: no sooner would she venture to the Sokolyuks than some trouble would be afoot either in the house or in the field. The day Prisia had left those fiends, as the reader might recall, Yavtukh had turned over with his wagon laden with sheaves twice, and of all places it had happened on a level road.

By now the whole of Babylon was already gossiping about the Sokolyuks near the whitewashed church that had been dedicated that day. The smart alecks kept

asking the brothers whom they should congratulate: the younger or the elder, or both of them at once. Since the founding of Babylon no one had ever heard of two brothers having one helpmate. And why should that have happened in a village where girls were legion, few of them rich, but the poor ones blooming like poppies. That cursed Lukian had surely adopted some of the habits of the Stundists, raved the pious old chatterboxes, heaping curses upon all gods except Christ—the one and only Lord and God, and regretting that Babylon had no parish priest of its own to anathematize the sinners before the altar.

The number of cunning questions and unfriendly looks that bore down on Danko and Lukian made the brothers cut short their feasting without having properly experienced the holiday tipsiness, and they rushed back home to get rid of Darinka. They decided to apologize to her and bundle her out of their service forever to stop all that gossiping once and for all. But no sooner had they opened the door and crossed the threshold than Babylon's tides of enticement ebbed.

The room seemed to have become brighter; all the dark nooks in it had disappeared; the floor was plastered and strewn with wilted herbs Darinka had found behind the barn; there were no cobwebs; the icons and portraits had been dusted; and the initiator of these changes was washing her hair in a trough, having filled the house with the smell of lovage. The brothers exchanged glances and did not dare to say a single word. Afterward she stood for a long time in front of the time-yellowed sliver of a mirror built into the wall and combed her soft braid with the marvelous streaks of gold which summer in the pasture had left there.

The restless night began for everyone when the cricket calmed down in its nook as it heard the

alarmed human breathing. Danko, as usual, made himself a bed on the floor, having brought in an ample armful of straw from the barn; Lukian spread a narrow length of coarse cloth on the well-heated stovebed; and Darinka, as was agreed beforehand, was offered the bed after the huge pile of pillows, not exactly snow-white, had been put onto the trunk. Since they were enormous and absolutely unfit for sleeping on — save perhaps for a fairytale monster, half lion half man — everyone used little pads which, worn as they were, were nonetheless very comfortable for the head. After the scuffle that broke out in the morning, the brothers did not dare undress to their underwear in the light. Even after Lukian had put out the oil lamp Darinka did not undress, because she had no decent nightgown. She lay quietly down on the bed with her clothes on. Suddenly Lukian recalled that in the trunk there were quite a few undergarments that would probably fit Darinka. Their mother had taken good care of them, and there was no use to leave the linen rotting in the trunk. He waited until Darinka fell asleep, then he quietly got down from the stovebed and went to his brother to seek advice — Danko might have different ideas.

“Well, we get rid of her, or what?” Danko asked in a whisper, after Lukian lay down at his side.

“She’s no bother to us, Danko, is she?”

“But what will people say?” Danko grumbled.

They whispered at length on the straw. Without coming up with anything definite but only clouding the entire issue with doubt, Lukian returned to his stovebed. There he took off his spectacles, put them on the stove cornice, and could not fall asleep. The alluring blue lights of Darinka’s eyes flickered over him throughout the whole night like some distant stars that burst into radiance deep in his heart.

From that night on, Lukian took a liking to everything about Darinka — her freckles, the attractive fluff of hair on her upper lip, and even her low voice which was soft in its own right. In no other girl had Lukian heard such a marvelous voice.

The next night, when Danko opened the flood gates in a buzzing snore, Lukian whispered to her:

“Darinka, are you asleep?”

“No, I can’t sleep a wink,” Darinka replied softly.

“I tucked a fresh nightgown under your pillow.”

“I put it on...”

“There are some more in the trunk, so you wear them. What do we need them for?”

Darinka was sprucing herself up, but mostly she was sprucing up the household whose mistress she was imperceptibly becoming. She plastered the sooty stove anew, painting it a glowing yellow, and embellished the chimney with peacocks so fine that both of the brothers bubbled over with excitement. Darinka did not conceal from them that she had seen such embellishments in a not-too-distant place — at Malva Kozhushna’s. But the Sokolyuks would not believe it, because none of them had been in Malva’s home. The Singers were not keen on letting strangers in, and only now did it dawn on Danko that Malva had treated him like a stranger as well.

## *Chapter 2*

That day Klim Sinitsya was making his way to Babylon in his light sleigh. Near the windmill the horses rushed into a snowdrift and barely managed to get out. Otchenashka, who watched the windmills now, came tumbling out in her sheepskin coat, saying

that she did not remember such a bitter winter as this one. It was even harder to get to the Singers' house. The little street running through the wilted sneezewort was covered with snow, as was the whole farmyard right up to the windows. There was only some unknown person's footpath leading to the house. So someone had not forgotten Kozhushna, Sinitsya thought. He had to deliver her old mother the letter from Malva that had come to the co-op. Malva complained that in Babylon Bonifatius was reading other people's mail. What naiveté! She should have known that before the letters got to Bonifatius they were read in Hlynsk by the postmaster Hapochka himself. Hapochka had an inborn passion for reading other people's mail. The District Party Committee had censured his old habit, but it probably wasn't that easy to drop, although now he did it in a more cautious and covert way. Klim Sinitsya left the horses and the sleigh near the Village Soviet in the care of the clerk Savka and stalked to the Kozhushnys' home along the freshly trodden footpath.

Savka covered the horses with rugs to keep them warm, pulled feedbags onto their muzzles, and settled down in the sleigh — not on the box, but on the back seat where he burst out laughing pretending to be God knows what bigshot. Then Bonifatius came out, looked the sleigh over with a critical eye, probed it here and there, and spanned some of its parts, trying to fathom the secrets of this forgotten model that was light for the horses and comfortable and cozy for people.

“My, Savka, that sleigh would be something for you to have!”

Savka had never had anything more than a pearwood sled when he was a child. But nothing could be comparable to it when you dragged it up the highest



hill and then raced down toward the white Babylon foothills at breakneck speed. Savka remembered Bonifatius during those childhood games. When he was a boy, Bonifatius had also come with the sled, holding on to its rope. But in the end he would walk down the hill with it, afraid to smash himself up. From that time on Bonifatius was probably the greatest mystery in all of Babylon for Savka. As it was, Babylon itself seemed to be in some unfathomable tangle of labyrinthine tracks left by magpies, dogs, and man. Savka was always the first to break the human tracks; then they were trampled down by schoolchildren, after which the old women walked them on their way to sewing parties, and after those feeble grannies whom the day meetings and cold drove over Babylon, all the other local residents freely walked those tracks.

What the hell, Savka thought sitting in Klim's sleigh. The path is always blazed by the weakest, although it should be the other way around.

Bonifatius smacked his lips and clucked his tongue so loudly the sound hurled back an echo — he must have divined how to make that sleigh. Then he went for lunch, a procedure at which he was more punctual than the Village Soviet's wag-on-the-wall. But Savka stopped him, pulled the rugs off the horses' backs, took down their feedbags, got on the box and drove the sleigh up to Bonifatius. All this happened within a minute. Bonifatius did not even have time to come to his senses and refuse; he sat down on the back seat and Savka drove him through Babylon.

Whoever saw Bonifatius in the sleigh that day would never have believed it was him. He was an embodiment of pride and dignity. He did not turn his head either left or right, even when he was being greeted, but looked straight ahead at Savka's lean back with its protruding shoulder blades. Savka also

comported himself with dignity, not permitting himself to look around lest he disgrace Bonifatius in this way, and only when they approached his house, did Savka ask:

“Well, how do you feel there?”

“The world’s not what it used to be, Savka... When I rule Babylon I’ll get myself such a sleigh by all means. With a box and springs in the back.”

“And who’ll be sitting on the box?”

“You will, Savka, you alone. Who else...”

“All right, go on and rule. As for me, I’m willing to serve you. Either as a coachman or as clerk,” Savka roared with laughter.

At the gates Bonifatius got down from the sleigh, ordered Savka to wait for him, and walked slowly toward the house like some bigshot.

There in the warmth of his home, Bonifatius was having lunch, while here, on the box, the chilly wind blew and the hoar-covered horses snorted. Savka covered their backs with rugs again and glanced constantly at the Kozhushnys’ cottage to see when Klim Sinitsya would come out of there. Since he did not appear, the old woman must have been treating him to some fine viands in gratitude for her daughter’s letters — buckwheat dumplings with pork fat or something like that. She was famous for her culinary skills which Orpheus Kozhushny, wandering about the world as he had, supplemented with some dishes that were fantastic for these parts. He himself prepared such dog meat Manchurian style as filled the entire hillside with redolence, but no one except him would touch that repelling dish. Bonifatius, however, did not tolerate any inventions when it came to food which, he believed, man had grown as accustomed to as daylight. There could be no doubt that now he was having a fine borshch with mutton ribs, and for main course,

dumplings with cabbage — something he had told Savka about earlier that morning. Savka, though, had baked potatoes for breakfast. This was also a fine treat indeed, if only he had not to enjoy it every day, but every other day.

The tensely alert elm trees stood on the hill in white silence while the swing rested in the loft of the Village Soviet. Savka had the keys to the swing and to the bell tower, and the secretary should have taken this into consideration.

Bonifatius did not appear. Savka prepared to leave, got onto the box, and was instantly seized by mad fury at Bonifatius. In a second he moved to the back seat, stuck the whip handle into the loop on the box, and burst into a roar of laughter.

Bonifatius in the door appeared with Zosia wearing an apron. She was a diminutive woman in the last days of pregnancy.

“Hallo, Savka!”

“Hallo, missus.”

Bonifatius waited for Savka to get out of his seat.

“Get onto the box!” Savka gestured, making himself comfortable on the back seat.

“Stop fooling, Savka.”

“Another word, and you’ll be footing it. And I’ll be driving behind to keep you from running away.”

Bonifatius wavered, then got onto the box, pulled out the whip, straightened the reins, and urged the horses on.

“I just want to see how you’ll rule Babylon,” Savka laughed from the warm bast lining of the sleigh.

Bonifatius ground his teeth, yet bowed to everyone who saw this bizzare scene — a very tall Bonifatius perched on the high sleigh box. The master of the situation, however, was Savka, although he was hungry just like Fabian the billy goat was from time to time.

Klim Sinitsya had stayed too long in the Kozhushnys' home, probably being treated to a good meal there, so Savka decided to go in. "Get off!" he said to Bonifatius when he drove up to the Village Soviet. Savka took his place on the box and directed the sleigh to the little street covered with snowdrifts. Inside the warm house where missus Singer invited him to a table with a big steaming pot of the famous buckwheat dumplings in pork fat, Savka concluded that the world was not such a bad place to live in after all, and how good it was that not all the people in it were Carmelites. Judging from the way Savka pounced on the dumplings, Sinitsya realized that the clerk must have gotten pretty hungry and gave him a good helping from the pot, which made missus Singer uneasy to the extreme. To prevent the extra expense, the old woman tried to gratify Klim as much as she could:

"Eat, Klim! Drink, Klim! I was very touched by that letter! To leave home and go such a long way off! She's taken after Orpheus, she has. He roamed the world all his life. But he wasn't around when she was born... Eat to your heart's content. You'll have a hard time keeping up with Savka. He always seems to be hungry..."

"Today Savka and I are going after the ones with full bellies," Klim said, encouraging the clerk.

Missus Singer saw she hadn't the slightest possible chance of saving the rest of the buckwheat dumplings for herself, so she emptied the whole pot onto his plate. For that Savka kissed her hand after he got up from the table, something the great co-op man did not have the sense to do. Well, that's what a Babylon education was all about...

During the night the Sokolyuks were visited by Savka Chibis who rapped on the little window opposite the stove. When they opened the door and he entered, covered with snow, he burst out laughing in the darkness (he simply loved to cackle out of place), after which he said that both of them were urgently wanted at the Village Soviet and had to leave immediately with him.

The lamp was lighted. Savka again guffawed on seeing Darinka in the bed.

“Why do we have to go at night, Savka? Is the day too short for whatever you have to do?”

The clerk sat on the bench cracking sunflower seeds; he was not authorized to give any explanations, they themselves would have to guess why they were being summoned because he knows the water best who has waded through it. Savka dodged their questions as much as he could, and the Sokolyuks could not worm anything out of him.

They got ready reluctantly, with grumbling and sighs. Danko's hands turned numb from fright; he could not pull on his boots for a long time as the bootlegs slipped from his fingers, stiff with fear. He had asked the cobbler to sew tabs onto the bootlegs — but he hadn't done it, although he had fleeced him for the boots.

When Darinka had closed the entrance hall behind them and the three men had gotten out into the street, Savka said that he had to take Yavtukh along too.

In a few minutes the clerk was leading out their frightened neighbor who couldn't do up the wooden buttons on his sheepskin coat for the life of him.

“What's happened?” Yavtukh asked the Sokolyuks. “Has someone else been killed?”

The Sokolyuks held their peace, believing the query to be a malevolent hint. They walked up Babylon Hill

to the cottage of Tysewicz, which had housed the *volost* office for some time, and was now the Village Soviet.

Here they met all the rich of Babylon: Matvii Husak, Artem Buh, both of the Radenkys — Khoma and Fedot, and Petro Dzhura, the owner of the tractor. They all lived in Babylon and had come here on foot; the farmsteaders came by sleigh, summoned by the militiamen who had arrived from Hlynsk.

Kindrat Bubela, tall, emaciated after the clink, and pitiful as the wretchedness he personified, moved among those summoned, complaining about the tax of two thousand rubles that had just been imposed on him: "You can't possibly raise that much money from a whole farmstead, even if you sold everything down to the last thread!" He urged the others to stand their ground and not shovel out the money, because whoever hurried to pay the first tax would be assessed a second and then a third, because those satans of Hlynsk couldn't be trusted; they'd fleece them to the end and make them beggars, and then this world would lose yet another Babylon which would certainly go to wrack and ruin without its true masters.

Pavlyuk the father came out onto the porch. He, too, was a farmsteader and ran the best smithy in the neighborhood. When they were looting Rodzinski's manor, he had overstrained himself hauling off a huge anvil and block, so from then on he had a hernia which he had to keep pushing back into his innards as it fell out more ominously with the years. Just then he was overexcited and held onto his hernia with his left hand, doubling his whole body to one side, then he dejectedly pulled his gray fur cap onto his gray head.

"How much?" His three sons — Onisim, Makhtei

and Roman, the smithy's slaves — ran up to him all at once.

"Fifteen hundred, no more no less," Pavlyuk said, waving his free hand in a gesture of despair, and started to push his way through the hushed crowd toward the sleigh to quiet his pain in it.

As he lay in the sleigh the farmsteaders surrounded him on all sides: "Come on, Sazon, tell us how they're going about this business." Pavlyuk lay on his back, looking into the frozen sky, as brittle as the first ice, and kept whispering: "Fifteen hundred. Fifteen hundred..."

Both of the Radenkys — Fedot and Khoma — were called into the Village Soviet. They went off with their backs stooped as if mounting the scaffold; on the porch, they took off their caps and bowed to the militiaman standing at the door, as if this would help them any.

Once they had been poor people who had a potter's wheel and a blind horse to take their products to Hlynsk. After the land distribution they had dropped their trade, built first one windmill and were now starting on a second. They were jacks-of-all-trades, having opened a saddlery and a cartwright's workshop; they were set on buying a tractor, to be followed by a thresher; they had made bricks themselves and built a house with two wings, almost like the one Tysewicz had had — they could have lived and enjoyed life, but all of a sudden Savka had rapped on their window that night...

The Radenkys were held up longer than everybody else. The older brother, Fedot, went down on his knees a number of times, begging the authorities to take into account his children, of which there were quite a few. He threatened to bring the kids and commit suicide right here in the Village Soviet. The younger

Radenky had no children, but he burst out bawling too, not so much for his sake as for his brother's.

Klim Sinitsya was representing the District Party Committee. He knew the Radenkys from the fairs at Koziv and Hlynsk (he sold clay in the same row with their earthenware), but he would never have believed that these were the same Radenkys, the recently poor men of Babylon, who had had one blind horse people said was so blind it couldn't tell the difference between a fair in Koziv and one in Hlynsk. Although the Village Soviet was well heated, Klim Sinitsya paced up and down the room in his unbuttoned leather jacket, but because of his missing arm the Radenkys had not recognized him. The vendor of clay they had once known had two arms; he was a gentle, kind boy, while this comrade representing the District Party Committee was firm and implacable, knowing their profits better than they themselves (he did not reduce the sum he had stated by a single ruble: five thousand rubles from the whole household or a half from each of its owners).

"Why are we any worse than Bubela or Matviy, or the others?" Fedot clutched at the final straw, but his brother calmed him down and led him, more dead than alive, out onto the porch.

When they named the sum, Matviy Husak gave a laugh, while Pavlyuk stopped groaning on his sleigh and forgot all about his hernia.

Then it was Petro Dzhura's turn to be taxed. The interview was brief, because they took into account his sick wife Ruzia and the fact that the co-op had hired his tractor when the locomobile broke down.

"Is that tractor of yours still around?"

"Yeah."

"Haven't sold it yet?"

"What for? I don't have to feed it, do I?"



"Do you intend to hold onto it for long?"

"Till I croak."

"What about joining the co-op and bringing your tractor along?"

"No, Klim, I want to be free."

"Write down fifteen hundred for him."

"Isn't that too little?" asked the tax assessor from Hlynsk, whose heart was cold as an adder's.

"That's enough for a start."

"And how many years do I have to pay?" asked Dzhura, tapping the floor with his boot.

"If you don't pay by New Year's, we'll expropriate your tractor. Enough! You may go, Dzhura, and think it over what's best for you. Either you're with us or with them," Sinitsya said, pointing to the door. With these words Dzhura left as if it were all the same to him.

After that they called for Yavtukh. He entered, merrily excited, animated, and almost in a happy mood. That put Klim Sinitsya on his guard. He sized up Yavtukh: the same legendary pair of pants. Now what could they take from him?

"Did you write the statement concerning the Sokolyuks?"

His romantic mood vanished, he glanced fearfully at their uncle Panko Kochubei who sat at Klim Sinitsya's nonexistent left hand.

"My oldest son Ivan wrote it to my dictation. I can't write myself, you know."

"Are you sure they've got a domestic?"

"Yes, 'pon my word she's a domestic. Panko Harekhtovich here can confirm that, uncle of theirs though he is."

"Uncle twice removed," Panko Kochubei specified for everyone.

"I didn't say once removed, did I?"

"You may go, Comrade Holiy. We'll take your statement into consideration."

"What do you mean I can go?" Yavtukh got angry. "And what about that thing, I mean the tax I'm supposed to pay? Am I a God's pet, or what?"

"We won't tax you."

"You won't tax me? Ye gods and little fishes! You should do it for propriety's sake at least."

"You're a man of average means, you've got a lot of kids..."

"Me a man of average means? That's the first time I've heard about it. Now what kind of man of average means am I, eh? I'm of the highest means there ever was."

"You?" Kochubei jumped to his feet, stung by such a brazen lie. "I've never butchered a single hog for you. So what kind of a moneybags are you without any pork fat?"

"And what about my sow and piglets? Isn't that a fact? I ask you to take this into consideration, Comrade Representative of the District Party Committee. Also, I press oil twice a year. You shouldn't use pork fat during Lent, anyway, and why do you need it if you've got some good hempseed oil for cooking?"

"We don't tax peasants of average means, Comrade Holiy. You can go now. We only tax middling-wealthy peasants who're well off, and not all of them at that."

"But you must tax me! I beg of you! I'm well off. I'm better off than the others."

"So how much would you like to be taxed?"

"Well, two rubles at least. I've got one of them on me right now."

"Soviet power can't go against the law."

"I permit the power to do it. I permit it, d'you hear."

"All right, that's enough!" Sinitsya pushed up the

leather jacket that was slipping down his left shoulder with a jerky, sudden movement of his shoulder blade.

Yavtukh, wronged and insensible, almost on the verge of tears, trudged toward the porch. When he came out, a number of faces drew near to his. One of them belonged to the farmsteader Loboda, the tip of his mustache touched with hoar frost.

“How much?” they asked with one accord.

Yavtukh unbent two fingers on his outstretched right hand.

“Two?”

“From such a beggar?” Loboda gasped.

“Now, where’s the justice of it? Don’t they even give a damn about the kids?”

Yavtukh burst out crying and went away, filled with utter despair at not having been taxed. It was the despair of a man who had not yet achieved anything despite his almost superhuman efforts. Yavtukh felt awkward at not qualifying as a middling-wealthy peasant, while others had passed across that loathsome “rank” seemingly at a single stroke.

Klim Sinitsya recognized both of the Sokolyuks, and his face crinkled into a smile, or so it appeared to them, and he deftly pushed up the leather jacket with that jerky movement of his shoulder blade. Uncle Panko did not show the least kindred feeling toward them nor did he propose that they sit down, although he had not denied such a courtesy to any of the others, except Yavtukh perhaps. When Bubela was called in, Kochubei had not known where to seat him, and in front of the Radenkys he was prepared to stand so that they could be seated. He gelded their hogs ceaselessly and was paid lavishly, especially when he returned to the hogs the second time, in the capacity of butcher. Up till then he had wonderfully combined the high office of chairman with this favorite trade

of his for which he had such a rare talent. Even the co-op enlisted Panko Kochubei's services. He was called out there two or three times a year, and that's where he really reached his highest acclaim. The co-op paid him in cheese for his work, and every time he brought home two or three wheels. Currently they paid him in cash. The fact that Klim Sinitsya was now eyeing the Sokolyuks so intently made Kochubei shudder, and a trickle of cold sweat broke loose from the nape of his neck and rolled down his back; a couple more such trickles and Panko would swoon. He groped for his ticker which was the feeblest part of his anatomy, covered it with his palm as if it were a wound, and then said to Klim Sinitsya:

"Klim Ivanovich, these here are the Sokolyuks, my distant relatives. When they were kids, they burned down Babylon, and now they're bent on sending their uncle to glory. One's a horse thief, and the other's called the Holy Squirt. A rare combination indeed. And now they've been up to another nasty trick — took a girl into their home, the one Yavtukh wrote about. Now what's Darinka to you: a wife or a domestic?"

The last time Klim Sinitsya had seen them was on the Abyssinian hills where they had slaved till the first snowfall, and regardless of what their uncle was thinking about them now, they evoked his sympathy and even admiration. If everyone in his co-op were as industrious as they, it would surely assert itself for a long time to come. Right now they were standing there as innocent and helplessly naive as ever, picked to pieces by Panko Kochubei, yet Klim Sinitsya felt no malice whatsoever toward them — either of class or human nature. He only asked, not without a tinge of irony:

"Now which of you is the horse thief, and which is the Holy Squirt?"

Their uncle gave them such a hypercritical look that one of the brothers could not help but find his tongue.

"Uncle's mixed up something, I'm afraid," Danko said. "But aside from that, it's me who's the horse thief, and he's the Holy Squirt. Isn't it so, uncle?"

Danko hadn't held a stolen horse by the halter for a long time, and Lukian had completely forgotten how the doors into the presbyter's house opened.

At this point Klim Sinitsya looked up their property qualifications: five *dessiatines* of land between both of them, horses of their own, not stolen, a five-share plow, a wagon, cow, two gilts, hens, pigeons, a still for moonshine, a handmill, a mortar (for millet), a hemp scutcher, and a domestic. They had met their set quotas for grain delivery; back in autumn when an attempt was made to set up a SOZ \*, they refused to join it; they farmed the land on their own, and in addition to everything else were unreliable politically. That summer they had done time in the Hlynsk jail. Such reference was surely meant to make a powerful impression on any representative, because it had been compiled by Bonifatius to cross and compromise Panko Kochubei through his relatives, thus giving Bonifatius a chance at the office of chairman. Panko fidgeted uneasily on the bench as Klim Sinitsya read the property qualifications of his kinfolk; he surmised the vile hand of the tricky Bonifatius, that brat of the barefooted Carmelites who had once ruled over Babylon from their seat in Berdichiv where the ruins of their cloister stood to that day. As for Klim Sinitsya, he was incensed by Bonifatius's nit-picking.

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

"The only thing he seemed to have left out were the mice," said Klim Sinitsya and almost shoved the list under Kochubei's nose.

What Panko saw there made him grasp his head in dismay. The last on the list to be taxed was none other than Fabian himself! Levko Khorobry! That was an irony of fate indeed. But to Kochubei's great chagrin the list had been signed by none other than himself, the chairman, and forwarded to Hlynsk.

Panko read the entry on Fabian: "He does not have a field of his own, turned down a plot during the land distribution, reasoning that it would be impounded anyway; has a billy goat which is being used by the whole neighborhood and for which he rakes in a lot of money; apart from that, he has additional earnings from making coffins; and of his other property a workbench and carpentry tools should be singled out. Is knowledgeable in the Bible and other books of questionable content."

Kochubei came up to Savka who sat on the water cask in the corner, and told him in a whisper:

"Get Bonifatius! Get that varlet in here as fast as you can!"

"How can I if his wife's having a baby right now? Zosia's two weeks late as it is."

"How do you know she's late?"

"Bonifatius told me."

"Then call Fabian."

"The man or the billy goat?"

"Both. And get a move on, man!"

Savka bolted out of the door, and by the time he returned, the Sokolyuks were already gone. They had been given a good tongue-lashing for the domestic. Klim Sinitsya made them write a statement in which both pledged that from now on they would consider Darinka an equal member of their family and owner

of one-third of all the property Bonifatius had so scrupulously listed. Klim Sinitsya was happy to have made that decision. He ordered the chairman to inform Darinka of it, and Panko could now rest easy: not a single relative of his had been taxed, and that was quite a feat considering he had to work with a shyster like Bonifatius.

Savka led in the bewildered billy goat, holding him firmly by the beard. Fabian wasn't home, and then Savka, returning empty-handed, espied the billy goat with its muzzle in a co-op feedbag. The billy goat was munching oats and frightening the horses with his ringed horns. A number of grains had stuck to his wet nose, and now he was trying to get at them with his tongue.

"And what sort of a subject is this?" Klim asked.

"It's Bonifatius's victim," said Panko Kochubei reflectively. "God knows what this paper says about him, but in fact the billy goat's worn out; he's old and good for nothing. Levko Khorobry doesn't gain anything from him. Once he was quite a stud, but now he's old and worn out..."

When Savka freed him, the billy goat stalked up to the cask which stood in the entrance hall in summer and was brought inside for the winter, pushed open the wooden lid which served as a stool for Savka, and, having appreciably slaked his thirst after a substantial repast of the co-op's oats, he trudged toward the warmest corner near the little stove where he liked to lounge during the meetings, slowly got down on his forelegs, stretched out, and instantly drifted off into deep slumber.

Levko Khorobry was struck off the list, and Bonifatius Liasota was almost put down in his place. His property qualifications, evil-mindedly exaggerated by Panko, as might have been expected, gave grounds

for imposing quite a pretty tax on the secretary of the Village Soviet. But at that moment a short-winded Savka burst into the room and, choking on his laughter, informed that Zosia had given birth to a son who had been named for his father. That immediately changed the situation, and even the tax assessor from Hlynsk did not insist on taxing Bonifatius Liasota. Panko did not insist either, because he was afraid that after the secretary, it would be the chairman's turn to be taxed. The money he made gelding hogs was well known to the tax assessor, let alone to Sinitsya who had an even more accurate knowledge of its amount.

Then Bonifatius arrived in person, solemn, excited, and somewhat embarrassed by the fact that yet another Bonifatius had appeared in the world. Klim Sinitsya congratulated him, while Panko Kochubei, barely resisting his urge to heehaw in the presence of the District Party Committee representative, asked:

"Why was Fabian, that is Levko Khorobry, included on that list?"

"To show the property of others," Bonifatius replied calmly. "Didn't you know, Panko Harekhtovich, that everything is better understood by comparison?"

"Well, that's why we almost decided to compare you with Fabian." Kochubei said. "But honor made us take into account that blessed event of yours. Be grateful to Zosia that she jumbled our cards."

"And do you know whom you should be grateful to for not being included on that list?" Bonifatius flared up. "To me, Panko Harekhtovich, for not having stated the capital you've made on those hogs."

Kochubei gave such a sudden start that he almost broke the uprights of the armchair he was sitting in.

"If we're left without any pork fat one of these days, he'll be to blame," Panko said, turning to Sinitsya. "Take my word for it, my knife won't touch a single



hog from this day on. Let Babylon breed boars for all I care."

"Calm down, it's not you we're talking about."

"But don't you see who I'm working with?"

"Who?" Bonifatius asked.

"With a Carmelite!" Kochubei blurted out.

Bonifatius rushed out of the room with a bang.

On the porch he was met with a hiss and roar from all sides which made him retreat into the dark entrance hall.

"He's the one who's selling us out!"

"Come on out, you Carmelite! You can't hide from us anyway!"

"Babylon crook!"

"Antichrist!"

"Citizens, quiet down!" the militiaman in the sheepskin coat said. "Quiet down!"

Then Savka brought in the Skoromnys — the father and his two sons. They kept to themselves, not mixing with anyone, because it would have taken them more than one night to get used to this alarming, unusual atmosphere. When they were summoned into the Village Soviet, they loped so tightly one behind the other as if they were one man. Such a unity of souls had never been created by Babylon's nature before — this was definitely the first case. And when they came out onto the porch and someone from the crowd asked, "How much?", all of the Skoromnys waved the query aside and instantly hurried back home. Even the snow under their feet crunched as if it was being trod by a single person.

Then came the Bezkorovainys, Pirnikozas, Valakhs, Zhuravskys, Butas, Chapliches — Savka was bringing them to the Village Soviet right up to the crack of dawn. Bonifatius did not leave out a single kopeck of their profits, having listed their equipment, assets and

reality; he had calculated their expenses better than they themselves could have, and so now he had to stand in the entrance hall behind the wall, tall and lonesome as he was equally just toward relatives and non-relatives, Orthodox and Catholics, rich and poor alike. It was only at dawn that he got out of his hide-out and dragged himself home to be present at his newborn son's first bath.

### *Chapter 3*

Bubela believed that he had started to live in the world not on the day he was born, but from the time he became the owner of a small farmstead tucked away in the steppe between Pritske and Babylon. Two people were responsible for his getting the farmstead. The first was Teklia, a rich girl from Koziy, with whom he had driven to Babylon a small, yet quite fleecy herd of sheep that were ready for the shears. Another of his acquisitions included a wagon without wheel hoops and a nag of the same age as Teklia; it was going to die any day, so his father-in-law gave it to him over and above the wedding rig, so that Kindrat would not have to harness himself to the wagon and drag it all the way to conceited Babylon. The second person Bubela had to be grateful to for his good fortune was the czarist minister Stolypin, during whose office Bubela started to see an ever-better future for himself. The bridal horse outlived Teklia who died during her first childbirth. As for Stolypin, he was assassinated in Kiev, and Bubela went to attend the funeral service on behalf of the Babylon *volost*, crying his eyes out, something he had not done on Teklia's departure. After that he went to the Kiev Cave Monastery to pray to the Lord to safe-

guard his farmstead. There a nun caught his eyes. She was Parfena, a most wonderful, bashful girl with a heart as gentle as the morning breeze that caressed the farmstead. He brought her around to the idea that his farmstead — amidst the fields, the sky, the universe — could be her nunnery if she desired. Parfena agreed, since she was sick of the Nunnery of the Intercession of the Virgin, into which she, a helpless orphan, had been forced by her relatives. At the Jewish Market Bubela hired a coachman who hailed from Hlynsk; in three days he brought Parfena to the farmstead during the night, and from then on his new wife was rarely seen by anyone in Babylon. Before the Revolution, Bubela concealed her from the landowner Tysewicz, during the Revolution from the officers and *sotniks* \*, and later on he concealed her from the whole of Babylon, convinced that the people living there without a Czar had become frivolous and unreliable. And Parfena, probably because she had left the nunnery, was punished by barrenness. Bubela resigned himself to this fate, but when he was getting on in years, he began to crave for an heir, making Parfusia, as he called her, drink all sorts of herbs; he invited some great quack from Kamyanka, who through various parables hinted that all the trouble was with Bubela who should try and give his wife more freedom and then everything would work out by itself, if, of course, the monks had not killed her flesh with some poison before that. If that was so the Author of All Things in whose name all this had been done would be of little help.

The sheep bred in large measure. Bubela did not know what to do with the wool and tallow. Parfusia

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\* *Sotnik* (Ukr.) — Cossack captain

did not seem to be getting older by a day; the columnar poplars grew vigorously around the farmstead, concealing its little realm more reliably from the outside world with each passing year; in the weirs the carps bred a-plenty; in the pens the hogs oinked and scuffled; secretly Bubela kept a number of girl farmhands from Pritske, who stayed overnight at the farm, sleeping on the straw in the barns, and throughout the whole summer, the Babylon boys visited them, trying at the same time to lure the nun out of the house, but Bubela held her in his embrace even while sleeping, afraid lest she bear him some frivolous brat that would nullify his efforts of many years and wreck his "realm" at the hands of some fainthearted heir. It would be better if his whole property were to remain with Parfusia in the event of his death which was in the offing: his asthma would do him in; now he sucked on an empty pipe almost all the time, rarely treating himself to even a pinch of tobacco. Then suddenly he was beset by yet another unexpected headache. A young bull had grown up at the farmstead, a real beauty, and the tinkling profits came rolling into Bubela's pockets since they kept bringing the cows from all over Babylon and Pritske. Whenever he led the bull out, he would first close the shutters of the house. Then he would give Parfusia the money for safekeeping, breaking into a choked giggle every time.

On the farmstead, the sun rose in Pritske and set in Babylon. To the east there was Fedir Maihula, a former trooper with Kotovsky's Army of Cavalry, whom Bubela furtively bestowed favors upon, bringing him a dressed sheep or a trussed turkey for his holiday table now and again; and on the west he was protected from trouble by the hog fixer Panko Kochubei himself whom he had actually placed in his

present office to rule over Babylon, a "wicked and insubmissive" village, vile in its eternal poverty, with its huts that pressed to one another and its crooked streets that seemed to be even narrower viewed from above. Only a handful of people living on those streets had made it big in this life. After the last fire in Babylon, only a few patches of land could be wrested from Tysewicz, and that in court. Captain Siroshapka threw in a bit for the victims of the fire — those who got the patches of land were the only ones who were well-off, while the rest were small fry, starvelings and eternal slaves in a ceaseless pursuit for a crust of bread.

Bubela whispered the prayers Parfusia had taught him. She herself had stopped praying, probably having lost faith in Father, Son and the Holy Ghost alike. For her, all this was embodied in Bubela whom she called "father"; he was her God, abbot and executioner at one and the same time, although he had never raised his hand at her in all these years or even abused her verbally, much as she wanted to be beaten up by her husband or bawled out at least once. When he hollered at the young bull or the seasonal farm hands from Pritske, Parfusia listened to him with envy. His refined, senile gentleness tortured her more than the laughter of the boys wooing the Pritske girls in the barn.

In his efforts to scrape up the two thousand rubles he had to pay in taxes, he gave his farmstead a going-over like he was looking for some hoard of Siroshapka's sharecroppers — this had been the captain's land once. Bubela would jump out of bed in the night, dress, and be out till dawn, and when he returned, he would say in despair: "No way of getting that two thousand, Parfusia. I'll have either to sell the farmstead or borrow a piece of rope from Pelekhaty in-

stead. Every time I go into the windmill, I get the urge to do it..." He was still hoping for Maihula's help but that, too, vanished. Maihula refused to intercede on his behalf, calling Sinitsya an incorruptible fanatic just like Robespierre. On hearing this name, Parfusia said that at the Intercession Nunnery there hadn't been a saint by that name; he must have been a Catholic saint, but she knew only the great martyrs of the Orthodox faith, whom Bubela strained so much to emulate. That was something she had realized when her husband returned from the inquest and said: "I'm already old; I've got nothing to lose, so I'll fight them. If I die, wherever they bury me, hire some people to come dig up my remains and bury them here on the farmstead. Don't put a cross on my grave; just let the grass grow through me and I'll whisper to you at night. Ha-ha, my sugarplum, I'm still strong, the Germans didn't hack me down, and neither will these bastards... I got two St. George's crosses from the Czar and the rank of *sotnik* from Hetman Skoropadsky. But don't you breathe a word about it. When the Hetman was deposed and we got beaten at Zhitomir, I came back with another *sotnik* — Tikhin Dorosh from Pritske. Once when we camped for the night, God forgive me, I went and..." Bubela shivered at the recollection. "That's so he couldn't tell anyone... That gray-eyed Nastia who comes to work for us is his daughter. Her stepfather is a good-for-nothing lazy-bones, a member of the Poor Peasants' Committee. Once I asked her if she'd had any news from her father, and she said: 'We're waiting for him.' Go on waiting, I thought to myself; you'd just as well wait for the end of time. We've butchered one another for this land they're trying to take from us now... After all, what are we without it?"

Next night he got his sleigh ready and drove to

Babylon. Parfusia crossed him when he was leaving, suspecting that this trip would be important for him: either he would return as strong a Bubela as he had been before or he would go to ruin, and then anything might happen. He could well set fire to the farmstead in despair and go off begging. Bubela was a man who couldn't be stopped. She would have either to return to the nunnery or ask to be accepted to Klim Sinitsya's co-op if they only would accept a person with such a past as hers.

When Bubela went off secretly to join the Hetman's troops leaving the farmstead in her care, Parfena knew what to do. She hired a young man from Babylon cheap — for ten rubles a month and free grub. He was Danko Sokolyuk. At that time he was a little over twenty and still didn't know anything about either horse-stealing or women. At first he was too shy to look the mistress of the house in the eye and went home for the night. But at harvest time when they started taking in the crop — Danko mowing the grain and she sheaving it — his puerility vanished quite suddenly. He didn't leave the farmstead for a week or two in a row and soon neglected his home altogether, his mother even had to come to Parfena to get the money he earned. The only thing left was for them to marry, but then Bubela returned home in a special operations trooper's uniform. He chased Danko away without paying him for his last month of work. Parfena walked about in grief and loved the boy for a long time after that until Malva Kozhushna plucked his heartstrings on the swing. Parfena had never seen Malva, but heard of her only from Bubela who said that Malva was a marvel of a woman for whom Danko Sokolyuk was nothing but a toy. Bubela was sure that of all the men in Babylon, he alone would have been able to tame her into submission and

honor had she crossed his path when she was still young.

Bubela had been handsome and strong once, but the farmstead had sapped his strength. Time on the farmstead flowed as fast as anywhere else. Parfena was already over forty while Bubela was on the far side of sixty. At first this difference in years was not glaring, but now it brought both of them much bitterness and disappointment. While Parfusia still endeavored to make most of life, he lived only for the sake of his farmstead. He got stricter with his wife and even ceased taking her along to the Hlynsk fair — the only place at which Babylon's residents had ever seen the nun. The less freedom she was given, the more persistently Parfena craved for it. If Bubela had been out of harm's way now, she would have left the farmstead and gone into the big wide world long ago.

Was Bonifatius hearing things, or was there really someone prowling around his house the whole night through? In the evening, Zosia had prepared dough to let it rise until morning. At dawn Bonifatius got up, probably earlier than anyone else in Babylon, and went to the barn for the straw to heat the stove with. Zosia pricked up her ears as she always did when she was waiting to open the door when her husband returned with a huge bundle of straw, but this time he didn't come, no matter how long she waited. She put on her house shoes and ran out into the yard, still half-asleep in the embrace of milky twilight, calling: "Bonifatius!"

In response she heard only the half-open door creaking in the wind.

It was dark in the barn. Zosia threw open both halves of the door with a gloomy foreboding and saw Bonifatius lying with the bundle of straw on the ground.



He must have been attacked when he was hoisting the bundle onto his shoulder and then strangled with the reins of a bridle.

Panko Kochubei and the whole of Babylon insisted that the Carmelite's pangs of conscience had gotten the better of him and he had strangled himself. No one wanted to live through the experience of yet another inquest in Hlynsk. Yet when she ran out of the barn, Zosia had seen a sleigh weaving its way through the upper part of Babylon with her own eyes — no doubt Bonifatius's murderers making themselves scarce... Then someone let out that Fabian had taken the measurements for his coffin long ago. That news could only have been spilled by Bubela, since he was the only one who knew about the notch on the wall in the coffin-maker's hut. Besides, someone recalled that day in Hlynsk when the Carmelite had raised his hand against Bubela. "And that's something that isn't forgiven," they whispered at Bonifatius's funeral. Bonifatius was buried in the wasteland, where all suicides were consigned to dust, at the insistence of Babylon's moneybags. A horrible snowstorm raged that day, the roads were covered with snow, so it was impossible to get to Hlynsk to stand up for the deceased. And in Babylon his defenders were nil. Probably no one but Zosia shed a tear for the deceased, because honest man that he was, he had never done a whit of good to anyone. His stinginess was unprecedented; even everything he used for himself was measured and weighed on a steelyard. He did not waste a single kopeck on drink either for himself or with others, yet he had the habit of taking note of and counting other people's goods and money as if they were his own. When he took his sugar beets to Zhurbiv in autumn, and if someone got stuck or his wagon overturned on the road, Bonifatius would drive around the unfor-

tunate, being concerned only for his own haul. Yet everything others lost on their way he would pick up and put into the wagon. Zosia conjectured later on that if he had been forced to foresake everything he had acquired and join the collective farm, he would have hung himself. In addition to everything else, he was cruel. Zosia was afraid of even his glance. But — God rest his soul — he who had craved to rule over Babylon one day had met a guiltless and untimely death, and a violent one besides.

Babylon's moneybags were in despair, afraid lest they be implicated in the death of Bonifatius in any way. In the daytime they kept out of sight, and in the evenings they sat up late at the Radenkys' or the Pavlyuks' or some other home, and sent their men out to Pritske, Koziv and Hlynsk itself to see how the land lay. The picture was the same everywhere, except that the taxes were even higher and harder to bear.

Klim Sinitsya was heard out at the District Committee on a statement of Bonifatius's, now a post-humous statement. In it, Bonifatius reproached the representative for being soft on the residents of Babylon. By decision of the District Party Committee, Anton Ruban, the manager of the organization department, was sent to Babylon. He was known as a firm man, hot-tempered, but just. Ruban acknowledged all the actions of Sinitsya as representative of the District Party Committee to be legal and left them in force.

Ruban took lodgings at the home of Malva Kozhushna's mother. He was of small stature and swarthy complexion. Back in Hlynsk he had only an old mother and no one else. That was why Babylon immediately started seeking a match for him, striving to obtain at least an influential personality for Hlynsk. Yet Antosha (as they called him once old lady Kozhushna started the ball rolling) had come to

unsubmissive Babylon for a different purpose. By his authority he dismissed Panko Kochubei as a hanger-on of the *kurkuls*, as Bonifatius had written in his statement, and until the elections took the duties of chairman upon himself.

On Christmas Eve, when all the believers and non-believers of Babylon kept to their homes, partaking of the *kutya* \* which some mixed with sugar and others with honey (in our home they put nuts into this heavenly viand, which made the *kutya* so delicious it was doubtful that Christ Himself had ever tasted anything like it), Savka Chibis came running up to our house. Covered with snow and excited for some reason, he refused to sit down at the table around which the Valakhs had gathered. He only took a couple of pancakes from the pan, cooled them in his hands, red from the frost, and swallowed the whole lot one after another without pausing for a breath.

"The chairman's come back from Hlynsk," he said to father. "He's got some urgent business, and asked you to come over to the Village Soviet at once! He said for you not to breathe a word to anyone about the summons. I guess he's calling you for the Last Supper." He burst into a loud heehaw, more out of place than ever, and scampered off to Lukian Sokol-yuk.

Father had once been on a farm produce requisitioning detachment and had had the imprudence to tell Ruban about it. Ruban put him to shame, saying that it absolutely did not become father to hide among the middling-wealthy peasants. After that, father wrote an application to join the SOZ which was to materialize

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\* *Kutya* (Ukr.) — boiled wheat with honey and ground poppy seeds served as the traditional Holy Night meal

in spring, and handed it over to Ruban along with his destiny as a middling-wealthy peasant.

"Blast him; why must he pester Christian folks on Christmas Eve?" said mother, as she gave father a little pot tied up in a white kerchief, along with half of the pear-wood spoons that had not been used yet. "Treat those antichrists to some of God's *kutya* so His wrath won't visit them on this night at least."

Father wavered as to whether to take the *kutya* or not; in the end he took it, stuffed the spoons into his pockets, whispered something to mother in the entrance hall, and left.

Ruban was cleaning the sooty chimney of the kerosene lamp. He seemed absolutely unsurprised by the pot with the *kutya*, which father had put on the table.

"Our *kutya*'s made with honey and nuts. Jesus Christ Himself never ate better," said father.

But when he started to lay out the spoons, Ruban finally realized that the *kutya* had been brought along not for the sake of disguise — as if the man had taken it to share with his relatives on Holy Night — but in earnest, to celebrate Christmas Eve here in the Village Soviet under the portraits of the revolutionaries.

Ruban glanced into the pot.

"Listen, did you really bring *kutya*?" he asked.

Father untied the white kerchief in which he had carried the pot, picked it up, and brought it closer to Ruban's nose.

"Here, smell it."

Ruban took a sniff; a wonderful aroma hit his nostrils. Ever since he had joined the Party he hadn't eaten *kutya* as a matter of principle, and he hadn't died, although neither did the Party benefit from his self-restraint.

“Eat it yourself,” he said. “We communists don’t fritter away our principles on such trifles.”

Father wrapped the pot in the white kerchief again and put it on the floor in the corner, probably intending to take it back home with him.

Presently Petro Dzhura arrived, smelling of his tractor, his sheepskin coat covered with machine oil and his hands black with grease. He greeted everyone, took off his cap, and sat down on the bench. Something was wrong with his tractor — it wouldn’t start. This worried Petro, because he was deprived of the instrument that frightened Ruzia so. Every night she came to his half of the house and wept at his bedside. She had horrible nightmares, for a deranged person’s dreams were deranged as well.

Ruban wiped the chimney, fixed it onto the paunchy tin lamp, raised the wick, and it grew brighter in the Village Soviet. It also became brighter in Dzhura’s heart, because in the dark he imagined Ruzia dressed in black for the rest of her life.

“Today’s Christmas Eve,” said Dzhura. “In Babylon it smells of *kutya*, pancakes and fish, but my tractor won’t start for the third day in a row. No sooner had it been told it would be in the SOZ than it wouldn’t budge.” Dzhura laughed at his remark.

“So why did you tell it in advance?” Ruban rejoined.

Within the past month or so, Ruban had gathered the Poor Peasants’ Committee twice. He set up the SOZ, put Petro Dzhura at its head, and made friends with him, believing that such men as he would be of benefit in the future. He loved walking up the Tatar Ramparts and looking down at Pritske where he had spent his years as a Young Communist Leaguer under the guidance of a Kotovsky trooper, Fedir Maihula. The latter had now surrounded himself with relatives

and cronies, and let the *kurkuls* raise their heads. Bubela's farmstead lay between Pritske and Babylon. Once he had come to Ruban and asked to be transferred to the authority of the Pritske Village Soviet.

"You may, if you like, of course," Ruban said, "but without the farmstead."

Bubela stopped short, realizing that he had gotten too far afield and had perhaps even been incautious, and asked Ruban to visit him at the farmstead. After all, Pritske chairman Maihula was a welcome guest at his home.

Former Kotovsky trooper Maihula was a kindhearted, honest man, but he had one flaw which was concealed most easily on another man's farmstead: he boozed a lot. Hey, tall long-haired Maihula, what are you doing over there? If Teslya had known about your friendship with Bubela, he would have opened a personal file on you.

Every Saturday Ruban went to seek Klim Sinitsya's advice, at times spending the night there and returning in the morning. Sinitsya read him Malva's letters each time. He was probably in love with her. But as for Ruban, it was strange and incomprehensible to him that Sinitsya could love a woman who had actually run away from him God knows where to.

Klim was a strange man indeed. Throughout the winter, his co-op members loafed around, tending the cattle and cleaning grain. If Ruban had been in charge, he would have made them sew, weave, crop feathers, make cheese and build boats to sell — there was enough material and hands to do all that instead of living off the co-op. Since he started visiting the co-op, it had livened up a bit. They had hired a cheesemaker, a private tradesman, true, but the hell with him — he could make the cheese until Malva returned

from her courses. The cheese didn't have a brand on it saying that it had been made by a private enterpriser. A steam-powered sawmill was set in motion, and the first boards were manufactured; in the spring they planned to open a brickworks, because the palace couldn't accommodate all the co-op members; something decent had to be built near it so they wouldn't be ashamed to show the neighborhood what the co-op was all about.

Klim Sinitsya, probably to a lesser degree than Teslya, regarded the co-op as a far-reaching experiment with regard to the world revolution, while Ruban with his practical frame of mind saw in it something very current which was necessary for the present day. Having seemingly forgotten about the little house overlooking the Chebrets, Ruban secretly dreamed of the Babylon co-op which he saw more clearly from the Tatar Ramparts than from anywhere else. He wanted it to be something grand, all-embracing, with a million *dessiatines* of farmland and thousands of members. What if a city were one day built on the present site of Babylon? It made him shudder to think that this grand project had to be started almost from scratch with but a score of associates.

Levko Khorobry, who was left without any boots when winter caught him by surprise, had been making himself a pair for the last week, and as he sat by the window, he saw the stranger on the Tatar Ramparts a number of times. But so far he had nothing to pull onto his feet so he could go out to meet the man: he had no desire to go running outdoors in straw shoes. Just then he put the finishing touches on his boots, took them off the lasts, slipped his feet into them in a hurry, threw on the green *chumarka* overcoat Zosia

had given him for the coffin he made for Bonifatius, and went outdoors.

"What are you looking at all the time?" he asked. "I've seen you here more than once, so I figured why not come out and invite you home."

"And who are you?" Ruban looked suspiciously at the *chumarka* and new boots which smelled of fresh wax. He remembered seeing this man before, without the *chumarka*, though — in Hlynsk, he thought.

The owner of the *chumarka* said with a smile: "I'm from Babylon, of course. Fabian — that's what they call me around here."

"Now what Fabian drinks water at the Village Soviet?"

"That's my billy goat. He's also called Fabian."

"A wonderful animal."

"Well, just like a billy goat should be, nothing else. I've simply gotten used to him. You see, I have a touch of night-blindness, so he leads me home occasionally. In this respect he's an irreplaceable friend. Are you Ruban by any chance? It's you, isn't it?"

"Yes, it's me."

"I was wondering why you kept looking at Pritske. You're probably the very same Ruban who used to live there. So how do you like Babylon?"

"Babylon isn't Pritske, that's for sure."

"I was at the patronal festival there some days ago and got to know their chairman. A great man he is, Maihula."

"In what sense?"

"Well, there's no oppression in the village — total freedom."

"For whom?"

"For everyone."

"Then it's simply anarchy."

"I suppose you'd like to have a dictatorship,



wouldn't you? Here we've got the dictatorship of Bubela, the Pavlyuks and the Radenkys already. It was always so, and will continue to be. In Babylon, he who's got the money calls the tune. I'm the only one who's free from them; I live as I please. I've got no farmland of my own, don't borrow seed grain from them, have no troubles about paying taxes, and I live like Socrates in Rome."

"Socrates lived in Athens during the reign of Pericles."

"Oh dear, I seem to have gotten everything mixed up again."

"And why don't you have any farmland?"

"I turned it down. Didn't want to become a slave of the land. Remember what the Carthaginian sage Mago said about that in his book on agriculture?"

"I know. Read about it on the walls of Sinitsya's place."

"Right now I'm reading the Bible. Rereading it a second time, as a matter of fact."

"For what?"

"When snow piles up around my hut, I read until they come and dig me out. They're afraid I'll freeze to death, you see."

"You lead an interesting life, Fabian. May I have a look at your house?"

"Sure, let's go in. I'm not alone now, though. Zosia's brought me some food to keep me from dying of hunger. I haven't been down the hill for a week now, so Zosia, God bless her, has come to my aid."

"Whose Zosia?"

"Bonifatius's."

"You mean our Bonifatius?"

"Exactly. When she goes to visit his grave, she drops by on the way. Bonifatius and I were distant relatives, which makes her something like my kin."

I've been thinking about moving him to the cemetery. His soul should be closer to people."

"Is that so difficult to do?"

"In Babylon, to be sure. It's a ruthlessly cruel place, believe me."

No sooner had they come inside than Fabian asked:

"Zosia, have you seen Ruban before?"

"Only once, but I was crying at the time."

Her boots stood on the floor, while she, a little black-haired woman with nicely done braids, was lying on the stovebed warming herself. She was barely thirty years old and there was still a trace of sorrow in her eyes set in a kind beautiful face. Bonifatius had brought her from Dakhnivka before the land distribution.

Zosia got up, slipped her bare feet into the boots, and threw the dry sunflower stalks she had been breaking on her bare knees into the stove. It seemed to Fabian that she had brought some coziness into his empty hut, but perhaps this feeling was generated by the fire which she managed to keep up even after the three of them sat down at the workbench that served for a table. Not all the shavings had been swept off the workbench, so Zosia took to gathering them up. Presently she picked up the shaving which seemed to be the longest of them all, without beginning or end, and thought that this could have been a shaving from Bonifatius's coffin. He was a very tall man like all the Carmelites. According to Fabian, this Catholic Order did not accept short men, supposedly on the grounds that a single shorty might discredit the whole Order. Ruban, however, was small of stature, but strong and sinewy. He had pitch-black eyes, a somewhat broad-cheeked face, and a hearty way of laughing (Fabian made much of how a man laughed).

After cleaning the shavings off the workbench,

Zosia put out patties filled with ground peas, a quart of *horilka* plugged with a piece of white cloth, and got three glasses from the dish rack. One of the glasses had a dead fly on the bottom which must have once drunk itself to death in the glass. Zosia blew it out and rinsed the glass with *horilka* which she then poured into the fire, sending blue tongues of flames up the stove. Ruban drank on a par with them. He didn't just take sips, but emptied the glass in one gulp, *praising Zosia's patties with peas and garlic*. Muddled by drink, he recklessly promised Zosia to have Bonifatius's remains moved to the cemetery. Fabian remarked that this should be done before the earth froze over them. Zosia burst out weeping, either from pity or from drink, and then they struck up the song *Hey-ho, the Snow Has Fallen in Carpets of White*. The song attracted the billy goat who came knocking on the door with his horns. When Zosia opened the door and he came into the hut, he sniffed at Ruban first and then fixed his eyes on the patties. When offered one, the billy goat refused to eat it, because he could not stand the smell of garlic. He lay down on the floor near the stove and drifted off into slumber by the crackling fire, although at the same time he was afraid his master would leave him in the hut by himself.

Dusk was descending on the Tatar Ramparts when the foursome began to make their way downhill. Ruban held Zosia by the arm, followed by a zigzagging Fabian, and behind Fabian walked the drearily sober billy goat. On this quiet and beautiful evening after Christmas all of Babylon's folk had poured out to their gates, Fabian exchanged greetings to left and right, everyone recognized Bonifatius's green *chumarka* overcoat on his back, and reproved Zosia and Ruban under their breath.

“So it’s Babylon that has to take the rap!” raved a woman carrying two pailfuls of water on a yoke across her shoulder. That was the violent and vociferous Palazia, the sister of Matviy Husak. Her husband, Khariton, had been killed in nineteen-seventeen in the Great War; she lived alone and never managed — or simply didn’t want to — marry a second time, although she had a sizable flock of sheep, a horse, cow, and was not burdened with any children.

She put the pails down on the road. The billy goat wanted to slurp water out of one of them, but all he got was a rap on the nose with the yoke. After chasing away the billy goat, Palazia picked up the pails and hurried home. Looks like that vile woman’s up to something, the billy goat figured, and pledged on his honor that if God let him survive till summer, he would take revenge on her sheep for the insult he had just suffered at her hands. He caught up with Fabian and offered him a horn so he would walk firmer and pay no heed to the pathetic residents of Babylon.

Fabian accompanied by the billy goat, and each of them separately, had frequently been at Bonifatius’s home before, but this was the first visit for Ruban. Bonifatius, Jr., was being rocked in his cradle by the old woman Romodan, one of those homeless old souls that were legion in Babylon. They did not have a crust to call their own and had never earned anything in their lives, but hired themselves out to look after children, crop feathers, and weave — that is those whose fingers could still twist the spindle — or simply begged to be let into someone’s home to warm themselves for a day or two. The old woman was singing a lullaby over Bonifatius when the tipsy company tumbled into the house, letting in blasts of cold and fright. The granny crossed herself on seeing a billy goat right by the cradle.

Zosia invited her guests to have a seat, asked the granny to bring them something to eat, took Bonifatius out of the cradle, and sat down with him on a stool.

“Did he cry?”

“Oh no, no!” the old woman shouted as she got a spare lamp to take with her to the pantry.

Zosia nursed the infant, put him back into the cradle which hung on ropes attached to a joist, asked Ruban to rock the child to sleep, took a bowl and, wearing only a blouse, rushed out to the cellar. She returned with pickled apples in sauerkraut.

“No one could make pickles like Bonifatius,” she said. “All the representatives from Hlynsk were treated to his pickles, and you, Comrade Ruban, must have some right away; there’s still a whole barrel in the cellar. Generally, my Bonik loved to lay in everything for the winter and spring.”

The old woman affirmed the statement with a nod of her head wrapped in its white kerchief — yes, yes, exactly — because recently she had seen two sackfuls of the finest wheat flour in the pantry, a barrel of salted meat, scores of braids of garlic and onions hanging on pegs, huge bundles of Turkish tobacco, and besides that there was a brick-lined cellar, a barn, woodshed and stable — so you could just imagine the amount of goods they contained. Bonifatius wanted to have something for a rainy day; he always looked upon the wealth of others with greedy eyes, and dreamed of having such wealth himself.

The old woman got drunk from the first shot of *horilka* and retired to the stovebed. The billy goat, after being treated to some pickled apples from the sauerkraut, was shown out. Luckily for him there was a big overturned straw basket that had held flour or corn, so he got into it, warmed himself up, and fell

asleep. Fabian picked a bench to sleep on (he had made the benches himself and had to sleep on them frequently). Zosia let the honorable guest sleep on her bed. She helped pull off his boots and seemed to have kissed him on the forehead — Ruban did not remember exactly — then she took little Bonifatius and went to sleep on the stovebed with him. Fabian broke into a buzzing snore from his bench. Ruban slept quietly. It was only Zosia who woke up time and again to attend to her baby. She could have lit the night lamp but was afraid; the windows were uncurtained, you could see everything from the outside, and someone was prowling around under the windows, which frightened her, because it might have been Bonifatius. Ruban was a handsome man with a fine shock of hair on his forehead; he had a pleasant laugh; his feet did not reek of sweat, and his foot bindings were as white as baby Bonifatius's kerchief — old woman Kozhushna was taking good care of him. He had a beautiful name, too — Anton, or Antosha to friends. He was well over thirty years old. In a month or two he could move to her place if he wished, either as a lodger or whatever else he wanted — why pay Kozhushna for lodging if he could have everything he needed right here. That's how she reasoned lying on the stovebed, while someone shuffled under the windows. She had been afraid of the dead since childhood and could not fall asleep now, listening intently to that pottering. When she had put Ruban to bed, he had hidden something under his pillow; maybe she should wake him up and send him out to see what was going on outside. Old people told her that Bonifatius would keep on visiting her until his remains were removed from the wasteland and buried in the cemetery next to his parents. It grew quiet outdoors, and only the third crow of the cocks chased the wretched soul away. With the tips of her

fingers, she touched the swaddled infant lightly, saw that he was warm, and sunk into the watchful sleep of all mothers.

Zosia was roused from sleep by a voice which came either from the direction of the commons or from the farmyard. Forgetting about her guests, she jumped down from the stovebed and rushed to the window, half of which was covered with straw from the outside to make the house warmer. The granny also jumped up from her sleeping place by the stove, whispering a prayer to ward off disaster.

What were all the Radenkys doing out there with Matviy Husak and his oldish daughters, and the old Loboda from the farmstead? Young and old alike were all milling around in the farmyard: Yavtukh with his Prisia, pious and calm; some strangers whom Zosia had never seen before from Pritske or Koziv in their sleighs.

On seeing her in the window, a boy in a hare-fur cap started yammering as if someone had stepped on his toe:

“Zosia, Zosia’s in the window!”

The crowd burst into heehaw and noise, but Zosia didn’t understand what it was all about. Both the Radenkys were wearing red sheepskin coats and Reshetilivka astrakhan caps, and the Husak girls were dressed up like for a holiday in silken kerchiefs, morocco boots, and snow-white sheepskin coats.

The Pavlyuks opened the gates and the crowd slipped into the farmyard. At this point Zosia realized that she was in for some bad trouble. She roused Ruban from sleep and then pulled Fabian down from the bench almost by force as he was not used getting up so early.

Ruban hastily put on his boots, dressed, and only then did he go up to the window.

"Come out and face the community!" someone shouted from the front ranks.

It looked like something of a riot. Ruban took the revolver from under the pillow and shoved it into his pocket. Those in the yard were not armed, but their defiant mood, their gloomy eyes frowning out from under the caps pushed down over their foreheads, and the clamor as a whole clearly showed that they had not come with amiable intentions.

"Could they have seized the Village Soviet?" was the first thought that crossed Ruban's mind.

He looked for Savka Chibis in the crowd — the clerk was not there, so they must have killed Savka and come here for his, Ruban's skin.

"What do you think they want here, Fabian?"

"Just a minute," said Fabian and pushed his face toward the window.

"Hey, where are you? Come on out! Show yourselves before the people and the Lord God! Let everyone see who's ruling over Babylon now!" That sounded almost like the well-trained voice of Panko Kochubei himself.

By now the crowd had reached the windows, and it might have started pushing into the house any minute.

Zosia took little Bonifatius down from the stovebed and scampered barefooted around the house in her nightshirt.

"Oh, my God, what do they want from us?"

Fabian had lost his spectacles somewhere, and without them he was no great shakes.

"Come on out, you guv'nors!" the crowd roared. "We know you're here!"

"They're the ones who did away with Bonifatius! They're the ones!"

At long last Fabian found his spectacles, went into the entrance hall, shook the billy goat out of the



basket, and opening the door with a sudden jerk, pushed the billy goat in front of him onto the porch. The crowd exploded with a roar of laughter. The billy goat just looked on, filled with undisguised contempt for those who had made him leave the warmth of the basket. He was followed by Fabian the man, pathetically crumpled, yet for all that, not devoid of a philosophical scorn for the mob. He bowed respectfully, and said:

“At your service, ladies and gentlemen. It’s me.”

“What the hell do we need you for? We know you inside out.”

“We want Ruban!”

Fabian turned his head in the direction of the entrance hall and said without losing the balance in his voice:

“Anton Ivanovich, you’re being called for.”

Ruban came out, perceptibly embarrassed and confused. The crowd droned threateningly:

“It’s him who’s forcing us into the SOZ! He wants to chase us off our land!”

“Nobody’s forcing anyone into the SOZ! It’s a voluntary association,” Ruban said.

“If it’s voluntary, make yourself scarce! We know what to do ourselves! We’ll take care of ourselves, thank you!”

“And if you won’t go, we’ll cart you out of Babylon like we did Pan Tysewicz once. It makes no difference to us!” said the elder Radenky, incited by someone who was slier.

“Reinstate Panko!”

“Panko for chairman!”

“Panko the hog fixer! We don’t want another Bonifatius, and a stranger at that.”

“Bring Zosia here! Call Zosia! Let her get the hell out of here along with Ruban!”

Pavlyuk's sons made a move to rush onto the porch after Zosia, but Ruban snatched out the revolver and blocked the way.

"I'll shoot you down, you bastards, if you dare put your dirty hands on Zosia. Bonifatius should have been enough for you."

The Pavlyuks retreated, and the crowd grew quiet suddenly.

"Let's go," said Ruban, turning to Fabian.

He walked off the porch and made his way through the crowd. Behind him sauntered Fabian, who in one way or another was to blame for this showdown — if he hadn't appeared on the Tatar Ramparts in his new boots Ruban probably wouldn't have found himself in Zosia's home. It was only now that the billy goat recovered his senses and stalked along with a proud mien — he loved processions and, in general, tried never to miss great historical events. In their wake came their pursuers on sleigh, horse and foot, without any definite idea yet where they were going.

"What do we do now, Comrade Ruban? You can expect anything from them. Babylonians are a hot-blooded lot if you stir them up. We've got Turks, and Tatars, and Poles — you name it. Not the quiet Ukraine you have anywhere else. Here, if you got varlets, they're the worst you've ever seen. They'll put out your eyes without any scruples. Bonifatius was ticked off in a jiffy, for the sole reason that he took stock of their property right down to the tatters."

"I've been sent here to fight them, not to softsoap them, Comrade Khorobry."

"Sure. But the situation's utterly unpredictable. There're almost no poor buggers in that crowd. Those scamps must be warming themselves around their stoves right now, while we got the filthiest part of Babylon trailing behind us."

They passed the house of Petro Dzhura. Ruzia pushed aside the curtain and smiled in response to Ruban's greeting. Ruban was glad not to see Dzhura among the rioters. He kept his tractor in his house, for which purpose he had cut a separate door in the wall. He slept beside the tractor and talked to it as if it were a living creature. Ruzia thought that this was the onset of insanity.

"I've got a fantastic scheme, Anton Ivanovich. That is if Dzhura will agree to help us."

"What kind of a scheme? An escape?"

"No, something quite different. A way to make ourselves scarce without being seen."

"No deal. Ask somebody for a horse and dash off to the co-op. Tell Klim Sinitsya what's up. He's got a self-defense detachment there. Let him send it our way. If we have to fight, we'll fight."

Animals sense danger faster than man. An escape route flashed with lightning speed through the billy goat's mind, which was always filled with a multitude of the most diverse schemes: he'd pretend he was walking off to relieve himself, for everyone knew that he never did so in the presence of people, always choosing an obscure, cozy place for this purpose. In an instant he outdistanced the philosopher, noticing that he was a mere shadow of his former self, then he passed Ruban who walked along with a fatally serene mien — the way people walk only to their deaths. When the billy goat was about to dart into the side-street leading to the Sokolyuks' home where he intended, in fact, to sit tight throughout this historical moment, Fabian instantly guessed the intentions of the sly critter, grabbed him by the beard, which had grown perceptibly thicker during the winter, and led him straight toward the Village Soviet: Fabian believed that the presence of the billy goat would have a

restraining effect on the mob, because his stature alone had something ennobling about it.

"You should've let him go," Ruban remarked quietly.

Indeed, that would be the most innocent way of breaking away from his pursuers. Fabian hollered at the billy goat — scam! — as he did whenever the critter got too close to the table, forgetting who he really was and contriving to snatch some food intended for the master of the house. The billy goat turned off into the clay pit, a bleak place everyone shunned during the winter. Fabian, for his part, puttered after him, and from there, the both of them were set on slipping away in the proper direction. The crowd moving past the clay pit gloated over this move of the Fabians.

"Look, the Fabians are already abandoning him. Now he's left on his own."

"Yeah, but just look how fast they ganged up with one another. They're tarred with the same brush. It'd be better if we chucked the both of them out of Babylon."

"The billy goat's their stooge all right..."

"I'm not sure it's a billy goat after all," the old woman Loboda put in. "It could be the devil. Haven't you noticed that no water is sanctified that he doesn't start hanging around? You see him during festivals, you see him during meetings, and you go to the swing — and he's there too. He's everywhere, in fact. No need to wonder why. That billy goat's been one of theirs for a long time. Take my word for it!"

"Oh, come on, this is too much. He's just an animal and nothing else."

"But what sort of an animal! It's not enough that he's disgusting and turns up in the dreams of pregnant women, but he's dangerous besides. Believe

me, we'll be having some trouble because of that critter all right."

"All the trouble we'll have will come from this man if we don't get rid of him."

The remark referred to Ruban who quickened his pace, clambering more determinedly up the snow-covered hill as he drew nearer to the Village Soviet.

Savka appeared on the porch. Drowsy from sleep, frightened, not having come to his senses yet, he didn't even have time to heehaw.

"Is this a riot?" he asked and burst into a peel of laughter which completely disarmed the front ranks.

Ruban waited a while for the mob to stop and quiet down. Bubela drove up in a one-horse sleigh and stopped to one side of the crowd to bide his time as if he didn't want to meddle in anything; from a side-street appeared Danko and Lukian, the younger Sokolyuk doffing his cap to greet Ruban from afar; the modest Skoromnys were running this way under full steam, probably thinking they were late for something very important. Ruban's eyes worked over the crowd. Savka stared at Panko Kochubei without blinking, thinking he had stirred up all this. Panko couldn't bear Savka's stare, spat on the ground, and hid behind someone's back.

"Anyone who wants to speak, come up here on the porch, please," said Ruban quietly.

The mob started looking for someone who'd go up there, trying to push first one, then another out of their ranks, but they all balked. When Panko Kochubei's turn came, he muttered angrily to the Radenkys:

"Oh, what's the use talking to him! We don't recognize his authority over us, and that's that!"

"Why fuss with him?!" a Koziv villager shouted

from his horse. "Tie him up, throw him on the sleigh and bundle him off!"

"What're you standing there for? Tie me up!" said Ruban, extending his hands. "But you won't manage to tie up the whole of Babylon. Take a look at how many of you there are. Only a handful. But Babylon's a big place, and all of Babylon's gonna follow us. I'm positive. Otherwise why'd we make a revolution? To breed a gluttonous bunch of sharks? No, brothers, you've had your day, and you won't tie up the hands of an entire people. As for me, go ahead and tie me up..."

An old bent pail that had been lying under a snow-drift was sent flying at Ruban. Someone from the crowd, probably the villager from Koziv, jumped down from his horse and hollered:

"Well, I've had enough of Babylon. Let's show him right away what's what."

The crowd was swayed into motion. The most hot-blooded forced their way to the porch.

Savka pushed Ruban into the entrance hall.

"That's Babylon for you, Anton Ivanovich. If anything happens — shoot! I'll guard the windows. I wonder what those dead flies want around here anyway?"

"What dead flies?" Ruban asked, not understanding what Savka had in mind.

"Those outsiders from Koziv. What do they want here? There are some from Pritske as well. Flocked together like a bunch of crows..."

Savka got down to business with fervor: he barricaded the windows with benches, stools and everything he could lay his hands on, and picked up the ax he used to chop wood for the stove. Ruban stood in the entrance hall for a while, then he entered the room and lifted the lid off the cask to drink some

water. The door was being attacked with a battering of boots and fists as the mob tried to break it down.

Soon afterward a rumble reached their ears from outside. Ruban made for the window, breathed at the frosty pane, and to his great surprise, saw Petro Dzhura driving his Ford tractor. He drove the tractor furiously, mercilessly. Enveloped in exhaust fumes, the machine, unsparing and unyielding, looked very much like a fantastic creature from another planet, because there was really something cruel and implacable in the turning of its wheels, in the fumes the tractor ejected from all sides, and in the diabolical laughter of the driver himself. Behind the tractor Fabian was skipping along with his billy goat, hollering:

“Run for your lives! Run for your lives!”

When he approached the Village Soviet, Dzhura steered his one-eyed devil of a machine at the rioters. It was only then that Ruban realized what he was up to, and he laughed inside. He called Savka to the window and let him peep through the hole he had breathed on the frosty pane. The mob stood rooted to the ground for an instant, struck all of a heap before that irresistible power which obeyed only one god in this world — Dzhura. The tractor's rear wheels were really frightening; there was something dragonlike in them as they dug their teeth into the ground, seeking murder. A man broke out in a blood-curdling yell; the women started to scream and fled in all directions. Pavlyuk's horses bolted at the sight of the tractor and tore off to carry their old master through the kitchen gardens. Dzhura had gone completely out of his mind by now. He set his monster against the Radenkys, Matviy Husak, and the old Bubela who barely managed to reach his sleigh and beat a hasty retreat to his farmstead, losing his cap. Husak's daughters issued

a piercing scream and pitched head over heels into the snow, Danko Sokolyuk dived into a hole, which must have saved the life of the tractor driver, who otherwise would have tumbled into it along with his machine. Dzhura probably got the greatest kick of all out of chasing after Yavtukh. He proved to be braver and nimbler than many others in the crowd and easily evaded the tractor, even jeering at this creation of human wisdom until Dzhura stunned him with yet another peculiarity of the machine, which was almost beyond Yavtukh's comprehension: he put the tractor in reverse and went after him. The daredevil lost his nerve and sprinted toward the ice-bound pond, sure that Dzhura wouldn't have the courage to follow him.

Fabian rocked with laughter, remembering how the rioters' faces had contorted with fright. Such a retribution could only have been dreamed up by him, the great thinker and champion of justice. The instant the street grew deserted the billy goat fell on the spoils of the fray — the feedbag that had dropped from Pavlyuk's sleigh. It had been a long time since the billy goat had tasted such wonderful oats, warm from old Pavlyuk's rump.

Dzhura was returning from his last raid in reverse better to see the heels of the retreating enemy. He was going at a good speed as if he wanted to demonstrate the inexhaustible possibilities of his machine.

"Stop! Stop!" Fabian yelled.

Another second and the victors would have lost the immortal billy goat who had played no mean part in this fray.

Bubela's gray cap was given to Savka for safe-keeping — to be presented to the future collective farm chairman. The barricade within the Village Soviet was dismantled, the building itself was locked, and



a note was hung on the door for Klim Sinitsya in case he came to Babylon: "Klim Ivanovich, we're at Bonifatius's place. Come on over." Then the foursome got onto the tractor and set off for Zosia's to get some breakfast. They were joined at the crucifix by Lukian Sokolyuk. When questioned concerning the whereabouts of Danko, Lukian spread his arms in a gesture of ignorance.

At slow speed the tractor moved serenely, without the snarling roar, and there was not a trace of its recent demonic rage. The billy goat sauntered behind the tractor. He was terribly thirsty, and although he could have allayed his thirst at the dike, in the stream that did not freeze until the feast of the Epiphany, he was afraid to fall behind the company.

#### *Chapter 4*

That night Bonifatius's remains were buried in the cemetery's Catholic corner where the first barefooted Carmelites were laid in their graves several centuries ago. The cemetery also had a Jewish section — on the site of the former Tatar burial grounds — crammed with knaggy columns of stone. What was remarkable about them was their similarity of form and standing, although during the lifetimes of the deceased things must have been fairly different. The Jewish burial ground was separated from the others by a shallow ditch, across which the souls of the deceased could easily go visiting one another for their secret get-togethers, sprees, regales and auctions, as had once been the case in death-depleted Babylon. The largest section, however, was for the Orthodox. There were tall wooden crosses rising over their graves, with

embroidered *rushnik* towels tied round them. Over the grave of the Sokolyuks' mother was a *rushnik* embellished with black flowers, although Lukian remembered well that initially it had had red cockerels on it.

Bonifatius's coffin was not as heavy as it was long. Fabian had misjudged Bonifatius's height, and the coffin would not fit into the grave they had dug, so they had to spend an extra hour on the burial. Dzhura's tractor, hidden in the shrubs, was cooling, which made Petro worry that it would be difficult to start up again. In the meantime, Ruban had prepared a wonderful and quietly articulated speech: "He's the one who should have ruled over Babylon had the class enemy not destroyed this giant of a man..."

It crossed Zosia's mind that this was what Bonifatius had craved for, but in her heart she had prayed that it would never happen, because it would have been a truly ruthless rule. She shed a final tear for him. And Lukian, for his part, also shed a few tears on recalling that his mother had ailed a long time before she died. The billy goat, having had his fill of Bonifatius's soused apples from the dinner table, was impressed by the remarkable functioning of his stomach: this was the first time he had been present at such a surreptitious burial. Petro Dzhura and Fabian lowered Bonifatius into his last resting place, after which they filled up his old grave and vowed that for some time no one but those present should know about the burial. They were afraid the *kurkuls* would defile the new grave.

The tractor, thank God, started. Lukian settled himself on the fender and Dzhura drove him downhill. Fabian and the billy goat stayed home on the Tatar Ramparts, while Ruban and Zosia, as was proper after a funeral, slowly trudged home on foot. The moon had

sunk behind the windmills. Babylon faded and seemed to become smaller. Ruban decided to do everything in one night — they still had to go to old Kozhushna to get his things so they wouldn't have to do it during the daytime with all the people gaping. They walked across the ice-covered pond that crackled ominously and in some places squeaked for God knows what reason. Zosia stopped, as if she were afraid of falling, and held out a hand to Ruban with a feeling of pleasant expectation. Ruban was like a little boy. Zosia recalled her childhood in Dakhnyvka, the tinkle of pebbles striking against the first ice, transparent as the air, her first love for the young trooper who put up in their home, then the wooing of the sly Bonifatius when Babylon was still a *volost* center — all this had come and gone... She didn't let go of Ruban's hand, and pulled him to her side; on the ice it was difficult, almost impossible to resist the pull...

Zosia stood under the elm trees where Bonifatius had played on the swing, striving to reach the skies, after which he had grown so tall; he didn't win anyone's heart on that swing, but she was grateful he had brought her here, because otherwise she would not have met Ruban. There was no swing now or she would have stepped on the board — the very idea of it seemed to have made the hoarfrost fall from the elm trees. For a fleeting moment, a joyous happiness enveloped her. There was something in Ruban that appealed to her — in his gait, in his speech, in his eyes, in his shock of pitch-black hair.

Old Kozhushna gathered Ruban's belongings in a little canvas bag. She would have liked to have such a son-in-law as Antosha around her house. After making the sign of the cross over him, she locked the entrance door behind them. Zosia took the bag and they went down the old Babylon streets, which had

all but disappeared in the perennial growth of sneezewort, dogrose and all sorts of burry vegetation.

"Don't you see anything?" asked Zosia time and again, stopping.

"No, what is it?" Ruban wondered warily.

"Either it's Bonifatius or I'm seeing things." She sidled up to Ruban.

"Oh, come on, Zosia. It couldn't be Bonifatius. A man only gets buried once and then he is no more; Bonifatius was buried twice."

Prepared for any contingency, he groped for his Nagant revolver; now he, too, saw the footprints disappearing into the thicket all over the deserted street.

Baby Bonifatius was sleeping in his cradle when they entered the house. The old woman Romodan sat half asleep on a stool, singing a lullaby under her breath. She had nursed a multitude of children during her lifetime, but never had any of her own. When Babylon was the largest city in the world, Nadia Romodan had been the prettiest girl in it. The old landowner Tysewicz, the father of the last of the Tysewiczes, had a crush on her.

Zosia put the little bag on the bench; something tinkled inside and rattled — probably cartridges. The old woman crossed herself and thought furtively that everything was reverting to its old course. Then Zosia made the bed and put two huge pillows on it which she had never used when she slept with Bonifatius. Zosia was chaste, almost like a maiden. She was worried that at dawn, the mob might reappear and pack the yard, yelling, pushing toward the window, and clamoring for vengeance.

But they did not come. Throughout the night, only Bonifatius whimpered in the chimney.

Ruban was still asleep when Zosia got up, slipped

her bare feet into her boots, threw his leather jacket over her shoulders, and hurried off to the barn to get a truss of straw (Bonifatius had wanted to change the thatch on the house; for three years in a row he had been stashing away the trusses which Zosia was using for fuel now). She opened the door of the barn and froze in horror: hanging down from one of the joists there was a rope, rocking slightly back and forth in the breeze. Zosia darted back to the house and said to the old woman who was still drowsy from sleep:

“Go and fetch a truss.”

Well, well, she's talking to me differently now, thought the old woman. She put on her clothes, slipped her feet into shoes, and went out to the barn. She did not see any rope there; the trusses were stacked up like a wall. Bonifatius had made them big. She struggled to the point of exhaustion to hoist one of them down, but failed and returned to the house weeping. Her feebleness made Zosia burst into laughter which roused Ruban from sleep.

“What's up?”

“I sent the old woman to get a truss, but they're so heavy she can't lift them.”

Ruban pulled on his breeches, got into his boots, and went to the barn with only a shirt on his back. The rope was rocking in the breeze. Ruban froze. So that's what the *kurkuls* had prepared for him...

On entering the house with the truss, he saw Zosia weeping, elbows on the windowsill, hands clutching her head, while the old woman Romodan was slyly running her fingertips across her lips, probably after having spoken her piece of mind.

“Old woman, what have you been lecturing her for?”

“It's nothing, nothing really. I only said that if

you get spliced first, then the man's trusses will get lighter, so to speak..."

"They're like feathers to me as it is." He took one by the band and pitched it up onto a rafter.

"My God, what a strong one you are!" the old woman said, squeezing her eyes shut, while Zosia laughed through her tears.

"You're a funny sort, old woman. Even if Bonifatius were still alive, I'd be with her anyway. I'd steal her, wouldn't I, Zosia?"

"Sure you would," Zosia said, took a knife from the dish rack, cut the band of the truss and stoked the stove with it, chasing away the forlorn soul from the chimney, that last nocturnal refuge of deceased men.

Ruban took off his shirt, went to the pear tree standing in the farmyard, rubbed himself with snow from the waist up, huffing and glowing from the procedure. Zosia gave him a towel she had taken out of the trunk. Bonifatius had never used it, so his blue devils would not pass on to Ruban. When Ruban left for work, Zosia stood at the window for a long time, following him with her eyes. It was good that Malva was not around to ensnare that wonder of a man, Ruban. She rushed off to her neighbor's to borrow a scythe (Bonifatius had taken his apart for the winter).

"What the hell do you want a scythe for when the snow's all around," her neighbor, the old Zhuravsky, wondered.

"I need it and that's it," said Zosia without going into any explanations.

She went to the barn, stacked up some trusses, and only then could she reach the joist. The rope fell down, its frozen end grazing Zosia's face. She took it to the house and threw it into the stove, so that nothing would scare Ruban away from her home.

When Ruban had set off for Babylon, Makedonsky

had asked him not to forget to keep an eye on Bubela. "We don't have any direct evidence," he confessed. "The search at his farmstead didn't reveal anything either, but we're sure he had a hand in that murder. We let him go to have a better look at him and those who're with him. So beware of Bubela, Anton, and don't you trust the air of serenity around his farmstead too much." Ruban wanted to send the old man the cap he had lost, reasoning that this gesture would be for the good, but the clerk dissuaded Ruban:

"Ha-ha, you seem to have a pretty vague idea of what Kindrat Bubela's like. Once he even won a court case against Tysewicz himself."

The Village Soviet had a trunk in which birth certificates, land deeds, a boundary strip register, certificates of death, and Bonifatius's cryptographic scrolls with the property qualifications of Babylon's residents were stored. The inside of the lid was pasted with paper slips recording the history of Babylon, from ancient times to our days. No scholar could have done this with such diligence as Bonifatius had, and Ruban felt a mounting respect for this man and, consequently, for Zosia.

Ruban ordered Savka to lock the Village Soviet from the inside and got down to studying the "realm" in which he would be living and ruling. Savka arranged the papers on the windowsills, tables and benches in the sequence in which Ruban studied them. By the end of the day, the whole floor was occupied. There was not a single record of Bonifatius and Zosia's marriage, which must have been effected in a church in Hlynsk. Ruban wondered whether it was at the Church of the Transfiguration or at the Church of the Ascension — as if it would have made any difference to him. As a matter of fact, Zosia's marriage was only one of Ruban's secondary points of interest, so to

speak. He was more interested in the history of Babylon, that very Babylon which had so cruelly and implacably persecuted Ruban the other day and forced Savka to barricade the Village Soviet.

"Apart from Bubela, who had a farmstead of his own during the times of Stolypin," Ruban said, "all those Pavlyuks, Husaks, Radenkys, Yavtukhs, Buhs, Severins, and Panko Kochubeis were bred by our power, Savka, yours and mine."

Savka laughed on hearing the name of his former ruler.

"That's simply ridiculous. They became the enemies of a power that gave them land, that gave them the vanes for their windmills, the bellows for their smithies, and opened the doors to the future for them. And take Dzhura, Petro Dzhura! What sort of a man is he, whose side will he be on tomorrow? Just imagine if he had gone against us yesterday, huh, Savka?"

Savka said, laughing:

"Petro Dzhura's the slyest of them all. Yesterday he was probably coming not to our aid but to theirs. Comrade Ruban, you can't trust a man who's got a tractor of his own. Sure as telling the truth and shaming the devil, as Fabian puts it."

Although Savka's revelation did not appeal too much to Ruban and went against his opinion of Dzhura, it nonetheless coincided with Klim Sinitsya's judgment: "He's a snake in the grass, even though he joined the SOZ. He joined it to keep from having to pay taxes and to retain his tractor." When Ruban asked him why he didn't join the co-op with his tractor, since he was just the right man, Dzhura said that the only reason he was afraid of the co-op was that it might appropriate his tractor, and he hadn't had enough of it himself yet, so he wanted to keep it at his house for a while longer just to smell it; and then,



the fanatic confessed, the tractor had yet another advantage: it was scaring Ruzia away from him. That shocked and incensed Ruban so much he prohibited Dzhura from indulging in such practices and threatened him with confiscation of the tractor.

Late into the night they put together the Village Soviet archives and shut them under two locks as Bonifatius had done. Their task completed, the chairman said that from now on and to the end of his, Ruban's office, Savka would have his evening meals at his place, that is at Zosia's, because evening meals for such people as they meant everything — a fundamental of fundamentals. Without a good supper the winters drag on sluggishly, the nights grow longer, the children are born feeble, and work in the Village Soviet would be anything but efficient.

"Right you are, but what'll Bonifatius say to that?" Savka Chibis asked his chairman. "He'd never offered anyone a cup of water."

"Come on, let's go; it's wrong to speak ill of the dead."

When they entered the house, Ruban said:

"Zosia, from now on Savka will be having supper with us."

Savka Chibis ate much and laughed all through the meal just for the pleasure of it. After supper, when the clerk was returning to the office, the ghost of the Carmelite met him on the dike, clambered onto his back and rode it all the way to the porch of the Village Soviet. "What else did you expect, eating at my home for nothing, eh? I won't have it, I won't have it" — that was his favorite phrase when he was still alive.

The Carmelite was afraid to ride into the Village Soviet because he might get shut up there, and every time that horrible rider made Savka sweat all over.

But he couldn't tell Ruban about it, not only because the latter was a Party member and wouldn't believe it, but because Savka was considered an outright crank, as it were. He went to supper, and although he returned with a cold heart, he kept on going lest he offend the new chairman and fall into disfavor.

Once he came across Panko Kochubei who was in a merry mood after having dressed a hog somewhere. Carrying the tools of his trade and a share for his efforts, he smelled of pork fat and singed bristle.

"How's life without me, Chibis?" he asked.

By that time Savka already had the ghost of the Carmelite perched on his back. He couldn't shake him off, and it was still a long way to the porch of the Village Soviet.

"Can't you see for yourself what it's like?" he replied to Panko and continued on his way, which no one in the world could have stood, except the patient, inimitable Savka Chibis. The hog gelder was unaware what a person he had held in little regard.

It was only to Zosia that Savka confided: "Your Carmelite torments me horribly." And he went and told her all about it.

She turned pale, spread her hands in bewilderment, and advised quietly:

"You'd better borrow Anton's revolver."

Women can't keep a secret. Ruban started accompanying Savka to the dike after supper, and at times, forgetting himself, led the poor man farther, right up to the Village Soviet. For Zosia those were the most trying moments. Even little Bonka, as she called now her baby, annoyed her during breast-feeding with his gluttony and the quiet, piercing look in his little eyes. She caught herself averting her gaze from his, fearing it — indeed, fearing the dearest eyes in the world.

## Chapter 5

Bubela believed in omens. For a peasant to lose his cap was tantamount to a Czar's losing his crown. The last thing he wanted was to see his cap traveling to Hlynsk. He worried that the Hlynsk experts might ferret out all his thoughts about them, about the new power, about everything Bubela had thought and said ever since Sosnin had organized the first co-op in the neighborhood and taken the first co-op cheese to the Hlynsk fair, for cheese was a wonder no one had seen in Hlynsk since time immemorial. When Sosnin left and never returned, Bubela celebrated a silent victory. The whole day long he walked around the farmstead, went out into the steppe, lay down in the grass, looked for hours at the farmstead from afar, and then rolled in the grass with joy like a horse. But the co-op survived; it did not fall apart, one fanatic was replaced by another — Klim Sinitsya — and an even greater threat loomed over his farmstead. Bubela incited the Koziv *kurkuls* and then Pavlyuk and some others to do away with Klim Sinitsya — understandably, with a certain amount of caution. But they mixed him up with the cheese-maker and ruined the attempt upon the life of the co-op leader. They hadn't the slightest intention of killing the cheese-maker, but he was the first to fly at them and draw his saber. So they had to save themselves.

And here he had returned home without his cap, eyes brimming with furious unshed tears.

"Dry some rusks, just in case, and get a couple of shirts ready for the road," he ordered Parfusia.

For some nights he didn't sleep at home, going to his relatives (on Teklia's side) in Koziv, from which he sent out a spy. He returned only when he found out that everything was quiet, that Ruban was living

at Zosia's, and Babylon was preparing for the first winter fair in Hlynsk (the roads were still free of snow and the earth had frozen into huge chunks, which made it difficult either to drive or walk). Bubela had aged within those few days in Koziv, yet during his brief stay in hiding there his hatred had swelled, and he had grown hard as steel against the highhandedness which, as he believed, prevailed only on a local level, while the higher-ups didn't have the slightest idea about it. He left for Babylon to retrieve his cap.

Not finding the chairman in the Village Soviet, he elicited from the clerk that the cap was still there, lying in the trunk under two locks. Savka, however, did not know what Ruban intended doing with it; probably he would send it to Hlynsk or maybe wear it himself when the severe winter set in. So far, Ruban had played the dandy in the old leather cap he had probably been issued in the army. Savka Chibis laughed at his suggestion as Bubela stepped up to the ironbound trunk, finding it hard to believe that his cap was still there and not in Hlynsk. So the experts had not yet read the thoughts he harbored.

"Savka, you aren't fooling me, an old man, are you?" he asked Chibis. "When I was young, your dad and I were good friends. We worked together for Pan Tysewicz at that time. His horses sent your dad to his death when they dropped into a gully. See, and now I've lost the cap I wanted to die in."

Chibis was utterly moved, because he didn't remember his father and treasured any mention of him.

"It's in there," he said, pointing at the trunk, "but I don't have the keys. Bonifatius used to have them, but now Ruban carries them."

Bubela fluctuated for a moment between suspicion and belief, then kissed Savka on the forehead in a fatherly way, and left the Village Soviet. Some thirty

minutes later he returned with Ruban (riding in the sleigh), who unlocked the trunk, produced the cap and gave it to the dumbfounded, subdued Bubela with these words:

“Don’t lose it any more, ’cause you might lose your head like that as well.”

Bubela mumbled something incoherent in response, pulled off the peaked cap with earflaps he was wearing, and donned the cap he’d gotten back on his gray head (had it not been for Zosia, Ruban would probably not have returned the cap; Zosia started weeping pathetically at the sight of the all-powerful Bubela falling upon his knees in her home as he begged for his possession). Bubela took his leave of Ruban and Savka with a bow of his head and drove off, feeling his own self again. He already imagined the joy in Parfusia’s eyes on seeing this wonder of a cap on his head. Outside of Babylon, he took it off and smelled the inside. It still smelled of Kindrat Bubela and couch grass — Parfusia washed his hair with a solution of couch grass so he wouldn’t go bald.

There wasn’t a single soul on the steppe; only the moon was slipping in and out of the clouds. And even there on the moon, Bubela thought, brother had probably raised his hand against brother in their contention for land. Did the moon have a history of its own? Did it have its Bubelas and Rubans? And why did dogs howl at the moon? Oh my, how plaintively they were howling just then, and what was it an omen of? Then it crossed his mind that he’d have to call Yukhim Lavrik the chimney sweep to clean the flues of soot. They hadn’t been cleaned for a long time. All these years, the stove had been stoked with straw, which produced more soot than wood did, so tomorrow he’d have to send for Lavrik lest the farmstead burn down. The howling continued. Could it be that there

was a pack of wolves abroad somewhere nearby? Bubela lighted his pipe; it seemed safer with some light. When everything was all right, he thought, he'd hunt down a couple of wolves this winter, because no one was as adept at hunting wolves as he. When the co-op was still run by Sosnin, a confirmed communist and a no less confirmed hunter, they frequently met each other in the weeds amid the no-man's steppe, the former hunting wolves from a horse, and the latter from a light sleigh he had bought for just this purpose. Incidentally, Bubela's horse always sensed the proximity of the wolves sooner than the hunter. During the hunt, Bubela would pretend to be frozen in the sleigh and even pressed his eyes shut. The wolves would make one round, then another. By the third round, he would hear the snow crunching under their paws; the horse would start shivering all over, and only then would Bubela come to life and lodge his only shot to bring in a booty which would not let Sosnin have a day's peace, because he frequently returned to the co-op empty-handed. As a matter of fact, it was during those hunting trips that they got acquainted. Bubela wanted to invite Sosnin to his farmstead, but on learning that he lived without a family at the co-op (his family had stayed behind in Moscow), he dropped the idea, if only for Parfuscia's sake.

At the farmstead, the dogs kept on howling with mounting force. One of them, the main watchdog Didon, had been on the farmstead a long time. Tied to a chain covering the distance between the cattle sheds and barns, the huge brute with its glowing red pelt and constantly bloodshot eyes recognized only Bubela, and even Parfuscia was wary of it. The other two were gundogs: Prince and Palma — the former a male trained for hunting hares, and the latter a bitch, for

partridges. They were an unequal pair, lusted after by the loudmouthed, mangy canine tribe of Babylon, which easily lured Palma away from Prince. The blind offspring of these illegitimate relationships were thrown by Bubela from a cliff into the Chebrets River, while Parfusia shed heartbroken tears over the lost souls. Bubela, however, derived a certain satisfaction from this, thereby guarding the farmstead against the dominance of unnecessary creatures. If he could have extended this power to the whole of Babylon, he would have very quickly cleansed it of every foul admixture and created something inviolable and lofty.

Bubela tugged at the reins. The horse was used to going in a bow collar and carried him to the farmstead faster than the shadows that strayed from the cloudlets and drifted across the steppe somewhere into the night. When the poplars, lanky and white with hoarfrost, came into view, Bubela felt almost tangibly that he had something worth going down on his knees for, as he did before the hated Ruban in the home of Bonifatius which he had never visited before; it was worth submitting to any humiliation to be able to sleep with Parfusia yet another night at least in the unequalled fairytale realm where everything belonged to him, even the hoarfrost on the poplars.

Something made old Bubela's heart miss a beat when the sleigh stopped in the farmyard. The dogs rushed to their master and yelped tumultuously. Didon put his huge front paws on Bubela's chest and snarled furiously at Palma cringing fawningly at her master's feet. The windows were still not shuttered and it was dark in the house — this stunned Bubela, because above everything else Parfusia was afraid of darkness. When they ran out of kerosene, Parfusia would make tallow candles all day long and burn them in a copper candelabrum with a crucifix on it. The smell of the

tallow spread through the house; Bubela smelled it in his sleep, although his nostrils, either with the years or by the gift of nature, were stuffed with protective hair that did not gray, which probably explains why Bubela let it grow.

Without unhitching the horses, he rushed headlong into the house with the worst of premonitions, found the candelabrum with a candle butt-end by sense of touch, lit it, and with the candelabrum in hand, scurried from room to room, of which there were five in all. Once something had come over him and he had started adding to the house one room after another every year, although they continued living in only two rooms as before. Parfusia was nowhere in the rooms. He burst into the pantry and looked into the huge flour baskets of straw as thoroughly as if she could really have hid there. The baskets were plaited tightly and reliably, and it was now that Bubela noticed that both of them were almost empty; the flour covered only the bottom; no wonder Parfusia had reminded him about the flour ever since Mary the Protectress' Day, but in the end he hadn't gone to the famous flour mill in Zboriv on the Southern Bug, which he visited once a year in autumn when the river was calm and high. This negligence alone, uncommon for such a farmer as Bubela who thought years ahead, was in itself ominous. He put the lids back on the baskets lest mice get in them, went out into the entrance hall, and made for the loft. No sooner had he put his foot on the first rung of the ladder than the vision of a hanged man crossed his mind.

No, that's a bit too much, he thought.

Bubela was afraid of the hanged. Carefully he lifted the loft hatch, expecting to see that horrid vision which had been haunting him as he climbed the ladder. He recalled the windmill watchman involuntarily.



When one suicide occurs in the village, expect another one very soon. Babylon had an entire cemetery of such suicides, and Bubela waved off the thought that Parfusia might have also joined their number. But thank God, there were only sacks with pork fat and baskets with sunflower seeds hanging down the rafters and a bat, dazed by the candlelight, clinging to the chimney. Still afraid, Bubela closed the hatch and climbed down the ladder.

He ran out into the yard and yelled:

“Parfu-sia! Parfu-sia!”

The wind blew out the candlelight. Hearing the call, the dogs rushed about the farmyard and whimpered like orphaned children.

They alone know where Parfusia has gone, thought Bubela. He jumped onto the sleigh, called “C’mon!” like he used during hunting, and headed for the steppe with the dogs.

The dogs seemed to rejoice at their master’s trust in them, sniffed up the scent of the mistress of the house, and outrunning one another, made for Pritske.

Could it be that she had gone to Fedir Maihula, the trooper from Kotovsky’s Army of Cavalry, who frequently feasted at the farmstead and gave more than a side glance at Parfusia serving them the meals. But he had a wife and children in Pritske. For Bubela this was perhaps the only consolation during the chase. He could not believe that Parfusia had left him forever at such a hard time and let down the farmstead she had given so many years of her life for, not to say anything about letting him down, which he considered simply preposterous.

Sensing the proximity of the fugitive, the dogs were carrying on their pursuit with mounting intensity. In his attempt to claim all the credit for himself, Prince would stop in his tracks and bark in the direction of

the fugitive whom he could not yet see but smelled the lacquer of her new boot soles. At one point, the mistress must have tripped and fallen down. Palma found her lost woolen mitten, waited for the sleigh to come up, and gave her master the mitten on the run, overshadowing the performance of Prince.

To Bubela the mitten seemed still warm, he pressed it to his lips, and hid it in his pocket with a smile. The main thing was not to let Parfusia reach Pritske. In the village, his dogs would be helpless. Now it was not the dogs leading their master, but the master urging on the dogs in front of him, as he rushed blindly ahead.

A black spot appeared against the white background of the snow. Bubela did not take his eyes, watering from the wind, off it. Prince recognized his mistress and whimpered guiltily, because he loved her; he loved looking into her eyes, which unlike Palma's were not condescendingly indifferent; Parfusia's were the severe and at the same time kind eyes of a human being to which the dogs had grown used to over the years.

Parfusia breathed heavily; to the last moment she had not abandoned the hope of shaking off her pursuers. At her feet lay a bundle she had thrown into the snow from despair. Bubela got down the sleigh, took the mitten out of his pocket, and lashed her across the face with it. Then, without uttering a single word, he took her by the hand and led her to the sleigh. When they turned toward the farmstead, Parfusia remembered her bundle. Bubela ordered Palma to retrieve it as if it were a dead duck. The bundle proved too big for the dog, but her master's will was first and foremost for Palma, and her zeal filled Bubela with delight. He weighed the bundle in his hand, amazed that Parfusia had taken such trifles on her

escape, and threw her treasure under his feet with disgust. The bundle burst open, and out fell embroidered shirts with white lace trimming, a blue woolen gown with a brocaded *plakhta*, a couple of blouses, a pair of red boots she had worn only once for confession, and a handful of batiste kerchiefs which Parfusia used to tie under her chin to the delight of Bubela.

She was wearing now a coarse woolen kerchief that would make any woman look dull, and a sheepskin coat. She hid her hands in the sleeves, afraid to look in Bubela's direction; from the corner of her eye she saw only his high-capped shadow flitting grandly and proudly across the snow.

Bubela, serene, sly and cunning, reasoned aloud: Why was he, after all, taking her back to the farmstead, why such benevolence in regard to a woman who was ruled by the devil instead of God; she wasn't a woman any more, but a devil in a petticoat; she could poison, knife, kill; she wasn't the Parfusia he had brought to this place in a carriage so many years ago; for the sake of that Parfusia of yesterday he was prepared now, as soon as they got home, to load his hunting rifle and shoot himself, but this woman at his side was not worth the time of day.

Then he stopped the sleigh and told her that she was free to go anywhere she pleased, and he'd try to forget her face, her eyes, her voice.

"I'm too old already to be so cruelly betrayed. Take your things and go with God; I'll order the dogs to accompany you lest you fall a prey to famished wolves."

Parfusia took her hands out of the sleeves, yanked the reins away, and the sleigh moved on. The shadow with the high cap flitted across the snow again. Bubela shot a sidelong glance at her and said:

“And it was you who washed my hair with couch grass so I wouldn’t go bald. Ha-ha-ha-hal!”

Bubela laughed in a beautiful, sincere way. Back in those days when she met him at the monastery, the first thing to capture her fancy was his laughter. She took the cap off his head and smelled it inside, because in this cap Bubela had again become his old self for her, but for how long was something God alone knew.

“I really don’t know what came over me,” she said. “Forgive me, Kindrat. For there’s nothing I love more than you.”

When they arrived back at the farmstead, they didn’t get out of the sleigh for a long time.

“Parfusia, here is the place of our unborn children, here’s our love, here everything is ours to the last tatter — yours and mine. How could you have abandoned the living and run for the dead? Unhitch the horses; I’ll go get some straw to heat the house.”

He went to the haystack, hooked some packs out of the huge gray mass on which he had made love to Parfusia last summer. He had climbed on top of the haystack then and wanted to sit there and rest for a while, taking in the farmstead from above. He had asked Parfusia to bring him his pipe, which he was in the habit of forgetting, since he smoked it less and less with the years. Presently he recalled how she had clambered up the ladder with pipe in hand, her eyes were alluringly black like overripe cherries, and when the rungs ended and he took her by the hand, Parfusia shivered all over, realizing that it was not the pipe he wanted but her. Don’t let go, she said, and climbing up to the top of the haystack burst into a gale of laughter. From above, the farmstead looked like a small toy. Somewhere far off the Babylon herd was returning from the pasture; the un milked cows moomed in the farmstead below; and then the sheep fell asleep

in the pens, but Bubela and Parfusia stayed on the haystack late into the night. Then she had confessed her sin with Danko Sokolyuk to him; she was perhaps the first woman to have led the formerly righteous boy astray. She confessed everything because she had to — Bubela threatened to push her from the haystack if she held back anything. Bubela had hated Danko ever since, although he had worked conscientiously during the hardest of summers, and as like as not had saved his farmstead for him. He owed Danko something else for Parfusia: all the farmsteaders had their horses stolen time and again, but Bubela did not lose even a foal, because Danko tipped off all the horse thieves who strayed into their parts. So there was no loss without some gain.

He worked more furiously with the hook, making the haystack shake and groan. By then Parfusia had already led the horse into the stable, put her belongings into the trunk, and come outside with a cloth for the straw.

## *Chapter 6*

The Sokolyuks were preparing for the first winter fair. They had talked over beforehand what they should sell and what they needed to buy. There was no urgent work around the farm, so Darinka was to go with them. The sacks of grain had been tied up the previous evening, Darinka trussed up some hens for the Hlynsk fanciers of domestic fowl, picking the heaviest and most handsome from the flock, and Lukian lured a pair of tumblers right out of the sky.

Every sensible man should have a little pocket money laid away for which he shouldn't be account-

able to anyone. The Sokolyuks went to bed early — they wouldn't be the only ones to take their surplus produce to the fair. All of Babylon would probably rush off to the fair tomorrow. The first fair to which the goods had to be brought by sleigh always turned into a winter holiday. It was ignored only by the poor who had nothing to offer on that holiday or by those who had sold all their goods at the last autumn fair in Koziv or elsewhere — either in Bililivka or way off in Borshchaivka. As for Hlynsk, it was surrounded by such an ocean of mud in autumn it was formidably difficult to reach, especially with loaded wagons, which probably explained why no big fairs were held here at that time of year. But winter made it accessible, and the fair drew buyers and sellers from far and wide. Hence it was important to turn in early, leave before the peep of day when the others had not yet rubbed the sleep from their eyes, catch the first customers, and return before twilight.

During the night, however, Danko changed his mind about going. His peasant mentality led him to the irrefutable truth that they wouldn't make much money at this fair, and as for buying kerosene, salt and soap, it wasn't worthwhile for all three of them to go. He harnessed the horses for Lukian and lined the bottom of the small sleigh with buckwheat straw. The sleigh had two heavy pear-wood runners which haughtily stuck their yellow noses upward. Danko opened the gates and said:

“Now look here, Lukiano, don't you go into debt over there, and don't buy anything from Leiba we don't really need.”

At the last moment when the horses were already dancing spiritedly and blowing streamers of steam from their nostrils as if they were heating up their innards, Darinka came running out of the house. She

was beaming with a delight that was beyond belief. Her eyes shone with such undisguised joy and heartfelt gratitude for her happiness that Lukian quailed before her look and turned away, while Danko involuntarily smiled into his beard — she, their Darinka, was the crowning adornment of this fine morning; she was wonderful for her large eyes flecked with brown, the exciting freckles on her nose, and for all her devilish female charm she could conceal a long time and then reveal suddenly and unexpectedly, enchanting the most arrogant of men. Darinka wore green leather boots recently made for her with the kind agreement of both brothers, a sheepskin coat, and a kerchief of the finest workmanship, which she once was shy of putting on lest she look too chic in it.

Darinka stuck one arm into the sheepskin coat on the run and already had one foot in the sleigh. It was a good thing Danko wasn't going with them. Now she could sit side by side with Lukian on the striped rug, and the two of them would fly across the snow-covered fields into the ungovernable winds, while Darinka would draw nearer to Lukian and tell him how much she enjoyed life. She had never had such an urge before, since many a time when she saw the rich farmers going to town on some holiday or simply to the fair, she never envied them their wagons or their sturdy, broad-rumped horses, or their expensive Oriental carpets and homemade woolen rugs with the green, black and red stripes that looked so new it seemed they had been woven only recently. Nor did she envy them their harnesses, with golden and silver trappings and copper bells. The only thing she did envy them was the stately ride as such; she was depressed at the thought that she would never experience such happiness — a stately sleigh ride; she'd pass her whole life in poverty and never even

have proper shoes for her poor feet which were often chapped and cracked from the cold and dew. And now she, too, would be sitting on a rug and admiring her fancy boots which would be spared the wear and tear of walking, and listen to the whistling wind and the pear-wood sleigh runners swishing across the snow. And there in town she'd show herself to the haughty farmers and their wives to let them see that the daughter of Nestor Zhuravka, who had laid down his life in the battles for Babylon, was not a servant with no rights, but free and equal, living in honor and respect, and that she had good reason for wearing the black cross around her neck. She had settled in the sleigh by now and said:

"Let's go, Lukian!"

But Danko blocked the gate.

"He knows the way himself," he said casually, caught her by the hand and pulled her down from the sleigh. "Giddup!" he shouted to the horses.

The gray horses took off at a gallop — they responded to the slightest nod from Danko. They took Lukian far beyond the farmyard before he had a chance to intercede for Darinka; moreover, Lukian had to keep the horses in check lest they rashly burn their impatient hearts. One of the tumblers got loose and lighted on Lukian's shoulder. Lukian shot a sidelong glance at it, saw that it was a dove and smiled; it was free to fly away but would not leave its mate in trouble and so held firmly on to its master's shoulder.

They flew out onto the road. The old hoar-covered willow trees looked like old women hurrying to their morning prayers along this road. A kite struggled against the wind in the sky. The dove caught sight of it and gripped Lukian's shoulder more tightly. The manes of the horses fluttered like black banners in the wind.



...A clanking clamor stood over Hlynsk; it was so strange after the quiet that Lukian seemed to divine something of alarm or even despair in it.

"Hey Sokolyuk, Sokolyuk!" that was Monia Chechevichny, a former Babylon lessee and now a Hlynsk moneybags, calling him over to his store that smelled of candies and pitch.

That autumn, an incredible tax had been levied on Chechevichny's property, so now he was selling everything he owned to pay it and get out of Hlynsk in one piece. Unlike the other NEP men who, upon sensing trouble, immediately sold out and escaped to the large cities, he held on to his grandfather's inheritance to the last — the steam mill, the oil press, and this store, but he got into a fix: his mill and press had been confiscated the year before, and this year he had been taxed so heavily that had he sold himself to boot he would not be able to avoid being evicted from Hlynsk even under the best of circumstances. "So take anything you like, Sokolyuk — laces, earrings, necklaces for the bride, or a necklace of small beads that would adorn the neck of any beauty." He had everything under the sun in that store! His icons of the kindest and mightiest Christian gods and saints always cost kopecks compared with what they were on the market. Monia got his icons from Berdichiv; the most expensive icon cost two to three rubles, but in this case it was the best money could buy: a halo of silver, a gilt frame, and images with the unvarying look of piety that could be so expertly rendered only by sinful icon painters whose diligence was exercised in the hope of earning absolution for their sins from the gods who had a suspicious resemblance to the owner of the store. The sacrilege of the icon painters and of Monia Chechevichny himself, who had no moral right whatsoever to trade in his portraits, let alone in those

of the Christian gods, was pardoned them because of the incredible cheapness of this utterly necessary commodity, the stocks of which were practically inexhaustible. Apart from icons, he sold everything a body could possibly need: casks of pitch, iron horse tethers, halters embellished with silver, drive belts for winnowing machines, cogwheels for strawcutters and whims — in a word, everything that didn't break down and would last for hundreds of years. Amid these odds and ends stood Monia Chechevichny scratching his goatee which had started to gray from all his worries, and wondered what made Lukian take so long about deciding to buy the necklace. Monia had a habit of smiling to his customers — smiling sincerely and devotedly — and of imploring like he implored Lukian now:

“Don't hex my store. If you've got the money, buy it; if you haven't, take what you want on credit, I trust you, Sokolyuk. Your parents used to trade with me, and your grandpa always stocked up at my grandpa's store.”

So making allowances for such a long-standing relationship, Lukian took out the hamper with the pair of tumblers (he trussed up the dove that had gotten loose immediately) and the bargaining began with the result that the dazed, trussed tumblers found their way under the counter in a jiffy and the most priceless of necklaces slipped in a cold trickle behind Lukian's shirt front where he would neither lose it nor forget it was there. On parting, Lukian advised Chechevichny:

“Take good care of the tumblers, they're a wonderful pair!”

But Monia only smiled in response. When he still had his mill, he had been fond of pigeons, but now he had most probably bought them for roasting. Even

given the exorbitant taxes he had to pay now, Chechevichny still loved to play a good knife and fork.

Convinced that he had gotten the better of Monia Chechevichny for the first time in his life and thus revenged his grandpa and parents, Lukian made for the fair proper — he still had to buy kerosene, soap and salt as cheap as possible, haggling over every kopeck. And here Lukian saw the same thing he had seen at Chechevichny's store. The fair was crammed with everything galore: thousands of hobbled sheep in sleighs, black and white hogs, piglets in sacks, vats of honey, an endless row of grain sacks, a multitude of oxen, cows, a number of bulls with rings in their noses — no one seemed to need any of these things, everyone wanted to sell, and no one was buying.

Maxim Teslya, accompanied by a stranger in a leather coat, who was probably from the *gubernial* committee, was walking around the fair, inquiring about prices, smiling and explaining something to his companion. Presently they stopped at the bulls. One of the bulls — a gray beauty of an animal — was Bubela's. Bubela stood there playing with him to show what a tractable and peaceful beast it was. He had already named the price — forty rubles — which at any other time would be like giving it away for a song.

"It's a pity Klim Sinitsya isn't around. That'd be a good bargain for the co-op," said Teslya and took his friend to the rows selling flour and grain.

Lukian did not follow them. He could not tear his eyes off Bubela's bull. He had taken their cow to him more than once, since this was also among Lukian's responsibilities.

Some of the Babylon moneybags were preparing to leave the fair, having failed to sell all their goods in the end. When Lukian returned to the gateway where

he had left his horses, he noticed many of his neighbors were missing: the Pavlyuks had taken their huge black hog back home; Matviy Husak was cursing his vats of honey; the others had also taken off — much cry and little wool. But what the hell was going on! Lukian couldn't find his sleigh. All that remained of it was some buckwheat straw and the traces of the runners which disappeared among a multitude of others only a couple of paces away.

"Hey, were are my horses?" Lukian hollered in despair and started running about the other sleighs and asking the strangers who had also failed to sell anything but were in no hurry to leave — all these people were from neighboring villages and still had plenty of time to get home.

Lukian was told that some woman wearing an embroidered white sheepskin coat and felt boots had come — or so it seemed; yes, she was wearing felt boots. She got into the sleigh as if it were her own and drove off.

Lukian was on the verge of tears. He knew from Danko's tales that horse thieves frequently availed themselves of the services of women, and if a horse were stolen by a woman, that meant you were finished and might as well start saving your money for a new nag. And here he'd gone and lost everything at one fell swoop — a pair of horses, the sleigh, the harness — and not just any old harness but the best set Danko had saved the money for years to buy. The blood hammered in Lukian's temples; he rushed away from that vile place and soon found himself on one of the side-streets near the fair where illicit goods ranging from moonshine stills, books about the private life of Czarina Catherine II, the Koran, love potions and God knows what else right down to five-ruble gold coins of Czar Nicholas were bought and sold.

This was the black market which the Hlynsk authorities ostensibly wanted to wipe out but at the same time tried not to take any note of. Here the bargaining was conducted in a quiet, underhand way — and of all places he had come here, wailing:

“Has anyone seen a woman in a white sheepskin coat with gray horses and an expensive harness? Hey, you there, how am I supposed to get home now?”

“Ha-ha, you must be generous to let your wife run out on you and take the horses along,” he was jeered at for his wailing.

Suddenly Lukian froze; right in front of him was Malva sitting in his sleigh, with his horses munching oats from their feedbags.

“Is that you, Lukian?” she said, laughing, happy to have played a trick on him.

His first urge was to beat her up, but he couldn't really have done that with all these people around, especially after that innocent laughter of hers. And the main thing was that he had found everything at once: the sleigh, the horses and the harness with its copper buckles. Lukian broke out into laughter at his incredible luck after such an untoward mishap. But the greatest surprise was Malva herself.

“How did you get here?”

“I was looking for someone to go to Babylon with, and I saw your horses. I stood and waited, but you never showed up, so I decided to play a trick on you.”

“I almost went nuts. If I got back to Babylon without the horses, that would be the end of me. I might just as well have gone straight to Fabian and ordered myself a coffin with no further ado. And where did you come from?”

“From the railway station, confound it! The coaches were cold; the tracks were covered with snowdrifts; and the train was stuck in the middle of a field for the

whole night. I traveled thousands of kilometers like a lady, but here at the end I got half frozen.”

He looked at her intently through his spectacles.

“You’ve changed, Malva; I barely recognized you.”

“But that’s not because of the cold, Lukian.”

“What’s the reason then? Oh yes, I know... I heard about it.”

“Hlynsk looks pretty pathetic today. Or does it just seem so because I’ve seen big cities now. I made a stop in Moscow. And I stayed in Kiev for a day. I saw the Cave Monastery, I saw everything... Crowded railroad stations, people running back and forth, going somewhere, hurrying, bursting to go places. And all the time I was thinking about Babylon. How is everything there?”

“Well, it’s still there... It’s been empty without you, though. No swing for you, no nothing.”

“No nasty gossip about Malva Kozhushna... Isn’t that what you mean?”

“It could be.”

“Well, are we going home or not?”

“Right away, Malva. But let me get my head together first.”

“Did you really get that scared?” she asked with a smile.

“Of course, what are the Sokolyuks without their horses? It would be like Fabian without his billy goat.”

“How is he?”

“Fine. Fabian’s still making coffins, and the billy goat roams around, sniffing up the deceased customers.”

“That’s who Babylon couldn’t live without.”

“Of course, what would Babylon be without them.”

“What about you? Still living by yourselves?”

“No, we took Darinka in for the winter. She’s our helper, you know.”

“Who does she help — you or Danko?”

“Well, you know how it is. Danko probably thinks she helps me, and I think she helps Danko. Look here I’ve bought her a necklace,” he said taking a red string of beads that filled his entire palm out of his embroidered shirt. Then he put it back behind his shirt front and buttoned up the collar. “I gave a fine pair of tumblers for that!”

Malva’s eyes gleamed. She looked him over and asked without a tinge of envy in her voice:

“Do you love her?”

“Well, you know how it is. Maybe I love her, but that doesn’t mean she loves me. I don’t have any luck with women. There’s nothing I can do to catch her eye. I guess I’m just an unlucky man, Malva. First I lost the horses, now I’ll lose Darinka... It’s a good thing it was just a joke. With the horses I mean. But what if it had been for real? I’m a hopeless case, Malva. No other man would ever have given such fine tumblers for a lousy necklace like this. What do you think, is this necklace worth a pair of tumblers?”

“You’re a wonderful man, Lukian. I know you...”

“Does your mother know you’re coming?”

“I sent her a letter through the co-op. I didn’t want the word to get out in Babylon. How is she?”

“Alive and kicking. I saw her just the other day at the festival... Yes, that’s where it was. They were singing beautifully at the church. It was the last festival, or so they say. Come on, gray dobbins, move it! Let’s take Malva Kozhushna for a ride, but where to I don’t know. Where to, Malva? To the co-op or your house?”

“To the blazing stove at my mother’s to warm up my soul,” Malva said with a laugh.

“But what about Klim Ivanovich?”

“Oh, he’ll come... And if not, that won’t be the end

of me. I'll set up my own co-op in Babylon. Would you join my co-op?"

"Gee-ho!" Lukian urged his horses.

"Does Klim Ivanovich visit my mother?"

"Sure he does. He brings some wood and other things sometimes."

"Is Teslya still in Hlynsk?"

"Where else would he be? Where the District Party Committee is, Teslya is there, too. Isn't it the same in Kostroma?"

"Kostroma is no quiet place now. Collectivization is in full swing there, all the Party members have left for the countryside. They've got bands, kulak riots. Our Sosnin's been seriously wounded. He's in the hospital in Kostroma now. So all of us were sent back home. There were a lot of us from Ukraine, too. From the Ksaverivka co-op and the Ruzhin co-op. There were even women — we all lived in one room. There was one brave woman from Ruzhin, a communist. You don't know what wonderful people there are in this world, Lukiano. One of these days I'll go visit her. We sit around in our little Babylon without ever seeing the world — believe me, Lukian, the world is so hard to describe we can't even imagine it. There's something exciting afoot, but we don't know what it is yet..."

A snowstorm was in the making. People poured out of the fair. Had old Bubela sold his beauty of a bull after all? How would Babylon get along without its one and only bull? The jail was empty, too — not a single light shone from behind the grates.

Was there really no one in jail? Lukian wondered. That was unlikely. They were probably just saving on kerosene.

Hlynsk smelled of burning straw. The door and windows of Monia Chechevichny's store were already



shuttered. Because of Malva's trick Lukian didn't have a chance to ask what was going on in Hlynsk. Neither did he manage to take a swig from the flask of *horilka* in the sleigh and follow it up with a piece of chilled pork fat he had in the basket. What kind of a fair was it where everyone tried only to sell? A strange feeling came over him when they got out of Hlynsk and caught up with Bubela's sleigh with the bull chained behind it. They easily outdistanced him, and it seemed to Lukian he looked lonesome and even visibly at a loss.

Beyond Hlynsk the winds blew wherever they pleased; they had shaken the hoarfrost from the trees, blown snow all over the roads, and seemed to have chased the moon out of the sky and shrouded it with clouds blacker than the horses' manes. The snowstorm broke, and Lukian involuntarily recalled Bubela, who would probably have to brave yet another storm more horrible than this one. Would he come out of it alive? And it looked as if Lukian had lost his way, yes, that's exactly what had happened. The horses started to flounder in the high snowdrifts until he drew in the reins and looked around the featureless field to get his bearings. From the outset of the journey, the wind had been lashing from the left side. Or had it? Aw well, let it be. He drove on and soon found himself amidst thickets and gullies. They were beginning to go astray. It had all happened because of Malva. She had asked him to stop in the middle of the field and had climbed down the sleigh with a laugh. In Kostroma she had gotten used to wearing pants in winter — quite an inconvenience for a woman, thought Lukian. The whole thing made him smirk. When she was back in the sleigh again, he asked anxiously:

“And where to now?”

“Straight on, Lukian, straight on...”

They only reached Babylon at daybreak, saved by the flask of *horilka* and the chilled pork fat — it's no wonder peasants usually take something along with them on a journey.

In the morning, when the snowstorm had let up, the horses brought the gray bull tied to the sleigh to the farmstead, and in the sleigh was Bubela. He sat with the reins in his hands, and for the last time his eyes stared severely through the hoarfrost on the farmstead and on Parfusia who rushed out to meet him. She shook him but he didn't turn a hair and sat there stone-cold in the sleigh. She untied the bull, unharnessed the horses and led them to the stable, then ran off to Babylon. She heard the dogs howling back at the farmstead and was frightened at the thought that they might be howling over their master whom she could not carry into the house all by herself. The first person she roused from sleep was Fabian, her nearest neighbor. He was sleeping on the workbench, having covered himself with the *chumarka* overcoat, while the billy goat was stretched out on the stovebed. It was cold there, but the billy goat must have had other ideas on that point.

Bubela was buried next to Bonifatius the following day.

Parfena was scared and begged Fabian not to leave her for at least nine days. He slept in the living room on white cushions like a lord while Parfena warmed herself on the stove as she had caught a cold during the funeral. The billy goat slept in the entrance hall with the hounds. He seemed keenly interested in what Parfena and Fabian were talking about and listened warily to every rise in their voices, but in the end he didn't register anything of consequence to him. The billy goat was not used to sleeping in the entrance

hall, so after nine days of dog's life like that he sauntered eagerly back home behind his master. Parfena dolled herself up in her holiday best, hitched the stallion to the one-horse sleigh, and rushed off to Babylon. It was her first visit in years.

Up till then Babylon had somehow managed without her, and she had gotten along quite well without it, but now she came for Danko's heart and filled his home with her charms. Danko, for his part, did not resist them. He took the box-calf boots and a clean shirt out of the trunk, went into the pantry and changed. He got in the sleigh and said to Lukian and Darinka, "I'll be back," and set off for the farmstead with Parfusia. That day after lunch, he led the bull out for exercise and made him run three times around the farmstead, prodding him on with a quirt clutched in fur mittens, exactly like the old Bubela had done until the bull started to steam in the frost, then he drove him to the manger and combed the white curls on its head indicating good blood and wild flesh. After that, he cleared the horse rink in the farmyard of snow and led the four-year-old stallion out for a trot. While Bubela was still alive, Danko had decided to steal the horse no later than next summer. Parfusia stood in the middle of the rink and spurred the stallion on with the quirt, snapping it loud. During the exercise the most essential part of the stallion popped out into the frost — the animal must have not felt the cold. Danko thought they might lose the horse because of it, and shared his fears with Parfusia. She laughed and strapped the naive man across his sheepskin coat with the quirt. For a long time thereafter, the traces of the lash remained on his back. Had the quirt touched his skin, he would have been scarred to the end of his days.

## Chapter 7

Rumors reached Ruban from all quarters that the *kurkuls* were banding together, gathering for "Last Suppers" in the homes of Babylon's rich every night, and inviting Babylon's "rabble" to these seemingly innocent repasts. Almost every night, Yavtukh and Prisia visited homes they had never been in before — the Pavlyuks', the Husaks', the Radenkys', the Lobodas', and even Bubela's while he was still alive. When a roasted pig spiced with horse raddish or a roasted turkey of thirty pounds or more was put on the table, Yavtukh would step on Prisia's foot under the table and whisper, "That's how I want to live, Prisia." "Sure, sure," Prisia agreed, and on seeing how humiliated they were by being offered one plate for the two of them, she would remind the hosts: "Yavtukh and I love to eat from one plate." They ate a lot, oblivious to any of the elementary proprieties expected on such occasions, and Yavtukh eagerly supported the most dangerous slogans of the *kurkuls* — to stand to the death! But when he came home and collapsed onto the bed with his belly turned upward, he confided in his wife: "I'm scared being with them, Prisia. I'm not scared for myself, but for them, because they might just disappear from Babylon. If that happens, consider me rubbed out as well, because I'd better kill myself than live as meager an existence as all the Holiys once did. And us, too, for that matter..." Yavtukh was worried that the apostles partaking of those "Last Suppers" had no other alternative than force, as if Babylon could really hold out against Hlynsk on its own, let alone against the whole country. As Yavtukh became less and less convinced this alternative would work, it became harder and harder for him to conceal his bewilderment in

their presence, and at every such supper he trembled at the thought that someone would point a finger at him and say, "There he is, the Judas, someone should kill him," without letting him retire to the old bed from whence all the Holiys had come into being.

The next evening they were invited to the farmstead of the Lobodas, who expected some big *Otaman* or *Hetman* or whatever from Pritske — in any case one of the men Kindrat Bubela had recruited from the outlying villages in case Babylon were left on its own at an evil hour. Yavtukh had a wagon but — damn it! — no sleigh, so he had to borrow a sleigh for the night since it was too far to hoof it to Loboda's farmstead, especially for Prisia, who was again with child. Had it not been for Prisia's delicate condition they would have gone to Loboda on horseback, which would have been both pleasant and convenient.

That morning, Yavtukh came running to my father to borrow the sleigh. Father agreed immediately, because in summer Yavtukh occasionally lent the Valakhs his wagon, which he would then inspect most thoroughly to see that no damage had been done to it. He would tap every single spoke and even crawl under the reach, saying that a wagon was incomparable to a sleigh — it was, after all, a beautiful and complex thing, and lending a wagon to anyone at all was tantamount to lending a violin to a lousy fiddler. Yavtukh was enamored of the very music of the wagon when he set out to Hlynsk for the fair in it or to Zeleni Mlyni for a visit to his dear uncle. On the way the wagon sang in a dozen of voices, evoking either sorrow or something bright and merry in his heart, depending on the speed at which the wheels revolved. All this might have been true, but from my father's point of view, his sleigh was in no way inferior to the wagon, especially when there was a ringing frost

and you hitched some real horses up to it, and not lousy nags like Yavtukh had. Then, too, it also depended on who was in the sleigh and where he was bound in it — uphill or down.

Yavtukh came for the sleigh without horses since he also wanted to borrow the breech band to which he hitched himself up and pulled the sleigh to his farmyard. No sooner had father returned to the house than all the Valakhs got onto him for lending out the sleigh. What if Yavtukh did something to discredit the Valakhs? At first father was thrown off balance, but he didn't dare stop Yavtukh. While they were arguing, Yavtukh had already lugged the sleigh to his farmstead; he knew the Valakhs quite well and probably suspected father's lack of authority in his family. No sooner had twilight descended than Yavtukh drove off in the sleigh.

"You should have lent him the cover for the horses, too," the Valakhs reproached father.

Yavtukh was so carried away that he didn't notice another sleigh following closely in his tracks. It had emerged from the Sokolyuks' farmyard. It stopped near our house and father got into it without letting the Valakhs in on his secret. He came back home late, before dawn, frozen to the marrow of his bones, with a hacking cough.

The next morning, Yavtukh returned the sleigh in the same manner as he had borrowed it, and wanted to leave immediately upon giving his thanks, but father stopped him.

"Wait a minute, Yavtukh. I want to have a few words with you in private."

"Go ahead..." He sat down on the sleigh, took off his cap, and wiped the sweaty shock of hair sticking to his forehead with the palm of his hand.

"Yavtukh, I simply don't understand why you want

to team up with the counterrevolutionaries? What do you have in common with them?"

"Just who do you have in mind?"

"The ones you were visiting last night in my sleigh. Didn't you see what kind of sleighs and horses and fancy rugs they had there? Was it anything like this little sleigh?"

"How do you know where I was last night?" Yavtukh asked warily.

"Do you think we're snoozing while you're out there plotting? No, brother, we also have our wits about us. We're probably more rattled than they are. But what in God's name are you doing there?"

"Do you want to hear the truth?"

"Well, that's up to you..."

"I'm scared of them, Severin. I'm scared stiff. They're determined to get their way and there's no pity in them. They'll fight to the death for what's theirs. Believe me."

"I know."

"But I'm a poor helpless man. And you want to make me poorer than that by taking away my wagon, my horses, my land, and all my dreams... even the patch of sky over my field where I count the stars."

"And how many have you counted?"

"Three hundred and ninety-two big stars and one hundred and eight little ones. It varies: some stars fade, and others appear, but they're all mine, nobody else's. And they're all right there over my field between the boundary strips."

My father just laughed. Our field was adjacent to his. So the sky was adjacent, too.

Yavtukh must have added our stars to his a long time ago; father had no doubts about that.

"We need people like you."

"What people?"

"The ones who're in love with the land."

"What do you need them for? To see them suffering? To see their pain when their land is seized from them? To make them bake bread in one bakery, cook borshch in one cauldron? Isn't that what the whole idea is about?"

"My goodness, how far they've led you astray... You know what, why don't you come to our meeting tonight. To Dzhura's place. I'll bring some chilled pork fat along. We'll start up the tractor and have a chat."

"They know about your meetings. Ruzia's gone completely out of her mind because of them."

"Not at all — she's come to life. I play the clarinet and she dances with Dzhura. The Sokolyuks come with Darinka, and Ruban brings Zosia. So come with your Prisia. You don't have to borrow a sleigh, and won't have to quiver with fright."

"Hey, look... They're fighting again."

Yavtukh's rooster had started a fight with the Sokolyuks'. After every such fight, his rooster stopped crowing, and since Yavtukh couldn't stand a night without a cock's crowing, he scampered off to break them up.

Ruban arrived soon after, bringing in the cold of the snowstorm from outdoors. Father was shredding tobacco. He had a special knife and board for this purpose. As to the tobacco leaf, it was taken from a bunch that was not overdry and had been treated with honey — such tobacco was probably not prepared by anyone else in Babylon.

"I see the sleigh is here already."

"He just lugged it in. He was drenched in sweat from it. I never realized he had such strong legs."

"Well, did you talk with him?"

"I didn't get a chance. The roosters started fighting,



and he ran off to break them up. That's Yavtukh for you. Here, have a smoke..."

They smoked thoughtfully, enjoying every puff in silence, those two dreamers who knew how to while away the hours, in the blue smoke during snowstorms...

Dzhura's tractor, polished and gassed up, stood on the floor, ready to rush out of the house onto the commons at any minute if need be and deal the enemy a crushing blow, if he dared show his face, no matter his number or the manner in which he was armed. The main thing for Dzhura was not to let himself be taken by surprise, to climb up onto the tractor in time, and drive it into battle. That was why when his guests arrived, Dzhura would crank up his machine and let it warm up to check on its combat readiness. Then he would say in the voice of a man who knew what was what in class struggle: "Everything's all right, comrades!" Of all the company, only the billy goat could not get used to these preludes, and every time Dzhura started his Ford tractor, the horned critter trembled like an aspen leaf and for the rest of the evening, he eyed the tractor with all the perspicacity of which these innately inquisitive animals are capable. Ruzia laughed when the billy goat started to tremble, for she, like no one else, was familiar with the fright the billy goat had for the machine; when the tractor had first appeared in her home, Ruzia herself had been the victim of Dzhura's tricks.

Then she had gotten used to them, because a human being can get accustomed to anything, even to such a fiend as Dzhura. In this respect, however, the billy goat could not rise to the stature of Ruzia whom Babylon held to be insane. But Ruzia only laughed at Babylon, which to her also seemed insane now. For

what normal people would entrust their destiny to such a murderer and self-seeker as her Dzhura. Deranged as she might have been, she had realized that Babylon was going from one extreme to another, trying to merge the wholesome morality and dignity of the great Fabian (the philosopher, of course) and the avarice and perfidy of her Dzhura into one. All the time she had an urge to whisper to Ruban: "Anton, don't you trust that Judas of Babylon — he'll sell you down the river if it'll get him even one silver coin." But she had promised herself to keep mum lest she extinguish the pleasant light that had filtered into her secret world with the appearance of Ruban. Ruzia was also impressed that Ruban was friends with Klim Sinitsya, so she was afraid to turn Ruban away from her home, hoping that he would bring Sinitsya with him one day.

When Malva appeared at those evening parties, she introduced something essentially her own into them, something Babylon had already gotten out of the habit of experiencing. Instead of the *horilka*, chilled pork fat and garlic (all of which it was my father's job to provide — a task which depleted the Valakhs' stock, meager as it was), Malva brought Sosnin's "teas" from distant Kostroma to the evening gatherings. For this purpose the samovar from Ruzia's dowry was polished until it shone, the water was boiled in it near the window, and then it was put on the table. This samovar from the home of the Shamshurin merchants was now put into the service of the class struggle between the two Babylons — the one that gathered at Dzhura's place, and the other that prowled around the *kurkul* farmsteads. But the latter did not have my father's clarinet. After the meal, during which Malva failed to make the revolutionaries get used to drinking tea (they were more inclined to partake

of the traditional Babylonian beverages which, as Ruban himself had admitted, beat the products of the Hlynsk "distilleries" by a landslide), father would take his clarinet out of its old wooden case bored with wormholes and play waltzes and cracoviennes, improvising for lack of sheet music. And in this case, too, Malva's old self resurfaced: she did not care about being in the last months of pregnancy and danced first with Ruban, then with Lukian, or even with Dzhura himself. She danced so lightly and with such spirit that at one time Zosia couldn't control herself, grew jealous of Ruban's interest in Malva, and took him away from her in the middle of a dance. But at this point a bizzare thing happened; it was so unexpected it caught everyone, the billy goat Fabian most of all, by surprise. The humbled Malva was challenged to a dance by the philosopher who had never before betrayed the slightest talent for dancing. He performed such a classic cracovienne that the billy goat was simply enraptured with his master, and my father offered to play a solo especially for them. While they were dancing, Malva asked him why he had concealed this talent before. The philosopher explained that so far, no woman, Malva included, had ever wanted to dance with him, taking him for a big oddity, and answered her with the words of Rabindranath Tagore, which he had once read among Sosnin's maxims at the co-op: "One is always one, and nothing more; for only two create the origin of one."

"You have the loneliness of your billy goat in mind, of course?"

"No, Malva, mine..."

Malva laughed. She was the only woman in Babylon who was not at odds with the billy goat, even in her present state. Moreover, the presence of the billy goat lent those parties something of the biblical and

unconventional, although at times they dealt with brutal and categorical issues.

Ruban knew that the old Babylon would not surrender without a fight, and it would fight to the death unless some compromise could be reached. Even in this home, Ruban sensed all the signs of suppressed animosity: Fabian would eagerly socialize his billy goat, but would Dzhura want to socialize his Ford tractor when the question came to a head? When Darinka tried to touch the tractor to grasp the secrets of this complex machine, Dzhura would slap her hands lightly. "Don't mess with it," he'd say. "Tractors aren't women's business." He was afraid Darinka might master the secrets of the machine, and he was jealously guarding it from the others as well, allowing only the billy goat to inspect and sniff at it unhindered. That fiend even derived satisfaction from knowing for sure that the critter could never master it, even if he studied it his whole life. But Ruban dreamed of putting Darinka on the tractor right now, because then he would feel more confident. Never mind, Ruban consoled himself, sooner or later we'll take that menacing thing away from you, Dzhura, because there's not much hope for you.

The more obliging and flattering Dzhura was, the more Ruban was put on guard, although he did not betray his real feelings.

Afterward, on their way back home with Zosia, he would turn around time and again. Once Zosia asked him: "What are you looking back for all the time, Antosha? Have you heard too many of Savka's stories about Bonifatius or what? Savka's really off the beam."

"It's not that, Zosia. I'm afraid Dzhura will shoot me in the back..."

"So why go there?" Ruban did not explain to Zosia why he was visiting Dzhura, or why he was fooling

himself. He did not want to surrender Dzhura to the enemy, although it was unlikely he could manage to make him a true friend because of that damned American tractor.

"Zosia, things have the property of shaping man's ideas," he said, and Zosia could only laugh at Antosha's supreme wisdom which was way beyond her grasp.

My father accompanied Malva back home. Since he led her across the ice, he was afraid both for her and for his clarinet; but probably he was most afraid that the Valakhs would find out about that stroll. Before Malva had become Andrian's wife, my father took a fancy to her, but afterward he, too, had incited ill-will against her, whereas now his attitude could be interpreted simply as class solidarity.

After these evening parties, Lukian and Darinka hid from Danko and went to Otchenashka's home for the night. She was out guarding the windmills, so her house was empty. Darinka knew the house from the days when she was a herder. There was a steel frame bed there, one leg of which was broken, and they had a hilarious time whenever the broken leg slipped off the brick it was propped on. The Fabians retired to their home, while Dzhura went to sleep beside his tractor. Even when he went into Ruzia's room he did not stay there long, because he had gotten used to breathing in the smell of the tractor in his sleep.

One night, when everyone had left and he had returned from Ruzia's room to his "workshop," as Dzhura called his quarters, someone came up to his house and rapped on the window. The visitors' sleigh stood in the farmyard till dawn, while inside the owners threatened him, reminded him of Ruzia's

parents, and reproached him with the tractor on which he himself would soon be driven out of Babylon just like Tysewicz who had been bundled off in a cart in his day. (And that would be done by precisely those who had visited him). Dzhura kept silent; Ruzia did not hear a single word out of him. One of the visitors was the owner of the thrasher from Koziv — a tall man in a long sheepskin coat and gray cap. Ruzia recognized him, although she had seen him only once or twice in the summer when Dzhura had teamed up with him during the last harvest. He left the house with Pavlyuk and Matviy Husak. When they came out, a big fellow in a hare-fur cap — probably the son of the thrasher owner — was started from his sleep in the sleigh. Dzhura accompanied them beyond the gates, and then he returned to the house and went into Ruzia's room.

“Did you hear all that, Ruzia?”

“Yes, I did...”

“Now don't you breathe a single word. You understand?”

“Go to sleep, Dzhura. No one would believe me anyway. I'm cracked after all! That's your doing,” she said and laughed into the pillows on which her braid, which she had unplaited for the night, rested like so many black snakes. Never before had Dzhura come into her room at such an hour...

The ganders still hissed at Danko and the dogs still tried to get him whenever he came out of the house unexpectedly, but that didn't really matter, because everything else was getting used to him: the horses, the cattle, the sheep, and even the rooster stopped attacking him, and if you're acknowledged by such a rowdy you can consider yourself almost the master of the house.

He went to have a look at the windmill. Otchenashka was sweeping up the remainder of the flour from the millstone. She, too, acknowledged Danko as master. She pointed to the bundle on the floor and said:

"We agreed upon that a long time ago, sonny, so let it be: this flour goes to the watchman whether the wind blows or not, whether I get my pay or not, and no matter what else happens..."

The windmill was a sturdy two-storied structure (the first story of stone, the second of timber); in summer it was cool, while in winter it was cruelly cold, and the old woman scampered home for the night, afraid not so much of the cold as of Pelekhaty.

After Danko had inspected the windmill inside and gone out to admire the vanes which simply bewitched him — only four of them but what power — she told him:

"Now, Danko, those vanes will carry you God knows where..."

"Where, Granny?"

"To Siberia perhaps," she replied with a laugh devoid of any trace of malice.

"Could be, could be. But for the time being, Granny, take your flour and give me the key to the windmill. I'll be watching it myself from the farmstead, 'cause I've got nothing to pay you with. So that's that..."

"And what about getting this instead!" Otchenashka stuck up her fist in a derisive gesture from her shaggy sleeve — something she would never have dared to do with Bubela. "I've been placed here by Bubela, and he alone will remove me. I've been put here till I die. And if you try to change that, I'll bring you and your farmstead to wrack and ruin. All I need is to whisper to Makedonsky... I'm no dumb Tikhin Pelekhaty for you! I'll bring such trouble upon you that all of you

will go to hell," she concluded making a broad sweeping gesture with her arms.

"Give me the key!" he said extending his hand, his eyes still on the upper vane.

She flung the key into the snow at his feet.

Danko dug it out of the snow, his fingers sticking to the cold metal. Then he went back inside the windmill, brought out her bundle, and after locking the windmill, said:

"I'm not Bubela, I'm Danko Sokolyuk, Otchenashka. I don't know anything about what Pelekhaty was up to. I didn't lay a finger on your Tikhin. Your conscience has to deal with that. But I'll be damned if I'm going to pay you for the winds all my life — like hell I will. Do you think they're yours or what?!"

"Yes, they're mine, mine!" Otchenashka yelled. "They're my winds, because I haven't got anything else to my name!"

"I'm not taking them away from you," said Danko, getting into his sleigh. "Go take them, catch them. What do I care about your winds?" he said and left.

"Pe-e-ople!" Otchenashka howled and ran through the snow down to Babylon, which was melting in the twilight.

Danko regretted that the old woman had not given him a chance to admire the windmill, to stand for a while and dream upstairs where the windows didn't cover over with ice, because there was not a bit of warmth inside the mill, save perhaps the warmth he could feel and grasp fleetingly with his soul alone.

In the farmyard he saw a sleigh hitched to a pair of light-bays which had once struck his eyes in Hlynsk. They had come either from Dakhnivka or Oveche. Yes, that was it — they were from Oveche. The visitor was the local *kurkul* Yosip Batyuk. He had come to see Bubela. Parfena received him in the living room,



treating him like an honored guest and serving him tea with raspberry jam. She did not invite Danko to the table. He unhitched the horse, watered it in the ice-covered trough, and then went to tend the cattle for the night. After seeing Batyuk off, Parfena came to the barn and milked the cow while Danko held the lantern.

Then other people began arriving — from Pritske, from Zhurbiv — all of them asking for Bubela since they didn't know he was no more. Yet another visitor came during the night. From the little room Parfena had given him to sleep in, Danko heard how she went out onto the porch and whispered with him.

"Are you alone, Parfena?" the visitor wondered.

"No, I've got a farmhand here," she said quietly so she wouldn't wake Danko up.

But even those quiet sounds roused Danko from his sleep, so he got up from his narrow bed, dressed, and went out onto the porch.

"Who's there?"

The tall man in the felt cloak shot a quizzical glance at Parfena, then he sized up the bearded Danko who was bleary-eyed from sleep. The horses standing in the farmyard were exhausted, and the young man sitting on the sleigh in a cowl and cap was napping. Parfena pulled her sheepskin jacket closer around her body and said:

"This man has come to see Kindrat Ostapovich. He doesn't believe he's dead and buried."

"Why shouldn't he believe it?" Danko asked, suspiciously glancing at the man.

"He thinks he's gone into hiding. You don't know what Kindrat Ostapovich was like, that's why..."

"Makedonsky himself was at the funeral. He didn't believe it either," Danko said, smirking into his beard. "Go to the cemetery and see for yourself. He's buried

- right next to Bonifatius. They've finally made up in the nether world..."

"The boy there in the sleigh is a stranger," said the tall man pointing to the figure in the sleigh. "I hired him for the night, because I was afraid to be alone on the road. So what if we go into the house after all?" the visitor said to Danko, sensing by the ring in Danko's voice that he was more than just a farmhand in this household.

They took the boy to the stable, and Danko told him he could warm himself in the hay loft. Parfena warned him not to burn down the stable smoking. They retired to the living room to talk by the dim light of a kerosene lamp with its wick turned low as they sat around an empty table.

"I'm Makar Dorosh from Pritske. My brother was the Dorosh who joined the Hetman's troops and was killed. You can trust me. I've got a windmill and more. With God's help, I have. Bubela fixed a date, and all of us will stick to it. Tell your people it'll be on Epiphany. Tell them nothing's changed; everything will stay just as we agreed. The peal of the church bell and the rifle volleys on Epiphany will be the signal. May God grant us calm weather and a good frost then. We'll finish up our job on the ponds and then advance on Hlynsk..."

"Doesn't Makedonsky know about the date?" Danko asked.

"If he did, I wouldn't be able to come here. Excuse me for saying so, Parfena, but it's a good thing Bubela is no more, God forgive me my cruel words. That's what lulled their vigilance... Is the farmstead under surveillance?" The question was addressed to Danko now.

"I don't think so. But... No, not since I've been here in any case."

“Does Maihula come here?”

“No.”

“Now you keep an eye out for that fiend. We let him slip out of our fingers to our misfortune... No one must be spared! Now, it's a question of who gets who.”

Dorosh got to his feet, his face glowing like the image on an icon. Parfena simply did not believe that he was capable of killing. Danko accompanied Dorosh beyond the poplar trees and didn't come back for a long time. He was probably making up his mind about something.

Lest he lose the grandness of Bubela's spirit with which he had been imbibed just then, Parfena moved Danko into the living room which had carpets and white pillows, wished him good night, and turned off the lamp. And there he was, lying under the rifles and deer antlers sticking out of the dark; wolves' heads bared their teeth at him from the opposite wall lit dimly by the moon; but what impressed him most were the wings spread out on the white walls. Parfena warmed herself on the stove, there abiding by the forty days of undefiled mourning...

At long last the Sokolyuks' home saw a holiday.

Before registering the bride and groom, Ruban delivered a beautiful speech. Darinka held Lukian by the hand, and at the very end of the speech she burst out crying, which spoiled the whole thing. The witnesses to the marriage were Levko Khorobry and Savka Chibis, whom Ruban had categorically forbidden to laugh under such circumstances. Savka would not have done such a thing anyway. He was as happy for Darinka as if it were his own wedding day, for their fates were somewhat similar.

Danko and Parfena were invited to the wedding dinner. But since there was no one to look after the farmstead, Danko came alone. He did not expect Malva Kozhushna to be there. He thought she was at the co-op. Her face had lost its former beauty, and her voice had become softer and feebler, while her laughter was tender and restrained without any of the irresistibility which had gone deep into his heart once. A completely ordinary Malva...

"How did you manage way out there?" he asked.

"There's a lot of snow... and it's scary."

"Did Lukian tell you we plowed up your *dessiatine*?"

"You could have spared yourselves the trouble. Next spring the tractors will come and plow it up again anyway to keep my horse from hopping into your oats."

"What tractors are you talking about?"

"My God. Ours, Danko, who else's? The tractors from Kharkiv."

"Have you moved out to the farmstead for good?" Ruban asked.

"How could I do that?" Danko said. "I still have half of my property here..."

"Not half, but a third," Ruban specified.

"Oh yes, a third," said Danko. "I forgot..."

Parfena was afraid to stay home alone, so Danko left early, feeling that he was an odd man and a stranger at the party. He stopped near the windmill and looked on the farmstead amid the white silence. Who knows what went on in his heart at that moment... In the daytime, a stiff ground wind swirled up toward the lower vanes, but now it was quiet; everything was in the grip of a tension that heightened his mental confusion. What if he were to go back to the party, drink himself under the table to his brother's

happiness, and not meddle in all the things he had taken upon himself along with the farmstead? Presently Otchenashka broke out in a cough in the Radenkys' windmill. The proprietress of the winds... What if he were to forsake everything except the winds to call his own and become just like Otchenashka? No thanks, brother! That wasn't for Danko Sokolyuk. He hurried off to the farmstead.

Parfena was waiting for him. She let the hounds loose to meet him. They jumped into his sleigh and fawned on him in greeting.

### *Chapter 8*

The riot was to start on Epiphany. The day before, a huge cross was chopped out of the ice and red beet juice that had been fermenting in the firkins of the old women of Babylon, who were given to the mystique, was lavishly poured over it. In their effort to make it look nice, they had overdone the dye job. The bloody cross glowed under the moonlight like a portent of calamity, while in the daylight it would probably have blinded any infidel who happened to stray past. The cross lay on the ground protected on all sides by a host of smaller crosses that had also been chopped out of the ice. It looked just like something out of the Bible, and the Babylon dogs were lured to the blood that had been shed there for the sake of humankind. Fabian the billy goat, utterly inquisitive creature that he was, also came here to have a look at this wonder, licked the fermented beet juice, and made himself scarce, because the pack of dogs was growing by the minute, and he was afraid to be left on his own against the whole canine tribe of Babylon, the more so since these bastardly fleabags,

with which he had some old scores, were becoming more rowdydowdy, picking fights, and starting all sorts of romances — in a word, they were desecrating and jeering at the giant cross, not to mention the innocent little crosses.

Snow crunched underfoot on Epiphany eve. It was resonant and limpid like the first ice on the pond, where the billy goat almost took a spill — the poor critter was unshod. He heaved a sigh of relief when he made it safely across the ice, and then crunched uphill, listening to the elegant music of his own hooves. He wanted to be sure not to oversleep the next day so he would be among the first to appear at the feast along with the riflemen who would proclaim the commencement of Epiphany to the rest of Babylon. He loved this feast not so much for the ritual of blessing the water as for the regales and games which had been held on the ice every year from time immemorial.

That night, it looked as if Babylon hadn't an inkling about the imminent riot. In all the homes, the villagers were baking and preparing the food, children and grownups alike were putting on clean shirts — the feast had been loved and revered here as long as anyone could remember. It was passed down from generation to generation that even the Tatars, after having captured Babylon, had not hindered the Christians from celebrating Epiphany, because the heathens were themselves eager to fly on the whirligigs with the young Babylonian girls. These tales would be hard to believe were it not for the half-breeds that were born to this day. Every conqueror left his covert streak in Babylon which hid like couch grass in a furrow only to resurface centuries later. Even today, when the cross attracted almost all of the faces which had not as yet been weather-beaten by

dry winds and tanned by the sun and the steppe, it could be seen distinctly who had come from whom in Babylon — who from the sprightly Mongols, who from the haughty Poles, who from the Turks or Greeks, and who was a Ukrainian of hoary Ruthenian ancestry without a single trace of foreign blood, descended from the Wends, the Scythians or the Antes. For instance, Fabian who built the Epiphany crosses with such genius, was a pureblooded and strictly national acquisition in every respect, but nonetheless this did not hinder him from believing that he was a direct descendant of the Lithuanian Duke Jagiello, simply because under this conqueror, Babylon had achieved its greatest prosperity. It had become a city which was supposed to have fully enjoyed the Magdeburg Right on a par with Kiev. It was said that quite a few “infidels” were sentenced to death at the Epiphany cross and later drowned in the ice holes. Eventually, this cruel rite which must have survived from pagan times was dropped, and everything sank into oblivion, along with the Magdeburg Right. In the Babylon of today the old enmity flowing in the blood flared up only occasionally, and then some were derisively called Mongols, others Polacks, and still others the sons of the great Allah or heathens. Yet on Epiphany, when everything backed down before the life-giving water which everyone took home as a cure-all, the Babylonians made up with even their bitterest of enemies, and the most distant relatives became closer by at least one generation. That’s how it should have been on this feast as well. But no, Babylon, as we shall see, was again moving toward a great and deadly strife, or perhaps even toward its complete destruction — not its first to be sure, but, we shall hope, neither its last throughout the long centuries of its history. It had once been set to the torch by

the Tatars, but then they had disappeared somewhere; its residents had been impaled by the troopers of Hetman Koniecpolski; the Turks had reached these parts on horseback all the way from the Black Sea and had demanded a priceless ransom — the women of Babylon themselves who were unsurpassed along the entire course of the Southern Bug River. Babylon was a mixture of many peoples of rare and at times unbelievable variety, because Babylon stood right in the epicenter of a human vortex, or, as the ancient chronicler put it, there did stand this city on the border between north and south, between west and east, and that is why many a people and many a conqueror thronged to Babylon; they came and destroyed, but its inhabitants rebuilt it again and again.

But the greatest trouble always lies in wait somewhere nearby. The worldly billy goat was probably the first among Babylon's residents to see it, and that was when he had climbed his hill the day before and had seen all of Babylon spread out before him. Near the windmills, the vanes of which were barely rustling in the wind, a crowd was swarming. This was something that had never happened before on such a viciously cold night. Every living creature, save perhaps the billy goat whose master was off visiting God knows where, had retired to the warmth and comfort of his home, while the goat alone roved through Babylon in search of whatever he could find to eat, and all his attempts to get a bite of something tasty had met with failure so far. So now, on hearing the creaking of the vanes, the billy goat, without a moment's hesitation, made for the windmills where he had always been a welcome guest, except for those rare occasions when the customers included pregnant women, who chased him away to the disparaging laughter of the men. At any other time, the billy goat



was met eagerly, called Fabian, and spoken to as if they were speaking to the philosopher himself: "Oh, Fabian, how're things in this world?" The billy goat would smile at those gibes, pretending he understood them well enough, shake his beard, and to the giggles of all those present, make himself comfortable near someone's sack of oats or, even better, near some dried barley.

The billy goat rounded the Tatar Ramparts easily and found himself on the eastern slope which was always open to the winds. Here the billy goat rummaged in first one, then another sleigh; he sniffed around the one-horse sleigh of Bubela, which was now used by Danko Sokolyuk, but they all proved to be without any grist. The hoar-covered horses were gloomily munching oats and chopped straw in their feedbags, saving themselves from the frost in this way. Without any precaution whatsoever, he approached the nearest windmill. He appeared in the door like a wraith, solemn and boundlessly trustful. He looked over those present, and somewhere in his heart was delighted to have come across such a respected company. There were Pavlyuk with his sons, tall men with huge arms like the vanes of a windmill; they could smash anything to smithereens with those sledgehammers of theirs if only they had their father's blessing; there was Matviy Husak with his two daughters who had dolled themselves up in their finest clothes — white embroidered sheepskin coats and silken kerchiefs — to catch the eye of Pavlyuk's sons; both of the Radenkys, the windmill's owners, were there, too — sedate and prudent like the winds themselves on the eve of Epiphany; and there were a lot of other folks the billy goat could not make out in the dim light of the lantern. Yet the next moment, the billy goat felt that he was not too welcome a guest. He

did not hear the usual "Oh, that's you, Fabian!" but was accorded a reception that was unfriendly and chilly, to say the least, even a bit hostile. The elder Radenky, who sat higher than the rest near the only window, said to those closer to the door:

"Chase him away, he sold out to the Bolsheviks a long time ago!"

And although this referred not to the billy goat but to his master, a host of hateful eyes bore down on the hungry creature who was entirely innocent and had come with the best of intentions.

Why?, thought the flabbergasted billy goat who, as the reader knows quite well by now, was very much given to analysis, and for this imprudence of his he was cruelly punished by Danko Sokolyuk.

Danko had arrived at the windmill with Parfena. She had no reason to fear a meeting with the billy goat, but on seeing the horned creature, she cried out and covered her eyes with the palms of her hands, which made Danko lunge from his place, run up to the billy goat and whack him with a fist between the eyes. This was so unexpected by Fabian, who had long considered Danko his patron, that his eyes bulged out in surprise, and then he dropped to the ground unconscious, after which he was grabbed by the legs and mercilessly thrown out of the windmill. He lay there for an indefinite period of time, and when he came to he was terrifically cold. He looked up at the Epiphany sky with the frozen stars overhead, the locked windmills, and the expanse of snow covered with the tracks of sleighs and horses; then he sensed a silence so wonderful and mysterious that his head stopped buzzing. He realized that he had been left here to the mercy of fate, got to his feet, and went home along the crunching snow.

Levko Khorobry must have had a good meal,

because he was sleeping in the middle of the room on Bonifatius's *zhupan* topcoat with his boots and clothes still on; his cap lay nearby, and the only mouse in this hungry abode was warming itself inside it. When the billy goat spent his nights at home, the mouse warmed itself near him. Fabian stood at his master's side for a while, believing he would be roused by the smell alone, but he was hoping in vain. So the billy goat resorted to more decisive measures. He butted the philosopher, at first lightly and delicately, but further on without any ceremony. That finally helped. Levko Khorobry sat up, frightening the mouse which scampered out of the cap and darted under the cold stove-bed, and snarled at the billy goat:

"Where have you been, you tramp? Because of you I lost my spectacles."

Fabian heaved a sigh for no apparent reason and smiled into his beard, for he knew that funny business with the spectacles only too well. When his master lost his spectacles, which were always found in the end, it was the billy goat who was to blame, as if he had no greater responsibilities than looking after that blasted thing.

Then the philosopher lay down on his back again and quickly fell asleep, knowing that he would manage without the spectacles for a while, relying on the wonderful eyesight of Fabian the billy goat who took the responsibilities of a guide upon himself in such cases.

That's exactly what happened. As soon as dawn broke and it was time to leave for the feast, Levko Khorobry washed, more or less spruced himself up, polished his boots, roused the billy goat and, taking hold of one of his horns, which had served him more than once, went with a quaint piety to the cross where the Babylon folk were already starting to gather.

The first to arrive were the riflemen, twenty to twenty-five of them. They clustered round Petro Dzhura whom they had elected their leader. There were not too many real rifles — Dzhura had one, as did the Radenkys, Danko Sokolyuk (Bubela's wonderful Tula piece), Sozon Loboda, Matviy Husak, while the rest had sawn-off shotguns, muskets, and zip guns. The Pavlyuks had hauled up something huge and clumsy that looked very much like a cannon. It was mounted on a plow carriage, the muzzle stuffed with gunpowder and tow, and lest the carriage trundle across the ice after the salute, the entire rig had to be fastened. That's exactly what the Pavlyuk brothers busied themselves with, while their father inspected the rifles, levelling each of them on his shoulder.

They were waiting for the people to assemble and the priest to arrive. Ever since the church in Babylon had burned down and Father Soshka had died, the priests came from other parishes. This time they had agreed to invite the priest from Hlynsk. One of the Skoromnys was sent after him, probably the eldest, because his horses were faster. So they all stood there waiting for Father Selivantiy who had to bless the water, collect his ten rubles, and then scoot back to his own dear parish church with a fresh pair of horses, because Epiphany also had to be celebrated there.

The people converged on the pond in several streams, bringing whatever food they had prepared along with large flasks of *horilka* which were to be emptied and then filled with holy water to be kept till the next Epiphany.

The philosopher loved this feast for its rural liberality, while the billy goat was fondest of the shooting and games which started right after the water had been blessed. During the tumult that

followed, he gorged himself on *kutya* and other delicacies which he would see in his dreams for many days thereafter when he was living on an empty stomach. At the cross, Fabian let go of the billy goat who immediately made for the riflemen and was met with pronounced suspicion. It felt odd to have him around, because most of them had seen him killed dead as a doornail near the windmill the night before. As for Danko, he was simply stupefied by the meeting, because the billy goat recognized him and looked at him with an explicitly heightened interest. Danko spat on the ground and stepped aside, probably wanting to get lost in the crowd, but the billy goat followed him to the guffaws of the riflemen. Danko stopped, took the rifle off his shoulder and raised the butt to bring down on the billy goat's head.

"What do you want?"

The billy goat dropped his eyes and stooped — he didn't want to die a second time, especially on such a blessed day as this, so he left Sokolyuk alone and made for the young women to get himself high on the redolent smell of *kutya* wafting from the glazed bowls. Among the young women, there were quite a few pregnant ones and they immediately chased him away, so the billy goat had to move on to another group — the pious old women of Babylon who had long been trying to convert him to their religion, because every time he was around they crossed themselves and whispered: "Lord God, subdue the devil and send our souls rest and peace..." The billy goat, who was fairly pious and solemn, stayed with the old women until the beginning of the feast.

Pavlyuk the father lit the fuse of the homemade cannon. A terrific explosion rent the air. The old women fell to their knees and crossed themselves fervently. The riflemen came up to the cross, fell in

one rank, and on Petro Dzhura's command, shot into the air once, a second time, then a third time. At that instant the shots were answered from Pritske, Koziv, and Dakhnivka, while these villages were answered in turn by other volleys, probably going all the way to Hlynsk. The echo rang along the entire upper reaches of the Southern Bug. The old women wept for joy, while the young women shouted to the riflemen along the line:

"Glory! Glory!"

The smoke hung in the air for some minutes, and when it lifted and the crowd came into view, people saw a manacled man with nothing on but a shirt and breeches being led up to the cross, his shock of black hair bobbing up and down from his resolute gait.

"Ruban! Ruban!" rolled through the crowd.

He was led by the Skoromnys, both of them holding their guns at the ready; so someone else must have been sent for the priest, or perhaps no one at all. Some paces behind the escort, Zosia was sauntering along, with little Bonifatius swaddled in a shawl in her arms. She wore only a vest, boots with no stockings, her hair disheveled, the long plait dangling down to her knees. When the Skoromnys had come for Ruban, Zosia had been stoking the stove; they had pulled him out of bed, taken his revolver from under the pillow, manacled the captive, and led him to the pond, telling him that he was being led to the Village Soviet as this was supposed to have been the order they received from Hlynsk, while they were really only complying with the will of the community.

Ruban realized now that he had been fooled, that there could not have been any order for his arrest, and after the firing started in the neighboring villages, following the volleys in Babylon, he knew that something unlawful was afoot.

“What’s this supposed to be — a rebellion or what?” he asked when he was led up to the cross and made to face the riflemen.

The riflemen exchanged glances, but no one had the courage to give him a straight answer, so he ordered the Skoromnys, who always served the community, although they didn’t always know why:

“Untie me, I won’t run away.”

Petro Dzhura gave a nod, and they eagerly untied Ruban and handed the elder Skoromny, Nichipir, the rope which he took without knowing quite what to do with it.

Ruban shoved the shock of black hair back from his forehead and crossed his livid arms on his chest.

“So let me ask again: what is this — a rebellion or some stupid joke?”

In response, Petro Dzhura again signaled the men to shoot into the air, and after a number of volleys the neighboring villages answered. Only the village of Semivody where Klim Sinitsya’s co-op was did not answer Babylon’s signal, and that was probably what disconcerted Dzhura. By that time, he had been forcibly pushed out onto the platform built of ice chunks, from which the priest was supposed to conduct the service. Dzhura, confused and diffident, floundered at a loss for words, and when he did find his tongue, his lips stuck together and he uttered almost in a whisper:

“Honored community. Dear people.”

“What’s he say there?” asked the old women pushing the kerchiefs back from their ears.

“You’ll have to make it louder!” someone said from the crowd.

“That’s what I say — we had our land and our freedom, and now it’s being taken away from us by the likes of my friend Ruban here...”

"We won't let him!" Sozon Loboda roared.

"Do you hear the support we have from all around?" Pavlyuk cut in.

"My friend here..." Dzhura continued.

"To hell with friends like you, Dzhura!" Ruban hurled back and went up to the platform.

Dzhura again groped for words, and while he strained to say something in response to Ruban, the riflemen spat angrily on the ground, seeing what an inarticulate spokesman they had chosen for themselves. Then Fabian pushed Dzhura from the platform and took his place.

"His spectacles. Pass him his spectacles!" someone shouted from the crowd which started to break up into groups: the larger group was against the instigators of the riot, and the smaller one — composed mostly of the wives and children of the wealthy Babylonians — supported them.

A kind housewife who knew about Levko Khorobry's poor eyesight had brought his spectacles, which he had lost at her house the day before, to the feast; she had found them in the straw when she was heating the stove that morning, and now the spectacles were passed on from hand to hand until they reached their rightful owner. Without them he was a nobody, but with them he immediately felt himself a philosopher, the master of this seething mob which had quieted down and was now absolutely subdued, especially after the billy goat briskly jumped onto the platform and took his place at his master's side.

The two Fabians, one of whom was on the verge of immortality, were surely worth listening to, but then Panko Kochubei interfered in the development of events. He popped out of the crowd, got onto the platform, and uttered in a thin squeaky voice like that of the hogs he gelded:



"I don't want to listen to this freak and I don't advise you do. He's been bribed by Ruban, but I hear the thunder of freedom which was fought for by our fathers, and we the older people..."

"Long live Panko the Hog Fixer!" came the cheer from the group of the wealthy Babylonians.

"Hurray!" the cry rolled across the pond.

"Give us your program!"

"A program you say?" Panko spread his arms in a gesture of surprise when the crowd calmed down. "It's either each will be on his own like we were before, or we'll all have to join the co-op or the collective farm," he said, pointing to Ruban. "There's an empty freight car waiting in Hlynsk to take all the undesirable elements out of Babylon!"

"He's lying," said Ruban. "I was in Hlynsk yesterday. There's no freight car there whatsoever."

"Dzhura, you better read the list of those to be exiled! Tell them who's on it," said Pavlyuk the father, coming up to the platform with his rifle.

Dzhura reluctantly produced the list out of the pocket of his sheepskin coat, sucked in his breath, and read:

"List of those to be banished to the Solovetski Islands: Petro Dzhura — that's me." Pointing to Ruban, he said: "That's how he sold his friend for having saved his life once. Then comes Levko Khorobry, that is Fabian, along with his billy goat."

The crowd burst into a roar of laughter. Even Ruban had to smile at such treachery, while Fabian merely put his hand on one of the billy goat's horns, prepared to go into exile, since he believed that philosophers must be ready to endure everything for the sake of their peoples.

"Matviy Husak and his entire family. Tikhin Skoromny, Nichipir Skoromny. Both with their families.

Why, I don't know. Yavtukh Holiy with his wife and eight kids."

"The ninth is already on its way," someone joked from the crowd.

"Fedot Radenky. Khoma Radenky. Because of their windmills."

"Out with Radenky, no hanky-panky," the wit rejoined again.

"Severin Buha. Because of his bees."

"His head is full of them all right," the wit kept at it.

"Danko Sokolyuk."

"For being a dependent."

"Parfena Bubela."

"For being the dependent's keeper," the voice came again from the crowd.

"No, for the old Bubela, God rest his soul," Dzhura said, and read on: "Panko Kochubei."

"Good gracious, who'll geld the hogs now?"

"I don't know," said Dzhura huffing on his frozen hand, and continued: "Chaplich."

"Because of his noble descent."

"Is Chaplich here?"

Demko, his son, responded:

"Father hasn't gotten down from the warm stove for years now."

"Then off you go instead," Dzhura became chattily talkative. "Sozon Loboda and Teklia. Are you here, Sozon?"

"I'm here all right, damn it. But what's my name on the list for?"

"Levon Pavlyuk, Onisim Pavlyuk, Makhtei Pavlyuk, Roman Pavlyuk and the whole tribe to boot."

"For their bellows, sledgehammers and plow-shares."

Dzhura fell silent, the list had ended and instantly

he was at a loss; it was as if he had been chased into a corner and didn't know what to do or say next.

"Who else is on that list?" asked Ruban.

"No one," Dzhura replied, feeling as if he were to blame that the list had ended.

"Don't you worry there'll be another list. That's only the beginning. They'll get us all!" hollered Matviy Husak who had actually compiled the list Dzhura had just read.

"To the cross with him, to the cross!" the elder Radenky hollered.

Zosia with little Bonifatius still in her arms emitted a scream. Someone's strong hands grabbed Ruban and dragged him to the cross. When they stood him to face the riflemen, his back turned to the crowd, Zosia fell down on her knees before Matviy Husak, which did not move him in the least as he unslung his rifle; then she ran up to Dzhura who met her with a chilly look as if he were seeing her for the first time.

"My God, wasn't Bonifatius enough for you?" she lamented, expecting the Babylonians to respond to her misery and stop the carnage. A moan of sympathy spread through the crowd, which again started breaking up into groups milling around on the icebound pond.

Upon the platform, Fabian heaved a deep sigh, probably not so much for Ruban as for the cruel treachery of the former Village Soviet chairman.

Ruban looked at the riflemen with hatred and wondered that almost all of them, including Dzhura, were so calmly loading their rifles, although one shot would have been quite enough.

Damn it, would they really shoot people after all, the thought crossed his mind as he heard someone breathing heavily behind his back. He turned his head: it was Lukian Sokolyuk; he stood there with

Darinka and greeted him with a guilty look. Even after Dzhura — who was gradually getting used to his role as leader — shouted, “Hey, you there, move aside!” and the crowd dispersed in a split second, Lukian and Darinka remained standing, and Ruban heard their excited breathing more distinctly now. For him it was a reward he hardly expected, while for Dzhura it was more than mere disobedience. Something alarming cut Dzhura to the quick, but he would not let himself back down.

“Sokolyuk!” he hollered at Lukian, giving him to understand that he and Darinka were to beat it and leave Ruban in front of the cross by himself; by that time even Zosia had been sent off to the old women who must have calmed her down, because her lamenting could no longer be heard.

But Lukian did not obey; he remained standing on the platform.

“Ready!” Dzhura ordered, believing that this would make some impression on Lukian.

But he moved closer to Ruban.

“Since I helped Ruban compile that list, I should be up here with him,” he said. “But Fabian, Dzhura, Chaplich, and our neighbor Yavtukh, and you, Danko, weren’t on the list. You weren’t on it. So I’m ready to die with Ruban, because I respect him more than anyone of you as a human being, as a friend, as a comrade. If you’re going to shoot him, shoot me, too. Why don’t you say something? Shoot, you bastards!”

“What do we do now?” Dzhura asked, undecided.

“Lukian, what have you lost at that cross?” his brother asked quietly.

“Something different from what you’ve found with them,” Lukian said, pointing at the riflemen.

Danko started forward, ready to push his brother away from the cross, and wanted to yell: “I’m the

eldest! I'm the eldest! You have to listen to me, that was what our mother wanted." But meeting Parfena's piercing gaze and catching her ill-natured laughter, he stopped, drew back, and said, barely hiding his grief:

"So be it. If the man's tired of living, what's the use in stopping him. Let him croak, the fool." He still hoped that Lukian would catch his brother's hint that they weren't joking around, and obey his command.

But Lukian stood his ground. Where had that holy squirt gotten the guts to do such a thing? Danko wondered.

The women grabbed hold of Darinka and forcibly pulled her away from the cross. She was sure Danko wouldn't shoot at his own brother. He had really lost his bearings and looked around at the riflemen with an inarticulate query in his eyes: what now?

"What's got you so scared, eh?" Yavtukh Holiy hissed contemptuously, wishing that Danko were in Lukian's shoes over there at the cross.

"No, it's nothing..." Danko stammered.

"What are you waiting for then?... Give the command! Don't you see Dzhura's lost his nerve?"

"Blindfold them," Danko said, lest he see his brother's eyes.

A number of white kerchiefs were passed forward from the *kurkul* group. There were more of them than was needed, so Dzhura threw the extras to the Husak girls. After wavering a bit, he climbed onto the platform, blindfolded first Ruban, then Lukian, and when he was about to step down, he caught sight of Fabian who also came up to the cross, leaving the lonesome billy goat behind, and took off his spectacles.

"Blindfold me, too, Dzhura. I'd rather die here than endure the shame you're bringing on Babylon — you're about to defame Babylon for all time."

When Dzhura blindfolded Fabian, the tragic silence was disrupted by lighthearted laughter. Its cause was the billy goat who approached the cross, which he had a strong desire to lick. However, he resisted the urge and took his place at Fabian's side, but in the process committed a brutally tactless thing: he turned his rump toward the riflemen, having not the slightest inkling of how disrespectful this was to their militant spirit. The seriousness of the situation disappeared immediately; some roared with laughter at the billy goat's antics, while others gave him his due for the courage he was displaying. Dzhura was now confronted with another dilemma: should he blindfold the billy goat or not? He was an utterly unfit leader — that much was obvious. Dzhura presented a pathetic sight even compared with the billy goat.

Feeling his friend at his side, Fabian asked:

“And what have you got against him? Scram, you good-for-nothing!”

But the billy goat didn't budge an inch. So Fabian addressed the riflemen:

“Don't you dare bury me in the same boneyard with this goat. I'm a Christian and insist on being buried with the other Christians. And to you, *kurkuls* and *kurkul* flunkies, I'll tell this before I die: you're a vile lot, wicked and dishonest to the core. Take Dzhura, for instance. He helped us make up that list. Ruban, me, Lukian and Dzhura did it. And Savka Chibis helped, too. (The philosopher passed Malva Kozhushna over in silence.) Where Savka is right now I don't know, but as for Dzhura, if he were an honest man, he'd be standing up here with us at the cross. Where are you, Dzhura? Let them blindfold you as well.”

“Take Dzhura to the cross! To the cross with him!” shouts rang out of the crowd. “Enough of his playing the hero!”

The instigators of the riot had no need for him any longer.

"Get moving, Dzhura!" Husak ordered. Pavlyuk nodded in agreement.

Dzhura kept his peace, waiting for the other riflemen to stand up for him.

But they only exchanged glances.

"Let Ruban tell us whether it was so or not," Danko said to the crowd.

"It was," Ruban affirmed quietly. "He even wanted to include his Ruzia, that turncoat..."

At these words, Danko resolutely went up to Dzhura, took the shotgun away from him, and said pointing to the cross:

"Get over there and take what you've got coming!"

"Friends!" Dzhura started to plead. "Neighbors! Somebody help me!"

But finding no sympathy with either group, he rounded the cross in a couple of leaps and took to his heels. The guns went off behind his back. Dzhura kept on running for a few paces, lost his cap, and then dropped onto the ice. Ruzia ran up to him, turned him on his back, and burst into tears. He was still alive and looked at her with eyes full of horror.

"Is that you, Ruzia? What have they done to me?" he asked almost in a whisper.

The billy goat could not stand the strain any longer and also got clear of the cross. The only thing that saved him was the fact that at this moment the riflemen were reloading their guns.

The threesome at the cross stood still.

The riflemen were silent. They waited for Malva Kozhushna who was being led up by the Bezkorovainys. They had no rifles about them. Malva walked cautiously, being careful not to fall. Her mother shuffled senilely behind her.

"Come on, move it!" Matviy Husak hollered.

"To the cross! To the cross with the co-op bitch!"

"People, what are you doing, don't you see she's pregnant?" Prisia started to howl, her eyes searching for Yavtukh so that he would stand up for Malva.

Lukian tore the kerchief off his eyes.

"And what do you want to kill Malva for?"

"For Babylon," rejoined Holiy, old Kozhushna's godson.

"Damn it, how long do I have to wait?" Fabian said angrily. "Shoot! But if you touch Malva, I'll curse you even from beyond the grave. Do you hear me, you bastards? Roman law didn't allow such atrocities."

"Blindfold her and put her by the cross," the old Pavlyuk said quietly. "This is Babylon, not Rome."

Loboda's wife covered Malva's eyes with a kerchief and helped her up to the cross. The old women took care of old Kozhushna.

"Danko, you once swore you loved her," Malva's mother lamented.

"Be quiet, mother!" said Malva. "How can such a hoggish man know what love is?" And she hurled at him: "You worthless freak! Shoot!"

"Get ready!"

"We won't let this happen!" The Bezkorovainys suddenly jumped onto the platform. Back at Kozhushna's home they had tried to dissuade Malva from coming, although they had been sent for her. Seeing what it had all led to, both of them confronted the riflemen, throwing them into disarray. "We won't let you do any killing. We don't want their blood on our hands!"

Then, as if on command, the Skoromnys, the father and two sons who had brought Ruban, stepped out of the group of riflemen and stood like a wall between the riflemen and the victims at the cross.



“Put your guns on the ice! We’ll settle our affairs peacefully,” Skoromny the father said to the riflemen and was the first to put Ruban’s revolver on the ice. The sons did the same with their guns, which they had been given at the windmills the night before. They still didn’t have a clear idea whose guns they were, although up to that moment they had even derived pleasure from showing them off. Yet with the Skoromnys everything was subordinated to one rhythm, one impulse. The sons waited for their father to tell them what to do next. They stood there menacing and inexorable, ready to take on all of Babylon alone; the Skoromny Cossacks from whom they traced their lineage had once belonged to the “terrible hundred” of Ivan Bohun. To this day the Skoromnys occupied an entire street in Bratslav, while here only one branch of the clan had settled down ever since it performed guard duty in Babylon. Yet Skoromny was undecided whether to fight the riflemen or not, because he hoped that everything would end peacefully. Pavlyuk, who had taken the leadership upon himself, said to him:

“Listen you, Skoromnys, every minute is precious... It’s either them or us. The others have already set out for Hlynsk, and we’re still here fussing with you. Whose side are you on after all?!”

Skoromny pointed at the ice and said:

“Put the guns on the ice and then I’ll have my say...”

“No bloodshed! No blood!” the women cried.

Somewhere in the back ranks Yavtukh scurried to and fro: which side should he join? Who would win? He was vacillating between the weakest and the strongest as he had always been. When the Skoromnys had brought Ruban, Yavtukh had immediately sided with the riflemen, but now that the Skoromnys were wavering, he wavered as well. They were standing

there so beautifully that if he had had the guts, he would have sided with them. Probably at no other time in his life was he as undecided as now — someone seemed to have brought a huge hatchet down on him and cleaved him in two from head to toe when the riflemen reloaded and locked their guns after that terrifyingly quiet “Get ready!” Would they really shoot at the Skoromnys? Yavtukh thought with horror. And only then did he rejoice in his heart that the shotgun he had taken out of the cache under the oven that morning didn’t have a single cartridge, although he had worried about it a lot before and had even felt inferior at the feast, seeing how well armed all the others were.

Skoromny discerned something wicked in Pavlyuk’s eyes and shot a quick glance at his sons as if to say: we’ll fight. Pavlyuk seemed to have intercepted the message, hissed furiously, “Traitor,” and shot at Skoromny. The latter still managed to cry out, “Boys!” and assailed the riflemen with his bare hands. Danko finished him off from Bubela’s gun, the one he had used for hunting wolves. The sons knocked Pavlyuk off his feet and grounded Danko on the ice without giving him a chance to reload. Pavlyuk’s sons left their cannon and rushed into the fray, fighting all the way to their father. Yavtukh was running around with his gun, not knowing whom to beat and whom to spare. Ruban and Lukian tore the kerchiefs off and without a moment’s thought plunged into the fight. They were followed by the Bezkorovainys who started to kick the gizzard out of Pavlyuk, with whom they were probably just settling some old scores. “Boys!” Pavlyuk implored, and his three sons left the Skoromnys and dashed off to save their father. In the heat of the fight, Yavtukh whacked Panko Kochubei across the head and he dropped on the ice like a sack, the

double-edged knife slipping out of his hand. Yavtukh had mistaken the hog fixer for someone else and was trying to lend him a hand now. But Kochubei's wife had seen what had happened, so she ran up with a bowl and thrust it on Yavtukh's head. "Ugh!" Yavtukh cried out as the cold *kutya* spilled over him, and raced around like mad with the bowl on his head. In the meantime, the Radenkys had gotten hold of Ruban and, twisting his arms behind his back, led him to the cross.

"Give me the gun!" Pavlyuk said, coming to his senses as his sons supported him. Sozon Loboda was just swinging his rifle butt back and forth; in this fashion he had knocked both of the Bezkorovainys onto the ice, and now he was trying to give Pavlyuk his gun, the advantages of which had been felt by everyone (its butt was faultless), but he was too late. The women joined in the fray, throwing pots at the riflemen, followed by flasks of *horilka*, bowls of *kutya*, and even pipkins of hot stewed meat that stuck to the battlers like hot tar. One such pipkin hit Pavlyuk and terminated his leadership for some time as it seemed, which event was immediately taken advantage of by Fabian at the cross. Plastered with the Epiphany offerings and partly scattered by the Skoromnys and Bezkorovainys, the riflemen lost all semblance of organization and were now a miserable lot; moreover, Ruban had broken loose from the Radenkys by the cross and was grappling with them on the ice, grounding first one, then another.

"Damn it, women, give your men a hand! Follow me!"

All at once a number of small ice crosses were broken off with a crack; the boldest women picked them up with both hands and advanced on the riflemen. Darinka was in the lead, holding a cross high

above her head — her father's spirit resurfacing as she recalled the way he had led his herdsmen into battle. Danko was strangling Lukian, so she dashed over to them and brought the cross down on Danko's head. Putting little Bonifatius down on the ice, Zosia pounced on the Radenkys who had overpowered Ruban and were thrashing him within an inch of his life. In vain did Prisia try to get her hands on Yavtukh who evaded her, having no desire to be bested by a woman, because he still did not know who would get the upper hand and feared above everything else that he might err in his choice of an adversary. Prisia grabbed him by the coattails at long last, but he nonetheless broke loose from her and yelled: "You idiot! Don't you realize it's still not clear who'll wind up on top of the heap!"

Seeing that their men were being given the works, the proud Parfena lunged into the hub of the fight, followed by the Husak girls in their white sheepskin coats, both of the Radenky daughters, Kochubei's wife, who had by then carried the glorious Kochubei from the battle field, Loboda's Teklia — in a word, by all those who strived for victory over Babylon. In vain did old Pavlyuk try to gain control of the situation and restore his leadership over the demented mob. Everything had got mixed up, embroiled, rising and then falling onto the ice again. Some were belabored with boots, while those who still offered resistance were grabbed in a bunch and toppled onto the ice, and rifle butts were smashed to smithereens. After scattering the riflemen, the women took the field, dragging one another by the hair, screaming, imploring, cursing. All of a sudden a mad laughter spilled onto the scene from somewhere above as if God Himself were laughing at this babel from the heavens.

A string of sleighs with armed men in them was coming down the Babylon hills onto the dike. In the lead flew Savka Chibis galloping like mad, both his hands clinging to the horse's mane. When he heard about the riot and Ruban's arrest, Savka had swiped a horse and dashed off to the co-op. It was Panko Kochubei's roan which Savka had appropriated after its owner had left for the feast. The riflemen had no way of knowing this, of course, and on seeing Kochubei's horse, they hollered with one accord:

"Treason! Treason! Death to Kochubei! Death to the hog fixer!"

Panko knew that he could not hope for mercy and ran to meet the co-op man.

"Well, Savka! What a hell of a fine fellow you are!" Panko would have definitely preferred to be on a horse at Savka's side at the moment. Seeing how the *kurkuls* and their flunkies were scattering at his appearance on the pond, Savka again broke into laughter, but that was a bad mistake, because the horse was unshod and, startled by Savka's heehaw, it slipped down on the ice and sent its rider sprawling. For the hero of the day, this was almost unbelievable, the more so since while he was pinned to the ground by the horse, he saw his enemies taking to their heels — on foot and by sleigh, and he was unable to apprehend a single one of them.

The first to take to his heels was Yavtukh who tripped on a small cross and hit the ice, while the gun with which he had so uselessly posed as a rifleman slipped out of his grasp and slid across the ice into the dry reeds. The Pavlyuks rattled away with their cannon mounted on runners. In the willow scrub they had hidden a sleigh in which they had planned to advance on Hlynsk, so now they tied the cannon to it and dashed off to their farmstead. Danko and Parfena took

it on the lam to the sleigh they had hidden in the willow scrub, too. As a matter of fact, there was row on row of sleighs all ranged for Hlynsk. Only the Skoromnys did not have a sleigh and ran off with their slain father on their shoulders, constantly getting out of step. "Skoromnys! Halt!" Ruban hollered, but this only lent wings to their feet. They made off at such speed it looked as if their father weighed nothing at all. Ruban was terrible to behold: his shirt was all in tatters, his hair disheveled; still keyed up by the fight, he watched them enraptured as they carried off the corpse of the man he believed to be the bravest in all of Babylon. The last to disappear were the children, who flitted away like flocks of startled sparrows. Over the empty battle field swept by a ground wind that stirred caps and leather mittens, Malva cried — the cry of the unborn child inside her. The wind trundled Kindrat Bubela's high cap, which Danko had again lost, to an unknown destination. After crawling out from under the horse, Savka caught the cap and brought it to Ruban.

"Here it is," he said.

Ruban looked at him with bewildered, uncomprehending eyes... It seemed to him that he was still standing at the cross until it occurred to one of the co-op members to cover his shoulders with a sheepskin coat, at which point he immediately came to his senses and rushed to embrace Savka whom Babylon had long taken for a nut.

Ruzia picked up Dzhura's cap, took his liveless body by the collar of his sheepskin coat, lifted his head lest it bump against the ice, and dragged him home. Klim Sinitsya greeted her, but either she did not recognize him or failed to respond, dragging on her Dzhura whom she had feared all her life. She was followed by the mystical old women of Babylon all

dressed in black to wash the deceased and prepare him for the funeral. The old women picked him up near the dike and carried him to the house. They put him on a bench near the tractor which seemed to have gone cold for ever along with its master.

Then the co-op men found Dzhura's gun near the cross. It was not loaded — so Yavtukh was not the only one who had joined the riot without a single cartridge.

Very soon the pond was deserted; only the billy goat was left, gorging himself on the tidbits from the feast. As a matter of fact, Fabian had always known that the road to plenty implied great suffering which he — excluding the incident of his escape — had endured rather heroically. That momentary cowardice of his was incited by Dzhura's run for it, but Dzhura had paid with his life, while the billy goat had only made the crowd laugh, perhaps in this way saving the lives of those whom he had betrayed at the cross. Now he was feasting with a clear conscience, eating the *kutya* right out of the pots which had been hastily left behind by the people, and knocking over the flasks of *horilka* corked with corncobs. He went up to the beet-red cross a number of times and licked it. The sun was high now, and the cross started to smell pungently of fermented beet juice.

In the meantime, various parts of Babylon were rent by the shrieks and laments of those who were involved in the riot. Within an hour or two they had all been assembled at the Village Soviet. Almost all of Babylon had come. Makedonsky and his men had hurried over from Hlynsk in several sleighs.

In the abandoned households, the unwatered cattle lowed, the hungry pigs squealed, and the dogs howled for their masters. The Babylon *kurkuls* who but recently had called the tune were now a worthless

scrap of humanity huddling in a close-mouthed, helpless group in Husak's sleigh.

Since Danko had fled on horseback, Parfena was brought from the farmstead to the Village Soviet alone. She sat silently in her one-horse sleigh. If Danko had been at her side now, she would have considered herself doubly happy, even if she had had to leave the farmstead for good.

Surrounded by his children, Yavtukh whimpered as he cowered in the Village Soviet's sleigh. He didn't have one of his own, but was reluctant to get into the Husaks'.

Ruban announced that the Babylon Village Soviet had decided to arrest the instigators of the riot and started reading the list. Each of them had to respond to their names: "Khoma Radenky — here," "Matviy Husak — here," "Prots Huliy — here," "Panko Kochubei — here," and so forth.

When Ruban called Yavtukh Holiy, Prisia answered for him.

"Yavtukh is here by all means," she said wishing thereby to underscore his utmost decency and obedience with respect to the authorities.

The cause of his blunder was the sawn-off shotgun he kept hidden away to use against the Sokolyuks if need be. It was a weapon after all. Yavtukh implored Prisia not to forget him and to wait for him till death. For her part, Prisia swore eternal love and loyalty to her husband, regretting that she had not made him a new pair of pants, of good, warm wool like those the *kurkuls* wore, and had to see him off in his lousy canvas pants. She failed to persuade Yavtukh to put on his embroidered holiday shirt and black castor vest, because from the waist up he was also in rags. Leaving for the feast, he was convinced that it would come to a showdown with the members of the Poor



Peasants Committee, and for this reason he could not afford to dress in his holiday best. Sitting there in the sleigh, he asked Prisia to give him her necklace of red beads for keepsake. She took it off and put it in his bag with the bread, several pieces of pork fat and a stiff, new, unbleached towel.

By Slavic custom, Levko Khorobry kissed Yavtukh three times on parting. Yavtukh regretted that the philosopher was not going with him — after all, together it would have been merrier if they were sent somewhere far off, and he burst into tears again.

“You’ve got no kids of your own, so look after mine, will you,” was Yavtukh’s final request. “Your billy goat loved to lunch with us under the pear tree in the summer.”

Levko Khorobry wanted to save Yavtukh and return him to his kids; besides, it would be a pity that such an oddity as Yavtukh would not be standing at the gate every Sunday: dressed in an embroidered shirt, castor vest, and from the waist down — a pair of pants with patch on patch. Levko Khorobry had run from Ruban to Klim Sinitsya and back a number of times.

“I want to put in a word for Yavtukh,” he said. “There’s nothing of a *kurkul* in him, he’s nothing but a middling-wealthy peasant, so let him go in peace.”

“Personally I don’t have anything against that,” Ruban said. “But will Makedonsky agree...”

Makedonsky made a different decision.

“Let’s take him to Hlynsk and see what he says.”

“And what if we let him escape? I’ll go in his place instead, eh? I’ve got no kids, nor wife.”

But the answer was no, because everyone had seen Yavtukh at the cross with his sawn-off shotgun.

The instigators were taken away at midday, the time of day snowstorms broke out in these parts. The

winds hid in Kumova Gully or some other place, laying low the whole night through, but as soon as the sun peeped into the gully, they fluttered out, pounced on the windmills, and then raised Cain in Babylon late into the night. The first to set off was Parfena sitting proud and beautiful in her sleigh; she was followed by the rest onto the Hlynsk highway. They stopped on the dike — the huge Epiphany cross lay lonesome on the pond and glimmered in scarlet hues that made it look tragic and almost fatal. Everyone fell silent at the sight of the eternal cross, and their escort did not hurry them, giving everyone a chance to get a last look at where they could have had a wonderful, merry feast, ridden on the whirligig, and vented their exalted emotions in the frosty night.

It looked like the cross would be lying on the pond for a long time until the squally thaws of spring, to be visited by the hunger-plagued billy goat only occasionally, mostly in the wee hours of the morning. The old critter would still be waiting for a miracle to happen when people would again come to the feast of the Epiphany with roasted meat and deliciously prepared food. But the miracle would not occur, while the fermented beet juice evaporated in the frost and the cross took on a cold, washed-out shade of blue until the spring flood picked it up and washed it to the dike along with the ice.

A red trail ran from the cross right up to the dike — the track Ruzia had left dragging her Dzhura home. Now she returned all dressed in black, beautiful, almost girlish, a bundle of nerves, a bundle of fright; or perhaps it was disregard for fright. She climbed up the dike, recognized Dzhura's murderers, went quickly from one to another, hurrying around to all of them, and asked:

"Is that all you got for my Dzhura? Ha-ha-ha!"

She rejoiced, but it was hard to tell whether it was because they were being taken away or because they had killed Dzhura and now she wouldn't have to be afraid anymore of him or of his tractor, which he started almost every night before going to bed, making their cottage tremble like in an ague-fit.

Ruzia was tremendously surprised to see Klim Sinitsya sitting in a separate sleigh with the escort.

"Is that you, Klim? And what have you done?"

His escort laughed, and that made her all the more certain that he had been arrested. Suddenly a wild idea crossed her mind: she would follow him. In her whirling confusion she rushed to her house.

The candles burned at Dzhura's head, the old women of Babylon whispered prayers over him, having covered his eyelids with copper coins so he wouldn't look so mad in death. She skipped into her room, hurriedly put on her sheepskin coat and kerchief, took her holiday best out of the trunk, tied it all up in a bundle and, without saying a word to the old women, rushed out of the house. She was just in time to jump onto the sleigh before it left.

"Whose place are you taking?" the escort asked.

"I'm going for myself," Ruzia replied guilelessly, intending later on to move over into the sleigh where Klim Sinitsya was sitting.

"You can go in place of Danko Sokolyuk. He broke loose, the bastard," said the mustachioed militiaman.

"It doesn't make any difference to me," Ruzia said with a faint smile. "My Dzhura is no more, so now I'm free as a bird..."

The billy goat sauntered after them beyond Babylon until the snowstorm hit him in the eyes. On his way back, he dropped in at Dzhura's to warm himself. Dzhura lay on a bench with meekly folded arms as Levko Khorobry measured him for a coffin. The old

women whispered something derogatory about either one or both of the Fabians — the billy goat and the man, or rather, the man and the billy goat, which was by no means one and the same thing.

Ruzia returned from Hlynsk that very day. She was sent back to bury Dzhura who had been fooled and provoked by the *kurkuls*. The Skoromny brothers and their sons also returned. They had confessed that they had been set and armed against Ruban, but they hardly supposed it would come to murdering him. "Now these very Skoromnys will help build the new Babylon if they get rid of their class errors," said Ruban at the inquest. "In any case, they are upstanding and hard-working people who can be relied on in the future." In the heat of the moment, Ruban might have said more about them than was really necessary. But what impressed the Skoromnys most was his lack of rancor, and they could not forgive themselves for leading him up to the cross. For a long time thereafter Nichipir would evade the chairman's eyes. The Skoromnys were people who if they trusted in a man to the end but once, they would never betray him as long as they lived.

On the market square a fire roared, fed by the torn-down NEP stalls. This Babylon fire differed from all the previous ones. It was kindled by Parfena and the other women, and Yavtukh warmed himself near it, roasting a piece of pork fat on a skewer. By the flickering light of the fire he looked like a hairy little creature striving for warmth, and indeed he sidled closer to the fire than anyone else. He had heard there by the fire that the lands to which the *kurkuls* would be exiled for their complicity in the riot were neither measured nor occupied, so you could have one hundred or two hundred *dessiatines* just for the asking, put up a fine block house (there was more timber than you

knew what to do with!), move your family there, and farm as much land as you could manage without anyone bothering you. There seemed to be some credence to that, because Yavtukh heard it not only from his fellow villagers whom he did not trust too much, but from other people as well, who were least of all interested in seeing some Yavtukh Holiy a landed magnate. Even Panko Kochubei had taken the tools of his trade along. "Who'll geld and butcher your hogs out there if not me?" he said to Yavtukh. And the childless couple Sozon and Teklia Loboda (like some of the women, she was voluntarily joining her husband in exile) took a wicker cradle with them, still hoping to bear children there. Yavtukh jumped at the idea of making it big, behaved insolently at the inquest, saying that he had joined the *kurkuls* consciously and of his own free will, no one had incited him to do so, and that he wanted to grasp everything with his own mind, so to speak. So the court did not heed Ruban or take pity on the father of eight children, although the very sight of Yavtukh could not but evoke sympathy. The court, chaired by Chuprina of Chuprinka, decided to exile him along with the Babylonian trash as a *kurkul* flunky and rioter. During the trial, Teslya's thoughts involuntarily revolved around the tragic character of Yavtukh Holiy. Given another chance, he could easily turn into a new Bubela — a wicked creation of the old Babylon. If he ever managed to build his own windmill on the hill and felt his wings, you wouldn't be able to take him down that hill with your bare hands.

The *kurkul* leader Dorosh, who killed the Village Soviet chairman Maihula during the Epiphany riot in Pritske, was sentenced to be shot. He confessed that the instigator of the riot was actually Bubela when he was still alive, while he, Dorosh, was only his

underling. He said that the course of events could have taken on a different turn had Kindrat Bubela not frozen to death. After overthrowing the local powers, they had intended to seize Hlynsk and proclaim a Hlynsk Republic.

“A *kurkul* republic,” Teslya specified.

Makedonsky smiled at that. On Teslya’s advice he had left Bubela go scot free the better to see who was grouping around him and what the intentions of the *kurkuls* were. But the sudden death of Bubela had lulled Makedonsky’s vigilance. And it turned out that it was more difficult to fight against a dead Bubela than a live one.

Chuprina from Chuprinka declared that the sentence of the court was final and that there would be no appeal to higher courts.

The next night, the convicted rioters were taken away from Hlynsk, and from then on their destiny affected no one either there or in Babylon. Eventually, Khariton Hapochka, who viewed the world through the Hlynsk mail, took notice of the letters from afar addressed to the relatives and fellow villagers in our parts. He handled these letters as he always did, but never once did he come across a letter from Yavtukh Holiy — not a single bit of message to either his wife or his kids. Yet from one pitiful letter, the postmaster found out something about him as well.

Ruban spoke at the trial and castigated Dzhura as a traitor and sneak, but here in Babylon he came to his funeral and gave a wrathful speech directed against those who made him into such a character, ensnaring him in their nets and ruining more than just his life. That day, the father of the Skoromnys was also buried. With his death Babylon lost something ancient, inherent in only this clan. Ruban forgave the sons his arrest, because he saw even during the riot

that they had been provoked by the *kurkuls*. Deep in his heart, he felt that the Skoromnys would be his reliable supporters in the future.

Dzhura's "workshop" became a sort of a club attended by everyone except Malva. She had not withstood the Epiphany events well, fell ill, and did not venture out of her house. When the snowstorms calmed down and it became possible to break through this way from the co-op, Klim Sinitsya visited Malva, bringing along the Martian from Hlynsk a number of times. His verdict was: a normal case of nervous shock. But the old women of Babylon, who had their own opinions about everything, predicted that she had consumption, which she might have contracted from Andrian while he was still alive. Ruzia had been afraid of Dzhura, and now she was afraid of her big house and of the tractor as well; she constantly imagined that the tractor would start up of its own accord in the middle of the night and wreak God knows what manner of havoc. Besides, someone was as incautious as to natter — Savka it seemed — that passing the house one night, he thought he heard someone start the tractor up. The thought that it might be Dzhura depressed Ruzia completely. She moved to the Kozhushnys and looked after Malva, but still continued coming to the evening parties in the "workshop," heating the stove, cleaning the house, and, generally, feeling like she was the mistress of the house as long as people crowded in it. If the club were moved elsewhere, the light in her home would be extinguished for a long time, just like her happiness, which everyone was now striving to revive, had once been. Speaking about happiness — probably for her ears — Fabian said that those who were endowed with it too lavishly were deprived of hope. Ruzia, however, had just begun to live — by that hope alone.

## Chapter 9

The reverberation of the cries and gunshots at the feast of the Epiphany still stood over Babylon; it seemed to have frozen in the air and came back to life at the slightest stir of a breeze. The winds had not yet scattered the vile curses the evicted *kurkuls* had heaped on Babylon for centuries to come. Malignant and furious, these curses stood in the air like some plague that could wreak death upon anyone. But as it were, Babylon was already regrouping for the new and inexperienced.

Ruban, who had been elected collective farm chairman, was rushing from one farmstead to another on horseback to prevent those of the Babylonians who were prone to a quick grab from pilfering the *kurkul* property that had passed into the ownership of the community. Both of the Fabians also rushed about. They were taking care of the *kurkul* dogs, which would not acknowledge their new masters or let anyone into the empty households until the philosopher had won over those four-legged sentries with the help of the billy goat, who quickly found a common language with the rotters. True, some of them that stubbornly refused to recognize their new masters had to be dispensed with in the end with the shotgun from the Village Soviet. This task was carried out by Savka Chibis without any qualms whatsoever, since in his day he had suffered a lot from them.

Having overcome this last vestige of the old world, the activists got down to urgent business. The cows, horses and oxen were moved to Bubela's farmstead. In one day the cattle drank up all the water in the well (something that was completely unforeseen), and there was nothing to bring the water in, because the collective farm did not have a single barrel on wheels.



The Pavlyuks' farmstead took in all the sheep which could not understand what had happened for a long time and yearned for their old masters. And all the domestic fowl, including a number of turkeys — those delicate giants which Ruban took a special liking for, believing them to be genuinely Babylonian birds — were shoved into the cattle sheds and barns of Matviy Husak's farmstead.

For the first time in the history of Babylon, the windmills ground the grist without the usual fee, and although the winds were rather feeble for this purpose at that time of the year, the people instantly saw the advantage of the new system, and what advantages still lay ahead was something only Ruban could know. But probably the most racking headache for the chairman was Dzhura's tractor which no one had managed to breathe life into thus far, and he was sincerely sorry that Petro Dzhura had turned traitor and met such an untimely and stupid death.

At the Hlynsk railroad station, tractors arrived on flat cars. Covered with snow, they looked quiet and wary. And here Dzhura was again recalled, because there was no one to take them down off the cars. There were no tractor drivers, and the trainees had just then been sent to study at the three-month courses in Shargorod. Darinka Sokolyuk had gone from Babylon. Lukian saw her off to the railroad station and shed a tear, that crank, as if she'd be away for years and not three months. He was probably worried because she was the only woman in the group. That crazy idea was Anton Ruban's — he wanted to send a woman by all means. Yet there was a reason for this: of all the Babylonians, men and women alike, she was the only one who had shown an interest in Dzhura's tractor. What if Darinka had a talent, a bent for machines after all?

Amid these first joys and failures, Danko prowled somewhere around like a wolf that had been chased out of the pack. Every night Lukian, whom Babylon had installed as chairman of the Village Soviet, took the shotgun which had been used to kill the unsubmitive mutts, and lay in wait for his brother. Danko sensed the danger and did not show up, although Lukian did not have the slightest intention of killing him, he only wanted to catch him and force him into the collective farm to which Danko might otherwise bring harm in his malice. And then a rumor had seeped out that Pavlyuk's sons—Makhtei, Roman and Onisim — had escaped and were hiding in the neighboring villages, threatening from underground to get their revenge on Babylon for the ruin that had been wrought them.

"What fools," Ruban said when he heard about it. "They themselves were only hired hands under their dear pappy. If they'd come and open the smithy and tire the wagons for the summer, we'd probably accept them into the collective farm. I'd get permission from Hlynsk myself."

Ruban sent Fabian to look for them. He searched through all the neighboring villages, but returned without the blacksmiths. Instead he brought along a young Gypsy by the name of Yona who was installed at the Pavlyuks' farmstead to guard the sheep and work as a blacksmith, but, in fact, he did neither. Yona proved to be incorrigibly lazy. He himself confessed that he had been chased out of his Gypsy camp for laziness. Yet he had a remarkable talent for singing Gypsy songs to the accompaniment of his guitar, and all the activists gathered at the farmstead in the evenings to listen to him. The philosopher rejoiced in his find until one night Yona burned Pavlyuk's house to the ground and himself suffocated atop the stove.

So he wouldn't have to bother with twisting bundles of straw to fuel the stove, yet sleep in warmth all the same, the Gypsy simply stuffed the straw deep into the stove, kindled it and slept on the warm oven bottom. Something sputtered constantly in the chimney until the soot caught fire. Only the guitar survived the flames, and Lukian took it to the Village Soviet. Now it hung there on the nail where Bonifatius had once hung his cadet cap. Then finally, Pavlyuk's sons, all the three of them, came to seek pardon. Ruban took them in, managed to get them pardoned, and soon afterward they opened the smithy.

Prisia was the first of the Babylonian women to pay a call on them. She came in the morning, greeted the tight-mouthed giants on their return, and wondered what kind of a smithy her sons would wish to have when they grew up. Cautiously she inquired about Yavtukh.

"He's gone," said Onisim, turning over a plowshare in the hot coats with his tongs. "It's only here in Babylon that people wear their hearts on their sleeve." (My, what words they had picked up, Prisia thought.) "But over there everyone's got something up his sleeve and hides in the dark. Everyone spies on everyone else at every step. All three of us jumped into the snow while the sleigh was moving. Father was sleeping, so we didn't even say goodbye to him. I gather Yona lived on the fat of the land in the meantime. Well, that's how it happens, auntie. So you just keep waiting for your Yavtukh!"

"He's a stubborn man," Makhtei put in, holding a sledgehammer in his hands. "Until he sees that land with his own eyes, don't expect him. He'll go to the end of the world with our father."

"And our dad's a fatheaded cluck, you know," Roman added.

"How dare you talk about our father like that?" Makhtei pounced on his brother.

"That's just what people say, I didn't make it up," said Roman, bearing down upon the bellows.

"For other people, he's nothing now, but he's still your father," Onisim joined the argument.

He took the plowshare out of the coals, tapped it a number of times with the little hammer that played the main role in this smithy, and then there was thumping and ringing and sparks flying at Prisia. But she stood there and the sparks didn't singe her. A host of thoughts roved through her mind in which Yavtukh stuck out like a curse, an irremediable pain.

Ruban gave himself up to the collective farm completely, without resting day or night. He did not come home for days on end, spending the night first at one farmstead, then at another. Zosia was afraid to be alone at night, so she occasionally invited Fabian and his billy goat to stay over. Fabian slept on a bench he himself had once made on Bonifatius' commission, and now he reproached himself for having scrimped on the boards, for the bench was narrow. They made the billy goat sleep in the entrance hall in a flour basket. He took vengeance on Zosia for this injustice by drinking from the firkin the beet juice she had prepared for borsch. When she complained to Ruban about the billy goat, he only laughed and gradually he got into the habit of drinking beet juice out of the firkin as well. It seemed he had never tasted a better drink, especially when he was tired and shivering from the cold at the farmsteads from whence the Skoromnys regularly beat the rail at midnight to let Babylon know that the collective farm was going strong and that no enemy force would be capable of overcoming it now.

During the first day of field work who do you think

was at Ruban's side — Levko Khorobry, Fabian. With his billy goat, of course. Since Ruban was a hot-tempered man, Teslya had advised him to choose himself a deputy chairman who was composed, tolerant, kind, even warmhearted. So Ruban chose Levko Khorobry as his deputy. True, the philosopher had only a slight knowledge of agriculture, but on the other hand he knew the Babylon folk like the back of his hand. But lo! there was a curious paradox. The billy goat surreptitiously belittled Khorobry's high status. The horned critter took the shine out of the deputy chairman who was frequently the butt of the caustic remarks and gibes of the local wits who appeared on the scene even at the most tragic of moments. Recall the feast of the Epiphany, for instance. But the philosopher could not really alienate such a true friend and associate. So they continued appearing together, the more so since the billy goat never poked his nose into his master's affairs. In the meantime, the philosopher had started calling the billy goat's horns his foghorns, and at times, though rarely, when he was in need of them after an evening party, he would ask: "Now were are my foghorns?" Say what you like, but high responsibilities have the property of elevating a person. The distance between them grew, and there were days, or rather nights, when the billy goat started forgetting what the philosopher's face looked like.

Spring toppled the Epiphany cross and swept it to the dike. The first hints of spring spread across the willow trees and reminded people about the swing. The inauguration of the swing was a holiday that had been in the innermost recesses of everyone's minds the whole winter long.

With the first spells of spring, Savka Chibis hung the swing on the elm trees. He did it in the evening, so that the swing could nap throughout the night and get used to the elm trees and the elm trees get used to the swing. The next day the whole of Babylon would be having a grand old time on the swing. He regretted that Malva would be absent from the holiday. Without her, something would be lacking.

Before that, what was called a hauling team for grain procurement had arrived in Babylon. Back in the autumn, the *kurkuls* had hidden their grain to withhold it from the state and deprive the collective farms — if any appeared in the meantime — of seed grain. The haulers came with long steel rods which could easily penetrate the Babylon soil from two to three meters deep. They probed the beaten farmyards all around, and pierced the ancient country trunks buried in the ground. The tips of the rods had special cavities; if they came across grain hidden in even the trickiest of caches, they invariably picked up a number of grains and brought them to the surface. The team had found quite a lot of grain hidden in Pritske, Oveche, and even in Chuprinka, and now it had moved on to Babylon.

On the team were some women who were generally kept clear of, because they could be neither bribed nor entreated, their defense being their hungry children they had left behind in town without any bread. They had arrived from Kramatorsk, with Ivanna Ivanivna, Teslya's wife, in charge of the team. She was a tall, lean, outwardly severe woman with no mercy for the *kurkuls*; however, the poorest peasants had no complaints about her. She did not heed any of the would-be squealers, nor did she treat them with any familiarity, keeping them at arm's length quite frankly: "We ourselves know where to search and whom to search."

She had noticed that some of the informers had contrived to leave their neighbors without a crust of bread. That, too, was one of Babylon's inherent features.

Ivanna Ivanivna lodged at the Kozhushnys' and made friends with Malva. Malva wanted to bear her child at home, but Ivanna Ivanivna insisted on taking her to the district hospital. The team leader knew where Teslya had been lodging and about Varya Shatrova, of whom she had been informed immediately by some guardian angel who was very much concerned for Teslya and his revolutionary integrity (that could well have been the doing of the postmaster Khariton Hapochka). Ivanna Ivanivna, however, did not give it so much weight as some people in Hlynsk did. She would not leave her plant or her children to rush off to Hlynsk. What would everyone, Teslya included, have thought of such a thing? As distrust or fear of losing her husband? But still when the hauling team was being formed, Ivanna Ivanivna had asked to be sent precisely to that district. She intended to move to Hlynsk for good after the children finished school, and that was not a long time off.

Every Saturday, the haulers gathered at the swing where they made friends with the Babylonians. One day Teslya came to the swing as well (he dropped in on his way from Pritske where another collective farm was being set up), mounted the maple board with his wife, and wouldn't go too high no matter how much the haulers egged them on, but then the irresistible, rebellious spirit of Ivanna Ivanivna was stirred to life, and she infected her husband. Laughing, she swung him higher than the elm trees. When Teslya hovered over the precipice, the abyss that opened up under his feet was so frightful he shut his eyes every time. The women from Kramatorsk were enthusiastic

about their team leader and encouraged her with squeals of delight.

Fabian the billy goat lay down not far from the swing, mostly under the burgeoning dogrose bush and, putting his beard onto his abraded knees, watched the swing flying with the Kramatorsk women and the residents of Babylon. He shrank at the thought that all these people, who were flying right up to the sky, would die one day, and then Levko Khorobry would make a fine coffin for each. As he saw it, immortality was ensured only to him and his master, probably because neither of them had mounted the swing so far. Fabian the man was afraid of heights, while Fabian the billy goat could not pick himself a partner for it.

But once Fabian the billy goat waited till everyone had left the swing, got out of last year's weeds, and went up to the swing, with the intention of having a go at it. But he couldn't get into it, and even if he had managed, he would not have been able to set it moving all the same, because there was no one around to give him a push. So the billy goat, who did not lack for fantasy, imagined that he was standing on the board and hit it with his horns. The swing rocked upward and then came back. He liked that and repeated his trick a second time, then a third. Delighted by his success, he wanted to achieve human heights now. When the swing hung motionless, he backed away from it, made a run-up, and butted the edge of the board with his horns at full speed. The swing flew upward, while the billy goat, fascinated as he was by the height he had achieved, stood on the earth without having the sense to jump aside, so on its return, the board hit his twisted horns with all its kinetic might. The billy goat dropped unconscious to the ground.



Throughout the night, he saw the human swing swaying back and forth in his dreams. He thought he was dying and believed his death to be beautiful, because, after all, he had achieved a height that was incredible for him. In the morning, the billy goat was found clay-cold under the swing. Nobody knew how he had died. Some thought that his death was a warning to the philosopher. It was only Levko Khorobry who reconstructed a more or less complete picture of the billy goat's death. But whatever philosophers know gets broadcast to everyone else later on. Levko Khorobry could not help but tell about his billy goat's last trick. Eventually a legend sprang up according to which the billy goat came to the swing every night and flew like mad. Someone even claimed to have seen him, alleging it was a fantastic sight: imagine — a billy goat on a swing!

The philosopher was intrigued and went there one night. He hid nearby and waited. Either he was seeing things or it really did happen that sometime around midnight the swing creaked between the old elm trees.

"That's him," Levko decided, left his hideout and came nearer — even with his spectacles he saw badly at night.

Two young people from the haulers' team were rocking on the swing. They were secretly cradling their love unbeknownst to Babylon. It was as if they wanted to break away from the night and fly toward the stars and the blue sky against which their outline showed. Fabian recognized them — a young pair from Kramatorsk.

"Is that you, Fabian?" they asked him from the height.

"Yes."

"Come join us."

“Won’t it snap?”

“Oh no.”

“All right, I’ll give it a try.”

He stood between them, frightened, not too eager, and they took him off into another world he had not known before. Afterward he came every night, and when he did not meet anyone, he would swing by himself. Soon rumors spread all over the village that he went there to be with his billy goat on the swing.

“Is it true, Fabian?” they would ask him.

“Of course it’s true, why not,” he replied with a smile.

One night Levko Khorobry brought a woman to the swing. He could not or probably did not want to be seen with her. They flew back and forth on the swing like magic until the cocks crowed for the third time. Without his billy goat, he became his old self again — Levko Khorobry. Now he was no longer preoccupied with universal problems, but merely with those of the collective farm. He took the billy goat to the outskirts of Babylon. He buried him there. “Peace to your remains,” he said, and took off his cap.

That’s how people die, Prisia thought to herself. Some get killed on swings and others die on white embroidered cushions, but Yavtukh believed that white cushions existed only to make the home brighter and was afraid to soil them with his face. There was not a single message from Yavtukh — it was as if he had vanished into thin air. It would have been better if she had hacked an ice-hole for him on Epiphany so she’d know for sure he was no more. These thoughts swept through Prisia’s mind as she watched her boys sleeping.

Malva’s birth pangs had started, prematurely it seemed. Her old mother was incautious enough to let

Savka know about it, and soon the most outstanding Babylon midwives who had delivered many a glorious person in their lifetime were gathered in her home. They came with their herbs for the first bathing and their simple instruments all but tempered over the sacred fire. On entering the room, they greeted all those present, crossed themselves, and sat down side by side on a bench, pious, wise and remarkably calm for such an occasion. The last to come was Khristina, a tall, lean woman in a white *ochipok* bonnet. She saw badly and groped for the threshold with her staff; she had delivered Malva herself in the very same house, and probably in the very same bed with its high carved bedstead of a kind no longer made in Babylon.

"Well, what's up here? Who's this coming to Babylon?"

"A son's coming," said the first old woman sitting on the bench. This woman with the kind, pious face was the Skoromnys' grandmother and was considered a diviner of baby boys.

Khristina shot a glance at the bench and asked:

"Either there are quite a lot of you or I'm seeing double."

"Savka asked us to come. All of us..."

"And he asked me, too," said Khristina. "How do you like that, the old doghead? A fool he may be, but he still remembers that I delivered him as well. 'Go on over there,' he said, 'and see that everything is all right, you're answerable to the Village Soviet for the offspring.'"

Savka didn't know what any of them were worth, so he simply sent the whole lot of them, and now they would have to decide who was the best. But they couldn't arrive at a common language, because the professional ambitions of each were enough for the seven of them. For some reason each tried to capital-

ize precisely on this delivery, but the old Kozhushna settled their differences by pointing at Khristina.

"Let her do it... Khristina."

The blind woman, either jokingly or in earnest, started to chase them off the bench:

"Scat! Scat!"

They cackled with resentment, and one of them called Khristina a blind hag, but nonetheless they trickled out of the house in a trice. Outdoors they were met by a wagon which burst into the farmyard and stopped at the threshold. It was Ivanna Ivanivna who had returned from the Martian whom she had gone to fetch from his hospital. She didn't trust the midwives much at all, especially those of Babylon, who, as it were, had managed to populate these hills without any interference from the followers of Hippocrates so far. And in this respect, there was yet another advantage of which Ivanna might not have known: the Babylonians did not throw the umbilical cords to the Hlynsk dogs, but buried them in their gardens, thereby tying the future citizens to Babylon. But if they started taking their women to Hlynsk for their lying-in and throwing the umbilical cords into the garbage, everything would blow away and scatter — that's what was on the old women's minds when the wagon rolled into the farmyard. They didn't leave, but stood near the gates, still hoping that old Kozhushna wouldn't let Malva go to Hlynsk.

But she did. Varya Shatrova came out with her obstetrical bag and carried mountains of pillows out of the house. Then they led Malva out, supporting her under the arms, and put her on the wagon. Khristina wanted to join them in case anything happened on the way, but Varya brushed her off with a joke, saying that a midwife would just be the cause of a mess, because those who strived to get out into the world

were already sly enough to take advantage of a mid-wife's presence on the wagon. They chased the mid-wife from the wagon to the malignant joy of her rivals standing near the gate: "Who does she think she is, that old blind one!"

The three women drove off into the night, but they might arrive in Hlynsk a foursome... Something similar had once happened to Varya during her obstetrical career. No sooner had they gotten out of Babylon than she remembered they had no matches and reproached Ivanna:

"You of all people should have taken them along. Who knows what might happen on the way? We might be attacked by wolves or something..."

"I've got this against wolves," Ivanna said with a smile, pulling a Nagant revolver out of her pocket.

That impressed Varya and she asked Malva in a whisper:

"Who is she anyway, and what's she doing around here?"

"She's from Kramatorsk. Came here to scrounge grain from the *kurkuls*. She's Teslya's wife."

Varya gave Malva such a look that Malva had to repeat it:

"I'm telling the truth, honest I am," and crossed herself.

Ivanna had guessed whom she would be going with when the Martian, pleading a complex operation he had to attend to, suggested that the head nurse go instead of him. To make the journey more agreeable for both Varya and herself, Ivanna said she was a wagoner from Babylon.

"Wasn't there a man around who could drive the horses?" Varya had fumed on the way to Babylon (the horses hadn't obeyed the driver too well).

"There were men, of course. But all of them were

strangers, so I decided to do the driving myself. You must agree they'd be embarrassed at seeing Malva in such a state. And Malva wouldn't be happy either."

"Could be," Varya said and lapsed into silence, having either fallen asleep in the back of the wagon or decided not to talk to this woman anymore. Oh my, what a lot of unnecessary things she could have otherwise blurted out about herself, about Teslya, about Hlynsk!

"Giddup!" Ivanna urged the horses on constantly, trying to chase away the unbearable silence that reigned over the wagon all the way from Babylon. "Giddup" and "giddup" — one and the same call, desperate and unfeigned. The call filled the night, and Varya's heart, and the future of the unborn child... For all that, its mother was patient, she did not cry out or moan, but only shut her eyes tight with pain. Varya saw that and furtively envied the driver who neither saw nor heard those throes.

The horses got tired, stopped halfway in a deep puddle by the spur of a gully, and started slurping the dirty water, greedily drawing the reflected stars out of it. Varya got onto the box, took the reins from Ivanna, urged and implored, but all in vain. After drinking their fill, the horses stood as if rooted to the ground. If they chill their legs, Varya thought, it will be absolutely impossible to get them moving. "Come on, let's get down and help them," she said to the driver, casting a passing glance at her feet. She was wearing boots, and so was Varya. Were they Teslya's? Ivanna wondered.

Right out of the night a third horse stealthily approached the gully from the steppe. The horses noticed it before the people did; one of them whinnied invitingly, but it did not respond, probably because the rider had taught it to keep silent.

"Who are you?" the horseman asked. Malva started on her pillows. It was Danko.

"We're from the hospital. The horses got tired and... oh well, you see for yourself."

The horseman rode up to the wagon, recognized Malva on the pillows, and recognized Varya, or so it seemed, but the third woman was a stranger to him.

"And who's that?"

"The driver," Varya answered for Ivanna.

"I don't seem to know her." Then he looked at the horses and all his wariness vanished without a trace. "Wow, those are my horses! And the wagon — isn't it Yavtukh's? It sure is! There, the shaft points up just like its former master's nose. Goodness gracious, just look whose hands this lousy property has fallen into! Three dames stuck in a puddle. Well, I guess I'll have to give you a hand..."

He did not dismount, nor did he attach his horse to the team, the more so since there wasn't a third set of breechstraps; he only brought his stud level with the tired horses, *grabbed the left-sided by the halter*, and shouted, "Giddup!" And the horses, which up till then had been completely dispirited, instantly seemed to change their minds when they felt the fresh horse in the "span," pulled the wagon onto dry ground, and rushed ahead. They continued in such a fashion, as a team of three — it looked like the horseman even restrained them a bit until they reached a better stretch of the road. In the wagon no one breathed a word; the women were bewitched at how the rider had managed to outwit the horses by "attaching" his stud to the team.

On the approaches to Hlynsk he stopped, and so did the wagon. Looking at the women out of the darkness, he said:

"Well, God bless you."

Malva lightly touched Ivanna Ivanivna's back with her boot. It could have been either a signal — shoot, shoot! — or an entreaty — don't shoot or you may frighten the baby! Ivanna could not understand the message. Bathed in sweat, the horses were catching their breath and snorting. It looked like they had saved the life of a future human being that night.

The horse under Danko was fresh, the night was unfathomable and pitch-black. A moment ago the rider had been there; and then he was gone, with only the spring mire splashing in his wake. The tracks led to Pritske, but by daybreak he could have been anywhere — off and gone with the wind.

Their wagon was now rolling through sleepy Hlynsk, jolting their innards on the first kilometers of a new cobblestone road which Teslya and all the activists had started building as soon as spring had come. My God, what a jiggle! Ivanna cursed the road builders at heart, worrying about Malva lying there on the pillows. The horseshoes struck sparks on the cobble. In the courtyard of the hospital, Ivanna Ivanivna kissed Varya. (Why had she done a thing like that?) Afterward, Malva was left to atone for the sins of the human race. The Martian was waiting for them in the hall, chain-smoking nervously. Then he told Varya not to breathe a word about her journey to Babylon with Teslya's wife. For Hlynsk was Hlynsk, and what it did not understand, it would make up to suit its fancy.

Malva Kozhushna was having a difficult delivery at the Hlynsk hospital. When Klim Sinitsya heard about it, he made his way there across the ocean of mire that was just hardening and clung to everything, draining the last strength out of his horses, which made him so desperate he wanted to turn back. In the meantime, Maxim Teslya was nervously pacing up



and down the brick walks in the hospital yard which was now being looked after by the Austrian Schwarz. Teslya had been sent here by Ivanna Ivanivna. Her team had left for Kramatorsk, but she had stayed behind to spend a day with her husband. Ivanna Ivanivna would have come herself if Varya Shatrova had not been there. God knows what Hlynsk would have thought had she appeared at the hospital. All the district townships were very much given to fibs and exaggerations with which they eagerly brightened their far from varied lives.

Twilight descended on the fenced-in yard, but Teslya waited for Klim Sinitsya. In last year's weeds, the remnants of a wagon — in which the doctors of the local *zemstvo* must have once rushed about the world — were peacefully rotting. Teslya ran out of the gates a number of times. But there was no Sinitsya. He brooded over a host of thoughts, pacing up and down the brick walks that had been paved by Schwarz for the patients lest they carry mud into the hospital. Teslya introduced himself, for he needed a better knowledge of such thoughtful citizens of Hlynsk as Schwarz. The Austrian's life was not exactly a happy one: time in a POW camp, war, hospitalization, hired labor with the NEP men. At the hospital he was steward and hostler, watchman and what not. Shamrai was an outstanding doctor, but nonetheless, some of his patients died. So it was Schwarz's responsibility to keep the ice in the morgue ready all summer long. He had to take care of the ice, kerosene for the lamps, and even milk for the newborn babies.

"Have you come to see Varya?" Schwarz asked Teslya.

"No, Comrade Schwarz. I don't need to see Varya. I've got a wife and two kids."

"In Kramatorski *Ich weiss*. I know. *Aber schön*, beautiful... *Ja, ja*."

"Not everything that's beautiful is permitted, Comrade Schwarz."

"You talk like secretary. *Gut, sehr gut*... I go, *Arbeit*..."

Teslya paced the walks until Varya, excited and confused, dressed in a white smock and cap, came running out of the hospital and shouted at Schwarz:

"Schwarz, darn your hide! Bring another lamp into the operating room. The ones we've got aren't worth the stuff they're made of!"

*"Ein Moment, Varya. Ein Moment..."*

He rushed to unlock his supply shop where he had a large stock of lamps, lanterns and a lot of other things.

It was only now that Varya noticed Teslya, which embarrassed her, because he had never seen her being so rude to her elders, and had never heard her raise her voice at her father, old Snigur.

"Excuse me, Maxim Sakovich. I hadn't noticed you were around... Schwarz is like one in the family..."

"How goes it there?"

"Can't say anything definite yet, Maxim Sakovich," she replied and ran away. A minute later Schwarz came hobbling with a huge lamp. Teslya noticed that all the peg-legged somehow managed to move along in big strides, compensating for the missing limb with the whole body. Somewhere far away was his country, snow-capped mountains, alpine meadows, relatives, and maybe even children. Teslya made it a point to ask Khariton Hapochka whether Schwarz was receiving any letters from home. And it would be interesting to know what he was writing the folks back home as well. Schwarz's letters! Now, how could he have had

such a ridiculous thought? As if he hadn't other things to worry about.

When it was dark, Ivanna Ivanivna came to the hospital herself. They paced the walk by two. From the high window of the operating room, a sheaf of light with shadows of people running back and forth in it fell into the yard. The two people in the yard did not bother them and dared not step into the light across which the brick walk stole.

"I'm worried for some reason, Ivanna."

"For Malva," she said with a smile out of the dark. "I've gone through that twice. I could barely get her to come here from Babylon... Just imagine how it would have been there, what with the roads deep in mire..."

"There's not much we can do here either. Whatever will be will be. I'm worried about my father and about Lebedin. I wrote him a letter, but I haven't gotten an answer. I've described and explained everything to him. I just hope the old man won't do anything foolish. He's got a pair of oxen, the finest in Lebedin. And he's got himself a sow with piglets, too. He's no *kurkul*, but he's something close to it. While I'm here gambling with death, so to speak, I can just imagine old Teslya handling things in his own way."

"A son isn't responsible for what his father does," Ivanna uttered a set phrase. "But as for the father with respect to the son — well, that depends."

"Everything's crazy and mixed up in this world, and there's probably not a single person with a purely proletarian background."

"Yes there is. Me," said Ivanna, stopping.

"In any case, you're answerable for me... To Kramatorsk, to Hlynsk, to the whole world. I for my father, and you for me. See how it is..."

Schwarz ran out of the hospital. The chimney of yet another lamp had cracked.

"Here we've got the Southern Bug flowing by and can't even provide a hospital with electricity. That's what gets me, Ivanna. And in autumn Hlynsk dwells in utter darkness. I've probably never seen such dark nights anywhere."

They both glanced at the sheaf of light and stopped. The shadows had stopped scurrying back and forth, probably waiting for Schwarz to return from his shop. Schwarz carried several chimney glasses. That's an Austrian for you! Our Slavic brothers would have had the sense to do that right away.

Klim Sinitsya didn't make it to Hlynsk in the end. He failed to cross the ocean of mire and turned back halfway. The path at the edge of this ocean was already drying and he probably could have made it on foot. There was a wayfarer pattering along that path just then. Sinitsya detected something familiar about him — either in his gait, his cap, or in his casually careless manner of carrying an almost empty little sack on his back. It was evening, and he did not manage to get a closer look at him.

"Smart man," he said to himself. "I was a damned fool to jump on this dratted wagon."

Sinitsya didn't offer the wayfarer a ride; in these parts, if someone didn't ask for a lift, he was left in peace. Highlighted by the moon, the Babylon windmills tried in vain to fly out of this mire into the sky that looked like a patchy stubble field that had yielded a haphazard crop.

The wayfarer whom Klim Sinitsya had passed was Yavtukh Holiy. He had escaped en route to his place of banishment. At a big railroad station, he went to fetch water for all the occupants of the heated freight car. Before that, he had stuffed his belongings into his pockets and the water pail and had not returned to the Babylonians. Even during the journey they held him for a little nobody and reproached him for his inconsistency, faintheartedness and dirty foot rags which filled the freight car with a nasty stench every evening when he took off his boots at bed time and slept his fill, while no one else could get a wink of sleep until the train had passed the little snow-covered stations and moved onto a standard gauge track. Yavtukh slept like a log, which evoked an even greater wrath in his hapless fellow travelers. Besides, he had a few pieces of pork fat and a couple of loaves of bread which he ate so heartily that it could not but produce certain aftereffects contrary to his volition. When he was roused from sleep, he was overcome with yearning for Prisia, for his boys, for Babylon itself, and simply would not believe that there would never be a Yavtukh Holiy who traced his lineage from the Registered Cossack clan of the Holiys. He still weighed the possible pros and cons of grabbing one or two hundred *dessiatines* of land at his unknown place of banishment. But what was that land worth without Prisia and the boys, without the horses and everything he had left behind stowed away, greased and prepared for spring with such diligence that even the best of farmers would have envied. Every kilometer of the way intensified Yavtukh's desire to escape, which he did in the end, having beforehand considered everything down to the minutest detail. He deserved credit

for some of the things he could foresee, but when it came to advance knowledge of his whole life, he hollered uncle.

He reached his home late at night and rapped on the window facing the field — all that he had planned beforehand. Not a soul in Babylon was to know of his return. Everyone had seen him among the riflemen on Epiphany, and he hadn't been empty-handed, something which could never be pardoned and would be punished sooner or later. Numb from the cold, he frightened Prisia and woke up the older boys who were sleeping tightly pressed to one another on the bed. He closed the entrance door so quietly it didn't even creak. The Sokolyuks would never have dreamed that he was already here in his home. Only when he stopped in the middle of the room did Prisia say to the roused boys:

“Your father's come home.”

Yavtukh put down his bag and went over to the bed. He touched every single child in the semidarkness, and said:

“It's me, children. Your father,” and burst into tears.

He still had his mud-spattered coat and cap on. On the floor lay his bag which surely had no presents for them — why should he have wept otherwise. Little Ivan or one of the older boys blurted out:

“What's the matter with you, Pa? We were fine without you. Uncle Fabian came to see us...”

“Fabian?” Yavtukh backed away from the bed.

“Never mind that,” Prisia calmed him down. “Tell me how you managed to get here.”

“I've got two feet and a head on my shoulders,” Yavtukh said with a smile. “What was I to do out there? I hadn't lost anything there if my children are all here,” — he motioned to them. “I could've had one

or two hundred *dessiatines* of land, put up a block house, and eaten the fat of the land... But I'm not the type who could trade all that for you. So I escaped way beyond Kharkiv. My, the things that happened there, Prisia! The local farmers were well off on the black land. The *kurkuls* were given a shaking down, but they still didn't want to join the collective farms, so they were shoved into freight trains with all their misery, roots and limbs... And how are things here? What's going on?"

"I've joined the collective farm..."

"You what?"

"Am I worse than the others?"

"So while I'm being lugged off and risking my neck, so to speak, you join the collective farm?" He moved toward her out of the darkness. "Well, well, I'm listening, Prisia, what are you going to tell me next..."

"They socialized our horses, wagon, and all the tools."

"The whole kit and kaboodle?"

"What's it worth without the land anyway? Pieces of metal and nothing more, Yavtukh."

"And you gave away the plow as well I suppose?"

"Yes, the plow and the hand mill. I only kept the harrow for the garden. Everyone left something for himself and so did I."

"You don't say... And do you know that I still haven't paid Monia Chechevichny for that plow, eh?" Yavtukh choked with fury.

"All that's left of Monia Chechevichny is a memory. Wasn't he on the same train as the rest of you?"

This fact set Yavtukh's mind at rest a bit. He hated to be in debt.

"Oh damn it! No sooner do I turn around than I'm a down-and-outer... What are you fussing around there for, confound you?" he said to the kids who

giggled in their bed, probably at their father. Yavtukh picked up his train of thought again: "Well, well, so how are you getting on here?"

"We've had our first day of field work already. We'll start sowing soon..."

"Who'll start sowing? Who, I ask you? Ruban? How does he know how and what to sow? Take oats, for instance. They should have been sown already. If in the mud you sow the oats, you'll surely get some kingly groats. How would Ruban know that?"

"He took one of our villagers on as a deputy," Prisia said with a smile.

"Who?" Yavtukh was piqued with curiosity.

"Levko Khorobry."

"Fabian?!" Yavtukh started with a jerk, and then his face broke into a fiendish grin. "Goodness gracious! So that's whose hands Babylon has landed in now. It serves you right. He'll surely make something out of you, God damn it... To surrender such a wonderful plow to Fabian! Ever catch your eye since then?"

"You mean Fabian?"

"I mean our plow!" Yavtukh fumed.

"Of course. I saw it during the first day of field work. Everything's safe and sound — the horses, the plow, and the hand mill. Only the wagon's difficult to recognize. From a distance it looks like ours, but when you get closer, you can see that it's not..."

"Ours had thirteen spokes per wheel. That's why I outdistanced everyone with my baker's dozen."

"No, I don't think this one has so many spokes," Prisia said after a moment's thought.

"I see. The wagon's been damaged. And what a wagon it was! Everything's gone to wrack and ruin... and Babylon to boot. What does it say in the Bible? Parfena used to read to us from it on the journey."



He took off his cap and recited: "And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded. And the Lord said, 'Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language, and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.' So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city. Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of the earth."

"And what comes next, Yavtukh? What else did Parfena teach you?"

"Let's get out of here... if you want to have a husband and a father for your kids."

"Where to, Yavtukh? I want to know where we could go."

"Thirty-five kilometers from here..."

"To Zeleni Mlyni?"

"Exactly. To the Lemkos \*. I passed through their place on my way. It's like another state. They pay their taxes and nothing else matters to anyone. They knocked right at Moscow's door with their case and live by the constitution. Uncle Lavrin runs an oil-pressing mill and a sawmill there. He took me in like one of his own and told me I should move over to his place and bring my family along. He said Soviet power would never pardon me my part in the riot. The Lemkos are different from us. They're sly people. Once they ran away from the Austrian Kaiser, and now they'll run away from the collective farm. Nice

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\* Lemkos — westernmost ethnic group of Ukrainians

and quiet without any riots. They've got their constitution. The Lemkos know everything. Lenin himself said this was a voluntary affair. So the only way out is for us to go to Zeleni Mlyni. There's nothing else we can do... For me everything else is a dead end. Is the Valakhs' son-in-law still around?"

"Where else would he be? He's joined the collective farm, too."

"I suppose he didn't socialize his clarinet the way you did our plow, did he?"

"He's been playing for the Valakhs almost every evening since spring began."

"The Lemkos want him to move out there, too," said Yavtukh. "Their old clarinetist died, so they're inviting him over. They can't take a step without music. They swill beer from Tyvrin and hold parties every Saturday. Our Babylon's no match for Zeleni Mlyni! Just like Hlynsk can't hold a candle to Shargorod. There's absolutely no comparison."

He took off his sheepskin coat.

"I'll rest for a day or two — and then we're off... Thirty-five kilometers isn't so far. I covered a thousand from around Kharkiv, hoofing it all across Ukraine. I ruined my boots, but I got a new pair of pants from Parfena that belonged to Bubela. She must have taken them along for Danko. To tell you the truth, they're too big for me, but they're something else, made of British broadcloth... All right, you pipe down over there and go to sleep!" he shouted at his kids.

Yavtukh came over to Prisia and lightly kissed her warm braids. On the journey he had loved her as never before. Strange things happen on a journey...

"I see the cradle's empty, huh?"

"I drank purging herbs. The old women told me it would have been a girl anyway."

“My, my! What a loss!” Suddenly he asked: “And how are our neighbors doing? They probably thought I was gone for good, ha-ha!”

Prisia fondled Yavtukh as if for the first time... She felt she would go with him to the end of the world. Had it not been for the children, she would have left with him right after the events on Epiphany.

“What’s the use asking about the Sokolyuks,” Prisia said. “You can’t expect anything good from them when brother goes against brother. Lukian is gunning for Danko to this day, and he takes Savka Chibis along with him. They’re afraid Danko will burn down the collective farm or something like that. You’re all I’ve got in this whole big world, Yavtukh, though you’re common, suffering, and down on your luck, you’re still mine... The kids’ve fallen asleep and Babylon’s sleeping, so take off your clothes and I’ll wash you after your journey. These pants are really fine; they rustle, sakes alive. The moneybags sure do know how to look after themselves...”

Come morning, Babylon already knew that Yavtukh had reappeared, but no one bothered him or made a move to expose him. Levko Khorobry predicted that Yavtukh would rest a day or two, feast his eyes on his children, and then come to the collective farm and join everyone else in the sowing. That’s what Lukian also thought on behalf of the Village Soviet. Where else could Yavtukh go since Prisia had already joined and put all her worldly goods in the common pool? They decided not to notify Hlynsk about his return, taking pity on his children and on him as well; it was somewhat unusual, a bit strange not to see him standing by the gate on holidays. They also took into account Yavtukh’s great love for the land. For the newly organized collective farm, he wouldn’t be a useless hand. But what they knew badly was his soul.

## Chapter 10

The following night, Yavtukh came and woke up our father from a sound sleep. The Valakhs didn't yet know he had returned, so his visit was unexpected for us. There were so many of us we had no need to lock the doors for the night, so from spring to late autumn both the yardside door and the one leading into the living room were kept wide open. Yavtukh appeared on the threshold like a wraith and stood there for a while, answering to father's query, "Who's there?", as if he were one of the family:

"It's me, Severin."

"Yavtukh?"

"Sure. Don't you recognize me?" Then it occurred to him that his new pair of pants must have been the reason why father didn't know him immediately. "Excuse me for coming so late, but I didn't have any other choice..."

The guest turned on his heels and left, while father, stepping into his boots and throwing a *svitka* cloak over his shoulders, followed him outside. Father respected Yavtukh very much for something he did not find in any other Babylonian. Yavtukh was the only one in the village who would come in the evening from time to time and say: "I'm so down in the dumps, play something for me on your clarinet." And father would take his clarinet out of its case and play just for him. He improvised Lemko melodies. Yavtukh would listen, shed a tear and leave. Father told the earless Valakhs that Yavtukh's heart responded to music more subtly than anyone else's. They shared yet another affinity with Zeleni Mlyni which was never ever mentioned: they were the only ones in Babylon with relatives there, and either of them could move there if they wished to. Presently, they were talking things over on

Andrian's bench; father coughed quite importantly there, while Yavtukh ardently brought home something to him. The Valakhs had depended on father for some time now. Were he to leave them, they would have immediately taken on quite a different quality. The ruins of the Zamoiskis' manor and the wrecked steam engine in the weeds were sufficient proof of the Valakhs' absurd ambitions in the past. There are epochs, however, which take into account their citizenry's past more than their present.

By the time father returned after that talk, all the Valakhs had been fast asleep.

At other times, father liked to prepare for that thirty-five kilometer journey well in advance. On the eve of the trip, he would grease the wagon wheels, pile meadow hay in it, thoroughly check and put the harness in order, polishing its many copper buckles until they gleamed, which probably explained why our far from handsome horses looked so striking. He curry-combed the horses so that they shone in the morning just like the buckles, and for the tortures they suffered at his hands he gave them an extra measure of oats for the night. To the whip set in a plaited cherry-wood handle — a make you won't find anywhere today — he fixed a red tassel and stood it in the corner under the icons as a symbol of the farmer's lack of compromise. On the evening preceding the trip, solemnity reigned in our home — everyone who was going on the journey would take turns bathing in a trough, put on clean shirts, and while our father whispered a prayer to St. Nicholas the Thaumaturge to protect us from Uncle Andrian (while he was still alive), from his spouse, and from all other machinations of the devil, we, the youngest children, imagined that free and distant realm which was severely and

justly ruled over by grandpa Chornohor (our father's father). We had already been there a number of times and enjoyed it immensely. That realm consisted of farmsteads and big, long houses under high thatched roofs; our horses drew wagons by breech straps while theirs had collars; the cows there were all of one color — red; the cemetery in the middle of the village had a white chapel and was surrounded by impenetrable lilac bushes; and there was yet another wonder for the sake of which it was worthwhile to travel even thirty-five kilometers: right by grandpa's house, freight and mail trains ran from Europe to Asia, and every locomotive had to whistle precisely by the house for some reason. At one time, a century or two ago, the farmsteads were inhabited by German colonists, but since they refused to let their sons do military service, the Czar expelled them from his empire, and for some great military feat, which was a secret to this day, he invited the ancient Lemko clan to which our proud grandpa belonged to come down from the hills and take over the abandoned farmsteads. When he appeared there, he was supposed to have said that it was only now that he understood why this land had been contended for in wars from days of yore.

This particular Lemko clan stuck to their dialect, customs and cuisine, although it gradually disintegrated in its tribal confinement and even degenerated to incest. Our grandpa was perhaps the first to break with these clanish traditions. But when his son brought his bride, our mother, and showed her to the proud Lemkos for the first time, they pardoned him his sin against the clan since she looked like their most beautiful women. Probably from that time on, their young men scattered throughout the neighboring villages, causing a great breakdown of the old clan,

much to its benefit. Our parents, who had started this loosening up in the first place, went there two or three times a year — on Whitsuntide, the feast of the Transfiguration, and Epiphany (as a rule, we kids were not taken to this most beautiful of church feasts because of the severe frosts, but back home we endured those frosts stoically and without restraint, free to come and go as much as we pleased). Sometimes they took Yavtukh, who had an uncle there, along. His uncle was the very same Lavrin Holiy who had come to Zeleni Mlyni as a young man.

With time, these family journeys grew rarer and eventually ceased altogether after Andrian's death, when our farmyard became empty and quiet as the first days following a fire. Only the wrecked steam engine, which the Valakhs had already seized from the manor in its crippled state, kept reminding us that some big and perhaps not too honest ventures had once been envisaged here. The grass, burned off once by an oil spill, still did not grow around the steam engine, and I saw father standing in front of the steam engine many times building castles in the air while I guessed what mysterious trains of thoughts passed through his mind. Before he came to this place and settled down for good, father worked on an agricultural produce procurement team getting grain for the famished on the Volga and hay for the First Army of Cavalry; he fell in love with mother and withdrew from the Revolution; after the land distribution, he got hold of a plot of land, brought a mechanic to have a look at the wrecked steam engine, went frequently to inspect the ruins of the old manor overgrown with sneezewort and nettles, and berated the cunning Zamoiskis who had wanted to sell those ruins to our grandfather just before the Revolution. Then father bought himself a whim with the first money he had

gotten of the land, which almost made him a *kurkul*. He was saved by Ruban who realized that the horse capstan with radiating arms could not be considered a machine and, consequently, was not a means of enrichment. On Ruban's advice, father had the whim socialized, and now our blind Chestnut was turning it on the collective farmyard all by himself, without a drover; it was enough to harness him in the morning, and as to unharnessing, that was something he could do himself without anyone's aid. Thus for the first time in the entire course of his heroic life, Chestnut's blindness stood him in good stead, because no normal horse would endure the constant fuss of going around in a circle — their heads spun and they tripped and fell from exhaustion while our Chestnut turned the whim as if it were a game and he gave the kids who perched themselves along the crossbeams like a bunch of sparrows a free ride to boot.

When this simple machine first appeared in our farmyard, it stirred the villagers' fancy to a point that it was no laughing matter. The young people forgot about the swing for some time and came to ride on the whim every Sunday. That pleased father very much, because his prestige immediately increased in the eyes of the Babylonians. He would take his most precious possession — the old wooden clarinet — out of its black case for joy, and to his music dances that sometimes lasted late into the night would start right there on the threshing floor near the whim. When mother disapproved of this revelry, father argued that without it, he would have completely forgotten how to play the clarinet, because music lived as long as it gave pleasure to people. I liked father most of all precisely during those moments when he played the clarinet; he seemed entirely reborn; the music lent him wings, he became inspired and gentle, resembling a



great wizzard; but what probably evoked my greatest fascination were his fingers — rough, callous and clumsy in real life, they took on an unprecedented grace on the clarinet keys. When the collective farm was being organized, father, afraid that he would have to socialize his clarinet as well, hid it somewhere in the loft and spread the rumor that he had sold it to some great musician in Hlynsk. I, for one, almost believed him, since I had not heard its magic sounds for a long time and all our surreptitious attempts to find the clarinet were in vain. We rummaged in the loft as well, but instead of the clarinet all we found there were some spare cogwheels for the whim.

Later on, when the article *Dizzy with Success* \* appeared in the press, the villagers joked that the dizziness had started with the whim, or at least it was the horses who had suffered from it first. Father didn't like jokes on such subjects, but when the whim was wrecked one night, he wept over it as if it were some great man who had died. Father only brought home one cogwheel, perhaps the largest, and later on we rolled it down the hill along the fir-lined lane. Heavy as it was, it rolled frenetically until it hit one of the firs, which shuddered from the mighty impact and dropped the remnants of last year's cones for us.

One night Yavtukh came running over to our house, popped on the threshold, and said:

"I'm going to Zeleni Mlyni. What about you? Aren't you going, too?"

The lackluster brass buckles of the harness hung

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\* The title of an article by Joseph Stalin published in *Pravda* on March 2, 1930. It explained the Party's policy in organizing collective farms, stressed that the process must be voluntary, and condemned administrative pressure on the peasants. The article set Party personnel on the path of rectifying the mistakes and extremes that had occurred

uselessly somewhere in the pantry. We recalled the recent past, and again some inexplicably exciting solemnity reigned in our home — we wondered whether the freight and mail trains still passed through Zeleni Mlyni bound from Asia to Europe this time, and whether it was just as merry there as before with the locomotives whistling right by grandpa's house (the whistling was especially impressive in the night) and whether father's folks still married mother's folks, holding raucous weddings with elopements, bridal ransoms, mad fights and reconciliations, in which my father would play no mean part because of the experience he had already gained in Babylon, which those who lived in the Lemko land were just getting an inkling of.

"I'll stay here," father said to Yavtukh. "But you'll take my youngest boy here to grandpa to drink some milk fresh from the cow. He's been coughing lately — probably caught consumption from Andrian, and I don't have a cow. I'll come for him later on..."

"As you like."

Yavtukh's flight was to take place quietly, secretly and unexpectedly; only Fabian was taken in on the secret, as a philosopher above all, and for this he was given Yavtukh's house with all the goods in it that could not be taken along. In this way the coffin-maker and philosopher became perhaps the richest man in Babylon instantaneously. He really looked like a magnate as he inspected Yavtukh's dilapidated estate, feasting his eyes the longest on the pear tree which would burst into white from sorrow any day now. The philosopher, it seemed, was pleased by the inspection, although he said to Yavtukh on parting:

"If you ever come back here, I'll move back to my hut on the Tatar Ramparts. It makes no difference to me where I live."

It couldn't have been otherwise. Great philosophers never covet that which belongs to others and have no sense of envy. Yet they have another flaw which Yavtukh failed to take into account. They cannot conceal what they know from mankind, thereby inflicting no mean damage upon it. That very same evening a swarm of relatives, close and distant alike, converged on Yavtukh's home and begged him not to leave for foreign parts but stay where he was. What would make life so different thirty-five kilometers away? It would be the same as anywhere else. Since he had escaped from exile, he'd be better off sitting right where he was and waiting instead of wandering off to Zeleni Mlyni with his wife and children.

But the handcart standing in the middle of the room was eloquent evidence of Yavtukh's firm resolve to leave. He had built it inside the house from bits and pieces. One of its wheels had even been taken from the Sokolyuks' farmyard, and the main thing now was for the cart to last the thirty-five-kilometer journey.

The last to turn up was Lukian Sokolyuk. He came not only as a neighbor but in the capacity of Village Soviet chairman as well. Enfeebled, spent, one lense of his spectacles cracked, he was suffering from a great emotional drama — he had failed to apprehend Danko in the end, and now his brother could be up to anything. Lukian expressed his reservations about Yavtukh's departure: was it really any different in Zeleni Mlyni? Was it a different country or what? And could the children really hoof it all the way against such gusty winds?

"You'll lose them along the way, and one of these days they'll curse you," Lukian said to Yavtukh.

The crack in the lense of his spectacles kept him from seeing properly and made him blink all the time. He promised that after the sowing was done he would

go to Petrovsky \* himself and plea for a pardon for Yavtukh. He sat in the middle of the bench, still warm from the relatives who had sat there, his hands gripping the edge, while Yavtukh was trying over and over to get used to handling the cart which he had built without having thought of how to get it out of the house. Lukian, it seemed, had guessed his predicament, judging the size of the cart against the width of the door frame, and smiled benignly.

"You going far?" he queried just to make conversation.

"No. Thirty-five kilometers."

"That's a bit far, I'd say," Lukian said seemingly to himself as if he were measuring the distance against the current strength of his feet.

"You think they have a different government over there?"

"No, but trains run by there, and that makes it easier. I can go anywhere I please... if anything happens..."

Prisia was then pouring last year's poppy seeds from a pot into a little bag.

"Everything started with Epiphany," said Lukian getting up from the bench. "I knew nothing good would come of it, but what could I do, locking horns with Babylon?..."

"What are you? No different from me. But Ruban could have stood up for me somehow. I didn't kill him, after all. Let him live in peace, let him build his co-op. But he chased me out of my nest. I'm entrusting

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\* Petrovsky, Hrihoriy (1878—1958) — outstanding leader of the Communist Party of Ukraine and the Soviet Ukrainian Government; from 1919 to 1938, chairman of the All-Ukraine Central Executive Committee, the highest body of Soviet power in the Republic

my house to Fabian, so you'll have a neighbor exactly to your liking. One power, one soul. But I'm different. Yes sir, I'm not like the lot of you!"

"Yavtukh, Yavtukh! What you need is a good drubbing. How could you, having so many kids as you do, run around with that sawn-off shotgun. What did you do that for? Who were you fighting against? Yavtukh Holiy a rifleman — how do you like that?"

"Never mind. You think you've driven out the *kurkuls*? As a matter of fact, you've saved them. One of these days you'll all croak from hunger here. And that's when you'll remember Yavtukh... I owe you some money, so wait a while, and I'll send it over from there. I don't mind borrowing, but I also like to pay back what I owe. That's the kind of person I am..."

Lukian went over to the water barrel, scooped up some water with a dipper, and before drinking it, said:

"Well, well, we'll see..."

He took a long time drinking the water as something kept nagging at him. When he left, Prisia said:

"Poor Lukian. He's completely tuckered out. That's what status does to a man. My, what fine fellows the Sokolyuks used to be!"

Yavtukh recalled something, ran out after Lukian, and shouted into the night:

"Hey, Sokolyuk, wait a minute!"

They talked about something at length beyond the gates, while here, in the middle of the room, stood the homemade cart, its shafts pointing upward, all ready for the journey. Yavtukh's kids fell asleep after waiting in vain for their father. Nowhere else did I sleep as sweetly as there.

We were roused at dawn. The horses did not snort in their sleep like they used to; nor was there a businesslike bustle in the farmyard as had been the case under similar circumstances earlier. The cart was in

the farmyard by then. It had probably been brought out sideways through the door frame, and when all of us came out, Yavtukh suddenly recalled something he hadn't found in the cart at the last moment. It was the clarinet which father had given him so the bandmaster in Zeleni Mlyni could teach me to play from sheet music. Father couldn't read music, but since I had a bad ear for music, he had failed to teach me without the notes. Yavtukh put the clarinet in the cart and said:

"That's for you so that you won't be loafing around there."

Yavtukh hitched himself to the cart and, rolling it out of the gate, proceeded with a firm tread as if he had been preparing for this journey all his life. Rarely had I seen him as resolved as he was then in front of the cart, rolling it along the narrow street which had also been the starting point of his previous thirty-five-kilometer treks.

Yavtukh stopped before the crucifix. The place where it stood offered a view of the whole of Babylon Hill. It was the place army recruits always came to bid farewell to their native village. One of us should have run to the schoolhouse which was just a few paces away to rap on the window and let our kind old teacher Arsena Ludwikovna know that we were leaving the village, so she wouldn't be missing us behind the desks on which we had left our names carved indelibly in case nothing came of us in later life, but Yavtukh decided to go there himself and we waited for him at the crucifix for quite some time.

Small of stature, smelling of perfume, with traces of sleep lingering in her eyes, she came out with Yavtukh, joked with us, and made fun of our cart. The teacher probably did not know that I was leaving with them as well, although she surely must have

heard that I had a mild cough. Arsena Ludwikovna didn't argue nor did she try to dissuade us from leaving, but neither did she bid us farewell, and for a long time we could see her standing by the crucifix like a kind goddess watching over us on our unpredictable trek.

It was still dark in the Village Soviet. Savka Chibis must have been asleep on the bench. In the morning he would find out that we were gone and let out a guffaw, for he was quite adept at laughing out of place. Yet he knew his business for all that. The haulers called him the Iron Broom, because he could tell where the *kurkuls* had hidden their grain by smell. He himself worked on an empty stomach and didn't take a single bit of the *kurkul* spoils.

As we left the village, the dawn was breaking, rosy-hued, quiet, with the black vanes of the windmills and an ocean of dewless steppe spreading around us. There wasn't a single dewdrop on the cobwebs — a sure sign that the winds were up and about. Any minute they would rise and whallop Yavtukh on the chest, and then all of us would have to grapple with them, with the best off being the smallest kid who was tramping closest to the ground behind the cart, while I would be the worst off because I had probably been infected by uncle Andrian and coughed constantly whenever I had to walk against the wind. So far there was no wind; only its faintly rancid smell with a scent of wormwood and a touch of wild thyme; I inhaled deeply and could not understand what had made Yavtukh stop. We could not see the steppe from behind the tall dry weeds, but he had already spotted people near the windmills.

Soon the wind swept toward us from that direction, bringing a thick, seemingly exultant hum, after which the vanes of a windmill that was then being turned

to the wind stirred hesitantly, creaked, and started to flap like the arms of a live giant. Its neighbor did all these things much more quickly, without any creaking or senile rasping, suddenly and impulsively. The noise died down, and only from the wagons came the snorting of the horses that had brought the grain to the mill. We left the cart and, enchanted and excited, went over to the windmills, too. It smelled of grain, life, and happiness there — in short, of the loftiest and most ordinary possessions of man. Fabian, wearing a cap of hare fur, piously clasped his hands and looked at the vanes of the windmills, enraptured and hypnotized by their flight. Yavtukh bid him farewell and burst out crying when he asked him to take good care of the house and everything else.

Throughout the morning, we struggled against the winds on our way across the field. I imagined all the way that any moment the flat-nosed robber Nazar whom everyone in Babylon knew would appear on the road, strip us of everything we had, and kill Yavtukh who once had hunted him along with the other villagers so he wouldn't steal horses any more.

Near Pavlyuk's farmstead, someone did really come out of the thicket and waved his hand for us to stop. Up to then, I had thought that Yavtukh was armed, since I had seen him with a gun on the feast of the Epiphany.

Yavtukh stopped without letting go of the cart, and we stopped, too, clustering around him, ready to meet our deaths along with him.

It was Danko Sokolyuk.

He came up to us, recognized Yavtukh, broke into an innocent, good-natured smile, tucked the sawn-off shotgun in his belt and asked:

"Going far?"

"To Zeleni Mlyni. To the Lemkos..."



"I've been there. They used to have fine thoroughbred stallions. But what they've got now I couldn't say..."

"It's the same now," said Yavtukh.

"Do you think they won't find you there or what?"

"Whatever will be will be..."

"They'll find you no matter where you go..."

Windburned and wearing an unbuttoned sheepskin coat, his face cut by a scar that had not been there before, and a new pair of box-calf boots on his feet, he stepped off the road and moved on behind Yavtukh. In the thicket, his hobbled horse whinnied — when it hopped we could see its head and mane, black as pitch.

"Giddup, horses! Oh horses, my horses!..." Yavtukh said, glad that everything had gone so well.

We got more brisk and eager and almost carried the cart up the Abyssinian hills. When they were tilled and sown by Danko Sokolyuk, the hills begat whirlwinds, but now they had spent their vigor and grown weak, so only a quiet ground wind rustled nervously across the plowed incrustated field. We clambered up the hills for what seemed an endless time, while the rider surmounted them like a wind, bypassed us and, firmly reigning back his horse, waited for us on the hilltop. The horse and the hill itself lent him an appearance of severity and grandeur: Danko Sokolyuk, the former master of these devilish heights.

"You were scrambling up that hill so fast I barely caught up with you," he said. "There's one thing I forgot to ask. How are my folks back there? I mean Lukian and Darinka... Still alive?"

Yavtukh nodded his head to say that everyone was alive thank God; the only thing they didn't know was where he, Danko, had disappeared to.

"So you're here," said Yavtukh. "That's just what I thought — you must be somewhere nearby."

Danko smiled down from his horse at the cart which seemed like an utterly new and interesting creation to him. He accompanied us as far as the ditch.

"I forgot to ask about Parfena," he said.

"Don't you worry about her, she'll get her bearings all right. I see she's still on your mind..."

"I loved her," Danko shot back from his horse, reluctantly it seemed but sincerely as well, because he kept silent for a long time afterward.

At the ditch Danko fell behind, turned into the thicket, and we proceeded without his company.

The first village we passed on our journey was Semivodi. I remembered that village well from the times we had passed it with my father. On Whitsuntide the cottages here were adorned with green boughs and smelled of herbs inside; on the feast of the Transfiguration, the whole place smelled of the first pears. In one of these cottages lived father's friend Artem Buha, a quiet, neat man who wore an embroidered shirt and kept bees. Every time we stopped at his place, his wife Dusia would treat us to honey cakes which no one could bake better than she. Their cottage stood on a rise; the farmyard was swept clean all the time; there was ergot growing all around, and hollyhocks were peeping into the window, not a single one of them broken or picked, because they had no children. Under the thatch, on a nail, there always hung the straw hat with a torn netting, in which Artem Buha went to the beehives to cut honeycomb for us. As we passed, it still hung there, tattered and torn. The masters of the house were not in, though. In the garden sparrows chirped from the growth of last year's weeds; in an elm tree a stork was standing in its nest, probably waiting for his master to come home, because when we stopped, he started to flap his wings and drum away with his red

beak. We didn't wait for the Buhas, but now pinned all our hopes on the village of Nova Hreblya where father and Yavtukh had even closer friends at whose place we had stopped many times and even stayed overnight once. The family was large and industrious; everyone in it was already grown; it would be just the place to stay for the night, and then when we left the Bezdushnys \* (how unjust names are at times!) we would have covered half the distance. Farther on there were Oveche, Raigorod, and the land about the existence of which the world hadn't an inkling.

In the evening there it smelled of wild thyme and a brass band played from sunset till dawn. The band had lots of brass players but no clarinetist, so after my father's visits to Zeleni Mlyni, he would brag so about his musical skills that mother had to put him down to make him hush for a long time.

It was the hour of the day when wisps of smoke were curling up over Babylon, when Fabian finished his worldly affairs and took up a book to fathom the mysteries of the world; the winds died over the fields, the windmills stopped revolving, the smithies quieted down, in the homes *kulish* corn gruel flavored with hemp seed oil was served for supper, the dough was leavened in vats, red beets were steeped in boiling water to make fermented beet juice for borsch, the gates were closed against evil people, and the herders drove the collective farm horses into the field, while the boys and girls got ready to go to the swing. I imagined seeing all this from a distance until we got to the Bezdushnys.

Bezdushny's sons were closemouthed and gloomy, although the head of the family seemed to greet

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\* Bezdushny (Ukr.) — lit. heartless or insensible

Yavtukh in a friendly enough way; he put a pile of wooden spoons on the table for our whole lot and treated us to supper. During the meal he warily touched upon a subject that was unpleasant to Yavtukh.

"Where are you taking the kids?"

"To my uncle in Zeleni Mlyni."

"And what about Babylon? Have you been run out or what?"

"We left of our own free will." Yavtukh shot a glance at Prisia lest she blurt out something.

"Just like that? Surely you must have some reason."

"No, none at all. This is Severin Chornohor's boy here," Yavtukh pointed at me, hedging Bezdushny's question. "See how pale he looks. His uncle died of consumption. You must have known him — Andrian, the well digger."

"Of course I knew him. He dug a well in my yard. Now we need wells more than ever before. The cattle have been driven back to the barns, and the wells we have don't give enough water. It's a pity such a master is no more. The boy really does look like Andrian. It's his eyes I suppose." Bezdushny glanced at me.

"Everyone with the disease has such eyes. He's going to his grandpa's. His parents' cow was socialized, and there's no milk at home, so he's going there to get some."

"We never had a cow to start with," I blurted out unexpectedly.

"Don't speak unless you're spoken to!" said Yavtukh aiming to whack my forehead with his spoon.

"All the rest yours?"

"Yes, all eight," Yavtukh said, smiling. "A wonderful lot, I tell you. Great travelers, like peas in a pod. All I have to do is try to keep up with them."

Bezdushny got to his feet.

"Now don't you fool yourself into thinking you'll get a rousing welcome in Zeleni Mlyni. Nothing of the sort! Go back to Babylon, man, before you get too far away, and live there like everybody else. Don't try to live by hook or crook, 'cause you won't gain anything from it. Zeleni Mlyni's turn to change will come all right, although the folk there are cratty and unsubmitive. I know the Lemkos..."

"No, we're going to Zeleni Mlyni," Yavtukh said also getting up. "Let's go, boys."

Back at home, Lukian Sokolyuk was probably already leading people back from the windmills, while Fabian, covered all over with flour, was walking with the Babylon boys. There was Ruzia, not a bit demented but normal and in love with Klim Sinitsya to the end of time. There was Savka Chibis who had become wiser by a hundred years, and there were flour-laden wagons creaking along. But we had broken away from our flock of swans, and so we had only a dark night to walk through, chimerical herds of sheep crossing our trek in Oveche \*, and the endless screeching of the cart wheels.

Raigorod was a township that was specially dear to father because he had married there. A little smaller than Hlynsk, it was somewhere between Vakhnivka and Makhnivka in size. A tall structure loomed over the quiet township — a two-domed Roman Catholic church which I had also visited once. Father insisted on being a Catholic, which was of the least disadvantage whatsoever for our home, because while other families celebrated holidays only once, we marked the great Christian events twice: Easter, Trinity, Transfiguration, Pentecost, St. Mary the Protectress' Day...

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\* Oveche (Ukr.) — lit. sheep (attr.)

On his holidays, father felt himself to be God's elect; he harnessed the horses, sat all of us in the wagon covered with a long rug that had been removed from the stovebed and thoroughly dusted, and then we drove to the Roman Catholic church for mass. At times the Catholic priest came to our village to visit his flock, and we, the children of a Catholic, would get candies in silver wrappers — something the Eastern Orthodox could not even dream of. For all that, the Catholic priest seemed chilly and overly sly as he spoke in a tongue we children could not understand—even father couldn't make out everything, although he nodded his head, pretending to understand the bald-headed priest wonderfully. Every time we returned from the Roman Catholic church, mother would give father her piece of mind about his religion with her caustic remarks: "I don't like those fake lordlings of yours. The best thing to do would be to strip them and see what shirts your Catholics would come to church in..." Mother's holidays took place exactly two weeks after father's, and during these events father could not but see the advantages of the Orthodox faith in Babylon. To tell the truth, Father Soshka did not bring us such fine sweets as his Catholic counterpart; on the contrary, he got his share of whatever was put on the table; yet the pious kindness on his face immediately eclipsed the lean Catholic priest, which made my father an ever less devout Catholic.

Just then, vespers were in progress at the church. We stopped for Yavtukh to admire the white building which stood out in the night; and when we moved on, we could hear the sound of the organ through the creaking of the wheels for a long time and imagined the evening procession around the church, with candles, church banners, and songs in a foreign tongue.

The last kilometers we walked as if in a dream, trailing behind Yavtukh as if our journey were endless, with the cart creaking ahead and spurring us on God knows where. By then we didn't want any warm milk or freshly baked bread. No brass bands were playing, so father's clarinet in the cart was of no use. There was only the night, the utter silence, and the unknown. A train bound from Europe to Asia rumbled heavily through the night. The locomotive shrieked by my grandfather's house. At the sound of it, we pushed on with all the might we had left: there it was, the black poplar with its burned-out heart, the eternal tree in this little realm with long houses that looked like the cars from a scattered, disorganized train. It seemed to us that the fires in the locomotives had gone out; their chimneys no longer belched forth smoke, and the cars were spaced out in a disorderly fashion in every place imaginable.

Everyone here had his own path; we reached grandpa's, down which our cart rolled faster than ever before. We arrived at our destination, pushed the cart into the farmyard, and Yavtukh rapped on the window. Someone dressed in white appeared behind the window. Dawn was already breaking. Grandpa must have not recognized Yavtukh, because when he rushed to the door and opened it, he froze. Why didn't he say anything? We had come thirty-five kilometers and he didn't open his mouth. We couldn't move an inch from exhaustion, and Yavtukh's uncle lived at the other end of the village. The smaller kids dropped into the ergot.

"Did anyone stop you on the way?" asked Chor-nohor.

"No, no one did," Yavtukh replied. "I've brought your grandson."

"I see, I see," said Chornohor as he stepped toward me.

"Well, we'll be getting on to my uncle's somehow..."

"Yesterday a stable was burned down. It belonged to the collective farm."

"What, you mean they've got a collective farm here too?" Yavtukh was jolted by the news.

"The horses died in the fire... and the oxen... You should have seen what fine oxen they were! My ox was there, too..."

"What's the fastest way to my uncle's?"

"They were taken away from Zeleni Mlyni today — your uncle, his wife and a couple of other arsonists. His oil press was expropriated, so the fool flew off the handle... You Holiys are a hotheaded lot. As a matter of fact, you're not as naked as you may seem \*. Your uncle managed to squeeze quite a bit of oil out of us. So, what are you standing there for? Get your kids and come on in. You can leave the cart there. That sure is some cart! Couldn't Babylon have given you a real wagon?"

"Sure it could have," said Prisia getting the children lying in the ergot to their feet.

"There were wagons, but the horses weren't any good... we wouldn't have made it. They literally hang in their breech straps. I've got a pair of them there. You saw one of them — a roan — the last time I came. It was a left-sider."

"Yes, I remember. And how's old Chestnut? Is he still alive?"

"He's turning the whim," said the older Ivasko.

"Well, I see you're getting a fresh start the hard way. All right, bring anything that's worth something into the house, too."

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\* A play upon words — *holiy* in Ukrainian means "naked"



"There's just the clarinet," Yavtukh said.

"And who'll be playing it?" grandpa inquired.

"Me," I said.

"Well, well..." And he went to the shed to bring some straw for the bedding for all of us.

"That's what you get for running away from Babylon, Yavtukh," Prisia remarked brusquely, holding two of the smallest children in her arms. Then she carried them inside.

In a day or two they came after Yavtukh. Someone in Babylon had informed on him. He was taken to Kopaigorod from where he would be transferred to Makedonsky in Hlynsk. It was Makedonsky who wanted to get his hands on him, as his captors from Kopaigorod didn't seem to have anything against him. For them he was simply citizen Holiy, Y. K.

"That you?"

"It's me," Yavtukh replied. "Yavtukh Korniyovich... and a Holiy besides."

Every night the trains roused Prisia from her sleep.

The grain fields were blooming right at the threshold, yet living away from her Babylon, she loved and cursed it as never before. Zeleni Mlyni was not to her liking, but Yavtukh had said that if everything turned out all right, he would come back to stay, forever perhaps.

## *Chapter 11*

Again it was back to the almost toylike "dinky line," as Ivanna Ivanivna jokingly referred to the Hlynsk railroad, when Teslya saw her off to Kramatorsk which had quite different trains and railroad

stations. There the giants from all parts of the country came rolling right into the plant she worked at and were loaded with whatever they happened to need from the huge noisy shops, one of which was managed by Ivanna Ivanivna. She promised him she would move to Hlynsk with the children and all their belongings not later than spring, although in fact she was not yet sure whether they would let her go. The metallurgical plant was now working exclusively on government commissions. Teslya had been a metalworker at the plant. He had come there from Lebedin in 1918; in Kramatorsk he married Ivanna who was a native of the town. He fought the Hetmanate troops in Kramatorsk, took part in disarming that pathetic host, and showed himself to be a valiant combatant and agitator. At that time he joined the Party, then followed the struggle with the NEP men right there in Kramatorsk. Although it was conducted in peace time, it was a difficult battle nonetheless. When he arrived in Hlynsk, Sosnin had already left the co-op, perhaps the only stronghold of the new power in the whole district. And here he fought side by side with Klim Sinitsya, dreaming about the new world that was to appear around the co-op. Together they had crossed that hard pass in their lives only to come to the tiny Hlynsk railroad station and avail themselves of the "dinky line," which, however, was bustling with greater activity than spring.

Teslya was in a fix. He had persuaded the entire district to organize collective farms, but himself proved to be the son of a private landholder. That's how it happens at times. In Lebedin, his old man Sak placed his gray oxen and his new five-windowed house above every ideal, above every demand of the times, above the destiny of his son, and above everything that had made the family a good name all these years.

“Ivanna and I worked our fingers to the bones for that house. We denied our kids and ourselves everything. And all because he wanted a house with five windows, no less. He forgot he was born in a miserable hut, that money-grubber. I’ll burn that lousy house to the ground; I swear I will. If you think I won’t you don’t know me yet, Klim. Here I get chewed out and cursed on occasion, but I’m a resolute man when I need to be. Just to think of it: me the son of a private landholder. By the time I get over there I wouldn’t be surprised to find myself a son of a... Can you imagine that? It’d be just what the Hlynsk fire-eaters need.”

Sak didn’t heed either his son’s letters or the Lebedin communists who complained to Maxim by post that his father had already butchered one ox and was going to do the same with the other. A pair of oxen was not so much — but what if that attitude were to infect all of Lebedin. The collective farm might well be left without any draught animals. Lebedin had no good horses since the residents had preferred oxen since times of old. A score of oxen had already been slaughtered for no purpose at all. The meat of old oxen was tough, tasted terrible, and got maggoty if salted down in vats. The letter was supposedly private, but Hlynsk still had Khariton Hapochka, so the next day the news was on everyone’s tongue. The District Party Committee called a meeting, an affair which was rather unpleasant for Teslya. Klim Sinitsya who was chairing it, barely managed to check the outbursts of Chuprina and Ruban who flew off the handle every time they heard the word “private landholder.” Teslya admitted that class struggle brooked no concessions, even if your own father was involved. So he decided to set out for home not so much to save his father as the Lebedin oxen. Probably in all of

history, no son had been caught in such a predicament. Hlynsk and Lebedin were far away from one another, yet he had been made responsible for the oxen. "Now just imagine, Klim Ivanovich, what a mess I'm in," he said. "To tell you the truth, those oxen could pull the entire country out of the misery it's in. I haven't seen the likes of them anywhere."

Putting his suitcase on the station platform, he moved some distance away from Klim to make his point.

"They're this big. And their horns are this wide," he said spreading his arms. "Mighty beasts indeed!"

Dull lights were blinking on the platform, so the Lebedin oxen, judging from Teslya's description, seemed absolutely gigantic to Klim Sinitsya.

"And you know, Klim, the meat of young oxen isn't so bad. Have you ever tasted meat of a young ure ox?"

"Now, where could I have done that?"

"I haven't either. But I've heard it's a real delicacy. Absolutely marvelous. Well, that's why my mission is so difficult." A faint smile crossed Teslya's cheeks, leaving its traces only in his dimples.

Teslya had a suitcase and the frayed greatcoat he had brought from Kramatorsk, which he put on top of the suitcase. He wore a pair of new canvas boots he had had made for the hot summer. Strange as it may seem, Hlynsk had sixty cobblers, yet Schwarz the Austrian made the best summer boots. He had quit his trade long ago on learning about the host of cobblers in Hlynsk, and took it up only in exceptional cases for the sake of "great people of Hlynsk," as he put it. Shooting a side glance at Sinitsya's footwear, Teslya advised him to apply for the services of Schwarz who would also make him a pair of boots of green canvas. They're very comfortable, he insisted.

"I don't have my things made by foreigners," said Klim Sinitsya, although his cowhide boots were horribly hot and made his feet sweat like they were in the fires of hell.

"Schwarz has applied for Soviet citizenship."

"When he gets it, I'll ask him. But right now I'm thinking about you, Maxim. I see you're taking along your greatcoat and everything else."

"Who knows how things will go there? As it is, you've got a *kurkul's* son standing in front of you. Why should it have happened to me? As I see it, my old man's gotten so unruly it's no joke. He's got his son's back to hold him up and a daughter-in-law in Kramatorsk. You bet! But the old codger doesn't realize how hard it is for this back to bear up under everything. No, I still think that a son must be held responsible for his father, especially now! You know, Klim, right now I'm prepared for anything. No enemies have ever seemed so horrible to me as my father with those oxen of his, because I'm his flesh and blood — there's no denying it."

The stationmaster came running out onto the platform, recognized both of them, and hurried off to summon the train from Zhurbiv it seemed. The sugar refinery held that the train belonged to it from the days when the enterprise was run by Tereshchenko who had had the "dinky line" built to transport sugar beets. All this explained why the train was always mercilessly delayed by the sugar refinery.

"Time we thought about a new railway. This one isn't big enough to bring in even a threshing machine. And tractors will be growing in size just like everything else, Klim. Mind you, in a year or two, everything that comes flowing in here will be different — bigger and heavier. This land needs big machines."

"But you know what I'm dreaming of, Maxim — the smallest machine that can dig beets all by itself, a machine as small and clever as human hands."

"They'll build one all right. But this is the only thing no one will replace" — he slapped his chest with the palm of his hand — "the human soul. By the way, what's between you and Malva? Why is she back to Babylon again?"

"When I was taking her from the hospital, the horses turned to Babylon all by themselves."

"How could they, when there was a driver sitting up front? I saw you leaving Hlynsk from my window. You two looked lovely from afar."

"That's just it — from afar. It was Yukhim who was driving the wagon. She asked him to turn to Babylon. I didn't argue."

"Do you visit her?"

"Yes, of course."

"Fine. There are things which must simply be outwaited. I think love is measured out for us on the scales of some great niggard. You have to be patient enough to wait for that last measure which is for life."

"I'm afraid that's the same as outwaiting eternity."

"But what if it happens all of a sudden... like with Ruban? For him it was like a bolt from the blue."

Hlynsk faded into the twilight. The Southern Bug had not yet spent itself after the flood and was stealthily flowing into the steppe from the mountains. From far away came the drone of tractors which Teslya himself had driven down the narrow platforms of the dinky train.

"You know what I feared most of all at the beginning?"

"What everyone feared I suppose — a bullet from around the corner."

“When the old is being destroyed, some part of the new is also wrecked with it at the outset. All right, suppose they’d killed Teslya. Big deal! There would have been you or Ruban to replace him. What I was most afraid of, Klim, was — well, how should I put it — that the counterrevolutionaries of the world would take advantage of our internal controversies. If all of that Entente had joined forces, can you imagine what a chance it would have had to stab us in the back?”

“Incidentally, I was thinking about the same thing. On that point I frequently talked in my mind with Comrade Marx. That worried me above everything else, more than Babylon itself.”

“There’s nothing for us to be afraid of now. We’re in the saddle as it is.”

“That’s exactly what I like about you, Teslya, that you don’t live with the concerns of Hlynsk alone. You picked that up in Kramatorsk, yes you did, my friend. I’d like you for that alone if for nothing else. No other man would have given a damn about those oxen. Lebedin’s got its own authorities, he’d have argued, so let them decide. In this case, not a few would have renounced their fathers. Not you, though. I wouldn’t do it either. You have my word as a comrade on that. But my old man died in the clay pit. He didn’t live to have a house with five windows. As for Hapochka, he’s a fink all the same.”

“Sure he’s a fink, but Hapochka’s experience deserves our respect. No post office operates better than ours. Chase Hapochka out and everything will be screwed up — you’ll get my mail, and I’ll get yours. But with him in there, nothing gets lost... We’ll train our own people first and then replace the Hapochkas.”

The stationmaster appeared again, animated and happy as if he himself were bringing in the dinky.

"It'll be here any minute," he said.

The train drew up. A couple of passengers got off, among them a militiaman with Yavtukh. The militiaman was from Kopaigorod. He was an inept greenhorn, so Yavtukh immediately took to showing him the way to the town. They talked amicably, probably having made friends during the journey. The only outward attribute which betrayed this man as Yavtukh was the little bag he was carrying lengthwise on his back and holding on to with one hand, while the other was pointing what and where everything was in Hlynsk.

A rail boomed three times. The train jerked into motion and rushed along. There was no need for it to make a running start. Klim Sinitsya took off his cap. Teslya stood in the doorway of his coach and took off his white cap as well. With the train picking up speed, he shot to Sinitsya:

"It's unreasonable for Hapochka to be..."

"What, what did you say?"

"To dismiss him is unreasonable as yet!... Hapochka I mean!..."

Klim Sinitsya smiled deep in his heart; that was Teslya for you. He brushed off an unexpected tear with his cap. The stationmaster was also standing there on the platform with his bell and was in no hurry to rush to his cubbyhole to inform his neighbor along the line that the dinky had left Hlynsk on time. Teslya had forbidden the train to be delayed by even a minute and impressed on everyone to take this matter quite seriously as real trains would soon be running through Hlynsk. For he who disregards little things will be apt to disregard the big things as well...



Khariton Hapochka had good reason to be in a jubilant mood after intercepting a letter from Lebedin, addressed to Klim Sinitsya in care of the Hlynsk District Party Committee. While rereading it, the postmaster had twice or even three times combed the bushy mustaches that had once gone so well with his cockaded cap (he had kept it hidden in a safe ever since the czarist post office ceased to function in Hlynsk). The spirit of restoration lingered perhaps the longest in such petty and surreptitious clerks as he. Khariton Hapochka did not consider himself at odds with the new regime, yet he was disposed to hold on to the old one lest he find himself buried under its ruins. The huge rolls of posters that arrived continually in Hlynsk, consigning the old regime to perdition, frightened him far more than the irregularities in the supply of salt, kerosene and matches. Yet every word of despair or lack of confidence he happened to come across in private letters vivified the malicious recesses of his heart. He combed his mustaches, looking into the magnifying glass he never parted with so as not to miss anything essential in the private mail; at the same time the magnifying glass acted as a mirror which distorted Hapochka beyond recognition, although he knew pretty well that it was he and no one else.

By the time Teslya got to Lebedin, his father wasn't there anymore — the old man had been evicted beyond the frontiers of the Republic as an irreconcilable enemy of collectivization. (At this point Hapochka burst into such a fit of laughter he had to cover his mouth with his hand.) So he, that is Teslya, had nothing left to do but put in an application to the collective farm to have his father's house socialized along with the oxen and turkeys which the old man had secreted among his relatives. As a matter of fact,

Teslya's arrival in Lebedin proved not only necessary but to a certain extent timely as well. He and the Lebedin communists managed to save one hundred and seventy oxen from slaughter, and then he himself was put in charge of that formidable force of draught animals that was to advance Lebedin into the future. His father's example had caused over one hundred oxen, and the best of them at that, to be butchered and stowed away in vats. Since there wasn't enough salt, the meat started getting maggots when warm weather set in (at this point Hapochka called to mind his own stores of salt which would be enough for several vats). Only one hundred ox hides could be retrieved and delivered to the state, which meant at least a thousand leather soles — not so bad after all. Teslya went to Kharkiv to meet with Kossior \*. Kossior could not see him for a number of days, so Teslya readdressed himself to Chubar, the Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars, and told him what was on his mind. Comrade Chubar treated Teslya's problems with great attention, and about a week later when the roads had dried up, he himself came to Lebedin, called a meeting and advised Lebedin's residents to elect Maxim Teslya chairman of the local collective farm in place of the former Primakov\*\* trooper from Sumy, who was an ardent man but little experienced in agricultural matters. So that was the turn Teslya's life took.

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\* Kossior, Stanislav (1889—1939) — Secretary General of the Communist (Bolshevik) Party of Ukraine Central Committee between 1928 and 1938

\*\* Primakov, Vitaliy (1897—1937) — Soviet military leader. In January 1918 organized a regiment of Red Cossacks; eventually it grew into a corps and was actively engaged during the Civil War in Ukraine

The new collective farm chairman was now in the process of sowing. There were many oxen, but practically no plows. Plows had always been scarce in Lebedin, so the oxen had to be hitched up two or three pairs to a plow and prodded on as fast as they could go. In conclusion the letter read: *We're plowing deep, breaking the boundary strips between the private plots forever, probably like the Romans plowed up Carthage. We won't leave a trace of a single oppressor behind. It's a pity father isn't here to see this huge communal field, because he himself had dreamed about it when he was still a poor peasant. I pity him, because after all, you only have one father. So how are your spring affairs getting along?*

...Here in Hlynsk, Klim Sinitsya replied, *I gave the co-op into Malva's hands. She started working with a dash, but I'm afraid the days of the co-op are numbered and a collective farm should be set up there. The co-op is now considered a utopia for dreamers, but I can't agree with that, because for me personally, the co-op was a forerunner of the future. Our future. Maybe I don't understand everything, but life will show us who's right. In the meantime, I'm running about the village day and night; there isn't enough seed grain, there aren't enough harnesses for the draught animals (the doings of our enemies!), I've put the tractors we received when you were still here in one team and placed Darinka Sokolyuk in charge (she's the one we sent to study at the courses, proved to be hot for the job). A couple of days ago I snuffed a "women's riot" in Pritske (the counterrevolution doesn't nap!). Khariton Hapochka will have to be tried for the disappearance of a large batch of posters that were sent to Hlynsk but never received. The posters read "Vigilance and Vigilance Again! The Enemy is*

*Acting on the Sly!" and had a picture on them. Imagine what a loss that was at this specific historical moment. We accepted two people into the Party: Lukian Sokolyuk was one of them. You probably remember him. He was Ruban's friend. At long last he apprehended his brother Danko — the one who was among the rioters in Babylon — and took him to Makedonsky. The other new Party member is from Zhurbiv — a worker at the sugar refinery who risked his life to hang the red banners on the plant's smoke-stack every holiday. You must have seen the smoke-stack — it's formidably high.*

*I'm sending you the letter from Ivanna, which arrived at the District Committee after you left. I don't know what's in it, but Hapochka surely does, because the letter's been held over steam... Varya sends you her greetings. She came here to the District Committee, inquiring about you once. I told her you'd gone to Lebedin, to which she said: "That Lebedin\* must have white houses for sure." I said I didn't know, because I hadn't been there. So without intending to, we invented a White Lebedin for your whereabouts. I still keep thinking that you're not in the real one but in some White Lebedin. Varya is a wonderful woman and I would have gladly moved over to her place had my friend from White Lebedin not been lodging there before me. And wasn't it me who told him off on that score in the first place. Yessir!... I return from the collective farm late at night, make my bed on the ragged sofa, go to sleep without supper, and at daybreak I'm already on my feet and hitting the road. Probably there are no people as footloose as we communists, and that'll probably be the case for a long time, because no one can complicate their*

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\* Lebedin (Ukr.) — lit male swan

*lives as much as we do. Your wheel keeps on turning under the water mill. I had the tavern closed for the duration of field work so the hands of the sowers wouldn't tremble from too much drink. Now I myself don't have a place to sup. And there's nowhere I can bathe. The water in the river is icily cold. Is it really true that you bathed even in winter and had your own ice-hole there?*

There were also some words about Malva, written tersely as if she were a stranger.

Malva lived in his room, rode his horse, and was in charge of the co-op. When her milk started to burn while she was in the field, she would draw it off without getting down from the horse. Her old mother watched her baby at home in Babylon. When the weather got warmer, she started bringing the baby to the swing in a trough and cradled it over the abyss. The infant had completely forgotten what a proper cradle was. It looked like the old Kozhushna was bent on bringing up a new poet for the co-op. No wonder they say that old people are no different from children. As soon as the Babylon cocks started crowing, the baby boy would open his eyes wide and listen intently to their songs. Old Kozhushna rejoiced that her Malva was not barren, as everyone had gossiped. Even if it happened late, she had still borne a child. So old Kozhushna was continually showing it off to fecund Babylon.

When Sinitsya spent the nights at the District Committee, he saw Varya passing on her way to work. She left very early when Hlynsk was barely waking up. She wore white shoes and a white dress of the thinnest homespun linen bleached to a milky-white. Hlynsk must have had some remarkable tailors,

because the dress was made with taste, fitting to her waist, lending her figure that finely restrained grace that bordered on simplicity and modesty. For some time now, Hlynsk had been fed up with the gaudiness of the NEP era in clothing. Watching her, Klim Ivanovich kept far away from the open window, but for all these precautions Varya seemed to feel his eyes on her and not a single time did she pass the window without looking in its direction. Deep inside, it made her smile, because at one time she had had the habit of sending a barely perceptible greeting through that window. Klim Ivanovich did not know for sure about it; he only guessed that it might have been so, and every time he was surprised to realize that all he lacked now was just such a greeting from this woman. Who had decided that he could not fall in love with Varya Shatrova because of one restriction or another? He himself must have invented them, for nowhere were they spelled out on paper.

So one morning, in defiance of all his views on the matter, he permitted himself what he considered to be a scandalous indecency: sticking out of the window was a windburned, eager Klim Sinitsya who was obviously not all that indifferent toward this woman. But there was absolutely no reciprocation on her part. Varya passed by as if there were no one around, as if the lilac bushes in the garden of the District Committee had not burst into white bloom the night before just for her, and Klim Sinitsya barely checked himself from uttering his "hello!" to her retreating back. A repetition of something similar might have cooled him forever, so he resolutely refused to hang around the window, and on the very next morning he came out to the wicket to meet Varya, stopped her, greeted her, and offered to see her to the hospital, although it was almost at the other end of Hlynsk.

"The white lilac is blooming in the garden," he remarked.

"I've noticed... it started to bloom yesterday. It's a week earlier this year."

"I've been watching you pass here for a long time now..."

"Is that so important to you?"

"Well, how should I put it... At first I didn't think much about it. Anything might go to a man's heart when the window is open and cranes honk over Hlynsk the whole night through. But I simply had to see you. No, that's not what I meant to say; that's not it at all... You see, the moment you pass by the District Committee stays with me for the whole day. Please don't be cross with me..."

"And aren't you afraid of telling all that to Varya Shatrova? The former wife of a ...."

"Varya, don't. I know all about it. It's really hard to forget."

"It's been twelve years now." Varya stopped. In the V-neck of her dress a gold locket showed against her freckles, and in her heart was a heavy burden and pain.

"I don't know how it all happened with Klim Sinitsya," Sinitsya said. "But believe me he loves you. He's in love with you and that's that..."

"Who loves whom?" Varya asked, laughing.

"Klim Sinitsya... that's me, the one who could never love before... not anyone... Well, Varya, that's what happens with people... with men... with Klim Sinitsya..."

They went on. It was early in the morning and she didn't know what to say to him. In the street the herd was being driven along; the cows lowed, and the sheep bleated. Schwarz was sweeping his brick walks with a long-handled broom made of birch twigs,

following it with a broad stride of his peg leg. The Martian was probably still asleep. She smiled at the thought of having to wake him, and involuntarily recalled Teslya. The query of "How's White Lebedin?" almost slipped from her lips, but she checked it in time and greeted the Austrian loudly, a bit too loudly for the occasion.

"Good morning, Schwarz!"

"*Guten Morgen... Ja, ja!* Fine day!" he said pointing at the sky which did not have a single cloudlet in it.

"Tomorrow I'm leaving for Velikiy Ustyug," Varya said to Sinitsya. "I'm taking my son there for holidays. He's got a grandmother there, Shatrova, my mother-in-law. She's already quite old..."

"Velikiy Ustyug... Velikiy Ustyug... That's somewhere in the north, isn't it?"

"Yes, but the summer's absolutely lovely there. At least it was..."

"All right, I'll be waiting for you," he said and pressed her hand.

The lilac in the District Committee garden had shed its blossoms, but still she did not return from Velikiy Ustyug. Weevils had attacked the sugar beets, destroying entire plantations. Klim Sinitsya was up to his ears in work, fighting the pest and planting the crops for a second time in some places. A drought had set in and he was impatiently waiting for the seeds to sprout.

In the meantime, Teslya kept writing from White Lebedin.

*We finished sowing at long last. What a difficult and wonderful time it was. I myself sowed, too. We have sugar beet seeders that were acquired in ample number by the former owner of the sugar refinery, Kharitonenko. I take care of them above all else,*



because imagine what it would be like without them — if they were wrecked or something of the sort, we'd be without any sugar beets, without any sugar, and without any sweets for the children. I guess that would be the worst sabotage anyone could do to us. So tell your collective farm chairmen to have their seeders cleaned after the sowing season, greased, and put in a place where they won't be burned or damaged. I have three and I care for them as if they were made of gold. As for grain seeders we've got next to nothing. Chubar promised us some, true, but so far we've been sowing with a *kolobets*. It's a sort of a pail made of light wood or bark. You fill it with seed, hang it under your right arm, and off you go sowing. That's probably how the Drevlyane and Sivertsi tribes sowed their crops, so the *kolobets* must have survived in Lebedin from those times. You people in Hlynsk sow from sacks and that's a different thing. When the sack starts to get empty, it's hard to take out the seeds, the pace slows down, the whole rhythm of the job is thrown off, you get an unevenly sown crop, and if the sower's worthless in addition to all that, you get a real mess. But a *kolobets* is a grand thing perfected by generations of sowers. It's light, handy, and in case of rain you cover it with a cap and the seed grain's dry. If you don't have a cap — sit down on the *kolobets*, then get on your feet and back to work. Imagine twenty or thirty men walking one behind the other in step, with one and the same sweep of the hand, one breath, and you among them in this dance of sowers, while way up front is the conductor, Grandpa Khozar, the *kolobets*-maker. A sweep of the hand and you've got a sheaf of wheat, but you must scatter the seeds freely, with a broad sweep, to the full beat of the music as if you were sowing to its sounds. And although there's no music, you seem to

hear it — at least that's what Grandpa Khozar says he does. He believes that anyone who's hard of hearing can't sow a field. That's how we're making our start, brother, with methods from the times of Herodotus.

Then I go running to the field to watch the seeds sprout and look at my handiwork. The kolobets I was using was too big for me. It belonged to a giant of a man who sowed ten dessiatines all by himself with it. My shoulder burns to this day, but you should see the crop. It's a beauty.

I'm beginning to fallow the land and have already hitched up seventy oxen to the plows, which is also a beautiful sight. Have you ever walked barefoot in a furrow? For a couple of days now I've been with the plowers, walking barefoot behind a plow, gaining a new lease on life, getting younger and healthier. I advise you to go to Babylon or anywhere else, take off your boots, and walk in the furrows a day or two behind a plow hitched up to a brace of oxen. It'll revive your heart like nothing else. The next day you'll simply want to fly... all the way, say, to Varya Shatrova. How is she doing there? Do you ever see her? Does she remember old M. S. (Maxim Sakovich, that is)?

A couple of days ago, two tractors and a plow arrived from the Kirov Tractor Works. I put them to work plowing. One's working days and the other nights. I'm driving the night shift myself and give the local kids a lift — they are all would-be tractor drivers. The other tractor is operated by a woman, Kharitya, from the neighboring village. She's got a jealous husband who guards her from our boys. Neither of them had a house of their own, so I gave them a half of my father's house, occupying the other half myself — now

*it's something like one team under our roof. Her husband works with me as a coupler and will soon be driving my tractor. Ivanna is insisting that I drop everything and return to Kramatorsk. Strange woman. I could leave Hlynsk, but never Lebedin. I can be as obstinate as my father. But Ivanna still thinks of me as her little Teslya. This spring I've matured as never before. The stature of a man changes with the circumstances. My greetings to Khariton Hapochka, even if he does read this letter. I don't think you should fire him because of the posters — he probably wasn't the one who made off with them... What would he want them for?*

For a month or two now, we've been living in this semi-dark, mildly strange place with the beautiful name of Zeleni Mlyni \*, although, in fact, it has only one steam mill that is black with soot. Gradually we're getting used to the weirdly charming local dialect the finer points of which were beyond the grasp of our grandmother Solomia during her lifetime, and our father quickly dropped it in Babylon; we're also getting used to the trains that rouse us in the middle of the night not so much with their whistling as with the demoniacal churning of their wheels — the trains stretch out like a taut string going uphill. They rattle, the locomotive puffs and pants, and every time it happens, I get the urge to rise from the straw bedding on the floor where all of us sleep pellmell and run outside to give the train a helping hand. Listening to them in the night, I get the feeling that they are moving enormous Asia to Europe and seditious Europe to the ravaged East. In the daytime, we run outdoors to see their wheels turning as they carry all

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\* Zeleni Mlyni (Ukr.) -- lit. Green Mills

sorts of goods, probably to our parts as well; up the grades the cars stretch out like lines of people, sad and thoughtful; the trains carry horses to replace those that are rotting away in boneyards and will be considered fallen in action in the great battles of history; they carry cows chained to improvised mangers, cows of every color, yet sacred and untouchable like those in Klim Sinitsya's co-op; they carry sheep in thickets of black and white, jammed close in a fashion only sheep can bear (one of them had borne its young on the train and was standing over its lambkin in utter despair); they also carry stones (whatever for?), cedar trees that have not been stripped of their bark, and green uncovered howitzers; an entire trainload of brand-new threshers; and soldiers with gasmasks — again something alarming must be brewing in the world. The trains are packed with ticketless peasants huddling in the vestibules, clinging to the steps, and even crouching on the roofs as they return home to bring in the harvest.

Prisia has been weeping every night now, furtively so as not to offend the Chornohors who have given us refuge as best as they could. They are kind, sincere people who'd do anything for us, yet we can't get used to their land, even to the best of everything it has to offer, things we would never have anywhere else. On the other hand, everything associated with Babylon has become dearer to us; without it, we would fade, go to ruin, and pine away here.

Grandpa sensed our irremediable sorrow and yearning for home a long time ago, and as soon as the grain crops turned yellow and the smell of the first baked bread of the new harvest wafted in this hospitable land, he rolled our legendary cart, worn-out and battered from our journey, out of the barn and repaired almost every single part of it, for by now he knew

even the least of its flaws. We could have borrowed a wagon and horses for a couple of days, but grandpa was a proud, farsighted man who said that we could not return as bigshots to the place we had left as beggars. To keep the cart from squeaking as it had on our way over here, he fixed a little wooden grease pail to it and even got some axle grease which the Lemkos made themselves.

We had to leave while it was still dark to be beyond the village at sunrise — there would be fewer witnesses to hurt Prisia's pride that way. Everyone was trying to persuade her to stay since there were plenty of empty houses. Even Luka Modestovich the teacher came to talk with her. The teacher was also the bandmaster, so in his band he wanted not just an average clarinetist but the pick of the crop, as he put it. And it was Ivasko, Yavtukh's eldest son, who proved to be the pick. As for me, the teacher found I did not have an ear for music. "It's all the deaf and dumb Valakhs who are to blame," I cursed them, listening Ivasko play the clarinet. Nonetheless, Prisia refused to stay, even for Ivasko's sake. It was probably Yavtukh's ear that his son had inherited, as well as Yavtukh's love for the sacred and gentle sounds of music. Of all the Babylonians, he alone came to father to listen to the clarinet. As it seemed, he not only took comfort in these sounds but had a need for them. And now Ivasko could have delighted his father's ear had Yavtukh not gone astray from his family.

Throughout the night the trains carried their parting whistles to us, and in the morning grandpa Chornohor was brought home dead in a wagon from the steppe camp. He had joined in harvesting the first crop of rye grown by the collective farm. Eager man that he was, he tried not to lag behind the young men, and sometime around evening dropped dead in the field.

They also brought his worn scythe which had had brand-new rakes fixed to it especially for this harvest.

Our cart had to be rolled back into the barn. We buried grandpa near the cemetery chapel with its narrow windows that looked like embrasures. This was where Zeleni Mlyni buried its celebrities. As it turned out, when the Lemkos still lived in the Carpathian Mountains, every village had a small pantheon of its own. In Babylon, however, everyone was buried indiscriminately, according to religious belief and regardless of anything else. Ivasko played the clarinet in the band, amazing the Lemkos with the bright sounds he drew from this most melancholy of instruments, and Luka Modestovich, in the capacity of both teacher and bandmaster, made a fine speech over the grave of Chornohor. There are no more devoted people in the world than teachers and bandmasters.

No one prevailed on us to stay now. When he learned what time we were planning to leave, the teacher came to bid us farewell, rolled the cart far beyond the village, and then, lean, wise and tall like a crucifix by a crossroad, he remained standing by the twilit road that stretched before us straight as the ruler he had once used to slap the palms of father's hands for his pigheadedness and disobedience. We carried father's clarinet in the cart — the teacher had insisted that we take it with us for Ivasko, so now the clarinet would sing for us along the whole thirty-five kilometers of our trek.

The number of children behind the cart seemed to have increased. It looked like we had grown up instantly as we frolicked along barefoot together, all in long pants, brisk, alert, and chummy like a bunch of little Gypsies. Prisia — beautiful, proud, with

sorrow in her eyes — had hoped to the last day that Yavtukh would come back to his kids. Where was he, what had happened to him, was he still alive or had he died in some foreign land? He had probably been exiled after all...

The cart rolled easily without any help from us and we barely managed to keep up, sauntering behind it with our pantlegs flapping. Prisia did not take the axle grease; the little grease pail grandpa had made especially for our cart now held a kitten, since the smaller children had wanted to take it along by all means. The kitten napped all the way, curled up in the bottom of the pail; the foolish little thing did not realize it was being taken to Babylon.

About halfway the cart started to squeak and its progress became slower and slower. Our only consolation was that the road back home was now shorter by half. No sooner had we passed Raigorod than we reached Oveche, and no sooner did we leave Oveche than we came upon Borivka, followed by Nova Hreblya, after which came the co-op, and then the Abyssinian hills — the lands of Babylon.

The co-op had been made into a collective farm at which the harvest was in full swing, with the grain cutters clattering as their wings dipped into the wheat like oars. The white swans dreamed on the lake. Soon Babylon would be living without them. They would fly over Babylon, stir up the hearts of people there, and then wander through the sky to distant lands, heading south and north, in all probability to the far-off White Sea.

In every village we were prevailed upon to stay and offered houses to live in and everything that went with them. Auntie Prisia caught the fancy of all the collective farm chairmen and all the team leaders. It's not that they made any advances to her — oh no,

especially when they saw that brood of kids behind the cart; it was simply that they had heard that there were no prettier women in this big wide world than those of Babylon, and now they could see with their own eyes. And how many would-be wagon drivers gathered around the cart! All the farms were short on drivers.

Prisia wept furtively as we rolled our cart onto the Abyssinian hills and saw Babylon spread below us in the midday haze — our grand, dear village with its cemetery, windmills, and white palaces, although, in fact, these were ordinary huts densely clustering around the foothills of Babylon. There was nothing grander or more beautiful than our Babylon as we returned to it from another land where the trains rolled from Europe to Asia right by grandpa's house, where we had left father's kind old teacher standing by the twilit road. I clearly saw him in my mind's eye — lean, wise, and tall, with a long white shirt girded by a silk belt with two tassels. No one in Babylon had such a magnificent plaited belt, or at least we hadn't come across any before. Babylon had no trains, no churns which could separate cream from milk in a jiffy; there were no sheaf binders that were light as birds and mowed and bound sheaves with Manila cord all by themselves; there was no club where music played every Saturday and the Lemkos drank draught beer from Tyvriv, which covered their mustaches with froth. Babylon might not have a lot of things, but for all that, Babylon as such existed, incomparable to any Zeleni Mlyni or Oveche, and even Hlynsk itself was worthless without Babylon, because there was no other Babylon in this world, save perhaps for the one that had once come to ruin in ancient Mesopotamia, as we learned from Levko Khorobry



long before we went to school. At times people must experience myths to grasp the lofty sense of life.

Babylon was known for its loaves of bread the size of sieves, of a type which was baked only here; it was known for the large fires that flared up almost every harvest season and forced Babylon to build anew and grow younger; Babylon was the Epiphany which its residents celebrated in a manner unequalled throughout the entire Christian world; it was the merry, more amusing than bloody hostilities with the neighboring "tribes" — the Flapped Caps, the Dead Flies, the Chaplains and a lot of other tribes and peoples the best representatives of which, predominantly of the fair sex, would then adapt themselves remarkably well in Babylon and bear children for future world wars, cruel and sanguinary this time; it was the two wise Fabians, one of whom, Levko Khorobry, is probably still living there to this day; it was the black whirlwinds that came flying up from the hot south and broke into rivulets upon crashing against the Babylon hills; it was us, auntie Prisia, our cart with the kitten in the pail, and my father's clarinet.

On the way Prisia kept impressing on the children that no one should find out that Yavtukh had been arrested in Zeleni Mlyni. We had to tell everyone that he was killed by a train. For the smaller children Prisia added that their father had been a great hero who couldn't have died simply like that. Whether anyone believed it or not, lest his enemies make fun of Yavtukh's ill fortune, they must be told a lie. "So why are we going back to his enemies then?" the children wondered. "Because they're our own people, not some strangers." After weeping her fill and resting a while, Prisia again hitched herself up to the

cart and we stamped on behind her, all of us as lively, bold, alert, and singlehearted as before and wise in our own way as we saw Babylon coming in on us through the midday haze.

The fields were already mowed here and there, heaps of thirty sheaves each were lined up in straight rows, capped and prim like czarist troops on a drill ground, the heads of the reapers and the backs of the mowers showed through the rye, while the steam engine on the threshing floor kept calling them to no avail; then the threshing machine roared into action again, popping out from behind a hill like some harbinger of what was to come, of something unusual and unknown.

Presently the steam engine drew in a billow of steam and exhaled it in a merry whistle like it had done at the co-op — this was the signal for lunch break. Everyone in the field — mowers, reapers and their kids — started moving toward us. Lukian Sokolyuk rode up on a horse that was still unfit for a saddle, the thresher stopped, the steam engine coughed up its last portion of steam, and the great Babylon lunch commenced in the shade of a haystack. The porridge was cooked right there in cauldrons sunk into the ground, while the bread was brought in a wagon by Malva Kozhushna. After she had returned to Babylon from Hlynsk, she was put in charge of the windmills and the grist. When Prisia came up, Malva greeted her — after all, they were relatives; then her eyes scanned the crowd for Yavtukh but she did not see him. As yet Malva did not know that Yavtukh had been “killed by a train.” In the meantime, more and more people were arriving for lunch. The Valakhs came in a group behind my father, the Skoromnys marched up in step like a single person, then came

the Bezkorovainys, and in the end Ruban came riding over.

“Wish you a good harvest!” said Prisia bowing to all sides.

Levko Khorobry came up to greet her. He wore a straw hat — Yavtukh’s, of course — and held in his hands a scythe with curved sturdy rakes attached to it. She had never thought that the scythe and the harvest hat would fit him so well. Timid and downcast, she stood before Levko Khorobry who smiled at her from behind the gold-rimmed spectacles. He told her that their house was standing in its place as before, with all their things in it, and that he couldn’t live there, because for some time now he had been haunted by Yavtukh. So he went on living on the Tatar Ramparts all alone.

We were forgotten in the bustle as if we hadn’t just walked thirty-five kilometers. So we pushed and pulled the cart up the high Babylon Hill surrounded by the phantom castles of summer, through which a road covered with dust clouds ran to infinity. Any day now these blessed parts would be visited by the black whirlwinds which came flying here from Tauria.

Stalking across the dike was Fabian the billy goat. The horned fiend must have risen from the dead. He stopped us, rummaged in the cart with his muzzle, shook his beard from side to side, and hurried away to bathe in the haze of midday. Either he didn’t recognize us or he wasn’t the real Fabian but one of his sons. And if so, was he sufficiently wise to bear the name of his immortal predecessor?

When we rolled the cart into our dear farmyard, the smallest kids dropped into the ergot, rolling, rejoicing and carrying on in the grass, while Ivasko took the clarinet from the cart and played what his teacher

had taught him in Zeleni Mlyni. Harken, ye living and resurrected! 'Tis music about you, and for you, my Babylon!

That very same day Yavtukh drifted in to Zeleni Mlyni. He got off at the railroad station of Pilipy (incensed at the name of it, and regarding the Lemkos as fools besides, because they couldn't insist on having a station right in their village), and by evening he was at his destination. As if resurrected, he was lively and talkative, quizzed the little herders on his way, bowed low to the young reapers, hoping to see his Prisia among them, and doffed his cap to the mowers, hollering across the field: "God be your help!" But at his final goal he was disheartened: how could they have left without him? It was not so much the fact of their having left as the dissipation of the great happiness that had filled him to the brim up to this moment. Besides, Chornohor's widow compounded his low spirits by shedding a tear for her deceased husband. Yavtukh had supper, thanked her, and said there was a sort of clarification on the status of middling-wealthy peasants, and since he had been one all the time, he was a man of the day now, and one who must be made much of.

In spite of the late hour, he left to cover the entire stretch of the thirty-five-kilometer trek.

Oh my land! You give us life so that we confide our proud hearts in you. We cannot escape you any more than we can run away from fate, and wherever the tempests of time might displace us, the moment they calm down and your horizons come faintly into view, we again yearn for those places where we first saw you, seemingly turned upside down, from the height of our cradles, then through the little windows, we

yearn for those farmyards overgrown with ergot where we first ran across you barefoot, experiencing your warmth and feeling your unlimited power in our veins. It is only you that can return the flocks of swans from distant worlds — he who has not heard their alarming honking as they seek you in the black mists, he who has not seen their fearless leaders crash against unknown cliffs in the night so that the others might remain alive and reach you, he will never understand to the end that people are under the sway of the same laws that govern our promised land. For some these laws become invincible only after they have gone thirty-five million kilometers from their native land, while for others who revolve around smaller orbits even thirty-five kilometers is sufficient.

## 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 Great Patriotic War of 1941—1945 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), *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 *Zeleni Mlyni* won him the Taras Shevchenko State Prize of the Ukrainian SSR for Literature.

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