Lost Shadows

THE Road of Death is an obscure trail leading across the Albanian Mountains from Galicia to the Adriatic Sea. And until even God Himself has forgotten the horrors of war, that narrow path will have no other name.

In 1915, when the Serbs were no longer able to withstand the withering onslaught of the Austro-German offensive, sixty thousand prisoners of war were marched in haste toward Italian prison camps.

In the mountains and wildernesses, forty-five thousand died within three weeks, from hunger, cold or exhaustion.

Along the plateaus, overblown by snow and fettered by frost, the trail became dimmer and dimmer . . .

Osyp Turiansky was one of the few prisoners who miraculously survived the miseries of that journey.

In *Lost Shadows* he recounts the fate of seven men who, after escaping from their guard, seek freedom in the endless wastes of snow. Without food or shelter, the desperate plight of these seven unfortunates resolves itself into a vicious struggle between the will to survive and the inexorable forces of death.

All the elements of pain, despair, destruction, madness and death, flame in rapid succession across the pages of this great adventure . . . vividly portraying that gruesome interlude lying between the chaos of reality and the peace of oblivion.

Lost Shadows is one of the most powerful novels to come out of the great war . . . to read it is to enjoy the most revealing experience of a lifetime.

Lost Shadows

Lost Shadows

By OSYP TURIANSKY

Translated from the Ukrainian
by
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Publishers New York

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Translator's Note

IDIOMATIC differences in any two languages present the first difficulty of translation. A further difficulty was encountered in translating this work from the Ukrainian into English, in that the novel deals principally with psychological reaction rather than physical action, for the author describes the mental suffering and agony of his characters instead of the physical brutalities of war.

Usually the American people confuse the Ukrainians with the Russians, overlooking the fact that these two Slavic peoples are quite different in anthropological, linguistic, historical and cultural senses. The Ukrainians are sentimental, contemplative, and restrained, while the Russians are aggressive, boisterous and eccentric. Consequently, the languages show a difference from the psychological point of view.

The translator has striven to keep the English version as close as possible to the style and structure of the original story and the action of its characters. In many instances throughout the work, proverbs,

phrases and idioms are translated literally in order to preserve the strength of expression. Also is preserved the author's recurrent use of the present tense for certain short passages in order to heighten the subtle moments of situation and emotion. When action is narrated, the past tense is, of course, employed. Broadly speaking, the translator was intent upon presenting his version in the manner preferred by the American public.

The translator met Turiansky in Vienna through a common interest in literary work, and with the passing of time the friendship became ever stronger. It was the author's last wish that this work be published in an English translation, and it is in compliance with that wish that the translator presents herewith the version which bears the distinction of being the first Ukrainian work of fiction ever to be published in America in the English translation.

ANDREW MYKYTIAK

New York, 1935.

Lost Shadows

PRELUDE

Chaos

Midway between the dark sky and the white earth, thousands of nebulous shadows went astray.

If men of distant sunny lands could become aware of these beings, they would wring their hands and shed tears for them.

Yet this will not occur, for these shadows will dissolve in the chaos of existence, like hallucinations beheld in fever, and no one will ever learn how, where and when it happened.

. . . . . .

Under the onset of the German-Austrian army, the Serbs left their country and took with them all the war prisoners, numbering sixty-thousand men, to the Albanian 'Road of Death.'

In the mountains, jungles and wildernesses, forty-

five thousand of them died within three weeks, of hunger, cold and mental agony.

Along the plateau of the Albanian Mountains, overblown by snow and fettered by frost, the rest of the captives dragged on toward their destiny.

. . . . . .

Not long ago, they still were men. Today, living human corpses move on the corpse of nature.

Clouds have jealously covered the sun and all the firmament, and remain hanging over these human shadows, like the gigantic dark wings of the spirit of universal destruction.

And quiet are these clouds, like a voiceless curse, motionless as rocks, inexorable as fate.

Like an avalanche of rock, the murky darkness glides down into the souls of the exiles.

The earth has renounced them.

It has thrust them into these high mountains, among the wild cliffs and upon trackless ways where death lies in ambush in every nook.

It has hidden itself from them by dense clouds of the fog that overhang both sides of the plateau and seems to extend into boundlessness.

This vast plain of fog resembles a disturbed sea that has become petrified.

The black sea of clouds covering the sky looks down with its icy eyes upon the grey sea of fog covering the earth.

And between these two infinities, the shadows are gliding along the silver-white range of cold mountains.

They seem to hang between heaven and earth. Between life and death.

The ridge outspreads wide, cleft, torn ribs which here and there merge in the greyish mist, or again emerge from it and die away, far on the distant horizon.

They lie on the upturned foggy couch like the skeleton of a strange giant who, while destroying life, himself has died.

And not far off, the giant-mountains have buried their white heads in black clouds.

The gigantic masses of cliffs sloping over the chasms—the clumps—the precipices—with forbidding granite walls, fissured in the titanic battle of the elements, reveal an illimitable panorama of devastation and ruin.

Out from the snowy peaks—the black slopes and gorges—from every rock and wild hiding-place, there peers untold dread, sadness and hopelessness.

But, despite all that, it would seem that the spirit of destruction had not yet completed its work of ravage.

The mighty ruler of these wildernesses, the frost, has laid it in bed, fettered, and has bewitched everything around.

And after the furor and clamor of battle and destruction, the earth, the heavens and the mountains, everything has become still and stony.

Yet somewhere amid this enchanted, numb tranquillity of the iced nature lurks a mysterious expectation of horror.

The thought, agonized by pain, has hallucinations as though rock against rock hugged each other in mute fear, and a ghostly whisper came forth from them:

"Someone will soon appear. . . . Who will that be? . . . What will that be? . . . Is it the hurricane that will shake all the mountains and chasms? And tear into a furious whirlpool all the sparks of life that came up here astray, and with one blast extinguish, demolish, crush, smash to fragments, and toss everything into the obscurity of non-existence, into the chaos of nothingness?"

. . . . . .

A long time already have the exiles laboriously wandered across the Albanian deserts. Two insistent companions, hunger and frost, lead them toward the inexorable destiny. Into their souls, of late days, the bitterest enemy, hopelessness, has settled. Today is already the tenth since they have eaten a proper meal.

But now, there are no longer any wild fruits, any weeds, any grass or rinds.

The flesh has almost disappeared from the exiles. Remnants of clothing flutter about them like soiled and frozen rags on skeletons. Their legs, swollen from hunger and cold, are wrapped with shreds that gradually shrivel until they fall entirely away.

And many a man walks bare-foot on the frozen snow.

Scarcely are the features of a face to be distinguished. Instead of cheeks, there are two hollows like deeply yawning graves. Their faces seem already covered, not with skin, but with a black-grey, earthy, moist veil—like mould on mushrooms.

The face of each man is framed by a long beard, dishevelled, scraggy like the stunted weed on a neglected clod of earth. Their eyes are hidden deeply in their heads. They seek the soul in order to

leave, joined with it, the body—the miserable, entirely desolate prison.

The eyes of one of them are extinct; those of the others flash with the fire of fever and the expression of menacing insanity.

When one man looks into the eyes of another, he shudders. He turns away aghast, and his pale lips quiver in a whisper:

"Death. . . ."

It is only the blind that do not see death in the faces of the others. And the weary human eyes have nothing upon which to fix themselves in rest. They seek after heaven.

But there is no heaven any more.

There is only the indifferent, petrified darkness sending down to them invariably one and the same message of finality:

"Death. . . ."

Their eyes turn away from the blackness high above their heads, and waver over the endless space of grey, dishevelled clouds of mist above the chasms. And this view imparts intense pain and extreme hopelessness.

So the human eyes shrink still deeper into their sockets and close of themselves. They seek a spark of light in the tormented soul.

Yet the soul, too, is hemmed in, as by a graveyard wall, by nocturnal depression and the chill that breathes death.

. . . . . .

And then, the last life impulse and a last yearning bursts the fetters of reality. Consciousness revolts against the extreme suffering and the wretchedness of existence, and falls asleep.

Tortured by hunger, exhausted by frost and sleepless nights, the captives sink into the dusk of sub-consciousness that more and more transforms itself into mental stupor.

About their imaginations, a veil of visions and lurid delirium winds itself.

Their consciousness, at times, resembles the pale-grown sun.

Small clouds are floating, now at a lesser, again at a greater distance, and darken the sun for a moment, or for a longer period—until a black cloud rolls onward, veiling the sun—perhaps forever. . . .

That which living men had once longed for, that to which their souls had once aspired appears now to these shadows of men as a ray of light in the obscurity of a prison. And ravished by this ray, the captives again see the life that has already passed

the death sentence upon them. They have visions of people who once upon a time were nearest to them. They welcome, embrace, speak with them. They discern strange echoes from their distant homeland, sing the songs they had heard while yet children. With a few exceptions, all of them appear to have become mad. And amid bright hallucinations, they lie down on the snow, smiles on their lips.

They break down on the 'Road of Death.'

Then the shots of Serbian rifles are heard.

It is the guards killing the helpless who cannot rise to their feet.

The enemies fear that these feeble human shadows might remain behind and strengthen the German and Austrian armies from which the distant muffled roar and boom of guns produces a hollow echo here.

Many war prisoners throw themselves into the chasm rather than helplessly meet death from a Serbian bullet.

There, not far away, a man collapses.

The enemy raises the rifle from his shoulder and draws closer to him.

The man extends his hands to the enemy, stammering:

"My children are still so small . . . merely tots as yet. . . ."

He indicates with his hand how little his children are, and with a voice that chills to the marrow of the bone, he pierces this world of darkness:

"Brother Serb, oh! do not make my babies orphans!"

But mercy is unknown to enemies.

Woe to the vanquished!

A shot echoes.

And the shadow reddens the white snow with the remnants of his blood.

In this way many die.

. . . . . .

The captives rally their last strength in order not to collapse. With the utmost effort, they move on, creep, crawl on all fours. Their mouths are set convulsively; their veins protrude on their dark-grey and green foreheads, as if they were about to tear themselves away from the face.

Their heads droop upon their chests, in faintness. An invisible force has thrown heavy ropes around their necks, bending and pulling them down.

They move on as though each of them drags his own corpse to an immense funeral.

The icy stillness of nature is interrupted by low moans, suppressed sobs, loud groans and laments of soldiers walking bare-foot in the snow; by shouts of joy by those who have become insane; by the enemy's shots, and the last shrieks of despair that precede death.

Many have lost consciousness of their surroundings, of whence they came and whither they are so going.

Some have forgotten how to speak.

. . . . . .

Within most of them the heart has already ceased to live. It no longer feels pain or desire, no longing for life nor for loved ones far away. Father . . . mother . . . sweetheart . . . wife . . . children? . . . What is each one of them? . . .

Father?

A strange, old light crushed by the mountain of ice.

Mother?

A small drop of life-giving water which had fallen into the muddy whirl through the fissured ceiling of fate.

Sweetheart?

A magic spring song which had died in the

coffin-cradle of the heart already killed.

Wife?

The fern from an old, very old spring already overgrown with the moss of oblivion.

Children?

A fairy-tale, unreal, woven by the light sent out from a paradise that can be found nowhere on the whole earth.

. . . . . .

What may befall them in an hour, two hours, tomorrow?

That is of no concern to them. They do not possess enough strength even to think of it.

With closed eyes, they sleep even as they move until after a while they lie down to rest forever on the 'Road of Death.'

. . . . . .

Mental stupor leaves some of them for a moment.

In their hearts desires awaken that unite them again with life.

Behold! A man, bare-foot and with purple-colored legs, has suddenly become aware of a fire on the clouds above the gorge.

With eyes that sparkle like flame, he points it out to his companions. And three of them now

are running whither they seem to have seen the fire.

They fall upon the clouds above the precipice. And the clouds enwrap them, even as the sea absorbs a grain of sand—as eternity enfolds three seconds.

. . . . . .

Neither good nor evil powers possess courage to view this picture of human distress and decay. Therefore, they are enveloping them in a heavy veil of snow.

The sky, the clouds, the mountains and the human shadows—all these disappear and merge into one infinite fog, grey as life, dismal as death.

The universe is slowly sinking into a giddy gap.

. . . . . .

Out of the chasm a small silver-white cloud emerges. Like a vision from dreamland, it rises over the human shadows and floats onward to meet the glacial darkness of the heavens.

No, that is no little cloud whatsoever. It is a strange being, who has compassion with human suffering. It seems . . . yes . . . it is a bright, benevolent spirit. . . . It will ask some one dwelling in the dark clouds:

"Why dost Thou let the hearts of these people

still beat faintly? . . . Why dost Thou, listless, watch these hearts bleeding with the last drop of living blood? Crush these hearts to fragments!"

. . . . . .

This little white cloud is the remnant of my slain soul.

It looks down upon me and upon us all as upon icy prisons built of human bodies, and sends down into the ice-bound coffin called earth questioning thoughts to which no answer is made:

"These people—shadows—are there to testify: 'Here are the present descendants of a civilization five thousand years old!

" 'Here are the living corpses of a monstrous lie!

" 'Here are the most eloquent symbols of the universal misery of existence!

" 'Why, then, was and is the mighty Logos of Buddha, of Homer, of Moses, of Plato, of Christ, of Shakespeare, of Kant, of Goethe so powerless?

" 'Is life merely a lightning-short pause between the aimless, absurd conflict and struggle of atoms —and their final disappearance into the whirlpool of nothingness?

" 'Is wisdom only a little drop in a shoreless ocean of stupidity?

" 'Is light the most sublime objective and aspiration of the human spirit, or, on the contrary, is it merely a hand-mirror for the sole, eternal goddess —the omnipotent, ubiquitous wench, darkness?' "

. . . . . .

In front of me . . . a strange creature, all withered up. . . .

Two thin . . . dead branches. . . .

What is that? . . .

A man? . . . A tree? . . .

No, that is a human being. . . .

He raises his hands heavenward. . . .

Why does he raise his hands heavenward? . . .

Does he pray? . . .

I hear him whispering:

"Oh, God . . . Why this cruelty? . . ."

I look at his hands and shudder.

No. I will not look at mine. . . .

I well know mine and his are alike. . . .

And all at once, I feel so sorry for these hands of ours!

I pity every creature who has felt no sensation but pain, whose only contemplation is death.

I pity all humanity suffering so greatly in a world of fire and the immense ices.

Something rises in my throat.
Something fills my eyes.
No, no, no one will see them any more. . . .
They are wept out already.
The eyes have dried up . . . they are frozen into ice.

. . . . . .

Where are you, Vasyl, dear friend of mine? . . .
You broke down in the snow.
Are you still living? . . .
Do you no longer feel sorrow? . . .
Or do you already look down upon me from distant heights . . . beyond my reach? . . .

CHAPTER I

The Dance of Life and Death

STRANZINGER, who was moving along with his six comrades at the end of a very long row, stopped suddenly.

"What ails you?—No strength left? . . ." asked Dobrovsky who was his guide at this moment.

Stranzinger kept silent, and only pressed more firmly the violin from which at no time he let himself be parted.

"Our life wanderings seem already at an end here," said Dobrovsky, turning back to his comrades. "Now the last battle between life and death will begin. . . ."

Both the words of Dobrovsky and the silence of Stranzinger were a language that ate into the hearts of the exiles like two ice-crusted daggers.

In voiceless fear, they looked at Stranzinger, and began to imagine that his infirmity was an ominous symptom to every one of them.

The violin—it was all that had been left to Stranzinger by the fate of war.

Fragments of a grenade had deprived him of his eyesight.

His mother died of grief; his fiancee threw herself into a river.

Since learning of the fate of these two, he had become speechless.

He had locked up all sorrow in the darkness of his eyes and the coffin of his slain soul, and had become like a rock.

Perhaps, after all, in the song of his violin he saw the daylight, at least one ray of the sun, and a narrow, blue strip of sky.

But only once was heard the song of his fiddle. It was after the death of his mother and sweetheart.

And that song was such a one as made even an enemy weep.

"Who will leave him behind? . . ." Nikolich groaned. "Let us halt here! We no longer have any strength. Let us die here. . . ."

Six comrades stopped.

"Go on! I will stay here alone," said Stranzinger.

They were frightened on hearing his voice which came from his mouth as from a sepulchre.

"We all will stay with you," Dobrovsky assured. "Comrades, is it not so?"

Every one of them nodded, silently.

"But we will not perish from Serbian bullets," Szabo grumbled.

He set his teeth. His eyes flashed angrily.

"Death to the monster that shoots dead *en masse* the dying people!" he hissed like a snake.

"*Napred,* forward!" he commanded.

"*Halgass, te kutya,* shut up, you dog!" Szabo gritted his teeth.

The Serb made ready to charge, but Szabo got the start of him and struck him on the head with his stick.

The guard dropped.

Alive? Dead?

Immaterial.

Szabo took from the fallen man his rifle and all the cartridges.

He searched him thoroughly.

Neither in his pouch nor in his pockets was a morsel of bread to be found.

He pushed him, and the guard rolled down into the gorge.

Szabo took the blind Stranzinger by one hand, Nikolich by the other, and all seven turned aside from the 'Road of Death.'

They stopped in the snow almost up to their knees, and looked about.

Within the range of eyesight, death grinned at them.

From behind the mountain, on the skyline, gloomy, weird cloudy spectres had crept out, covering the greater part of the sun.

They looked like gigantic tigers or fairy vampires.

They opened wide red jaws, which seemed steeped in blood, in order to rush upon the mountains and devour them together with seven living creatures.

For how dared life to stray into this cemetery of nature?

A few steps beyond, the mountain ridge, as a steep precipice, descended into the abyss.

They glanced at the grey, stiffened clouds of fog beneath them and at the peaks that towered above the clouds like huge ice tombstones of all existence.

Nowhere the slightest trace of human life.

Everywhere the icy desert, spread with frozen lifeless corpses.

Even though somewhere—far away, could be found an Albanian hut, they would not have the strength to stagger over to it.

But what the use, even if they reached it?

Instead of hospitality, they would likely find their death on the very threshold of that hut, at the hands of the Albanians.

. . . . . .

A grim foreboding whispers to their hearts that for them there is no longer any return to life.

Their eyes seek after the comrades abandoned by them.

And a great yearning for life flames up in their hearts, like the last ray of the light doomed to be extinguished.

In front of them, yonder, far off, a long line of nebulous shadows is slowly gliding.

It is gliding and creeping on like a huge trampled worm and with its last efforts bores into the grey fog to die there quietly.

They reach out with their hands after their comrades.

"Wait! Wait!" they call, in torn, toneless voices.

To their call, only the chasms reply, in a hollow voice:

Wait!

"Let us not go after them!" Szabo warned. "There destruction awaits us. I have a gun. Let us seek an Albanian hut. Now it is supposed to be the noontide. In case we find nothing, perhaps we shall succeed, in one way or another, in making a fire. Perhaps, someone will notice our fire in the night, and will come to us—"

"Wolves will come. . . ." Dobrovsky thrust through his teeth.

"Who knows? . . ." Nikolich sighed. "Perhaps also men will come. . . ."

"Men?" Dobrovsky snapped. "Men are for us worse than wolves. . . ."

"To endure till evening and through the night, we must have, at least, some bit of hope," Nikolich lamented.

"The only hope—some miracle, or our people," the former murmured.

"Of course, not the kind of wretches we are. . . . But—"

He does not finish his remark.

They start out to descend the plateau, to dive

into the cold fog and, through it, to reach the valley.

Perhaps, down there, a human life is breathing, and a warm heart is beating.

. . . . . .

Dobrovsky and Szabo, who were the strongest among them all, leave their five comrades to wait while they themselves look to the right and the left, for a road or path, in order to be able to descend and to reach a human settlement.

After a long while, both of them return.

"All our efforts proved futile," Szabo reports.

"Somewhere in the book of Fate, it is written that we have to perish—here—in this place . . ." says Dobrovsky, as though pouring sharp icy needles into one's heart.

"I want to live—I want to live!" Boiani groans, in reply to him.

"Dark powers," growls Dobrovsky, "have driven us to a fantastically wild graveyard of nature, between heaven and earth.

"We no longer have before us a goal, no more strength, but, nevertheless, we will not desert the weakest one among us.

"To right and left, there are only steep slopes, down which even the chamois would not be able to run."

After a long searching and groping, the exiles become aware that only one way is open to them—the same their comrades had taken.

Where are they now?

The crushed worm has already vanished on the horizon, in the thicket of fog.

. . . . . .

"I cannot go—or stand any more. . . ." Boiani lisps. "My legs tremble . . . tremble. . . ."

He sits down on the snow.

Desperate weariness also drags the others forcibly down.

"Let us not sit down!" Szabo warns, "for we shall not rise again."

But after a while, he, too, sits down beside the others on the snow.

It is only Dobrovsky who remains standing, and seeks for something in the dark clouds, on the mountains, and in the dense fog over the gorges.

His ear seems intent on catching sounds that he alone hears.

. . . . . .

Nobody and nothing answers the voice of pain.

All nature listens, spellbound, to the walking of a mysterious giant who somewhere softly wanders over the peaks.

Again, he buries himself within the foggy gorges that men may neither see him nor hear his steps.

. . . . . .

Amid the perpetual stillness, unsearchable as a dream of a millennial grave, there floats to their hearts from distant, sunny lands—like a lingering ray of light—a strange voice that long ago had lapsed into lethargy.

And it murmurs and hums gently like a gnat in the green, sun-fondled grass.

As though from behind the twilights of centuries . . . from the boundless worlds of beyond . . . from beyond the ocean of eternity, comes a dreamy . . . tender . . . and very soft hum and murmur:

Mother . . . father . . . son! . . .

. . . . . .

They gathered together, glancing at one another.

They all trembled in fever.

"Fire . . . fire . . . fire! . . ." Boiani stammered. "Without fire, we shall die. . . ."

They began to look around, to see if any tree were visible.

Nowhere was there a forest, or a grove, or a lone tree.

Nearby, stood a snow-drifted bush.

With great effort, they cut off little branches, and broke off the trunks at their very roots.

But how can one kindle a fire from frozen, green twigs?

"Take out the works of Shakespeare, Goethe, Kant!" suggested Dobrovsky, smiling so ironically. "They will be of use here."

Yet it was only three days before that they had been forced to burn these works.

Szabo cast a scornful glance at the violin of the blind one.

"This creaking thing," he spoke angrily and resentfully, "would lend itself well to make a fire. . . ."

"Leave it alone," Dobrovsky intervened, "this fiddle is—his eyes. . . . Instead, I would suggest that every one of us cut off a dry piece from his own garment, in order to make the fire."

They did so.

But the pieces burned up, and the wet branches and leaves did not catch flame.

The fire went out.

"To make the fire burn, a few rags are not enough," said Szabo, with a strange determination. "For this, a whole suit is needed."

"Where shall we get a whole suit?" Dobrovsky

asked, fixing the other with inquiring eyes. "Why did you kick the corpse down into the chasm?"

"Pretty soon there will be many a corpse among us here . . . more or less. . . ." Szabo replied, with a quiet cruelty. "But it is necessary that it occur still earlier. In accordance with practical life requirements and social altruism. . . ."

"How do you mean that?" Nikolich whispered.

"Tearing off our ragged clothes is useless," Szabo argued, with perfect composure.

"Sentimentalism is—death. . . . Let us think soberly!

"In any case, one of us will die first. . . ."

In the glances of the others Szabo read a timid, silent question and incomprehensibility.

"Are your brains frozen as well?" he mumbled. "The matter is very simple: One of us must—die. . . ."

A new chill stream, cold as the palm of death, smote the souls and bodies of the exiles.

It was as though something jolted within them, and a dishevelled nightmare crept out of the debris and ruin, and began swiftly, very swiftly, to sweep out of the exiles the sparse remnants of life and hope.

With uncertain eyes, they gazed at Szabo who, himself, became afraid of his own cruel idea.

"It is—for the common welfare . . ." he added, after a short silence, probably induced by the desire to weaken its impression.

"For the common welfare—first perish yourself!" fulminated Dobrovsky, looking sharply into Szabo's eyes.

"I shall be the very last to die . . ." the other replied, "but our comrade, Boiani, would like to die now.

"It is only his thought that scarcely glimmers . . .

"Why, you, yourselves, know that he has forgotten his very name.

"Hey, you! . . ." he turned to Boiani with the rough question, "What is your name? . . ."

"I want to live . . . I want to live! . . ." Boiani stammered, in an imploring voice, as if the last vestige of his consciousness placed itself on his lips.

"Pshaw!—We all want to live!" Szabo exclaimed hastily. "But who cares what we want? . . . One of us must die. Which one? That is the problem!"

An icy silence followed, in which they made efforts to formulate Szabo's reckless idea in their consciousness exhausted by fever.

"Which of us will sacrifice himself voluntarily for the others?" Szabo asked, with explosive force. "We all have sacrificed ourselves for the so-called fatherland—may the dogs tear it asunder!

"Do we seven not deserve to have one of us kindly die for the welfare of the six? What? . . .

"Well, then . . . who will this very instant? . . "

"I," the blind one broke the silence.

"I will," came hollowly from the lips of Pshyluski.

Both of them had hitherto been speechless. They seemed to have now regained the ability to speak, only to bid farewell to life.

Dobrovsky drew nearer to Stranzinger, and took him by the hand.

"You stand aside . . ." he spoke. "You are a saint. Nobody's hand will touch you."

"What about you, Pshyluski?" resumed Szabo, who had the impression that the others agreed to his horrid proposal.

"You have a rifle—I am ready," said Pshyluski, in a hollow voice.

"O God!" Nikolich gave a rattling groan. "Is it possible that we have to look upon the voluntary death of our comrades? Let us wait!

"Fate itself will decide which of us shall die first."

All of them, except one, understood that.

"Which of us is the weakest?" insisted Szabo, piercing Boiani with his evil eyes.

The latter began to tremble. His blue lips had become even bluer.

"I want to live! I want to live!" he mumbled.

"I would suggest this," Szabo went on. "We must not die of the frost until we make a fire here.

"Our bodies, the cursed cadavers, have already become almost numbed with the cold.

"We shall run, jump around this broken bush. By running, we shall warm ourselves a little. And then—for aught I care!—let us tear to pieces our tatters to make fire!

"But in the event I collapse, and shall have no more strength to rise to my feet, then I will spit on all my remaining hideous existence.

"Then, strip off my clothes, and—well, warm yourselves, and live! . . . Live! . . ." Szabo distorted his mouth with chilly irony.

"That one among us," he added, "who collapses first, and does not rise again, will be of use to the rest of us. . .

"Let us express it more nicely, piously, Christian-

like: That one amongst us who during our running around the bush shall fall, and no more scramble to his feet, will release us by his death. . . ."

As if turned to ice, they listened to these words.

Meanwhile Szabo further added (it was impossible to surmise if he did it through wishing to weaken, or strengthen his idea):

"According to the Holy Scripture that reads: 'By death, He hath conquered death'!"

A speechless horror seized them.

Though this idea penetrated them with deathly dread, as if the icy point of a silent scythe had suddenly buried itself in their brains, they, nevertheless, felt that one of them would soon be forced to succumb.

It had to be so, for such was their destiny.

The only question was, which of them would be that first one? . . .

Yes, yes!—Which—Which?

O Thou, indifferent One!—Which? . . .

. . . . . .

Without the slightest evidence of refusal, these human skeletons, frozen by the cold, utterly exhausted by hunger, started running and jumping around the bush.

The only thought that was moving their numbed legs was: Run and jump, and endure! Otherwise, your very comrades will strike you dead!

Stranzinger stood apart. Then he took four steps forward and four back.

At first, they could hardly move; then their motion was more lively.

Not a single one of them would remain behind to show that he was the weakest one.

An extreme effort to keep up strength was discernible in their wildly sparkling eyes, in convulsively set teeth, in veins swollen on their foreheads, temples and necks, as well as in the color of their faces, which earthy-dark and dirty-grey as they were, changed more and more to violet.

. . . . . .

Of a sudden, a strange force rooted my feet to the spot.

First with my hands I covered my eyes, then with my fists I began to beat my forehead.

I wanted to dispel the darkening which at that moment started across my brain.

Or, to kill the truth which had come face to face with me.

Lo! Unexpectedly, it seemed to me that my comrades had disappeared somewhere, and in their place, weird, cruel apparitions stared upon me with vague eyes. . . .

. . . . . .

They eat themselves into me with their eyes. . . .

And await something from me.

And then the desire takes hold of me: Collapse, fall dead on that very spot, or leap down into the gorge! Kill and crush this thing which is called consciousness!

I approach the edge of the precipice and look down into the depth enveloped by frozen shreds of fog.

A hundred feet underneath, a rigid, curled, milky-white fog is dormant.

A white couch with round, soft pillows. . . .

This white couch! It draws and lures me down constantly. . . .

One step—one little "forward!"—and there is deliverance from pain . . . rest . . . rest. . . .

Pshyluski, as though on his tip-toes, draws closer to me.

In his eyes, a dim hope is wavering. . . .

"You are afraid . . . alone? . . ." he goads me. "I

too, am afraid alone. . . . Both together . . . both together! . . ."

He points with his hand at the precipice, and glances at me feverishly.

I look at him—and recede. . . .

He alone bends over the chasm, gazing with rigid eyes into its chilling depths.

What is the name of this force? . . .

With an iron chain it keeps me fettered from behind, and will not let me go. . . .

Life? . . .

Oh, no, life has no value whatever for me.

In a fairy tale one reads: They are beyond seven mountains, beyond seven rivers. . . .

No. They are somewhere so far away, beyond such an ocean which has no end or limit. . . .

The two are there. . . .

And yet, I feel their presence here.

I feel a very little hand behind me, on my neck.

Now, this little hand is bigger already.

Anyhow, I have not seen it for two years.

These two beings. . . .

No, I have to live!

I am turning away from the brink, and am jumping and jumping around the bush. . . .

Ha—ha. . . I am jumping! . . .

. . . . . .

Abruptly, Dobrovsky began, with icy mockery, to scrutinize his comrades. At the same time, he feigned wonderment, and laughed, in an uncanny manner.

"That is it!" he then exclaimed, in stupefaction.

"Gentlemen, I see—you are—dancing! . . . That is all you needed! Ha—ha—ha! Well, I am no killjoy! . . . That is to say, for a dance, music is needed—of course. I will play the cymbals for you. . . ."

He started to chatter and grit his teeth.

His companions slowed down in their running, and glanced at him, with speechless horror.

Szabo drew closer to me, his face radiant with an unconcealed joy.

"He is already losing his wits. . . ." he whispered in my ear. "We shall have a fire—you hear?—We shall have a fire!"

Meanwhile Dobrovsky smiled the smile of annihilation.

"What is that? . . ." he asked. "Are we really the very last? We have a party . . . Well, yes. . . . All right. . . . But—where are our ladies? . . . Are we to dance without the ladies? . . "

"Dobrovsky—friend!" I asked anxiously. "What is the matter with you? . . ."

But the other did not answer.

"Hist—do not retard the inevitable. . . ." Szabo hissed to me.

Now Dobrovsky's expression betrayed a strange enthusiasm.

"Let us imagine, gentlemen," he began, "how many balls are taking place at this very moment in the world we left long ago. How many charming women turn about at this moment, only to dance life wantonly away! While we are dancing here to regain our lives. Are you conscious of the importance and meaning of our dancing?—Ha-ha-ha!

"Let us exert our sick imaginations, now extremely prone as they are to visions and hallucinations, and we shall forget our black lot, even without using morphine and hashish. . . ."

"When, at last, will you go mad?" Szabo cried out suddenly, from the bottom of his sub-consciousness. "Quick, quick!—Do not torment us any longer!"

"All of you will go mad," Dobrovsky replied quietly. "I, alone, shall preserve my lucid thought, for my Czech skull seems still all too hard and sound for such subtleties as visions and insanity.

"That is very distressing to me. Perhaps, you will see all you want to see with your eyes, but I, it seems

to me, shall see the same with my soul only. However, I shall see with the eyes of my soul far more than you will. . . ."

He stopped and glanced into the dark, misty distance.

He stood for a moment, absorbed in thought.

"I am afraid of nothing," he then proceeded, harshly. "Nevertheless, I do not know exactly why this graven stillness around us, as well as your silence, disturb me somehow.

"All the time I feel that amid this enchanted stillness, something will suddenly lighten up and strike like a thunderbolt.

"And it will kill all of you because you are so sad or unconcerned—myself, however, for my laughing. . . .

"Therefore, as long as I feel a bit of strength within me I must talk away odd feelings of mine. . . .

"In my life, full of drudgery, I talked very rarely.

"But now, in the face of death, all the time I feel the need to chat a little. . . .

"I shall splash my soul with my words, and chat and chat, cry and laugh—ha, ha, ha, ha!

"Moreover, I have to tell the world something about myself—and all of you. . . ."

An ever increasing fear was gradually settling over me.

"Oh, where are ye, powers of light?" I groaned out.

"Quiet! . . . Everything takes its proper course!" Szabo bade silence.

Dobrovsky, in turn, again spun the ominous thread of his speech:

"Gentlemen, more *bon ton!* More elegance!

"Do not all of you look as grim as dark night! Let the ladies read in your obligingly smiling mien that you are going to shower compliments upon them. . . . Look!"

And he showed what elegant and graceful dancing was.

It was an odd contrast between all his choice salon movements and his ragged, filthy tatters covered with snow and dried blood.

Had these people been now in the world of life and the sun, it would have been a peculiar spectacle to see Dobrovsky's mouth invariably curved in derision and cynicism, his hollow, pale-greenish face, with its long, shaggy, reddish beard, and its mustache like two dishevelled brooms—he himself making efforts to display the pleasant, captivating mien of a dandy.

No one of us knew the exact secret of Dobrovsky's frantic behavior.

Was it insanity that began to burst from him, or, on the contrary, the intention and wish to hasten the death of the feeblest one among us, by means of mockery and laughter?

Perhaps such laughter as his was the not infrequent fruit of the horrors of the world war. . . .

The image will not leave my brain:

Dobrovsky, his brother, and myself are lying in the line of battle. From the sky, the iron hell of the cannon fire is pouring down upon us. The earth, now torn, again cracked and tattered by grenades, flees hence like a living being, thuds, roars, and bellows, and is whirled into atoms.

Where Dobrovsky's brother has lain—there suddenly a black pit yawns. . . .

"Brother dear—where are you? . . ." Dobrovsky whimpers.

Unexpectedly, something from the sky falls down before us. . . . The head of his brother. . . .

Oh, its eyes move!

Dobrovsky leaps to his feet, grasps his brother's head in his hands, presses it to his bosom, and suddenly bursts into such a ghastly laughter that it

drowns the thunder of the cannon, the bursting of the grenades, the groaning of the earth, and the wails of the dying.

Something of that demented laughter must certainly have remained with him. . . .

Like pointed clumps of ice, his words descend upon the remnants of my soul:

"Gentlemen, you have not dressed yourselves up in ballroom style. . . . You have no idea how and whereby women are pleased, and how their hearts are conquered. . . .

"Where are your patent leather boots?—Where your dress suits?—Ha, ha, ha! . . . Where are your smooth, fat and shaven faces? . . .

"Do you wish to imitate dress suits with your torn rags? Eh, eh—are you crafty, or just children? . . . And where, gentlemen, are the main things preferred by women, your bodies? . . .

"It is an unpardonable frivolity on your part, gentlemen, that you desire to entertain fine ladies, by means of your egos that weigh but seventy-six pounds each! . . .

"Will you, feathery-light and frozen gentlemen, serve the buxom mothers and their daughters as fans? . . . Do you wish to flirt with women only by

means of your naked souls? . . .

"O you, foolish—beg pardon—skeleton idealists that you are! . . ."

I pressed my hands to my forehead.

In my thinking, fire and ice collided; they bubbled, boiled, froze and burned me.

"God grant that I may immediately die!" I wailed.

"Do not hurry—one is sufficient. . . . " Szabo responded, with compassion.

Meanwhile Dobrovsky eyed every comrade, an ironical sympathy playing around his mouth.

He fixed his glances on Pshyluski and called to him:

"Sir! I am very sorry, but your dress suit is much too old-fashioned. . . . Instead of two, there are thirteen lappets to be seen. . . ."

He pondered a moment, then laughed as though a happy idea had occurred to his mind.

"Never mind . . . never mind. . . ." he cried out. "It is wonderful! . . . Gentlemen, you yourselves did not guess it. . . . Why, we are arranging a masquerade ball, such as the world has never seen before. . . .

"Be it as it may, primp up a bit, gentlemen, anyway.

"Most kindly remove with your fingers the Serbo-

Albanian national property which creeps on you in such dense swarms, for I shall start introducing you.

"Let the ladies from the very Imperial Court ball stand in front of you!

"Ask them to dance with you, and press them closely to your hearts, and they, in turn, will surely warm you far better than any fire imaginable."

Boiani and Nikolish, who all the while had been staring at Dobrovsky as though fascinated by the weird shine of the demoniac and suggestive fire of his eyes, stretched out their hands as if longing to press someone to their bosoms.

Their emaciated faces, their sick smile, but still more, the embracing motions of their hands filled my pain-racked mind with sudden fright.

I turned away my eyes from both of my comrades, and sought for composure in the eyes of Szabo.

But he stared as gloomily as though in the next moment he were going to demolish all life.

I turned to Dobrovsky, yet I was unable to say a single word to him.

Struck as by a thunderbolt, I stood, overwhelmingly tormented by a single doubt:

Has Dobrovsky gone mad, or I? . . .

His eyes emit an uncanny power. . . .

These eyes of his draw me down into the abyss. . . .

They hurl lightnings, his mouth flings forth thunders! . . .

His words cut all the continuity of my thoughts. . . .

He bows low . . . disappears. . . .

Dobrovsky—where are you? . . .

Hell speaks and scoffs as it has never scoffed before!

I hardly see him in the blue mist. . . .

No, it is not he! . . .

A red gleam licks the fog. . . .

A peal of laughter rolls across the snow. . . .

Satan himself mocks! . . .

And like a cold dismay from grim, frozen pits and caves, so are the words that chill all my being:

". . . a very interesting company of seven men despatched by fate into a distant world upon matters of death.

"In the midst of our journey, pardon us for mentioning it, we experienced boredom, and so we have arranged, between heaven and earth, amidst the clouds and snows, a very romantic ball, to which we have the honor to invite you. . . .

"Kindly come from your golden-glittering Imperial Palace over to our ball room. . . .

"It, too, is very fine and far more spacious than yours. . . .

"Its ceiling—a boundless sky, its walls—snow-white rocks, its parquet—the frozen snow as shiningly white as the omnipotent breasts of your Illustrious Highnesses. . . .

"We have wonderful music.

"Also we have here an original buffet. It differs from yours by only one trait:

"It is not we who wish to consume it, but it that wishes, itself, to devour us. . . ."

He made his teeth chatter, and indicated the chasm nearby.

With every spark of feeling, I longed to save Dobrovsky.

I stretched out my hands to him, imploring:

"Dobrovsky—friend—brother. . . . What ails you? . . .

"Come to me! I cannot move from the spot. . . . I shall put your head between my cool hands. . . . My cold palm I shall press to your feverish forehead. . . . Brother, come to me. . . ."

Yet Dobrovsky ignored my imploring, and went on with his mad harrangue:

"My name is Dobrovsky, the hero of the world war. He is a man who scoffs at hunger, cold, life, death. And laughs, I beg you pardon, a bit also at you, your ladyships—of course—within the limits of decency. . . .

"The hero of the world war, Stranzinger. . . ."

Here he broke off and glanced at the blind one who was standing aside, indifferent to all the gaiety and, apparently, to all pain.

Dobrovsky studied him and his blind eyes, and suddenly he clutched at his throat.

Then he coughed as though wishing to drive away something that had come from his mind and pressed at his throat.

He collected himself and proceeded:

"This gentleman, who is standing at the buffet like a stake in the earth, is the hero of the world war, Pshyluski.

"He is always beclouded. A worm seems always to be gnawing at him. Probably, he has become estranged from someone, and—poor fellow!—is therefore so sorrowful. . . .

"A child's mind, that is all!

"Out of purely humane motives, and for your own pleasure, that is the main thing, your ladyships,

kindly flirt with him, otherwise melancholia will engulf him.

"Besides, please do not take it amiss of him that his ball costume is not quite a fashionable one. But I assume the gracious ladies will surmise why this is so. . . ."

Pointing at me, Dobrovsky introduced:

"The hero of the world war, Doctor Turiansky.

"He is dancing probably for the first time in his life. Very susceptible to the warmth of the female heart, particularly in the present era of the general universal cold. But he seeks that warmth only in his family nest.

"Kindly give him the proof, your ladyships, that elsewhere also there exist warm little nests. . . .

"The knight of the world war, Szabo, an untamed son of the Hungarian puszta. A great and dangerous madcap. . . . The lady who subdues him obtains the highest prize.

"The hero of the world war, Nikolich, a sentimental boy, the purest joy for you, your ladyships.

"The hero of the world war, Boiani, a strange fellow who, in consequence of various annoyances experienced in Albania, has forgotten his name.

"Sick, exhausted, affected by fever, he once bent

over a cold river to get a drink of water.

"But instead of taking water into his cap or palm, he plunged entirely into the water.

"We drew him up, but he forgot to pull his name out of the water.

"Kindly take pains, your ladyships, to have him recall it again, otherwise it would prove—hm—impracticable—perhaps also dangerous—to have love affairs with a nameless fellow. . . .

"Boiani! Your lips have become very blue.

"Do embrace firmly the most beautiful princess and kiss her rosy lips loudly and passionately until your bloodless, violet ones blush and burn with fire. . . ."

With these words, Dobrovsky's eyes constantly bored Boiani with an unearthly flame, as though he threw out of them a superhuman, omnipotent power.

Boiani embraced the air in front of him, and acted as though he kissed someone.

Dobrovsky watched him, and spoke to himself rather than to the others:

"Why do I not see anything? . . .

"Can there be no power of imagination for me? . . .

"Is not all life actually an illusion? . . .

"Envy overpowers me. . . ."

. . . . . .

Dobrovsky ran about like one possessed.

He stopped for a while, looking alternately up to the black sky, and down into the gorge.

In his face there was visible a battle between the sorrow and pride of a man who, tossed down into the abyss of existence, feels all the dread of his weakness.

"Oh," he broke out, laughing sardonically, "with what delight would I shatter the stone-like heavens to fragments and thrust all their powers down into this chasm!

"May the emperors, the rulers, all the higher powers, who have cast mankind into the maw of the universal inferno, fall down, themselves, into the fiery sea in which human beings burn!

"Then they would become genuinely human, and human beings, in turn, brothers."

. . . . . .

Each individual made efforts to imitate Dobrovsky's spirited running.

However, it proved difficult, and it was only Szabo who succeeded in matching him. He next to Dobrovsky possessed the greatest vigor.

But for a short time, the life instinct surged within them so forcefully that they jumped with equal dash.

In those death-like countenances of the skeletons, it was only the eyes that gleamed with a burning unquenchable desire to live.

A faint smile in these eyes and their fire kindled by the hope of life, which the dance had awakened, stood in still more glaring contrast to their dying faces.

. . . . . .

With signs of an angry and malicious impatience, Szabo began to inspect his comrades.

Right now, he pierced me with his glance.

His eyes seemed to question eloquently:

When, at last—will one of us? . . . How long must we still wait? . . .

In the first moment, it flitted through my mind that it was not my comrade, but destruction that stared at me.

I was about to shriek like someone tortured by a black nightmare. But I instantly regained my composure.

"You think," I said to him, "that I cannot run as well as you? . . . Look here!"

And I started running around the bush, in Szabo's very manner.

Moreover, in order to give greater proof of what

strength and courage I possessed, in spite of the tormenting languor of anxiety and death, I began to yodel, in a trembling and broken voice, a merry, sprightly folk-song.

. . . . . .

Szabo turned away from me.

He now began to jump in front of Boiani alone, looking into his eyes, persistently and provokingly.

Scarcely alive, yet setting one foot before the other, Boiani, very languidly, lowered his gaze again and again. For, as often as he looked at Szabo, a deathly tremor overcame him.

And even though his eyes were downcast, he felt Szabo's glance pressing like a stone slab upon his entire body. This glance deprived him of any resistance whatever.

"Why do you look at me like . . . like a devil? . . ." he ventured to ask Szabo, in his weak voice. "I want to live! . . . I want to live!"

Szabo gave no answer, but pinned his deadly glances still more fixedly upon him.

"I cannot endure this devilish stare. . . ." Boiani moaned. "Now I wish I could instantly die . . . or something like lightning might extinguish within me all sensaton of fear and suffering. . . ."

He rested his eyes on the mountain that hid its peak in the black clouds.

He shivered like a wavering flame in the darkness.

"May it descend. . . ." he lisped, "crush . . . peace . . . end . . . this very moment. . . ."

Over again, he repeated these phrases.

"Look!" Boiani exclaimed suddenly. "The huge mountain divides the black clouds already. . . . It topples straight over me!"

He cast himself down, and waited for the mountain to tumble down and crush him.

Lo! There before him gleamed Szabo's eyes.

Boiani leaped to his feet, stumbled and fell.

"No—no!" he cried, terror stricken. "It is not a mountain—it is man who wants to kill me! . . ."

Terror gave him new strength.

He sprang up like a ball rebounding from the ground, and began to dance anew.

"She has tripped me up," he cried out, "but here is a kick . . . a kick! . . . Ha, ha, ha!"

He thrust with his foot as though at some person whom he then appeared to push toward the chasm.

. . . . . .

The delirious jumps of the weakest man seemed to have inspired the others.

Even Pshyluski, who had kept very close to the edge of the precipice, now plunged amongst the runners, with a stony expression of face.

"Away with you—you *debauchée!*" he shouted continuously.

Everyone started to cry out against some being whose footsteps were slowly drawing nearer—silently and ominously.

It was like the outcry of people in a virgin forest at midnight who wish to startle into flight something that hovers in the enchanted stillness, only to rush upon them at any moment.

Boiani chuckled.

"I have pushed her down the precipice!"

Nikolich stammered:

"Oh, my darling, my darling!"

Pshyluski:

"Away with you!"

Szabo cursed in Hungarian. Dobrovsky gnashed his teeth, while I repeated for some unaccountable reason:

"The sun . . . the sun! . . ."

Stranzinger alone stood aside, silent as a statue.

Like dry, storm-driven thistles, like wisps of straw on high-bounding billows, the human shadows

fluttered in the reckless dance of life and death.

. . . . . .

Their death-carven faces resembling dingy-grey, green and purple clay that threatens every moment to fall to pieces, their singular shouts and the wild, marrow-rending music of Dobrovsky—all this inspires an illusion that the world is unhinged.

They are tormented by the thought that the earth will be rent asunder beneath them, and the heavens crash down upon them.

Something unknown like the mystery of all existence, something boundless like eternity, peers through their eyes and expresses itself in every movement.

What is that?

A tiny spark.

It grows and grows until it breaks out into a fire that sets the world aflame.

The universal fire of life is burning over the world abyss of nothingness.

Which will be victor?

. . . . . .

Suddenly, I feel as though my consciousness were somewhere outside me.

Dream? Or hinges which spring away, unloosened? . . .

Or, perhaps, a phantom possible only here, in this icy pit? . . .

Something is moving around my ear, trying to enter it by force. . . .

A spectral fly. . . .

And in the humming of this fly, I hear again and again:

"Never . . . never. . . ."

With my hand I drive away this spectre although I do not see it. Yet in the next moment, I again perceive this sinister humming. . . .

I flee to the edge of the chasm and, exhausted, wearied, crouch down.

But the fly hums now as before. Again it buzzes like a distant, incessant echo of the funeral bells:

"Never . . . never . . . never. . . ."

But gradually, this buzzing relieves me from the sensation of dread—it even quiets me.

I am beginning to sense a joy that this monstrous fly, this demon, god, devil, this somebody—knows that we are here, that human beings are here!

That is to say—in hell, or possibly somewhere in heaven—possibly in an abyss—possibly amidst the crosses of a graveyard—in an ice-bound, endless vacuum, there, probably, is still a somebody who

thinks of us, a something that thinks of us. . . .

It is unimportant, immaterial, what it is that thinks of us. . . .

But—it thinks of us! . . .

Perhaps, it is our fate? . . .

. . . . . .

O Fate!

Shall we never return to the sun path from the frost-sealed coffin to which our world here has been transformed?

What power could wrest us from this frozen hell?

Oh, there is no such power.

There is nobody any more.

God has damned us.

It is only demons that wait for our destruction.

All great, all good powers have renounced us.

Who knows, if, perhaps, there are still in heaven —in the air—on the earth, little, angel-like beings who possess some healing power.

Perhaps, these little angels could save us. . . .

Perhaps—oh!

Son, oh, my little son!

Pray, my boy, pray for your father!

Perhaps, your innocent angel prayer will break through the obdurate firmament of the heavens. For

it is bitterly hard for your father to die—oh, if you knew how hard it is to die without having seen you once more, even for the last time.

. . . . . .

Boiani ceased jumping and running, and gazed down into the gorge, in search of something.

"*Madre mia*," he abruptly sobbed and screamed, "—where are you? . . ."

"Do not weep, Boiani, before anyone except your mother," said Dobrovsky, "because it is only a mother who will understand and feel compassion with your tears. To give you an example, I shall have a chat with a person with whom at one time I was on friendly terms."

That very moment, Pshyluski, who stood a few feet distant, and with listless stupor viewed the dark world around us, turned to Dobrovsky. It was for the first time that his mute indifference gave way.

With a singular curiosity he fixed his eyes on Dobrovsky, and began with a tension and mustering of all his strength to listen to him, as though Dobrovsky's next words were destined to bring him liberation, or death.

Yet Dobrovsky did not notice this strange attention shown by Pshyluski.

"My last meeting with her," he spoke, "lives in my memory as clearly as though I had this woman now before my eyes.

"Your Ladyship, you do not recognize me because I am in masquerade costume. For a bit of warmth from your tender heart, I shall give you all the fire that is bursting from my entire ego as from a volcano.

"This fire within me is under the spell of such a heat that I should like to dampen it somewhat with the stream of my tears. . . .

"To my sorrow, my tears are frozen. . . .

"I have a long journey before me from which I shall never return.

"Give me, in farewell, your little white hand. . . .

"Did my hand frighten you?

"You will not? . . .

"You say it is the hand of a skeleton? . . .

"Allow me, then, to kiss you—the same way I did once upon a time. . . .

"You cry out, in fear. . . .

" 'Instead of a face, you have the hollows of a corpse' . . . you say. . . .

"Why, you well know what gave me hands and cheeks like these. . . .

"Shall I tell you about that once again? . . .

"What is the use? . . .

"Anyway, while I was dying in the trenches during a cannonade, your patience to wait for me gave out.

"And so you have flung yourself upon the neck far away . . . to distant sunny lands. Imagination, that yearns for warmth and light, paints these

I would better not have asked at all. . . .

"But you had only one answer:

" 'To the—devil with you!' . . .

"From that moment, I do not weep any more. On the contrary, I always laugh and make sport of life, and death. It is only my soul that cries perpetually for its lost faith both in the woman and the human being. Under the mask there is my soul alive. I no longer have a body. . . . But you never will see the soul nor will you hear its crying, for it is only a soul that can see, feel and understand another soul.

"Do you flee from me? . . ."

Then, turning to his comrades, Dobrovsky called:

"See, with what contempt she turns her back upon me!

"Do not weep, Boiani, before a woman who proves to be merely a soulless puppet, for her mouth

will distort itself in feminine repugnance at the sight of your low spirits.

"Neither tears nor souls should you show women, the puppets, but only your bodies wrapped up in the most fashionable rags festooned with dazzling trinkets, and lined with highly-colored, sweetly-sensual, brainless word-embroidery!

"Then, any woman will be yours—for a short time. . . ."

Dobrovsky turned again toward the vision of his erstwhile sweetheart.

"You say," he asked, "you cannot find a single word for an eternal farewell?

"Well, be that as it may, I cast upon you the most fatal curse: May such a dance as we perform here, be destined for you."

He paused and allowed his gaze to wander over the jumbled sea of fog. He seemed to be seeking his bygone spring.

. . . . . .

In this whirl of running, dancing, shouting, and outbursts of emotion, it was difficult to define where the intellect ended, and where madness began.

Boiani, in utter exhaustion, could no longer run.

He paused and looked down into the chasm. His

weary eyes rested on the ice-woven heaps of fog.

But the cold forced him to jump again.

He took a few steps, and fell.

Now he was no longer able to rise easily to his feet.

He struggled long, an insane expression in his eyes, and painfully raised himself to his knees.

Supported thus, he scanned again the tangled sea of fog.

Suddenly, his eyes flashed with a joyous fire, and his lips smiled. . . .

He stretched out his arms to the pale-blue distant fog.

"Palm, O palm! . . ." he called. "For a year I have not seen you. . . . How glad I am to see you again! . . . Somebody is standing under the palm-tree on the seashore. . . .

"A boat leaves the shore. . . .

"And in it is. . . . Oh, who is that? . . . God! . . .

"My mother! . . .

"Look there! . . .

"She is swimming straight toward me! . . .

"O madre, mia carissima madre, I, your son, am here! . . .

"I will not wait. . . .

"I will plunge into the sea. . . .

"I will swim to you. . . ."

With a last effort, he rose to his feet, and hurried to the brink of the gulf to hurl himself to the bottom.

But Szabo, who had watched him closely, caught him instantly by the waist, and held him back from the chasm.

The unfortunate one fell.

He was no longer able to rise.

Fear, desperation and madness wrested a scream from him:

"Death! . . . O God! . . . Have pity on me. . . ."

His comrades gathered about him, and hung their heads, in silence.

With imploring eyes, Boiani looked at each comrade, one after another. But on meeting Szabo's gaze, he rent the snowy desert with his shrill voice:

"Madre mia! . . . Save me! . . . Save me! . . . This man is going to kill me! . . ."

"Do not think of me that way, comrade," said Szabo, "I, too, am human." And he glanced at Boiani with eyes in which flashed a gleam of compassion.

On noticing a humane spark in Szabo's eyes and hearing his warmth-breathing words, Boiani's eyes

and face radiated with brightness. He held out to Szabo his hand which resembled a small dirty piece of ice.

"Szabo," he spoke in a soft, tender voice, "let us shake hands!"

Szabo did it, and the two wretched, blue-dimmed hands rested for a moment in each other. It seemed as though sympathy had recreated the light and the warmth that had left their world.

"Now I no longer fear death. . . ." said Boiani, releasing Szabo's hand.

For a while, he viewed his comrades placidly and serenely, almost merrily, as a small strip of azure sky unexpectedly becomes visible upon earth, amid the battle of elements.

Abruptly, a shadow fell across his face. "I beg of you, comrades," he said in a broken, hardly audible voice, "In case you see my mother—in case my mother should ask you about me . . . tell her, comrades, tell my mother that . . . that . . . you never knew or saw me . . nor have heard anything of me . . . never."

A short sob shook him.

"No, no . . . comrades," he continued, "do not say that to her. . . . Convey to my mother. . . . Lord

God . . . what shall I, miserable one, tell her? . . .

"Many tender greetings from me . . . and give her a—dear, warm, good word from me. . . . And tell her, friends, that I died . . . in a warm room . . . on a white bed. . . ."

His last tears covered his eyes in their deep sockets.

"Please, brothers. . . ." he asked, "help me to get up. . . ."

They lifted him.

With his faded hand, he wiped his eyes.

Then he again cast a glance at the fog.

"I do not see anyone! . . ." he exclaimed, in disappointment. "Was it in a dream that I saw my mother? . . .

"Madre mia, do not float over to me. . . . For, if you were to see me—your heart would surely break from grief. . . .

"Addio, madre . . . and do not bewail me much."

His comrades laid him softly on the frozen snow.

"I feel cold . . . cold . . . cold. . . .

"I beg of you, brothers . . . make an end of my life —that I may not . . . suffer long . . . like this. . . ."

"Do not worry, brother," Dobrovsky comforted him. "You will instantly fall asleep, and all your

pain will pass. Soon, all of us will fall asleep, and all will be well with us, together with you."

Shortly Boiani fell asleep and—was well.

His mother came to him, after all. . . .

And while sleeping he did not feel any pain nor did he see death. He only smiled joyously, for his face felt the heart throbs in the warm bosom of his mother.

. . . . . .

They stripped the dead body of its clothes, and made a fire.

With pensive brows downcast, they listened to the sizzling of the fire.

Their souls had flown away to distant lands. As autumn dew, their souls fell on the windows of the white houses. As invisible angels, they hovered about the human heads, and kissed them welcome and farewell.

. . . . . .

After a long silence, some of them cast a glance at the corpse of their comrade.

He lay there, skin-clad bone—shrunken—like a splinter. His breast seemed to have torn asunder the whitish-green skin out of which the ribs, like naked beggars, peered sadly into the dismal world. His

swollen violet legs and arms stood out from the body strange and ghastly. His bluish face, too, was swollen.

Yet—Death had failed to efface the happy smile that overspread his whole countenance, and left to it a soft, tender expression.

And it seemed to them that his stiffened smile was saying:

"Brothers, now I am happy. . . ."

And as they gazed upon the corpse, there played over the lips of each of them the suppressed, unspoken question:

Whose turn will it be now? . . .

. . . . . .

"Such is human destiny!" Dobrovsky broke the heavy silence. "Weeping, man came into the world, then he laughed, sang, learned to walk, and in the end trotted, poor devil, up to this place, where, only after the hideous spasms of suffering in this damned wilderness of ice, he found rest, once and for all."

"Strange. . . ." Nikolich remarked, "he lies there, with a smile—in spite of all. . . ."

"This smile of his—is a spark of happiness," Dobrovsky explained. "A momentary delusion, amidst pangs and torpor, has kindled this spark."

"Shall we also share such happiness?" Nikolich anxiously asked.

The others shrank.

. . . . . .

Dobrovsky, motionless, gazed long upon the fire.

But his eyes, apparently, did not see it.

They were wandering in the deep, impassable labyrinths of his soul, in search of something.

Finally, he stared beyond the fireplace into the tranquil, icy distance.

"Cursed be the life," he gave a sigh, "in which the stronger can only live upon the corpse of the weaker!"

CHAPTER II

SEARCHING

THEY are crouching around the fire, and feel a renewed, long-forgotten life starting to flow stream-like through their veins.

The crackling of the fire falls benevolently and sweetly upon their ears, like the caressing prattle and chuckle of a baby.

Not for the most beautiful song nor for any other wonderful music would they now exchange the sound of this fire; for music, at this moment, would beat upon their frozen souls in heavy, glaring discord.

The song-like crackling of the fire awakens sensations and thoughts from lethargy. Like convicts from a grim prison, they escape from their pain-stricken minds. Like birds of passage, they migrate far away . . . to distant sunny lands. Imagination,

that yearns for warmth and light, paints these lands in rare colors. No snow glistens there, no frost is numbing life—there no human tears flow. Eternal peace and quiet happiness prevail there. Azure heavens bend lovingly over an earth plunged into green endlessness.

There blessed summer ever displays its beauties—there the sun shines eternally. A sun so massive that it covers the heavens. It shines so loveably, so luxuriously—ah! it warms . . . warms. . . .

Like the shoreless current of a wide river, the light is diffused over the green pastures, flower-adorned meadows, steppes, villages that dart into blossoming corners of the orchards, as though playing hide-and-seek with the sun.

Its shimmering rays seek rest upon the tree tops of somnolent forests, orchards, poplars and willows.

On the blue horizon, on the edge of the dusky forest, with its majestic perpetual brooding, on the green mat of luscious grasses, the air shimmers in the luxuriant glow of the sun. It quivers . . . quivers. . . .

The sun loves man.

It descends from the heavens, and alights upon human souls. Wherever there is a heart, there the sun shines.

Men hide among the white flowers in the green grasses, smile at the light, and bless it. Some, however, seem already drunken with the life they had drawn in from the sun. They lead their little children into the orchards to sit there in the shadow of the apple and cherry trees.

. . . . . .

Above the snow-shimmering mountain peaks, over the grey, petrified clouds, the souls of the shadows find a path, and along it send their dreams, their yearnings—to the happy people in the sun realms.

Now they are wealthy in poverty, happy in unhappiness.

Now they live half asleep, half awake.

All that which life had wrested from them, it now restores in dreams as realities perceptible in the depths of distress, because they seem to see before them all that of which they are only thinking. That for which they yearn, appears to their eyes in full animation and colorfulness.

The boundless spaces vanish; the grey fog melts away; and the sunny land emerges like a silver-irradiated vision before the shadows, and glimmers close in front of them.

Through the veil of longing, reverie, and sun-rays, their eyes behold a picture:

Someone is sitting with drooped head.

Someone is kneeling and raising his hands heavenward. . . .

Someone is writing a tender letter. . . .

Someone dries his tears. . . .

A little boy looks eagerly into someone's eyes—he surely is asking:

"Mother, when will father come back to us?"

. . . . . .

Suddenly, all the visions have been scared away, like birds, by a strange, fearful voice:

"Do not run away from the sun! Do not hide in the shadow!"

The blind one became afraid of his own voice. He started up from his semi-slumber.

"Where are we? . . ." he asked, fearfully, turning, in astonishment, his sight-quenched eyes to his comrades.

They shrank.

It was as though the myriad souls of men, lying in the immeasurable burial ground of existence and seeming to suffer still in the grave, arose from those

graves at the hour of midnight, asking one another:

"Where are we? . . ."

. . . . . .

I gave his face a glance.

It seemed the countenance of a being who was no longer of this world. Though this man was only twenty-four years of age, nevertheless his blind eyes, his greenish-earthy face furrowed by deep ditches and wrinkles, his thick grey-bleached hair, had made of him an old man.

Once in these beautiful, dreamy eyes flashed the spark of youth and enthusiasm for all lofty ideas.

No. It is impossible that this human being should for all eternity find only darkness before his eyes.

Why should the mouse, the mole, the snake enjoy the sunbeam, but not man?

Is it the highest justice, or the tragedy of existence that mouse, snake, and man of genius should be to nature equally dear and equally indifferent?

. . . . . .

Centuries seem to have passed since this happened.

Cannon balls rend earth and man.

All around, hell, madness, death, rage.

Every man dies a thousand times within one brief second.

He alone is lying calmly in the trench.

And his eyes—oh, I never shall forget those eyes!

So mildly, with such child-like innocence and love, they gaze, as though they unconsciously wished the stony heavens to be touched by the holy kindness and beauty of the human heart.

They would reveal to the night of life the immortal sunlight and hope of the human spirit.

. . . . . .

Now, however, dark cavities mark where his eyes once shone.

This is the product of the cruelty of men and the heavens!

His whole form, with its covering of innumerable patches full of holes, the fleshless, withered fingers on his blue hands—all this is not a mere picture, but the living ghastly embodiment of such ineffable, immeasurable suffering that there are no words, no human tongue, no ability to express it.

I study him, and pain rasps upon my soul.

My poor brother!

Your pain, damned to eternal silence, might move even the cold rocks to pity. But it will not move the evil powers, in their strutting gait through heaven and earth.

Why are my hands infirm to lead you out of this icy tomb? Why are all of us here so helpless, and you, holy brother of mine, the most unfortunate among us?

. . . . . .

I am seized with a strange desire.

If I were a ruler, an emperor, a god, I would kneel in the dust, in the swamp, in the snow, in the mire before this poorest man suffering in the depths of existence!

I would ask for his forgiveness for all the unthinkable tortures that I had brought down upon him through my selfishness and cruelty!

I, the emperor, the god, would weep before him like a child, that I overcast the white blossom of his spring with the winter of old age and ruin; that I extinguished the rays of light which his mind might have cast over future generations, and plunged him, like a clod of earth, a pebble, a speck of dust, cruelly, aimlessly, to be the prey of death.

But no!

Even a small clod of earth, a pebble, a mote, the dark void of a gulf—everything has an aim, end, destiny.

On the clod of earth, a seed will sprout. A peb-

ble will pave a way. A mote, when united with other motes, will rise in a dust-cloud, and darken the light to man.

An abyss will block man's way, and devour him.

But what aim or destiny has he—have I—have all the rest of us here?

Who will answer this question?

Where must one seek after Thee, O Heavenly Power?

In the vapors of human blood?

In the smoke of universal conflagration?

Why dost Thou look so indifferently upon all this?

Why art Thou silent?

. . . . . .

Yet God, the frozen graveyard of nature, even death itself—everything has grown deaf and silent.

Over all the earth spreads the vast, weird pallor of a corpse.

High overhead, in the heavens, there extends the immeasurable blackness of death and vacancy.

And my tortured soul wanders, like a blind beggar, in endless, dark, impenetrable deserts, and again and again asks in vain:

Where is light . . . life . . . God?

. . . . . .

"You are sighing, Nikolich," I voiced my compassion. "Did you also leave someone—over there—far away, somewhere in the world?"

"Father and mother," the other whispered, and pressed his stained sleeve against his eyes.

"I have nobody," Szabo anticipated my question.

"Your loneliness is your good fortune," said Nikolich.

"Do you think so?" Szabo objected. "Can a lonesome individual ever be happy? . . .

"Who knows," he said to himself rather than to the others, "perhaps, loneliness in happiness is more painful than that in distress. . . ."

"Nobody longs for you. . . ." Nikolich sighed, "nor do you know what yearning means—be satisfied."

. . . . . .

"Whom did you, Pshyluski, leave at home?" I asked.

"My children."

"And your wife? . . ."

"That is—yes and no. . . ."

"How do you mean that? . . ."

"Do not ask me."

Pshyluski moaned heavily and, with hanging head, let his eyes rest on the fire.

. . . . . .

I cast a glance at our blind comrade, and shuddered.

Why did I ask my comrades about their families?

I would better not have asked at all. . . .

He must have heard everything.

. . . . . .

Yet he seems to have banished thought of the terrible fate of his family as well as his own.

And he sits now as if, once living, he had been changed into a monument of stone upon the grave of his own life.

Do not waken the pain that sleeps.

That would be a crime. . . .

. . . . . .

"When my body was becoming frozen," said Nikolich, "my mind was thinking only of how to save my life. But, at this time, I feel somewhat warm. After all, what of it? A heavy stone weighs on my soul and presses upon it incessantly.

"Nor do I know which is more painful: The frost, the pangs, or, perhaps, the craving for those whom, in all likelihood, I never shall see again?"

. . . . . .

From the gorge, in front of the exiles, a white little cloud again emerges, and it rises slowly, softly, stealthily, as though it were afraid, because, amidst the frozen stillness and lethargy of nature, it alone represents motion—life. . . .

But on its way, it becomes faint and remains suspended, motionless between mountains and sky.

. . . . . .

Nikolich looked back at the road over which they all had come. In the far distance—on the horizon—a huge, mysterious shadow appeared, spreading itself across the path stamped by men in the snow.

"Comrades," Nikolich whispered, "look over there—at this strange shadow on the road. . . . The road, and a shadow across it. . . . That is a cross—a huge cross. . . . What does this cross mean? . . . What is its omen? . . ."

. . . . . .

They looked in silence at the gloomy mystic cross and listened to the ominous whispers of their hearts.

. . . . . .

I do not know exactly why this mystic cross on the road resembles the stream of life.

What day of the week is today?

I do not know anything now.

The creaking wheel of time has stopped.

The future no longer beckons to me; there stands —alas! no past behind me.

And my present?

It is a drop of blood fallen somewhere on the glacial, very narrow, endless thread between two eternities. It is a wound gaping ever wider and deeper. Its pale blood covers everything that was, that is, and that will be.

. . . . . .

Perhaps, it is the truth . . . perhaps it only seems so to me. . . .

It has been—or soon will be—three years since my son was born.

Where are you now, my boy?

I do not dare to ask if you are well, for I do not even know that you are alive.

Oh, how happy I would be if I knew that you, and your mother—that you both are alive and well! Then, I would not be so unhappy and lonely here. The clouds that look down on me would not appear so cold and dark. The icy desert would not waft waves of cold cruelty against me.

God and men forgot me; they cast me off and abandoned me.

My soul is torn by a thousand wounds.

My body is abandoned to slow, certain destruction—that, my boy, is the way in which your father celebrates your birthday!

When thinking of you and your mother I fear my utter anguish will drive me mad—if indeed I have not become so, long ago.

Tell me, fellow men, where are these two?

Do they still live?

Vain question! . . .

My comrades are as poor and wretched as myself. How, indeed, should they know the answer.

Silent are the mountains, silent is the snow-waste. Silent is the wind blast—it blows not hither from my distant Ukraine.

O artist, strange and full of genius!—thou who, since the beginning of life, hast beat ceaselessly, but with artistic measure within my breast; toiling to direct the streams of blood with which thou nourishest my thought; kindling the spark of feeling into a flaming firebrand—O thou, my heart!

I pray thee, cease beating so untiringly!

Rest with me—for ever.

. . . . . .

And yet, how strange!

Something remains hidden in the depths of my heart. Small, pale, scarcely perceptible.

Hope.

Perhaps the cruel enemy, who overran my homeland and forced an entrance into my house is reminded by the sight of my boy on his frightened mother's arm that he, too, has left wife and child behind. Perhaps that recollection saved my wife and child from disgrace and death.

. . . . . .

There is only one thing that forces the greatest fear upon me. A nightmare is harassing me day and night. Constantly before my eyes appears the ghastly picture of death which I had seen at Munkacs, in northern Hungary.

I fear to recall that dreadful—that dreadful—

No, I cannot bear to look at those soldiers, with their blackened faces. They struggle to leave the train which has brought them from my native land. Nobody is permitted to approach them and greet them. Only a dog is running toward them.

Someone shouts . . . someone fires. . . .

The dog howls grievously and flees. The animal must pay with wounds for its attachment to man, for even the dog must not greet the approach of the epidemic-stricken.

The soldiers lie close by the train. They writhe and twist in convulsions.

Finally, one shows pity on them. . . .

While their groans are deepest, one comes to them, and claims them. . . .

Death.

Perhaps . . . mother and son. . . .

Cold sweat-drops stand on my brow.

Away with you, black apparition!

Help! Help!

It rushes straight upon me! . . .

. . . . . .

This nightmare will drive me mad.

And yet, I cannot believe that you, my boy, no longer are alive. My brain cannot conceive the thought that your tiny arms, which once used to embrace your father so tightly, have become dead already, and now rest motionless in the raw earth.

No, you are alive, my boy, and your mother.

Yes, both of you are living.

I kiss your little head, and wish that you may never share the fate of your father. And after you have grown up you will not long for me as now I long for you. For you will not be able to remember when you, too, had a father and played on his lap.

Your mother will teach you that your father died in the war, and you will repeat my name, with reverence.

When you ask where my grave is, your mother will say that your father rests amid the steppes of the wide, flowering Ukraine.

Neither your mother nor you, my boy, will know that I shall not rest in our Ukrainian homeland, but that far away, in a foreign soil, the hungry wolves have torn my body to pieces, and scattered my bones over the Albanian mountains, forsaken by God and man.

Goodbye, my boy—for ever. For ever? . . .

Who knows. . . . Perhaps I shall see you and your mother again. . . .

Oh! What a strange idea!

That I shall see you and your mother again! . . .

What a fanciful fairy tale!

Is it not madness to imagine that I might escape from this world inferno in which all mankind is suffering, and out of this dark pit in which I am now dying, and see you both again, alive and well?

It was long ago, my boy, since I received the last letter from your mother.

She wrote that when she asked you where your

father was, you looked with your small eyes thoughtfully somewhere far into the distance, that you pointed somewhere with your little hand, and said:

"There. . . ."

And now, whenever I look toward the mountain that looms yonder, severe and gloomy, I seem always to hear you speaking:

"There. . . ."

Oh, my son!

Above, on the mountain top, death lies in ambush, ever stretching out its bony arms—for me . . . from behind the rock.

. . . . . .

O fate!

Ease my suffering! That I may, at least in my dreams, see my boy in the arms of my wife!

But if it should be my lot to die here, I wish to become insane before I die, that, at least in my imagination, I may dream of that bygone domestic happiness to which the entrance has been for ever barred to me by thee, my fate!

. . . . . .

"I long for nobody and for nothing," said Dobrovsky, "why should I? On the contrary, I ask myself, sometimes—

"For what purpose has the animal whim brought me into the world? Is this shabby existence of mine indeed worth worrying about? This brutal, and corrupt world is not for me. The most painful thing is that all that is savage and predatory in man swims to the surface. This war has dragged human beings down to the level of ravening beasts, most of all, those people who never lay dying in the fire of battle.

"But into the deepest pit have sunk those women who, by their lying, hypocrisy, cruelty, boundless avarice, and exhibition of lust, have outdone the most beast-like of men."

Panting, Dobrovsky stopped, his eyes glowing with anger.

"Hard it is to die amidst the roar of grenades—in hunger and cold," he began anew, "but much harder to live amidst the animalism and degeneracy of present-day mankind! Therefore, I assure all of you that, if someone should meet us here still alive and should try to rescue us, I shall jump down into this gorge, but not return to a world long since doomed."

He lapsed again into silence.

. . . . . .

"Well, thirty bullets—that is enough!" murmured Szabo who for some time was preoccupied with the rifle, and counted the cartridges, again and again.

"Enough for what?" asked Dobrovsky, in a lifeless tone.

Szabo made no reply. He proceeded to tie his belt with cartridges over his shoulders, grasped the rifle and arose with alacrity.

It was only then that his face brightened with a mysterious courage.

"Within an hour," he promised, "each one of us will have roast beef!"

Nikolich, with a bewildered expression upon his face, watched Szabo turn away, and start out.

He leaped up quickly, caught up with Szabo and embraced him.

"O Szabo, dear—saviour of ours! . . ." he cried.

"Leave me alone!" the other grumbled. "Do not act like a woman."—But his eyes twinkled with satisfaction, nevertheless.

"Szabo, take me along with you—"

"Do not be silly! With what will you shoot—with your nose?"

"But in case, God grant, you should shoot a deer, . . . how will you carry it along?"

"He would like to have deer all at once!" Szabo nodded over to us. "Wait, do not be so ravenous! A hare, or a cat will be enough!"

In the meantime Dobrovsky had started up from his place by fire, with an eagerness depicted upon his face.

"What—you, too, Dobrovsky?—No, no—stay here, and take care of the fire. I shall go alone."

Whistling a march, Szabo hurried off.

A few yards away from us, he stooped and lifted something small and flat.

"It will burn, I suppose," he called over to us, flinging the find dexterously in Dobrovsky's lap. "Let some one of you fetch the dry twigs lying here in the snow!—So long!"

The hope of getting food and relief increased their strength and took away the anguish from their hearts and faces. Even the frost seemed to have lost its icy grip, and the snowy distance ahead of them seemed to take shape and to say to them:

Seek, and ye will find.

They looked incessantly after Szabo until his grey soldier cloak began to merge with the greyness of the horizon and until his entire figure sank into the greyness of sky and earth.

Now Dobrovsky slowly wiped the snow and the icy coat from the find.

It was a book.

"After all," he said, "fate seems to accord us diversion in the monotonous hours of our limited earthly sojourn. Though—this book proves that we are not the first ones who discovered this snowy kingdom."

He paused, his features becoming earnest.

"Strange," he spoke again, "there is a cross stamped on the cover . . . Yes . . . yes . . . a prayer-book, and well preserved.

"Who knows who its owner was? . . . In any event, he lost it in one way or another. . . ."

Again he paused and examined the cover.

"This bullet-hole is a mystery," he reasoned after a while, as though to himself. "Probably the book had saved the life of its bearer—of course, on the firing line."

Most of them drew nearer to see for themselves.

"Dobrovsky," Nikolich asked at length, "may I have it?"

"Oh, you expect the prayer-book to be also your saviour—I see," the other smiled back. "Wait a minute!"

With his pocket-knife, he then cautiously began to unglue the cover from the leaves, one after another. It was only with the greatest effort that he succeeded in doing so.

"I wonder if there is the name of its owner. . . ." someone remarked.

"No, the name is lacking here," Dobrovsky denied. "Instead of that, a dedication: *Gott schuetze dich—Mutter.* One of similar talismans given by mothers to their sons on saying good-bye to them. How many of them will ever welcome back their dearest ones! . . ."

A hard quiver went through them and set them musing.

"At unusual times, such as a war, unusual things can happen," I said. "Perhaps, the man is still alive . . . somewhere. . . ."

"Guesswork, rather—nothing more," Dobrovsky replied while skimming the leaves, "he may still live, or he may not. Even though he had escaped death in the fire of battle he, nevertheless, may have starved—

"Good gracious! . . . Can any one imagine? . . . The velocity of the bullet broke just on the page with the Ten Commandments. . . . A symbolical and,

perhaps, unique occurrence in our world war! It speaks volumes!

"Look—you see? . . ."

Utter amazement held them spellbound.

"We shall simply drop the difficult matter," Dobrovsky finally decided. "Nikolich, you get the book. Here you are. . . . No, not yet! First fetch the twigs."

. . . . . .

"Splendid!" Dobrovsky acknowledged when Nikolich brought an armful of branches. "Give them to me, I shall fix the fire, myself. We have to save the fuel. Szabo's promise may come true—the fellow is an excellent marksman.

"Now it is our turn to ponder over the culinary problems," said Dobrovsky, with suppressed excitement.

"Who of us will be the chef? What kind of roast beef do you like? Roast hare, deer, bear, wolf, fox, wild boar? Who likes cutlets, steaks? . . . Who likes a soup meat? . . .

"What about salt? Would it not be appropriate if, in view of the situation, all of us became members of an anti-salt society? . . . Or, is it not possible to deceive our stomachs and their creator by making

meat salted with snow, instead of with salt?—"

"Do not dwell upon culinary delights so much," Nikolich interrupted, "because I have got pains in my stomach already."

"All right," the other assented, "let us go on talking about what we started to. In this way, we shall make the time of our waiting for Szabo shorter.

"Well then! What have we fought for? Was it to deliver the nations from slavery? Or, perhaps, for equality and brotherhood among men?

"No! These issues run counter the interests of the forces which had organized the war. On the other hand, *man* seems to have waited for this bloody orgy to unleash his bestial avarice.

"To give you one of the many examples in this regard, we have broken the Serbian front and have swept onward like a tide. A hundred feet ahead of me, I saw this very picture. A Serbian soldier lay prostrate—and my corporal beat that soldier's face, again and again, with his fists.

"I drew closer and saw that the Serb had long been dead.

" 'Why do you box the corpse's ear?' I demanded, infuriated.

" 'For the simple reason,' he said insolently, 'that

this Serbian dog has not a single penny in his pockets! . . .'

"Here is the spirit of our world war! Here is the genuine image of the biped beast called man!—"

"Dobrovsky," I asked, eagerly, "and that corporal—what did you do with him?"

"I sent a bullet into his head."

"I give you credit—the bestiality of human beings disgusted you beyond measure! So in your heart, in the hearts of many people, feelings of humaneness are still alive!

"Such feelings are for the present only as sparks under the ashes of human egotism and corruption. But there will come a time when these sparks will blaze into a conflagration, and burn to the ground all the rotten structures built upon the foundation of ferocious fighting between man and man, between nation and nation."

"Unless the ashes should first extinguish those sparks!" Dobrovsky cut in, drily.

"Here, among us," said Nikolich, "are represented the nations which usually hate and fight with one another. And yet we, their sons, cherish nothing but feelings of brotherhood for each other.

"In this way, we have already brought the ideal

of humaneness and brotherhood into realization."

"Nothing but a catastrophe," I observed, "capable of engulfing every nation in a maelstrom of common suffering, greater than ordinary human woe, will create a new and better world.

"Great suffering is the sole and underlying source both of spiritually creative life and common welfare. But it is only the spiritually strong who can endure that suffering.

"The weak will die of it.

"This world war, terrible as it is, seems to be only the first of such catastrophies which will bring about either humanity's true life, or its extinction."

"Extinction, rather. . . ." Dobrovsky interposed. "The world cataclysms which may take place will certainly find only spiritual corpses. With its trend to crass materialism, mankind shows a dullness toward things of the spirit.

"The great progress of civilization has been achieved at the expense of spiritual culture. Humanity of our times can or will not see the gulf between these two.

"It is obvious that the wider the world spaces that man conquers, the narrower and more contracted is his inner, spiritual life.

"The wider the range of the technical weapons with which man arms himself, the more his soul withers and shrivels."

"That is an abnormal phenomenon!" Nikolich said, grimly.

"And in the prevailing confusion an inevitable one!" Dobrovsky retorted. "Moreover, I have a bad premonition. Humanity will suffer under the weight of the mechanization of its life. There are indications to the effect that machinery will be at the disposal of the unscrupulous parvenus whose first and last words are mammon and power. The extremely petty human intellect controls its products, not to build up a beautiful life. If the formidable power of armaments exterminates human beings in war, other machines of the same power will likewise destroy human life in peace.

"In the long run, machines will oust out on the street millions of working people while their owners will eventually commit suicide on the heaps of wealth produced by their invented machines.

"In creating a vast mechanization of life, the captains of industry resemble those builders of the tower of Babel. However, they will not finish their tower; rather they will be destroyed by the

monster that they have created, for Nature takes a terrible revenge upon men for their endeavors to become its masters. For the rest, even the best of man-made machines are inadequate in comparison to the living mechanisms of nature. The shortcomings of human technique become more evident if we take into consideration, for instance, the ingenious structure of ants and bees. In short, human intellect, *perfect creation as it may be, cannot match the* instinct of many an animal—"

"Pardon my interruption, comrade," Nikolich asked, "but do you not overestimate those instincts?"

"I know what you are driving at!" Dobrovsky threw back. "You want to defend human superiority to the animals, forgetting that our sense of superiority turns us blind. We observe many plain phenomena, but we do not know how to draw from them the simplest conclusions. For instance, every one of us saw, not infrequently, a huge flock of ravens flying high overhead. But not every one contemplated what an accord and harmony, what sense of order directs these black-winged birds during their circling in the air.

"Bearing this in mind, let us imagine what would

happen if the population of a greater city should suddenly, by some magic, sprout wings and rise high in the air, but still retained its previous human character. I wager the fight among men would continue raging in the aerial sphere. Tax collectors would pull out human wings for unpaid taxes, lawyers would do the same for debts, proletarians would get at grips with *bourgeoisie,* envious and jealous women would entangle their delicate fingers in the hair and wings of other women; alcoholics would cut off the wings of their neighbors in order to get brandy; bandits and thieves would continue their trade in the air, by means of sticks, pistols, daggers and the like, endlessly. And the result? While during the ravens' flight there was not, is not and will never be any case where even one raven fell on account of its fellow-bird. If men flew in the air, however, every moment a man would fall upon our heads, wounded, stabbed, stunned, blinded, poisoned by his neighbor.

"But what is the use of considering hypothetic examples? What did we see in the war we have just left behind? Man has not yet learned how to fly because his aeroplane is a mere caricature as compared with the perfect wings of birds, and lo! he

is spreading the blackest crimes and death in the air, as well as down from the air, all around on the earth! God, is there any one who can tell me where is to be found that higher human intellect which at least can equal that of creatures?"

Tr-r-r-r-a-a-a-ch-ch-ch—!

This violent, strange, and shrill crack made their heads jerk up.

The abyss, mountains, heavens, and the snowy waste resounded long with the peculiar echo.

Excepting the blind Stranzinger, they all rushed to their feet and looked in the direction Szabo had gone.

He was not to be seen. But that left them unperturbed.

Certainly, it was Szabo who had fired.

With the eyes of their hearts, they clearly saw him preparing salvation for them.

"O Szabo, how dear you are to us!" Nikolich exclaimed, full of enthusiasm.

Slowly their excitement abated.

"That supposedly higher human intellect," Dobrovsky went on, "makes efforts to refashion the world—efforts inspired by blind and dull hatred.

High ideals serve the wicked intellect as a mask to cover its hypocrisy.

"What was the ideal that led us into the Albanian Mountains? What is the idea that requires our tortures and our death?

"Think of the bodies of forty-five thousand innocent fathers and sons—victims of hunger and cold, in these mountains! . . .

"Forty-five thousand people—a plaything of disgraceful death! . . .

"Oh, that bony witch! She who lurks for us here! She who today will strangle us, in the most cowardly and cruel way—in case Szabo brings us no salvation.

"We shall not even die a so-called hero's death, but we shall die here like blind puppies thrown down into a freezing musty pond."

He waved his hand, and crossed his legs in comfort.

"High ideals—well, nice words," he immediately grimaced, "why not? . . .

"But the world would be beautiful to live in were it not devastated by the deluge of ideals. . . . Yes, my friends. . . . It sounds like a paradox, but it is true. Ideals, as long as not realized, are of no value.

"Listen! The ideal of almost every religion is contained in the commandment: *Thou shall not kill!* Yet if all the people killed from time immemorial, in the name of divers faiths, by some miracle rose and appeared before us, then, at the sight of millions of these martyrs, we would exclaim: In the name of God, man transformed himself into a devil!

"What is supposed to go on at this moment—yonder, in the world?

"Millions of the French and their allies, on their knees, implore God in the churches to help them smash and kill off the Germans and their allies. People on the opposite side are praying similarly. Can any one imagine a worse profanation of religious ideals?

"Almost all the religions have made unthinkable compromises with murderous instincts of humanity. Consequently, the logic of almost every religious faith appears to be: *Thou shalt not kill but—kill!*

"And due just to this fundamental contradiction, all the religious beliefs are dying out more and more. Hence, if there are still believers, they are mostly of such a kind who believe in heaven for themselves, in hell for others—"

"It is a dreadful truth," Nikolich deplored.

"Nor is the ideal of national justice exempt from profanation," I commented. "The same wickedness divides nations into the privileged and outlawed ones, into the dominant and the subjugated ones. For this reason, it is but conceivable that nations, brought by their oppressors to despair, prefer a war to an accursed drudgery in bondage. They do that, not out of any love of war, but because the most dreadful war is to them less mortifying than the disgrace, torments and cruelties of slavery."

Dobrovsky nodded in affirmation.

"A fight for freedom is holy—always and everywhere!" he said firmly. "And now, let us take the idea of a state . . . because it is for an empire that we are now here! A state serves its purpose if it fosters peace and secures for its citizens the pursuit of happiness.

"Unfortunately, almost every state glorifies war. In this frame of mind, the governments welcome their being involved in a war in which they hurl millions of young people on the barbed wires, drive them to the cannon-balls, and erect mountains of corpses. And yet we are living in an enlightened century! Was our government not barbarous in forcing man to kill his fellow man for an interna-

tional quarrel, not of his making? What else if not brigands are the degenerate statesmen?" He foamed with rage beyond his wont.

"Europe, old wench that thou art!" He shook his clenched fists against the north. "The tears of any mother shed out of sorrow for her son that died in this war hell, are of greater value than all these bloodthirsty states! . . ."

Dobrovsky's eyes flashed both with fury and contempt.

Nobody dared to make any remark.

"Nikolich," he demanded, in a changed voice, "you possess the sharpest sight of all of us—get up and look out for Szabo."

The other rose, put his hand to his forehead and gazed for a few moments.

"No, I do not see Szabo yet," he asserted.

"It is a pity that there is no other rifle at our disposal," Dobrovsky complained.

He became silent and listened to the crackling of the fire.

. . . . . .

Suddenly the exiles started, listening to an abrupt crash, roar and din that reached their ears from the peaks of near mountains.

This unusual roar and bellow rolled down the slope more and more until it died away in the chasm, near the fire.

"Strange . . ." Nikolich whispered, in bewilderment. "The graveyard of nature is speaking for the first time. . . .

"What is that? . . ."

"It is hard to surmise," Dobrovsky reasoned, "we are here beyond the laws of nature—beyond the laws of heaven as well as earth. Probably, the ices in the mountains are cracking . . . or the frost is breaking up."

"How cold is it now here?"

"At most, three degrees below zero. But to the hunger-stricken people it is too much, anyhow."

"Dobrovsky, what is that? I cannot see Szabo as yet."

"He may be very busy—let us not worry."

"Go on, then, and tell us about ideals, dear friend of ours. We are anxious to hear more about them."

"Very well. . . . Our assembly looks like a congress of learned men who are discussing vital problems of mankind. Equipped with theoretical knowledge only, we have to analyze world conditions influenced by ideals. These mountains all around give

us an unlimited freedom of speech that was denied us in the outside world. It is true, the war got us out of the habit of thinking. Small wonder that conclusions we shall draw may appear incomplete or superficial. But the world will not take any notice of what we say. After all, humanity is not interested in us any more.

"While exposing ideals one cannot help comparing them with the ancient idols which are said to have required hundreds of men as blood sacrifices. Well, the cruelty that took place in the dark ages can, at least, be explained by the circumstance that idols were feared as the vengeful gods.

"The only difference between the insatiate pagan gods and our ideals is that, in our times, millions of people are dispatched to the other world by the exclusive beneficiaries of ideals such as liberty and patriotism. The tendency is for those in power to terrorize common people because of these ideals which, in reality, are of no practical use to the unprivileged. In other words, high ideals are ignominiously desecrated for the sake of the unscrupulous egotists.

"Bloody victims increase in direct proportion to the development of civilization. In the distant

past, man adhered to the principle: *Eye for eye, tooth for tooth!* Nowadays, hundreds of eyes for one, thousands of teeth for one tooth are demanded. On the one hand, deifying present-day man, on the other hand, a cynical disregard of his life.

"I should also compare ideals with the Biblical leper, Job. In their helplessness, they cry, groan, and lament. But as soon as these ideals sprout feathers, get strong, they transform themselves into the fight-obsessed, fanatical Apocalyptic monsters that breathe fire, and spread destruction and death all around.

"You see that ideals, instead of turning men into angels, make devils out of them. Instead of establishing a paradise here, they have turned the world into hell.

"On account of ideals, we are doomed here, and all humanity will perish a bit later. . . ."

Dobrovsky threw a few twigs on the fire and silently gazed at the small curly rings of smoke that rose above the group, and hastened upward to join the blackness of the sky.

The crushing power of the logic with which Dobrovsky had criticised the deadly effects of the militant ideals, impressed us profoundly.

I forgot that I was thinking in terms of eternity. The theme Dobrovsky outlined was too arresting to pass it in silence.

"Dear friend, Dobrovsky," I said gravely, "you have told us a great truth about ideals. Every ideal is beautiful, holy, divine, as long as it remains in an embryonic state. However, that very embryo is no longer the same after it has developed sufficiently enough to command rifles and cannons for its self-assertion. Love for fatherland, to quote one of the many ideals, transforms itself into a *sacre egoismo,* national and racial hysteria, expansion, conquest of weaker peoples. That is the order of the day that denies brotherhood of nations and mows down the flower of youth—"

Cr-r-r-a-a-ck-ck!—Cr-r-r-a-a-ck-ck! Cr-r-a-a-ck-ck-!

Sounds of shots were heard coming rapidly in quick succession from the direction in which Szabo had gone hunting.

Again our pulses quickened, and we experienced exhilarating emotions of joy and hope.

"Now we can rest assured that Szabo's efforts will end best!" said Dobrovsky while viewing his

comrades, with confidence. "This pleasant sensation reminds me of the happiest moments in my life.

"Vienna . . . university . . . lectures . . . my work in the beautiful library of the university. . . ."

"Once a week, dark beer from Munich in the Restaurant Mitzko—served by his daughter, the wonderful fraulein Mitzi. A girl, I tell you! . . .

"Pink and lily played hide-and-seek in her small face. And her hair—no, it was not hair—the morning sun eternally rose on her head.

" 'Fraulein Mitzi, *bitte schön,* please, a Viennese schnitzel with pickel—and a mug black beer. . . .'

" '*Bitte sehr,* right away.'

"She disappeared.

"Meanwhile I swiftly dropped my hand into my pocket to reassure myself—you know. . . . For a student's head is always full, but his stomach and pocket is cosmic emptiness.

"But, heaven be praised, there was just enough to pay for the ordered lunch.

" 'Fraulein—you favor me too much. . . . You have brought me a schnitzel as large as . . . as an acre of ground!—"

" 'What an imagination!' she burst out laughing while putting the plate and beer in front of me.

Her laugh rang out with the musical tinkle of little silver bells.

"But this laugh embarrassed me. I instantly realized that my comparison was somewhat clumsy.

" 'You see, fraulein Mitzi, I am not so hard working a fellow that I can afford to eat so much food. That is what I wanted to tell you. . . .' I well admit that I lied ungraciously. In reality, I could easily beat even two schnitzels like that.

" 'Then, you may leave the rest,' she twittered.

"Now I made overtures to the girl.

" 'To tell you the holy truth, I have to eat and drink everything from *you!* . . .'

" 'To drink everything from me? Why do you have to? . . .'

" 'Because I . . . because I—eh, I shall tell it in your ear. . . .'

"She bent over to me.

"Her little ear was like a very small fine white pie.

" 'I love you, fraulein—I cannot help—" I whispered, as is the habit with young men and charming girls.

" 'I do not believe you!'

" 'I shall prove it.'

" 'How?'

I grasped her small hand and kissed the fingers.

" 'What you think, I am married?' she said, in a changed tone, and withdrew her hand quickly.

"What was it? A reprimand, or kidding? . . . I did not know exactly whether she was annoyed, for it was for the first time that I happened to meet her all alone.

"So I resorted to my beer, in order to get courage and—inspiration from a gulp.

" 'Fraulein Mitzi, how nice it is here—in your room! Flowers, branches and greens in every corner. . . . Pictures everywhere on the walls. . . . Faust sitting on a beer barrel. . . I feel at home here—like in the middle age—fine. . . . Faust-like. . . . The walls are also full of wise and smart proverbs. . . . For instance, that opposite me, over there: A fat pig and niggard will only after their deaths make gifts of themselves!'

" 'A marvelous joke—is it not? Do you also like it? . . ."

" 'Yes, I do.'

" 'I like it extremely. But a hundred times more I like you, Mitzi, upon my word of honor.' "

" 'Oh, your word of honor!—'

" 'It holds—' I said while kissing her rosy-white cheek fervently.

" 'Let me alone!' she screamed in a muffled voice and broke away from me so hastily that I dropped in my chair. The girl rushed out of the room, leaving me in sheer amazement.

"Nor was there my mug of beer any more.

"O dear me! All was lost!

"Well, the loss of a sweetheart one could endure in some way. But how will you, unfortunate one, bear the shame of playing the part of an impostor? . . .

"Why, you have not a single penny, you chap, to pay for another beer in case—see! She brings it in—indeed!

" 'Fraulein Mitzi, the Germans are a genial people!' I began to flatter. 'On every hand, there are masterpieces of their art.

" 'The first one in this house is you, fraulein. The second one is your beer from Munich. The third one is your famous Viennese schnitzel, and the fourth masterpiece—my silver watch.

" 'Please take it as a pawn, because, you know, today I shall be short of money—'

" 'Stop talking nonsense!' she snubbed me.

'Here! . . .' she added while pressing sudden kisses on my lips. Then, she left.

"From that day, we loved each other for a long time . . . and faithfully.

"Now all is over—it will never return again. . . . Dante is perfectly right when he says: 'How hard and painful it is to recall happy moments in distress!' "

Dobrovsky made a gesture of resignation and breathed heavily.

"Is Szabo not coming yet?" he asked, with a faint uneasiness. "Any moment he ought to give a sign of himself."

All of us gazed earnestly but in vain over the landscape.

"*Now,* Turiansky, I understand Dante's loss of Beatrice," he said, in a low voice.

"Those words from Dante you have just quoted," I answered, "are to be taken literally in our present situation. Why, then, magnify our suffering by reminiscences like that? Rather let us come back to the interrupted theme of our talk. That would be more advisable."

"You may be right, brother. Where did we leave off? Wait, I have it! You spoke of chauvinism

and imperialism as the distorted offshoots of national aspirations. What do you say, are there still any ideals not abused, or not violated?"

"At least arbitrarily interpreted. Even the tenets of the Christian religion have ever since been subject to wilful disputes which are also in our days carried on by fundamentalists and modernists. But that is a chapter in itself.

"I should like to confine myself to one of the loftiest ideals, the commandment: *Love thy neighbor as thyself!* Human nature prone to selfishness has never coped with these beautiful and sacred words. In addition, civilization has done its best by developing the disastrous alienation among human beings. It has gone so far that not only nations are inimical to one another, but even within the limits of one and the same nation, one class hates the lower, another class the upper. Parties fight one another tooth and nail.

"Moreover, even family life is veiled with a fog of alienation. How often a father is a stranger to his son, in turn a son to his father, a wife to her husband, and vice versa! It is an occurrence that does not surprise anybody."

"Nothing but destructive forces regulate human

doings," Dobrovsky said philosophically.

"If evil forces are so rampant," I replied, "why should not the good assert themselves as efficiently? Of course, it requires great courage from the better section of humanity.

"I see no other remedy than the restoration of spiritual values universal in their application. Men ought to establish some fundamental, religious-like principles that would figure as an organic link between the harsh reality and the highest idealism, between earth and heaven, between man and God."

"Have you already formulated that idea?" Nikolich asked, reflectively.

I had to meditate for a moment.

"Not exactly an idea—but I suppose something like: *Back to humanism!* would appear acceptable to any one—"

"First of all, to me!" Dobrovsky exclaimed, apparently moved. "Yes, my dear Turiansky . . . Lord God, you are championing idealism that once, in our school days, lifted our young hearts above the rigid reality, above our surroundings—idealism that made us scorn all the barriers and created for us a different world! . . . Where are those happy times of enthusiasm and faith in humanity! . . .

Dear brother, you drive me into a state of melancholy. . . ."

I was awe-stricken. Was it the same Dobrovsky sceptical all the time I knew him? . . .

"Your thesis," he continued, "tends to elevate and inflame human hearts more than all the morbid doctrines of this senile age. You propose the culture of soul which brings unity and order into life, and promotes the greatest possibility of human dignity. Am I right in assuming that all that would ensue after humanity has passed through the unprecedented inferno you have previously mentioned? . . ."

"I had in mind nothing else, dear friend. I imagine that some universal upheaval will have to purge mankind of everything that is rotten. Only then a new era will follow."

"What should I say. . . . It would be indeed a turning point. In case such a maxim is generally adopted in one way or another, at least it would become impossible for wars to materialize. . . ."

Dobrovsky buried his fingers in his hair and seemed to be suffering under the stress of some great emotion.

"If . . . in case . . ." he said, in a subdued voice,

"*that* is the point, my brother! There are no promising signs. What can you do with a human mind subject to aberration—"

"Listen! You hear? . . ." Nikolich gasped. He turned his face to the east and put his hands to his ears.

Some of us did the same, and listened.

We heard the boom of cannons that, sombre and muffled, frequently rolled to us from afar. Again as though cannons suddenly overleaped the spaces and thundered ever nearer.

"It is the Germans, Austrians and Bulgarians," said Nikolich. "If we succeed in keeping alive until tomorrow they will come here and rescue us."

He stood up and looked in the opposite direction.

"What does that mean?" he asked, in utter despondency. "Of Szabo there is neither sight nor sound! He has been gone too long—who knows when he will come back. . . ."

"Do not be discouraged, Nikolich!" said Dobrovsky. "We have waited up to now so patiently—a few moments more will make no difference. He may return from the opposite direction. . . ."

But the tone of his reassurance was somewhat uncertain.

"Your theory on humanism," Dobrovsky turned quickly to me, "is exceedingly interesting and edifying. In connection with this, what conception of life in general have you?—" While saying this, he encouraged me with his eyes.

So I instantly understood Dobrovsky's suggestion. A prolonged silence would be at this moment intolerable and would increase the morbid atmosphere which had already arisen from the enigmatic absence of Szabo.

"I do not know," I began, "if I shall be able to finish my speech, for Szabo may indeed surprise us. . . . Nevertheless, let us try. Life of every being, or at least the life of man, is the greatest of miracles, renewing itself every day. It is the most real phenomenon and, at the same time, the highest ideal. We neither see nor know God: He is distant, inconceivable to us. However, in the manifestations of life we directly feel the highest creative power of God. We feel and see divine life in a blossoming flower in the springtime, in the song of a lark, in the murmur of a brook, in the child's smile, in the sunlight and the creative word of a poet.

"Meanwhile, the maladjusted human temperament tries to alter rules and laws managed by God and nature.

"In my judgment, titanic efforts are needed to prevent the disintegration of human entity. No doubt, there are great brains in the world who might take up the unusual job to cure the world evils. But would they be successful?—I do not venture to predict.

"The task would be perhaps facilitated by inspiring the pupils in every school with altruism and good will toward all nations. The growing youth should be constantly taught that the cultivation of selfishness on the part of preceding generations has brought humanity to the brink of an abyss.

"Unless a radical change occurs in the world, in the course of a few hundred years, wild and dull hairy creatures will creep over the Athenian Acropolis, the Louvre in Paris, the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin and the Belvedere in Warsaw—"

"That would be the crown of human progress. . . ." Dobrovsky frowned.

"And its condemnation. . . ." I conceded. "But in spite of that eventuality, let us imagine the wonder of wonders if all nations, all creeds, began to train both the young and the old in unconditional mutual tolerance and friendship! . . ."

"That is not beyond the bounds of realization!"

said Nikolich, animated. "There *are* already nations quite different from the others, and which live up to the standards cherished by us. I mean the Scandinavians who, by their proven friendship and the love of peace, can serve an encouraging example for a genuine understanding among the nations. If, besides, the Swiss people of different nationalities can live together in a perfect harmony, why should other European nations be eternally cursed with mutual hatreds?"

"The reason is simple, my friend," said Dobrovsky, getting a start on me. "These other nations display their mental aberration, together with the raging instinct of inherited cannibalism. All kinds of imperialism, all the slavery of nations, the racial and social fanaticism, can be traced back to the erstwhile cannibalism. Wars are nothing other than a recurring furor of that primordial sin of the human race. As a matter of fact, the primeval savage devoured his fellow men out of hunger and misery, while the biped creatures of our era prove refined or civilized cannibals. To be sure, they do not eat one another literally. Instead of that, they undermine the very existence both of nations and individuals while devouring all their means of living!—

Which cannibalism, I ask you, is more monstrous—that old, naive one, or this refined one of today?"

"The modern is more shocking. . . ." Nikolich acknowledged. "Those comrades on the front may put an end to this savagery. . . ."

He abruptly rose to his feet.

"Something is moving on the horizon! . . ." he indicated, full of joy. "A small live stick! . . .

"It must be Szabo! . . .

"Who else could it be? . . .

"By God, it is Szabo!

"Look! . . ."

Dobrovsky and I leaped to our feet and fixed our eyes on the distance.

"Do you really recognize Szabo?" asked Dobrovsky.

"No, I cannot; he is too far away yet. But I think I see the means of our salvation! . . ."

"What do you mean—the means of salvation? . . ."

"This small live stick carries something under its arm. . . ."

"Perhaps it is the gun. . . ."

"Something thick and bulky. . . . Surely it is venison! . . .

"Sz-a-a-a-bo-bo-bo!—Hel-lo!"

We all three started shouting:

"Szabo!—Szabo!—Szabo! He-l-lo!"

As an answer, we heard: Cr-r-r-a-a-ck-ck! from which all the gorges and abysses began to crack as though they were choked by the sound unheard of here.

"What is that? . . ." Nikolich asked, in astonishment.

"A very good omen," said Dobrovsky, "Szabo replies by the shot. It is war-like, as befits."

"But it is strange that he disappeared! . . ." Nikolich became more and more anxious.

"Perhaps he descended into a gorge. Probably he wants to hunt something more for us.

"Well, let us sit down and await him quietly."

We did so, and I made use of this period of silence.

"My friend Dobrovsky, you are right in what you call the inherited instinct of cannibalism," I continued. "This primordial trait degenerated in the course of centuries to the modern sadism which pervades not merely individuals, but also entire nations that happen to be the dominant ones. Having not yet got rid of the primitive traits of their ancestors,

they feel a sadistic delight if their governments deny alien people (accidentally annexed) the elementary human rights to live. In many a case, the enslaved nation surpasses its oppressor both in culture and moral values. The oppressor will, however, realize his sadistic inclination only after he has forfeited the independence of his own state.

"But, ruthless as my indictment of the present-day mankind may be, I cannot help believing that, after all, some day a new spirit will sweep the world—"

Cr-r-r-a-a-ck-ck—! Again we heard from the vacant distance.

"It is Szabo who has fired!" Nikolich became radiant. "The shot is much louder—he is probably not far off."

"I rarely am mistaken, Nikolich!" said Dobrovsky. "Our viewpoints, Turiansky, do not coincide—we simply cannot help it. You are an optimist. . . . Forgive me if I do not believe that someone will ever succeed in tearing from the bottom of human nature instincts of selfishness, hatred and the hideous delight at seeing other people suffer. On the contrary, it appears as if these instincts were sanctioned by our civilization full of contradictions:

"Do not kill, but—kill!

"Hang and love!

"Do not kill, or you will perish in jail!

"Kill, or we shall kill you!

"Kill, then you will become a patriot and hero!

"It is easy to say: 'make over human nature by means of education!' The fact is that to educate, in your interpretation, means to create men anew. It could be, however, accomplished by the Supreme Being only, and nobody else. For even the best educational system possible falls short of supernatural achievements. True, education has become a point of ambition of our century. But despite its standards, education proves nothing short of a burlesque if it cultivates chauvinism and violates the fifth commandment.

"I shall tell you of a seemingly insignificant incident from my own school days. (I remember quite well as though it happened today.) It eloquently illustrates contradictions prevailing in the educational system.

"In the fifth grade of our school, the religion teacher had lectured to us upon the virtue of loving our neighbors. Hardly had the bell given the signal that the lesson was over when the gymnastics teacher ran into our classroom.

" 'Boys,' he called to us, 'take the rifles and let us go to learn how to fire at the Germans!'

" 'Father,' I asked, 'you teach us love of our neighbors, and the professor, in turn, teaches us how to fire at these very neighbors! Who is right—you, Father, or the professor?'

" 'You fool!' the religion teacher snubbed me.

"It boiled within me.

" 'Father,' I set my jaw, 'God in heaven is the only infallible. . . .'

"The priest was beginning to get angry, but he left the subject because it would prove heresy. He panted a trifle and went away.

"While I inwardly speculated: Religion teachers and professors, all of you lie and corrupt our minds and hearts! . . .

"That day, these two tutors of mine shattered all my illusions and undermined my faith.

"I may add that modern education is no longer a serious matter, since methods in teaching are primarily emphasized and have become an exclusive prerequisite for acquiring wisdom or knowledge. This absorbing care for the form at the expense of the subject of study will have undesirable results. The youths will emerge from the schools with a

proclivity for lying, harming and cheating their fellowmen—just by means of the most modern methods! . . .

"Nor is education in the military schools any better. A young lieutenant was sitting in a restaurant. His chest was decorated with medals received for bravery—awards for having killed many people. His conduct, like the trumpet of Jericho, blew at people around him: Look at me! This is the way a hero looks!

"But alas! All the hauteur of the officer vanished suddenly. He became pale, blue, slumped, as though on the point of sinking beneath the surface of the earth.

"What happened? . . .

"You see, he had noticed that a small insect of the class called *pediculus vagabundus* was creeping on a medal over his chest.

"I had to lead him outside, in a half-fainting condition.

" 'You know, comrade . . . I have not changed my underwear for a . . . good many days . . .' he hesitatingly explained.

" 'Would it not have been more appropriate,' I said to him, 'had you publicly shown the insect the

same bravery you showed the people you have killed? I am sure, for such courage you would, perhaps, deserve another medal. . . .'

"The lieutenant gazed at me, in confusion and dismay. He left quickly, without saying a word.

"Sporadic as this incident may be, it, nevertheless, is an indirect proof of the fact that cadets are inculcated with caste-feeling. The training of irreproachable characters is neglected.

"But what are we actually doing? Are we in a trance that we twaddle about the salvation of humanity which has put us mercilessly on the death stage? . . . Exceptional specimens of philanthropists!"

Again that diabolical laugh! Dobrovsky spat scornfully in front of him and rubbed his hands nervously.

"My friend," he said to me after a while, "people of your type are candidates for prophets or reformers—"

I was surprised at the sudden change of his temper.

"If it were not for you, brother," I rejoined quickly, "ideas like those championed by me would not have become the topic of our conversation. Be-

sides, I am lacking in talent, vigor and will to be a prophet. But, anyway, if people from the outside heard our talk, many a believer of fratricidal ideas, many a believer—as you say—in heaven for himself and hell for the others—would break out, indignantly: Professional critics!—A heretic! To the stake with him!"

"You do not mind my remark, brother—do you?" Dobrovsky apologized. "I made it in a fit of misanthropy. . . . By God! The more people I meet the better I like my dog. Why, you, yourself, have just branded human hypocrisy. To hell with it! We live in such times that if Christ came down again among men, they would not crucify Him as they did once, but would garb Him in a uniform, thrust a rifle in His hands, send Him out to the front, and kill Him with poison gas!—"

Z-z-i-i-i-i-i-i!—

To their ears came the sound of a gun being fired.

However, it was not the shot at all, but something else that threw them into anguish. It was something like a mysterious and cruel fly droaning, humming and whizzing swiftly, high above their heads.

There echoed the sound of a third shot, the

fourth—the fifth—the sixth—again lower to the left of them, this six times repeated, terrific sound:

Z-z-i-i-i-i-i-i!—

"Brothers," Nikolich groaned, "it is that live stick that fires at us! It is not Szabo!

"Who is it? . . . What is that? . . . The very same who fired—he comes to us! . . .

"O God!—He will shoot us all down!

"How shall we defend ourselves against him? . . ."

"Is that Szabo, or not Szabo?" Dobrovsky asked Nikolich, gently.

"Impossible to discern. . . ."

"Is he carrying anything?"

"Something under his right arm. . . ."

"It is Szabo."

"Why, then, did he fire six times at us? . . ."

Dobrovsky, himself, did not know what the reason was, and became embarrassed.

"Szabo is glad to have succeeded on his expedition," he tried to calm his comrades, "hence he fired a *hurrah!* . . ."

"Thanks for a deadly hurrah like that!" Nikolich complained. "But what do I see? . . .

"Ah, it is Szabo indeed! . . . Let us try to call him."

They began shouting.

Szabo fired again.

There was only one thing that puzzled them. Why did Szabo not respond to their shouts? . . .

"Szabo!—Szabo!—Give a word! . . ." Dobrovsky shouted anew.

Silence.

They sat down, lapsed into silence, hopefully and anxiously awaiting his return. . . .

. . . . . .

Szabo came forward. . . .

"At last, you are back!" Dobrovsky rejoiced while watching the comer closely. "There will be a supper!"

But Szabo was silent. . . . His face was sombre as the sky above them. . . .

He put the cartridges and rifle down on the snow . . . sat down at the fire . . . put the bundle beside him. . . .

A grey twisted mantle. . . .

What was inside? . . .

No doubt—their salvation. . . .

Silence.

It lasted but a short time.

Yet it seemed as though eternity were dying. . . .

"This world is not worth spitting on!" he spoke, in a grating voice that made the group shudder.

He again paused for a moment.

"There is not on the snowy plains the least trace of a living creature," he began to report, "except ourselves, and the people who died in the snow, on the 'Road of Death.'

"I looked around, walked over the mountains, valleys, and gorges, intently seeking with my eyes, hid myself, lay in ambush, waited, sought—all to no avail.

"I was seized with anger, and I fired the first time to wake any enchanted creature, or all the devils and evil spirits and to shoot down all of them.

"But nothing came to life. There is nobody and nothing—except hunger, cold and death.

"Later I perceived that somebody moaned somewhere, not far away.

"I directed my steps there, and saw three unhappy ones just like all of us, lying frozen in the masses of snow.

"They observed me and begged, implored me, embracing my legs:

" 'Brother, oh, do us the greatest favor! Kill us! Oh, kill us! We will always pray to God for you

if you will make short our sufferings.'

"You heard me fire thrice? Was it not so?—He? . . ."

"We have heard," Dobrovsky nodded, in a hollow affirmative.

"It was at the moment when I shot those unhappy ones.

"One of them had a good mantle on, while the other two had good shoes.

"There you are! I have brought them here because Stranzinger's cloak and shoes have already entirely fallen off.

"Ashamed that I could not help you in anything, I got into such mad fury that I even sat down and fell into the snow from weariness and yelled like a maniac. I lay in the snow, looked up to the black clouds, choked with rage, and roared and cried out.

"Where is that odious bird that hatched this nauseous country out of stinking crow eggs?

"Where are all ye, angel-guardians of ours? Well, when we, having reached the point of satiety, were lying in soft beds, in warm rooms—oh, then you guarded us hovering over our beds! But now, when heroism is needed and the heart to save us—more miserable than leperous dogs—you are missing—here in the snow and ice, this dog pit! . . .

"Infuriated, I fired a few shots, haphazardly.

"I wanted to drive a bullet into my skull. But I reconsidered: I lived, properly speaking, suffered together with you, so may I depart together with you —no matter where.

"I started back to you, hardly able to drag myself.

"And in my ears, again and again three terrible voices kept crying: *Kill us! Oh, kill us!*

"I turned to them and shouted amid the snow:

" 'Why, I have killed you as you wished! Well, why do you keep bellowing? . . . What more do you want from me? . . . Leave me alone and complain before Him who has made you in His image and after His likeness!'

"I fainted bodily and mentally.

"I gazed and saw that all this refuse all around us —the snow, ice, and mountains—began suddenly to reel in my eyes. Ough, thou wretched, beggarly world! A dance thou art longing for? . . . I see! . . .

"And what about colic, or the black Asiatic epidemics, eh? Thou rascal that thou art! Lo!—can you imagine?

"In front of me, at the range of one kilometer, a strange, terrific giant emerged, something like a

devil, or man. And he was so tall that he hid his forehead in the clouds while leaning his arms against the mountains. He stared at me with eyes like two huge fiery sockets. Out of his mouth, instead of a tongue, an ugly serpent was crawling, and grew monster-like, twisting itself around his body, entangling, licking and cleaning him up.

"All at once, this tongue-serpent extended down to the earth, hissed, leaped frantically with his twists and drew closer to me. . . .

"I started firing at this monster.

"It was only after the sixth shot that the giant sank all under the earth.

"Dobrovsky, what may it be? . . . Is it possible that I have entirely gone mad? . . ."

"No, my friend. It is an hallucination caused by great suffering. . . . But now, *I* shall go hunting."

Szabo gave him a sidelong glance of amazement.

"May the goddess Artemis, the devil tickle her, bring you more luck than she has granted me!" he wished at length.

. . . . . .

Sooner than expected, Dobrovsky returned from his hunting expedition.

"Nothing doing. . . ." he thrust slowly through

his teeth. He sighed deeply as he joined the others at the fire.

"*Lasciate ogni speranza voi ch'entrate*—abandon hope, all ye that enter here!" he added, significantly. "You, Szabo, have effected a cleavage in my inward self while stirring within me a new appetite for life. That we undertook the enterprises to save the life of all of us, and failed—well, the omnipotent human instinct of self-preservation is to blame and nothing else."

With his foot, he thoughtfully pushed a burning twig back to the fire.

"It was the last disappointment in my life," he said, bitterly. Then he drew himself up. "One has to bow to the inevitable. . . .

"However, before I die, I should like to silence this cursed dog, this huge mad wolf of mine—my bowels, or call it, for all I care, the stomach—with a dish of any kind of food! . . ."

CHAPTER III

HUNGER

SO long as their frost-benumbed flesh fought with the aid of fire against death by cold, all other suffering had, as it were, crept aside into the shadow to await a favorable chance for assault.

But now, when their bodies had grown partially warm and the weak current of their blood coursed more regularly through their veins, these crouching ones began to start at the hunting failures of Szabo and Dobrovsky.

They felt their old terrible guest and enemy, hunger, beginning rapidly and with redoubled persistence and force to knock and pound on the door and threshold of their sensations and thoughts.

Those old sensations which broke forth anew with such deadly force were thus expressed by Dobrovsky:

"For ten days, not even the smallest piece of wood has burned in these furnaces of animal life, in our physical stoves which bear the more commonplace name of bellies.

"We are forced to figure as experts in the art of hunger, having expectations of approaching death in the very near future.

"For that reason, we must envy murderers and all kinds of culprits who, prior to being hanged, are allowed to exercise the natural functions of animal life.

"We happen to be in an exceptional position, that is—we are delinquents of humanity *honoris causa.*"

"To hell with such honor!" Szabo cursed in Hungarian while clenching his fists.

With the exception of Stranzinger and Dobrovsky, every one of them was gripped with such convulsion of the stomach that they were forced to writhe on the ground, in pain.

After the first spasm had abated a little, they began, for the thousandth time, to ransack their pockets.

They were trying to find at least a small morsel of bread or something—not to satisfy the killing sensation of hunger, but only to deaden it for a short while.

They all searched thoroughly in their pockets.

Only Stranzinger sat quiet and motionless.

Pshyluski stared stubbornly into the fire, and his face expressed hopelessness.

. . . . . .

"I have found something already. . . . Take and eat," said Szabo while showing his companions a few thousand-crown notes. He recounted in what manner he had acquired the money. However, nobody was curious to learn.

"We had marched through an Albanian village," he continued, unruffled by the indifference of the others. "None of us had eaten anything for three days.

"It was possible to buy some paltry corn bread, but—deuce take it!—there was no money.

"I reported to the captive captain who carried a large amount of paper money. (His duty was to help his destitute troops.)

"He himself was always satiated—always ate something voraciously and chewed like a cow. In addition, he was so round and fat that he looked actually bloated. It seemed that he would burst at any moment and would deprive us of the only possession which God had left us—the pure air. We

feared that, like a huge squeezed bug that had been over-feeding, he would poison the air with his stench.

" 'Captain,' I said, 'we beg of you humbly . . . please lend each of us a few of these monetary flaps —otherwise we all shall have to starve.'

"He would not even hear of any loan.

" 'Starve!' he squeaked, 'not a single penny will I give you!'

"I turned this over in my mind: Ough!—wait, my friend, you shall pay dearly for this! Once in the mountains, I took advantage of a favorable moment and snatched the money from him. He struck out to hit me. But I kept quiet. . . . It was merely this way—I dealt him a punch in the ribs—softly—so to speak. . . .

"The fellow, instead of falling for a time and rising again, chose, you know, a longer road, and ran straight ahead into the abyss. . . .

"Boys, if you knew how my heart was throbbing with joy while I watched him, the scoundrel, rolling as quickly as possible down the slope! And what elegant and graceful turns and twists he displayed while doing so! I assure you—he was a real social lion.

"Then he leaped like a hare, or a wild goat over the mountains. And what a hurry he was in—that God help us! . . . He evidently wanted to complain of me to Belzebub as soon as possible, on account of my discourtesy and my lack of war discipline.

"Peace to his ashes, at the bottom of hell!"

. . . . . .

Szabo flung the bills into the air.

"Save the money," Dobrovsky warned, "because you, my friend, are an exceptional sinner. Unless you succeed in securing protection in hell with Lady Belzebub, by means of money, you will have as hard a life there as here."

A few bills fell down on the skirts of Szabo's cloak. He scanned them a long time, at first indifferently, then with a strange, growing interest. Suddenly, his eyes flashed with a sinister glare through which untamed fury gleamed.

"*Kutya teremtete!*" he cursed in Hungarian, and snatched a bill with his bony fingers. He scrutinized it for a while, with wide-open, maddened eyes.

Like a flash, he thrust the paper into his mouth, and began to tear it with his teeth and to chew it voraciously. His eyes stared out from their deep hollows, as if they themselves were eager to watch

closely how a man could manage to use money for food. . . .

His sunken, earthy-grey cheeks grew swollen, and by their mobile swelling one's sight could follow the little paper bundle as it wandered to and fro in his mouth.

The entire expression of his face pictured misery, fury, and frenzy. While he was angrily biting and chewing the paper money, he growled savagely like a mad dog that is gnawing vainly on a dry bone.

His comrades watched him, both with compassion and horror. It was only the blind one who did not know, at first, what was going on around him. He sat there quietly. Dobrovsky watched Szabo, first with astonishment, then with an unconcealed irony.

"I admire your *naiveté*, Szabo!" he ridiculed. "You set yourself to an unusual task. In a very peculiar manner, you wish to solve a social problem. . . . The matter appears, at first sight, a simple one: By eating the money, you hope to succeed in destroying capitalism, and, at the same time, to still your hunger. . . .

"Honest to God, not a bad idea—"

"Stop mocking—will you?" Szabo gnashed his teeth. "I feel both a frantic fury and a joy while

tearing these flaps to bits. In doing so I feel that I am crushing and murdering all the gilded rabble of the world, all the economic and whorish policy on account of which we are dying here like dogs! . . ."

While saying this he bit harder into the monetary bundle, and apparently swallowed a part of it.

Dobrovsky smiled, sardonically.

"My stars! . . ." he feigned surprise. "Is that true? . . . I see that you have suddenly become a great—er—idealist! . . . However, your idealism will only afford you pain in the stomach. . . . You will not alter our miserable world. . . . Therefore, be sensible, and— First, take care, as every staid citizen does, of your health.

"Second, spare your money, for the mouth is a very bad money box. Besides, if by any miracle whatsoever you should escape alive from our abyss, consider how many possibilities of life's enjoyment you will have in your capacity as a plutocrat! For money, the mob will cringe at your feet, in dust and mud. By means of money, you will deprive man of his honor and even of his life. With money, you will become known as a Gibraltar of honor and chivalry, even if you are the dirtiest rascal in the world. For money, the state will confer upon you the title of Excellency.

"Would it not sound fine—His Excellency Szabo?. . .

"But the most beautiful, the sweetest thing, the crown of creation, will be this: For money, the most beautiful, the most wonderful women, wives, girls—Catholics, Protestants—exotic creatures—all will fling themselves upon your neck!"

With torn bill-scraps in his teeth, his eyes wide-open, Szabo cried out like a mad man:

"I will massacre . . . murder all those idiotic excellencies, all those diplomats, war-criers, money parasites that continually drink, sucking, like vampires, the very blood of nations grown childish!"

He spat out the bits, one after another. He seemed to have composed himself a little. He glanced silently at the thousand-crown bills lying around him and seemed to ponder over something.

Suddenly, he burst out into wild, joyous laughter as though a happy idea had occurred to his mind.

He stubbornly eyed the bills at his feet.

"You aristocratic horse skulls!" he started assailing. "You, diplomatic and warlike robber barons! You, mouldy generals! I am calling you before the tribunal! Your judge will be the poorest, the hungriest, the most wretched dog, called Szabo!"

He made a mocking bow and spat once more. Then he picked up a thousand-crown bill, and held it with both his hands before his eyes.

"What is your name, you, low creature—of noble birth?" he asked, in a stentorian voice. "Deadly afraid of the judge Szabo, you forget the tongue in your mouth?

"It is you, that minister, who principally contributed to turn the whole world into a terrific slaughter-house! In the name of the millions of men murdered by you, I sentence you to death."

Szabo put one end of the bill into his mouth and tore it with his teeth and fingers to little pieces which dropped on his dirty cloak.

While he spat out the scraps of paper that remained in his mouth, Dobrovsky smiled silently.

"You are an unequalled, nimble-minded chap, my friend Szabo," he began again. "Both your anger and your role of supreme judge afford me intellectual enjoyment. But justice should be preserved even toward the greatest criminals."

Szabo already held another thousand-crown bill before his eyes.

"And this, what is it?" he asked passionately. "With whom have I now the honor? . . ." And

instantly he himself answered, in an aristocratically drawling voice:

"General of Cavalry, Count Uezkuell-Drillenband, has the honor to introduce himself humbly."

"Ah, General, knight of the Maria Theresia Order! It is you who, without any previous barrage, ordered our entire battalion to capture that Serbian hill which was literally bristling with barbed wire and machine guns. . . . Meanwhile ordering all the artillery fire to be turned on the backs of the poor fellows! And so, aided by Serbian fire that faced them, you succeeded in massacring entirely your own battalion!

"Only I, all alone, was saved, precisely in order that you, General, might appear in court before me.

"Tremble before me, Count, tremble, you, Imperial-Royal *canaille*, you, beast in human shape, you . . . you. . . ."

With mad fury, Szabo bit, gnawed, chewed the bill, and spasmodically dragged and tore at it with his fingers.

His comrades gazed at him, with horror. Even Dobrovsky, who was about to ridicule, now kept silent.

"I am afraid of him. . . ." Nikolich whispered to Dobrovsky.

"His lack of reason," said the other, "proves reasonable above the average. . . ."

Szabo snatched another bill.

"I recognize you at once by your odor," he hissed. "You are a war hyena who has amassed millions from the blood, the corpses, and the suffering of the poorest—from the sorrows of widows and orphans. I should tear you to fragments with my teeth. To my sorrow, I cannot put you in my mouth because your stench is, ough!—much too great. . . ."

Szabo crushed the bill into a very small bundle, turned about and tossed it down into the gorge.

"In the Valley of Jehoshaphat," Dobrovsky whispered now to me, "we shall nominate him President of the Day of Judgment. . . ."

Meanwhile Szabo held another thousand-crown bill in his hand, in front of him.

"You, Very Reverend glutton and dignitary," he proceeded, "belong with those who, with their eyes always rolled heavenward, are tripping straight into hell. . . .

"Preaching from your pulpit, you have driven men to fratricide. What am I to do with you, Very Reverend Father? One has to treat you devotedly, as befits an inflated Pharisee."

Szabo turned his eyes with great devotion up to the black heavens. Then he held the bill carefully in his left hand while with his right fist he dealt the paper blow after blow until it fell to ground, torn and ragged.

With both hands, he now took another bill.

"I feel a heat in my finger tips. . . ." he grumbled. A woman has fallen into my hands—ha-ha-ha! . . .

"I beg your pardon, madam. . . . The war made me a savage. . . . I shall, therefore, behave a bit impolitely . . . perhaps even rudely. . . .

"What is your name, please? . . . Ah, you are silent, bashful, like a school-girl. . . . No, no, without any hypocrisy, please. . . .

"When your husband, in storm and thunder, in frost and snow, was braving the bombs, thinking of you alone while facing death, you felt no shame in warming your matrimonial bed with a rascal.

"Womanly honor, children, motherly pride—all these were powerless against your instincts of a wanton, you, madam, you, slut, you! . . ."

He put the bill close to his face, and blew his nose into it, then hurled it far off with contempt, spat after it and exclaimed: "Dirt to dirt!"

Another bill was introduced.

"I. . . . I. . . . his . . . Highness Roy. . . . Royal War Lord. . . ."

"Ah, the humblest, most obedient servant of your—Highness. . . . It is you, beg pardon, the symbol of the sty which is our present system of political and social order! We shall burn you alive. . . ."

"Leave his Royal Highness alone," Dobrovsky mocked, "he is almost as poor as ourselves. His Highness may deign most gracefully to die of hunger and cold as we do. . . ."

That very moment, Dobrovsky caught up the bill which was already flying down into the fire and held it in his hand.

"Throw it instantly into the fire!" Szabo shouted, "otherwise I shall have to assume that you, too, belong to that venerable company. . . ."

But Dobrovsky flung the bill down into the gorge.

Szabo collected all the bills and hurled them into the fire. Now he sat motionless and silent. One could see that he was shrouded in gloomy thoughts.

All at once, he picked up an old, crumbled, partly torn one-crown bill that had escaped the fate of the others, and scanned it for a long time.

"You, worthless, miserable scrap of paper that you are!" he said with great pain and sorrow. "You —you represent the poor, wretched dog called Szabo. You, Szabo, are wicked and foolish. An unworthy, dishonest tramp, no better than those whom you have just condemned to death. For that reason, you will have to condemn yourself to capital punishment. . . ."

At these words of Szabo's, a ray of a pure, holy compassion with his pain shot across the hearts of his comrades.

Suddenly all of them became frightened, for Szabo rose abruptly and ran toward the ravine, evidently intending to leap down. But Dobrovsky sprang swiftly after him and grasped him by the hand.

They wrestled awhile with each other.

"Let me go!" Szabo cried. "Let me go! I want justice for myself!"

With much trouble his comrades finally comforted Szabo and brought him back to his former seat beside the fire.

He sat as if he had thrown his soul down into the chasm. All his anger, all his desire for vengeance, all of his grief and penitence, the face of the

blind comrade, the deathlike faces of all, their forlornness, the grim clouds, all of life's misery and pain,—everything suddenly burst forth from him in violent, unsuppressed, spasmodic sobbing.

It was hard for his comrades to control their emotions. . . .

Only from the blind eyes of Stranzinger one could not learn whether he was weeping or not. . . . Had the cruelty of gods and men deprived him even of tears?

. . . . . .

Unexpectedly the blind comrade interrupted Szabo's sobbing with a voice that seemed to come from the boundaries of eternity, from beyond the limits of good and evil.

Like a strangely sublime, mystic and mighty spirit which hovers high above all the errors and faults of mankind, above all the anger of the gods—a spirit that comprehends everything, understands everything and forgives everything—the blind man breathed out from both soul and mouth:

"Men are neither good nor bad. . . . Men are only unhappy and—happy."

Moved to the very depth of their hearts by these

axioms, the unfortunate ones looked at their still more unfortunate comrade. Over their chilled and sunken faces rolled large, heavy, glistening drops, like pearls over lumps of ice.

. . . . . .

They finally became composed.

"Comrades!" Dobrovsky said, in a soft, mild voice. Now we have no longer any money nor do we need any. Now we have become real men. . . ."

. . . . . .

The shocking picture of suffering shown as Szabo's soul became more and more agitated by its own imagination and passion, brought back to them the world in which they had once lived and which now appeared to them so remote, unattainable, lost. . . . All their former life in the world, with its joys and charms, passed before their eyes.

Stupefaction was followed by reflection and reverie. They sat in silence until hunger forced them to search anew for morsels or even for dust that was once called bread.

I stopped rummaging in my patched rags. My soul seated itself on the wings of thought and flew somewhere—far . . . very far away. . . .

Christmas Eve. . . .

My wife and my little son are with relatives and grandparents. . . .

In a large warm room, a Christmas tree is standing. . . . It is covered with lights and everything a child's heart could wish. . . .

The entire family stands around the Christmas tree. . . .

. . . . . .

I, ragged, misery-stricken, covered with mud and blood, a corpse rather than a man, draw closer, secretly, gently . . . on tip-toe, to the window, and take a glimpse inside. . . .

The mother says something to her child. . . .

She takes it by the hand, and smiles softly. . . .

A shadow of meditation flits over her forehead. . . .

Perhaps, at this moment, she thinks of me. . . .

The child looks for a long while into her eyes, and asks her:

"Mama, why is father not here? I would like father to teach me to sing the Christmas song: *Christ Is Born.*"

I feel a shock, as when a storm strikes the dry grass-blade somewhere on the frozen steppes. . . .

"My son! . . ."

I clutch at the shutter to prevent myself from dropping.

. . . . . .

The fog fades away from before my eyes. . . .

Mother and son look through the window under which I am standing. . . .

O heavenly Power!

Can they indeed have beheld and recognized me? . . .

How I am drawn to them, how irresistibly I am drawn to them! . . .

Yonder is my life, my sun, my all! . . .

. . . . . .

A heavy hand falls upon my shoulder. . . .

I feel that I am unable to enter the room. . . .

Who am I?

I am unworthy of the company of my wife, my son, the grandparents. . . .

At this moment, they all are content, if not happy . . . while I see the impenetrable and impassable gap between their contentment and my wretchedness.

. . . . . .

No, I have no right to these people.

Why did I come here? . . .

This is only a dream . . . only a morbid creation of likewise morbid fancy . . . that I once was a human being . . . that I enjoyed human happiness and took delight in the rays of the sun. . . .

It seems to me that for centuries I have existed in a starless night . . . in a black cave . . . among ice-hunting reptiles. . . .

And for long centuries I must languish there. . . .

The light blinds me, the warmth that is wafted from these people kills me. . . .

But no. . . .

I would die a hundred times that they might be happy.

How could I, an uncanny and icy phantom from the ice-caves, appear suddenly among these people to spoil their peaceful Christmas joy?

Dare I attempt to kill their song *Christ Is Born* and wring from their bosoms a cry of horror?

. . . . . .

No, be it as it will! . . .

I cannot, I must not join them.

. . . . . .

I stifle the sobbing that rends my bosom and flee from the window. . . .

And, unnoticed, I seek refuge with my friend. . . .

He recognizes the wretch. . . .

Full of joy, he barks and licks my hands and face. . . .

I hide myself in the straw in the dog-house and await, with glowing eyes, the food that will be brought for Hector, father's dog—my friend. . . .

. . . . . .

Reality. . . .

Blind eyes . . . the fire . . . sullen sky . . . hunger. . . .

I wipe my eyes with my soiled sleeve, and again I seek for a morsel of bread.

. . . . . .

O wonder of wonders!—Wonders happen in the world!

In the tangled desert of my torn rags, I found a small dusty ball. It contained crumbs of bread, tobacco, sweat, and the cloth-lint. And from within it—the world is full of surprises!—a worn, yellowed little block of sugar peeped out, bashfully and modestly.

Dizziness seized me.

Without betraying my discovery to anyone—hist!—I was at first about to fling all this, in a wild lust of hunger, into my mouth. On the way, how-

ever, between hand and mouth, an obstacle interposed itself which called forth a wild conflict in my soul.

This obstacle was the picture of misery and destitution in the faces and forms of my comrades.

While closing my hand convulsively upon the dust-ball, I glanced at them, and, simultaneously, listened to the inner voice.

"In case you divide this dust among them," it whispered, "you will not only fail to help them, but, on the contrary, will only increase their tortures. Consume it yourself. . . ."

I closed my eyes and began again to raise my hand with the ball to my mouth. But before the dust with the piece of sugar reached my mouth, my hand trembled, and within me a feeling awoke that impelled to confess.

"I have found a piece of sugar and a bit of soiled tobacco," I said. "How shall we divide this into six equal parts? Dobrovsky, do help me."

With the exception of the blind one and Pshyluski, all the others riveted their glances upon the piece of pale-yellow, dust-enveloped sugar lying on my pale palm.

The expression of their eyes recalled that of hun-

gry dogs at the moment when their master at the table is taking food into his mouth, and they watch his hands with greedy intentness.

"My friend," Dobrovsky said good-humoredly, "you apparently are going to set up the Christ's communism among us. . . . Unfortunately, we lack here both communistic executive and apparatus to establish an equal distribution of this world's goods. . . ."

Nevertheless, he helped me to divide the piece of sugar into six parts. First of all, I handed a piece of it to our blind Stranzinger.

"No . . ." he refused, curtly.

"My poor brother," I asked him, "please do not refuse."

"From life I desire nothing more," the blind one replied.

"Brother, do not act like a child," Dobrovsky pleaded.

"You well know that you have had nothing in your mouth for, at least, eleven days! . . . Take and eat, we beg of you."

But to our continued urging, the blind comrade responded only with a negative gesture of his hands.

Now I handed a small piece of sugar to Pshyluski.

"I won't . . ." he also refused.

"Why not? . . ."

"Do not ask . . ." he said, and bowed his head.

"Brother," Dobrovsky turned to him, "apart from our common misery, there is something else that torments you.

"Tell us what it is, and we will console you as much as is possible here. . . . I believe that by revealing your mental tortures, you will find some relief for them. Of course, it is up to you."

"Perhaps later. . . ." Pshyluski evaded.

"Take this small piece right away and eat," I implored him.

"Thanks—you eat, yourselves, meanwhile I shall stand a little apart, over there. . . ."

He arose, with great difficulty, and withdrew.

His back turned to his comrades, he remained standing on the brink of the precipice, gazing down into its depth, with hanging head.

All four of us cast anxious glances at him, and at one another.

I was depressed by a new suffering.

"After several days of hunger," I said, "a blind accident, like the stingiest of stepmothers, gave us a paltry piece of sugar. Yet, to our sorrow, we

would consume this bit of nothingness as though it were the bitterest wormwood. . . . May I ask you?"

With trembling fingers, the other three took their portions from my hand.

Thereupon, we ate our scanty meal with such mad desire as probably no happier human being has ever experienced, or will ever experience.

It may have been for this reason that Dobrovsky during our brief physical relishing of such a repast remarked:

"Who would have expected that in this dark pit of ours it should be our destiny to sweeten our bitter lot, at least infinitesimally? . . ."

Then we made our cigarettes of the dust, and lighted them.

"After a sweet dinner," Dobrovsky began, "a good cigarette is in order. . . . Everything is in the best shape. . . . As I see it, we have become sated bourgeois! And now we need a stimulating chat, in order to help digestion. . . .

"About what, for instance? About the poets and the critics? . . . Well, yes. . . . There is only one thing we would wish them:

"Gentlemen, if you please, pray make a visit here to learn in our school—well, of life and death. . . .

"In doing so the poets would create all their poetry with pure blood, and not with ink only, as often is the case.

"Critics here would become poets, provided of course, that their very narrow rational mentality did not transform them into icicles resembling human form.

"For a creative work, creative talent only is far too insufficient.

"A poet must have experience both of the deepest hell of human life and of the summits of human happiness. Then only will his word move, grip and elevate the human soul!

"But enough of the subject matter. I am aware that, despite our exquisite dinner, all of you are lacking in mood. Apparently all your strength is turned too one-sidedly upon the problem of a nap. . . . Is it not so? . . ."

They gave him no answer.

"All of us are exhausted," I whispered, trying to resume the talk. "You are the only one who is able to continue speaking on your own behalf and on ours."

"What problem shall I tackle, anyway?" Dobrovsky asked the question. "Perhaps about the

cosmic idea, in connection with the piece of sugar? . . . Excellent! . . .

"First of all, then, many thanks, comrade and brother, for your hospitality.

"By your altruism, your active idealism slightly intermixed with philosophical criticism, your attachment to life and its higher values, you deserve indeed the privilege that our stepmother, nature, should pull you out of this abyss.

"Be it as it may, you represent a positive element for the so-called cosmic idea. That is to say, the logical conclusion is:

"Nature needs individuals like yourself for propagation purposes. . . . That is very well, but! . . . Search after logic, after any idea in nature and you will hardly find them there.

"Exactly as it is with a woman. . . . I, with my poisonous view of life, represent your counterpart, and carry already a germ of death in my soul.

"But these four comrades of ours, who represent either positive or negative extremes, are shadows far too feeble to keep themselves above the surface of the freezing ocean which is called life. But—"

Dobrovsky broke off, for Szabo began suddenly to groan heavily, grasping at his stomach, kneeling

and touching the earth with his forehead. His pain had the effect of contagion on the others. With the exception of the blind one and Dobrovsky, hunger convulsion soon seized upon all.

We weltered together in convulsions on the ground.

Involuntarily I looked at them, with a glance, rapid as a flash of lightning.

Enough—enough of that. . . .

This picture, like an incurable wound, will suppurate in my soul.

I cannot believe it.

I do not believe that these withered, tattered frozen heaps, mixtures of snow and blood, are human beings . . . men!

But to these tattered heaps there sticks something that squirms in convulsions.

Becomes blue with pain . . . and groans and groans. . . .

Yet this groan is something momentary.

It is sparks that will be extinguished.

It is smoke that will fade away.

But what more matters—it is these eyes that grow stiff and take on the glaring whiteness of insanity! . . .

These eyes press; they press against the forehead.

They wish to burst, to tear, to crush, the web within the forehead in which thought dwells. . . .

For thought is—a lash . . . a wound . . . hell . . . death.

If the embodiment of blood-covered cruelty beheld these eyes, it would, in all certainty—weep!

But cruelty does not see them.

Cruelty has become blind.

Yet there is one, hiding in the black pillows of clouds, who sees these eyes. . . .

He sees them as He sits up there, a stone in the stony heavens!

He is interested in Eve's apple. . . .

He is perturbed by dust on the leg of a drone. . . .

But the hell of human suffering will not move Him! O God!

. . . . . .

Perhaps, after all, these are not indeed human beings that grovel amid convulsions in the dust and ice of the earth?

Yes, they are human beings.

For among all living creatures, it is man who suffers the greatest tortures.

. . . . . .

Finally, they all felt some relief from agony.

"I do so long to live . . ." Nikolich began to wail. "Not so much for myself as for my parents, and for the sake of knowledge. Life is so beautiful."

Szabo's eyes suddenly glowed with a new fire, as though smoke-veiled.

He shot at his comrades a long, pondering, inquiring, uncanny glance.

"Do you really long to live?" he quickly asked Nikolich.

"I do."

"Do all of you wish to live? . . ."

"Yes, all of us."

Nikolich cast a glance at Stranzinger.

"Does the blind one also long to live?" he asked me, in a whisper.

"You should rather ask if he is alive. . . . His spirit does not dwell here any longer. It wanders far, far away from us—beyond all pain."

"I do not want to live," said Pshyluski. His words fell like a violent downpour of rain.

The others gazed at him, in perplexity and amazement.

"Why? . . ." some one asked.

"Do not ask . . ." was his brief answer.

Again he enveloped his soul in silence.

"Are all of you willing to live at any price?" Szabo continued to ask.

"Why this insistent questioning? . . ." Nikolich asked.

"Because I have found a means of deliverance," Szabo intimated.

The exiles looked at Szabo and about themselves. They were speechless and stunned.

It was only after a moment that Nikolich awoke from stupor.

"Have you really found a means of deliverance? . . ." he asked, in a listless voice. Then trembling with excitement. "Where? . . . What kind?"

"Yonder—look! . . ." said Szabo, pointing with his hand.

Their eyes followed Szabo's hand and rested in the distance.

"I do not see any deliverance," Dobrovsky denied.

Nikolich put his hand to his forehead, and looked long at the frozen horizon.

"Perhaps somewhere in the distance," he reasoned, "there are people walking on the 'Road of Death'. . . . No, I do not see any one."

"Why, do you really see nothing in front of you?" Szabo asked, impatiently.

"Nothing but the corpse of our comrade in the snow," Dobrovsky replied.

"The corpse of our comrade?" Szabo echoed the statement.

"In that very corpse—our life problem lies. . . ."

"What—is that? How do you mean? . . ." Nikolich recoiled, all trembling.

"This corpse is our only salvation. . . ." Szabo answered, with a cruel composure.

A speechless horror clutched the others with icy claws.

Nikolich sank upon his knees, wringing his hands.

"God, O God," he cried out, "is all our torment not yet enough for Thee?"

"Are you crazy? . . ." I quickly turned to Szabo. "Should a corpse save our lives? . . . Should the body of our comrade be food for us? . . . We, human beings—cannibals? . . ."

Yet Szabo followed the trend of his idea with savage logic:

"If it is permissible to kill men, it is likewise permissible to eat them. . . . We shall all perish here, like blind puppies, if we allow ourselves to be swayed by womanish reasoning which prattles like this: To kill men *en masse* is a national and patriotic honor, chivalry and heroism . . . Confound such morals! . . .

"But for dying unfortunates to eat a human corpse in order to save their lives—that is the most monstrous crime in the world!

"Is that not the most horrible human lie?—What?!—*Bassama kutya!*

"Life, or death!

"Therefore, all prejudices, stupid ethics, superstitions—away with them! In the battle against death, *everything is fair that serves to hold death at bay!*"

. . . . . .

From the innermost depths of their souls they startled at Szabo's insistent proposal. However, not the slightest doubt could exist. To save their own lives, they would be compelled to eat the body of their dead comrade. Spirit and body met in close conflict. On the one hand, the conviction that they were about to become cannibals grew ever more hideous. On the other hand, there clamored the

instinctive will to live, which in its fight is not particular in choosing means.

Here loathing, there the desperate demand of hunger: Give me everything within your reach, or accept death!

More and more were they obsessed by this battle of ideas.

It bored itself into their brains—rent all their thoughts.

There was no other means of deliverance.

All but Stranzinger and Pshyluski turned toward the corpse.

Their eyes protruded and became unnaturally large.

From their faces swept forth ravening glances which demanded—not life, but release from the unbearable pangs of hunger.

Their mouths alone grew distorted as though in convulsive abhorrence.

In turn, their eyes seemed longing to fly over to the dead body and devour it.

"Why do you wait?" Szabo pressed on.

"For God's sake, what are you going to do? . . ." Nikolich lamented. "Is it true that misery has shaken the last remnant of human feeling from your souls? . . ." There was no reply.

"Let us reason calmly and carefully," said Dobrovsky, interrupting a brief silence. "Our situation is hopeless. Soon night will come. Through this desert of ice no one can come or stray by night. In the night such a frost will set in that even a fire will be useless to us. For the rest—the fire will go out soon, for we have no more wood left."

"God, O God!" Nikolich cried out, in despair. "Szabo, I beg of you, be so good as to render us the last service. . . .

"You have the gun. . . .

"Shoot me dead and—all of us! . . ."

"That also is a sensible idea," Dobrovsky agreed. "It is far better to die instantly by day than to perish slowly in shattering frost by night."

"But who will shoot me dead? . . ." Szabo asked.

"You, yourself . . . O *mayko moya, mayko!*" Nikolich whimpered, with tears running down his cheeks.

"Through a damned longing for a still more damned life," Szabo exclaimed with his usual forcefulness, "I have become doubly a coward. That is the explanation of the reason why I am loath to shoot either you or myself. . . ."

He fell into profound meditation.

"Come on," he turned to his comrades, with a cold and brutal expression upon his face, "let us fetch the corpse!"

"Let us not go, brothers!" Nikolich implored. "Szabo, do not go!"

"Now—in the face of death," Dobrovsky interfered, "is not the time, my friend Nikolich, to pose as a super-sensitive esthete. . . . Why, yesterday, did you not see our comrades, simple privates, eating the body of their own comrade? Do you, perhaps, think that your stomach is made—how should I say?—of divine ambrosia, and not of the same ugly clay as mine and that of any other individual?

"Oh, do not be silly! Look at yourself, at me, and at all our comrades! What do you see?

"Merely skin and bones—is it not so? And who was it that has eaten our flesh? . . . Tell us, I ask you, who was it?"

"Misery," said Nikolich, his eyes brimming with tears.

"What misery are you speaking of? Is it so hard for us here, after all? Have you already forgotten our dinner of today? And the fresh air we are permitted to breathe here, by the grace of the Almighty? . . .

"What about our full freedom to die at our discretion? That is to die slowly, or to leap instantly into the abyss and present our miserable bones as a gift to the devil and his earthly accomplices. . . .

"Or our privilege to cling to life at whatever cost? . . . Does that mean nothing?

"I tell you once again: Our bodies have been ruined by the ruling powers and the money magnates, the mightiest masters in the world. These chaffering barkeepers of blood have left us only the skin-bag containing our poor souls and bones.

"But who bears the blame for all that?—Eh?"

"It is our destiny . . ." Nikolich groaned.

"Tatata! Big word! Our destiny is only the spoiled daughter of our own will. Like mother like daughter.

"Our will power is to blame as well. For, why did it make us passive, blind tools for killing?—So it came to pass that all our strength and spirit and courage has been absorbed by the monster which spits forth cannon, breathes out poison gas and consumes thousands of people.

"It is with our own feet that we have stamped flat our human dignity. And that is our very crime for which we have now to die. In short, he who

prefers to live has got to eat the body of his comrade."

"Dobrovsky," said Nikolich, weeping, "you wish to deceive your own conscience—is it not so? . . . Is *that* really your philosophy, in good earnest? . . ."

"Nonsense!" Szabo interposed angrily. "Every philosophy ends where the stomach puts in its demands! Why waste so many words? . . . As far as I am concerned, I do not see any difference between a dead man and a dead horse, or a dead bear —for that matter. Of course, I should prefer to eat a dead bear rather than a dead man, not because of any sentiment, but because it would taste better.

"I am sorry that I—your mess officer—can put nothing better before you. But in the extremity of need, even the devil will eat flies. Alas! In this cursed ice cellar of ours there is no trace even of flies."

"As I told you," Dobrovsky spoke again, in support of Szabo, "our present terrible agony is the product of our equally horrible crime—a product by logic, inflexible as iron.

"Nor is there any sentiment or beauty in that logic. . . . But if you, Nikolich, wish to die a superstitious, sentimental, esthetic death—well, we cannot help it—"

"Oh, no! I will not die. My parents—"

"You see?" Dobrovsky cut in.

"Then, come on," said Szabo, "and help me carry the corpse to the fire."

"Lord God—never! . . ."

"I see . . ." Szabo mocked, "you wish to eat refrigerated meat. . . . Not so bad. It is in accordance with modern hygienic regulations. . . ."

"Oh, Satan! . . . Satan!" cried Nikolich, shivering, and hid himself behind Dobrovsky.

"Well, if none of you will fetch the corpse," Dobrovsky declared, "then I will not go either. . . ."

"Who will go with me?" Szabo insisted.

Three times he asked the same. However, each time dead silence was the only answer.

"I am going, myself!" Szabo finally declared. It was no sooner said than done.

. . . . . .

Not rain, not hail, not snow—

Horror pours down as a black deluge from everywhere. The pulse pounds in anxiousness.

What will Szabo do? That is the dread question which mortifies the soul. . . .

They turn their faces away from the corpse.

. . . . . .

No further word do I speak. The unutterable horror of Szabo's idea has shaken all my being. My body trembles. I feel that in another instant I shall break down, without strength to rise again.

But weaker still has grown my wretched soul. My thought begins to fade. A dark-red fog arises before my eyes, and bedims my mind.

All my being lapses into oblivion.

. . . . . .

Something like a sharp drill bores . . . it wakens . . . I feel myself thinking once again. . . .

I feel pain . . . I wait for something to happen. . . .

I am alive. . . .

. . . . . .

I gaze past the fire into the misty distance.

A hundred feet from the fire stands a bush, overlaid with snow.

This bush—is it a reality? . . . Is it a growth within my mind? . . . Or is it growing into my soul? . . . This bush has two round tops. The upper, the wider one, bends over the lower. A female figure. . . . As if pressing a child to her breast. . . .

I cannot withdraw my gaze from this picture. How dreadful for a mother to be here with her child, surrounded by ice and snow! How carefully

she has wrapped up her child! . . . How tenderly she presses it to her warm, maternal breast! . . .

. . . . . .

Perhaps . . . after all . . . it is not a bush. . . .

Perhaps . . . it is indeed a mother carrying her child? . . .

. . . . . .

No, it is a bush.

But how is it possible that a bush should look like a mother with her child? . . .

. . . . . .

Of a sudden, the red fog again surges over me. Everything vanishes. . . .

. . . . . .

I open my eyes.

Black, icy, motionless sky.

Nothing else.

I hear voices:

"Get up! . . . Get up!"

My comrades raise and hold me. Then their hands no longer support me.

Again I sit alone, staring in front of me.

. . . . . .

No—there is no bush . . . no bush. . . .

. . . . . .

Yes, yes—it is a mother with her child. . . .

. . . . . .

Heaven and earth have forgotten her—like us. . . .

Her death will be far more terrible than ours. She must first look helplessly—desperately—at her dying child. . . .

. . . . . .

She seems to notice us. . . .

Why, then, does she stand there, motionless? . . .

No! She tries to move, but strength has left her. She and her child are dying from cold already. . . . Perhaps she is begging help from us, in her dying, very weak voice? . . .

Hush! . . . Listen! . . .

Is it not soft moaning and sobbing that I hear? . . .

. . . . . .

A sudden scream of horror scatters my thoughts.

Szabo has returned, carrying something with him. He has put it beside the fire. . . . He himself sits down . . . sits and stares at the fire. . . .

A lump of ice!

. . . . . .

Something suddenly shook me as an earthquake shakes the granite rock.

He raised his arm to his eyes . . . and covered them with his soiled sleeve. Dobrovsky broke the icy silence with a voice like the hiss of a snake.

"What did you bring with you?" he inquired.

"A piece of a human body left behind in the snow. . . ."

Dobrovsky gritted his teeth and broke into satanic laughter.

"Do not worry, brothers!" he said, with irony that bit into the marrow. "Now we shall roast human meat and feed on it—renew our strength and start toward the golden sun!"

Dobrovsky's hellish laughter was still reverberating in the air, when suddenly there beat against our ears the hissing and stewing of the piece of human flesh that Szabo had thrown into the fire.

Like a flash, everything vanished before me—the blind one, and my other comrades—the fire—the firmament—the waste—and hunger!—

. . . . . .

Out of this vacancy, an iceberg issues. With all its immense weight, it topples upon me—presses—crushes me. And every block of ice sizzles and stews, sizzles and stews—oh!

Oh! Thou heaven! How weak a screen thou art

against this all-parching, hellish power!

Though pressed down by the ice-mountain, I am nevertheless—alive. . . .

"Heavenly Power!" I am crying out. "Kill, kill me!" But my voice of despair does not reach the heavens. I have passed beyond all pain. That is why it is my destiny to think for millions of men, and to carry all the crosses of suffering.

So be it, I am ready.

But, if Thou, O Lord, art—powerless, then let Satan come to aid me!

Torture, torment me on thousands of racks! Deal me such a blow with the ice-steeled hammer which forges our destiny, that I may become unconscious of the dark-clotted sizzling of burning human flesh!

Yet my plea has no effect. . . .

"Why this hellish outrage! . . ." I shriek aloud to deaden the sizzling. "I cannot—stand it! I cannot stand it!"

In response, I hear a voice louder than mine.

"Does it make you rave to hear the sizzle of human flesh in the fire? . . ." it hisses at me. "Then why did you rejoice in killing living beings? . . . Why did you accept praise and honors for committing murder? . . . Ha-ha-ha! You are the offspring

and—the victim of civilization which has legalized this crime against life. Meanwhile, deeds that are harmless to life and nature are branded falsely with the stamp of crime.

"Therefore, throw to the winds this pitiful human morality, with all its absurdity and perfidy! . . . Throw it all to the winds, and eat the roast meat of human body—so that you may live on—and continue to kill human beings. . . . Ha-ha-ha-sh-sh-sh-sh—!"

This fever of body and mind will lead to death!

I beat my head against the ice-hardened ground so that my head may be shattered upon it, so, only that I may not perish slowly, with thoughts that freeze and sensations that burn like fire!

Come, my Redeemer—come, take my life!

Sh-sh-sh-sh-sh-sh! . . .

. . . . . .

Silence. . . .

Hissing? . . .

Where is it? . . . How did it happen? . . .

. . . . . .

Nikolich picked up the piece of flesh with his stick, and threw it from the fire. He was pale as a ghost.

"I may die," he cried, in a cracked voice, "but

I will not eat human flesh—nor shall any one of you do so!"

The starving group watched, with ghost-like eyes, as the hideous repast disappeared from their sight. Little by little, they began to feel Nikolich's deed as a relief from a heavy, dismal oppression. Their stolid silence was changed for a moment into impressive solemnity.

A ray of light had penetrated into the dark recesses of their souls—a token that the spirit had overcome the flesh.

Theirs was a holy—a divine—victory. Through the spirit, they who faced death by starvation found strength to sacrifice their very lives that they might stifle—overwhelm—destroy the raging lust of the flesh.

But dearly did they pay for the spirit's victory! Their physical strength, utterly exhausted, was now face to face with a final trial. One by one, they sank into the snow, without fear, in dead silence, as blossoms drop softly at the deadly touch of frost.

Only two of the exiles still sat there motionless: One whose spirit dwelt already in a world behind suffering, and one whose body held strength beyond that of his companions.

One was the blind comrade; the other—Dobrovsky.

"Do not lie down, brothers!" Dobrovsky dissuaded. "Bear up for just a little while. Perhaps something will happen and save you."

When his warning remained unanswered, he raised them, one after another.

"Bear up for just a little while," he again encouraged.

The bed of white snow beckoned to them with magnetic power. However, a final flicker of life held them from repose upon a couch from which they would arise no more.

They sat there in a stillness broken only by their subdued sighs and slowly fell into stupor and insensibility.

. . . . . .

From out the black clouds, strange, bright lines are slowly creeping. Like tongues of apparitions which crowd the firmament. . . . That firmament where cold and stillness reign, and will reign forever.

But no.

The cloud fringes have a rusty tint, as though covered with slowly clotting blood. From the

gloomy and livid heavens, from that glacial petrification—a demon of destruction will soon emerge.

He may awaken at any moment.

Then the heavens will suddenly be riven apart, and dark forces will rush down upon the earth and crush the universe to dust.

The ceiling of hell is not more terrible than this firmament.

Everything is silent—asleep in the darkness of ignorance.

Yet how blessed is that existence. . . .

In darkness of ignorance. . . .

Fortunate he whose consciousness sleeps.

. . . . . .

The fire no longer crackles.

It glows quietly, that it may not disturb the ghostly stillness of nature.

. . . . . .

The exiles turned their eyes away from life, and sank, listening, into the depths of timeless silence within themselves and all over and around them in the icy, starved world.

. . . . . .

It seems as if the softest whisper or the slightest airy movement would awaken some being, as

immense as human suffering, as strong as life, as powerful as death.

And that something would then take place thus far still untold by any one, in the bright land of fairy tale—unseen in the sunlight of spring—unmeasured in the darkness of the abyss.

. . . . . .

Someone begins to sigh gently.

The blind man.

For a long time, no one hears him sighing.

It is not the moan of a human being which has forced its way from his breast.

Rather is it the sorrow of a being of light who, chained and cast into eternal darkness, is weeping helplessly before the tombs and crosses, both ancient and new, of the human race.

Weeping over open graves which await their occupants. . . .

Where are those graves? . . .

Are they beside a quiet little church hidden beneath the boughs of old linden trees, amid plains overgrown with golden wheat?

Are they on a foreign shore, beyond the blue sea?

Or, perhaps, amid the snows—the ice—the clouds—here? . . .

O my poor brother, what is it that troubles you? . . .

. . . . . .

With his fleshless fingers, he groped over the frozen surface of the snow.

He was seeking his eyes—his violin.

He found it.

His face became bright.

His death-tortured soul seemed to have departed through the dark cavities from whence his eyes once gazed—and to have rested on the strings of the violin.

At first, the hands of the blind man trembled, and the numbed fingers refused to heed the command of the spirit. The frozen violin wished, like its frozen master, to keep silence forever. Its tones at first were broken, hoarse, hollow, as though the instrument were angry at being disturbed.

Gradually, the blind man's will overcame the impotence of his hands and the resistance of the fiddle.

Into the obscurity of souls and into the emptiness of distance, the blind man's song was floating.

It faded far . . . far . . . into endlessness, like a dream that never more will reappear.

It soaked into the soil, like warm blood shed in vain.

It pictured the journey of life—from the cradle of childhood—over sun-bathed plains—through storm, tempest, and chaos—melting into the brooding darkness of eternity.

On the wings of this song, their souls flew away to upturn the mountains and to bring back the springtime and happiness that, alas, can return no more.

The violin of the blind man sang the song of eternity.

And the song bade farewell to life—it spoke—it rejoiced—it cried:

From the secret, boundless region
Of the spell-bound, mystic silence
Comes an echo to the spirit
From a sea of endless flow.

In blue heavens, sunlight-gilded,
Silvery sounds forever vibrate:
Eden's song of happy childhood,
Dawn of life's primeval spring.

Bells are ringing . . . and the echo
Wanders over hills and valleys . . .
Widens out along the sun-path,
Slumber-muted—like a dream.

Bells of Easter-tide are ringing. . . .
Bring, oh, mystic blue of heaven
Down to earth, where man is dwelling,
Buds of Heaven's flowering.

Earth is held in Heaven's embraces,
Golden sunrays o'er it gleaming. . . .
All life's offspring, earth-created,
Held in wide-encircling blue.

Men, whose hearts with love are leavened,
Pray as lisping childhood murmurs.
Like a garland, springtime-garnered,
Wreathed around the church they stand.

From dense darkness light emerges,
Penetrates the boundless spaces.
Greets the world a voice triumphant—
Sings the joyful: "Christ Is Risen!"

O'er the fen a peewee hovers,
With its plaintive note of grieving.
Grieving, sighs the mourning mother
For the son who leaves her side.

Friends and kindred now embrace him,
Say: "Farewell, son, comrade, brother!"
Willows, aspens, silver river,
Whisper, too, a last goodbye.

From the earth, a youthful spirit,
Like a lark in springtime's gladness,
Soaring high and ever higher,
Touches heavens with its lips.

Resting in the sun's bright haven,
Sends the soul its message winging—
Speeding swifter than the lightning
To remotest realms of earth.

O'er that ocean, vast and shoreless—
Rigid firmament outspreading—
Looms the shadow of a gateway;
Is its name . . . Eternity?

Rocky barriers, darkly massing,
Pile the pathway of the spirit.
While afar, beyond their menace,
Spreads the spring of endless life!

All in vain the human spirit
Fights and struggles through the ages,
Seeking springs of living waters,
Seeking streams of truth and joy.

Bruised by bitter disillusion,
Wounded grievously by weakness,
Sinks the soul on broken pinions
Downward ever to the earth.

Mortal malice, grimly leering,
Glides o'er earth, in selfish blindness.
Brothers whet against their brothers
Knives of avarice and greed.

Mountains groan, and valleys tremble;
Seas of blood and tears are tided;
Through the gloom no light is piercing,
Save the lurid flash of guns.

Drowned are sinking souls unnumbered,
'Neath the flow of blood-stained rivers.
Vain petitions rise to heaven,
Orphans, widows weep . . . despair.

Mercy, fled afar, has hidden.
Look! The gods themselves forsake us!
They sit, shaken with the laughter,
And the thunder is their laugh!

Once again man's titan spirit
Flutters its unfolded pinions.
To the world, new words are spoken—
New commandment—truth—proclaimed:

"Wet with tears of stern endurance,
Winds the way to light and gladness:
Still to warriors, wrapped in darkness,
Dreams bring visions of the sun.

"I will quench all tears, all grieving,
I will open springs of healing,
And from supermen and God-head
Truth and gladness I will bring.

"Falsehood's temples I will crumble—
Shatter hell—demolish heaven.
Then shall rise a new dominion—
Eden shall again be found."

Somewhere dimly in the distance,
Eyes can see the sunlight shining.
Sun, where art thou? Eyes, where are you?
What bedims you, eyes of mine?

How may I behold my mother?
See again my smiling sweetheart?
Never shall it be—no, never!
Lost and gone—blind eyes of mine!

Do you hear, my friends, my dear ones?
Loving touch I feel upon me;
Arms are clinging—then a whisper:
"I am here to lead you . . . Come!

"Through the gloom, dense, starless, primal—
Essence of the soul of darkness—
I shall lead you ever onward
To a sea of endless calm.

"God or man shall hear no story
Of your resting-place eternal.
Neither myrtle-boughs nor cedar
Shall bend brooding o'er your grave.

"Tears shall never fall upon it,
Nor shall cross be raised above it,
On whose surface shall be craven
Words of fate for men to read:

" 'Here are sleeping eternally
Exiles of fate's persecution,
Who have passed through pain's dark portals,
Hells of anguish and of tears.

" 'Ever shall you wander, dying;
But afar death still shall hover.
From your endless, painless darkness
Never shall despair depart.

" 'Vain shall sound your ceaseless sobbing;
Naught shall fill the vacant vastness.
Neither God nor man shall hear you,
I alone shall hear your cry.

" 'Strong am I, but vain my forces
To dispel your dark despairing:
That, like me, shall be eternal.
Who am I? My name—is—Death!' "

The song has died away.

As though breathed upon by death, and turned to stone, the human shadows sit rigid. Their souls have not yet returned from distant wanderings, death-impelled into infinity.

They roam the pathless, dormant wastes—grieving and longing for the life that they have lost.

But the voice of their sorrow has died unheard.

As six drops of water unite in a single drop, so have six souls been united and become a single soul. Though that solitary soul seems insignificant as a speck of dust driven by the wind into the unknown—yet that soul-dust has become great as the world in meaning, for it holds within itself all the world's sorrows—and greater in essence than the gods—for, to the gods, sorrow is unknown.

. . . . . .

They seem doomed to remain seated around the fire. . . .

Mute, bewitched, immobile, damned.

All, all are dead—the earth and men, heaven and the gods.

Dead is all motion—dead also the soul of the cosmos.

Even time, sage of the bygone ages, has dulled

himself into a slumber upon clouds of dreamy vastness.

Death, itself, seems to have died.

The sea of eternity has ended its ebb and flow.

Eternity is at rest.

. . . . . .

But human sorrow was wake!

The blind man awoke.

He raised his blue hands, clenched his fingers and pressed them to his pallid mouth.

He was freezing.

I took his hands between my palms to warm them. But my palms were cold.

I pressed his hands against my lips and cheeks. But my lips and cheeks were cold.

Then I sought to bring warmth to his hands with my breath . . . to give him part of my soul. But I felt no warmth either in my breast or in my soul.

I felt nothing.

Yet from the dark labyrinths that once had held my soul, something came forth into the light. My last, warm, straying, hitherto unwept tear fell on his withered hand.

I wiped this tear away, unnoticed and swiftly, and drew his hands nearer to the fire.

The blind man seemed to have felt the warmth and moisture upon his hand. His sightless eyes seemed fixed upon me. Then he pointed with his finger to the spot from which I had wiped the tear away.

A mysterious ray of light shone from his soul and brightened his features.

Why need he seem to gaze so long upon me? . . .

And speechlessly!

. . . . . .

Suddenly he grasped my hand.

Pressing it, he whispered:

"*Im Leben gibt es Sonne,* in life there is a sun."

His voice was like the mysterious flutter of the wings of a messenger from beyond . . . like the tender sigh of a baby slumbering in the dawn.

Filled with amazement and reverence, his comrades gazed upon his face.

Their mute glances seemed to say:

In your soul, torn by sorrow more terrible than that of others—you see the sun. . . . Your eyes, that in truth face only the black night—behold the sun —through your soul. . . .

. . . . . .

And their blind comrade, pain-benumbed, living

symbol of the wretchedness of existence, ceased from that moment to signify merely a fellow-atom amongst them, a wretched worm trodden by fate.

They felt that from his darkened eyes flowed forth a mystic power. . . . A power more brilliant than light, stronger than the blind force of the raging collision of elements, holier than all the gods.

The immortal strength of the human soul.

The powerful spirit of humanity that, beyond miseries of today, beyond the rivers of blood, beyond crosses on millions of graves, beyond the vast, boundless darkness of the universe, beholds the sun of future generations. . . .

And the man, within whom this mysterious, bright and powerful spirit prevails, will, when dying, rejoice because of the sun that some day shall rise. . . .

It seemed to them that their blind brother no longer felt hunger, cold, pain or desire for speech, for his soul now dwelt in a sunlit world, beheld through his blind eyes, but which to them, the seeing ones, remained unperceived. . . .

. . . . . .

For a long while, they gazed upon their blind comrade, with silent reverence.

. . . . . .

Dobrovsky looked in turn at each comrade.

"He is happier than we . . ." he whispered.

And five wretched beings, crushed under the wheels of destiny, mused in tremulous awe and longing upon the happiness of their mystic blind brother. . . .

They mused, in envy. . . .

CHAPTER IV

Deliverance

SUDDENLY there struck upon their ears a subdued, mysterious voice:

You hear? . . .

It burst forth as from the grave, suppressed, wavering, ghastly.

In the rattling tremor of that voice sounded a note as of a joy, at the approach of someone. . . .

Oh, he is coming—he is coming now to bring—deliverance.

Who sees him?

Who hears him?

Pshyluski.

Why Pshyluski?

Nothing can matter to him. . . .

Not the heavens, the clouds, the gorges, his comrades.

Shocked, they gaze at him.

"Listen! . . ."

. . . . . .

High overhead, the heavens shower myriads of tiny dust motes, like grains blacker than the darkest clouds. They crawl upon the clouds, as though looking there impatiently for someone. Again they merge into the clouds, and disappear for a while.

"Harken! . . ."

They prick up their ears, and perceive. . . .

. . . . . .

From the impenetrable dawn of the centuries until this moment, silence has reigned in this frozen realm. . . .

Let lightning rend this deaf, darkened world!

Let thunderbolts shatter it!

Would that we did not hear that ghostly voice!

It forges new chilling fetters upon the vestiges of our souls.

It pierces to the marrow of our bones.

. . . . . .

A spirit has descended to protect Nikolich. It takes his thoughts, like children, by the hand, and leads them into a lighter pathway. . . .

"You hear? . . ." Nikolich whispers.

And in this moment, the vestiges of life fade from his features, except that in his eyes still glimmer the sparks of a far—distant fire.

In a broken, mysterious voice, that somewhere . . . once upon a time . . . far away . . . had been heard quavering from a cradle, Nikolich partly repeats, partly improvises, the song to which he imagines that he listened.

Sleep, my little one,
Sleep, beloved son,
Sleep, my hope, my all.
Sleep, my son and smile.
Only a little while
Can light upon your cradle fall.

Youth will not be done—
Until the wars, my son,
Turn brother against brother.
And you will heed the call—
O son, my all, my all—
Oh! heart-break of your mother!

O star! To no avail
You shine, then slowly pale—
I faint with dark despair,
Deep in the gloom, my child,
So desolate and wild,
Ravens will find you there.

With the last verse, he raised his eyes heavenward and shuddered. Then he gazed upon his comrades, one after the other.

"My mother has told me the truth. . . ." he said, in a voice that stammered with fear.

"You hear? . . . High in the air, the ravens croak. . . ."

. . . . . .

Living, they sit like corpses and endure that dreary voice pecking at their brains as with a sharp, rapacious beak.

. . . . . .

"Someone is calling me—yes—someone is calling me! . . ." Szabo breaks the silence. In his voice, his waning vigor and weakened mind are perceptible.

He struggles to his feet, moves toward the brink of the abyss where Pshyluski is standing.

"Who is calling me? . . ." he asks the latter.

"No one from the chasm. . . ."

"From whence, then? . . ."

"From the sky. . . ."

"Who?—God? . . ." Szabo cries.

"From the sky, the ravens call. . . ." Pshyluski answers in a whisper.

Szabo returns to the fire, grasps the gun and lifts it toward the clouds.

"Where are the ravens? . . ." he inquires, "I will shoot them all. . . . Where are the ravens? . . ."

"We cannot see them," Dobrovsky whispers, "we can only hear their croaking. . . ."

"May lightning crash everything—everywhere!" Szabo curses, threatening the heavens with the gun.

He returns to the fire, puts the gun beside him, buries his fingers in his hair and sits like a stone.

. . . . . .

The other exiles also listen for something distant . . . something dear . . . something long-lost. . . .

In vain.

In vain I struggle to distinguish a word, groan, sob, or lament from the mother with her child who had emerged yonder from the snow.

Why does she stand there all the time? . . .

Why does she not weep? . . .

Why does she not come to us? . . .

Nor does her child weep. . . .

Why does her child not weep? . . .

What could any human being do here but weep? . . .

How can such a thing be possible? . . .

Here, nearby, is a small child—and it does not weep? . . .

I grasp Dobrovsky's arm.

"Tell me," I ask him eagerly, "why does this baby not weep? . . ."

"Whose baby? . . . Where is the baby? . . ." he whispers.

"With that mother. . . . She is standing over there —in front of us. . . ."

"Calm yourself, brother. It is only your imagination. . . . No mother and no child stand before us . . .

"No one stands before us. . . . No one will come to us here— No baby, or wife, or father, or mother. . . ."

"Mother . . . mother. . . ." Again and again I repeat the last word.

. . . . . .

The heart of each one aches with longing to lean his head on the bosom of his mother and to feel on his hair a tender caress of her hand.

This frozen hell of suffering has changed them into weak, helpless little children.

They are lonesome, thrust forth from the threshold of life, forgotten by everything in the world.

Instead of tenderness—of sympathy—of a home —man has given them curses, cartridges, fetters and the stony bread of captivity.

Nature has thrust them into cold labyrinths from which there is no escape any more.

And as an infant longs for its mother's breast before slumber, so they now long for a touch of tenderness before entering upon the long journey from which they shall not return. . . .

. . . . . .

The gruesome croaks which fill the air have awakened the clouds and the mountains from their deathlike slumber.

The churchyard stillness and chill indifference of the icy world flee like a frightened hound.

From the distance comes a muffled murmur. . . .

A tempest is approaching. . . .

Then will follow a battle between the mountains and the heavens. The battle between life and death will also come to an end.

The murmur sounds ever nearer—it is like distant surf breaking upon a slumbering coast.

Mountains and gorges revive.

They are angry with the unseen power which calls

them back to life. They give forth sepulchral groans —they resound with echoes—they are pregnant with chilling voices.

With the terror of an animal driven into a chasm that has no outlet, I grasp Dobrovsky's arm.

"Dobrovsky, brother! . . ." I falter. "Let us hide . . . save ourselves . . . flee! . . ."

"Whither shall we flee? . . ." he returns, helplessly. "Where shall we hide? . . . Let us guard the fire to prevent the storm from sweeping it away."

"Hark! . . ." calls out the hoarse voice of Pshyluski who is standing on the edge of the slope. There is an inscrutable interest in his tone.

We listen . . . we hear . . . we see. . . .

Oh, is there not water enough in the sea, not anguish enough in human heart—are there not tears enough in human eyes?

What do I see? . . .

What do I hear? . . .

It lightens . . . it thunders! Lightens and thunders! . . .

"Dobrovsky, friend, what is that? . . . Here—in the midst of cruel winter, it lightens and thunders! Is it only for me, or for us all, that it lightens and thunders? . . ."

"For us all—we are high up in the mountains," he explains, in a hollow voice. "In the valley below it is autumn—maybe without snow and frost. . . ."

"Why, then, are we to die amidst these dark clouds, these ghostly clefts, and not among men? —Tell me, brother. . . . I am incapable. . . ."

"Brother," Dobrovsky murmurs, "you can continue your questioning to death—nobody will give you a plausible answer. I can only say that we are not on good terms with—destiny. Otherwise it would not have wrested us from the foundations of the earth—"

At this instant, a forked shaft of lightning tears across the sky, and thunder follows with ominous detonation.

Under the impact of the storm, the clouds begin a frantic dance, shaping themselves into fantastic jaws, distended bellies and arched backs.

Like the escaping rush of furious wild beasts, the clouds crash against each other—knot themselves—dash onward.

In masses, they rush madly into the maze.

Their thunderbolts menace the peaks that stand in their path. And the benumbed steppes of mist at the feet of the exiles became animate.

The storm bites—rends—shatters the knots, the tangles and the shreds of fog.

Through the rift, the eyes of the banned ones behold not the earth, but a dark, formidable abyss like the black night of an inferno.

Massive pillars of mist from beneath them mount upward, and meet the clouds of heaven which welcome them with thunderbolts and darts of lightning.

Suddenly, Nikolich springs to his feet, and points to the wavering mists and clouds.

"Look up there—look!" he screams in terror.

"Dragons ride on the clouds! . . . They flash their bloody eyes! Their yawning jaws open! They spit fire! Lord God! They drive upon us! Drive straight upon us!"

He falls upon his knees, raises his hands heavenward and weeps.

"Our Father, who art in heaven," he prays. "Have pity on us! Have pity on us! O heavenly Father! Be father also to us!"

His last words are accompanied by a blinding flash of lightning.

The other exiles, too, with the exception of Stranzinger and Dobrovsky—delirious from their

sufferings, their wretchedness, their tortures from the blind elements—behold fearful apparitions in the clouds.

These spectres remain half-hidden for a while, lurking with open jaws in the dark recesses of the clouds.

Now, these foes of light look grimly down upon the little fire on the earth and upon the little creatures huddled near it.

They glare in anger, and seem to grow more massive, in their black menace. They crowd above the little fire and the living beings around it. They wrap those below with darkness and send down streak after streak of lightning, like huge, fiery, sinister question marks. They receive no answer in return and burst out again in fury.

Stroke upon stroke of lightning is launched against the earth.

A cold wind breathes death upon them.

The men cower more closely about the fire.

Death-tremors shake their bodies.

One man seeks in the eyes of another even the tiniest spark of reassurance. But he finds there nothing except a livid, frozen, shrunken, corpse-like spectre of disintegration. Instead of eyes, black hollows

stare at the exiles—they grow, grow—grow . . . yawning, spectre-like, over their heads as if at any instant they would engulf everything. . . .

The tortured soul loses its strength and its power over the body. The lips open, and there issues from the throat a long-drawn, ghastly sound:

A-a-a-ah—

. . . . . .

Into the mist-muffled raven croaks . . . into the rumble of thunder and the moaning of the wind . . . weird laughter pierced.

What is that? . . .

"Pshyluski—what is the matter with you? . . ."

"Ha-ha-ha-ha!"

He lapsed into silence. He had unburdened his heavy-laden soul.

"Comrades!" he addressed us. "I wish to confess to you. . . . I shall die more easily—by doing so. . . .

"This war-hell shattered everything into ruins—High aspirations of the spirit . . . human dignity . . . honor. . . . Man sprang like a beast upon his fellow-man. . . .

"Still, amidst the world-wreck, I saw remaining a single goal in life. The family and its happiness. . . .

For years, I did not see my wife. I longed for her. . . . I loved her above everything. . . . Leave of absence was given me. . . . I went to her . . . to my little boy.

"My boy . . . little innocent angel . . . prattled . . . told me everything. 'Father,' he said, 'a gentleman lived with us for a long time. I did not like him very much because he kissed my mother. I cried and pushed him away from my mother, saying: 'That is *my* mother!' But that gentleman laughed and kissed my mother again. '*That is my mother!*' he said to me.'

"The earth seemed to open under my feet. Oh, why did not the abyss swallow me then? I had lost the aim of my life. All my dreams of domestic happiness—trodden—besmirched—shattered. . . . My last hope . . . my one supreme aim in existence . . . my sole harbor of safety after the world-tempest—that, too, had been crushed . . . destroyed . . . cruelly . . . insanely. . . .

"But still more terrible is this— That woman has destroyed the life of my son. She kissed her lover before his eyes. She poisoned his pure soul with the venom of falsehood and corruption.

"My wife's sin against me has been forgiven

. . . by me, a man about to die. . . . That crime of a mother against her child I shall never forgive."

He became silent. He gazed out into the dark world as though seeking someone there. His features, his whole figure, seemed to resemble those of a dead man whom a miracle had brought back to life.

This re-animated being now turned his vacant gaze toward the distant spaces and awaited the return of his pain—that he might take it with him to his grave.

He was shaken by a sudden tremor. Out of his eyes, wide-open and overcast by a white film, there flashed a feverish flame. He placed himself again upon the brink of the chasm, and bent over.

"Here is hell!" he exclaimed. "My boy is weeping! . . . She kisses her lover! My child pushes the lover away from his mother! . . . Where is the gun? . . ."

He straggled back to us, grasped the rifle, took aim, and fired.

The mountains sent back a mournful echo.

He burst out laughing.

"Now my wife will kiss no more lovers. . . . Now her body grows cold like mine. . . . Ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Then he dragged himself to the fire, buried his head in his hands and riveted his gaze upon the flame. In that attitude, he sat, benumbed.

"Children, silly children that you are!" said Dobrovsky. "Pshyluski, do not give way to vain regrets for that which never will return. I, too, have suffered a similar grief. But I do not cry. Why should I? Is a wicked woman worthy of a man's tears? No! The blackest demon is a snow-white angel as compared with the blackened soul of a human being—yes. That is true."

Out of his bosom a low groan tore its way, but he instantly suppressed it. He seemed ashamed of his momentary weakness.

"You are no ordinary marksman," he said to Pshyluski while laughing sardonically, "now that you have succeeded in shooting an enemy, at the distance of two thousand kilometers. . . . Nevertheless, accept my advice— If blind chance, your potter and ours, should shape you again out of clay—if again you come into the world, again become crazy, and marry again—then use your marksmanship to better advantage. . . ."

But the other did not hear these words. He was thinking only of his boy.

Time and again he pressed his withered hands to his forehead, and whispered:

"Dear boy of mine! Why do I not see you? . . . Why do you not come to your father? . . . My angel, my little orphan! Who will put you to bed in the evening? . . . Who will comb your curls in the morning? . . ."

A thunderclap drowned his lament.

Soon his body began to grow cold.

On his face, two clear rivulets were now freezing.

. . . . . .

"The fire is going out," someone whispered, in a weary, uncertain, dreamy voice.

The fire was glimmering faintly.

Pshyluski no longer saw it. His soul had begun its journey toward the unfathomed warmth of a new sun.

. . . . . .

Suddenly, the frosty air gives forth a crackling sound.

Oh! It is the blind man's violin that is dying!

He holds it over the flame, trembling in every limb. . . .

Four knives are driven into our hearts. . . .

Four strings break, one after the other. . . .

In the death of the violin one hears the lament of human suffering and despair.

Oh, how the tongues of flame lick the violin!

So fate, as though with the rough tongue of an animal, licks the soul from our body, and the body, in turn, from earth.

. . . . . .

The tongues of fire have vanished.

Again the fire faintly glimmers.

The violin is no more!

And for the blind man there is no more rest.

It seems that the tremor will not leave him until the very end. . . .

Hallucinations—the death of Pshyluski—the sinking fire—the burning violin—Stranzinger's tremor—all these together have roused the others from torpor.

A last yearning for life and for distant loved ones breaks over their failing souls, like a storm over an icy sea.

Lying on the narrow path to life, they behold the dead Pshyluski. His corpse, raised against a stone, with head hanging heavily on the chest—sits

rigid. Even after death, his face and figure bear the traces of suffering.

He seems to have taken with him, into the other world, his dull pain and his torture of anxiety for his lost son. Will he find there someone who will soothe his pain and sorrow? Or, there also—silent—solitary—listless—will he watch only the vampire that is draining his heart's blood?

. . . . . .

Nikolich gazes at the body beside which he is seated, and a shudder passes over him. A strange fancy bites into his weakened brain, fills his thoughts and shakes his entire being. He edges away from the corpse and presses himself against Szabo. He trembles like a child left alone in a graveyard. He turns large, horrified eyes upon the corpse again and again.

"He is dead. . . ." he whispers to himself rather than to the others, "but he is sitting. . . ."

He turns his eyes to Szabo, and presses the latter's hands convulsively.

"Szabo . . . tell me," he demands, "why is he sitting? . . ."

"Do not be afraid. . . ." Szabo replies, in a hollow voice, "you are a soldier. . . ."

In the ensuing silence, Nikolich can find no ease. In a muffled voice, as though placed in a coffin with the lid nailed down, he mutters:

"I have seen many dead men. . . . I have never seen a sitting corpse. . . .

"Friend," he turned to Dobrovsky, imploring, "tell me, why is he sitting? . . ."

"Be calm, brother," Dobrovsky tried to soothe him, "do not agitate yourself."

The silence is interrupted only by the whistling of the wind.

. . . . . .

A new fear overcomes Nikolich. Ghost-like, he glances again at one who no longer trembles.

"Boiani died. . . ." he whispers, in a dim, faint voice, "Pshyluski died. . . ."

"Stranzinger? . . . Is he? . . .

"My brother! Speak only a single word. . . ."

Silence. . . .

. . . . . .

Nikolich gazes into the dark-grey distance, as though seeking someone.

He turns and glares at his comrades.

"You hear? . . ." he whispers. "Someone is weep-

ing. . . . I tell you that I hear it—someone is weeping. . . . He is far away from us. . . . Standing on a green, sun-gilded meadow. . . . He is weeping. . . . Why is he weeping? . . ."

He listens eagerly, as though through the grieving wind he hears the wailing of another.

. . . . . .

A cloud of snow driven by the storm begins a wild dance above the heads of the exiles. It rushes down upon them, without warning. Each is hidden suddenly from the sight of the others. The icy wind and the tiny dance-mad pellets of snow seem to be dashing out their eyes, and crushing the life from their bodies.

Soon the snow cloud leaves them and whirls itself away, in shrieking laughter. . . . Icy streams course through my hands and feet, and up into my head. My head is roaring . . . seething . . . Hammers are pounding within it.

I am drowning in a cold delirium.

I open my eyes; I send forth, unconsciously, a cry that pierces the cold world.

I see around me dead bodies covered with smocks of snow.

The dead sit . . . yet they move. . . .

It is a dream.

Dreams like this appear only to the dead. . . .

But no.

The dead have no dreams whatever. . . .

The dead sleep quietly. . . .

I am alive. . . .

I live, and suffer amongst the dead. . . .

Oh! My heart is pierced by a thousand icy needles.

They are eating into my brain.

And they sting, sting, sting!

I am watching dead men. . . .

Dead who are living. . . .

Living who are dead. . . .

Joyful wonder comes over me. I see her!

The mother, who has been standing with her child in the snow before us, as if rooted to the spot. She also is moving. . . .

"She is coming toward us!" . . . I cry aloud. "She is coming toward us! . . ."

My pulses pound in uproar.

"Do not come near us! . . ." I call in desperation. "Here you will find death! . . '.'

"You are alive—dear friend. . . ." Dobrovsky interrupts my warning.

With terrified gaze I turn to him.

He takes my hand, and points to our comrades.

"All are alive. . . ." he says. "All but Pshyluski. . ."

The weird movement of the dead is now at an end.

I begin to recognize every comrade.

They all are shrouded in a dense winding-sheet of snow.

The blind man shivers—shivers. . . .

He did not die. . . .

Nikolich's eyes are closed. . . .

He also shivers. . . .

He is alive. . . .

. . . . . .

His eyes still closed, Nikolich begins to speak as though in a feverish dream:

"I want to live. . . .

"Somebody has put us alive into the grave. . . .

"Here, in the grave, I am cold. . . .

"I wish to live. . . .

"But not here . . . not here. . . .

"I want warmth. . . . I want light. . . .

"Brothers, let us leave this cold world. . . . It is not for us. . . . It is not for us. . . . This world has

changed our souls into icicles . . . it has killed our bodies. . . .

"O Almighty Father! Take us to Thine eternal warmth. . . .

"Stranzinger . . . brother! Show us the sun. . . ."

A blinding gigantic serpent of lightning violently writhes and coils over the heads of the banished ones. Then with a crash, it disappears into the depths of the chasm's misty void.

Szabo watches the lightning, with savage laughter, clenches his fists and raises them toward the clouds.

His upturned eyes flame with frenzied rage.

He shouts in a voice filled with fury: "Thunder and strike! . . . Look upon that blind one! Look but once upon the distress that has been wrought upon him! Is that not enough?

"This miserable worm, Szabo, cries to thee, in contempt: Thunder and strike! . . . Thunder and strike! . . .

"Fear has no application here!"

. . . . . .

Nikolich opened his eyes. His tremor increased.

"Cold . . . cold . . . cold. . . ." he muttered, gnashing his teeth. Dobrovsky, who was lapsing into

apathy, now looked about.

"You see? . . ." he indicated vividly with his hand. "Yonder, a hundred feet from us, is a nice bush. . . . We shall make a fire. Let us go!"

At these words from Dobrovsky, a new sensation shook my being.

Into the grim night—into the ice-bound gorges—into the death-like deserts of my agony and dissolution, a sudden ray of light had penetrated, bright as from the southern sun, strong as the life force itself, bearing freedom, like the hand of a victorious liberator.

A mysterious motion began within the unfathomable recesses of my soul which hitherto had been at rest, even as the ocean depths rest silent in eternal darkness, while the surface is rent by the fury of the tempest.

Primitive emotions began to surge like towering ocean waves which form chasms between them, into which may be flung everything that at the surface threatens life with destruction.

My brain became lucid with the suddenness of a lightning flash. The fixed idea haunted me that Dobrovsky was a being who had set his mind on killing all of us—on crushing all life. . . . Meanwhile

he had begun to move in the direction of the bush.

"Come back!" I shouted to him, while struggling to rise.

"Do not try to go there!

"It is not a bush! . . .

"It is my boy with his mother!

"She is coming to me with my boy!

"She will save me—and all of us . . . from death!"

With the aid of the rifle and by the exertion of all my strength, I rose and tried to go toward my wife and son.

My comrades stared at the bush, with looks of great amazement.

Szabo and Nikolich gazed long and persistently.

My words fought against their disbelief. . . .

Szabo's eyes flashed with certainty.

"Yes—oh, yes," he exclaimed, "that *is* a woman with a child! She will save us all from death!"

Meanwhile Nikolich showed a joyful stupefaction.

"Look well!" he called to us in ecstasy. "Don't you see? It is the Virgin Mary, with Jesus in Her hands!"

He fell to his knees and extended hands in front of him.

"O Holy Mother! O Jesus!" he prayed. "I beseech you! . . . Save us from death!"

Trembling all over, Dobrovsky glanced at us.

"Strange. . . ." he whispered to himself. "Is it possible that I alone, in this hell of ice, have kept my mind clear? . . ."

He drew close to me.

"Why do you not go forward to meet your wife and son?" he asked, in a mild tone. "Get up—I will help you."

I tried to rise, but I had no strength left.

My legs had lost all feeling.

With the obstinacy of despair, I struggled to overcome my infirmity.

I tried to crawl on hands and knees.

All in vain.

"Friend!" I began to beseech Dobrovsky. "Have pity on me. . . . Please find some way to lead me to them. Think of it, brother— Thousands of miles she has journeyed across high mountains . . . deep rivers . . . a child in her arms. . . . She is tired after the long journey. . . . Although so close to me, she has lost all her strength. But she will save us from death. . . ."

"Dobrovsky!" shouted Szabo and Nikolich.

"Help him to walk to her! He is right—this woman will save us all from death."

Dobrovsky made a supreme effort.

He helped me to my feet.

"We both are going in the same direction," he said. "You want to welcome your wife,—I, for my part, am going for wood to burn. . . ."

I threw my arms convulsively around his neck, and we began our walk.

"They are walking! They are walking!" came from behind us the joyous call of Szabo and Nikolich.

"God has not forsaken us! We all shall live!"

"Look! Look!" called Nikolich. "How the Holy Virgin smiles over to us! You see? Hurry, comrades, hurry! We are following you."

They both struggled to rise. Instead, they only could writhe upon the ground. At the shocking realization of his helplessness and weakness, Nikolich began to sob.

He wept like a baby.

The sobs echoed from the far mountains and valleys.

They mingled with the rumble from the chasms.

They spread as a curse over the frozen earth.

Voicing the desperation of ice-fettered youth, it beat against the frozen firmament.

Even the ravens took fright at the sobbing of a human being. They ceased croaking, and circled high overhead, craning their necks and listening attentively to the strange voice which interrupted their gloomy music.

But the heavens felt no fear. Coldly they rejected human grief, deadened it with their thunders, beat it down with the wings of carrion-birds and scattered it over the hills and the grim gorges.

Dobrovsky struggled on, dragging me with him. Yet despite the utmost exertion of his strength, he could walk only several steps.

Unable to go farther, he stood still for a moment. Then we both sank downward, with a groan.

Dobrovsky rose again, but he had no strength to lift me.

"Brother, I implore you. . . . Go alone to them. . . . Bring them here. . . . I can see and hear them—my child will be frozen to death. . . . His mother will die of grief. . . . Do you hear them weeping? . . ."

Dobrovsky took three steps more and fell again.

He crept to me, like a mortally wounded dog.

"Do not grieve," he comforted me. "Let us go

back to the fire and gather new strength. Then we shall reach them—in one way or another."

We began to struggle toward the fire, creeping and writhing over the snow. Hardly had we started, when Szabo began to threaten us with his fist.

"Turn back at once!" he shouted. "Do you not see? . . . This woman has come here to rescue us all from death! Why do you not go to meet her?"

Dobrovsky mustered his strength and rose once more.

"See—here is my heart! . . ." he called to Szabo, beating his breast.

"Fire! But mark what I tell you! If your shot should fail to hit the heart, then I shall have strength enough to crawl to you and choke you like a sparrow. . . ."

Szabo seized the gun, and began to beat his forehead with the stock.

Meanwhile, Dobrovsky crept back with me to the fire. We seated ourselves and looked anxiously around. . . .

The fire had gone out!

Oh! dark chaos of torment!

"Brother, what now? . . . Now we, human shadows, crouch over the ashes of life."

"Alas!" said Dobrovsky, in resignation. "Love, hatred, strife after the ideal, wallows through ice and mud, heaven, hell—all—all are ashes! Merely shadows!"

For the first time, a throb of pain distorted his countenance. But it lasted for a moment only. He recovered his calm at once.

"Well—," he said, "what is the conclusion of all our philosophy of life? Like a flash, we entered this world—ground into icy dust, we shall leave it.

"The fire has gone out—it is time to go to bed. I have no longer either desire or strength to support this life. I long to fall asleep at last, to sleep peacefully . . . sleep. . . .

"Good night to you, comrades. God grant that we may sleep as gently as Pshyluski.

"Look! He sits quietly—he cares for nothing. Misery does not distress him—a real Polish nobleman. . . .

"Nevertheless, we forgive him, for he suffered more, perhaps, than we all.

"Goodbye, all, far or near. Dear comrades, friends, brothers of mine! Forgive me if ever I harmed you by word or act. Do as I soon shall do, and we shall be happy, for we shall feel neither

pain nor joy, neither cold nor heat, neither night nor day.

"Good night to you, my old mother. Do not grieve for me; do not beat your gray head against the wall—because it is of no use. I shall fall asleep, peacefully and fully conscious. For the first time, I feel a mysterious, even joyful, gratification that now in my heart only *one* desire is burning— A perpetual peace. . . ."

Slowly Dobrovsky turned to me.

"You, too, brother, do not despair," he comforted. "If, in the darkness and chaos in which all of us grope and suffer, the spark of any idea whatsoever can continue to glimmer, your ardent love of spiritual and creative life will overcome death. If, however, all our life is only an aimless turmoil of accident and madness, well . . . then go peacefully to sleep—in the conviction that the world is but a reckless joke.

"Good night, brothers. Do as I shall do. . . ."

He took snow and shaped it into a cushion which he placed behind his back, drew his legs up under him, leaned his elbows on his knees, put his hands to his head and closed his eyes.

So he remained seated, motionless, silent . . . mute. . . .

. . . . . .

His silence drove courage from the others and left in its stead a vast emptiness. And this emptiness was surrounded by an endless sadness, as the graveyard surrounds a grave newly closed over a father or friend.

. . . . . .

At first, Nikolich looked at him with vague glances. Suddenly he burst again into loud weeping.

"Do not leave us, brother!" he begged like a child. "We shall miss you sadly. Tell us everything—as you have been doing until now . . . Console, comfort, soothe us—dear friend—father of ours! . . ."

"I beg of you. . . ." Dobrovsky spoke for the last time. "Fall asleep, brother, as I shall do. . . ."

Sobbing, Nikolich crept close to Dobrovsky and kissed him.

"My brother—," he cried, "on this woeful earth, farewell for ever! . . ."

Silently, Dobrovsky returned the kiss.

Nikolich then dragged himself to his comrades,

sobbing and kissing them goodbye. Then he snuggled close to Dobrovsky, taking the latter's pose. Finally he raised his pallid hands toward the black clouds.

"O, God," he prayed, in tears, "take our souls to Thy heavenly warmth and to Thine eternal light."

As he ended, a long, fiery shaft of lightning tore through the stony blackness of the skies. The next moment, everything was again wrapped in bleak darkness.

. . . . . .

The sharp daggers of delirium drove themselves into the imagination of the dying and into all the forces of the icy world. The firmament, the mountains, the clouds groaned as if convulsed by the dull droning of the thunder. Like a mortally wounded animal, the wind rushed upon the mountains and gorges. In wild madness, it tore the clouds to shreds, whirled through the clefts and shrieked as though lashing ocean billows into foam.

Then its sound was like the moans and sobs of thousands of women, over the graves of their children and husbands. Again it cried like the innumerable victims torn by cannon balls and burned

by poison gas in a cruel battle.

The heavens trembled; the mountains rocked.

Into the incessant groans and echoes, a new and ominous sound penetrated. At first, it was muffled, hollow, and profound; then protracted, grim, like the tearing blast of trumpets.

It was the howling of wolves!

In this ghastly symphony of wind, ice, wolves, and carrion-ravens, the last vestige of consciousness vanished from the exiles.

. . . . . .

I neither hear anything nor understand anything.

All that remains of my thought—all my soul—is over there . . . with my son and his mother. They both are so near, and yet so far away!

I will move heaven and earth with the fire of my soul . . . with my tortures and desperation!

I must—I will—save my loved ones from death!

Oh! Thou Almighty! Have compassion with Thy children of the earth! Have mercy on me! Not a miracle . . . no special grace . . . do I implore of Thee. Grant me but a little strength . . . that I may get to them. Look down upon the ravens! Thou hast created them. Sinister, deadly creatures. . . . Yet Thou carest for them. . . .

Behold! Two ravens hover high above my head. . . .

They part from each other. . . .

Look! Again they are close to each other. . . .

Why, O Father, hast Thou given the ravens happiness? . . . while men are torn apart from one another by Thee—through palm-trees and ices, through happiness and distress, through love and hatred, through heaven and hell? . . .

O, Thou most merciful One! Look down upon the ravens! Look down also upon the mother, the child and myself. . . . Have mercy on me!

While saying the last words of my prayer I see a form of horror creeping from the darkness and slinking close to my wife and boy. . . .

Oh, God!—Oh! Powers of hell! Suffer not this creature to kill son and mother!—

Deadly horror gives me strength. I crawl to Szabo, wrest the rifle from his hands, take aim and fire.

The beast vanishes.

For the first time, my heart rejoices. . . .

Powers of Hell!—what is this? . . .

Where are they both? . . . Where have they gone? . . .

Instead of my loved ones, I see, in front of me—a

black . . . dry . . . leafless bush. . . .

Oh, endless pain!

On wings of lightning, my tormented soul flies upward to the clouds.

"I have killed mother and son!" The voice of my despair rends the black skies. "Comrades, kill me! I am unworthy to live on the earth! I have killed mother and son! Dear friends of mine! Say a single word to me! Kill me!"

My comrades sit like statues of stone.

I creep up to each of them in turn—shake them—wake them—

Yet they all are silent!

Bending down to the snow, my head strikes against the frozen ground.

Something rings . . . rings . . . rings. . . .

Someone groans frantically from the chasm. . . .

Someone approaches, softly.

Ah, how kind thou art!

I thank thee, O death! . . .

. . . . . .

"All of us are cursed. . . ." says Szabo, suddenly, in a voice coming as though from beneath the lid of a coffin.

I look toward him.

His face is purple; his wide-open eyes are fastened immovably upon me; his mouth gapes as from an unprecedented heavy curse upon everything that breathes and thinks.

Shocked and spiritless, I gaze at him, while the slow-coursing rivulet of blood freezes in my veins.

I try to tear my eyes away from this apparition.

I try in vain.

. . . . . .

I do not know any more—is it truth, or imagination?

The mouth of the corpse opens wider and wider and becomes more ghastly in its distortion.

I hear husky laughter coming from the earth into which human corpses have disintegrated.

"Are you still alive? . . . Suffering? . . . Painlessness . . . peace—that is all. . . . Make an end . . . an end. . . ."

And in the shrieking of the wind, in the clash of the racing clouds, in the distant howling of the wolves, I hear the never-ending sound:

End . . . end . . . end. . . :

I look away from Szabo.

With a last effort, I turn the rifle, place the end of the barrel to my throat and put my frozen toe on the trigger.

"Far away . . . there . . . the sun. . . ." came a low, caressing dreamy voice, as though from another world.

The rifle falls from my hands.

"Oh, mein Bruder," I call to him, joyfully, "let us seek the sun!"

He sits on—silent. . . .

Oh, his eyes—his blind eyes!

Oh, power of light, dwelling high above us! Give him back his eyes!

. . . . . .

For the last time, I stare afar over the tearful frozen desolation. Perhaps, a tiny gleam of salvation will sparkle somewhere.

My eyes gaze on, and do not close again.

Close no more, eyes of mine! . . .

Search . . . ever search! . . .

. . . . . .

Upon my face, upon my discolored hands, upon the universe, small white flakes are falling.

Is it snow?

Oh, no.

They are frozen tears with which someone would lull me and then drown me.

I do not see heaven or earth.

I do not see any life—anything.

Everywhere—on every spot—are frozen tears.

I, myself, am a frozen tear on the ice-plain of existence.

. . . . . .

O Inscrutable, Almighty, Ice-mailed One! Extinguish, I pray Thee, the last spark of my consciousness . . . my suffering . . . that I may quietly fall, like a frozen drop of blood, down into the whirlpool of nothingness, into the void of non-existence.

. . . . . .

An unfamiliar warmth courses through my body. . . .

Someone takes my heart between his warm palms. . . .

Serenity fills my soul. . . .

I close my eyes.

My imagination sees a world, new, yet so old—old, yet so new. . . .

A world . . . familiar . . . yet miraculous! . . .

A white house. . . .

Through the branches of an ancient ash tree, sunbeams, like artist's fingers, paint on its walls strange flowers of silvery light.

Blue smoke winds peacefully over the house and up to the azure sky. . . .

Beside the house—in the sun-gilded courtyard, children are playing. My mother holds me, still a little baby, in her arms, caressing me. . . .

I laugh and laugh. . . .

. . . . . .

I am now a big boy. . . .

I am sitting in a little green orchard . . . listening to the old, old pear tree which whispers fairy tales of long ago. . . .

I see my little boy approaching. . . .

He leads his mother by the hand. . . .

She stands behind me and covers my eyes with her hands.

The child laughs happily. . . .

I lift my son in my arms. . . .

I am filled with amazement—his hands are so small. . . .

. . . . . .

But there is something that amazes me more—The existence of my wife and son seems an inexplicable enigma to me. . . .

Connected with some secret event. . . .

They both are alive—yes. . . .

But—this miracle! . . .

What was it? . . .

Do you remember? . . .

When you—when was it? . . . How and where did it happen? . . .

This event lives in the depths of my soul. . . . Yet remembrance of it cannot rise clearly to the threshold of my consciousness. . . .

I give them a lingering look.

"Are you really living? . . ." I ask, tenderly. "Or, it is only your shadows. . . ."

"What is the matter? . . . Why these strange questions? . . ."

They both embrace me. . . .

"Do not kiss me . . . my loved ones. . . . My lips are frozen. . . . Death rests upon them. . . ."

They weep.

I take them by the hand. . . .

We walk in the sun. . . .

Our path is overgrown with grass. . . .

Round about us, wheat fields undulate. . . .

They play hide-and-seek with the sun rays and shadows. . . .

The golden ears of corn bend, in welcome. . . .

And overhead—wonder of wonders!—The azure

heavens smile on me as on a friend. . . . The universe merges into a luxuriant sea of light, and warmth. . . . Sunlight penetrates the depths of my soul.

Why am I alone—everywhere, and all the time? . . .

. . . . . .

The splendor vanishes. . . .

The light grows dim. . . .

Twilight approaches. . . .

Dark night is round about. . . .

It, too, becomes imperceptible. . . .

I am no longer conscious of light, or darkness. . . .

I do not see or hear anything. . . .

The last thought and the very last wish: Thou. sea of oblivion and eternal peace—welcome! . . .

CHAPTER V

Miracle

DREAM? . . .
Reality? . . .

Through dim mist, the vision appears—

Ice . . . icy hands . . . water . . . I am in water.

. . . . . .

A voice:

"Brother . . . is *that* how you rest? . . . Look up at me. . . . It is I, your friend. . ."

Silence.

"*Piznayesh mene*—do you recognize me? . . ."

. . . . . .

It is the Ukrainian language that first stirs thought within me. . . .

"*Ce ty, Vasylu*—it is you, Vasyl . . . you have

long been dead. . . . We both are now beyond all pain. . . ."

"No, brother. . . . You are living, and so am I. . . ."

I understand it all.

"I had fallen, helpless, in the snow. . . ." he says.

"We were parted from each other. . . . I was put on horseback. . . . We became aware of six human shadows. . . . They were crouching around a dead fire. . . . Half covered by snow. . . .

"I recognized you. . . . I leaped from my horse . . . drew closer, and—by some inexplicable miracle, your heart was still beating. . . .

"Medicines—all our remedies—were of no avail. . . . A last attempt. . . . We put you into the water of this brook. . . .

"Now stay a little longer . . . you will recover. . . ."

"Where are my comrades? . . ."

"Over there, on the mountain—by the fire. . . ."

"Has the fire gone out? . . . "

Silence.

"Are they no longer alive? . . ."

"Brother, later about them. . . ."

A grave silence.

"Where are they? . . . My son was here with his mother. . . . I struggled hard. . . . I tried to rescue them both from death. . . ."

. . . . . .

I hear a voice saying:

"He struggled. . . . Now we have solved the riddle—how he remained alive. . . .

"His comrades sank into apathy—mind and body. . . . This accelerated the coming of death. . . .

"He alone struggled—he exerted his last strength to rescue his wife and son—that is, his illusion of wife and son—from death. . . .

"That struggle forced his blood to circulate and stimulated his heart. . . ."

I know now that it is Vasyl who is speaking:

"The spirit of life creates an ideal which saves the flesh, that is, the material world, from destruction.

"Brother, in a little while, we go hence. . . ."

At this moment there comes forth from behind the clouds a brilliance of inconceivable power that spreads like a sea of radiance, over the living and over the dead. . . .

I gaze at it.

"What is that? . . ." I ask in amazement. "How

did this happen? . . ."

"It is the sun, brother. . . ."

"How is it possible that I can see the sun? . . . My destiny is to perish slowly in ice and darkness. . . . And only in my hallucination to dream of the sun. . . ."

"Henceforth, you will live in the sunlight of cheerfulness and tranquillity. . . ."

"My comrades—are they far away from here? . . ."

"Up there, on the mountain—in front of you. . . ."

I look up at the mountain of death and at the sunshine that melts away the snow on the heads of my dead comrades, dancing and glistening, sparkling and shimmering.

My deep sorrow, unquenchable longing and never-healing wound, cry out, and ask:

"O sun, sun, why do you shine only upon the *corpses* of my comrades . . ."

. . . . . .

Out of the deep sockets of my eyes, two large, heavy tears, warm as blood, forced their way.

They rolled down my emaciated face, like two stones on arid, storm-beaten, thunder-riven earth . . . and, listlessly, disappeared under the ice.