IVAN BAHRIANY

The HUNTERS and the HUNTED

"A hymn to the free life."—TIME

"Vivid as a tiger's tooth."—NEWSWEEK

$3.50

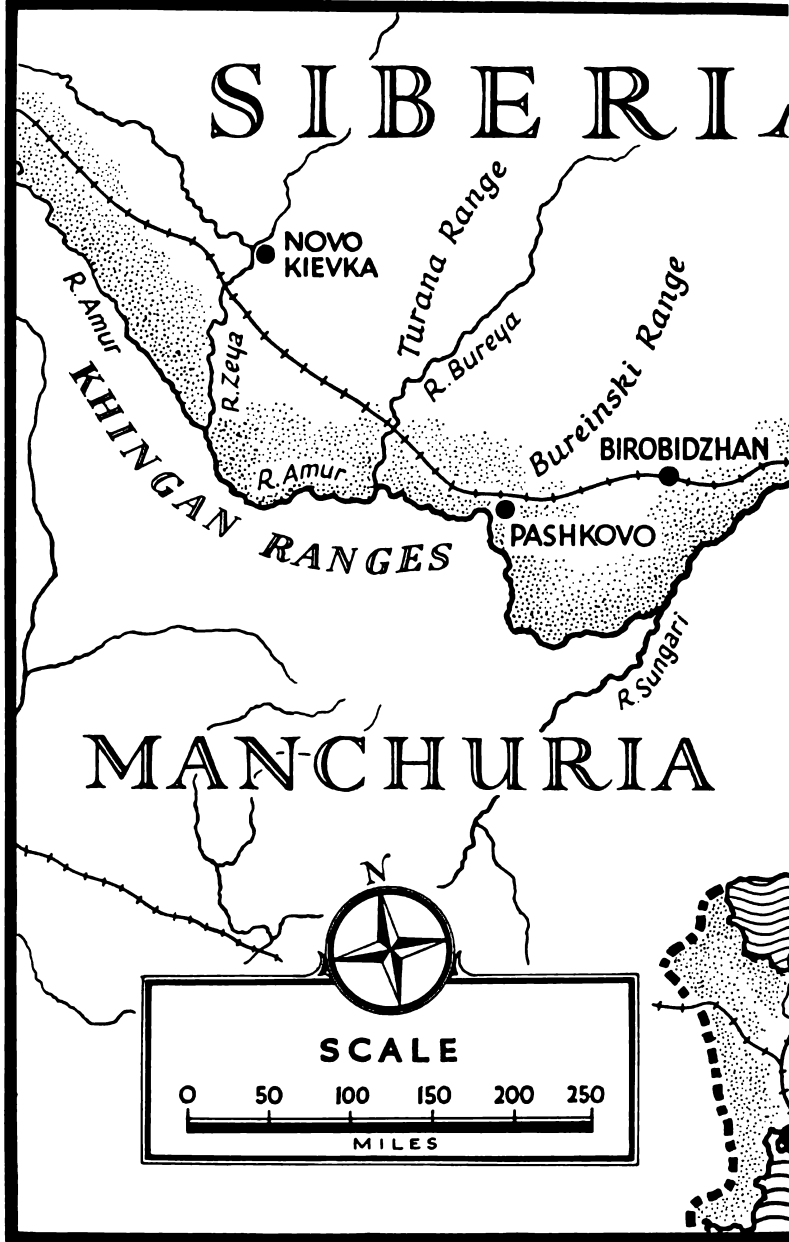
The HUNTERS and the HUNTED

by IVAN BAHRIANY

'The brave always have good fortune' is the motto of the family of tiger hunters who capture tigers alive with a pole and lasso for the zoos. The Sirko family, father and mother and daughter, live an idyllic free life in the vast Siberian forest—a green tunnel of beauty in the summer and a white blanket, isolating them from the evils of civilization, in winter. Theirs is a happy life which they hazard against the Siberian tigers. Into this isolated, self-reliant family comes a young aeronautical engineer escaping from a Soviet death-train.

Bahriany, like Hemingway, deals with the primary fundamentals of life—love and death, loyalty and courage—yet his style is uniquely his own, combining a sensitive perception of the beauty of the forest with the simplicity of the hunter's life. He tells this story—rare in these days—with a directness and simplicity and swiftness of pace which give this book the reality of actual experience.

Here is an idyllic love story in the solitude of the vast forest between a young engineer and the beautiful daughter of tiger hunters—a story that speaks directly to the heart—of man's courage in facing death, man's loyalty, man's deep primitive love for one woman and man's unconquerable will to be free.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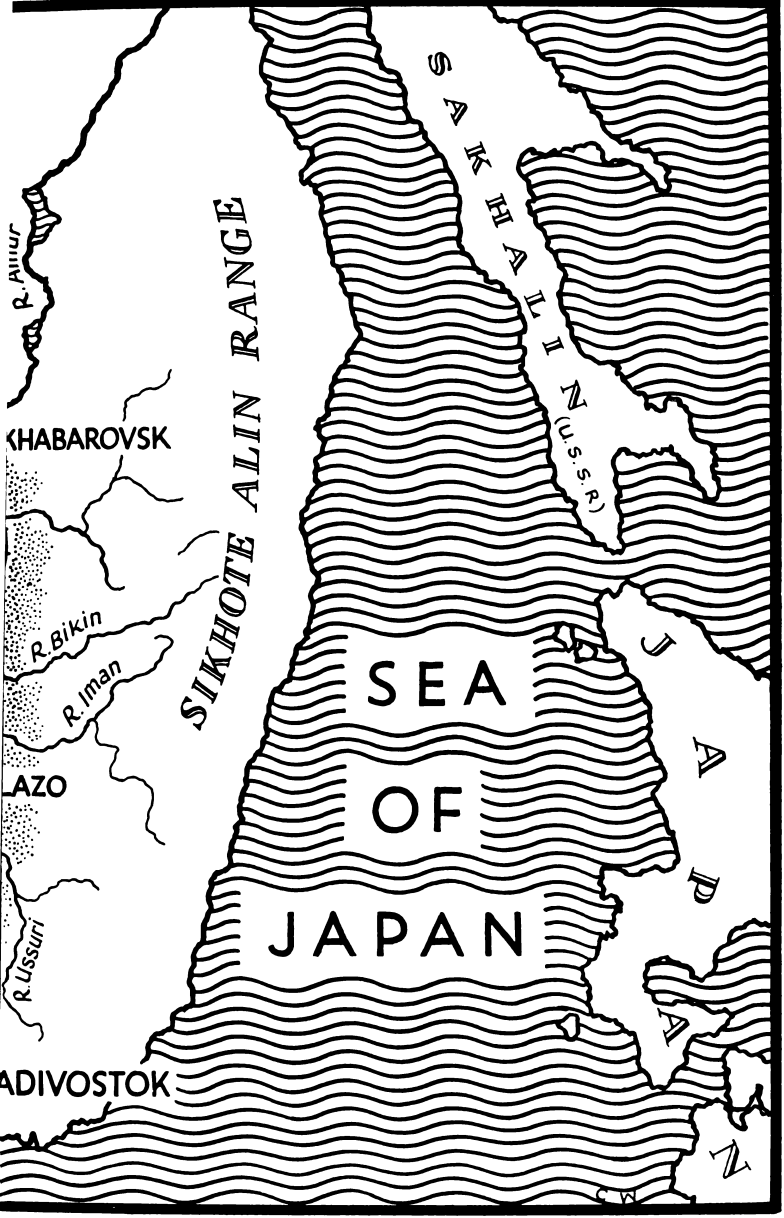
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BY

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Introduction

The author of this novel, Ivan Bahriany, was born in 1907 in the province of Poltava. His father was a bricklayer; his mother came of peasant stock. After attending a grammar school and graduating from an industrial trade school, Bahriany entered the Institute of Fine Arts in Kiev. He completed his course of study, but failed to gain a diploma because he was suspected of 'political unreliability'. His first poems and short stories began appearing in Soviet Ukrainian periodicals in 1925. He was a member of the literary group MARS (The Workshop of the Revolutionary Word) which stood aloof from the official literary currents sponsored by the Party. All members of MARS became victims of the purge of Ukrainian literature in the early 1930's.

Several of Bahriany's collections of short stories, his long poem *Ave Maria*, and the historical novel *The Little Cliff* were published between 1926–32. His novel was severely attacked by the Communist critics and condemned as nationalist and counter-revolutionary. In 1932 Bahriany was arrested. After spending eleven months in an isolation cell in prison, he was sentenced to five years' penal servitude. He served his sentence in a *Bamlag* (a concentration camp on the Baikal–Amur Main Line). In 1936, fearing that his sentence might, as frequently happened, be renewed, he escaped. For two years he was a free man, though pursued by the NKVD, which seized him in 1938, while he was on a visit to his mother in the Ukraine. He was rearrested and spent two years and four months in a prison in Kharkiv, awaiting trial. Finally, because of ill-health he was released, but compelled to live in his home town under the surveillance of the local police.

During the Second World War Bahriany made his way to the West. Since 1945 he has lived in Germany, unable to emigrate to the United States or Canada because he is suffering from tuberculosis. He continued writing after the war. In 1945 he wrote a short pamphlet *Why I Don't Want To Go Home* which was translated into several languages. Among his other works are the novels *The Orchard of Gethsemane* (1950) and *The Ring of Fire* (1953), a collection of poems, *The Golden Boomerang* (1946), and a play, *The General.*

In 1943 Bahriany took part in the Ukrainian resistance movement, and today he is the leader of the Ukrainian Revolutionary Democratic Party, largely consisting of Soviet Ukrainian refugees, dedicated to the idea of an independent and democratic Ukraine.

University of Toronto GEORGE S. N. LUCKYJ

Contents

1

The Dragon

The dragon with wide-open fiery eyes, breathing sparks and smoke, flew through the endless night, shaking the wilderness with its mighty roar.

Not out of Chinese fairy tales nor from the pagodas of Tibet but from somewhere in the centre of 'The Land of the Men-hunters' it rushed over vast distances, across the endless Urals, over the impassable steppes of Siberia, through the grim Baikal and the wild watershed of Trans-Baikalia. It wound itself around the peaks and rocks, sowing sparks and stench into the sky. It burst like a flame above crevasses, curled up and around steep precipices, flew like a whistling spiral into the wild high lands, and disappeared suddenly into the bowels of the earth. Far, far away it flew out of the ground, shaking the night with its infernal laughter, like a creature out of Hell.

This was not the legendary dragon of the Dalai Lama. It was a real dragon, the biggest, the most fearful of all dragons; neither Kozhumiak[1] nor St. George could have dealt with it.

Sixty sections to this dragon. At the front there was a fiery-eyed head — a huge two-eyed Cyclops, a super-locomotive J.S. (Joseph Stalin); at the rear, a super-locomotive F.D. (Felix Dzerzhinsky). Sixty sections to this dragon, each bristling with bayonets like a porcupine; sixty enormous brown coffins each filled with helpless victims, each full of living dead. Flickering eyes peered through the iron gratings,

[1] Kozhumiak, a legendary Ukrainian hero, a dragon-slayer, renowned for his physical strength.

through the darkness into a lost world, looking back towards their motherland, bathed in sunlight, filled with the laughter of children, of wives and families left behind. The belly of the dragon was full of these eyes, the eyes of those condemned by the GPU, the NKVD.

And there was no legendary Kozhumiak to save them. No one to hear their cries as they were borne into the frightful unknown, across thirty lands to the edge of the world.

Occasionally a guard, imagining some plot to escape, lost his nerve and fired a shot blindly into the treacherous night. And although no one could jump off and live at this speed, and although no one so well guarded and sealed could escape, still — the guard must be careful and 'observant', for he had been assigned a task of 'honour and glory and heroism'. But perhaps he too was frightened, perhaps his head was spinning, riding on the tail of this diabolical comet.

Scores, hundreds, thousands of kilometres slipped by as the dragon crossed the meridian and described a gigantic parabola somewhere near the forty-ninth parallel. No ordinary express moved like this, only these fantastic trains of death. The 'specials' of the GPU and NKVD drove at this mad pace, for they were all bound for a secret destination festooned with bayonets and searchlights. These were the fantastic yet real accessories of a legend; a secret legend about the disappearance of souls.

At various places the express stopped only for a brief moment and guards ran along the roofs, jumping from car to car, poking sticks into the iron gratings to see whether a break had been effected anywhere or whether there were any attempts to escape. Another group of guards ran along the sides of the express knocking on the cars — perhaps a bolt had been loosened, perhaps from within one of these cars an enemy had plotted against the State, against law and order. After all, it was their task of 'glory and honour' to see that these prisoners reached their destination.

The Commandant of the express ran along, starting from the engine, and, with his head high, cast a worried look

from car to car, searching for something. He continued along this series of grim, hermetically sealed, brown boxes built for forty men or eight horses, and finally stopped near the middle to catch his breath. And then, reaching up to the grille, he yelled at the tired eyes and pale faces that peered through, 'Mnohohrishny!'

The faces and the tired eyes dispersed; instead, one pair of eyes from the depths of the car approached the grating and a deep voice replied, 'I am here.'

'Name?' There was a brief pause and then slowly, in a deep sullen tone, 'Hryhory.'

For a moment the Commandant of the express looked silently into the man's face; apparently reassured, he turned and went back.

The eyes in the pale face now glued to the grating followed him and a voice coming from deep down, from an inferno boiling in the heart, burst through clenched teeth, 'So you are guarding me; you dog.' And then a voice from a far corner, muffled and sarcastic, 'Oh, yes. You, my friend, are like a general, you have attained high honour. The Big Chief himself does not eat, does not sleep, but comes running to pay his respects.' And another voice of encouragement, 'Never mind, you will serve your twenty-five years and become a marshal, eh?' Suddenly the man burst out in a shower of awful, uncontrollable curses against law, against the Universe, against Hell, against Heaven itself. The express suddenly started and gained speed, and above the clanging of the wheels there rose the sorrowful song of the outcast. It began with one voice, the voice that said 'Here! Hryhory', sullen and deep. It began the heartrending song:

And the fields turned white, and the fields turned white;
Even the glens . . .

With the end of the first couplet the song was lost in the crunching of the wheels; almost lost. Then another voice, like a blood-brother, picked it up strongly:

Even the glens . . .

And the two together, full-chested:

And the body hurt and so did the heart . . .

Two voices and two friends, they were joined by a third; the song, struggling like a bird in a sepulchre, suddenly flew to freedom out of this coffin, out of this dragon's belly above the screeching of the wheels. A song of three voices took wing and rose above the dragon.

A maddened guard beat the butt of his rifle against the wall of the car. 'Stop singing, stop it. . . .'

And even the head — but no one will weep over this pale body . . .

The guard ceased beating against the wall, unable to stop the song; the melody grew and swelled.

The train flew on with its screeching and whistling. Perhaps in this vale of madness the guard had heard this before, perhaps he had sung it himself; perhaps it was only the sound of the train or the wind of Siberia crying in a hundred voices. The guard grasped his rifle and stood there, leaning heavily against the wall.

And only his comrade will cry and weep, only his comrade. . . .

Clouds of acrid smoke tickled the guard's nostrils and squeezed his throat; J.S. burst into a roar of diabolical laughter.

Oh my dearest brother, my dearest friend,
Perhaps I will die, perhaps I will die. . . .

A tide of endless grief, of anger, of grim sorrow — the song fluttered over the dragon and spread over its path and the dragon cut through it, tore it to shreds and swept it aside with its fiery tail. And in its wake followed two bloody endless ribbons of steel, shimmering and flashing, two veins spun out of the song, spun out of the heart. Far behind these ribbons stretched to the lost homeland, they followed the

heart or spun out of it sodden with blood, stretched to the breaking point yet unable to break.

Perhaps I will die, perhaps I will die.
Will you make for me, dear brother, dearest friend, a coffin of elm?

The train ripped into tunnels and squeezed through them madly, like a shell through a cannon, as though striving to erase the song and its bloody trail, but the song remained and the veins did not break.

* * *

Silhouettes of mountains flickered by, the wilderness of the Amur, the peaks and ranges of the Little Khinkhan, crossroads, block posts, and stations. The servile semaphores raised their arms well in advance, for this was a trainload of convicts; the NKVD express J.S. was coming.

Everything stood aside as the train, whistling and roaring, flew by.

After a while the express stopped again; again the guards ran along the roofs, and again the train Commandant ran back, raised his head and shouted, 'Mnohohrishny!' The answer came, 'Here! . . . Hryhory.' The Chief retraced his steps and was followed by two flickering eyes and a suppressed and increasingly embittered, 'So you are guarding me; you dog.'

This scene was repeated at every stop, and each time the Chief seemed more composed and his tone less alarmed, his questions now showing a trace of sarcasm, and at the end he added scornfully, 'You're some brave guy.' After all, the express was nearing its objective.

With each new stop there was a dogged determination in the glittering eyes of the prisoner. The turmoil of an unbroken and undefeated will.

As the hours passed the express approached its objective; it was moving across new latitudes, having turned sharply to the south after crossing the wide Amur.

During the day could be seen the beauty of the blossoming land, spilling a sea of flowers. Those few who were lucky enough to be near the grating cast despairing eyes over the enchanting land. The horizon was guarded by a range of grey violet hills and a ragged cockscomb of trees. Wide valleys bathed in sunlight, spreading and twisting, were covered with luxuriant grass, flowers and ponds; a wonderful, fantastic countryside. In their urge for at least the illusion of freedom the condemned pressed to the grating and reached out through the openings. Shots were heard along the express, but no one paid any attention; the train seemed to gather speed.

At night a starlit sky came out, millions of stars mixed with the sparks from this mad train; and trees and flowers strained desperately from the right-of-way, only to approach each other again in a chimeric dance at the rear of the dragon.

The landscape continued to change, and then there was no more land. On the fifteenth day of this mad rush the land suddenly ceased. The express had reached the blue ocean; it heaved a sigh of smoke and steam and screeched to a stop.

The train had reached the last ocean station — and now began to shake itself free of its burden. It began regurgitating the contents of its sixty stomachs. Amazing, how many people could be packed into these dirty brown boxes! How did they stand it, what kept them from falling apart?

Thousands of ragged, filthy rat-like skeletons, aged and bent; although many of them were between twenty and twenty-five years of age, yet they all looked like octogenarians. Thousands of them wrapped in rags and blankets or half-naked — cast out of their native land, away from their families, from society, tortured, without any rights, condemned — condemned to die somewhere in the unknown which they had yet to reach. The express had reached its goal, but not its contents — these thousands of martyrs.

They were herded together like sheep, in groups, surrounded by guards. They gazed without expression at the grey, endless, watery desert covered with a light mist.

That was their route — across the Sea of Japan, across the endless Pacific, somewhere to Magadan; more thousands of kilometres over the water to hostile, unknown Kolyma and perhaps farther.

But they were beyond excitement and fear. They were dull and unconcerned; these exhausted beings could only stare at the ocean ahead. They came from Kiev, Poltava, the Kuban and Kherson — children of a different, sunnier land and another sunlit sea.

The guards dispersed all the civilians from the station. They surrounded the place, and guarded it with rifles and wolf-hounds, ready for action.

More convicts kept pouring out of the cars. Some could no longer walk and were supported by their friends who apathetically helped them cover the last bit of ground — for many the last stretch of life's road.

Suddenly the alarm sounded! When all the convicts had emerged from the cars the Commandant cast his eyes over the mass of humanity; and then suddenly dashed off to the middle car.

'Mnohohrishny!'

Silence.

'Mnohohrishny!'

Again silence. No one replied, 'Here!' No one replied, 'Hryhory.' As though stung, the Commandant drew a pistol and jumped into the box-car. Empty. He ran out in front of the crowded convicts, yelling:

'Lie down!' — and he boiled over with the most violent cursing.

The crowd lay down.

'Mnohohrishny!' The Chief shouted, both angry and pleading — half-threatening, half-begging.

His barked command sent the guards scurrying through the empty train and the surrounding area. Telephones rang

in the station. The dogs were sent ferreting in every corner — but neither the dogs nor their masters could turn up the missing prisoner.

Finally they found the secret. In the middle box-car, No. 32, they found four boards had been cut across with a knife above the buffer, exactly where one would have least expected it. Only a man with superhuman patience and will-power could have done it. That task must have taken many nights, all the way from the Urals; and then to mask it somehow each day! That maniac had jumped out while the train was in full motion.

He could only have jumped to his death, yet the prisoner would not admit defeat. There were at least ninety-nine chances out of a hundred that he had ended up in bits and pieces; yet he had jumped.

'The devil! The devil!' boiled the Commandant. How he had guarded him — all to no avail! The thought maddened him. One thing seemed clear. Someone must have helped, someone had carefully covered over the hole.

'Get up!' he shouted. All arose. Their heads hung low in an effort not to look at the guards and thus betray themselves by the changed look in their eyes.

'Who helped?'

Silence.

'Car 32! You will be crushed! Turned into manure! Who helped?'

Silence. The inmates of car 32 were separated. About sixty of them formed a separate group.

'Who was his partner?' The men continued to gaze down sullenly. They were silent, though their hearts beat violently. Not from fear, but from wild joy, almost a vicious joy, and pride in that 'devil', that lad. They knew how and when he had jumped — far from here, in the middle of the night.

But no one breathed a sound.

There is a solidarity, an unwritten code of convict morals, the like of which exists nowhere else in the world — the morals of the downtrodden, the *sanctum sanctorum* of convict loyalty.

The men stood unconcerned. But the hands of many itched to reach for their caps and touch them to the ground — 'May this earth rest lightly on you, you crazy dare-devil!'

They remembered his words, which came out with a sigh one night.

'Better to die running than to live rotting.' And he had added angrily, desperately:

'To live! To avenge! — or to die.'

The mass of these ravaged, dehumanized beings seemed electrified. Each heart pounded. Human dignity, long crushed, came to life. Faces turned, and wings seemed to grow on those who had been, in body and spirit, completely broken. The crowd whispered:

'He escaped! To certain death, yet he escaped!'

The Commandant seemed to sense trouble. With his pistol he waved off those who were to be punished.

The other prisoners were driven to the harbour.

* * *

When they were loaded aboard the steamer, and everyone knew about the young man who had been condemned to twenty-five years of hard labour, who had cheated the 'tribunal' and jumped to death from the train, men stood on deck and, turning to face the west, gazed with wide-open eyes.

They were bidding farewell to everything . . . and before their eyes was a picture of the one who had not surrendered, who had managed to stay behind. He was the symbol of proud, uncowed youth, a symbol of that freedom-loving, plundered Fatherland. . . .

The steamer faded into the grey mist, carrying the unfinished legend of an eagle, a foolhardy dare-devil, who was a proud descendant of the first Siberian convict — the great-grandson of Hetman Demian Mnohohrishny.[1]

* * *

[1] Demian Mnohohrishny, a Cossack hetman (captain) of the seventeenth century, banished to Siberia.

In the meantime, along the whole Trans-Siberian Railway and all frontier points a message was flashed of the escape of, and the search for, a great enemy of the State. These points were underlined: Youth, twenty-five years of age, fair hair, athletic, aviator. Sentenced to twenty-five years. Name — Hryhory Mnohohrishny.

2

The World on Wheels

With flashing nickel handles in its luxurious compartments, and with brightly lit windows, along the same Trans-Siberian Railway came another express, the so-called 'Pacific Express No. 1'. Swaying gently as if in a dreamy waltz, with fluttering silk curtains at the windows, and crystal-clear mirrors, the express rolled on in the night like a string of lustrous pearls, with the enamelled names flashing by: 'Negoreloe — Vladivostok.' This express carried exalted passengers somewhere into the unknown and dream-like country, into a wonderful Eldorado.

Between deep-blue mountain ranges and along the legendary Baikal and across the high ridge of the Stanovoy watershed it flew like a handful of meteors among the stars; dropping into the valleys and rising and twisting around the walls of precipices, the express moved in a glittering spiral as if held by magic to the rocky walls.

This was the finest, most modern express in the USSR; the most comfortable in the so-called worker-peasant State. Its round-trip reached half-way round the earth, 'Negoreloe — Vladivostok', from the sombre Baltic to the shores of the Sea of Japan, 12,000 kilometres one way. It was suitably fitted out for its ten-day journey; the wonder of civilization, the acme of taste and imagination.

Joyful and festive, filled with life and sound, this first-class luxury express floated along, a separate world within the world.

The compartments were soft, dreamlike and quiet, decorated with flowers, packed with luggage, lit by lamps with

many-coloured shades and filled with expansive and noisy inhabitants of various ages and positions. The whole express was a microcosm of the phantasmagoria of the 'Sixth of the World'.

Engineers and aviators, Stakhanovites, airmen, Party workers and tourists, collectivizers of kolhozes and sovkhozes, bureaucrats, efficiency men and industrial hucksters, directors, and camouflaged adventurers, lawyers and spendthrifts, potential thieves and impotent Pharisees — civilian and military — workers in the organs of 'revolutionary law enforcement', contrabandists and 'responsible matrons' and eccentric but equally responsible 'lady comrades', with lovers and without lovers, with briefcases and without, with and without Party status, enamoured 'kittens' and even more enamoured 'cats', responsible and irresponsible grabbers and deserters with and without Party cards, and many more.

These were the expansive discoverers of the obvious; the arrogant record-breakers of the average. Seekers of dangerous adventures and even more dangerous careers; seekers of fortune and 'long rubles'; jugglers of long and even longer figures on bank cheques foreseen by the 'codex' of labour laws; amateurs of belles-lettres within the limits of the 'codex' and the Collective Agreements and the Criminal Code.

Experts in applied geography, comfortable jobs, resorts and railway maps.

Lovers of Dunayevsky,[1] Marx, and *preference.*

In a word — the cream of the workers'-peasants' empire in all its greatness and all its strata.

All the passengers differed in age, profession and status, but all had one thing in common — they were looking for something and escaping from somewhere — seekers of fortune and escapers into the unknown.

All had escaped from the hateful reality at one end of the earth and were now dashing off towards the other, running

[1] Dunayevsky, a popular Soviet composer of light music.

from everything and chasing everything, escaping what was already tiresome and perhaps cursed, and searching for what was unknown, unseen but beautiful and appealing.

This common characteristic might be called a fever, a reckless drive towards a half-real chimera, an exotic Eldorado where they had not been before. This was the common bond uniting this mass of humanity, these wanderers who populated this unique world on wheels.

Yet to the majority of them this 'somewhere' seemed fairly concrete and definite. They were going to the DVK (The Far-East Country), somewhere at the other end of the world on the shores of the Pacific Ocean. That was where they would find the real fairy-tale world, of which they had heard so much, about which they had read, reflected and dreamed. That was the destination of this speeding community — dashing onward without pause or a backward glance.

An imaginary extra-territorial world: a world of blessed independence from any kind of 'spets' (specialist) or 'prof' (professional) substance, and from any sort of 'spets', 'prof', 'part' (Party) discipline, from the hustle and bustle of compulsion and chiefs, from endless queues and equally endless 'series of meetings' in the trade group or union. This was a world of ideal freedom and complete absence of dictatorship (if you did not take into consideration the dictatorship of a love affair or the over-officiousness of the conductor). A world of adventure and romance, a world of kisses and meetings, of fantastic stories, unbelievable events, transformed by a prism of fantasy.

A world of blessed freedom purchased for cash along with their seat reservation. Night followed day, then again day, then again night; forests and deserts and mountains disappeared, the whole world was running away. . . .

This new world took its place — tense, magnetized, radiant, in the hues of the rose light emanating from luxurious lamp-shades — a world shielded by filmy curtains

and saturated with flirtation and yearning, to the accompaniment of gramophone foxtrots and rumbas. And the man responsible for all this was Arseniev.[1] Oh, that Arseniev!

Yes, Arseniev! He was the god of this express, this world on wheels. He was the lord of its thoughts and hearts. He reigned here as he had never reigned in the land he discovered and which elevated his name to the god of all adventurers like those on this express. He was the Columbus . . . the discoverer of the unique; the conquering hero of the unconquered, the champion of the most exotic and most fantastic region in the world — the Russian or rather Soviet Klondyke.

Tigers — all conversations began and ended with tigers. They reigned over the imaginations as a frightful yet inescapable image of that unknown land towards which each had started out so lightheartedly, as if to a wedding. They played a part in card games, in drinking, in gossip, and even in love-making.

'Did you hear . . . did you read how a tiger recently stole a guard . . . ?'

'What are you saying! . . . One heart . . . How did it happen?'

'Two spades! Ho, ho, took him away like a kitten . . .'

'My God! . . . Pass! . . . My God!'

Or:

'Oh, you sleek kitten!' That, of course, between lovers. Another woman, sitting in the seat across, widened her eyes and whispered to a neighbour:

'Some kitten! He is her fourth since the Urals.'

'And how many before Vladivostok?'

'Some appetite, God forbid! More like a tigress than a kitten!'

A couple embraced in the corridor; holding each other close, they gazed out of the window and dreamed:

'Ah, how happy I am! . . . We will go far, far into the taiga, and there in the bush, midst flowers and primordial

[1] Arseniev, a Russian explorer of south-eastern Siberia.

forests, I will build a cosy little house . . . I will make it so . . . so . . .'

'Careful, you will rip off the buttons. . . . Oh, how wonderful. . . . Aren't you afraid of tigers?'

Or:

'Please tell me, can one walk around the streets in Khabarovsk? Safely? Is there a militia?'

'There is. Why?'

'Well, I read that until recently tigers frolicked in the streets and carried away people, even horses. Is that true?'

'True.'

'My God!' And turning to her husband in a desperate hysterical mood: 'Didn't I tell you, didn't I? To hell with that Far Eastern Country! But no, we're going, we're going. He will get . . . He'll get isolation pay. He'll . . . It's not enough for him! I'm getting off this train! I'm getting off at the first station! I've had enough of your fantasies.'

'Please, dearest heart, please calm down!' The distraught husband, probably a book-keeper of a 'Soyuzryb' (Fish Trust) or a 'Soyuzzoloto' (Gold Trust), tried to cheer her. 'All right, we won't go to Khabarovsk, we'll go to Sakhalin. It's surrounded by water and the devils won't be able to get there.'

Tiger. A frightful deity with a striped skin — the almighty 'Amba', more famous than Arseniev himself, and the most exotic beast on earth.

Perhaps Zhen-Shen, that wonderful root, that talisman, mythical yet real, product of this Ussurian Eldorado, was the only thing that could compete with tigers. Even the magic fern which blooms on the night before Ivan Kupala,[1] a host of treasures and pagan legends, paled before the power of Zhen-Shen.[2]

Just the name — the compound word — rejuvenated old men and gave them hope that all was not yet lost, disturbed

[1] Ivan Kupala, a pagan deity and festival named after him, celebrated in midsummer, the time of greatest vegetation and fertility.

[2] Zhen-Shen, a rare medicinal root, found in the Ussuri forests; used in Tibetan medicine.

old hearts which had long ceased to react to high breasts and other attractions, provoked old bachelors to boyish pranks and Don Juan gestures, and drove the young to fever pitch. Exhausted by excesses, they dreamed of the moment when that enchantment of Zhen-Shen would at last be at their service. . . . And not being able to await that blessed moment they pawed over their 'kittens', and the imagination gave rise to a conviction that they had just come under the influence of Zhen-Shen and wonders would now be theirs to behold. . . .

Oh, Arseniev, did you ever dream that you would become such a successful promoter, the driving force behind such a mass of humanity, able to rouse them to such extraordinary deeds, and drive them towards that chimeric fairy-tale country, that country where you froze your feet and lungs, where, in pain and poverty under the stress of frightful Asiatic conditions, you prematurely laid down your wandering bones?

Did you ever imagine that after death you would become such a promoter, such a force in the hearts of sloe-eyed beauties, reckless adventurers, and drunkards, even bookkeepers, and old bureaucrats? Had you any notion that some day you would drive them over thirty lands, over countless chains of mountains, endless bush and wasteland with families and chattels, to conquer and hold the land you discovered, that renowned Klondyke and Eden; yes, that Eden where grape-vine and cranberry grow, and the cork tree and, if you are to be believed, the polar birch, the subtropical panther and the Himalayan bear — the polar 'ursus arctos', the noble elk and the snow-white gorilla?

And these exalted conquistadors, having started out from Takanka, or Sukharevka, or Lopan near Kharkiv, Krevan, Shuliavka, from the mudholes of Odessa, Leningrad or some other all-Union slum, having escaped the boredom of Soviet daily life and 'social competition'—having ended all that in one stroke at the ticket office, they climbed aboard this longest of long-run trains and began life anew. To live

again, to love again, to yearn again. Some with a purpose, some without, they dived into the unknown which began permeating their consciousness from the first day, asserting that they were going to a place where things were different, where the whole world was different.

The scenery, the attitudes, the flora, the people and the horizon changed from day to day, everything was new and increasingly strange. When they crossed the Urals they noticed snow on the mountain tops. In the Viatka they examined samples of the folk-craft which they were used to seeing in the city 'arts and crafts' shops, and they bought mouth-organs and whistles and all kinds of bric-à-brac made of wood, paper, clay, bark; painted, carved, or burnt out by the genius of the Russian civilization of Viatka. And these bits and pieces, these mouth-organs and these whistles changed the appearance and tone of the whole express. European styles were overpowered by the styles of Viatka. The train was filled with folk-craft — baskets, slippers, suitcases, toy bears, combs and vases, and the most useless toys.

Whenever the express stopped there was always something new that none of them had seen before. The passengers tumbled out of the train and bought up whatever they could lay their hands on, dragged it back into the train, sat down, and again there was laughter and joking and ribald singing at the tops of their voices, 'Long and wide is my native land.'

Near Irkutsk they looked out of the windows and sang a famous prisoners' song which they all knew as the hymn of the former Tsarist Empire, 'Far in the regions of Irkutsk.'

East of Baikal they noticed a sharp difference in the native population: red-skinned Buriats and Buriato-Mongols around Ulan-Ude — proud, bronze Yakuts, burned by wind and snow, reminiscent of Jack London's Indians, similarly bronzed Yakut women at Chita, dressed in national costumes; Tunguses with their sharp-eared clogs — Chinese, 'Gurans'. . . .

Partly to entertain the passengers, and partly to display

his erudition, a professor of history, with a little round belly and glasses above a hairy wart, with a fan of cards in front of his nose, was delivering a historical treatise about the first political exiles to Siberia who laid down their bones in this area of trans-Baikal, the grimmest and harshest corner of eastern Siberia.

There were two of these pioneers; the first was a rebel and traitor, the Little Russian hetman, Demian Mnohohrishny, the second was the mad schismatic, the priest Avvakum.[1]

But no one reflected on how that 'traitor', Mnohohrishny, that patriarch of exiles, had so truly deserved a monument somewhere here among these bare crests midst the wilderness of trans-Baikal.

Through the windows there flickered in a wide arc the grim landscape cut by ranges of rocky mountains. It flowed by both sides of the express. And suddenly, as though a purposeful illustration to the professor's excursion into history, like a mirage summoned from the past, there was an addition to the scenery. Like an apparition, all these generations of exiles to hard labour, whole armies of them, stood on both sides of the railway track leaning on pickaxes, shovels or wheelbarrows, knee deep in water and mud, gazing at the train:

'Poor fellows! Look! A *Bamlag*!'[2]

Everyone dashed to the windows. My God! There they were! Real flesh and blood, in countless numbers like the exposé of a painful secret, like the secret itself, too frightening to behold.

There they stood in countless rows, tired, exhausted, in queer and frightful *Bamlag* uniforms: rag caps pulled over their ears, and their clothing in such rags it seemed they had been ripped and torn by all the dogs on earth and all the winds and storms of trans-Siberia.

[1] Avvakum, a seventeenth-century Russian archpriest, author of a well-known autobiography; a schismatic, who spent many years in Siberian exile.

[2] *Bamlag*, concentration camp providing labour for the construction of the Baikal–Amur Main Line.

They stood and watched the express, these flickering ghosts of an almost forgotten world.

Unshaven and filthy, with burning, sickened eyes; row upon row of humanity written off the register of life, surrounded by patrols, shotguns and dogs. Some waved their hands, others just looked on, dully waiting until the express went by.

They were building a new road, paving it with their despair, and now here they stood as though on parade, from Chernihiv, Kherson and Kuban . . . the progeny of Mnohohrishny and Avvakum, the first convicts. They were the ones about whom some day people would tell stories and sing slow, sad, painful songs, as painful as the winter winds of trans-Baikal.

Suddenly things were thrown out through the windows of the express; first from the engine, like a signal — several packages of tobacco, and then out of all the windows there flew cigarettes, pieces of chocolate, lemons, boots, pieces of bread, parcels wrapped in newspaper, a torrent of the most varied items. Children waved, and, urged on by an elemental drive and a general mob psychosis which seized the express, they threw out flowers, candy, mouth-organs — they clapped their hands enthusiastically and laughed from sheer joy.

The people in the *Bamlag* uniforms came to life and rushed at the gifts, stamping over one another in the process.

Shots were fired from the embankment. And, as though in protest, someone madly tossed out of the window of the train everything that came to hand: a pillow, overshoes, phonograph records, a bed-spread, money. . . .

The wind picked these things up and they hovered over the train like doves scared into flight by the shots.

Someone in the train buried his face in the seat cushion and wept bitterly.

The paper money continued to float over the train and followed in its wake. There seemed to be no end to the prisoners. They seemed to rise out of the ground and waved

their hands silently; and as the distance increased they blended into a blurred grey fog.

The express flew on madly without a stop.

And ceaseless tears continued to flow on that comfortable, soft seat in the Pullman.

But this event passed quickly and only momentarily marred the high spirits of the passengers. New and more interesting impressions pushed that mirage aside as though it had never happened. It was left behind somewhere in trans-Baikal, and towards them came new wonders, new scenery such as they had never seen before.

As the train came out of a dark tunnel the blinding sun shone on such a beautiful panorama that some could hardly resist the urge to pull the handle marked 'Westinghouse', which would have stopped the train. 'If one could only stop here and walk out — no, run out, into that landscape. . . .'

Then again darkness. Rocking pleasantly to the accompaniment of gramophone tangos and foxtrots, and dreaming and dreaming, it flashed on towards Utopia.

It both created and dashed towards this fairyland, losing the sense of distinction between reality and fiction, between facts and their meaning — part of this fairy kingdom of Arseniev, 'Dersu-Uzala' and 'Amba'.

II

It was bright and comfortable in the dining car. Large fans rotated smoothly and quietly near the ceiling, making a refreshing breeze. Ruby wine-bottles twinkled on tables covered with snow-white cloths. There was beer and cognac and liqueurs, and port bottles crowned with gold. They seemed to carry on a conversation with the clicking wheels, their sound an invitation to the passengers. Near the bottles were huge cut-glass bowls of oranges, candies, pieces of chocolate and a variety of tarts.

Solicitous waiters in black jackets with white napkins

slung across their arms stood awaiting orders; they were ready to move at the flick of an eyebrow and seemed to foresee the slightest wish of a customer.

Such comfort, such luxury, such a variety of drinks! This must be the only place in this whole fantastic 'one-sixth of the world' where one could find anything like this. So much fashion, such noble manners and wealth, such solicitude for human needs!

The express was a kind of extra-territorial state. It had its own customs, its own laws, its own regime; it was a separate world. Sometimes foreigners travelled on this train, diplomats, ministers and guests from far-off countries.

The bottles continued to ring out merrily, and the fans kept turning dreamily. A huge mirror, hung with cut-glass prisms, shed a fairy-like, flickering light.

Evening silhouettes ran past the windows in two continuous rows like endless films; violet and rose-tinted landscapes, white peaks of mountains, deep indigo valleys, grotesque outlines of trees, block posts, buildings. . . .

The buffet car was almost empty. Those lovers of beer and wine and happy conversation who used to fill it during the first few days were no longer there; some of them had reached the bottom of their pockets because these things cost money; others had devoted themselves completely to cards, some were romancing, and still others were playing another rumba. Only a few people occupied this cosy spot.

At the end table by the window sat a powerful-looking major — dark brow, fleshy nose, somewhere over thirty years of age — a major in the OGPU, NKVD. He had pushed his blue cap to the back of his head, undone his collar and was drinking his wine; his glass never strayed far from his lips, and his eyes were glued to a newspaper which he had managed to stand up vertically. He was sipping both his wine and his *Pravda*, studying the leader's speech delivered at the last conference of the All-Union Communist Party. Now and then he took out a pencil and underlined something, smiled enthusiastically, then frowned, took

another drink and continued to peruse the paper with his jet-black eyes. The major seemed to be the embodiment of the stately power and honour of his 'proletarian' state. No one in the train bore himself with such dignity, such pride and such self-assurance; yes, even with some disdain, with a secretive mien, and an intense feeling of superiority.

He was not moved by anything exotic, by eccentric tales, not even by the tigers. What were these compared with what he had seen, what he knew, what he could do? The kind of hunting of which he had been and still was a master could not be compared with any other. If only these amateurs knew that here, under his glittering uniform, were hidden things before which even Arseniev with his silly Dersu-Uzala would pale; and all those tigers — even their hair would stand on end.

He was not following some exotic will-o'-the-wisp. He was following other game. He had received an assignment, a high post somewhere in the devil's playhouse, and was going to assume his post in the ordinary run of duty. He was fully disciplined, punctual and not inclined to get involved in trivialities. In the meantime he wasn't wasting time: he drank his wine and studied the leader's speech.

At the other end of the buffet car there was a pleasant atmosphere of clinking glasses, humorous stories and laughter. A pleasure-seeking group had pitched camp there. They had shoved two tables together and covered them with a battery of bottles, glasses and plates. Five grinning daredevils, soldiers of fortune, young reckless comrades, had settled down to drinking and laughter. They were typical of this country's young 'heroes of our time' who were so plentiful these days, who kept moving from place to place, earning good money and spending even better, and grinning at everything. They were the spendthrifts of life and money, perhaps professional engineers or airline pilots or both. They were the ones who flew all over this 'one-sixth of the world', over this huge polyglot of humanity, and would fly over all the other worlds if they could get out.

One of them was wearing pince-nez glasses and smartly cut English breeches. The others, half jokingly, half seriously, referred to him as 'professor'. Another, dressed in a jacket of military cut and fawn riding breeches, was most elegant and undoubtedly reckless. More than the others, he laughed arrogantly and poured out highly spiced language. Only now and then he stopped abruptly, frowned, and looked around suspiciously. Two others — wind- and sun-burnt by the Crimean or perhaps Odessa sun — were big, muscular and grim. The fifth was from Novorosiisk in the Kuban, a contrabandist from Batum; but nobody knew that.

Four of them had travelled together from Kiev. They were going to the 'Eldorado' somewhere at the other end of the world. Why? No particular reason! They had met in Kiev, pub-crawled together, and decided to go. They were looking for something exciting, something better. They quit their jobs, signed contracts for the Far East, got their passage money, boarded the train and went. If they didn't like it there they would simply go back. They knew the Labour Law by heart and nobody could pull a fast one on them.

The fifth one — the one wearing a military jacket and fawn riding breeches — had joined this happy, carefree group *en route*.

They drank whisky followed by Malaga and port and then went back to whisky after a bout of beer. They seemed to enjoy themselves and had not a care in the world. Later they ordered food, and generally conducted themselves like young millionaires. 'Waiter, three more caviars . . . waiter, some more smoked meat! . . .'

The waiter hurried with his task, his face retaining a look of complete indifference. He had seen a lot in his time, but these boys seemed to have seen more. You couldn't surprise them or ruffle them. The 'professor' had been to the Far East before. He had even been to Chukotka right next to Alaska on the Bering Straits. It was he who had talked

the others into going. Now he was entertaining them with humorous accounts of his adventures.

The waiter brought the smoked meat and the 'professor' picked up a knife and fork and started to cut a piece. His efforts proved completely useless. '*Eureka!*' he announced suddenly with enthusiasm, and added solemnly in professorial tones: '*Eureka!* I shall make myself some shoe-soles out of this piece. I shall sign them, full name and address, and the year of birth. And I shall walk through this blessed land . . . and eventually I will be eaten by a tiger. Yes, he will eat everything, bones and all, but not the soles of my boots! That will be more than he can manage! You, my dear chaps, will find them, and you will bury me, or rather the soles, and you will drink my — no, their health. . . . Waiter! *Zubrovka*,[1] please!' There was loud laughter in the group. The waiter brought the *zubrovka* and made a casual effort to remove the offending smoked meat. But the 'professor', politely but firmly, protested: 'No, no, what do you think you are doing? I paid good money for this and I won't give it up so easily. After all, this is quality material! How about patent rights?'

The major frowned disapprovingly at the group but they didn't pay the slightest attention to him. They acted as if he weren't there. He put the paper on the table and stared out the window. . . .

'Hey, chaps, did you notice the *Bamlag* today?' asked one of them suddenly, casting a meaningful glance at the major.

'Yes, we saw it,' replied one of the men in solemn, thick tones. 'Yes, we were even present at the parade. . . . I wonder who threw out a pillow. It will help them sleep comfortably!'

'The hell with the pillow. But someone threw out a gramophone record. What in the world good will that do?'

'Why not, it might be useful at that' . . . then only whispers and a pause, followed by a burst of laughter.

The major shifted, looked at the window, frowned again

[1] *Zubrovka*, brandy.

and then smiled, repressing his inward laughter. 'Let those boobs laugh,' he said to himself. 'They've either been there already or they are candidates.'

The 'professor' changed the subject:

'Attention please, attention please,' he began, imitating a radio announcer. 'This is . . .'

'Odessa-mamma,' interjected the one with the coffee-coloured jacket.

'Yes, Odessa-mamma.'

'And Vladivostok — a filthy dump-hole. . . .'

'Well, we'll get there and we'll see. Attention please! Which one of you learned geography? And history? . . . Well, it is well that you all studied it. If you didn't you will, until it chokes you. . . . Well, by way of education, self-education that is, I will tell you how God created the country we are going to. Waiter, beer!'

The happy 'professor' poured out the beer for his friends, and began an authoritative discourse on a naturalist-geographic-cum-religious theme about 'how God created that queer country', that Golden Eldorado where they were going, and that 'it is a place where even the devil will break his leg before he figures out what it is all about'.

'But,' he continued, 'it is generally known that that country has everything in creation, everything is there just as in a museum, except for bananas and monkeys, if you don't take into account Darwin's researches, and except for crocodiles, if you regard as crocodiles only those things that swim somewhere near Cheops' pyramid. Everything else is there. You see, it was like this. . . . When God created the world — although the Vladivostok Turk who told this one ascribed this achievement to Allah, for, as is customary all over the world, everyone roots for his own team — so, according to this Turk, Allah created this miracle, but orthodox unbelievers and the Christians have made their own corrections. . . . Well, when our God made the world, he moved from west to east and placed things as was necessary according to plan. He carried a sackful of seeds and things and

placed them as though following a carefully worked-out Finance Plan of a heavenly Communist Economy. This here, that there, right around the earth. And finally he came to this area and stopped on the crest of Sikhote-Alin — yes, there is such a range — and there was no more land! His sack, however, still held all kinds of things! God looked and wondered. It would be too much of an effort to go all the way back, so he simply spilled everything out of his sack right here! And that is how it all began.

'And the mess that this caused was such that, God forgive, people will puzzle for a long time as to how this could have happened. I must say, it is some country! And, in the words of that Vladivostok Turk, nobody can figure the whole thing out, only Turks or Zaporozhians perhaps! Why Zaporozhians? To that he replies that that is the way things are ordered on earth. If things are too tough in any spot, then send in the Zaporozhians, or at least their progeny. In the Kuban — Zaporozhians; on the Terek — Zaporozhians. At Petrograd — again Zaporozhians! The same thing here. Tsar Nicholas was no fool when he insisted upon those foolish *khakhly*.[1] God, too, had them in mind when he created this world. It's been that way ever since, and it might not end until our generation. . . . Waiter, soda water, please!'

When the lecture was finished, the boys drank it down in clear whisky, made editorial corrections and additions to the text. Things were going well; thus they enjoyed themselves, with not a worry in the world.

The major, in the meantime, was again deep in his paper and had by now reached the sixth page containing sport and other all-Union reports.

Two men dressed in raincoats, elegant chrome leather boots and Uzbek skullcaps so popular in summer, entered the dining-car. They sat down at the end table and opened a bottle of beer. Apparently bored, they gazed around the car and listened to the hum and laughter. They looked at

[1] *Khakhly*, derogatory name given by the Russians to the Ukrainians.

the major, at the jolly company . . . and exchanged glances.

Shortly afterwards one of them rose and walked up to the young men. He stopped in front of the one wearing the military jacket, stared at him for some time, and then announced solemnly:

'Follow me . . .'

The youth in the military jacket looked him over slowly from head to foot, picked up his glass and said:

'Excuse me, are you speaking to me?'

'Yes, you!'

'I am listening. . . .'

'Follow me!' repeated the skullcap sharply, shoving his hand deep into his pocket.

'Oho, do I understand you correctly, and have you — have you come to the right place?'

'Shut up!' shouted the man.

Suddenly his companion came up and stood beside him smiling, his eyes darting all over the buffet-car and especially over the other members of the group.

'Shut up!' shouted the first one threateningly. 'Listen, when you are spoken to. You are under arrest. Follow me.'

'In the first place I am not yet arrested. In the second place I have no intention of following anyone anywhere, and in the third place we have yet to see who will follow whom, and where.'

The youth rose slowly, clenched his teeth, leaned on the back of the chair and, tapping his heel, continued: 'Listen here . . . am I drunk or are you, am I a silly ass or is it you? How about your documents?' And then, addressing himself to both, 'Where is the order for my arrest? If you please, the order for my arrest?'

'With pleasure,' and the man wearing the skullcap pulled a revolver from his pocket and raised it to the youth's nose. 'Here's the order for your arrest.'

'Bravo!' the youth exclaimed sarcastically. 'But you are a fool, that is a false order. I have a similar one; here,' and

pulling back his jacket he slapped a holster containing a revolver which hung on a belt at his hip.

Immediately his feet were knocked from under him, and his arms were pinned behind his back with a jiu-jitsu hold, but the youth was strong, he broke loose and in the process knocked down several chairs and one of the attackers. After a short but determined struggle they pinned him again and disarmed him. The buffet car was filled with curses, the frightened waiters hovered in the doorways.

And now the major got up and took two steps forward. 'What's this all about, citizens?'

One of those wearing a skullcap rushed over to the major, stood rigidly at attention, and reported something in a whisper.

This set the major's eyes afire. 'Mnohohrishny?'

'Yes,' and he passed some documents and photos to the major. But the major would not even look at them and pushed them aside. He rubbed his eyes, knocked his forehead with the palm of his hand and suddenly cursed vehemently through his teeth. There was a satanic note to his curses, but he soon regained his self-control and in a calm and serious voice said to the skullcap: 'Let him go, he's not the one. I know the other one personally.' And, after a pause, 'Oh yes, I know him very well.'

The man in the skullcap wavered and the major turned to him sharply but quietly:

'What did I tell you? And I advise you generally to be more careful. Are you blind? Check the documents and then give your Chief a report.'

The skullcap paled perceptibly, stood at attention and repeated, 'You have been told to free him. Yes, free him, and give a report to the Chief.' And he turned to the scene of recent battle. The three men concerned went aside, looked through the documents and continued cursing. The two skullcaps were full of apologies to the youth wearing the military jacket, who continued to curse them roundly through clenched teeth.

They returned his revolver and broken belt, then the two of them sneaked out quickly.

'Fools,' mumbled the youth as he fastened his belt, 'damned idiots, can't do a job cleanly. Boobs!' and without looking at any one or saying goodbye he left the buffet car.

In the meantime his friends had sobered considerably during the incident and sat quietly. They just stared at each other.

'Well, boys,' said the 'professor', finally, 'how about another order for each one of us? Just one. . . .' The jest didn't work. Things weren't the same. In spite of the efforts to revive the recent carefree atmosphere, nothing came of it. They had lost the desire for further 'orders' as well as the assurance that, after what had just happened, they could continue in safety on their journey.

'The world has come into its own! Oh, yes, the world, tram-tram-tararam!'

As though at a command the boys got up. Four husky blue-eyed daredevils hardened by storms and winds and wandering, and welded together by a short yet strong friendship which had so recently been threatened — four friends in search of adventure, of unknown regions and of a better fate. They poured themselves full glasses of whisky and raised them solemnly. Smiling, they looked each other straight in the eyes and emptied the glasses in one swallow. They paid the waiter and departed.

* * *

The major was left alone in the car. For a long time he sat and drank; but now it was cognac instead of wine. He continued to rub his temples and somehow could not stop the waves of frightening memories connected with that cursed name which kept welling inside him. 'That devil!'

That man was the only one he had not broken and who would continually reappear in his mind's eye for the rest of his life.

He recalled that episode of two years ago — the investigation he had conducted into the case of an aeroplane-designer, a friend of the pilot Chukhnovsky.[1] That devil in human form!

Brrr! those eyes with tiny spots on the lids — they would follow him for ever.

What didn't he do to him! In fits of maddened anger he had broken his ribs, twisted his joints. . . .

He no longer insisted on his confession — no, he only wanted the devil to howl and weep and to beg him as all the others had done. But he only gazed back with wide-open eyes, like a statue. At first he fought back madly, contemptuously, with curses and sarcasm, he spat at him — the investigator — right in the eye. Later he only sucked in his breath through clenched teeth and was silent; crushed but not broken. He was silent and filled with contempt. They had to bring him in on a sheet, for he could no longer walk. . . .

He was already dying — but he wouldn't breathe a word, and those eyes, those eyes! . . .

They poisoned the major's sleep and peace of mind, they seemed to poison his whole life. Those drops of blood on the eyelids — they burned in a deathly pale face with a sickening fire of unspoken, infinite, beastly hatred, and stared unblinkingly right into the bottom of his soul. . . . Those eyes would crucify him, tear him apart!

Damnation!

That damnable wide-eyed serpent! How often had he struck out at those eyes; he had even tried to gouge them out but couldn't manage it himself because that devil had the strength of a Goliath even when bathing in his own blood, even when carried on a sheet. At first it took four of them to lay him out but he couldn't very well gouge out his eyes in the presence of witnesses, and moreover, his nerves wouldn't stretch that far. But they should have been gouged out! Now they would hound him for the rest of his life!

[1] Chukhnovsky, a famous Soviet pilot and aircraft designer, later arrested.

The man had said so at the very beginning:

'I will torment you for the rest of your days. All of us who have come through here, we will all torment you and accompany you to your grave — thousands of us who have been beaten and tortured. . . .

'You will go to sleep, but you will not be able to sleep; we will yell and roar in your ears. . . .

'You will have a mistress — but you will not find happiness with her; you will kiss her like a thief, but you will not possess her — we will yell, roar and howl. . . .

'You will embrace your wife — and suddenly you will be driven to madness by our lament. . . .

'You will have children, but they will not bring you comfort; you will see us in their eyes. I shall stare at you from their eyes and you will run from your own flesh and blood, but there will be no escape. . . .'

'The devil! The werewolf! The scoundrel!' The major gnashed his teeth from too much drink and from a nervous tremor that travelled up and down beneath his skin. He had come to know this feeling well since he had ruined his nerves on this job. With shaking hand he poured another cognac and gulped it. And the unpleasant associations continued to press on like the tide through a broken dyke.

'That devil must have cast a spell!' The major remembered those suffocating sleepless nights which he alone knew. And the hallucinations — he who had nerves like steel cables — he had hallucinations. Eventually he was afraid to sleep by himself and he had got married. And having married, he used to run away, afraid to sleep at home.

The major recalled when that maniac had escaped from the lunatic asylum where he had been placed as a result of the interrogation. That was fine; that seemed to be the end. He, the major, the investigator, would now have complete peace because the only exit from the asylum was the grave.

But no! He had escaped! He wasn't mad at all!

They caught him. And the major begged to be allowed to continue the investigation, although he was now the head of a department. He wanted to attend to it personally because he felt that as long as that man was alive he would have no rest. It was up to him to finish this case. And the tribunal sealed it properly! It had looked as if everything now was over.

But damn the man, he had escaped again somewhere along here, where his own fate had led him.

The major continued to pour and to drink, and his thoughts led him over and over again to his first days with that maniac. Even without the drink his head was buzzing and the glass seemed to contain neither wine nor cognac, but blood. He spilled it out through the window and set the glass down. He gazed at it. He saw two eyes with little drops of blood on the eyelids approaching him; they were burning with a fearful inextinguishable inhuman hatred, they were the eyes of his crushed but undefeated victim.

The major pushed the table back and rose unsteadily. 'The bill!'

* * *

The express dashed on and on, rocking gently, carrying the exalted seekers of fortune, impatient passengers, into that unknown imaginary region — the kingdom of Dersu-Uzala and Amba, now close at hand.

3

The Duel with Death

It was a high taiga cut by four ravines thickly covered with forests and as impregnable as an African jungle. It stood still as though charmed, not a leaf rustled, not a twig moved. Huge cedars, well over a hundred feet tall, had outstripped everything else in search of the sun, and their clean brown stems reached out from the chaos underneath and stretched towards the heavens, only their pinnacles crowned with foliage. Sunbeams flickered above these crowns, and white clouds sailed overhead. In another ravine huge poplars towered above the other foliage. In a third there was a thicket of nut trees with a few elms and small birches and there were a few choke-cherries entwined by long vines of wild grape. The fourth and last ravine was complete chaos; in many places there were compact thickets of various bushes, and tall grasses and weeds. Everywhere there lay, criss-crossed, dead trees like giants on a battlefield, some perfectly sound, others decaying, with hollow centres like the muzzles of strange guns. Others had been uprooted with their whole root systems left clinging to the trunk like huge fists with rock and earth still between their fingers.

The earth itself was covered with moss which seemed to grow everywhere. The valley was dark and damp; only here and there sharp streaks of sunlight broke through and stood out like swords stuck in the ground.

An impenetrable virgin jungle spilled over into the unknown, now descending and then slowly rising uphill, moving from crest to crest like a profuse sea of green.

A little striped animal sat on its haunches on a fallen cedar and like a studious scholar investigated an old mushroom which it held between its paws. Suddenly it was alarmed. No, it was really nothing, the jungle was as quiet as the strange temple of a strange god. Only a woodpecker chattered as it flew from one high cedar to another where it stopped suddenly on a branch with its tufted head downwards and its neck stretched out. Otherwise there was perfect quiet.

Tiny shadows flickered across a fallen tree. The chipmunk began playing with them, and, with his tail high, hopped over these shadows. Finally he stopped and looked down. Below, a narrow path seemed to emerge from the weeds among the fallen trees and then disappeared into the forest. It was a small animal path beaten down over hundreds of years. There were many such paths never before trodden by human foot. The chipmunk scrambled down on to the path, moved hither and yon and, suddenly, uttered his cry and dashed madly up the cedar and then to a young oak. He peeped out and then hid again. He uttered another cry and stopped abruptly but continued gazing from around the branch. Something was moving, something was coming up the path. He heard the rustle of a dead leaf and then the crack of a twig, then a few pebbles went rolling down the slope. Something heavy was moving slowly up the winding path towards the clearing. The frightened chipmunk dashed upward and chattered with all his might. He couldn't make up his mind from which vantage-point he should observe the scene — which was the safest. He knew all the animals and knew exactly how to conduct himself in their presence. He knew the deer and the *isubra*.[1] He had watched the woolly bear straining up the slope and the silly wild boars who always left havoc in their wake. He had observed the marten, he knew the wolves and all his enemies, primarily the fierce bobtailed cat. But the kind of thing that was coming now he had never seen before. Should he run or should he stand his ground?

[1] *Isubra*, Manchurian deer.

A two-legged creature, breathing heavily and faltering, having finally climbed to the top of the crest, came up the path. He was ragged and as thin as a skeleton. His hairy chest heaved irregularly, revealing thin ribs through tattered rags. On reaching the fallen cedar the man sat down heavily, leaned against the roots, threw back his head and closed his eyes. Slowly, with his hand, he wiped the sweat off his face. He was quite young; he was completely exhausted.

The tightly clenched jaws of his darkened face were covered with a growth of beard. Two deep, upright wrinkles between his brows were flaked with dried perspiration.

For a while he sat motionless as though asleep. Then suddenly he opened wide his eyes and, leaning forward, listened intently. Again he closed his eyes and huddled to the upturned roots. He licked his dried, cracked lips, and, without opening his eyes, slowly shook his head. 'It's no use. . . .' As though in reply, he clenched his teeth, rose and, rocking from side to side, took two steps, then turned and sat down again.

'That's far enough . . . this damned, accursed country. There is no strength left. . . .'

He whispered this without any tone of complaint, talking to himself in the manner customary to people who have been jailed for a long time.

'Hey, my head! How much you have taken and endured, and yet you are dying. And you will die . . . Hm. . . .'

His nostrils twisted in a brief smile, he sighed, then wrinkled his eyebrows in a heavy frown. Myriads of thoughts ran through his tired brain in feverish disorder. He had been going now for five days; not walking, but running like a deer in a straight line through the bush. He had escaped from death and had flown as though on wings. 'Freedom! Freedom!' His nostrils widely distended, he was almost overpowered by the intoxication of freedom as he dashed through the tangled greenery. All his twenty-five years came

to life at once, straining every muscle and mobilizing every nerve in his body.

'Freedom! Freedom, be my bond!'

He drove himself onward, for he knew that his very existence depended upon how far he would be able to get away in the first days. When his strength gave out, all he needed to do was to stop and look back. There rose before him the frightful mirage of what he had lived through, and the even more frightening scene of what was in store for him if he were caught. Then a sudden burst of energy welled within him and he flew on like the wind. 'Farther, farther, as long as your strength lasts.' Just a bit farther and he would be safe. 'Then we shall see. Oh, yes, then we shall see.' He would flee far beyond the borders of this 'fatherland', into Manchuria, Japan, Alaska, China . . . new, strange, unknown countries. He would go round the whole world and then return home. Yes, he would come back an avenging conqueror. He would escape going eastwards but he would return from the West.

And he flew on and on. At least he thought he still ran as fast as he had at the beginning, whereas in fact he only walked; and more slowly and more heavily as the hours went on, until he was barely crawling. The spirit within him flew on like a falcon, but his legs, barred by the tangled growth underfoot, hardly stirred.

Yet he fought on in a straight line through the wilderness. If he came upon a path he avoided it; he went straight through the underbrush, like a beast pursued by dogs. He feared meeting a human being. In the morning he was wet with dew from head to foot but he would not stop. His struggle onward and the heat of the sun would dry him. He knocked his feet against stumps and stones but paid no heed and felt no pain. His course drove him into a tangle of fallen trees and he fought on recklessly for hours, ripping his clothes to shreds, tearing nasty gashes in his skin. He climbed over huge logs, his feet struck loose gravel or gaping holes in the ground covered over by weeds and he fell, wrenching his

knees and ankles, but he rose and went on. And when night came, when darkness spilled over everything and it became impossible to see, he stopped and slept where he was. He had nothing with which to make a fire, he had no weapons, no shoes, only half-rotted prison rags which were slowly being ripped to shreds, and which, he knew, formed a trail behind him.

The first night he slept on a huge fallen log and was wakened in the morning by drops of cold dew falling from high branches. The second night he spent in a hole, and in the morning he was nearly frightened out of his wits when he saw an overhanging mass which stood about fifteen feet above him — a wall of roots of a huge tree that had been uprooted with earth and rocks. The roots were bound together so tightly that they held this mass of earth and rock in a death-like grip. Had they loosened even one of those rocks it would have been big enough to kill an ox. Quickly he sought water, drank and was on his way. The third night he fell into a pile of dry grass and weeds that had been made into a lair by some animal. Something jumped out of the lair and dashed off grunting, leaving broken branches in its wake. He assumed that he had fallen into the den of some wild beast but before he could think the idea through he was asleep.

Utter fatigue — only now did he begin to understand what it meant. He had never known it before. At first he did not think of food, then hunger struck suddenly and violently, demanding satisfaction for today — and all the other days. At first he thought it would be a simple matter in this wonderful and fertile land of vegetation, animal life, fish and birds. Then came terrifying anxiety; he could not find anything which was edible. The taiga would yield him nothing. In vain he ferreted with the care of a scientist and the desperation of a starving man. No berries, no fruit, and apart from toadstools there seemed to be none of those things he had read of as being usual in forests.

The powerful vines of wild grapes would not yield him

one gram of food; there were no fish in the brooks, no animals, no birds in this jungle. As far as he had gone he had not seen one living thing, apart from an occasional snake that slithered away off a stump or stone bathed in sunlight. Where was that strange and even exotic world of birds and beasts? A wilderness, a still green wilderness. And yet he had scared an animal from its lair one night, therefore they must be here. But how would he get it even if he did meet one? There were ninety-nine chances out of a hundred that such an animal would get him rather than the reverse. Yet somehow fear did not penetrate his consciousness. He pulled out roots from the ground and tried to chew them, and once he chewed and swallowed something which made him faint, and his body became covered with cold sweat; he vomited, drank water, vomited again as though his whole inside were coming out through his throat.

'Damnation!' And yet he did not despair; he had gone through too much to give up now. He had been close to death many times and it was only his good fortune that he was still there to walk this endless green ocean. If he could only eat, just a little bit, he would be completely happy to continue swimming this sea, to experience the same form of life all the other living things here enjoyed, like the huge cedars that reached the clouds. No, he was not a victim of despair. He clenched his jaws tighter and went on. He was driven forward by unyielding stubbornness and a steeled manhood which had been tried a hundred times. Forward, in spite of everything! But his cool brain knew that he was dying none-the-less — that he was walking a razor edge between life and death. One slight blow and he would fall into the dark abyss. Something within him fought fiercely and rose in a tight knot towards his throat. He licked his dry, blood-encrusted lips and shifted his aching head into a more comfortable position. He forced himself to stare ahead unconcernedly. Suddenly he noticed right in front of him a little striped animal, whose wide-open eyes stared at him with evident curiosity. Tsik! Tsik! Tsik! Then he flicked his

tail, cocked his head and disappeared in the weeds. In a moment he was back again on the tree, settled down comfortably on a branch, looking like a Tartar in his little striped coat. He took a nut out of his mouth and holding it in his forepaws he studied it carefully.

Apparently the nut was satisfactory and he began gnawing it rapidly without taking his eyes off the man. He worked fast with his tiny jaws, spat out the shells and then wiped his whiskers with his paw.

Two surprised and hungry eyes looked at him. Saliva was pouring in the man's mouth.

'Look at the beast, he's eating.'

Slowly the traveller arose. Without taking his hunger-driven eyes off the little animal, he began to edge forward stealthily. He was seized by an overwhelming desire to catch this living piece of flesh and blood. Therein lay his salvation. Very slowly, his eyes half-closed, he moved closer and closer. The animal continued to chew his nut apparently oblivious to what was happening. He raised his hand, closer and closer. All he had to do now was suddenly to close his fingers, when the little animal darted away as though blown off by a gust of wind. He jumped down into the grass, dropped the nut and dashed off in fright. The hunter jumped clumsily after him and tried to trample him down in the grass but the animal succeeded in reaching a gaping hole in a huge log. The hunter beat the hollow log madly with his bare feet. It gave out a hollow drumming sound but did not yield. He picked up a stout stick and with it succeeded in breaking the rotting log through in several places; the animal was not there. He hadn't noticed that it had run out the other end of the log a few moments before and had scampered up a very tall tree where it now looked down full of concern, not for its life but for its home in the log. The log was now almost completely smashed, and the hunter was groping desperately inside the ruins in the hope that he had crushed the animal somewhere with his blows. As he dug his trembling hands into the pile of rotten wood

he suddenly found something. His fingers dug in and he pulled out — nuts! He tried one — yes, they were nuts! Whole, beautiful, shining nuts. He kept pushing them into his pockets and they kept dropping out through the holes. Finally he used his torn shirt-tail to make a bag. A treasure! A whole mound of nuts. He began cracking them; and his hand continued to feel around in the hollow log. . . .

The sad chipmunk looked down wistfully as he watched the robber pillage his store. All last autumn he had skilfully collected them and carried them in ones and twos in his little mouth.

The man now sat on a stump and ate the nuts, devouring them frantically. He noticed a peculiar plant nearby and pulled it out. It looked and smelled like garlic. He tasted it and found it good. He put the nuts aside, looked around the immediate area and found several other garlic plants. Then he settled down seriously to his meal.

He ate for some time and the pangs of hunger slowly subsided. Peace, and even some strength, returned, and hope, founded on what had just happened, that all was not lost.

The chipmunk approached the fallen log and saw what had happened to his home. He climbed on to a branch, looked sadly at his attacker and complained bitterly — 'Tsk, tsk, tsk.'

The traveller's good humour was restored. He looked up at the victim and said with sympathy:

'I am sorry about this business, little brother, but what can one do? It might have been worse. I would like you to know that this is the worst crime I have committed in my life and I would certainly deserve twenty-five years for this. But they gave me that sentence for the devil knows what. I will let you in on an interesting secret. They were taking me away and guarding me so carefully; and I up and got away! They were taking me to the end of the world, but I escaped; right into the night, out of a speeding train. I bet

the Chief raved! How he worried about me! Whenever we stopped he would come running up to the window and cry:

'"Mnohohrishny!"

'"Here!"

'"Name!"

'"Hryhory! . . ."

'And yet he failed. Ha-ha-ha!'

He went on to explain to the chipmunk how he had been sent with a trainload of convicts from Ukraine, bound for Kolyma. They had sentenced him to twenty-five years and they thought they were going to bury him somewhere in the snows.

He looked sadly at the pile of shells which was all that remained of the nuts, tightened his belt, found himself a stout walking stick and proceeded along the path joking to himself: 'Forward, Robinson. God is not without mercy and a Cossack is not without fortune.'

When he reached the bottom of the ravine he found a tiny spring; he drank and felt much better. The great forest now appeared brighter. Sun shadows danced over the green branches and far away he heard the laughter of a squirrel. It was still early, and the dew shone on the grass, reflecting the sun's rays like dazzling jewels. A wind rustled in the tree-tops but here at the floor of the forest it was sheltered and quiet.

As he followed the path made by the animals his eyes took in everything, searching for food. Now and then he left the path thinking he had seen something promising. Once he forced his way into the thicket to find that it was only a piece of rotten stump.

The path began to rise and wind among fallen trees and stumps and over huge boulders. Heavy branches and tall grasses hung over the path. At times it became necessary to crawl under this green cover which converted the path into a dark tunnel. There were animal tracks everywhere and although he could not see them he knew there must be many animals in the vicinity. Funny he hadn't noticed this

before! Here was a tree with chunks of hair stuck to the bark. It must have been from a large beast, because the hair was fully five feet off the ground. Here claw marks were imprinted on the path; there the prints were like those of a sheep. And over there lay a bare, gnawed, yellowish skeleton. He was not alone; the forest was full of other inhabitants! But where were they, why couldn't he see them?

He had walked for about two hours and the path still continued upwards. His brief elation began to wane. Fatigue and hunger exhausted him and he felt as though he had been walking an eternity. Stubborn sweat poured into his eyes; under his heart there was a pain, and his head was spinning. Now he stopped more often, leaning against trees, closing his eyes, listening to the ringing in his ears and the drumming in his head. It seemed as though he would never reach the crest. There, beyond that peak, must be the end of all his suffering. 'Well, keep going. . . .' Again he took himself in hand and went on.

Finally he reached the top. The forest now gave way to a clearing covered with flowers. And beyond, a magnificent view opened before his feverish eyes. A rolling green sea stretched out before him as far as the eye could see. It was ruffled by huge fantastic waves which followed each other upward. It was the forest rising to each crest, then falling away and rising again. The first crest was greyish-green and serrated. It was followed by another that was greyish-purple and stretched right and left as far as he could see. Then the colours turned bluish-grey and light blue, and always higher and higher. A wonderful, fantastic panorama, awe-inspiring in its beauty — and frightening. Who could possibly wade through this endless ocean?

The path ran downhill now and disappeared in the bush, but the traveller sat down on the ground, rubbed his forehead and pressed the swollen veins on his temples. Perhaps that would stop the knocking in his skull. This must be fever. God, if he only had a gun or at least a few matches!

Bees were humming all around him. He closed his eyes and imagined himself in an apiary . . . he was once more a little boy who had come to visit his grandfather . . . there was an ikon of St. Zosim and St. Savaty under the huge lime tree, and there were beehives all around. There were the beehives in the tree-trunks covered with large pottery lids. Ripe black cherries, like a girl's lips, peeped from among green leaves. His grandfather, clothed in white and with a white beard, was looking into the beehives and mumbling something. . . .

He opened his eyes and sure enough there were myriads of bees hovering over strange multi-coloured flowers; just like an apiary. Where do they fly, where do they take their pollen? . . . The air was filled with many strange insects and butterflies. The bees were crawling into little rose-coloured bells which looked just like roses except that they were very tiny. They dug around inside and then flew away. But where? In this chaos of activity it was impossible to follow their flight. The sun was blinding and his eyes were already filled with many-coloured discs.

The traveller rose suddenly — there must be a dwelling somewhere near. Surely that was where the path led. He must follow it; that was his only salvation.

The path led downward into dense bush. He walked until noon but found no sign of a dwelling. Soon he realized that this path had never before been trodden by human feet and that it had been made by animals in the course of many centuries. In some places where the ground was soft it was beaten down almost two feet deep and the rocks over which it led were worn as smooth as the palm of your hand.

But the path did lead to a fast mountain stream which wound its way through the bush. He could hear the water bubbling over rocks, and in the distance he could hear a monotonous roar which indicated rapids or a waterfall. He sat down on a rock and stretched his legs out into the water. Then he lay down face upwards. It was pleasant to lie

there and to feel his legs soaking up the water, to feel it rising higher and higher through his veins, stilling the pain in muscles and joints. After the legs had had a drink he turned over and soaked his parched lips, then his chest and shoulders and finally his whole body.

Reluctantly he came out, lay down on the shore and stared into the clear, painfully blue sky. He closed his eyes and dozed. The sun burned mercilessly. . . . Suddenly he sat upright. He was not conscious, but his eyes were wide open:

'Initial M . . . Mnohohrishny. . . .'

'I'll be ready in a minute. . . . I am dressing. . . .'

'May they be thrice damned! . . . (They were taking him for questioning.) . . . I'll be with you right away. . . .'

Slowly the gurgle of running water and the roar of the rapids crept into his consciousness. The terrifying scene disappeared.

'Phew, things are bad, brother. You're not doing very well, Robinson!'

He was about to rise when he caught sight of something between the rocks. My God! He reached down quickly and retrieved his find. A knife; a hunting knife! Actually it was a sheath out of which protruded the rusty handle of a knife. The sheath was half rotted away and the handle had turned green but still, dear God, this might be his salvation.

It wasn't easy to extract the knife; it had seized up in the sheath. He cleaned the handle with sand, revealing a series of copper, lead and bone rings with which it was covered. Then he worked on the sheath, knocked it on a rock, pried it, soaked it in water and finally extracted the knife which had turned black with rust but was well balanced and heavy. After twenty minutes' rubbing in the sand he had it shining, and though it was heavily pock-marked it was well made and still in good condition. This was not only a knife, it was a real weapon, with its heavy handle of metal and bone and a strong blade that would serve him well in time of need.

He was as happy as a child. The knife must have been lost a long time ago; it must have been there for years awaiting its destiny. Now he wasn't in a hurry. First, the knife must be sharp and so he sat down to sharpen it on a stone. Occasionally he tried it on a hair and continued sharpening it until he achieved a razor edge. Then he repaired and cleaned the sheath and chain and hung the knife on the piece of rope that served him as a belt. That felt good!

Armed thus, he crossed the stream. Perhaps the other side would be more hospitable. He used his weapon to cut through the bush on the edge of the stream, and came at length to a quiet pool of back water. He peered into it and saw staring back at him a strange, dark-bearded face. My God! Even his mother wouldn't know him. He decided to shave!

Settling down on a stone he soaked his whiskers, peered into the clear water and tried the knife. 'It cuts!' This was a better razor than the piece of glass in prison. When he finished he washed himself and inspected himself in his 'mirror'. A young man! 'My God, how many changes have taken place since I last saw myself clean-shaven!' He began feeling sorry for himself, sorry for that carefree, young, happy face which at one time had distracted more than one girl. He felt sorry for his youth and all those things that were lost, never again to return. A serious, metallic face looked back at him from the water. It was still young, but there were those vertical lines between the brows, and the big eyes burned like those of a madman.

'Well, old boy, with a face like that you could live in the jungle and be a scarecrow for the living and the dead. What a face for a man of your years, a real Mephistopheles. Pull yourself together, smile, life is bound to change.'

But life did not seem to change. For a long time he walked through the taiga. He thought he walked rapidly, but in fact he moved slowly like a wavering shadow; just to keep from lying down and dying. The knife didn't help now. He left it in the sheath and didn't take it out. His

strength was failing and towards evening it seemed to come to an end.

He lay down under a huge cedar, sighed deeply, rested his head at the foot of the tree and just lay there. Eventually he pulled out the knife and put it down beside him; after a while he picked it up and shifted it to a more handy position. Once more he heaved a heavy sigh.

'Yes, this must be the end.'

Thoughts kept wandering around in his head, which felt as though it was filled with molten lead. 'What day is it today? Oh yes, the sixth . . . well, that's not bad . . . a horse would have been dead long ago. . . . I wonder if it would have been better if I had been a horse . . . sixth . . . yes . . . but God created the whole Universe in six days . . . this jungle included.' A long pause, and then, 'The sixth day. Yes, it is the last, the very last day of my life. . . . Yet a little longer. . . .'

He did not want to move his arms or legs, he no longer wanted to think, he only wanted to lie there on and on into eternity. Let the tall cedars continue sighing, and under the blue skies of day and stars at night recount to the clouds how one man . . . and let the squirrels listen in too . . . how one stubborn man overcame death five times, escaped from the jaws of a dragon and, driven by wild joy, brought his weary head here. How in his pursuit of freedom he found death. How this complete stranger blazed a trail through the wilderness and lay here among the bushes. Here, several thousand miles away; near the edge of the earth. . . .

He heard the echoes of his childhood, tiny bells in the meadow, the roaring waters of the Vorsklo and the Dnieper, ringing girls' voices. He remembered blue flowers in the fields, the acrid smell of the thyme in the valley. . . .

He was lying on the warm stove, watching the flickering lamp and the flickering ikons above the tapestry. And his mother sat spinning and singing a faint melody:

My beautiful mother, now I am lost for ever,
Why have you sent me away where I have never been before?
Dear Mother Beloved, dear Mother Beloved.

Something rebellious within him was trying to lift his head but it wouldn't move. It was being held down by a hairy, angry and insatiable demon sitting on his chest, stopping his breathing . . . and his mother leaned close over him. . . .

Suddenly he opened his eyes. 'What's that? A shot!'

He sat up. He felt faint and dizzy but the rebel within him lifted him up. Another shot, like a blast of thunder, and at the same time a terrified, inhuman yell:

'Hrytsko!'

It was the desperate cry of youth seized by the fangs of death:

'Hrytsko!'

Immediately he was on his feet. Reeling, he summoned all his strength and hurried through the undergrowth. Again a cry, this time nearer.

Summoning all his strength, he broke out into the clearing. There! . . .

A huge black bear was standing on its hind legs, trying to seize within its jaws someone who, pressed into a crack between rocks, was fighting back desperately with a gun-stock.

Like a madman he went straight for the beast, driven by a fierce lust to kill. His hand lunged for his knife.

The bear took a quick breath, left its victim and with a growl turned on the new enemy.

The youth squeezed between the rocks let out a childlike cry . . . Driven by diabolical strength, the man sank the knife into the white collar, deep into the gullet, twisting it cross-wise. Triumphantly he saw the blood spurt in all directions, flooding that expanse of white, and for a fleeting moment he glimpsed the youth, dressed in the leather garment of a hunter, dash towards him. That was the last thing he saw.

Everything turned black; he fell to the ground with that hairy black mass, which covered him like a blanket of night.

For a few moments there still continued in his ears the far-away melody:

My beautiful mother, now I am lost for ever,
Why have you sent me away where I have never been before?

then everything was still.

* * *

The moon rose above the wooded crests and stood like a fiery shield fastened to the gate of an unknown world. It seemed to be alive, now darker, now lighter; the face of a great spirit, the demon of the unknown, untrodden other world. It continued to grow darker and lighter and steadily it became more red, while a light mist kept rising from the valleys where it lay like huge billows of cotton-wool.

There was a sound of horses' hooves. Three riders appeared in a clearing on a crest, like Chinese shadows on a dimly lit screen.

'Father,' called a clear young voice, 'are we lost?'

'We are all right,' replied a deep voice. 'Will one of you get off and tighten the girth?'

Two of the riders jumped down from their horses. The third was carrying something across the saddle. One of the young riders quickly tightened the strap and listened closely to the figure lying across the saddle.

'Have you finished? Well, God speed us, children!'

'We haven't lost the way?'

'Don't worry.'

The two remounted and the group rode off like mountain spirits against a background of mist.

The silence closed in again — the strained, deceptive silence of the wilderness. It was cut suddenly by a distant roar, fierce and frightening, which rolled and echoed over

and over and suddenly stopped. In reply came a fierce yet sorrowful growl. . . .

A grouse called sleepily . . . deceitful sounds, crouching, rustling . . . an owl flew quietly across the moon. The taiga was just coming to life. The moon paled and rose steadily above the crest of the forest.

4

The Family of Tiger-Hunters

The song brought him out of oblivion. At first it was a sticky, woolly darkness; then there came forth the thinnest sound like the tiniest ray of light, which grew and grew.

> *Oh, there flew three falcons through the orchard —*
> *Hey, hey, hey.*

And the sound of that 'Hey' was like a dreamy wave, driven on by a girl's tender voice.

> *And touched the grapevine with their wings. . . .*

And the girl's voice rose in flight with the falcon in the song. It must be his sister, Natalka, singing. Yes, he must be lying in his home, wounded, exhausted. It happened in the Kholodny Yar, near Zhabotin. How was it? Oh, yes, that dog of a Party member tossed a hand-grenade at his feet and he picked it up. . . .

And his beloved sister, his faithful nurse, Natalochka, worried so!

Warily he opened one eye; the other popped open by itself and stared. . . .

There was a girl sitting in front of him, but it wasn't his sister Natalka. But she was equally pretty, and bright-eyed, slender and sun-burned.

'Father, Father!' the girl said happily. 'He has opened his eyes. . . . Thank God, he's alive!'

'Well now, that is good,' replied a strong calm voice. It was a hearty voice that reverberated like an empty barrel. 'Well, my son, perhaps you were a little drunk, eh?'

He was a big man, well built, with bushy eyebrows; his hairy chest was visible through an open shirt. 'Took you a long time to sober up!'

The girl was beckoning to someone.

'Hrytsko![1] Come here and see what huge eyes he's got. Only . . . he seems to have lost his senses . . . look at him . . .'

'Natalka,' spoke the father, 'go and tell your mother to bring us a glass here. This Cossack's soul must have stuck to his ribs . . . hurry!'

Hryhory seemed to be suffering from hallucinations. He rolled his head from side to side examining his surroundings. In the corner there were sacred pictures decorated with festive embroidered cloths and he could just see the picture of St. Nicholas of the Miracles.

There were dark crosses burnt on the ceiling depicting the suffering of Christ. Slowly he realized he was lying on a large wooden bed, undressed, and covered with a woollen quilt or cloak. There was a clean smell of sweet-william . . . the sun was shining through the window. The mother, wearing an old-fashioned married woman's cap and a voluminous skirt, came into the room smiling, carrying some plates. . . . Behind her came a bright-eyed girl who somehow reminded him of a turtle-dove. Near the window stood a tall, well-built young man holding a Cossack saddle.

Hryhory closed his eyes. The girl was saying something and, suddenly, there rose before him . . . what was it? That voice, that mortal yell of the hunter cornered by the bear — the last impression he remembered from his former life. But that was a youth, wearing trousers and a hunter's leather coat . . . a young man.

[1] Hrytsko is the diminutive form of Hryhory. Here, however, the girl is calling to her brother whose name is Hrytsko.

Hryhory opened his eyes — and there stood before him a girl holding a little red glass, saying in jest:

'Hrytsko, whom are you going to saddle? Drop it and come over here. . . .'

The youth was about to hang up the saddle when the father said:

'You will go to Kiev, Hrytsko. Go and saddle the horses.'

'Where am I?' cried Hryhory, trying suddenly to rise.

'God be with you, keep quiet, lie down,' said the mother. She laid her hand gently on his forehead and gently pressed his head back on the pillow.

'Lie still, dear heart. Goodness! He looks as though he was just taken from the cross. . . . And you!' she said, turning to her husband. 'Aren't you ashamed of yourselves? It's all well and good for you, who look like well-fed oxen, but he's not fit for any talk.'

'Oh, that,' said her husband. 'He is one of our own. Have you any idea how much I knocked him around when he was slung across the saddle, unconscious and near death? And how many days has he been lying here fighting death? And look, he's alive! Thank God, son, that everything is all right now. Yes, everything. You know, I was about to take you away to Kiev — it's not far from here — where you would have died and I would not have known who you were.'

'Where am I?' muttered Hryhory, not quite sure he was sane.

'You are with us; with us at home, son.'

The wall was covered with pictures of girls in embroidered blouses with many strands of coral beads, and young men in caps and cloaks.

'What district is this?'

'Kievsky, what else?' replied the girl. And the way she said that word 'Kievsky' made his heart ache with thoughts of home.

Hryhory raised himself, wide-eyed; a mixture of joy and fear.

'Perhaps you are from that other Kiev?' said the father. 'Perhaps you would like to be on your way home?'

'No, no!' and sudden fear gripped him up and down the spine. No, no! There soared in his memory the Lukianivska prison at Kiev, the OGPU-NKVD. . . .

He had been running away all this time from Kiev and here he was back again; he struggled to rise.

'Let me go, let me go, I don't want to . . . I'll go away. . . .'

They held him down. He lay quietly now; perspiration bathed his body.

The mother crossed herself and whispered through her tears:

'My God, my God, the poor boy is not all there . . . what evil things they do to people! . . .'

Everything within him urged him to run, to escape, but he pretended to be calm and enquired casually:

'Is it far to town?'

'No,' replied the father, 'it's quite near, about 400 versts. We belong to the Kievsky district. And where are you from?'

Should he say or shouldn't he? 'Who, me? . . . Yes, I too am from the Kievsky district.'

'Oh! And which village?'

'From Trypillia. . . .'

'My goodness.' The mother spoke up and clapped her hands. 'My dear child! Then you are not from this Kievsky! You must be from the Ukrainian Kievsky. . . . My mother also came from Trypillia. Goodness, you are a neighbour!'

Suddenly it seemed as though someone had released an all-powerful brake, the black shadow of fear crumbled, and he felt wonderfully light and happy. The people round him were kith and kin. Here, at the edge of the world, after all the frightfulness, here were his own people! They worried about him and tended him like mother, father,

sister and brother. And the Kiev here was another city entirely! Hryhory rubbed his forehead and smiled, and within him a child seemed to dance to the rhythm of its own joy: 'You're alive, you're alive, you will live!' And he wanted so much to say something fitting and eloquent.

'Mother . . .' and he faltered as he looked at her, 'let me call you that, for that is what you are . . . my mother.'

'Not at all, not at all, dear child.' Visibly moved, she furtively wiped away a tear.

By now Hryhory had regained his self-control and calm assurance:

'So you say I am at home, Mother?'

'Yes, son, you are at home.'

'Wonderful! Greetings to you from Trypillia.'

'Thank you, son, thank you. How are things there, there in Ukraine? Have you been away long and how did you get here?'

Hryhory laughed.

'Now, that is enough,' interrupted the master of the household. 'No more talking. Must get well first. Hey, little squirrel,' he addressed his daughter.

The girl passed Hryhory the little red glass.

'Take it, son. Those are the kind of herbs that can raise the dead. Wait a moment! How about something for me too, daughter!'

The girl hurried away and brought a similar glass for her father, only this time the liquid was clear.

'This is the same, son, only yours has been prepared with herbs for you while mine is ordinary. There is a lot more where this came from, and one day you and I will do it up well, you bet.'

'What makes you chatter so?' asked the mother. 'Usually you are as quiet as a stump, and now . . . Hurry up; the boy's hand must be aching. Drink, son, and lie down. Don't bother with this old man. . . .'

'Hold it, woman! Not everyone can do such a heroic deed. Before Hrytsko and I leave, I want to have a drink properly. Hrytsko, are the horses ready?'

Hrytsko, tall and dark, stood by and with a smile looked at his father. 'Ready, Father.'

'Good. We are going, and you will lie there and get strong. What do they call you?'

'Hryhory.'

'Did you hear that?' He turned to his son. 'Good. Very good. I wouldn't have asked you, but, you see, something happened. . . . Well, son,' and he raised his hand, 'here's how!'

'What shall we drink to?' Hryhory jested.

'Just drink. . . .'

Hryhory drank. The liquor was fiery and very bitter. A burning stream went through his veins.

The old man drank, rubbed his moustache and said:

'That, my son, was for my daughter, whom you saved for me; and for you, who in turn were saved by her. May health be with you. . . .'

Hryhory stared from one to the other. 'For your daughter whom I saved? What daughter? Where is she?'

The mother brought in his dinner, a plate of fish: 'Eat, my son.'

'Well, it's time for us to go,' said the old man, turning to his son. He rose from the table, crossed himself, put on his cap and said to his wife:

'Look after things for me.'

He stood for a few moments near the door in deep thought, gazing from under his bushy eyebrows at the patient, and said:

'You are at home here, do you understand? For many versts around there is nothing here but virgin forest and animals. There are no people. Do you understand? I don't know yet who you are, but my house is your house, that is our law here. Even if you were not a Christian but some Mongolian, you would still have the protection of

that law. May fortune and happiness be with you. Goodbye.'

Quickly he and his son left the house.

From outside came the sound of horses' hooves and the joyous barking of dogs. 'Nepra, Zalivay!' came the old man's voice. 'All right, all right, we're going.'

The sound of the horses' hooves passed the house and soon died away in the distance.

Hryhory wanted to ask about so many things, but the strong drink and his dinner and the nervous excitement of returning consciousness amid his new surroundings made him very sleepy. Thoughts continued wandering around in his head, but his exhaustion and the quiet of the house soon overwhelmed him. The last thing he was conscious of was the girl floating around the house, tall and proud.

* * *

The sun spilled over the table and wove golden seams across the white table cover. A bear cub sat on the table, grabbing his face with his forepaws trying to catch a bee which was attempting to sit on his nose. The cub was becoming angry and struck out at the air with his paw. Accidentally he hit himself on the nose and began whimpering. The bee continued humming, darting among the rays of the sun, but did not cease the attack.

Like the sound of a silver string the humming penetrated the sunlit quiet and into Hryhory's heart. He lay propped on his elbow and looked in front of him. Had he slept long? It seemed like eternity. But now all that frightfulness through which he had lived had disappeared into oblivion, like a bad dream. He felt light and airy. Something had happened to him which he could not quite understand; it reminded him of his childhood; no worries, no troubles, only a limitless, sunlit peace.

He looked at himself; there he was in a white embroidered shirt; he looked across the room where a group of ikons decorated with embroidered cloths reminded him of those

in his grandmother's house in Trypillia, his native land from which he had been driven out, perhaps for ever. For a moment sorrow nipped at his heart.

Those were truly regal cloths decorating the ikons, and over there was a carved dresser, and a painted stove decorated with flowers with two cooing doves, or perhaps they were two falcons!

Whom did he save? What daughter? Where? When? How did he get here? He looked around; the house was empty. Near the stove stood oven prongs and pokers, and there was a strong smell of fresh-baked bread. Everything looked so much like home, except for the floor, which was made of boards so clean and scrubbed that they shone. Right above him two guns were hanging on a white wall; one looked like an English Winchester, and the other — a Japanese carbine. Below them there were ammunition pouches filled with rounds. On a third nail there hung a knife in a sheath. His knife. Amazing! His knife in such company. But from scratches on the wall it was obvious that a gun had hung there earlier. He spotted that because he had been acquainted with guns from childhood. He also noticed for the first time that a pair of huge antlers with caps and towels hanging from their branches were mounted on the opposite wall between two windows.

There was a sound of feet in the hallway. Hryhory pulled the cover over his head and pretended to sleep. Someone entered the room. The person approached his bed and he could hear breathing. He opened his eyes, and there, stretching over his bed, was the girl. She was hanging another gun on the wall. The girl looked down and said, 'Oh, did I wake you?'

She leaned back, tucked in her blouse and added, 'Well, how are you?'

Hryhory smiled. 'Pretty,' he said.

The girl pouted, and blushed. She was pretty. There was a queer combination of unusual beauty and seriousness. She seemed as supple as a panther, and self-possessed as a

princess. He looked at her and felt like an awkward schoolboy. She couldn't be more than eighteen. 'It has been a pretty adventure, I meant to say. And what is your name?'

The girl blushed and frowned. 'They just call me and call me, and eventually I come. And who do you think you are?'

'Who am I?'

She smiled. 'So queer. And where have you come from?'

'It's a long way off, you wouldn't even count that far.'

'Oh, I know that you are from Ukraine. I know even more: I know that you have a girl whose name is Natalka.'

'Silly,' muttered Hryhory.

'Why silly?'

'It is true that there is a Natalka, but she is my sister. And how do you know that?'

The girl was embarrassed. 'You should have heard all the things you mumbled here for five days, tossing around like a mad one. We thought you were going to die. You have my mother and father and brother to thank for bringing you back to life — without them no doctors could have saved you. My father knows all kinds of rare herbs and medicines. Don't you get up, and don't you stare at me so, because you are not supposed to get up yet. Just lie there and listen.'

'Well, what did I mumble?'

'My God, it was frightful. I don't know what it was all about and what awful things had happened to you. Father was worried that there was no priest to administer the Last Sacrament. He thought it might ease your conscience, because you seem to have a great many sins. You mentioned prison cells and tribunals, and death houses, and firing squads, and' — here she changed her tone to sarcasm — 'beloved Natalka.'

Hryhory frowned. 'Oh, that's nothing. Years ago I used to like to read all kinds of frightful books.'

She looked at him with ill-concealed suspicion, fear and sympathy. 'Oh, is that what it was?'

'Yes,' he replied.

'Well, if you have read so many frightful books perhaps some day you will tell me about them. That would be interesting. Everything frightful is interesting. Is that all right?' But a scoffing, suspicious look in her eye showed that she did not believe him.

'Yes, that's all right.'

'You have also wandered into our region. Perhaps you will tell me that that, too, is only in a book and not really true.'

He was cornered, but he saw no reason to tell her the truth. He thought for a while and then said, 'Listen . . .'

'Natalka. Yes, my name's Natalka too,' smiled the girl.

'And your patronymic?'

'Denisivna. But just call me Natalka, because that is our custom.'

'Good. Maybe you will tell me your surname?'

'My surname is of no interest to you. It is very old, and, as the Russians say, it is a *khakhol* surname.'

'Well, what is it?'

'Sirkivna.' The girl said it with pride. 'My father was Sirko, my grandfather was Sirko, and so was my great-grandfather. They were all Sirko. And there are masses of them round here already. . . . Do you know what my father told me about you?'

'What?'

'You wanted to ask me something else. Ask me. . . . Do you want anything to eat?'

'Listen, Natalka. I know you all think the most awful things about me but I would like to assure you. . . . No matter what you think, I do want to tell you that I am an honest man. Later I will try to prove it, but I would like to explain . . .'

'Never mind.' The girl cut him short. 'Do you know what my father said? He said that as long as you are in this house he is as responsible for you as if you were his own son.

He doesn't want to know anything. And our father . . . Well, you will live and see. Hrytsko, too.'

And she added lightly:

'God has given you a brother you will never regret.'

'Wait! Whom did I save, and where? It was supposed to have been a daughter. Is that a joke? Or maybe it was you.'

'Yes, me.'

'No, let's talk seriously. I never saw you or saved you in my life, so do not try to fool me. All of you seem to be in a conspiracy. I remember . . . I was not out to save anyone; it just worked out that way. Some strange fellow was waving a rifle butt in a crack between some rocks but I saw clearly that he wore trousers . . . a huge black devil was attacking him and he was defending himself with the rifle butt. . . .'

Natalka suddenly changed the subject.

'Oh, see what this rascal is doing! Why, you!'

The cub, bored with just sitting on the table, had jumped on to the bench, reached up the wall and pulled down all the pictures he could reach. Now he was trying to bite into a picture frame. It didn't seem to taste right, so he was making a special effort to knock it off the wall. The girl picked up the cub by the scruff of his neck and tossed him in the corner where he began whimpering like a baby.

'Oh you little devil! What a rascal you turned out to be!'

'I wonder who those people are?' he asked, pointing to the pictures that were strewn on the floor. 'Are they all members of your family?'

'Certainly,' she replied, giving him a handful. She even took some off the wall and then spoke to the cub:

'So you are crying. Aren't you a little fool! Come here, you little scamp!'

Hryhory looked at the photographs. The girl picked up the cub who was sobbing like a child, pushed a bench nearer the bed and sat down with the cub in her lap. She

petted him and he stopped crying and took a renewed interest in the pictures.

They were interesting pictures of girls in embroidered blouses with many strings of corals, and wearing peculiar fur boots. There were pictures of groups of bridesmaids, and young married women in groups and singly. There was one of a whole family, a large family: grandparents, parents, children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren — about forty people in all; a veritable clan! A very old man and woman were seated in the middle and the others, according to degree of relationship, were arranged on the sides and to the rear. The children were lined up on both sides of the patriarch and his wife, dressed in their festive finery. In most of these pictures the background consisted of mountains, which was unusual for a Ukrainian family from the steppes. They reminded him of scenes from the Carpathian Ukraine. There was one picture of about twenty horsemen with rifles slung on their backs and surrounded by a pack of huge sharp-eared dogs. If it weren't for the dogs appearing in the picture one could have taken them for a platoon of Cossacks. That, in fact, they were: Cossacks of the Ussuri.

There were pre-revolutionary photos of Cossack officials — *Osauls*,[1] Cornets, and Otamans of the Ussuri and Amur Cossack units. They all showed long moustaches, huge swords, and many were bedecked with medals. All had many service stripes.

There were also newer photos, different clothes, different people, but the same types of faces; men, women, girls and boys, members of the Red Army. And there was one very unusual photo: snow was falling, and in a wooden cage a large tiger with his jaws wide open. At the side stood four hunters obviously posing before the camera and leaning on their rifles. One was old and the other three quite young; and all were wearing those queer clothes — peculiar leather trousers, leather jackets and ammunition belts. Three were wearing caps and one was without, and the one without was

[1]*Osaul*, a senior Cossack officer, hetman's assistant.

Natalka. She was standing leaning on a Winchester with a sarcastic grin on her face. This photo disturbed him. He glanced at Natalka and stealthily put the picture at the bottom of the pile. Now, of course, everything was clear to him, for here was an exact replica of the boy who was yelling in the crack between the rocks. He continued to browse through the other photographs. Natalka placed the bear cub on the bed. 'He is your pal. You made him an orphan, now entertain him.'

'How's that?'

'You killed his mother.'

'Oh. He looks similar, has a white chest.'

'Are you pretending or were you really not in your full senses then?'

'Have it whichever way you like, but even if I had all my senses then, how was I to know it was his mother? It would be better if you told me about it, especially how I got here.'

The girl again picked up the cub and explained briefly, 'It's very simple. We were in Dragon Valley preparing a salt-lick for antler hunting. We will soon be going antler hunting and then you will know what it's all about. It's a long way from here. I strayed away from the camp to shoot black grouse for stew; before long I was lost. I was carrying only two rounds of fine shot, thinking I would be able to shoot something near by and come right back. Didn't even take a knife with me. But the game seemed to be all dead, there wasn't a thing in sight and instead of game I ran into this cub. It looked so funny that I tried to pick it up; and lo and behold, there was its mother. You couldn't see in the thicket, and I had forgotten that wherever there is a young cub there is a she-bear. I dropped the cub, but the mother came after me — she was angry, and when black bears get angry they're real devils. I tried to run but there wasn't anywhere to go, so I turned and fired a round of this fine shot at her, and that did it. She would have torn me apart if I hadn't been able to squeeze into that

crack between the rocks. I fired the other round too — who knows where? — and struck at her paws and muzzle. I yelled for my brother but I was too far away. For the first time in my life I was thoroughly frightened; this meant certain death.

'And then something came crashing out of the thicket. Some animal, because it did not really resemble a human being. My God, I thought, another bear! It was hairy, black, with a crazy look in its eyes, and it came straight at the bear, as I thought empty-handed. When the bear fell down on it, I was even more frightened and tried to drag the bear aside. The bear was dead and I managed to pull her aside a bit. Beneath was a man and he too seemed dead — ragged, starved and with a knife. Nothing seemed broken, but he was dead.

'Later we took everything — the cub, the bearskin and you. At first we thought we would look after you there in the Dragon Valley but my father examined you and said that you would die there from fever. "We must get him home as soon as possible or he will die. At home we have the necessary things to take care of him," he said.

'We rode, we flew, all night. You were delirious and shouted all kinds of nonsense. You also called your mother and your Natalka. Father listened for some time and said: "He is one of us. Yes, he's one of us, he speaks our language", and he drove the horses as fast as they could go. That was all; now you know everything.'

'Now I understand.'

'As you see, we even brought the cub, a playmate for you,' she said teasingly. She set the cub on the bed and collected the photographs.

'Wait a minute,' said Hryhory. He picked out the picture with the tiger and passed it to her.

'What is all this?'

'What do you mean, "what is all this"? That is a photograph of us with the cat,' she said offhandedly.

'And why are you with the cat?'

'We caught it and took it to Khabarovsk, to the depot. There some queer characters from newspapers and from film studios came to take pictures. They had all kinds of funny equipment.'

Hryhory now noticed the picture was no ordinary one but a movie 'still'.

'Well, what is it all about?'

The girl looked at him as though he were stupid. She walked over to the wall and took down several more pictures. More tigers, some with one, and one picture with two. They were all shown in cages with the hunters around and Natalka appeared in several of them.

'How did you manage to get him? You certainly took many photographs of him.'

'Of him?'

'Yes, of that cat.'

The girl frowned with the same expression she had in many of the pictures, and in an insulted tone pointed at various photographs.

'This one we caught last year; that one the year before; and that one two years before, and that one even earlier — that's Father with Mykola and with our uncles. Mykola was our brother who died. And these — they are old ones. If we collected all the pictures of cats that Father caught with our uncles and even with Grandfather, there would be no place to hang them. Those are only the tigers, and how about lynx and wolverine? And we do not take these pictures. We only deliver the animals to the depot according to agreement, and the gentlemen there take those pictures. "Look at the wonder of wonders," they say, "the *khakhly* are catching live tigers",' and she mimicked those 'gentlemen' who called her and her family *khakhly*.

'And how do you catch them? Do you shoot them, and then . . . ?'

'What for? One that had been shot would be useless except perhaps to the Chinese for soap. At the depot they

would pay no more than a thousand for a dead one. A live one, without any defects, will fetch twelve to fifteen thousand *karbovantsi*,[1] and all of it in trade. That is how we live. What fool would shoot them? You must get them alive.'

'And have you caught a devil like that alive?'

'Yes.'

'With nets?'

'No, with our hands.'

'Alone?'

'No, four of us — Father, Hrytsko and Mykola.'

'How?'

'We caught him, as you can see.'

Hryhory could not hide his astonishment in the face of the incredible, but apparently undeniable, fact. What a girl and what deeds! Undoubtedly she was telling the truth, but he could not assimilate it in his mind. Either the 'cats' here were domesticated or the people here were unusual.

'But how do you catch them?'

'Well, perhaps you will stay here for a while and then you will see. Maybe Father will take you along and then I will see what sort of a hero you are and whether you will call for help. . . .'

After a while she added sadly:

'Last year my brother Mykola died in this kind of hunting. . . . He was a real eagle.'

'Why do you bother with these cats?'

'What else would you have us do? Death lurks here everywhere, even on the stove, so you come out and face it. "God is not without mercy and a Cossack is not without fortune" — that is what Grandfather used to say, and we are his grandchildren.'

There she was, a fine example of Cossack blood; so young and slender, and yet so serious, so tempered and so proud. Such were his thoughts and feelings about her, but

[1] *Karbovantsi*—rubles.

he did not show this; he teased her, as apparently was his custom with girls.

'Why should one risk one's life that way? You could plant fields, raise hogs and chickens. After all, others do that.'

'Yes, others sow; and do you think there is no risk in sowing? They can't live on bread alone, so they too must venture into other things. We do not sow for bread at all. We only grow oats and buckwheat for horses. Bread might or might not grow, but the forest is always full of animals, even "hogs and chickens". So we hunt all our lives because it is more convenient and more interesting that way, especially now. But only our family and one other catches these cats. Others are afraid.'

'I think . . .'

Hryhory looked at the girl, and as he recalled the bear his thoughts were tinged with fear: some day a beast will suddenly tear this beauty apart. But to her he said:

'A cat like this will eat you one day.'

Until then the girl had spoken quite seriously. Now she frowned and became angry, closed her mouth tightly and gave him a look. She was obviously insulted by this childish remark and by his tone of superiority.

She was proud, like a wild horse that is prepared to kick to death anyone who dares lay a hand on him. She frowned but did not say anything. Good manners seemed to be as much a hereditary characteristic with her as good looks. She put the cub on the floor, collected the photographs and eventually muttered:

'Didn't I talk a lot today? Even my tongue is beginning to swell. I've never talked so much before.'

'It must be time for lunch,' came a voice from the other half of the house.

'Yes, it is time, Mother.'

Her serious manner disappeared immediately, and she hummed a little song. *Yes, it's about time. Oh yes, it's about time. . . . Mother will beat me . . .*

As she hummed she hung up the photographs and went into the other part of the house.

After a while the door was opened and in came Mother with a tray covered with plates. There was also a little red glass. She laid it before him and said:

'Eat and build up your strength, son.'

'Thank you, Mother.'

'Thank God, and get well. Our men will bring salt and then you will go hunting with them. I am sure you never saw in Ukraine the kind of things that happen here.'

The little bear caught the edge of her skirt with its teeth, dragged at it and growled joyfully. It, too, wanted its lunch. The old woman petted it like a baby.

* * *

Pinks bloomed in front of the house. They were obviously well tended and were competing with native red, yellow and violet irises which spread all over the slope right down to the brook and out to the forest; they seemed to salute each other amidst the multitude of other colours in a sea of brilliant, luscious and juicy greenery. On one side a big solid mass of rosy willow-herb. Choke-cherry trees peeped from behind the house as though they had just escaped from the taiga. They stood there in full bloom like girls decked out in their Sunday best, their branches overhanging a small garden and an apiary with a score of beehives. Bees were humming all round the house and the flowers provided these golden workers with all kinds of work to do. The banks of the brook were lined with blooming cherry trees which seemed to be peering into the swift water and listening to it babble over the stones. In front of the house was an open field. One couldn't call it a yard; there were no fences and no gates. Here all the thickets and the jungle-like forest spilled over right up to the crest of a range of mountains which described a large distant arc around the house.

The house was old but solid, built of excellent timber, with a carved porch and carvings around the windows. It was roofed with shingles and stood on the slope of a hillock, with its four windows looking out on the brook flowing below. Beyond was the blue-grey crest of Sikhote-Alin.

To the right was a big shed with a hut for keeping bees in winter, a stable for horses, a cówshed, a haystack and some other buildings. To the left was a garden fenced with a one-rail fence, and a pot hung on the nearest post. There were potatoes and sunflowers in the garden, and on the edge of the brook was another shed — a 'black' bath-house.

That was all there was to the establishment — the only one for miles around. The nearest village, Kopytonivka, consisting of several similar houses, was more than fifty kilometres away. Hryhory knew this and it made him happy. Danger from people would be minimized, and he knew that the hunters with whom he was living would protect him.

Mother, Natalka and he were alone. Father and Hrytsko had been away now for two weeks. Mother had expected them back yesterday, but since they hadn't come they surely must be arriving today. Knowing that they were to return any time now, Hryhory did not go anywhere but sat all day on the mound of earth around the house and waited. He was tense and wondered how they would react to him; perhaps not as they did before, when he was ill. Absent-mindedly he played with the bear cub and observed the world beyond. At the moment his attention was dominated by a wooden beetle wielded by a sunburnt girl's arm on the edge of the brook. The paddle rose and fell and made a clacking sound and echoes responded from the surrounding hills in several voices. It sounded to him like a quail drumming somewhere in the wheatfield at night. Amazing!

Natalka was doing the laundry by the brook, wielding her tool like an expert sportsman doing his morning exercises.

She was humming a song, rinsing the wash in the water and then beating it down with the beetle, whacking away with all her might. A queer girl, this Natalka; somehow Hryhory was a bit afraid of her, afraid to look her in the face. She seemed to get angry when he stared at her. He did not know how to approach her and in her presence felt like a clumsy youth. You couldn't say that she was unapproachable or that she was silly or haughty. She didn't even understand how bewitching she was, undoubtedly she didn't. She was like that unique plant which, if you touch it with your hand, will prick you with scores of tiny needles. Here she was, a girl hunter, one who had faced and overcome many frightful dangers. Yet she was like a wild deer which is afraid that she might be caught and won't allow anyone to approach her. Or perhaps she just didn't like him?

Maybe it is best to disregard her completely. Let her go on doing the washing. My God, isn't she wielding that beetle angrily? She must imagine she is beating somebody's arrogant eyes; maybe his own eyes staring at her. Hryhory smiled at this strange thought and forced his attention in another direction.

Far beyond the brook a herd of wild deer came out in the clearing. There were five of them. They stood there close together, raised their heads high and listened. What was this clashing noise and where was it coming from? Suddenly they turned and dashed off into the tall grass with only the white spots on their haunches popping up now and then. They disappeared into the forest as though they had never existed.

'You should go out for a stroll, son, or perhaps you should lie down and rest. Are you bored?'

This must have been the tenth time that Mother had come out on the porch and looked across the brook, over the greenery towards the path to see if they were coming. She shielded her eyes from the sun and peered with a worried frown.

'It is taking them very long. I hope nothing has happened.

'Natalka!'

'Wha-a-a-t?' replied the girl, singing.

'Come here.'

'Say what you want, I can hear you. I want to finish the washing.'

'What do you think has happened to our menfolk?'

The girl replied jokingly:

'We-e-ll, what about them? They are riding somewhere.'

'God knows, the way things are nowadays, God forbid.'

'They are riding, Mother, they are riding,' Natalka replied happily to her mother. 'And if they are not riding, they are walking and leading their horses and so are a little late,' and she laughed, carefree, and went on beating the clothes.

The mother laughed too:

'That's the way she is. As they say, "a new seed" even scoffs at her silly mother. That is all the consolation I get, son.'

She came down from the porch and sat beside Hryhory. Apparently she had finished her work inside and now had some time to spare. She straightened her married woman's cap, placed her work-worn hands on her knees, and drowned her eyes in the sea of green which stretched towards the valley where the path disappeared.

'Well, we shall have to sit and wait,' she said with a friendly smile.

Her face was like her daughter's. What was she like when she was young? More than likely she was like Natalka. She was so well preserved in spite of being marooned out here at the end of the world, locked in a struggle with primitive nature. She must be well over fifty but she still looked young and carried herself well. Her voice was also like her daughter's, except that it was warmer and friendlier. It reminded him of the voices of all those mothers back there

some twelve thousand kilometres away. But her voice didn't belong to Kiev province. Hryhory was certain that she was a 'Poltavka' by origin. Her 'l' was soft as it was with all women of Poltava; somewhere between hard and soft 'l'. This was to him a dear, and somehow disturbing, characteristic. He wanted to ask whether her mother or grandmother came from Zinkiv or from Lubny. She continued to gaze beyond the valley, and still smiled at her daughter's jesting and self-assurance.

'I have wonderful children, my son . . .' and her voice was so full of maternal pride.

'I always thank God for sending me such joy. And whom do they take after? They fear neither storm nor thunder. Take her for instance — she smiled, nodding towards Natalka — 'whom does she resemble? Give her a horse, a sleigh, a rifle or dogs, and she will go where even a man will not dare. The darkest night, the fiercest cold, the worst downpour — makes no difference. She should have been born a boy. If only God will grant her health and good fortune, because this is a frightening country and life here is frightening too. I had another son — Mykola was his name — may he see heavenly glory! If you could have seen him; he was a true eagle! Hrytsko is healthy and handsome, but Mykola was more handsome and stronger; like Grandfather Sirko who could bend horseshoes with his bare hands. He was friendly and carefree like she is. . . . He brought her up and taught her everything. Whenever they prepared for a hunt I used to worry about him — "Watch yourself, be careful" — and he would laugh and assure me:

'"I will bring you a live bear on a rope, Mother . . ." and he used to bring me young bears and wild cats. Things went well with him. He was brave and lucky, and yet misfortune came. I sometimes think people are dying everywhere, danger lurks and you can't escape your fate even if you hide behind the stove. But that's the way a mother's heart is . . . very likely your mother worries a great deal about you. . . .'

After a while she continued, 'Don't worry, son, believe in your own good fortune. You have it. I may be old and foolish but there are some things I do know. The brave always have good fortune.'

Hryhory felt like hugging and kissing her as Natalka undoubtedly would have done. He hardly restrained himself. The old woman continued with simple conviction:

'The brave are always lucky! Take us for instance. When we came here, my God, what a wild and frightening place this was! Deadly boredom, loneliness, and hardships all around; and death. A foreign, unknown land. And yet we got used to it and, as you see, we managed. We overcame the wilderness, conquered this country and populated it. We are accustomed to it and now we like it. When children were born, God gave them all the qualities necessary to live in this country which, after all, is their fatherland.'

Hryhory listened with rapt attention and when the old woman finished he asked:

'You came by ship around the world?'

'Yes, we sailed from Odessa, when was it? Yes, in the spring of 1887 . . . all that water, dear God! And all those countries and people! But I cannot tell you all about it; one day the old man will tell you. He is not a talkative man, but once in a while he has an attack of talking and then you can only listen. He is older than I am, and at that time he was already a young man, so he will remember many things. He will teach you a few things here. You must be getting bored.'

'No, everything here is new to me and queer.'

'Queer?'

'Yes. For instance I have been looking over your house for the last few days and it seems strange to me. Inside it is whitewashed and painted in our style, but outside it has a Siberian or Polessian look.'

The mother laughed. 'Oh yes, I, too, could not get used to it for a long time. But it is only here that we have it

that way. When we lived in the village (now it is the town of Kiev), all the houses were whitewashed outside just as they are in Ukraine. They used to laugh at us here — "All this forest," they said, "and the *khakhly* build houses out of clay and whitewash them." No, the houses here are the same as in the Ukraine and sometimes better because they have board floors and usually have tin roofs. Before the revolution our people here lived well. They had a hard struggle at the beginning but afterwards things improved. This country loves labour and rewards it generously. For those willing to work this was a garden of Eden — forest, gold, fish, fertile soil, all kinds of berries, there was everything. And you know how hard-working our people are. We lived well once! You should have seen. It wasn't in this house. This one was built for hunting. Our hunters used to come here in the fall and made this the main camp for the winter.

'Yes, we lived well and my grandfather had a large family. You've never seen one like it. There were more than fifty men. He had seven sons; he married them off but did not separate them from the household. He gave his daughters in marriage and took the sons-in-law into the household. His homestead was more like an estate. There were seven of us daughters-in-law and eight sons-in-law. And then each of them had children! It was a real crowd. Sirko's corner was a whole village. We lived happily. Old Sirko didn't even know how many horses, cows and hogs he had. The apiary alone had more than two hundred hives. Everyone worked well, so they had many things. There was room to work and to earn. They planted their fields, they hunted wild animals, took produce into Manchuria and China, mined gold, caught fish, collected berries and nuts, and caught wild animals alive. We never had to eat black bread. Even when crops failed we received flour from abroad, from Japan and America, and rice from China, and all kinds of things. And you should have seen the guns and hunting equipment our boys got! We lived here better

than at home, this was our second Ukraine, a new Ukraine, my son, and more blessed. And our people called the places here by their own names — Kiev, Chernihivka, Poltavka, Ukraina, Katerynoslavka, Pereyaslavka and so on. Sometimes they were homesick, but all over the Ussuri and Amur it is like home; that's where our people settled, near the rivers, where you can grow grain. Yes, they lived well, but then everything turned topsy-turvy. Someone must have angered the Lord. New times, new ways. The things that happened made people catch their breath. The Soviet Government came and turned everything inside out.

'People changed and life deteriorated. Sirko's country no longer exists. And we spat at all that and came here so that we could finish our lives in our own way without seeing or hearing what was going on. It's a long way from here, although for this country it is not so far, about five hundred versts. Still there are few people here and the authorities don't bother you as much. Formerly, when Sirko and his sons first began hunting there was hardly anyone here, only a slant-eyed "Mandz" or "Gold" or whatever they are called. If you cross the mountain you will see in the distance a place called "Khektser" — that will be Khabarovsk. Grandfather said that when we first came here it was only a shack and now it is a city. When you cross the mountain and climb the Terney or the Olga you will see the ocean. That's where we first landed and then fought our way through the jungle to the Ussuri. If you continued along the crests you could go for months and never get out of the forests, only jungles and rivers and mountains and marshes.

'We have been here now for about ten years. This brook is called Pidhoronok and it empties into the Khor which empties into the Amur. All the streams begin in those hills and flow in many directions. There is the Bikin, the Iman, the Mukhen, and some others which I have forgotten.'

Hryhory listened to the soft quiet voice of this mother and he felt good. It stirred his blood; she was so much like his own mother at home, and yet different. She showed such simple bravery, such self-assurance which was perhaps not conscious but only elemental. And there was also a freedom-loving pride as natural as those mountain crests!

That was the reason why her Natalka was so primitively proud and untamed.

'Do you ever feel homesick for Ukraine? I suppose you do not really remember it.'

'Yes, I remember, but . . . if you feel like it some day perhaps you will tell me about Ukraine and how people live there today. I would love to hear it. I often recall my childhood in my native land. My mother used to miss it terribly. That's probably why she died. She always asked that she be taken home to die and be buried beside her parents. This sorrow creeps over me too when I remember my mother. But I love this land too. I grew up here, bore my children here, and buried four of them. I buried my father and mother here too. I couldn't bear to leave this land but I also long for the other. I remember Mother's stories of those cherry orchards, those wide steppes, quiet rivers, bright starry nights, and other things about which she spoke and which I saw myself even though I was still small. . . . For instance I have lived a lifetime here and have never seen a cornflower. There, in Ukraine, I used to weave crowns out of them and periwinkle and clove pinks on the night of Ivan Kupala. They don't grow here, except for a bit that was brought from Ukraine by some settlers. It grows here now and smells and reminds us of that Ukraine. . . . Sometimes memories of that quiet sunny native land crowd themselves in the mind and then I would like to fly there. . . .'

Hryhory felt pain in his heart. He wanted to tell this mother that the quiet, bright and sunny Ukraine no longer existed, that the cherry orchards had been cut down, the rivers were flowing mud, the steppes were drenched in tears

and the bright skies had turned ominously dark. But he thought, better that she should love it the way she remembered it.

The mother continued:

'Yes, son, you will return there. You have no roots here and never will. Besides, times have changed and you are different.'

Hryhory wondered why they assumed that attitude towards him. After all, he hadn't told them anything and they knew nothing about him except that he wasn't a local inhabitant. It also surprised him that they did not ask him who he was and how he had strayed into the forest. After all, he could be some thief or criminal. It is true he had talked during his illness, but could they believe that? Yet he could tell from their sympathetic attitude towards him that they guessed something; but because of their native good taste, as often happens with simple people, they did not ask any questions. That touched him deeply and he was grateful to them.

The sun had reached its zenith and was pouring hot waves of heat over the earth; the temperature was at least ninety-five degrees. The mother suddenly rose.

'It is time to eat. I am afraid they won't be home today. I hope everything is all right.'

'They are coming, Mother. They are coming,' shouted Natalka in a happy, ringing voice.

The mother raised her hand to her eyes and looked at the path. Hryhory rose suddenly, catching some of the tension. He glued his eyes to the path away beyond the valley, but there was nobody there. 'Where does she see them? Where are they coming?'

The mother couldn't see anything either. 'Where can you see them? Who is coming?'

'Our menfolk are coming, Mother! Just help me to hang the clothes quickly.'

'Where do you see them?'

Natalka was laughing as she approached with an armful

of clothes which she put down on a log near the choke-cherries.

'I haven't seen them yet, but I know.'

'Don't play the fool, daughter. What do you mean — you haven't seen them, but you know?'

'When you have lived in the forest as long as I have you will learn,' and she laughed heartily. 'Oh, Mother, I didn't mean that!'

'Have you lost your senses?' her mother scolded. 'Your mother has spent a lifetime in the forest and you say, "When you have lived as long as I . . ."'

Laughing, Natalka continued. 'I wasn't talking about that, Mother. . . . They are really coming. Do you want to know how I knew? A magpie brought the news on her tail. . . . Zalivay barked, away in the distance, and I heard him. That is all there is to it. They will be here in an hour, or two at the latest.'

As though to confirm her words a small speck appeared on the path where it first became visible as it crossed a bald, sunlit hillock. A dog! It was followed by a second and a third. They ran ahead for a bit, then turned and playfully ran back over the hillock.

Hryhory was duly impressed. One must have some hearing to hear a dog barking two hours' walking distance away. And besides, to have recognized that it was Zalivay and not another dog! That girl had good reason to poke fun at him.

The mother laughed, waved her hand and hurried into the house.

'I haven't time now, daughter. Let Hrytsko help you.'

'Then give him the line. But he might fall off the cherry tree and kill himself.' She seemed quite serious now and was frowning.

Hryhory went into the hallway, brought out a long line tied in a bundle, untied it, and approached the large choke-cherry trees.

'Do you want it high?' he asked.

'Right at the top.'

Hryhory climbed the tree and tied the line fairly high. Then he picked up the other end and asked, 'Where do you want it?'

'Around that hill.' She tossed her head in the direction of the blue mountains, without turning.

Hryhory pulled the line towards the shed. The line was too short. 'That darned girl!' He pulled at it angrily and it broke in the middle.

'Such a good line, and he broke it.'

He couldn't tell whether she was really surprised or just sarcastic, because it was a really stout line. But then she added sarcastically:

'And you haven't even had your lunch yet! What will happen after you have eaten. . . .'

Embarrassed, Hryhory joined the two ends of the line, tied it to the cowshed and, without turning, walked off.

'Where are you running to? Mother told you to help, and to obey older folk. But perhaps you had better go and I will do it myself before you tear something.'

Hryhory walked to the brook, picked up all the washing, brought it up and laid it on the log. Natalka didn't even glance at him. Casually but deftly she continued hanging out the clothes on the line, on the branches and on the fence rail. Hryhory looked at her askance, smiled to himself and went off to the brook.

An hour later the hunting dogs appeared; they came dashing into the brook, barking joyfully, and running straight to Natalka almost knocked her off her feet.

The yard was filled with the sound of the girl's laughter and the barking of dogs gone crazy. They spun her around, jumped above her head in an effort to lick her face, especially that beautiful Yakut dog called Zalivay.

'Mother, please call them off, or do something, or they'll spoil all the washing.'

But the dogs had now noticed Hryhory near the water. They had passed him before, but now they barked madly and rushed at the stranger. If it had not been for Natalka

they might have torn him apart. As it was, they growled for a while and turned back to the girl. She scolded the dogs laughingly, 'Don't touch him or he will tear you apart with his hands.'

There was a sound of horses' hooves on the path. Five heavily loaded horses came into view. In front came the old man, not just an old man, but a bewhiskered old giant, tall and broad, red-faced, with a hairy chest showing through an opening in his white shirt. He wore top boots, a well-worn cap, padded trousers (in spite of the heat), a hunter's knife at his side. A short rifle was slung to the saddle of the leading horse.

At the rear came Hrytsko. He was as tall as his father, a handsome giant about twenty-five years of age. He was wearing an old army jacket, the same kind of top boots, a cap on the side of his head, with a thick growth of curls showing from underneath. There was a knife at his side and a shotgun slung over his back.

They laughed heartily when they saw Hryhory.

'Ho, ho, my son, you are frisking around already,' boomed old Sirko as he waded across the brook. 'We have brought you something.'

Crossing quickly over the brook, the old man stood with his arms outspread for an embrace. Some invisible force almost made Hryhory dash like a child into the old man's arms, but he controlled himself. They embraced each other ceremoniously like a father and son, and kissed according to the old custom.

Hrytsko simply stretched out a stout hand and greeted him, smiling. They looked amazingly alike, the same build, the same age, and similar in appearance. Two Hrytskos. Even Natalka's eyes filled with tears when she looked at them.

'They are like two bears! Look at them, Mother.' But Mother had already seen them and she came out of the house quickly to greet them.

'We will soon see how well you shoot, son. This is for

you.' And the old man handed over the present. Hryhory found himself holding a brand-new rifle.

When they were unloading the horses old man Sirko added:

'You'll have a horse too, son; this bay. Well, old lady, how about some dinner?'

Of course the dinner was all ready.

5

Target Practice

Next morning they cleaned their weapons. According to Sirko's orders they were preparing for a long hunting trip.

'When you start out hunting, all your weapons must be in perfect order.'

This wasn't in fun and they were preparing carefully, as though they were going to war. They sat in front of the house facing the sun, spread everything out on the grass and started working. Each cleaned his own rifle. Natalka and old Sirko had Winchesters, Hrytsko had a Japanese rifle, and Hryhory his new one. He took it completely apart, for he wanted to see if everything was in order as well as to get some practice — perhaps he had forgotten how to do it.

Old Sirko watched carefully from the side to see if the rifle was in good hands. Then he gave a satisfied smile, and as he worked he recounted how this 'toy' came into his hands.

'You mustn't think, son, that this is an ordinary rifle. One might say that it comes from the greatest general — yes, from Blucher[1] himself.' And the old man described how they signed a contract with the OKDVA (Special Far Eastern Red Army) to deliver venison and wild boar meat and other game. And how he met there with Blucher, whom he knew from the Civil War when, together, they had fought the White counter-revolutionaries and the Japanese. Well, this Blucher, overjoyed by an unexpected meeting with this old

[1] Blucher, a Soviet marshal, commander-in-chief of the Far Eastern Army; perished in the purges in the late 1930's.

veteran of the revolution, gave him this rifle. He ordered some high official to bring it from the stores, 'as a gift to a veteran of the revolution and the most outstanding hunter in the whole USSR'. And having handed over the gift with due ceremony, he enjoined: 'Take it and don't betray it. I am passing this heroic weapon into promising hands.' The old man closed one eye and for some reason laughed heartily. After a while he added:

'The devil guessed well! He is a great man; one of our people, that Blucher.'

Hryhory could not help laughing, but for a different reason; or perhaps it was for the same reason as the old man. The thought had come to his mind:

'How often life itself creates situations that one could not possibly imagine. Yes, this is no ordinary rifle and it has certainly fallen into promising hands. Will I fulfil their expectations . . .?'

He raised the rifle and looked towards the sun through the barrel, which showed a shiny spiral reflecting all the colours of the spectrum. He weighed it carefully in his hand for balance.

Natalka looked askance, with a sceptical twist to her lips.

'Whoever behaved that way with a rifle? Why does he peer into it like a magpie into a bone?'

She was handling her Winchester like a veteran soldier; had it completely apart, checked it, cleaned it and oiled it, and was already assembling it.

Hryhory reached the conclusion that he had a good rifle. It was an older make and therefore exactly and cleanly finished, and it had never been fired. All he had to do was break it in. In the meantime he felt he would like to play a joke on Natalka, who seemed to be jeering inwardly at him. He continued to fumble with the rifle and apparently couldn't manage to put it together. Natalka was now blushing because of his ineptitude.

He wasn't fooling the old man, however, who went along with the game and asked:

'Have you ever fired a rifle? Do you know how? Do you?'

Hryhory scratched his head and muttered:

'I've never tried; perhaps I do know how. . . .'

Finally they finished cleaning and reassembling the rifles and began packing their ammunition.

When everything was ready, old Sirko looked across the valley and then turned to his son:

'Run out there to the hill and take some chalk with you.'

Hrytsko knew what was coming. He brought his horse out of the stable and rode out to the hill on which grew a row of old cedars. It was about six hundred metres away. After a while he came back.

'Now we will do a little target shooting,' he explained to Hryhory. He seemed to remember something, went into the house and came out with a new case which he handed to Hryhory. The case contained a pair of Zeiss military field glasses.

Hryhory fixed the glasses on the spot on the hill and he found that animal heads had been drawn on the cedars. He also found that the right side of the binoculars was blank.

'Those are good glasses, but one of the lenses is spoilt.'

'What is a lens?' said the old man.

'It's this glass.'

The glasses belonged to Natalka and she now took them away with the remark, 'These are perfectly good glasses.'

After a while the old man took the glasses from Natalka and gave them back to Hryhory.

'You, son, will watch while we do a bit of pasting. If you see anything interesting, tell us.'

At his command they all lay down in army style, Natalka on the left, then Hrytsko, then the old man and finally Hryhory. Even the dogs lay down in a row, stuck out their tongues and pricked up their ears.

'Ready! Each one will fire five rounds. The right-hand stag head belongs to Natalka and the rest in order.'

'Do we fire together or take turns?' enquired Hrytsko.

'Take turns. Natalka first.'

She glanced sideways at Hryhory, who was peering at the targets through the glasses, then in quick order she fired five rounds.

Hrytsko followed her, firing as rapidly.

Hryhory watched carefully and couldn't see anything except that after the last round something flew up on a nearby tree.

Old Sirko followed Hrytsko. He took his time and after each round muttered, 'There goes another darling.'

Natalka, who had been carefully watching her father shooting, remarked gravely, 'You've ruined the tree, Father, and it was still growing.'

Hryhory fired last. Although he had fired at many a target he was now on edge. This was an unusual test, especially with a new rifle and against marksmen such as he had never met in his life. He set the sights at 600 and took several careful aims.

Natalka's remark, 'You see, that's the way it's done,' saved the day for him and he became taut as a bowstring. In rapid succession he fired five rounds.

After the last round, everyone, including the dogs, dashed madly across the valley, old man Sirko on horseback. Natalka reached the cedars first. She looked over the stag heads drawn on the cedars and turned to her father. 'I told you you ruined the tree — look!' There were five holes in the chalked head, one next to the other. On her own target was a group of four in the middle and the fifth was high up in the horns. Hrytsko's target showed only four bullet marks. Hryhory looked at his target and his heart sank. There wasn't a sign of any bullets, but when they came close to his target they found that about a foot above the head there were five bullet holes that could have been covered with the palm of the hand. The back of the tree was one gaping hole.

'There's the one who really ruined a tree. Beautiful rifle, beautiful, thanks to Blucher.' Old Sirko spoke gleefully.

'You're a good shot, son. This rifle seems to carry a bit high, but you'll fix that up.'

When they got back to the house the young people did some trick shooting. Old Sirko watched them for a while and then could restrain himself no longer. He showed them 'how he used to shoot at one time, when he was young'. He took out of his pocket a few copper coins and asked Hrytsko to toss them up one after another. As Hrytsko tossed a coin up the old man quickly caught it in his sights, fired, and the coin would disappear, and you could only hear the whine as the coin was driven by the impact of the bullet. After each round the old man remarked with a sigh, 'That's how I used to shoot when I was young.'

This was a happy preparation for what was to be a long period in the taiga, a long trip followed by serious and dangerous hunting.

* * *

The horses had only one day's rest before old Sirko decided they should start preparing for the hunting trip. The others did the work; he restricted himself to planning, to suggesting and occasional 'heys'. The 'others' meant mainly Mother and Natalka who prepared supplies, packed them in sacks and large and small bags. There were flour, candles, sardines, bread, sugar, compressed tea, jars of oil and honey, cans of spirit, matches, flints, needles, thread.

Mother kept telling Natalka:

'Watch, this will be here. I will put that there. . . .'

They checked the tent, cut foot-cloths, repaired the top boots and hunting clothes, cleaned army mess-tins and field spades. They even included some cheese-cloth with needle and thread, whatever use that might be to the hunters.

Hryhory was going too, so he helped in every way he could, even though old Sirko kept muttering, 'Leave it alone, son. That's not a man's job. It is different once you are out hunting, but here there are others to do that. . . .'

But Hryhory enjoyed taking part in these unusual preparations, which gave the impression of a long-term expedition. There were ammunition boxes, guns, horse-shoe nails, mosquito nets, shooting sticks, an axe, a saw and many things he had never seen before.

The preparations lasted a whole day, and departure was set for the following morning. At daybreak Sirko's household came to life. Four good horses — a grey, a black, a bay, and a chestnut — stood near the porch. The loads were carefully distributed over each horse. When everything was loaded and strapped down they went inside to breakfast. They ate quietly and quickly, while the old woman served them solicitously.

'Perhaps you would take me with you. I shall be bored and lonely,' she said.

'Then come along,' said Natalka.

'Yes, come along, and who will stay at home? . . .'

'What are you cackling about?' spoke up old Sirko. 'You will be bored, eh? Then you will appreciate us more when we come back.'

'As though I didn't appreciate you now. . . . Eat well. What is the matter with you, Natalka? Eat, my child. You too, son [to Hryhory]. Don't look at them, eat well . . . when you get out there you won't have these things. The devil knows what you will eat there. Probably something the dogs wouldn't eat here.'

Hryhory laughed and ate enough for three just to please her. The others weren't doing too badly either. The table was covered with a cloth and set as though it were Easter. They drank fruit liqueurs and ate sardines with vinegar; then hot borsch and *pyrohy*,[1] meat and potatoes. Then *pyrohy* with rice, meat and beans. For dessert they had honey and stewed cranberries.

After breakfast they stood up, crossed themselves before the ikons and prepared to move. The old man was giving his wife 'orders' as to what she should do if anything hap-

[1] *Pyrohy*, dumplings, a favourite Ukrainian dish.

pened, and what should be attended to. Just before leaving the house they sat in solemn silence for a few minutes, then:

'God be with us!'

They bade good-bye to the mother.

There was just a suggestion of a rosy hue in the east when the troop marched out from Sirko's homestead. The three huge hunting dogs led the way. The two Hryhorys followed, with rifles slung over their shoulders, both wearing top boots with the tops rolled down, and good light hunting clothes. Then came two packed horses, the grey and the black, then came Natalka wearing clothes like an airman's, made out of 'the devil's skin' and carrying a leather cap in her hand. The other two horses followed. In the rear came old Sirko, using a shooting stick to walk with. He was wearing top boots, a pair of greasy old trousers, an old short coat and an old-fashioned cap probably as old as Sirko himself.

After crossing the brook they turned east and began climbing a narrow path, rising slowly at an angle along the slopes towards Sikhote-Alin.

Mrs. Sirko stood on the porch, now and then making the sign of the cross in their direction. She accompanied them with her eyes as long as they were in sight. Before they disappeared in the jungle Natalka turned and waved in the direction of her mother who was no longer visible. The air was fresh and cool as is usual in these regions in the summer. Mist stirred above the valley, and above the brook below, and crept into the breaks between hills. Slowly it rose as though out of a deep sleep.

Against the foreground of the chimeric walls of Sikhote-Alin the rosy hue kept flooding up into the sky.

'It will be a clear, hot day,' said Hrytsko. No one commented.

On both sides of the path there grew masses of flowers like roses except that the blossoms were only about one-tenth the size. Hryhory became acquainted with these when he

first set foot in the bush but he had only recently learned that they were called *kiprey* and that they were perhaps the best honey providers in the whole world. He also knew that in this area there were many hillocks which were bare of trees and covered as thickly with these flowers as the steppe is covered with wheat. Local beekeepers would sometimes carry their hives a hundred kilometres to such locations.

The dogs ran forward along the path, then stopped and waited for the men and horses. They would play around Natalka or the old man for a while, and then dash off again. Sharp-eared, broad-chested, they looked as fierce as wolves. Two of them were grey with brown spots, and one was brown with a black streak along his neck.

'Do you know anything about dogs?' asked Hrytsko when the dogs ran back and began playing in the glade, grabbing each other with their frightful, huge jaws.

'I know a little about ordinary dogs.'

'What ordinary dogs?'

'Well, hunting dogs, like hounds. . . .'

Hrytsko laughed: 'I don't know those, but have you ever seen any like these?'

'No. Those frightful things are probably good for—looking after prisoners.'

'Well, you should know that these are priceless dogs. First of all there aren't any others like these in the whole country. Hunters such as Golds, Tungus and Yakuts usually have dogs; they even ride them and perhaps they would even hitch them to a plough if they knew how and if there was anything to plough, but there are none like these. Those two grey ones — Zalivay and Rooshay — are Yakut Huskies and the brown one, Nepra, is a Gold Husky. The important point is that they are hunting dogs. The three of them will seize a wild boar by the "seat of his trousers" and hold him until you can come and finish him off with a knife. But even that is not the real point because there are many hunting dogs. The most important fact is that these dogs are tiger hunters. As a rule there isn't a dog in the world

who will not run to your feet whimpering from fright at the very scent of a tiger. But not these dogs. I think they would tackle the devil himself. Father trained them that way from pups. Therein lies their real value. Without these dogs we are nothing; with them we can venture anything. And how intelligent they are! Look, they understand that we are talking about them. Watch their faces.'

'Zalivay!' called Hrytsko, and the huge, broad-chested Yakut ran up and searched his eyes. His general appearance was that of a German Shepherd but his paws were massive, his chest like that of a boar, and his clear sparkling eyes betrayed tremendous reserves of strength, courage and devotion. Hrytsko patted his huge jaw.

'This is Natalka's pal!'

On hearing the word 'Natalka' the dog stopped, let the men go by and waited for his mistress.

'He would tear the heart out of anyone who threatened her. I once made a move to strike her and she shouted "Stranger"; you should have seen that! Some time ago he was ripped by a boar. You will notice one of his legs is a bit crooked. It was broken and his belly torn. Father gave him up for lost but Natalka pulled him through. She took as many pains with him as with a human being, and he is used to her. He will not forget that as long as he lives. Many people have wanted to buy him. Some have offered as much as fifteen thousand but Father wouldn't hear of it. Once he did suggest selling him, but you can't always tell whether he is serious or just joking. But, my God, you should have heard Natalka; 'You had better throw me into the bargain, in that case," was her reaction.'

Zalivay came running to the front. Perched on his sharp ears was Natalka's 'Dynamo'[1] helmet, fastened under his neck. The dog moved proudly and solemnly.

'That is one of their jokes. But Natalka has occasionally sent him home from the taiga. He will deliver anything you give him, and will bring back whatever he is given. He

[1] Dynamo, the best-known Soviet sports club.

has never lost anything, or had it taken away. As far as he is concerned no one can take anything that belongs to Natalka.

'I'll tell you how they taught him to hunt tigers. Natalka would put her shawl or shoe under a tiger skin when he didn't see and would then say, "Oh, my God, Zalivay, help me, look!" It was frightening to watch him. There would be a cloud of fur flying out of that skin. The others are well trained, too, but he's their leader. Without him they would be like Russian soldiers without a general.'

The bush grew thicker. The path led through thick tall grass, weeds, and through impassable walls of branches and vines. Heavy dew drenched them as though somebody had poured it through a sieve. By the time they reached the next crest they were wet through and through. The young men waited for the others. The sun was blinding them now as it rose over the top of a distant, grey, serrated crest. It painted the steep bluffs in the most varied hues. Hryhory caught his breath at the beauty of the sight.

Natalka's head was wet and big dew-drops were perched on her nose and eyelashes, but her eyes sparkled with happiness. She stood and looked at the sun. Her face blossomed like a rose and looked as inscrutable and unconcerned as these jungles and squirrels and the sun itself.

'Well, shall we rest?' suggested Hrytsko as he watched water oozing out of his footwear.

'No. Now that we are as wet as this we should continue as long as the gadflies haven't started,' said old Sirko. 'We have a long journey ahead of us.'

The path divided here into two directions.

'Take the left one,' ordered the old man.

'Aha, we are going to the Sky Blue Valley,' said Hrytsko. He walked ahead as he explained to Hryhory. 'Sky Blue Valley is quite far from here. There we have the best salt-lick and it is best for antler hunting.'

'Would you please explain to me what a salt-lick is?' asked Hryhory.

'Don't you really know? Ah yes. . . . Well, a salt-lick is a salty piece of ground which *isubras* eat.'

'And what are *isubras*?'

'Why, *isubras* are the ones with the *panty*.'

'And what are *panty*?'

Hrytsko laughed suspiciously. The path now led across a clearing. There was more room, the grass was sparse and there were few trees and thickets. When they came to clearings like this the two Hrytskos walked side by side.

'Don't laugh at me,' said Hryhory, 'and don't be surprised. In my lifetime I have hunted ducks, geese, rabbits, wolves, foxes, curlew, woodcock and hoopoe but . . .'

'And what are woodcock and hoopoe, and those curlew or what have you?'

'All right then,' laughed Hryhory. 'Now you had better explain everything clearly so that I can understand.'

'Fine. Salt-licks are spots in areas that have been burnt over, or on bogs in the hills. Occasionally fires have burnt out stretches over a hundred versts. In the case of these hill bogs, the sides of the hills are often salty earth. These are salt-licks. The *isubras*, the deer and the moose, like to eat that soil, especially when they are growing new antlers which are called *panty*. The *isubras* go mostly to the salt-licks on burnt ground which is open and safer. They go there only at night, during the summer when their antlers are growing. These antlers of the *isubras* and of the spotted stag are very valuable. The spotted stag is now almost extinct. The *isubra* is not a spotted stag, he is greyish brown. There are many of them here and they look . . . well, you will soon see for yourself.'

'I still don't understand what *panty* are.'

'Well, now! The male *isubra* changes his antlers every year. In February or March he knocks off the old ones and during the summer new ones grow again until mating time in the fall, when his antlers are once more large and beautiful. Then the males fight for the females. While these antlers are growing they are soft and possess some secret power as

a medicine against all kinds of diseases. The Chinese are experts in these matters. These young antlers are sold to China for good solid gold.

'Now you know what *panty* are and why the *isubra* is so valuable. The hunting of these animals is now strictly controlled. You can't shoot them either for meat or for hide, only for these *panty*, and only during one month. And only those can hunt them who know their job and who have special permission. Father says that at one time everybody shot this animal recklessly. It was very plentiful. Now do you understand? It is difficult to explain it clearly but you will see for yourself, and then you will know.'

'Hold on! You say that the salt-licks are naturally salty soil. But Mother and Natalka said that you salt them. . . .'

'Certainly. The soil becomes exhausted. Take, for instance, an excellent salt-lick which is extensively known and used by animals and which is also well fitted out and handy for antler hunting, because on a new salt-lick, even if you find one, you won't do any hunting for a long time. You see, antler hunting means shooting the male *isubra* for their *panty*. In order to make it possible you have to organize and equip the new salt-lick. You must build a well-concealed shelter where you sit and wait, and from where you shoot. Since you do this hunting only at night the shelter has to be very close. But the *isubra* is a clever beast; you don't fool him easily. You might camouflage the shelter perfectly but he will not come near for a long time. It might take a year or two until he gets used to it so that the shelter no longer makes him suspicious. That is why old "safe" salt-licks are the best. And you have to keep adding salt so as to keep the animals coming. This spring we took half a ton of salt to the Sky Blue Valley alone. Is it clear now?'

'Clear.'

'We are used to these things, we grew up here and everything seems obvious to us. But there must be many things that are baffling to you. There are some things I wonder about. For instance, the highland bog; water flows down,

but here you have a marsh high in the hills. And what a marsh! It is some twenty versts long and so bad that if, God forbid, you slip into it you will never get out. Once a whole expedition got lost. It strayed into this bog at night and that was the end. Now why is that so?'

Hryhory began to explain to Hrytsko what caused these bogs. He told him about the perma frosts and other factors that brought about these queer phenomena. Hrytsko listened, surprised and somewhat embarrassed:

'There you are. You have been fooling me all along. You know the answers and yet you ask.'

'Oh no, much of this is a Chinese puzzle to me.'

They continued thus, walking and chatting. Hryhory asked about everything and Hrytsko answered willingly, betraying the deep native knowledge of the hunter-naturalist in topography, geography, plants and animals and the techniques of hunting, fishing and trapping. He was a true child of the taiga; he couldn't imagine himself in any other environment.

Hitherto, apart from his father, Natalka had been his only friend and companion. But they had spoken little — too much of their experience had been in common. Their conversations usually consisted of a few brief words.

Natalka walked a score of paces behind, separated by the horses. She could see the young men talking with animation, and could make out their individual voices, but she did not draw any nearer to them.

The sun was beginning to burn. The thickets were still cool, but whenever they emerged into the open the sun peppered them with hot rays. The bush was as quiet as a cathedral. Here and there a woodpecker could be heard or some bird would fly near by. But there were few birds in the forest, and as though to fill in the void some kind of animal flew from tree to tree. It rose from a tall pine and, spreading out, it dropped down, gathered speed and then came up again and latched on to a poplar and scrambled up to the top.

'What is that, Hrytsko?'

'That is a flying squirrel — a half-sister to a squirrel and a chipmunk.'

Once Hryhory saw a group of tall, graceful animals relaxing in a sunlit glade covered with a luscious growth of heavy grass. They looked at the cavalcade and didn't move.

'What are those?'

'They are deer.'

'Surely deer are not that tall.'

'Why, are there smaller ones?'

'Yes, and are these stupid or timid?'

'Stupid?' Hrytsko laughed. 'You should try and find them in the autumn or the winter. Right now they are having a good time because no one bothers them in summer. In these parts they are usually left alone even in the winter and that's why they are not afraid.'

The deer watched for a while, then slowly turned and with a few graceful leaps disappeared.

'There are masses of them here as well as other animals, except that you can't see them. It's not so bad with the deer, especially if they have not been scared, but others are as cautious as the devil. They can see us all right. You might see what appears to be a dried branch sticking out and you could stand there for an hour and it wouldn't move, just a dried branch so far as you are concerned, but in fact it is a prong of a moose's antlers, or an *isubra*, and the animal itself is behind a stump or a log just peeping with one eye, and it can disappear in the twinkling of an eye. You've got to be patient, crafty and brave if you want to hunt here.'

From a distance there came a humming sound and it increased as they moved on. Presently there flew towards them columns of what seemed to be horseflies except that they were greyish-black. Hryhory looked around and saw that the sound was really coming from the rear, where whole columns of these flies now hovered over the horses.

'The gadflies have come,' said Hrytsko in disgust. 'They

are a real menace. They don't give an animal any peace in the daytime — any animal in the forest — and we are still a long way from the resting place at the spring.'

The men stopped and waited for the horses who were madly swishing their tails, kicking, waving their heads and blowing. The dogs were flicking their ears and snapping viciously. The gadflies kept coming in clouds; they descended indiscriminately on horses and dogs, dug into their skin, but they left the humans alone.

'You take the roan and I'll take the black!'

They walked beside the horses and fought off the gadflies. Wherever they struck with their hands there was immediately a splash of blood from the squashed bloodsuckers. It was impossible to keep up with the attacking horde. Almost before they descended they had punctured the hide and had their fill. Nothing seemed to be of any use; the more you killed the more came.

'This is bad. Go and find the tar, daughter,' ordered the old man.

They found the tar and covered the more sensitive spots on the horses. The old man mumbled:

'This is bad. It's still a long way but we'll have to get there or they'll eat us up.'

They started out again. The tar maddened the gadflies; they now attacked the humans. They continued their assault upon the horses, getting into their eyes, their ears, nostrils, mouths, and even their tongues if the horses happened to open their mouths. Because of the tarred parts their attack was now concentrated on small areas and these were literally covered with armies of gadflies.

Although the dogs suffered too they did have considerable protection from their thick coats.

'Can you explain this?' said Hrytsko angrily. 'Today these black things are causing havoc; then they will disappear and yellow ones will come; then blue ones that are very tiny and very fierce. Do you have them at home? No? Well, you are a very fortunate people. Here you can't

ride in the daytime. The wild animals suffer terribly. Right now the *isubra* is somewhere in water hiding from the pest, with only his mouth and ears sticking out. And the harm these gadflies cause, especially to deer. Sometimes you will shoot a buck in March and when you skin it you will find masses of larvae stirring under the hide. The eggs were laid under the skin, some time in summer, and they hatch in the winter. In March they begin stirring and the skin is covered with lumps. Eventually the larvae cut a hole in the lump, fall out and become these devilish gadflies. Such a hide is of course useless; all holes, like a sieve.'

Everybody was engaged in beating off the gadflies with their hands, which were now covered with blood. The path turned downwards and in time the party reached the bottom of a deep ravine. Here it was cool and semi-dark. A little stream could be heard falling over stones, the number of gadflies diminished considerably, and it was heavenly compared with the torture they had just left behind. They stopped here to rest and await the hour when the hordes of flies would settle down and they could proceed. The young men unpacked the horses, led them into a large thicket and then lay down on the rocks.

The old man began making a tripod for the cooking pot; Natalka picked up a Winchester and started off along the watercourse.

'Are you off to scare bears?' Hrytsko laughed.

'Wait a minute; come on, Hrytsko, let us go with her after partridges!'

The men picked up their shotguns, Hryhory's a double-barrelled one, and caught up with Natalka. The valley was dark and wet. Huge flat rocks, stumps and fallen trees were all covered in grey moss.

For a while they walked but found nothing. Then they decided to separate and see who was the better hunter. Hryhory went to the right. He climbed the crest and went down the other side, always carefully checking landmarks so as not to get lost.

A squirrel chattered above. Hryhory looked up for a long time, trying to spot that happy little beast somewhere near the top of a cedar. He examined every branch, every cone, but he couldn't find him. He could hear a tiny noise, a scratching, but still couldn't locate the squirrel. When he looked down again, he found that he could no longer fix his position. He began searching in his pockets for a piece of paper to make a marker when he heard a shot. This was followed by a flutter of wings and a pair of partridges flashed by and sat on a dead poplar tree. One stretched his little crested head and stood absolutely still, and the other walked up the branch. Hryhory raised his shotgun and fired twice. One partridge fell down and fluttered for a moment and the other, apparently badly wounded in the wing, went off sideways, and eventually fell. Hryhory noted the peculiar-looking tree near which the second bird fell, and went off into the thicket to pick up the first one. He then made for the tree but when he got there the bird was gone. He searched for a long time until he noticed some feathers on a branch. Then he searched thoroughly near by and eventually found the partridge in some heavy undergrowth.

It was time to return to camp but for the life of him he could not tell which way to go. In searching for the partridge he had turned at least ten times. Now he was completely disorientated. For a while he walked left, then came back and walked right, and came back again. Where the devil should he go? He couldn't very well shout. What a hunter! 'Went off a few yards and got lost!' He started again and thought he should be descending by now and be near camp, but it wasn't there, so he turned back. The more he tried to find his way out the more he realized he was hopelessly lost. He broke out in a cold sweat, not with fear but from the thought that he might disgrace himself for life; any time now they would start searching for him. Taking himself in hand, he tied a handkerchief high on a bush so that it would be visible from a distance and then he began walking in a spiral. He came to the spot where the first

partridge fell; he broke off the top of a bush, peeled the bark to make a marker. From here he started walking in another spiral and finally walked out into a clearing. Phew! this was the way he came, there were definite marks in the tall grass, so he started downhill. Then he stopped and looked around and listened. Was he lost again? And then he heard the cracking of the underbrush and saw Zalivay running with his head down following Hryhory's footsteps.

Hryhory stood still until the dog disappeared and then went off quickly in the direction from which the dog had come. She obviously sent him to search for me, he thought. It's a good thing we didn't meet. And then he heard voices, heard the crackling of a fire and smelled smoke. Natalka was saying, 'Obviously he's got lost', and Hryhory thought there was a note of concern in her voice. 'He wouldn't get lost,' said Hrytsko. To which the old man replied, 'You don't say! When I was forty I got lost right next to my own house.'

'Hrytsko, let's go and search, or at least fire a shot.'

'Why? After all, you sent Zalivay; he'll find him and bring him back a prisoner.'

'Oh, oh,' shouted Hryhory and calmly walked up to the camp. Everyone laughed. 'We have already plucked our birds. Hand yours over.'

Hryhory sat down by the old man and started plucking the birds.

'And where is Zalivay?' wondered Natalka.

'Why, he was with you.'

Just then Zalivay came running carrying Hryhory's handkerchief in his mouth.

'I wonder what was chasing our hunter that made him lose his handkerchief!'

Hryhory only blushed. While the dinner was cooking they took off their footwear, washed their feet, hung up their top boots, washed their footcloths and hung them up to dry. They watered and fed the horses and cleaned their guns.

After dinner they rested for a while, then packed the horses and started out again. Towards evening they crossed a large bog, climbed another crest and came out in a clearing, over which they proceeded northward for some time. They moved quickly so as to reach before nightfall the familiar spring where they could camp. By now everyone was tired. Hryhory was perspiring freely and sweat poured into his eyes. They were all thirsty, especially after a hearty dinner. Their water-bottles were empty.

In addition, mosquitoes started annoying them. Natalka, however, was prepared. She pulled down her helmet, covered her ears and only had to shoo them away from her face.

Hryhory felt as if someone was beating him with nettles. He scratched one spot after another and felt the swellings rise. His face felt as if it were pockmarked, and there were blisters between his fingers. Even the horses were breathing heavily and snorting in a futile effort to ward off the mosquitoes.

6

A Meeting with the Moroz Family

Twilight descended quickly as though trying to prevent old Sirko from reaching a suitable camp site for the night before total darkness set in, a spot in some valley with a blessed stream now so indispensable for the tired travellers. Sirko knew that the nearest place was about ten kilometres away, so he led the party as fast as possible.

They were not destined to reach such comfort. Suddenly Sirko's group stopped. Coming along the path towards them was another party moving just as fast, obviously trying to cross the hilltop before nightfall and reach a valley with a stream where they could settle for the night. The two parties met at the very peak of the crest.

It was the most unusual occurrence. Such meetings seldom happened in this uninhabited boundless sea of green.

In front walked an old man with a heavy stick in his hand and a pack on his back. Behind him came several heavily loaded horses, three or four people and an assortment of dogs. Riding side-saddle was a young mother with a baby in her arms. A young girl walked between the horses and occasionally swatted them with a branch to drive off the mosquitoes. She was bare-legged, well proportioned, and her face was streaked so heavily with sweat and grime that it was impossible to tell her natural colouring.

In the rear came a lanky young man with a black moustache, a rifle slung across his chest.

The meeting was a great surprise to both parties. The first to greet each other were the dogs, and the families quickly followed.

Hrytsko was beside himself with surprise and sheer joy when he recognized his old friends.

'The Moroz family; I swear it's the Morozes! May you be stricken by a deer's tail, as Father would say. Hey, pug-nose,' he called to the girl, 'where are you stumbling to so fast? Stop!'

'Ah! . . . why, of course, to see you! And how are you, bridegroom? And why are you in such a hurry? Are you going to propose?'

There were peals of laughter, and repeated expressions of surprise and joy.

'The Moroz family!'

'The Sirko family!'

One mountain never meets another but two old, famous families could not pass each other by, even in this endless virgin forest.

Hryhory watched this unusual scene with keen interest. Morozes were friends of the Sirkos; and where?

'This is the Moroz family,' Hrytsko explained hastily, and then turned his attention again to the sharp-eyed, sharp-tongued grimy girl. 'They live on the Bare Mountains behind "the devil's stove". The old man is Natalka's and my godfather. That one is his son-in-law, that one there is Hanna Morozivna, married, and that one is Mariyka, sharp as a tack, as you can see. We haven't seen each other for about a year, not since we danced at Hanna's wedding.

'Hey, Mariyka,' he laughed, 'where have you been rooting with your nose that you got it so dirty?'

'Why, I was looking for you!'

The old men doffed their caps and greeted each other solemnly according to taiga and Cossack custom, while the women exchanged loud kisses.

'Hold your kisses, Mariyka; take it easy, pug-nose, I will be right over!' called Hrytsko.

'Tiu, tiu, so that's the way you are! And with that face? Go on back, I much prefer my horse, ha ha ha!'

This bare-legged girl, disguised by sweat and grime, proved to be a lively blonde. She was jabbering like a magpie to Natalka, her eyes darting at the young men. She even stared at Hryhory and then whispered something to Natalka, who smacked her face.

'Oh, go ahead and kiss him,' said the young married woman as the other girls helped her off the horse. She was young and beautiful and full of spirit. 'Have pity on Hrytsko. Look how jealous he is.'

'He can go to the devil. He might bite me. Listen to him neigh!'

The young people went on joking, laughing and teasing. Even the quiet, lanky son-in-law joined them.

Meanwhile old Moroz and old Sirko stood on the path and talked. They were old friends and distantly related; each had godchildren in the other family. They had migrated together to this country, and had lived in the same village for many years. Eventually they separated and now seldom saw each other. They were happy over this meeting and talked rapidly about life in general and where they were travelling.

The Moroz family was taking a short cut home from Komsomolsk. Hanna, who had been visiting her older brother's family there (he was now in a concentration camp), had been delayed, and had given birth to her child. They had gone to bring her home from the camp hospital ('what an awful place it is, God forbid') and to settle some business matters. Old Moroz had a contract to supply game for the directing personnel of the concentration camp — 'the lords want meat'. They had now been travelling there and back for twenty days.

'My God, what is happening now in this world!' Moroz shook his head sadly as he told them about Komsomolsk, and all the frightful things that were happening in that town of prisoners.

Night fell before they became aware of it. It was too late to travel in either direction so they decided to camp where they were. They unpacked the horses and placed the packs in a large half-circle. In the centre they made a large fire, and hung their guns and ammunition pouches on the branches. A tent was pitched for the young woman with the baby, and the horses were tethered near by before being let out to graze. Then the men took their spades and went in search of water.

The problem of water was difficult at this height; their only hope lay in digging. They dug several holes about five feet deep but found no water. Their clothes stuck to their backs with perspiration but all they came across was damp soil. Hoping against hope that some water might trickle into the holes eventually, they returned to camp.

The girls were sitting in front of the tent, licking their parched lips. The few drops of water that remained in one of the flasks had been given to Hanna but these scarcely wet her lips.

Their early period of elation was now gone. The unquenchable thirst had killed all signs of good humour as drought kills a flower. They could do nothing but suffer in silence.

Lying stretched out flat on the ground, Hrytsko tried to divert their attention.

'Grandpa Moroz, give me your Mariyka. That pug-nose can't possibly be of any use to you.'

'Take her, take her! . . . But what will you do with her, son? You will find her difficult to handle. You see how she kicks up her heels with me.'

'Oh that's nothing. See how quiet she is with her mouth wide open. Hey, Mariyka, are you expecting rain?'

'Don't be a fool. It's because I am gazing at you so earnestly!'

'Dear Hrytsko,' Hanna joined in pleadingly, 'it will be good for you and for us. Grab your good fortune or it may never come again: for a bottle of water we will trade you a

whole girl with arms and legs. What do you say? If you don't do it now you will remain single for the rest of your life. Who else would have you?'

'Good,' agreed Hrytsko. 'The water-holes will be full shortly. But I want to think it over. It's a bit dear, Hannusia; at that price I might get something without a pug-nose.'

Mariyka wasn't pug-nosed at all; well, perhaps just a tiny bit. In reality she had a pretty nose on a lovely face. Both she and Hrytsko knew it. He was teasing her because as a child she did have a pug-nose, and he never ceased telling her about it.

Nobody thought about food. All they wanted was a drink of water, just one drink! The young men went several times to the holes but there wasn't a sign of water.

The old men suffered the least. They smoked their pipes and talked. Hryhory could hardly stand it any more. He lay quietly beyond the reach of the fire, pressed his chest to the ground, and with his head resting on his arms observed everything with strained eyes. He heard the old men conversing but he couldn't concentrate. His thoughts fluttered around like broken clouds driven by a hot breeze from the steppes. He was amazed at what was happening round him; and he was specially surprised by the endurance of the old men. They seemed completely unconcerned. The others, too, didn't seem unduly disturbed. Apparently they were resigned.

Only Natalka kept licking her lips which had cracked in the middle. But that was all. A smile lit up her face as she leaned over the baby lying in its mother's lap and played with it. Only Mariyka kept her mouth open like a bird in a heatwave.

The young married woman sat deep in thought. With the baby in her arms she looked beautiful enough to paint just as she was in this background. To Hryhory she seemed the epitome of everything that had been said about the Madonna, and she, this Madonna of the wilderness, seemed to have

forgotten about the whole world. She didn't even cover her breasts, either because she was not ashamed or because she had forgotten about the young men. Or perhaps she was trying to quiet the angry thirst within by the coolness of the night. . . .

What a picture it would make, he thought, this bright fire-lit circle in the black, wild desert! Beyond the reaches of the fire the darkness was pitch black.

Without a word Hryhory stood up and began to collect the water-flasks.

'Are you off to market, son?' said old Sirko with a smile.

Hryhory smiled too. 'Something like that.'

Hrytsko looked wide-eyed. 'No, really, what are you doing?'

Hryhory's answer was straightforward: 'I am going to get water.'

'Tiu!' exclaimed Hrytsko as he got up. 'What has got into you? God be with you!'

'Why not? There is enough water round here to drive the Dnieper power station. Why should we suffer?' As he said that, he caught Natalka looking at him and it made him more determined than ever.

'Leave it, son,' said old Moroz. 'We will manage somehow. There isn't any water near. Besides, it's dark and nobody goes roaming around in the taiga at night. You're not in the garden in your back yard.'

But Hryhory would not give in.

'One can try. . . .' He looked at old Sirko who sat smiling without saying a word, slung a rifle over his shoulder and stepped out into the darkness.

'In that case wait for me,' shouted Hrytsko, and began collecting some water-bottles, including three large ones that belonged to Mariyka. He picked up a rifle, called to Nepra to follow and disappeared into the darkness after Hryhory.

'He is crazy,' lamented Mariyka, 'I swear to God he is crazy!' Even Natalka laughed.

The son-in-law came to Mariyka's support: 'Amazing . . . I have never seen anything like it', and he pulled a face, as though they were really talking about a madman. Old Moroz sighed and shook his head, but old Sirko continued to puff at his pipe and smile in his moustache: 'I bet he's never seen anything like it!' And the young mother, as though voicing his thoughts, spoke stubbornly with hope and feeling:

'He will get it! You can see that if you look at him. . . .'

There was no reproach in her voice, only admiration and a hope of quieting this hellish thirst and her anger with her husband. . . .

The son-in-law only muttered something under his breath.

There wasn't a sign or sound from the young men. Finally someone went to see if there was any water in the holes. There wasn't a drop. Two hours had passed and still the men did not return. The party began thinking about sleep. Nobody said anything about supper.

Natalka lay on a saddle under a large oak. She half closed her eyes and looked into the fire. Zalivay lay down beside her with his head on his forepaws and also gazed at the fire. Mariyka settled down on the packs. Although it was late nobody could sleep. The old men and the son-in-law sat near the fire and exchanged an occasional word, but thirst and fatigue drove away even their desire to talk. Besides, their thoughts were now centred on other things. . . .

Hanna looked at the others with concern but did not say anything. It was now past midnight, and fatigue gave way to fear.

Old Moroz spat angrily. 'Many things happen in these forests, especially on such dark nights. They must be crazy, God forgive! . . .'

Old Sirko just sat and smoked and looked at the fire, unconcerned. He glanced at Moroz with only 'Mhm!'

'Who is that chap?' enquired the son-in-law as casually as

he could, no longer able to check his curiosity. 'He is a queer one; doesn't seem to belong to the taiga.'

'No, he is not of the taiga,' agreed Sirko, knocking out his pipe against a piece of firewood, and refilling it slowly.

'Who is he? Perhaps a son-in-law; ah, yes, that's probably it.'

Somewhere beyond the fiery circle someone muttered, quietly yet angrily. It was Natalka, who, apparently, was annoyed.

'No, not a son-in-law,' replied Sirko between puffs.

'Obviously he is not local.' The lanky son-in-law continued his enquiry.

'No, he is not local,' was the old man's offhand reply.

'Well, who is he?'

The old man looked at the lanky man and at old Moroz for a while with a sardonic smile, and finally answered seriously and resolutely:

'A relative . . . from the centre. . . .'

'Maybe a Party man. Seems to be. . . .'

Sirko dug around in his pipe with his finger for a while.

'No . . . take it higher.' He reflected for a moment and then added proudly, firmly and a bit too loudly:

'An engineer, so there!'

'Oho!'

There was an awkward silence. The son-in-law was confused and impressed by this terrible word which he had heard before, but never really understood. This secret foreign word, like a wizard's spell, overwhelmed him.

Sirko continued smoking without batting an eye, even when he noticed his daughter's surprised eyes gazing at him from beyond the fire-lit circle. The girl then bit her cracked lip, sighed, turned to the oak tree and pressed her face against the saddle.

Suddenly Zalivay was alert and raised his head. Something had moved in the darkness. The dog pricked up his ears and growled, and then quietly lay down again. The other dogs

who had got to their feet now followed his example and settled down, looking towards the path.

Out of the darkness came Hryhory approaching the fire. He was carrying a collection of wet water-flasks which gleamed in the firelight. His hair was also soaked, but his face was calm. If he could only have seen that pair of glittering eyes that now looked at him out of the darkness! Old Sirko yawned, faintly raised his eyebrows and enquired:

'So you did buy some? Good.' Then he added in a calm, loud tone:

'There you are. You were right, Hanna!'

Everyone got up, amazed, as though it wasn't ordinary water in those flasks but that legendary healing and living water which resurrects the dead.

Natalka rose from her saddle and Hryhory gave her one of the flasks, and one to Hanna. The girl glued her parched lips to the flask and gave her eyes to Hryhory.

'And where is Hrytsko?'

'I thought he would be here by now. We went together there and back. A while ago we argued: he said left and I said right. Neither would give in and so we decided that each would go his own way and let God decide who was right. Nepra is with him.'

Hryhory made a move to go back to look for him when suddenly Nepra came out of the dark followed by Hrytsko, carrying only two big bottles. He hung up his rifle, sat down and burst out laughing.

'What are you neighing about? Where are the bottles?' inquired Mariyka.

Hrytsko waved towards the forest.

'Go and pick them up. Ha, ha, ha! You know, you will never run into another guy like this Hryhory of ours. When we left, it was as dark as hell. Turn one way and you dash your head into a tree, turn the other way and you bump your ribs into a stump. You just couldn't keep your feet straight. So I thought to myself: Let him carry on like that

for a while. He will soon cool off and turn back. But he kept on going down like a bear. Nepra was afraid to go ahead and clung to my feet, but he went on crashing through the bush. Then I heard him fall over a log. I was trying to follow in the rear, stumbling and falling until I felt my bones cracking. Still we moved on somehow. I couldn't see him and he couldn't see me. I was getting angry. I hoped that just a bit more and he would beg for help. But he didn't!

'We came to a rocky cliff and felt around for some time to find a way down but couldn't. I was happy about that: at least, I said, we can't go any farther. But he moved off to the flank and eventually made his way down. My God, how many times we must have fallen. You might go back there, Mariyka, and pick up the water-bottles. I don't know how we got through without breaking our necks or cracking some bones! We went on and on, and still no water. My eyes were standing out on stalks and I pleaded: "The devil take this, let us go back! We'll go like this for a year without finding water and we won't be able to get back!" But he only laughed: "Don't be silly. This slope can't go all the way to Japan. The highest mountains in the world are only between eight and ten kilometres, and these are just hills. Before long we will reach the bottom and there you will always find water."

'So we kept on going. We must have gone about four kilometres when I heard him say: "Aha, somewhere here."

'We reached the bottom and the weeds and grass there were like reeds; over your head. We prowled about and eventually struck a stagnant pool.

'Suddenly some devil made a terrific racket and went crashing into the bush. Nepra whined and clung to my legs. It must have been a bear or a wild boar, or perhaps something even worse. . . . We tried the water and found it was stagnant and smelled. I tried some and immediately spat it out; it was tea and fat scum in one. "Let's go back," I said. "No, let's go farther!" "I won't go," I said. "Then

sit here and let the big bad wolf eat you." He stood and listened for a while and then went on down.

'A while later he shouted: I hurried in his direction to help him, thinking he had run into some two-legged devil. At this point I almost broke my empty bottles. When I arrived I heard running water and there was Hryhory slopping around in it, and talking to himself.'

'Whoa,' Hryhory stopped him. 'You had better tell us how you carried water for Mariyka.'

'Ha, ha. You know, Mariyka, I had more than half your bottles up to that time. We drank, soaked our heads, washed, rested and drank some more to stock up. Then we filled the containers. I said I would give you a drink from two containers just to make up to you. Every time I fell I broke one of your bottles until they were all gone. My ribs will hurt for at least three days. You have lost your dowry, unlucky girl! Still, you have to pay for water such as this. Anyway, we finally got here. I thought I knew the right way, but he seems to be like a wolf. . . .

'Tell me, Father,' Hrytsko said after a pause, 'what does it mean? Nepra is a good dog but she wouldn't have gone ahead if you beat her.'

His father yawned and spoke sceptically:

'When have you seen any dog prowling around alone in such a jungle on a night like this? There is a great deal of animal scent here! Wild animals see much better at night than dogs do.'

'But Hryhory and I couldn't see anything and still we managed about eight kilometres.'

While Hrytsko was recounting their experiences Natalka and Mariyka hung some pots and a tea-kettle over the fire and went about preparing supper. Everyone came to life. The Moroz family brought out some sardines and smoked fat bacon; the Sirkos opened up their supplies. A cloth was spread and at midnight the two families began a banquet conforming to all their customs and usages. They drank the health of those present and those who were at home —

Mother Sirko and Mother Moroz — 'May they be frisky!' They drank for the dead — 'May they enjoy the kingdom of heaven and may the earth lie feather-light upon them!' For those who were not yet, but inevitably would be born, 'when we have such girls and eagle-like lads!'; and they drank to safe travel and safe return. They drank and talked and feasted in Cossack style and tradition. But they handled the food in hunter fashion and their jaws worked as those of the people of the taiga, strong-toothed and hungry as wolves.

Hryhory sat opposite Hanna, and as he watched her excellent and typically Poltavan profile highlighted by golden arabesques from the fire, and listened to the proverbs and sayings, he could not avoid the impression that this had happened to him before, many times, far away from here. Perhaps it was happening now in a meadow near the Vorsklo or Psiol near his old home, where, during the Troyetsky holidays, they were making gruel. There would be the sound of horses feeding in the meadow and before long they would hear the corncrake announce morning, the sun would rise and they would hitch the horses and go home. . . .

Now the fire flared up and sent showers of sparks skywards and lit up the trees festooned with rifles, shotguns, ammunition pouches, field-glasses, rucksacks, and, on the ground, saddles, spades, packs, sharp-eared fierce wolfhounds, and an army tent. No, this was no meadow in Slobozhanska Ukraine! . . .[1]

After supper the younger people fell asleep right where they sat. Only the old men and the lanky son-in-law sat and talked around the fire.

Hryhory walked away and lay down on the sacks but in spite of utter fatigue he could not sleep.

Old Moroz was talking about Komsomolsk. At first Hryhory didn't follow the conversation because in his heart he was near that huge oak. He pictured her there in his mind but he couldn't visualize her face. . . .

[1] The Slobozhanska Ukraine, southern parts of the provinces of Kursk and Voronizh, and the province of Kharkiv.

Only slowly did Hryhory catch the frightful substance of the old man's words which drove away all desire to sleep. Old Moroz was describing the city of forced labour, the hell and damnation of the canal construction lined deep with Ukrainian bones. He had been in Komsomolsk when they first began digging in that wilderness. Now he had contracts with the *Bamlag* to supply meat, and had seen and heard many things he wished he had never seen or heard. Now his own son was there. . . .

Old Moroz turned the pages filled with gruesome details of the frightful epic of the concentration camp. He spoke of columns of bedraggled skeletons of prisoners out in the terrible cold, of countless terrorized people sentenced to slow death, of large numbers of 'our people' from distant Ukraine, about starvation and scurvy, superhuman suffering, of people working outside in temperatures fifty-five below zero, half-naked honest *kulaks* of Poltava, Kherson, sentenced as 'thieves of state property' in the form of wheat from their own fields, and other 'enemies', scholars, teachers, peasants, workers, bewhiskered old men and similarly bewhiskered youths, of deaths without burials, death from suffering, hunger, cold, disease and worry, of wild dogs dragging parts of human bodies between the barracks, of soul-rending prisoners' songs, deepest sorrow without tears, about unbelievable suicides. . . .

Hryhory listened, his teeth clenched. He suffered extreme pain when he visualized those columns of prisoners, and the whole colossal tragedy epitomized by this infamous Komsomolsk. His imagination revived what he had lived through — the clang of prison doors . . . the screams of those being beaten . . . the lines of prisoners. . . . He came out in a cold sweat. As old Moroz continued, his taut nerves were near breaking point, disturbed, alarmed. The NKVD was now penetrating the taiga; the old believers were being 'dekulakized' and a whole village had been deported. There were unheard-of arrests and nobody could keep or use arms without special permission.

The old man swore lustily until his son-in-law shushed him and indicated with his eyes where Hryhory lay. Sirko waved his hand as though to say, 'Don't be afraid, stupid, the engineer is one of our people.'

Moroz went on:

'So they want our arms! Some managers! We have lived a lifetime here without having asked them what to do. Where were they when the first Christian human being set foot on this soil, ha? Damned Herods! . . .' He shook his head, sighed and added:

'The world is lost. They won't let you finish your life in peace.'

'Damn their souls,' said the son-in-law. 'There will be many yet whose eyes will stand out on their stalks . . . but we'll see . . .' and he told them how the NKVD tried to get the Kirpichenko brothers in the Bare Mountains. For five years they searched and couldn't find them. The four brothers had their 'headquarters' with arms and supplies up there where the devil himself couldn't find them. Finally they tracked them down last winter. The siege went on for three days but the Kirpichenko brothers fought their way out and crossed into China.

Everything was mixed up in Hryhory's head; only one thing persisted — a sharp premonition that his ill fate was still clinging to him, following closely on his heels or even preceding him and preparing for him the damnedest surprises on this earth.

It was as though someone had disturbed a layer of ashes over a dying fire and started fanning it. There welled in his heart an all-consuming fire which had subsided in this green paradise. It was an overwhelming yet powerless anger that clenched his fists until the bones cracked, that forced his heart to suffer the pains of a prisoner in the torture chamber.

Hryhory lay there and thought his thoughts, some fast as a hurricane, some moving slowly like dark ominous clouds over an anxious earth.

Eventually he fell asleep. When he next opened his eyes dawn was breaking. The fire was out. Except for the cropping of the horses, all was quiet. He turned his head and watched Natalka lying face upwards under the ancient oak. She was motionless — her eyes wide open and gazing straight up — only blinking now and then as dew-drops fell from the branches above.

* * *

The sun had not yet cast its golden hue over the tree-tops when the Sirkos bade farewell to the Morozes. Each party packed quickly and set out on its way; the Moroz group south and the Sirko group north. These dwellers of the forest had their affairs to attend to like other people.

The only thing that remained was a pile of ashes and a black burnt-out patch marking the camp-fire. It would remain there as a reminder for months or even years. Passers-by would notice it, or perhaps even stop to pitch camp and make a new fire without being able to read this mark's true history, how it came about, what took place, what was said here or what thoughts were born. No one would know that the Sirko family had met the Moroz family here; and no one would ever know that among them was a descendant of a famous line, cast out on these hills from a distant land by whimsical fate. Here as he threw dead branches into the fire, and lay facing the skies, he thought many, many thoughts during a very short night.

No one bothered to notice that black spot when they left, except Hryhory, and then only to see if they had left anything behind. They had not slept enough, but they felt well.

The morning air was cool and bracing; it forced a quick pace on man and beast. But that wasn't the only reason; before the sun became scorching and the armies of gadflies took to the wing, everyone wanted to cover as much ground as possible.

Again Sirko walked in the rear while Hrytsko and Hryhory took the lead.

In one place the young men saw a peculiar thing. The sun had risen high by this time, spilling golden spots over the clearings and over the path. They were walking far ahead of the rest and suddenly came upon a large grey snake, with black markings, lying on the path. It was sunning itself on one of those sunlit spots. When it heard their footsteps it didn't raise its head as snakes usually do, but instead opened its jaws wide and laid its head on the ground. The men were really surprised when they saw tiny snakes like large needles scrambling to safety in the wide-open mouth. When the last young one had disappeared inside, the snake closed its mouth and with lightning speed vanished into a pile of weathered rocks.

Old Sirko was in a hurry, so they walked without a break to cover ground before the heat set in. They walked along crests, descended into valleys full of dewy grass and weeds and then climbed new crests. It seemed there was no end to these forests or to this route leading to the Sky Blue Valley.

After a short stop for breakfast and a nap, they started out again. From crest to crest, down into the valley and up to what appeared to be the last crest, it seemed as though they were always on the same spot. They walked along the uplands and through deep ravines and dark glades, with the sun now on their left and now on their right, and sometimes disappearing completely behind virgin forests, so dark and damp that there wasn't even a sign of a gadfly. It was pleasant in these glades; if they could only continue in them all the way!

Several times they crossed bogs where the horses had to walk very carefully in line, almost step by step. One false move and you were in for trouble, for you could easily drown before someone got you out.

Earlier the path had been well worn but now it petered out and finally disappeared altogether. From now on they walked cross-country, which was really difficult in these parts. Progress was very slow and Sirko led the way; he alone now

could lead them out of this green chaos and bring them to their goal.

After some time they came upon another path and after a rest they went on at a more rapid pace.

On the third day, about noon, they reached the Sky Blue Valley. But before they reached it they spent one more night on the way, but this time near water, the head-waters of the Mukhen river. In reality there was no river here at all, only a spring and a tiny brook, but it was very picturesque. The brook cascaded down a waterfall in the midst of the elemental beauty of steep precipices, chattering happily. There were many such waterfalls in this part of the taiga, remarked old Sirko.

Here they pitched camp and laid a big fire. They also set up individual mosquito nets because the mosquitoes and midges made life impossible. They climbed into their nets, tucked in the sides, and carried on a conversation in the darkness.

'Where did you put the horse-shoe nails, daughter?'

'I didn't put them away. It was Hrytsko.'

'Which one, daughter?'

'The "engineer", or whatever he is.'

'What are you gabbling about?'

'I'm not gabbling, Father. Yesterday you told the Moroz family something about an engineer. . . .'

Hryhory laughed.

'What are you laughing about, son? Because the old man is stupid? It just happened that way. . . .'

'He is laughing, Father, because he is happy at being placed in such a select profession.'

'No,' Hryhory answered seriously. 'I am laughing, Father, because you guessed.'

'How is that?'

'I really am an engineer.'

'Oh!' In his excitement the old man climbed out of his mosquito net. 'And you say the old man is stupid. Ho, ho!' He seemed very happy. 'Anyone could see that right away. . . . What branch, son?'

'Aeronautical,' eventually came the reply.

'What is aero — aero — what you said? One could sprain one's tongue on that!' came Natalka's hesitant, though curious query. You could almost see her blushing at her own stupidity.

Hryhory explained: 'An aeronautical engineer is one who designs and builds aeroplanes.'

'My God, why didn't you say?' spoke up Hrytsko, excited. 'Then you can fly?'

'Yes, I can.' And after a lengthy pause he added as though poking fun at himself: 'See how far I have flown.'

Old Sirko noticed that the conversation might take a wrong turn and butted in:

'Wonderful, really wonderful! The old man wanted to tell a lie once and it didn't come off! Well, son, since my lie turned out to be true, we shall call you Engineer from now on. Is that all right?'

'Engineer . . . Engineer. . . .' Natalka repeated it several times to herself so as not to forget.

'Zalivay,' she called, obviously with the intention of enlightening her pal on the latest developments, but thought better of it:

'No, leave it till tomorrow. That, brother, is a difficult word for you to understand,' she said to the dog who ran up to her mosquito net and touched it gently with his paw.

Hryhory lay under his net and listened intently to the nuances in her voice.

She is scoffing, he said to himself. I wonder what would happen if one took this girl suddenly into that other world — a world of laboratories, scientific institutions, noisy factories, a world of roaring motors, flashing propellers and the hum of a thousand aeroplanes in the air. Could one imagine her astonishment? And then to lift her high up and to rush her far beyond the clouds. . . .

The insects hummed in their ears. They had worked their way into the nets. Now and then a thin voice, sharp as a needle, would separate itself from the general hum:

'Dzin-n. Dz-z-i-i-n', closer and closer. It soared over the nose or the ear, and the resulting tension was as intense as though it were a huge aeroplane with its motors whining — 'Dzi-i . . .'; and suddenly the propeller was driven deep into the skin! 'The devil! Where does he find a way in, in a brand-new net?'

The old man and Natalka couldn't stand it any longer. They came out from under the nets and the old man yelled:

'Hey, Engineer, Hrytsko! Time for supper!'

* * *

The next day, after what seemed interminable ups and downs over a series of upland clearings, they finally reached Sky Blue Valley. Below a hill on the edge of a good-sized mountain stream stood a building — a shed or a house, covered with birch bark. Two windows looked out over a wide, seemingly endless meadow which descended slowly down to a distant bluish-purple crest, and then turned right. The horses neighed as if they had come home and the dogs ran around, ferreting. The valley, permeated with its bluish hue, bathed in sunlight, stood dreamy and attractive like a lovely girl. It was covered with a sea of forest, but here and there were bald spots — open meadows. In front of the house on the other side of the stream the slopes of the hills and the bank were covered with a lush growth of grass, with, here and there, bare stumps or blackened, burnt trees.

The house had a porch and at one end a lean-to. Near the house stood a haystack, a roof supported by posts, and there was also a hitching-post. Next to the house lay a canoe turned upside down.

'Well, we are home! Whoa! Is the master at home?'

In reply a brown long-tailed animal the size of a large cat jumped out from under the canoe and dashed for his life.

'A marten, ha-ha-ha! Hold it! Wait a minute, I want to tell you something! . . .'

But the marten wasn't waiting. It kept on running, giving the impression of a mobile broom. The dogs raised a howl and dashed after it, but the marten, as though assisted by a wind, rushed to a tree and made straight for the top. The dogs seemed satisfied that they had really scared the unwanted guardian of the house, and turned back.

Meanwhile the hunters unpacked and made themselves at home. Inside there was a good peasant stove made of field-stone, a wooden floor and a wide plank bed.

As soon as they had rested they began to work. In an hour it seemed as though they had always lived there, everything was washed and cleaned and laid in order. There were even flowers in the windows, beautiful many-coloured wild flowers which Natalka had picked. While the men were laying out the packs she had gone to the meadow across the stream and she had come back with irises, wild daisies, poppies, rock-cherries, and spiked willow-herb.

They deposited their ammunition and baggage in the shed, from which they rolled out huge barrels. They were thick and solid but they had dried out from disuse, so they took them and filled them with water. Judging by the cooper's instruments that were in the shed Hryhory concluded that these barrels were made on the spot. He was very much surprised that such tools and even more expensive objects, such as cross-cut saws, knives, pails, a large cauldron and the canoe lay here unguarded and nobody took them. Nobody had knocked out the windows and the stove was not ruined, even though the home had not been locked. As a European he was duly surprised and said so. Old Sirko was surprised in his turn:

'How else? You'd make the birds laugh. You know, son, there is an unwritten law here. At one time you could leave a gun or a fur coat in a tent or whatever you like and it would be there for months without anybody taking it. If somebody came along he might spend the night there,

or wait out a storm, and then depart. Even now, thank God, there haven't been many changes so far. I remember it used to be that way in Ukraine. Isn't it now?'

'I am afraid that now they would take everything, the tent included, or remove a cap from a person, together with his head!'

'Is that so? They must have learned a lot lately!'

They laid a fire in the stove to see if it was in working order. The old man set about cooking dinner outside. Natalka took the horses to pasture and the young men went swimming in the 'Broads'. This was a churning pool beneath the waterfall which was large enough for a hydro station. A transparent wall came tumbling down from a height of ten feet. Great volumes of water came billowing down and boiled and roared, then spilled over to the sides and hurried off to repeat the same performance farther down. The young men enjoyed themselves. The water was cool and pleasant.

'You would never guess the name of this waterfall.'

'Judging by the kind of people who must have named it, something like "Annui", or "Ulakheza" if the name was given by Chinese. Or "The Deribas Waterfall" if it was named by moderns.'

'No, that's not right. It is called "The Maiden" by all the hunters. Nice name, isn't it?'

'Yes, nice.' And he thought to himself, Yes, really. It is teasing and angry, lush and tender, mellow and seductive in its wild beauty — it should be renamed 'The Maiden Natalka'.

'There is a story,' continued Hrytsko, 'whose origin is not known. There was once a beautiful Udeg[1] maiden who loved a foreigner. She loved him but never told her love. When he went away and did not return, she went into the forest and, weeping, fell to her knees and prayed to her god to bring him back. She waited and cried and this spot became the waterfall of her tears. The maiden sorrows

[1] A Tungus tribe.

and weeps . . . that's the way they tell it. It's not true, of course.'

Hryhory was not inclined to ruin a beautiful legend.

'Why not? It might be true.'

When they returned, dinner was ready. The old man and Natalka had also bathed and were awaiting the others.

'Today is the Sabbath,' said the old man after lunch. 'I declare a holiday until tomorrow. Tomorrow we will go on a reconnaissance.'

After dinner they went to the meadow, cut some grass and brought it back for the horses for the night. Natalka went off with her dog Zalivay and her field-glasses. For a while she stood in a thicket and watched the men mowing, then she spent an hour watching a squirrel, and for an equally long time she lay on the bank of the stream and peered down into the water through her glasses. Zalivay lay at her side, pricked up his ears, and also peered into the water, until Natalka pushed him in. Later they both climbed the precipice, jumped from rock to rock and chased a skunk which they cornered in the open near the stream. He protected himself heroically and finally climbed up a tree, from where he peered, frightened by Zalivay's huge muzzle. At this point they could have taken him easily but Natalka called off the dog: 'Let's go. We've given him a scare, haven't we? He'd better keep out of our way in the winter when he's rich.'

For the night the young men tied the horses to the hitching-post and prepared separate quarters for themselves under the haystack which was to be their home.

* * *

Next morning when the sun had evaporated some of the dew and when, according to old Sirko, 'all animals had begun their day', they saddled their horses and the four of them rode out to look things over. Before leaving they washed themselves and the horses. Hryhory had

wanted to grease his hunting boots but Natalka forbade it and her father explained:

'It scares the animals. There must be a minimum of unfamiliar smells. After all, this is antler hunting and these animals are specially sensitive to the smell of humans or gunpowder.'

That was why weapons were scrupulously cleaned and why they went on horseback so as not to leave traces of their movements on the ground.

The dogs were left behind, tied up. They had not been brought here to hunt deer.

Hryhory was excited, like a true hunter, especially on the eve of such strange hunting. On the way they came across two wild boars but no one even thought of reaching for a gun. Later they saw a moose up to his neck in water. Old Sirko stopped the group in a thicket and they waited until the moose decided to go away. Sirko muttered: 'The darned nuisance prowls about; he should be sleeping. . . .'

They rode for about eight kilometres, mostly without speaking, and finally arrived at the salt-lick. Before approaching it old Sirko inspected it carefully through field-glasses to make certain nothing was there — 'there' in this case being a wide light-green clearing. When they came close Hryhory saw that the salt-lick itself was a low-lying approach to a bare hillock. Part of it was covered with lush grass and in others it was a marsh. Above was an impenetrable forest and below it was the muddy foreshore of a rocky stream. Beyond that stretched an endless bog covered with dead tree trunks, which looked like the masts of sunken ships. They were all blackened and contrasted sharply with the light green all around.

The party did not go to the salt-lick itself, but each observed it only through field-glasses. Old Sirko examined it first and seemed pleased.

'Just look over there,' he said to Hryhory as he gave him the field-glasses.

Amidst the greenery Hryhory noticed several black spots

where the ground had been dug up and trampled and recalled Hrytsko's remark that 'the beasts eat this ground'.

The old man pointed in another direction. Hryhory looked for a long time before he noticed a little rise in the ground covered with grass and weeds not far from the black spot, but hidden among bushes and wind-fallen trees nearer the stream. He guessed that this must be the camouflaged hide.

Their inspection lasted about ten minutes and then the old man rode off by himself.

'He has gone to see where the animals come from,' explained Hrytsko.

Old Sirko came back apparently satisfied and they rode off along the stream to inspect another salt-lick about three kilometres away. The same routine was repeated there. On the way back to camp the old man summarized the results of his inspections:

'It seems we haven't come for nothing. You, young Cossack [to Hryhory], must be lucky; may God grant it be so!'

It was traditional to draw to see who would go hunting the first night and this they did when they were back in camp. The old man and Hryhory drew the first turn.

When the sun began descending in the west, Hryhory and old Sirko collected the field-glasses, mosquito nets, an axe and their rifles. Before leaving, the old man took off his cap and crossed himself. Then they set out on foot.

During the first part of the journey Sirko gave Hryhory various instructions regarding antler hunting:

'Even if you are being consumed by fleas, you must sit absolutely still. Don't sneeze, don't cough, don't do anything even if it goes on all night. Keep both your eyes glued to the salt-lick. You will shoot first just to try your luck, but you will shoot only when I press your foot. Some of the animals will be hornless; those are females, and God forbid that you should shoot one or the salt-lick is lost. If their blood is spilt there, there will be no more hunting for a long

time. There will be animals with horns but they could be moose or stags. You can shoot only a male *isubra* with the right kind of antlers — thus and so. . . .'

When the sun was setting over the crest they were already in the hide-out with their rifles fixed in embrasures in the wall to avoid any noise later.

Twilight fell suddenly, as is usual in hilly forested regions. It became dark as soon as the sun disappeared.

Hryhory looked to the left at the greyish crests under a red circle interwoven with a spider-web of light rays and his thoughts involuntarily went back to the camp.

The hide was very small, hot and damp. Mosquitoes and gnats were becoming bothersome, and the mosquito nets afforded little protection. The thin buzzing started outside, worked its way in and then suddenly dug in painfully. Hryhory suffered in silence. They sat on tree stumps and, without getting too near the tiny windows, silently peered out at the salt-lick. Time dragged. Soon after, however, it rushed by with a ringing in the ears.

There was movement in the bush; a branch cracked, leaves rustled. Hryhory held his rifle tightly and looked hard into the growing darkness but saw nothing. Every second he expected the old man to press his foot. . . .

There! They were coming! Shadows passed over the pale background formed by the sky. The beasts carried their heads high and you could hear them sniffing the air. But the old man sat still and continued looking out through the field-glasses. Hryhory wondered whether the old man was as excited as he was. He knew he was ready with his Winchester, but he just sat making slight adjustments with one finger in his Zeiss field-glasses.

Slowly a huge animal came out and stood about twenty paces away displaying a pair of fine antlers. Hryhory hardly restrained himself from firing. He wanted to shout 'Shoot, Father, shoot!' but when he looked closer he could see that the antlers belonged to a moose. The beast went on to the salt-lick and started pawing the ground.

Time flew by. Then there came a muffled drumming sound; something came down the path they had followed. Then it stopped, very near. Any moment now it would come into view. But it stood still for a long time. Hryhory was thinking that he had imagined this, when suddenly the animal snorted, stamped the ground, turned, and dashed off.

'Ah, a heathen soul!' hissed the old man, not able to contain himself. 'The devil understood!' The other animals on the salt-lick also ran off into the bush.

They continued sitting for a long time, the old man muttering in ill humour. Several more shadows came to the salt-lick but the old man did not press his foot.

In the morning they quietly left the hide-out and returned to camp. The old man carefully examined the path near the hide-out and as he walked back he kept looking closely at the path. After about a kilometre he silently pointed to hoofprints coming out from the taiga on to the path.

Hryhory felt tired, as if he had been beaten; after he had walked for some distance his legs felt better, for during the night they had gone completely stiff.

When they were far away from the salt-lick old Sirko spoke:

'That was bad luck. And it was some animal! And crafty, too. He came out on the path and followed our footprints until he caught the scent where the prints were fresh. But we will fool him anyway.'

The brother and sister jeered at them in camp. Hryhory's face had swelled so from the insect bites that even the dogs did not recognize him and that caused much merriment. Hryhory soaked himself in the water for half a day and then went to sleep. When he got up Hrytsko almost laughed himself to tears: 'Truly Chinese!' Natalka bit her lips but finally couldn't hold herself in any longer and burst out laughing. Hryhory looked at himself in a window-pane and agreed that it was some mug. His whole face was swollen, the nose was a sausage, and the eyes were mere slits.

'Don't worry, my lad,' the old man encouraged him;

'we shall see what they will be like when they come back tomorrow.'

'But why hasn't the same thing happened to you, Father?' Hryhory enquired.

'Ah, my skin is like that of an ox. They can't get through!'

Hrytsko and Natalka left late in the afternoon. Their father told them to go to another salt-lick.

During the evening old Sirko would stop and listen attentively. At night he went out every so often and listened in case there was a report of a rifle shot.

In the morning the hunters came back empty-handed. Hrytsko teased Natalka and she jeered at him. It seemed that nothing worth while had come around that night. There were two beautiful stags but their antlers were still 'green'.

Old Sirko heard the report and seemed satisfied. 'Good, very good. . . .'

Both Hrytsko and Natalka were dirty, wet through and through, sleepy and bitten, but their faces were not swollen. Hryhory was glad when he saw the girl's face looked normal, severe yet tender and pretty. His own swelling had gone down overnight but now it itched mercilessly.

Now it was again his turn with the old man. This time they were more careful. Three kilometres from their destination they took off their boots and went on in the stream, wading right up to the hide-out.

'Now we shall see who is the more crafty,' muttered Sirko.

They got their guns ready, and sat down to wait.

Again there came deer, and later other shadows, but Hryhory couldn't make them out. These must have been interesting, judging by the attitude of the old man.

Around midnight they heard the sound of stamping hooves on the path and somewhere off to the side. The animal on the path stopped. From the side came a female followed by a stag. They stopped, listened and pawed the ground. Hryhory felt his knees shaking and his heart pounding so hard that circles danced before his eyes. But the old man

did not give him the sign, he didn't step on his foot. Then from behind the hide-out right past the wall came another one, and stopped not more than fifteen paces away. Against the background of the sky you could clearly see its head and antlers, even the individual tines. Hryhory aimed at about the pelvic joint and waited what seemed an eternity until he became conscious of a severe pressure on his toes. He squeezed the trigger; there was a flash and a bang and the animal leaped. The old man fired at the same time but in another direction. In a moment he whispered:

'That was good, son. Now we can sleep. But be quiet — animals aren't afraid of shots, only of people.'

They lay down on a pile of dry weeds. Hryhory couldn't sleep and kept turning from side to side. He was burning with shame; after all, he saw the animal leap and run. 'A miss!'

'An antler hunter came, a wasted shot, and the result was — pfft!'

They awoke and came out of the hide-out at dawn. Over to the side where the old man had shot there lay a huge brown animal, its head proud even in death. They turned to where Hryhory shot, but there was nothing there.

'That's good, that's good,' muttered the old man and went on following a row of brown spots on the grass.

'Shot in the loin . . . a huge devil. . . .'

They had walked about a kilometre when the old man nodded his head happily and said: 'There. Well, praise the Lord.'

On the very edge of the stream lay a beautiful large *isubra*. He had died having his last drink.

'That is wonderful.' The old man was overjoyed. 'He dipped his antlers, as though purposely, so as not to scratch them or break them. A real good "lad"!'

Hryhory was sorry seeing this lovely animal. He felt like a murderer. The old man took off his cap, crossed himself to the east and took out his hatchet.

'Hold it like this.'

With a knife he cut the skin in a large circle around the antlers and then skilfully cut them out with the skull.

'A marvellous pair! That's your good luck. Here, hold them.'

Hryhory took them. So these were *panty*? They seemed more like rubber truncheons than horns. They had three prongs each and seemed more like stuffed skin. They gleamed with the short, thick fur which covered them.

In the meantime the old man quickly and expertly skinned and cleaned the carcass. The venison was stacked on the grass and covered with the hide. The rest of the carcass was sent floating downstream.

They did the same with the second animal after they had dragged it to the stream. This, too, was a beautiful young stag with smaller but fuller and perfectly symmetrical antlers, which, Sirko explained, are most highly valued. While they waited the old man talked:

'At one time the Chinese used to pay twice their weight in gold for such well-matched antlers, whereas ordinary ones, even undamaged, fetched only half as much gold or less. If they were damaged, then they sold for very little. You see, among the Chinese they provide the best medicine against all kinds of sickness. If you know how to prepare them, then even an old man would be anxious to marry. . . . We used them when we looked after you. That is why they are valuable. I learned a few things from the Chinese. And here is why little antlers are so valuable. Antlers are regarded as the best kind of bribe. When one lord gives a bribe to another, the Chinese regard these antlers as the most valuable "gift" for that purpose. They slip so easily out of one sleeve into another. But you should try hiding large antlers in your sleeve! Besides, the young ones are more potent. At one time the Chinese used to come here to buy them and even hunted for them until they were discouraged by our folks. Now the authorities have organized the process and sell the antlers in China for gold. . . . I wonder why our folks aren't here yet? Let's go or the

antlers will spoil. There will be no more hunting on this salt-lick until a good rain washes off the scent.'

They picked up the antlers and walked towards camp. On the path they met Hrytsko and Natalka on horseback.

'Who?' enquired Hrytsko.

'Who else but he?' The old man nodded his head in Hryhory's direction.

'Both?'

'Of course,' said the old man, smiling. 'Go ahead, and collect everything neatly.'

* * *

When they got back to camp old Sirko, like a high priest, occupied himself ceremoniously with the antlers. For the time being he wrapped the antlers in cheese-cloth. The others watched while he instructed them.

'Listen — specially you, son. This might come in handy some day. You see, the antlers are soft and they must be made hard or they will spoil and be worthless. Formerly the hunters used to cook them Chinese fashion, but that is a long, dawdling process and requires Chinese patience. At the base near town they use electricity, but before you could get them there they could spoil a dozen times. Here we do it in a straightforward manner. How is the stove?'

A fire was crackling merrily in the stove. A huge pile of resinous wood burned fiercely.

'If the antlers were slightly spoiled they would blow up and crack. In that case you must prick them like sausages to let out the fluid. You see, they are full of blood, and blood spoils quickly. Few people know how to toughen antlers. That's quite a big job. Our method is a secret. We bake them, just like bread.'

When the stove was good and hot the old man told them to clear the fire out of the oven. Then he stuck his hand in, held it there for a while and decided it was too hot. Ten minutes later he asked Natalka to try it. Natalka stuck her hand into the stove:

'Who knows? . . .'

The old man tried it himself and asked Hryhory to try.

Hryhory laughed:

'You should have brought a thermometer. What temperature do you want?'

'A thermometer would be useless. The temperature has to be varied according to the kind of antlers. You have to judge by hand.'

Finally the old man decided that the heat was just right. He placed the antlers inside the stove, closed it, looked at the sun and marked the time.

Hryhory and Hrytsko went to the bog to bury the *isubras*. They dug two holes about three feet deep until they reached frozen ground. The carcasses were placed in these natural icehouses which they covered on top with stumps, branches and stones to protect them from the sun and from prowling animals.

Quite casually Natalka began to cross-examine her father.

'You are deceiving us, Father, when you say that Hryhory killed them.'

'Well, well, and what makes you say that?'

'Because one was killed by a Winchester and one by the other rifle.'

'If you are so darned smart, then your father must be a liar. . . .'

'No, but tell me.'

'I have already told you.'

With considerable reverence the antlers were removed from the stove. When the wrapping was removed, old Sirko was overjoyed.

'You certainly bring good luck, my lad. I have been counting on you.'

The antlers were now half their original thickness, hard as bones, and looked like velvet.

Hrytsko and Natalka were very impatient for their turn.

* * *

At dawn Sirko wakened Hryhory.

'Get up, son, you will get the rest of your sleep in the daytime.'

Near the house stood horses with ropes slung over their saddles. Quickly they rode off. The old man had heard three shots during the night from the direction of the Sky Blue Valley. When Hryhory said that it might have been other hunters, Sirko shook his head:

'Natalka is there.'

He said it so positively that there seemed no room for any doubt.

'She shot twice. She is my lucky one.'

When they arrived at the second salt-lick they found Hrytsko and Natalka waiting, sitting on the edge of the stream with their bare legs dangling in the water.

There were two pairs of antlers in the hide-out and two carcasses in the grass.

On the way back Hrytsko explained how they had agreed to fire together, and how his sister fooled him and fired twice running. Natalka made vehement excuses why she had had to shoot twice. She spoke with great animation. Hryhory listened and thought:

She is like a preying animal! No, just wild and primitive. Her blood is turbulent like that of the panther or wildcat or any other animal here.

Before leaving the hide-out, old Sirko examined the salt-lick carefully and expressed the opinion that during the night there had been at least four stags and four does. Hrytsko and Natalka admitted that there had been four males and three females and those that escaped seemed better specimens, but they were farther away.

'Never mind, children. It's good, very good. We shall wait and perhaps God will give us rain and then we might get some more.'

* * *

Now that the salt-licks were not usable they found themselves another interesting occupation: 'light' fishing. During

the day they cut hay for winter hunting, and at night they fished with lights.

They launched a boat and to its prow attached a heavy wire grill to serve as a fireplace. Within this they piled dry resinous wood twigs and branches and birch bark, carrying reserve supplies in the boat. They also took some petrol, a spear and their guns just in case. Thus equipped, Natalka, Hrytsko and Hryhory set out.

The boat followed the current, its prow lit up by a brilliant blaze which made the surrounding area seem even darker. In the deeper spots where fish were more plentiful they added fuel by spraying it with petrol, which sent sparks high in the air.

These were wonderful nights which Natalka and Hryhory would never forget. Natalka wouldn't part with the spear and Hryhory was more than willing to let her have his turn. He sat back and acted as helmsman; and gazed at her to his heart's desire. She didn't notice him. With spear in hand she leaned over the edge of the boat and peered intently into the deep water. A wisp of golden hair fell over her brow, reflecting glimmers of light from the fire. A lightning thrust and Natalka pulled into the boat a large trout or a grayling. She picked her prey for size and speared unerringly.

Hrytsko looked after the fire, and if he wanted a turn with the spear Natalka pleaded with him to let her carry on just a bit longer. Even when he did take a turn she couldn't stay away but leaned over the edge of the boat and watched him. If he missed she got excited and insisted on taking over. Hryhory spent hours watching her. Agile as a serpent and graceful as a fairy, she concealed a strange power. There was a fusion of youthful beauty with something primitive, elemental and unapproachable.

Once she made a mistake and drove the spear into a submerged stump. For a long time they circled there, trying to free the spear from the raw wood. Natalka was annoyed and threatened to get down in the water to free it. Without saying a word Hryhory took off his shirt and slipped into

the water. To the accompaniment of her constant commands and suggestions he finally freed the spear. When he came up and met her eyes, she blushed, frowned, and turned away.

Those were wonderful enchanting nights, in a fairy-tale virgin forest, on swift black waters glimmering with golden arabesques.

With the dawn they rowed against the stream towards the camp. They arrived wet, tired, covered with soot, and happy.

7

Memento Mori

The Sky Blue Valley, the purple mountains, and the lush virgin forest were bathed in dazzling morning light, displaying all the colours of the rainbow. Billions of drops shimmered on everything, with miniature suns scattering light on the broad leaves of oak and hazel, on grass and flowers, on the thousand-year-old, moss-covered trees and stumps and on the tops of lofty cedars and poplars. They shone there like drops of fire, which now and then let go and fell down, scintillating among the trunks and streaking through the blue coolness of the deep shadows of the thicket.

A heavy dew covered everything, beading and weighing down blades of grass, and clinging to the petals of flowers. The stillness was supreme. Not a leaf or blade of grass moved; all was rainbow-shimmer.

Natalka stood on the footbridge with a gun and bending down a little looked into the water, immovable, watching a brown trout that for the last two days had become the centre of attention of their whole colony and the object of a contest between them. They were determined to catch it. What a large trout! It made its lair among the great rocks in the depths and rarely visited the shallows, disturbing the hunters, but disdaining all kinds of ruses; it vanished as soon as steps were heard on the bank, as if sensing peril. The problem in this unusual hunt hinged on the fact that it was hard to ambush the trout, and still harder to shoot it in the water, as only a vertical shot could find its mark. Shot at an angle, the bullet would hit the water, ricochet, and whiz

away in a frenzy, as if from the pain of having been shot into the water. But the trout could not be outwitted by a vertical shot nor by one aimed at an angle.

Natalka made up her mind to get him. It was in her character that when something took possession of her heart she could not be deflected from it. Now she was possessed by the trout. Standing there like a statue, motionless, she peered unwinkingly into the depths. Reflections of the waves played on her face and eyes as if trying to make her smile or spoil her hunting.

In a similar pose and also holding a gun stood Hrytsko on a rock that projected far over the water.

Hryhory had already given up this kind of sport. It was not because it required the patience of a Chinaman, but because the morning was so bright and perhaps because of the reflections of sunlight that played over the face and eyes of the girl, chasing each other like dabs of quicksilver. He sat on the overturned boat in the middle of the yard filled with sunlight, his chest exposed to it, and looked at all that dazzling world. Stillness hung in the air and stillness in his heart and all was shimmer, shimmer.

No genius could describe the rich symphony of this brilliance and spectral medley and that joy, the tempestuous joy of living and flowering, nor those unseen wings that grew in his heart. . . . And even more so that resurrection, that coming again to life in this world; not in the world of boredom, brutality and despair — all that remained behind as in a dream — but in a world of rainbow brilliance, a world of limitless, joyful peace and happiness. But he had a strange illusion. It had remained with him for many days now, ever since he found himself in this primitive, unspoiled, half-fabulous world and had become a part of it in spite of himself; part of this brilliance and medley and joyful peace, and all this symphony of life beyond which, it seemed, there was nothing else and never had been. This strange feeling concerned the past. It had never existed. Yes, there was only a dream, a hideous nightmare. A misty fiction, a

semblance of life. He had been there before he was born not as a human, but as some different kind of being. Ther all of a sudden . . . !

What was it? Distant thunder? Wind? Again. . . .

Hryhory jumped up, feeling the violent beating of his heart.

The wind grew into a hurricane with lightning rapidity. Then came a mad roar, and thunder shook the earth; the wind flew over the thickets and the whole Blue Valley, shaking gleaming drops from the trees, causing a virtual rain of stars. . . .

Shaking the earth, the thickets, skimming over the cedar tops, roared machines, huge monsters, black against the sun.

Aeroplanes! Six . . . eight . . . eight four-engined monsters.

The dogs yelped and ran; then, gathering on a small hill, began to bark furiously. Rooshay sat wolf-like on his hindquarters, lifting his head and letting out a dreary howl.

The aeroplanes thundered over the camp and flew low over the valley, tilting now one wing then another, as if looking for something. Eight strange, huge birds flew over the valley, deafening everything with their roar, and below them sailed eight large black shadows across the greenish-blue earth, changing from grey to violet blue, to blue. Reaching the end of the valley, the aeroplanes turned around and flew back low, still tilting their wings alternately.

Dumbfounded, Hryhory stood in the yard as if rooted to the spot. He felt the violent beating of his heart in his chest as if he had been cast from a high cliff to the ground below. A welter of feelings — uneasiness, surprise, violent emotion — took hold of him. Slowly it ebbed and in its place there came a foreboding of something sinister. Primitive instinct, as in the dog Rooshay, was aroused and predicted calamity.

He shook his head and frowned, and stood thus in the yard as if hypnotized, watching the blue horizon where the planes vanished in the sunlit distance.

He did not even notice Natalka, who stood close to him

and watched with him. There was anxiety in her eyes as she pressed her hand to her breast.

The aeroplanes did not stun the girl. She was surprised, and that was all. Something else, indeed, startled her, some instinctive reflex, intuition perhaps, or an incomprehensible fear — who knows?

She looked at Hryhory's knitted brows, grimly set jaw and tried to quiet her heart with the pressure of her hand.

And the morning was still sunlit, shimmering — displaying pearls, and rainbow hues, a smiling, golden morning.

* * *

The same day there came to the camp yet another unexpected guest. It was about dinner-time when the dogs began to bark and plunged into the thicket. Natalka stopped them with a shout and they came back, lay beside her growling and listening to something in the forest that covered the mountain slope above.

Someone was slowly climbing down the steep slope, taking hold of the bushes. He had on a fur hat, padded trousers and a coat of deer hide tied with twine; a cartridge-belt slung over his shoulder, a knife and a gun completed his attire. He used his gun for a staff.

'Look, look,' wondered old Sirko. 'Pyatro Dyadorov, the old son-of-a-gun!'

The guest disentangled himself from the bushes and approached the group, smiling broadly with his whole square, slant-eyed face. Short of stature and with a beaming face, he approached with sure step, as if coming home and glad to be there.

'How do,' and he thrust his calloused hand at everybody.

'How do, old fellow,' said Sirko.

The man closed his eyes from happiness when old Sirko embraced him and shook his hand, the good old friend. 'This is Pyatro Dyadorov,' and he turned the Tungus to face the boys, 'the best hunter in the world. . . . Well, well, a good guest!'

'How do, Natalka. . . . How do . . .' He hesitated before Hryhory and looked enquiringly at Sirko who nodded, 'He's one of us, too.'

'How do, Captain,' and he gave his hand to Hryhory who squeezed it. It was the first time he had ever met a Tungus, but he shook his hand in a friendly manner, liking the slant-eyed, naïve and childish face. He only wondered why Pyatro called him 'Captain'.

'Everyone they meet the first time who looks important or a Russian to them, they call "Captain",' explained Sirko.

The Tungus leaned the rifle against the tree and, wiping the warm perspiration from his face, sat down on the log. Watching all of them with his little, slanted, smiling eyes, he rested. His head was covered with a thatch of blond hair, the upper lip and chin decorated with a few hairs of the same colour.

Then, without haste, he fished out a tobacco pouch and a pipe, filled it with *makhorka* and lit it, handing the pouch hospitably to the others. Sirko filled his pipe too.

'Well, how are you getting along, Pyatro? Tell us, why do you wander around? Why don't you hunt for antlers?'

'Seek aeroplane.' He spoke, like all the natives, a funny broken Russian. 'Seek aeroplane,' he repeated resignedly, and sighed deeply.

'What aeroplane?'

'Fell down. . . . Fly little, little and fell. . . . Seek.'

'Why did it fall down? Let it rot, what do you care?'

'Not enough powder . . . powder burn, aeroplane fly. Powder no more, aeroplane fall. . . . Kaput. . . . Fly, fly, and ch-sh-sh-ik!'

He showed with animation how it did 'ch-sh-sh-ik' and fell straight down to the ground, and clicked his tongue.

'When did it fall and where?'

'Ten and one day,' and he helplessly moved his hand, implying that no one knew where it fell down and that nobody saw it fall.

'Seek.'

'Why do you look for it? Let it rot there.'

'Have to. Chief many shout soon . . . soon greater chief.'

And then Pyatro explained that even if the aeroplane was not his own, he had to hunt for it. Everyone had to do it. He had already travelled hundreds of miles during these ten days and all for nothing. . . . And now, being near the spot, he had come to visit with them.

'How is the antler hunt? All right?'

He sighed regretfully and nodded his head. His hunt was lost. Not allowed to hunt. They had ordered him to search, and all the others too. Many people were thus roaming the forests looking for that puzzling aeroplane in gullies and thickets in that immense area. Nobody saw how and where it fell nor even what that 'aeroplane' looked like. They had alerted people in all the taiga settlements, scattering them in all directions to search and not return until they found it.

'Well, then, you'll never return home,' jested Sirko, 'deuce take it!'

The Tungus sighed, moved his hands helplessly as if to say 'What can I do?' and added: 'Chief order . . . shout quickly . . . mad quickly.' He held his tongue for a while, smacked his lips and shook his head in despair. 'Antler hunt lost!'

Everyone sympathized with him. They asked him to have dinner with them, to rest and stay overnight. The Tungus refused. He rested a few minutes longer; then, saying good-bye to everyone, he put his hat on, took the rifle and, pocketing his pipe, vanished as mysteriously as he had come. There were rustling sounds from the thicket, and then silence.

'Well, I declare . . .' Sirko broke the silence and then spat, perhaps on the aeroplane or perhaps on the 'chief' that 'shout quickly', and nodded in the direction taken by the naïve forest man with the face of a child. 'A golden character, an excellent hunter! He has to bear such a cross. It's not enough that fate has blessed him with a "dear" wife.

It's added an aeroplane besides. What a silly affair that "aeroplane" is, and what crazy chiefs!' Sirko sympathized with the Tungus with all his heart.

'He lives by hunting . . . a big family and a wife, a beauty. Some Russian woman. Good-looking . . . a beautiful daughter of Satan, but God forbid. . . .'

'How did he win such a beautiful wife when he himself is so plain and simple?' asked Hryhory, suddenly feeling uneasy about those aeroplanes that were supposed to be looking for a lost aeroplane; his heart was heavy. . . . He felt that he was a fugitive, that he was running away, but . . . was he being pursued? 'How did he win her?' he asked, unable to foresee how this beauty would some day cross his own path. . . .

'It was this way . . .' and old Sirko told how this Pyatro Dyadorov won the most beautiful girl among all the Old Believers[1] and how he suffered for it. . . . 'Poor man, innocent as a child.'

'There was a girl, Fiona they called her . . . Natalka, go and see if the horses are safe! It sounds as if Don has got entangled in the hollow. . . .'

'I know that story, Father', and she shrugged her shoulders mockingly, but she got up and, calling Zalivay, went away. 'They'll talk all kinds of nonsense,' she said; 'let's go.'

'Well, she was rather indiscreet with young men . . . and then it happened. . . . Pyatro was dying for her, worshipped the ground she trod on. It happens that way sometimes. . . . And so he married her. . . . And she's like a queen and he . . . see what's become of him. . . . Serves him right. . . . It's as if a goat had mated with a cuckoo. . . . She's a shameless hussy. . . . Pyatro, as you know, "seek aeroplane" and his wife most likely entertains a big chief', and Sirko spat.

They listened to hear if anyone else was coming.

The thickets were silent and quiet. Who would think that this forest ocean was filled with such important happenings, that such a great number of people were searching there, and

[1] Old Believers, a Russian religious sect.

that somewhere within it an aeroplane had plummeted down?

They felt that someone else would visit their camp in the Sky Blue Valley about the missing aeroplane. Hryhory was excited while pretending to be calm.

But no one came and nothing happened. Soon even this event was forgotten, sunk in the green rustle and flood of sunlight . . . rubbed out . . . vanished.

Thus echoes vanish, rolling over mountains and thickets, growing weaker somewhere beyond the Blue Valley and fading into silence. Thus the moon glides over the waves at night, splashing and fleeing away with the waters. . . .

Time passed dreamily over the limitless green ocean, bathed in sunshine and full of exuberant youth, accompanied by the call of birds and animals and the mysterious whisper of leaves.

Time passed over the thickets embellished with flowers, ran through the veins making the heart tremble like a leaf.

Youth was on its way. It was life itself marching triumphantly like a shimmering, sunny expanse over the limitless, flowery Sky Blue Valley.

* * *

Then there were two rainy days. It was not an ordinary rain but more like an African deluge. Old Sirko was in a good humour. A day or two before he had watched the sky, sniffed the air, felt some 'twinge' in his nose and had suddenly aroused everyone to a feverish activity, preparing a snare, a brushwood dam across the river. It was secured to the rocks by firmly tied logs that stretched across the stream from one bank to the other. The dam was supposed to be a fish trap. A weir-basket was put in the middle, its mouth turned downstream. This was because fish seek the shallows upstream in the summertime, and in winter go downstream searching for deep pools.

In big streams the dams are large and the weir-baskets huge, sometimes big enough to hold a quarter-ton of fish.

Old Sirko told all this in snatches as they were building the dam and constructing a new weir-basket, which was then hung up on a tree. After a heavy rain the fish would seek warmer water and then would be the right time to set it.

And to be sure the rain came, proving that old Sirko's barometer was reliable, and had not made a mistake in its forecast two or three days ago. When it rained everyone sat on the porch in holiday mood and watched the heavy streams from the sky pour over trees and bushes, knocking down leaves from the aspens and old cones from the cedars and flattening the blades of grass in the valley.

'The Maiden', a dreamy waterfall, no longer whimpered but sobbed mournfully, swelling like a sea. The water in the river roared, rising higher and higher. Stones that had previously stuck out of the water vanished one after another under the murky flood.

Old Sirko was very glad. 'It's God's blessing. It will wash the earth, clean the foliage, obliterate tracks, bring a new order. Hunting will be good, and fishing too.'

The party had plenty of leisure but they were not bored. They could stay half a day at a time watching intently without moving a muscle, and it was a joy now to sit on the porch or in the house listening to the music from the heavens. The young ones felt dreamy and appeared gloomy, but they really were glad, while the old man was very happy. The rain fell like a deluge, producing thousands of drumming sounds.

It was thunderous at the beginning. Lightning flashed intermittently and the thunder rolled among the mountain-tops, ending in sudden crashes. Then streams of water poured down, making the earth shake under the impact. Old Sirko would cross himself: 'God be praised, it did not pass us by.'

Thunder rolled over the Sky Blue Valley and the rain changed its tune to a steady downpour. It fell with great force, murmuring and rustling like innumerable belts in a huge transmission.

The swollen river boiled through the mist, moving like liquid lace. 'Will our dam hold out?' was the only worry Sirko had. 'I've only seen rain like this in India long ago when I was young.'

And filled with reminiscences, to the accompaniment of the rain, old Sirko told of his strange voyage round the world, about life in Ukraine long ago, and about the inhospitable country where, led by fate, they later landed. . . .

The old man grew talkative. He told extraordinarily fascinating stories about the Sirkos' lives in the Poltava district, close to the famous city of Pereyaslaw, where his parents lived. His grandfathers and great-grandfathers had lived in that land too, and they had gone to the Zaporizhya[1] and thence to Crimea and Turkey. They sailed in little rowboats across the sea and brought fear to everyone, and quite often they were captured and became slaves on Turkish galleys, from which, however, they usually managed to escape.

Much later their grandchildren sailed over the same Black Sea. They left their native land with tearful farewells and waved their hands and caps for a long time from the sea, sailing to strange lands far away in search of a better life. They passed by the Turkish coast, through the Bosphorus, saw Istanbul and other places where their forebears had died on hooks and stakes for daring to terrorize the Sultan and his subjects. . . . And then, through a canal, they passed into another sea and went round the world. They were soaked in Indian rains, dried by hot Ceylon winds, drank water in Bombay and shed tears in Singapore. Sailing around China, they lay in heaps on the bare decks and gnawed their fingers and lamented. But they lost neither faith in better luck nor their sturdiness. . . . No, no!

Thus they sailed on, becoming salty tough sailors.

And when they came to the wild country near Japan and disembarked, they cursed it heartily. Day and night, awake

[1] Zaporizhya, a town in the Ukraine, also the district 'behind the Dnieper rapids', the centre of the Cossack territory in the seventeenth century.

and asleep, they thought of their native land. Half of them died in the first months and the rest got used to the new land after a while. When this happened, they prospered beyond their dreams.

In this way . . . the old man told the story in detail but in his dreamy style, interspersing it with humorous anecdotes. His story of bygone days was listened to like a fairy tale by the descendants of the famous Sirko family, the old man's son and daughter, and by the descendant of Hetman Demian Mnohohrishny.

It rained hard all the time. Then patches of azure began to appear over the Sky Blue Valley.

* * *

Hryhory was struggling with himself, for he nursed in his heart a love for a whimsical forest girl, Natalka, which had struck him like a malady. He loved, but his love appeared hopeless. And so he fought this sickness with all the persistence of reason. He appealed for help to his sober reason and his sturdy nature, and tried to judge himself. His reason opposed his heart.

His heart longed to be near the waterfall and Hryhory would go and spend long hours sitting there, as if in a court, where Reason was the prosecutor. But . . . even if his heart seemed to agree with his reason and gave in under pressure of brutal reality, it did not feel any better and did not cease moaning.

And so he struggled with himself and did not know what to do. To follow the usual course and try to charm or deceive her, he did not dare and could not do. Besides, all the proven methods of world-famous lovers would be ineffective in this case. She was different. After the rebuff he had received the first day, he did not dare invite another. And Natalka, it seemed to him, was quite unaware of what was happening to him. She was a child of unruffled repose. Very likely she did not even understand what love was. After all, who and what was he? What use would he be to her?

In the position he was in, he had no right. Who was he? A beast hiding in the thicket from the hunters. He had no right to live, no passport. He might be tracked down tomorrow. If she should respond to his love it would be the greatest misfortune for them both.

Thus he suffered. But if someone had suggested that he should leave all this and go away, he would not and could not, because he was happy beside her. He felt how his blood boiled and surged merely at hearing her voice. That voice re-echoed in his heart with pain. Yet this was happiness, painful, great, ungoverned by reason. So reason surrendered.

Listening to the murmur of the waterfall, he remembered its name and the charming legend about the Udeg girl and scoffed at himself: 'This should happen to you. . . . But if you'd become a waterfall no misty water would fall, but rocks, indeed.'

* * *

Hryhory endeavoured to forget himself by observing the world of nature, especially during leisure hours. He had an innate capacity to see things because he had grown up in the country and had always enjoyed nature. The plant and animal world had an inexhaustible number of secrets, and every day brought new surprises. Hryhory would lie hidden between logs, for hours at a time, watching an ermine bustling under a steep bank. It looked like a funny old man in its summer fur, reddish brown, in comparison with its magnificent winter raiment. It would pop up from the ground, examine a pile of pebbles, hesitate over a handful of earth pellets brought up by an earthworm, climb up on to the roots and run busily up and down.

Hryhory tried to remember all that he had once learned from biology, botany and ornithology in order to relate all these phenomena to some logical basis. He recalled Pavlov's theory of reflexes, and tried to find in it all some order and sense.

Sometimes he cautiously followed a doe with her fawn for miles, moving like a shadow from tree to tree or from

bush to bush, curious to see how that fawn was behaving in its new environment. It was especially interesting when the fawn, finding a frog, would stand over it with its legs outspread, and watch it for a long time. The fawn's long-lashed innocent eyes, like those of some beautiful girl, would register genuine surprise. Then, getting impatient, it licked the frog with its tongue. The frog leaped as if stung and the fawn, still on the same spot, skipped even higher with mad enthusiasm and surprise.

Once, roaming the woods far from the camp, he found the tracks of a boa on the river bank. He had read much about this great reptile of the constrictor family and had heard many stories of it, but he had never seen one. Then he found it, or rather its dry skin that had been shed, lying like a huge hose among the branches. The boa itself must have been somewhere in the neighbourhood. Having cast off its old clothing, it surely could not live far away, for this operation took place as a rule early in the spring when it emerged from its winter habitation. Suddenly there was a rustle in the grass, and some movement from the direction of the river. Hryhory dashed around to see what it was. More rustling and a splash, then silence. . . . Cautiously and quietly, so as not to scare it, he moved the bushes, and bent over to see. Suddenly he felt like someone who had received a hard blow under the heart. He gasped with excitement and embarrassment.

On the rock across the river, bent down like an osier, her nude body gleaming in the sun, stood a wood nymph wringing out her wet tresses. A silver stream of water splashed from her hair to the ground. Natalka, naked and beautiful, stood there like a wood nymph. Her arched body shone with gleaming drops in the sun. . . . Hryhory shut his eyes and, turning quickly, slunk away like a thief.

Oh, God! How could he? What if she had seen him? Fool! Idiot!

For a long time he roamed the woods. His passions were aroused. He did not dare to return to the camp until at last

he heard them calling for him. Natalka's voice was heard trying to outshout Hrytsko. There was mockery in her soprano, accompanying her brother's bass! 'Engineer, ahoy!'

At breakfast Hryhory avoided looking at Natalka, trying to concentrate his attention on his food, but without success. He stared at his hands and saw a wood nymph wringing her hair, all a-shimmer. He frowned and tried not to look in the direction of the girl. Natalka watched him innocently. When their eyes met accidentally, Hryhory felt a twinge of conscience and reddened. Natalka looked at him quietly for a while and then turned away.

Could she possibly have seen him?

No, it couldn't be. Her clear eyes showed only pensiveness and surprise.

'You're not sick, son?' asked the father, noticing that Hryhory was ill at ease.

'No, no . . . it's just . . . that I remembered something.'

'Don't give it a thought. To the devil with it. Let Lenin think. . . .'

'But he died a long time ago, Father, they say; he lies in the mausoleum now.'

'So much the better. He has nothing to do now, so he may lie and think about many things.'

They all laughed.

That evening the three of them sat in front of the house on the log that served as a footbridge across the river. Hryhory, at Hrytsko's request, was telling about other lands, forests and steppes, limitless as the sea. He spoke of the spring with skylarks, nightingales, cuckoos, hoopoes and countless other song-birds . . . about quails in wheat fields and many other things that he missed so much, and he imitated the birds' songs and calls.

His imitation of the cuckoo's call brought old Sirko out of the house, much surprised. Then he called like a quail and a hoopoe and whistled like a nightingale . . . well enough.

Natalka, looking at him from one side, wondered, but did not believe, that birds could sing like that.

Hrytsko stood up and went away, remembering some unfinished business. Hryhory grew quiet. He felt helpless, sitting there alone with the girl. The blood rushed to his temples, his heart beat furiously as it had in the old days when he first found himself facing a large audience before a speech. Now, when he spoke, he did not recognize his own voice.

'Natalka,' he whispered, 'why are you so . . .'

The girl glanced at him from under her brows as if she were splashing cold water into his face.

'What's wrong with me?' she asked.

'You never speak to me; it's as if you were angry. . . .' He felt this was a foolish observation.

She did not reply at once, but kept silent, lowering her eyes. Then she said:

'Why should I be angry? A silly thought. . . .'

She sat on the log, her hand resting on it close to Hryhory. He covered her hand quietly with his own, as if unintentionally.

'Oh!' The girl shook herself nervously and snatched her hand away. Then she jumped to her feet and went quickly away.

When she disappeared, Hryhory wandered aimlessly along the river bank. Slowly he waded into the river and sank his head into the water, trying to calm himself.

* * *

The hunt for deer antlers was coming to an end. It had slipped by like a single day. Preparations for departure were under way. Good-bye, Sky Blue Valley! They had had good luck. God grant they would have the same luck next year!

Sirko and Natalka saddled the horses, loaded antlers and other goods, and departed, leaving the rest of the camp-breaking to the boys.

Hrytsko and Hryhory, following the instructions they had been given, constructed a raft out of logs and tree branches, put four barrels of meat on board, tied the boat behind

(loaded with hay and covered with tents) and sailed down the River Mukhen.

After three days and many more or less serious mishaps, they arrived at the river's mouth. There, where the Mukhen joins the Amur, stood a trading post of the Far Eastern Fur Trust.

The man in charge of the post, red-headed, with large moustaches, Mokienko by name, noticed them from afar, recognized Hrytsko and twisted his mouth in welcome.

'For the love of the Sultan! Who is this?'

'Cousin Hryhory,' was Hrytsko's reply.

Mokienko asked no more questions. It was not customary here to ask too many questions, because all that mattered was not who, but what kind of a man an individual was — good or bad.

Mokienko was an old-timer, hospitable and friendly, but conscious of his own dignity. The Sirkos did not deal with him, but he knew them well, having at one time been a groomsman at their wedding. He respected them and gladly agreed to help them out.

They left the meat with him to be shipped on the first boat sailing upstream to Khabarovsk. The barrels were sealed and properly addressed. Then the bill of lading was filled out with all the necessary details and sealed in an envelope. Mokienko attended to all this; he was thorough although he did not like writing at all, preferring other work. But in this case it was necessary to do a service for a friend. He was descended from a family of hunters and liked hunting better than sitting around at the post.

The boys stayed at his home overnight. Mrs. Mokienko, middle-aged, friendly and good-humoured, treated them royally. She asked a great many questions about their home. She was bored because her sons had gone to hunt deer, and her daughter was taking a commercial course in Vladivostok. She showed the boys snapshots of her daughter, a brunette like her mother. Some pictures showed her in hunting-dress, some in a beautiful deer *dokha* (winter-coat), and

some in ordinary city clothes — a beautiful girl certainly. Her mother was very proud of her, though secretly she grieved for her, and exclaimed:

'Oh, God, where is that city of Vladivostok? The child is surely suffering from all that learning', and she grumbled at the 'old man' because he was bent on 'ruining the child'.

8

Autumn and Winter in the Taiga

Summer was waning. It passed away like one bright day and the autumn was at hand — golden autumn, when grapes ripen in the taiga and their clusters, filled with red juice, weigh down the vines.

After the deer-antler hunt, the boys remained at home but only for five days. They mowed the grass in the old apiary six miles from home 'to earn their meals', as Hrytsko put it jokingly. When they had had enough of this they both went to the head-waters of the River Iman.

Old Sirko was busy at the apiary with Natalka, collecting honey. After that they planned to take the antlers to the post and to make some preparations for the winter.

During this time Natalka seemed to be more estranged than ever from Hryhory, and avoided meeting him. Purposely or not (it amounted to the same thing) she passed him by, looking sad and pensive. So Hryhory was glad to wander away. Let time take care of this estrangement and perhaps it would heal itself. When the boys had left, taking Nepra and Rooshay with them, Natalka became even more unhappy. Sometimes she felt so miserable that she was even angry with Zalivay. The dog wanted to go with the others, but his mistress would not let him.

And sometimes there was a sudden change, and she did foolish and mischievous things like a child. She would jump with Zalivay from rock to rock in the river until one or the other fell into the water; she would play with him, throwing sticks or jumping over a high rail fence, each trying to outdo

the other. She was a little girl again. At other times she would stand on the log and, cupping her hands to her mouth, would call out to the wood nymphs, teasing them by shouting sonorously and then listening to her voice repeated scores of times. Zalivay, catching the spirit of his mistress, would also bark and receive an answer from a score of dogs at the same time. He was excited by the echo and tried to run here and there, convinced that there was a whole company of dogs.

At times she vanished for half a day or so, lying down somewhere or roaming the woods and finally coming home with wet eyes, so quiet and docile and gentle.

Mrs. Sirko watched her daughter sadly, but did not say anything. She realized that the girl was maturing and was lonesome, for the child was at an age when she did not know herself what she wanted. The mother sighed, knowing that she had been like that once, too, so she suggested, 'Perhaps you would like to visit your aunt in Kiev? You remember you went last year at exactly this time, when the grapes were ripening?' thinking to herself: Let her have a little fun among other girls and boys!

Natalka embraced her mother and laughed.

'No, Mother, there is nothing to see there. I want to be near you.'

'Since when have you become such a mother's pet?'

'I am not! Why does everybody think I am so moody and cranky? Am I like that, Mother?'

'Well, no, but you are not one to hold on to your mother's apron strings.'

'That's not fair. Sometimes I am sorry for you. We go here and there, and you always stay at home. You feel lonesome, don't you? As I feel sometimes when I am away from you. . . .'

'My dear child,' said her mother, concealing her happiness, 'perhaps you should go and see your aunt?'

'No, no, Mother!' and Natalka hugged her mother and whirled her around.

* * *

Leaving old Sirko at the apiary, the boys rode south, following the slopes of the Sikhote-Alin. It took them all of four days to reach their destination. Besides rifles, food and camping equipment, they had also two scythes minus the handles.

Where the River Iman is joined by the wide and boisterous tributary of the Aramu, beyond the small streams of Ulakhez and Sanchykhez, there was a little hut — Sirko's old camp near a spring. The boys settled there and led a carefree happy life like two Robinson Crusoes. The taiga around was empty, there was no human habitation in the vast forest within a hundred miles with the exception of an occasional 'manza' (hunter). About sixty miles upstream there was a small settlement of the religious sect of Old Believers, called the Dydy. Downstream almost as far as the railway line, more than a hundred and twenty miles away, there was only wilderness. Beyond the railway there were many lumbering camps, but they were vacant in the summer, reviving only in the winter-time when the lumbering season was under way.

Here there was a vast emptiness in both summer and winter, because there was no lumbering, except when some expedition went upstream or perhaps some Old Believers passed over the ice to the river town of Iman.

All around was virgin forest, untouched, like no other in the Zeleny Klyn. The vegetation was almost subtropical, thought Hryhory, observing the flora. He remembered from his days at school the geographical map and concluded that they were somewhere along the same parallel as Sevastopol.

Here they stayed. There was no hurry; they roasted in the sun, slapped at the mosquitoes and botflies, fished for fun and sometimes shot ducks for exercise. There were plenty of ducks. They would sit in a row on a gravel spit, between rapid water and bushes, and preen themselves. The boys shot only the farthest ones in the row, those three to four hundred yards away, considering it poor sportsmanship

to shoot those close by. Especially interesting was a duck called 'kloktusha', a Japanese duck, covered with strange feathers.

Between idle moments they worked at mowing grass in the forest glades and low-lying places and in the evening prepared snares for the winter.

The work was not tiring, food was both good and plentiful and they really had a holiday. Counting the days at the beginning by making notches, they soon grew tired of it and decided to follow the good old rule of laissez-aller.

Thus a month passed and autumn, with clear skies, chilly mornings, hoar frost on the blades of grass, and cobwebs over all, crept in, unnoticed. The grapes were ripe, but the sour berries set their teeth on edge and they could eat no more.

The time set for departure had long passed and they would have been gone sooner, for the old man must be grumbling, but Hryhory was bitten by a viper as they were mowing, and had to cure himself. Hrytsko was frightened and Hryhory himself was at a loss what to do, although he did not show it. The viper was one of the moccasins, a very poisonous kind. Hryhory tried all kinds of measures so familiar to those who have never been bitten by snakes. First of all he made a tourniquet of his belt above the knee, which made the leg turn blue in about five minutes. It was the liverish colour which alarmed Hrytsko still more, and drops of blood oozed out of the bite. Then Hrytsko was ordered to open a cartridge and cover the wound with powder, but he hesitated to fire it, fearing that it might tear the leg away. It was a sure but dangerous operation. At last they agreed to use less powder, and Hryhory put a match to it. There was a flash, and everything went dark in front of his eyes. He did not cry out, but paled a little. They waited. The leg was swelling and hurt badly, chiefly from the tight tourniquet. Having no other means, Hryhory, guided by his audacious but deep trust 'that nothing could harm nor ever had harmed him so far, and this time would be the same', put a compress on and took off the belt.

They continued their haymaking, having first put on their shoes. The leg swelled towards evening so badly that Hryhory could hardly walk.

The next day it was worse. Hryhory vomited and lost his appetite, but forced himself to eat. Hrytsko was in despair and demanded their immediate departure, but Hryhory quieted him and kept himself under control. For four days his body battled with the poison. It was a tragic situation for Hrytsko to look on and be unable to help in any way. He wanted to go to Iman, to return home, to go to Dydy to see a sorceress, and he wanted to act at once, but his comrade quietly but resolutely refused all these plans. He scoffed and would not budge. Hrytsko, though stubborn himself, finally gave in. The confident, unruffled attitude of his friend quieted him. The result vindicated Hryhory's stand; nothing happened to him. Four days later he was well again. But much time had been wasted.

* * *

Heavy snows were followed by frosts. The taiga put on new raiment. Autumn in this land is golden, but short, and winter had already begun in October. This was the busy season for hunters, the time when squirrels and other fur animals are taken.

It would be out of place to dwell here at length on the subject, to describe how lynxes, polecats and wolves were trapped, or how wild boars were shot. It is enough to say that this was done. The hunters started with the migrating squirrels, hunting them in thickets and gullies and taking thirty to forty skins a day. This lasted for two weeks, as they followed the animals, penetrating into unexplored regions. These migrating squirrels wander in huge armies from one region to another looking for better feeding grounds, passing through valleys, crossing great rivers, on and on. The hunters go after them when their fur is at its best.

But this was just the beginning. They were waiting for the real hunt, a hunt to make the nerves tingle, but a very

profitable one. The squirrelling over, they returned home and drew lots as to where they should go. Father and Natalka drew the Sky Blue Valley, and the boys drew Bikin and Iman. So Hrytsko and Hryhory were together again. First they made the long trek to Iman.

They dressed according to the season, putting on deer shoes and trousers made from deer hides. These were tied at the ankles with leather thongs to prevent snow from slipping into the shoes. Apart from this, their attire was almost the same as in summer, for walking in thickets makes one hot even in a temperature of fifty below zero. But they also took along wind-breakers of deerskin to put on in camp, especially at night.

While hunting, Hryhory tried to ignore everything, his fate, the uncertain morrow, forcing himself to look ahead and to forget everything else. It was better not to think, to live as long as possible, to breathe and to see the sunshine over the dazzling expanse of snows, to brace up to the winds, and listen to the murmur of the cedars. Quite often, listening to that murmur, that winter's tale, or admiring the beauty of a lively squirrel, he forgot that he had to shoot the little animal and often it escaped.

At first the hunt was not very successful. The snows were deep and, though there were a lot of nuts on the cedars and hazel bushes, squirrels were scarce. Migrating squirrels in passing through the region also carried away the local species. Polecats had deserted the woods in the autumn because mice, their natural food, were few and the animals wandered into the plains to look for them. The hunters sometimes found tracks, as if someone had stuck three bunched fingers into the snow, but it was almost spring, when there was less snow. Rooshay's search usually ended in failure, because the polecat burrows into the snow and wanders there among logs and boles.

The boys lifted all the snares they had set in Iman during the summer and moved back to Bikin, for it seemed like a more promising place.

Old Sirko and Natalka also decided to return to Bikin; for while hunting in the Sky Blue Valley was quite good, Natalka had set her heart on going to Bikin. She dreamed about Bikin. . . . It was supposed to be a much better spot. She and her father scared a few wild boars in the Sky Blue Valley and trapped three bobcats. Natalka even caught one alive.

She chased it for a long time on skis, turning it towards a meadow where there were no trees for the bobcat to climb and get a much-needed rest. The animal was already tired out and the girl caught up with it easily. Cornered, the bobcat turned on its back, presenting four paws of sharp claws in defence, but to no avail. Natalka pressed it down with her long ski and it was soon all over and she had secured it alive.

But she had no luck with this bobcat. In the camp it bit Natalka's foot. Her involuntary cry brought Zalivay, like a demon. The dog pounced at once at the culprit and tore it to pieces. Natalka did not seem much concerned; she had little interest in anything except in getting to Bikin.

As soon as she arrived at Bikin she went hunting with the boys. Natalka was very happy. She played like a child, acting in a silly way when she should have been serious. She seemed not to know what it was to be afraid. With Hryhory she was somewhat subdued, almost frightened, but he had grown used to this and he was glad to be near her again.

* * *

One afternoon Hryhory went on a squirrel hunt, taking only a light shotgun. Roaming here and there among the cedars, scanning branches, he did not realize that he was going farther and farther away from camp. He stopped frequently to watch squirrels busy with cedar cones and remembered the chipmunk he had robbed when he was fleeing into the taiga. How was the poor fellow getting along now?

Just as he realized it was quite late and time to return to the camp, he suddenly heard snapping and a suspicious rustling. Through the trees he saw a whole herd of animals searching for something. Hryhory hesitated a moment, then, noticing a huge fallen tree close by, he climbed on to it. In another moment the place where he had stood was surrounded by wild pigs. They rooted under the snow, grunting and smacking their jaws, chewing cedar cones to get at the nuts. There was a host of them. One, as big as a bull, remained always in the centre, and all the others scurried around him as he towered above them like a mountain. Hryhory guessed that this must be a 'tusker', the leader of the herd, of whom many terrible stories are told. He regretted that he had only a shotgun, no rifle. To use the gun would make his situation worse — a boar is not a squirrel. The tusker, sensing a human being, grunted furiously. The bristles on his razor back rose like spines on a hedgehog. Gaunt, deep-chested, large-snouted, he was a dreadful monster with tusks projecting above the upper jaw like knives. Hryhory knew that to fire a shot in order to scare them away was impossible, because a boar cannot be scared. On the contrary, it would only enrage him sufficiently to charge the enemy on the log. His tough hide would shed buckshot like peas.

But the boar did not see him — he was sitting too high in the centre of the great log for that. Hryhory was warmly clad, but not warmly enough to be enthroned for long in such a high place of honour, while the pigs were in no hurry. They grunted all around him, having found a large quantity of food. If only Sirko and the others were here, they would have a merry time. The tusker nudged the log a few times and Hryhory felt it vibrating. The fiend was scratching himself.

It began to snow, and a wind arose.

At last Hryhory could contain himself no longer — those damned scratchers! He discharged his shotgun right into the tusker's face, thinking: I'll frighten him, knock his eyes out.

The shot certainly made an impression; the mad boar, stung by the shot, became furious, smelt the enemy and, roaring, hurled himself upon the log. He certainly would have reached Hryhory but suddenly an unexpected thing happened.

In a twinkling the whole herd, including the tusker, rushed away, fleeing from something, and disappeared as if by magic.

'A tiger! That's it!' From the stories told by Hrytsko he remembered that in this country a tiger is sure to follow wild pigs, stalking them for his food.

The possibility of meeting a tiger with a shotgun in his hands would not be a pleasure. He knew that the 'cat' is afraid of humans and never attacks them first, but . . . he might be hungry. . . .

But there was no tiger. He could not see very far in the twilight and through a driving snowstorm.

With the narrow choice of dying in the claws of a beast and of certain death from cold on top of the log, Hryhory waited but a few moments, listened cautiously, and, climbing down, walked away.

But which way was he to go? The wind whirled the thickly falling snow through the darkness. . . . Only then did he realize what a fool he had been. Not only was he not armed properly, but he had no matches; he could not make a fire. He went stubbornly ahead, but soon lost all sense of direction. Considering his desperate situation, and realizing that he had gone too far and could not find his way back at night, he decided to wait until the storm had abated. To keep himself warm he began to tread the snow around a tree. This went on for a long time. He tried several times to light a fire — all to no avail. He plucked cotton from his jacket and stuffed it into cartridges and fired his gun. Thus he used up all his cartridges but there was still no fire. He cursed the cotton which was soaked with sweat; it would smoke for a while and then die out depressingly.

When the storm slackened a little he trudged straight ahead until he was tired out. The storm began to rage again. He sat down between three cedar trees and decided to wait till morning. He concentrated all his will-power on keeping awake, well knowing that should he fall asleep he would not win this contest with the elements. In spite of this he dozed. It was a strange kind of half-sleep, for he thought of many things. Then he was awakened by a touch. He roused himself and saw a huge beast standing in front of him, licking his nose.

'Zalivay!'

The dog barked joyfully. After a minute a figure, completely white, covered with snow, came near. Natalka! She must have waded through waist-deep snows, she was so exhausted and out of breath.

'Alive?' she asked, catching her breath.

'Yes,' he answered, with restraint.

She breathed hard for a long time and then said angrily, 'Who would go out at such a time? Have you no sense at all?'

That was all she said. It was obvious that she had made the long trip without a stop, without skis, in darkness, through the thickets. And the storm raged on.

They stood for a while and then moved away. Wading in deep snows for a long time, they lost their way once more. Natalka had not followed Zalivay, thinking she knew the way better than he did, and now she realized that they were lost. Utterly exhausted, they could go no farther. They were forced to call a halt.

Finding a big rock in a thicket, Natalka chose a sheltered place under a roof of intertwined branches covered with snow. There was no snow there on the thick carpet of moss heaped with leaves and dry weeds. She sat down helplessly, leaning against a tree trunk. Hryhory hesitated, then sat down beside her, and Zalivay lay down at their feet. To start a fire was impossible because Natalka had not thought to bring matches either when she set out.

So they sat there.

At daybreak the storm had subsided. The girl, tired out, slept in a sitting posture.

Only in the wilds, in a cruel environment, is there a genuine human solidarity that takes for granted heroic deeds as if they were daily chores, as if they were a duty, and no one ever dreams of calling them 'heroic.'

The sleeping girl, unaware, leaned her head against Hryhory's chest and slept like a child in her mother's lap. She moved in her sleep, taking up a more convenient position as if on a pillow. She slept soundly, her face turned up a little and her head nestled close to his shoulders. Hryhory sat there, afraid to move and wake her up.

The girl was dreaming of something and smiled. Some strange dream roamed under her eyelids, moved her brows, and warmed and softened her mouth a little. Hryhory looked at her lips and struggled with himself. An overwhelming desire to kiss those lips took hold of him, to kiss her gently, as a mother kisses her sleeping child. Only once. She would not feel it. And he, like a thief, listening to her breathing, kissed her gently, gently. Only once.

The girl opened her eyes, her eyelashes fluttered, showing surprise, then fear. She instinctively touched her mouth, still burning from the kiss. . . . Then she flared up. . . .

Jumping up, she hid her face in her hands, turned and rushed away, forgetting her rifle. Zalivay bounded after her.

Embarrassed, caught in the act, stunned and shamed, Hryhory watched her flight in bewilderment. He cursed himself. For the first time he realized how much harm could be done by a single kiss. Fool that he was! But he thought she would not feel it. This made him an even greater fool; a petty thief.

Knitting his brows, he sat there and did not know whether to follow her or not. Finally he set out, taking her rifle along with him.

The camp was quite near. It was plain that they had

circled a great deal the previous night, and had almost reached it, they were so close.

Natalka, angry, waited at the edge of the clearing. She looked straight ahead without turning. It was obvious that she had not wanted to return without the rifle.

Hryhory quietly set the rifle against a tree and went away. 'A petty thief!' He turned aside and wandered a little way from camp.

He did not return to the camp until he heard from afar Natalka's gay, vibrating laugh. . . . She was already fooling, and playing with Zalivay. . . . Capricious, incomprehensible girl.

* * *

The following day the hunters started for home, to get there in time for the Christmas Eve celebrations. They travelled practically without rest for one day and one night, and then again for a day and a night. . . .

'Christmas Eve will be the day after tomorrow,' mused old Sirko and was impatient. How did they happen to be so late? This had never happened before. And he pushed on. Deep snows, no trails; no matter what you do, you cannot accomplish the impossible.

They had no rest; they ate and slept on the way. Both horses and humans were exhausted. They would have flown if they could, but instead they dragged along in snow up to their ears.

Sirko counted again and again, and seemed to be lost in his own calculations. No, it is today for sure, today is Christmas Eve. He was right the first time. And they still had far to go.

A blue, cold evening found them still on the way, wet as otters from sweat and from ice-breaks in the shallow pools which they sometimes met travelling over the frozen rivers.

At the head-waters of a tributary of the Bikin they reached some barracks.

Old Sirko was surprised and bewildered — new barracks! Lumbering had at last reached this far. Strange! Could this be a new camp of the Bikin lumbering collective?

They stopped their horses by the barracks, to have a little rest and to dry their clothes and their wet shoes.

Hurriedly they fed the horses and tied up beside one of the barracks. The building was filled with people, collectivized farmers fulfilling their state duties of forest exploration. Across the river there was another barracks, but one filled with the 'repressed', prisoners exiled to this lonely place.

Having watered their horses, Hrytsko and Natalka tightened the saddle girths and made other preparations for continuing the journey. The skies were blue and cold. The forest, hedged by walls of rock, was sunk in a gloomy, expectant silence. Hryhory was scanning the other bank of the river as if drawn there by some mysterious power. He could see in the twilight someone going around with water-pails. There was a watch-fire inside the stockade, and someone was sawing firewood by the barracks. Then the sawing stopped. Someone called:

'Orlov!'

'Yes, Comrade-chief! What is it?'

'Tell those hussies . . . tell those good-for-nothings to saw faster, I am famished.'

'Yes, Comrade! Hey, you. . . . Stop your dilly-dallying!'

The saw went rasp . . . rasp . . . under the blue, cold sky. . . .

Suddenly the silence of the intense cold was broken by the young, sorrowful voice of a girl, gentle and lonely as the call of a lapwing:

Where, oh, where have I been
Led by my sad fate?
Even my smallest tracks
Have been covered with snow.

And a second voice, as young and sorrowful, joined her, clinging to the first like one cornflower to another:

. . . The places I trod,
Where I have suffered,
Mother, dear mother of mine,
Now I am lost for ever! . . .

'Shut up!' and the heavy gate of the stockade slammed shut.

Hryhory had never used brutal invectives, but he could not restrain himself now. God be merciful, it's Christmas Eve today!

'God, O my God! Are you there in the skies? O God! Don't you see all this?'

The skies remained blue and indifferent, the mountain-tops and rocks gloomy as impenetrable stone walls. The thickets were limitless and strange, with waist-deep snow-drifts, impassable. There were no roads or trails . . . no kin, no letters from home. . . .

Hryhory left the place with a sad heart. His feet were heavy as if filled with lead or rooted to the ground. He felt as if he could not move them. He stood there, his gaze directed across the river, instinctively taking off, then putting back, his rifle on his shoulder. Everything was ready for departure but he did not budge and, as if hypnotized, gazed into the darkness across the river. No one knew what was going on in his mind. Natalka's voice brought him back to reality.

'Well!' She stood before him and uttered that 'Well!' angrily, her eyes showing a gleam of suspicion in the star-light. 'What's the matter? Do you have to be called?'

They started off. Snow crackled under the horses' hooves. Hryhory plodded behind, followed by the rasp of the saw and the lapwing's mewling cry, his constant companions in the limitless crunch of the snow.

It seemed as if they were fleeing from something new, or perhaps they were merely trying to overtake something, — perhaps yesterday . . . no, Christmas Eve. The Sirkos hurried without rest . . . and they caught up with it.

It sometimes happens that one can overtake the previous day, but this phenomenon takes place only in a wilderness where there are no calendars, where a human being is a calendar to himself and records time according to his ability and necessity, where an hour or a day is of no

importance, where the saying 'Time is nothing in comparison with eternity' applies better than anywhere else.

Old Sirko was wrong in his calculations. They had arrived home on Christmas Eve, because *kutya*[1] and other preparations awaited them. Or perhaps old Mother Sirko had made a mistake. But very likely no one was wrong, since the days could not be checked there.

At any rate they were not too late, but came home exactly on time.

A hot steam bath was waiting for them and *kutya* and a sheaf of grain in the corner, a dreamy oil lamp in front of the icons, a table covered with a festive table-cloth and a Christmas Eve atmosphere, as there had been in Hryhory's home during his childhood.

First of all the three men took a thorough steam bath such as is provided only in the wilderness. Hryhory, strong as he was, could not take what Hrytsko and old Sirko were enduring.

They left their outer garments in the house and, taking switches made of birch twigs, rushed in the fifty-below temperature to the bath-house, situated on the river bank about a hundred and sixty yards away. It was a small cabin fitted with a wide shelf around the walls and a stove built of native rocks with a big kettle inside.

The rocks were as hot as coals. Old Sirko and Hrytsko enthusiastically poured water on them, and soon the steam was so thick that they could hardly breathe. To a European this might seem like cruel torture or an inquisition, but they enjoyed it, sluicing each other with very hot water and then climbing on the shelf, where they flogged one another with birch switches, unmercifully. They splashed themselves with cold water and then again with very hot water. They rubbed their skins with soaked bast like emery paper and once more flogged each other. Then they ran out into the snow, rolled in it, playing like little children, father and son. Climbing once again on to the shelf, they

[1] *Kutya*, Ukrainian Christmas dish, made of wheat, honey and poppy seed.

again used the birch twigs on each other. This is the traditional steam bath of the wilderness.

Hryhory watched them and laughed: 'Soon I'll get used to this, too.'

In spite of not being inured to it, he had a good steam bath too, without resorting to all that terrible torment, and he felt as if he had washed away all his sins.

The Sirkos celebrated Christmas, preserving all the old customs; there was *kutya* on Christmas Eve, accompanied by the soul-stirring and romantic ritual which Hryhory remembered so well from his childhood, including carols.

Very early next morning there was a knock at the door.

'Am I allowed to recite verses?' someone with a voice like old Sirko's asked from the hallway.

'Come in!' said the mother, sitting by the stove.

The door opened and the reciter, dressed in holiday clothes, entered. He took off his cap, smoothed his hair and began to recite the time-honoured verses. Hryhory had never heard them before:

'Christ was born to bring joy to the world. After Adam's sin He was born in Bethlehem and in a stable, not in a house, which is a wonder. A bright star, beautiful and round, rolled over to Bethlehem, there stopped (she knew just where), and illuminated the stable all around. Shepherds from the steppe ran to Bethlehem bringing lambs as gifts, played on their pipes, greeted Him and went back to their herds. And holy angels, winged, wonderful, sang so heavenly that we were born, grew up and married, but never heard such singing. An ox and a donkey stood by the manger; they also recognized Christ, fell on their knees and breathed on Him, because they knew who He was. And three kings brought gifts for Christ from the Far East, laid them there and greeted Him in lofty literary style: "Pray bless us also, that the rye may have a good yield, and that there may never be a day that we may not live in heart's ease." Old Joseph was glad to see them, accepted their gifts and said: "Sit down in our stable and we shall treat you with what God

has sent us." Then he brought them each a mug of spiced brandy and a cup of neat brandy. The kings sipped all that, and fell asleep where they sat. And a heavenly angel, holy and graceful, whispered to them in their sleep: "Hurry home and don't go near Herod, even though when you saw him yesterday you promised to return again and tell him the great news." The kings woke up, crossed themselves, turned eastwards and went home.'

These were the verses which old Sirko recited, and to which Hryhory listened with great admiration. He had heard many sets of verses recited, but never one like this. Then, later in the day, Hryhory memorized it all, taking a great fancy to the ending, seasoned with folk humour, telling how God punished Herod for the massacre of little children:

'God dealt Herod a severe punishment for shedding the blood of innocents. He felt very distressed and sick, green spots appeared around his eyes, his upper lip grew black as a dog's tail, so that he did not dare to persecute Christ. The diabolical rascal did not want to lead a peaceful life. He was lost without a trace like a dog in the market-place.'

Old Sirko took upon himself this duty because there was no one else to do it. And Christmas without mummers would not be Christmas.

Then the Sirkos exchanged good wishes and sat down at the table. There was much to feast upon and a great deal of merriment. . . . Then they rested. At noon they had a real celebration. What quantities of fruit, liquor and meat were consumed!

In the evening they were visited by carol-singers: Natalka in a beautiful dress which Hryhory had never seen before, the flowers in her hair tied up with a blue ribbon, and a necklace of coins around her neck; Hrytsko in his Sunday best — both with deer coats thrown over their shoulders and bespangled with snow.

They sang and everyone happily joined in, for they had feasted well that day. Even Natalka, who had never

touched brandy before, had drunk three glasses, toasting her mother, her father, and all the others, and she was blooming like a poppy.

Hryhory sang too. His initial gaiety, however, gave place to longing, then to deep anxiety. Perhaps it was the effect of the brandy, but it was as if someone had let a black curtain down. His heart felt heavy, so heavy. . . .

9

Khabarovsk Raided

On the third day after the Christmas holidays Hrytsko and Hryhory went to the town of Khabarovsk.

'To deliver furs, to renew contracts for the first three months, to get ammunition — that's a very handy thing to have! And, most important, to get permits from the game inspector for different kinds of guns, especially for a new kind of rifle. . . .'

All this was to be done by Hrytsko, according to his father's instructions, and Hryhory volunteered to help, since he had a burning desire to see once more that world which was forbidden to him. What was happening there? He realized that it was dangerous in the extreme, but this fact made it so much more attractive — it offered a chance to play blindman's-buff for a while. The thought of challenging Fate and trying her out fascinated him.

Either — or . . .

In reality there could not be two alternatives. There was only one, followed by a black void. He realized that.

And that is the way it almost happened.

He and Hrytsko saddled their horses, the sorrel and the dun, loaded the sacks with furs, oats for the horses and food for themselves and rode away.

'As if you were going courting,' jeered Natalka, watching the boys with envious eyes as if they were really going to woo some princess. They were two such handsome creatures, such magnificent princes, dressed in perfectly new hunters' 'uniforms', sewn and embroidered in native style, wearing

deer-skin shoes that were wonders of their art, girdled with cartridge belts, and over these they wore luxurious deer-skin winter coats. These were long, with stand-up collars; their heads were covered by roe caps. Their sunburnt faces, seasoned by wind and frost, looked as if they had been chiselled by an artist out of cold metal.

Two young princes, two heroes. . . . Shouldering their guns in the manner of Cossacks, they mounted their horses and disappeared.

For the first day they rode towards the railway station of Lazo through thickets drifted with snow, over hilltops and bare valleys, as the crow flies, through bushes and dried weeds. Having nothing to do on the way, they shot pheasants and black grouse, firing at them on the wing as they arose, alarmed by the trotting horses, from under the snow where they had taken shelter from the cold. This method of enduring intense cold is practised by both wild creatures and humans alike.

Some places actually teemed with these birds, especially pheasants. This sub-tropical bird adapted himself wonderfully to this grim land, multiplied and flourished there in the summer in luxuriant thickets, remaining through the winter in great numbers, having grown accustomed to temperatures of fifty degrees below zero. The black grouse, on the other hand, was destined by God to live here; he was in his element, for which he was specially created.

The boys enjoyed this sport very much. It tickled their vanity to shoot certain kinds of birds, in this case cocks only. Flying suddenly out from under the snow, a brilliantly feathered cock whizzed straight up like a bullet for about thirty yards, and then, levelling off, flew parallel to the ground. This manoeuvre made him a very poor target for the hunter. But it made the shooting more exciting. Shot on the wing, the fine-feathered cocks flew back into the snow, shedding brilliant-coloured feathers.

And so, riding along, they hunted like true sportsmen.

They reached Lazo in three days, having collected a

few dozen birds on the way. They tied the birds' heads together and hung them from their saddles.

About five miles this side of Lazo, they arrived at the camp of an acquaintance, Kim-gi-Soon. They gave all the birds to him as a present and camped there, leaving their horses, rifles and other unnecessary things.

Kim-gi-Soon was a good old friend of the Sirko family and received them with great hospitality. The Sirkos were always welcome guests, perhaps because of their own generosity and hospitality.

The evening was spent in celebration, the boys treating Kim-gi-Soon to brandy and meat and all those Christmas delicacies that Mother and Natalka had stuffed into the bag, remembering this good Kim-gi-Soon.

The celebration was so enjoyable to Kim that when the boys had gone to bed he still sat on his heated flagstone floor and sang in his falsetto voice the only song he knew, which he had learned so well from the Red Army soldiers stationed on the Manchurian border. It was a Ukrainian song, 'Unhitch the horses, boys', which Kim called 'Ryus song', and it was very popular all over the Far East.

Hryhory listened to it in great amazement. Kim-gi-Soon never suspected what an extraordinary impression his drunken singing was making, what a number of thoughts it called forth in Hryhory. Only from the mouth of an alien, in a far-off land, does a native song acquire some special meaning and sense.

On the morrow, leaving their horses behind, the two young men continued their trip by train. It was here that the civilized world began, the world of machines, electricity and radio, the world of 'social construction'—briefly, the world of the 'final phase of building up socialism in one country'.

* * *

This was not Hrytsko's first trip to civilization, but even so he felt a little helpless, not as at home as he was in the primeval forests. As a consequence, Hryhory had to

take the initiative, otherwise they would never have got on the train. Express train No. 1, Negoreloe–Vladivostok, passed, then postal express No. 41, Vladivostok–Moscow, too, but there was no chance to board them. There were no local trains, they were all long-distance trains, and tickets on them were either 'reserved' for various 'responsible' personages or given as a 'favour'. Since our two travellers were not accounted 'responsible' they could not get on the train.

There were a great many 'irresponsibles' on the platform and they decided to wait for an express of their own, a half-real, half-fantastic 'fuel and timber' express, as someone in gay mood sardonically described it. This was the name applied to the famous and (of its type) exclusive train No. 97, Vladivostok–Moscow. Something like this could only exist in that land of socialism, and only in a district of the 'limitless' multi-national 'motherland' such as this.

At last towards evening this 'express', famed throughout the Far Eastern Provinces, Eastern and Western Siberia and the whole USSR, appeared. It was already twilight, and since it was dark, both inside and out, everything seemed even gloomier. Moving heavily, the train coughed a few times as if afflicted with a bad cold, and stopped.

The train was very long, about fifty cars, half of them box-cars and the other half mail-cars; all of them, however, functioning as passenger-cars. It was not loaded with 'firewood' but all the cars were so crowded with passengers that human hands, heads, and even feet stuck out of windows. Dark, without a single light, the express hummed or rather buzzed like a beehive, yelled, sang and coughed, cursed masterfully and wailed like a child.

Express! Not an express, but a whole republic on wheels.

Hrytsko and Hryhory made an attack upon it because it was impossible to get on the train in any other way. All those inside protested vehemently at anyone getting in, and expressed their rage in foul invective, using any and every means at their disposal to stop the intruders. They gave

the impression of having deliberately chosen this kind of sport to keep themselves warm in the intense cold.

'Follow me!' commanded Hryhory quietly, sensing the familiar situation which he had experienced a long time ago, and remembering all the rules and standards of behaviour in this civilization embracing 'one-sixth of the globe' and all its peculiarities, that make you a lost sheep if you don't know them.

'Follow me! Both together now!'

On this command, both of them exerted their ox-like strength. They were followed by many others who, as if using a battering ram, battling hard, broke into the car. Those that were lucky enough to gain entrance with the boys' help, began to abuse not those who were in but those who were shoving them from the outside. The lucky ones would not let them in, throwing foul oaths like mud into their faces as if they were lunatics. Original customs! Outlandish customs!

But this train had even more surprises in store! No reservations or tickets were needed to board it. Theoretically there were tickets, but it was practically impossible to apply any rules and nobody bought tickets. Everyone went when and wherever he wanted to go. But since there were no tickets no one could complain about the train and it went as its fancy directed. When it wanted to go it went; when it wanted to stop it stopped, and sometimes it stood for hours either at a station or somewhere in the bush or on a dead-end siding. Since tickets only existed in theory, ticket-collecting was only possible in theory, too. With the exception of those who boarded the train in Vladivostok, none of the others bothered to buy tickets. The only difficulty lay in getting on the train.

When that first step had been taken, one could be sure of never being bothered for a ticket. The train was always so packed, indeed, that no conductor or ticket-collector had ever succeeded in penetrating farther along it than a third of its length.

The car in which the boys found themselves was exceedingly crowded and dark, perpetually noisy, and filled with foul air spiced with acrid *makhorka* smoke. They sobered up and penetrated into the crowd, settling comfortably. Hrytsko did not have to stand on his own feet on the dirty floor, but was held up as if by some miracle.

In the meantime the train whistled, hissed and screamed, jerking the cars until people's ribs rattled; finally it started and crept into the darkness. Then, when the passengers had been jolted down a little, the boys adjusted themselves with more comfort.

The noise, the broken phrases, jokes, snatches of song and curses made them feel strange. Hryhory had an impression that he was at home. The car expressed itself in all the dialects of his language, those of Poltava, Kherson, Chernihiv, Odessa. . . . Someone shouted: 'To hell with you!' reminding him of distant Podillya.

Those on the express had probably always spoken those dialects. The greater number of the passengers came from Ukraine. And although this express was on the Vladivostok–Moscow run, it was, nevertheless, by virtue of its language, songs and everything else, Ukraine; it was an extra-territorial Ukraine, 'a ship without a helm and sails'.

Someone was talking about Sakhalin, 'be it thrice cursed by God', where their whole district was 'recruited' into the fishing industry. Another group, also 'recruited' to Dalstroi, 'the damned', listened and responded with strong, peppery words and immortal Ukrainian humour.

Seasonal workers! Recruited, contracted and 'planned development' workers with wives and little children. . . . They had been sent from place to place over the whole 'socialist motherland'! They built socialism. They were the ones who built socialism.

'They went out there with lice in the seams of their clothes and are coming back with lice in handfuls.'

'They worked hard, but all for nothing!'

For days, weeks, months they wandered like this, enduring

filth, cold and hunger. . . . Inspired, they first went east; mastered by despair and apathy, they returned west, replaced by new ones. Wave after wave of such seekers of better fortune, forced and 'voluntary' enthusiasts, shifted hither and thither. They conversed, quarrelled in the same tongue, sneered, sang and cursed sullenly and sarcastically everyone and everything.

A baby's thin voice wailed in the darkness hopelessly, endlessly. It cried like a nestling, and bending over the baby a weeping mother's voice tried to comfort and hush it. 'What's wrong, dear? . . . Well, stop, please . . . Got a headache . . . Oh, Lord! Well, honey . . .'; and suddenly in mad despair: 'Hush, damn you! Hush . . . or I'll . . .' and she burst out weeping, hopeless and forgotten.

The baby moaned in pain.

'Well,' said someone's sullen voice with a Kuban accent, 'we arrived. A whole week we spent idly in the sleet and rain, without shelter, in Vladivostok. Before the contracts were signed they treated us generously but after that, having us in their power, they threw us on to a rubbish pile. Cattle are treated far better . . . damn them all and their lousy "constitution"!'

'And they rooted us out,' whispered someone, unburdening himself of sorrows that can be measured only in darkness. 'They did! Threw us out into the snow with little children. My God! "You're a kulak," they said. Mother died in Pechora slave camp and we five, her sons, scattered to the four winds. . . . Three went to Northern Concentration Camps. . . . Well, let them . . .' he said through clenched teeth.

A sad girl's voice, singing . . .

'I worked in the Donbas,' said some young man impudently and gaily. 'Nothing doing. "Show us your passport," they said. Fools! If I had a passport I'd be a people's commissar, but a better one . . . couldn't help it. . . . Went to Arkhangelsk, Kamchatka, Tashkent, and always the same damn thing: they want your "release" from the village

soviet. Devil take them!' and he sighed sceptically. 'Great country, but too damned crowded!'

'What news from home?' worried some woman. 'How are they?'

'Do you know,' someone spoke loud, as if to a deaf person, 'Serge was executed! The horses died in the collective, and they said "saboteur"!'

'But,' hissed someone, trembling — apparently sick — on the top bunk, 'when people died out in the whole district, don't worry, then they didn't look for saboteurs!'

'Well, hush, hush, my sweetheart,' moaned the mother.

A peasant girl was sitting there quietly. She remained silent amid the general hubbub, and then her voice emerged as if from muddy water, as an accompaniment to the baby's wail, but more subdued —

Whoever shall read that letter,
He'll know all my heartaches. . . .

'Hush, dear, hush!' pleaded the mother's voice and she clung to her child like the wild marjoram in the field.

Hryhory listened to all that noise, his teeth on edge, his head swimming. Things he had begun to forget, all the tragedy of his people, lay like a great burden on his mind and upon his heart.

His whole motherland was like this, on wheels, smashed, broken, deprived of individuality, filthy, diseased, in despair! He clenched his teeth till the jaw muscles bulged out.

The train rattled on, shuddering convulsively in the darkness, and making long stops at stations and sidetracks.

At some stations two individuals with lanterns pushed in.

'NKVD.' A murmur passed through the car.

Where conductors and controllers were powerless and too considerate to penetrate, these two squeezed in and were at home; they were looking for something. They peered into people's faces by the lantern-light, stepping over them like logs.

Hryhory waited calmly, prepared for the worst. He realized now how foolish he had been to show himself without documents. But before he had had time to analyse this a lantern was thrust into their faces, first at Hrytsko and then at himself. They were examined from head to foot, but, luckily, it was the beautifully embroidered deer-skin coats and shoes that caught the attention of the inspectors. They left the train, perhaps thinking that these two were some exotically dressed 'responsible' officials, chiefs of village soviets or directors of gold-mines.

At the station of Krasnaya Ryechka the express stopped on the devil knows what track among a sea of freight-cars picked out by the reflections of light from distant lanterns.

Another train pulled in from the opposite direction and stopped on the next track. Hryhory's heart trembled. Pale faces pressing against barred windows looked out — the NKVD 'express'!

On the other side of the 'express' there was a similar train going in the opposite direction. Car platforms were patrolled by men armed with triple-edged bayonets. Someone called from the express on the left to the train on the right.

'Hello, countrymen! Where are you going?' and the fellow laughed mischievously.

'To the Far Eastern Camps. And you?'

'To the Northern Camps! Ha, ha, ha!'

They pushed their hands out through the iron bars, waved at each other and laughed. Laughter was the only thing left to them. What incredible madness stalked through this land, where trainloads of prisoners were moved from one end of the world to another in opposite directions. And no end was in sight.

* * *

The city was enveloped in a haze of microscopic ice particles that glittered in the sunlight. A fifty-below-zero temperature chilled the pedestrians whose hurried steps produced all kinds of creaking and clumping sounds. The

city was built on hilltops shaggy with hoar frost. Smoke-like wisps of vapour rose from horses, people and dogs alike and settled on them as hoar frost. Everything was wrapped in clouds of vapour, creaking, grinding, hurrying.

Khabarovsk was the capital of this Far Eastern land, this capricious Eldorado.

The boys walked along the main thoroughfare named Karl Marx Street. City residents, officials, workers and soldiers, Russians, Ukrainians, Chinese, Koreans — all hurried along with their noses tucked into their collars, colliding with one another. There were men with briefcases and civil servants with maps and military wallets thrown over their shoulders.

Automobiles with chains on their tyres rattled alongside sledges drawn by reindeer — the tribes of Golds had come to the city. Mangy reindeer with big horns, scabby dogs with sharp pointed ears, and tiny, exotically dressed women sitting on the sledges drew the attention of the city dwellers. They crowded around, watching, because they had never seen anything like it. Statistics show that there are very few natives and 'old-timers' in this capital, they are mostly drifters, changing all the time. Here the population flowed like water in the Amur, coming and going, settling nowhere.

People came here voluntarily, as Party or trade-union representatives. Unable to endure the rigorous climate, they gave up all the advantages or conveniences offered by some central authority and fled away. These fellows, having tasted a little of the exotic and bizarre, returned home to sit by their *samovars* and tell tall stories about this capricious land and its wonders.

The reindeer drew the sleighs apathetically, followed by a great crowd of gawkers. All the pedestrians who went to work carried tin dinner-pails as well as all their miscellaneous belongings. Once someone made up a riddle about the city: 'Three mountains, three holes and a hundred thousand stew-pots and briefcases — what is it? Khabarovsk.'

But Hryhory liked the city, perhaps because it reminded him very strongly of Kiev. Locked under thick ice and covered with ice hummocks, the wide Amur flowed around it. A broad main street which began at the river bank had modern buildings on both sides. It was short, but looked European, almost like Khreshchatyk in Kiev. Some buildings were really beautiful, five or six storeys high, and built in modern style. A number of buildings were under construction. The tall scaffolding looked as if it might fall apart any time, revealing beneath it enchanting structures.

The city suffered from a housing shortage, and in the freezing temperatures people were living under large tarpaulins spread like huge Kirghiz tents. A number of families lived there, close to the Amur, in the freezing temperature.

The boys window-shopped in front of the 'Gastronom', looking at all the masterpieces of the 'All-Union Food Industry': wines, canned meat, hams, sausages, chocolates and candies, some wrapped in tinfoil and others without. Then they looked at the window display of 'Dynamo', a sports association, showing all kinds of athletic goods, sports and hunting equipment, beautiful new double-barrelled shotguns, blank cartridges of all sizes, telescopes and so on. This was supposed to be a supply base for all the hunters and explorers, where they could buy things cheaply at wholesale prices.

In the State Liquor Store there was Lenin's portrait in one window and Karl Marx's in the other — both fashioned out of bottles. Hryhory laughed: 'Up till now I didn't know they were such drunkards. How great and creative is the genius of the builders of socialism! It acknowledges no limits, it does not stop at anything.'

Having nothing else to do, they went on looking round the city, trying, at the same time, to find where they were supposed to do their errands. First of all they had to go to the Far Eastern Fur Trust, but they were not in a hurry, for it was quite early. They looked at the window displays; the crowd looked at them.

When the two boys appeared on the main street, the interest in the exotic reindeer and the Golds suffered an eclipse, quite put in the pale by two aurochs who, surely, must have come from the blue Khekhtsyr that hung so romantically on the horizon. Legends were told about it in Khabarovsk, but no one from the city had ever visited it. Old maids and young girls were especially excited. Some even tried to catch their eye, winking, staring, or talking loudly to their companions, making remarks about them and laughing.

The faces of young girls, reddened by the cold, breathed warmth, youth and carefree boldness. And in general these Khabarovsk people were strange, as if everyone knew everyone else and all were friends. A teen-aged girl with her briefcase and books under her arm faced the boys, staring at them, and with mincing steps unceremoniously measured them from head to foot.

'Boys, will you be kind enough to tell me where you bought these things, and where I can get them?' and she pointed to Hryhory's embroidered buckskin shoe with her own little shoe. 'Devil take this cold! In our Odessa . . .'

Hryhory offered her his shoes as if he already knew the girl from 'our Odessa', as if they had come to this part of the country together. And the girl from 'our Odessa' was gay and talkative. She was 'Khetakhurovka',[1] an enthusiast, who had come in light shoes direct from blessed, sunny Odessa to this over-publicized and romantic Far Eastern land.

The boys could not sell her their shoes. Hrytsko promised to get the girl a pair, though not in Khabarovsk, but in the taiga — shoes specially made for a girl, wonderful buckskin shoes, if only she would visit them. He even told her how to reach the place. The girl was most appreciative; she said she would go there without fail, she would like to have the shoes very much. . . . Hryhory laughed.

[1] Khetakhurovka, a Soviet girl who followed the example of Valentina Khetakhurova in going to live in the Far Eastern land.

The girl, who had at first begun to talk in Russian, at once changed to Ukrainian as soon as she heard Hrytsko, who could not say a word in Russian correctly. 'Countrymen! Good heavens!' she cried happily. So they came to complete agreement, until Hryhory explained the geography of the taiga to her a little, and she, realizing the impossibility of visiting them, burst out laughing and pushed Hrytsko in the chest and called him 'an absolute bear'!

'That's right. Why do all the girls call us "bears"?' wondered Hrytsko, turning to Hryhory. 'I mean Natalka, Mary, and this. . . .'

'What do you mean by "this"?' she asked.

Hrytsko looked at the girl, who was hopping like a sparrow on a twig, and laughed outright. 'This' proved to be a chemical engineer. She had come to build something great. . . . Just now she was angrily hopping in the cold, radiating youth, good health, and inexhaustible energy from rosy cheeks and large hazel eyes.

'Khabarovsk is filled with new people like me. We're all new, "twenty-five-thousanders", "Khetakhurovkas", Red Army, those sent on a mission, on a contract, engineers and officials. All of us are cold and we have a close fellow-feeling. Funny people, funny city and funny Far Eastern land!'

Funny, indeed! Enough to make one weep.

The boys were not selling their buckskin shoes, though they were really sorry that they had none to sell ('Why,' she asked, 'didn't you bring some girls' shoes along, just in case?'). But the girl helped them out, telling them which way to go and where to turn to find what they wanted. She even accompanied them part of the way in order to direct them.

At the corner of Karl Marx and Plyusninka Streets they parted. The girl stamped her feet, standing there for some time, pointing with her finger and shouting, correcting their route.

The quiet air, dried up by the cold, only needed movement to make one feel comfortably warm. But different individuals have different ideas about cold, and react to it

in a different way. Taiga hunters are one thing and city dwellers are another. A hunter is able to walk in cold weather over hills and valleys with only a light jacket on and not only feel no cold but actually get hot and perspire as if in a steam bath; his jacket gets covered on the outside with hoar frost from the perspiration passing through it. It's quite a different story with city dwellers arriving from other lands who are not used to cold. But they, too, become acclimatized. Hryhory noticed the girls in the streets. Some, regardless of appearances, wore ugly felt boots and thick stockings to keep out the cold, while others, whether from poverty or vanity, continued to wear silk stockings and thin slippers. They remained in the cold as little as possible, slipping quickly from building to building.

In the Far Eastern Fur Trust the boys parted with their furs, renewed their contracts, and were paid a substantial sum of money. Hrytsko was asked to enter into a competition with some unknown hunter. Just to get rid of them he put a cross on the entry form. 'Who could and would dare to compete with the Sirkos? Ridiculous!'

Then they set out to attend to their main business, that of locating the State Inspectorate of Hunting, or, more properly, the chief regional inspector, Ivan Potayuk, a good friend of old Sirko. Ivan Potayuk had visited the Sirkos quite often, sometimes coming during an antler hunt on all kinds of investigations, and they were his guests whenever they happened to be in the city. He always assisted them in all the formalities connected with such delicate matters as permits to hunt deer for antlers, or to catch raccoons, or to carry certain weapons. Just now the Sirkos wanted to get some triple-barrelled rifles.

The office of the inspectorate was in a bank building in the centre of the city. Hrytsko could not find it as it had moved recently to this new location. The building was supposed to be a skyscraper, the tallest and finest building on the main street, with a large sign in front, and following this description the boys found it easily.

It stood across the street from the offices of the Provincial Executive. This pride of Khabarovsk, a grey, six-storey-high edifice in the American style, was decorated in front with large letters — 'The Far Eastern Bank'.

Potayuk, a short but energetic fellow with a very sharp nose, sat by the table under a large map, his Kuban cap on his head, because he prized it very highly and hardly ever took it off. The map was marked with the figures of different animals and birds. He greeted the boys warmly, but frowned and seemed ill at ease.

He asked about the 'old man', about the deer and squirrel hunts and a great deal of other taiga news in which he was very interested, but it was apparent that he had something else on his mind. During the conversation he leaned towards them and suddenly, unable to keep to himself the uneasiness that was preying on his mind, informed them in a perplexed whisper: 'All the highest officials have been arrested . . .' and he named a commissioner of the foreign trade commissariat under whose jurisdiction this inspectorate was, and the directors of the Far Eastern Fur Trust, and even the chiefs of the Provincial Executive and the Provincial Committee of the All-Union Communist Party. 'Well, in general . . .' and Ivan Potayuk waved his hand rather hopelessly.

It was real news to the boys to hear that this world was afflicted with an epidemic of arrests. . . . It was not a local purge, but widespread, the whole 'sixth of the world' was affected. But they did not care very much, except that they were sorry for this good fellow.

They expressed their sympathy by an eloquent silence, and told him of their business in the town. They were in a hurry to be done with it and leave at the earliest opportunity.

'All right,' agreed Potayuk, 'but . . . as you see, there are some changes. Everything has to go through the NKVD. Wait a moment!'

He lifted the receiver, thus connecting himself with the NKVD exchange, called a number, greeted someone and

spoke, explaining the matter. 'A well-known hunter, you know . . . so much the better . . . has a permit for exporting raw materials and must have a certain kind of gun. According to regulation so and so he must have a permit to buy it and he petitions . . .'

The receiver produced some squeaks and clicks to which Potayuk listened attentively, his face frowning more and more.

'Well, that's that!' He hung up the receiver and, pushing his cap angrily over his eyes, stood by the window and gazed at the fantastic designs which the frost had traced on the window-panes.

'There. . . . They want you to apply personally. You'll have to go, boys; I'll write an application for you and you'll file it and wait for an answer. . . . Don't say that you have guns, but only that you want to get some, understand? Say that you have a contract to hunt wild pigs. . . . I think the Old Man has a contract for that. Yes? Well, I know. Now you need a permit to buy guns and to use them. If they ask how you are managing now, only mention those guns that are covered by permits. Is that clear? Do be careful, Hrytsko!'

While he was giving these instructions, Potayuk filled out an application. 'Hand this to them. Room 133, second floor. Go this way. . . . And be careful!' He paused. 'Then come back to me. If you can't, give my best regards to your father and tell him to watch out. Alas'—he rubbed his brow—'nasty times. Devil knows what's happening! You're used to living there like sovereign kings. . . . My best wishes to Natalka, the scamp. Say that I'll come a-courting. . . .'

He joked for a while, shook hands firmly with Hryhory and at the same time looked intently into his eyes. Hryhory withstood that look and smiled back. Potayuk smiled too.

'A great lad!' the thought flashed through Hryhory's mind, but he didn't say a word. Potayuk rubbed his forehead, wanted to ask something, but seemed to change his mind:

'Well, on your way. . . .'

They went out and made for the NKVD.

Hryhory walked side by side with Hrytsko, determined to risk a prank — a dangerous visit. Some devil inside was urging him:

'Go ahead! After all, why not? . . . To hell with them!'

The NKVD was located in a large new building at the corner of Kalinin Street. It formed a large six-storey crescent on that corner, and though the building was not yet finished it was already occupied.

Statuesque guards stood at the colonnaded entrance. Dressed in long fur overcoats holding rifles with fixed bayonets, they looked exactly like those posters which were supposed to illustrate the might of 'the first dictatorship of the proletariat in the world'.

Hryhory, with Hrytsko, walked up the steps to the vestibule. He walked in a proud yet insolent manner, sweeping away his steps with his long coat like an imperial lady with her train. They walked past the guards who stood like statues — the embodiments of power, secrecy and the uncompromising vengeance of the so-called 'revolutionary legality'.

In the vestibule Hrytsko stopped, grabbed Hryhory, and pulled him to one side. This product of the taiga, this primitive, straightforward young man, was as sensitive to danger as a wolf—a wild, freedom-loving, proud mountaineer. He looked hard at Hryhory and spoke sharply: 'Go away! . . . Wait for me out in the street.'

Hryhory was neither superstitious nor weak-willed. He did not believe in devils or evil spirits, but he believed firmly in intuition, in subconscious perception and in animal instinct. . . .

He stood for a moment and watched Hrytsko mount the stairs. Eventually he overcame the stubborn urge to follow, and obeyed that friendly uncompromising command: 'Go away!'

He turned slowly and went out, past the guards and into the street.

Half an hour, then an hour passed — he became uneasy walking up and down at the corner. He was fully aware how suspicious this looked and that it might end very badly — imagine loafing around on a corner opposite NKVD! It would have been better if he had gone upstairs. He turned back to the NKVD building and was just starting up the stairs when Hrytsko came out. His eyes warned Hryhory, and he approached the latter without any signs of recognition — a wily hunter, a true hunter!

At this moment Hrytsko was aware of his hunter's role, warned of the nearness of beasts of prey, and he moved carefully on the margin between safety and real danger — a tiger hunter! As he passed by he winked and whispered: 'Walk off to the side, behind me.'

They walked that way for a block, turned right and then left and made their way to the Inspectorate of Hunting.

Here Hrytsko put the declaration on the table and took a deep breath: 'They refused it.'

'Yes,' said Potayuk, evidently not surprised. 'Well, and . . . ?'

'They refused. "You don't need it," they said. "Hunt as you did before."'

Potayuk was silent. He frowned for a while and then burst out in ironic laughter:

'Listen, Hrytsko . . . And who is this one with you?'

'He is a relative of ours here. I gave him a winter coat and deer shoes. He is one of us!'

'Good'— and he smiled openly at Hryhory. 'So they won't let you have it?'

'No, they won't.'

'They say you don't need it?'

'Yes.'

'Well, the devil take the fools. Think of it! . . . It is not for me to instruct you and your father. Do you understand? . . . My greetings to all. Prepare yourselves well for

another hunt next summer. I'll come to feed the mosquitoes. . . .'

They thanked him for his trouble, said good-bye, and went out. Now that their business was all taken care of they remembered how hungry they were. They had a bagful of money and a rucksack filled with food but they wanted something hot. They wanted to eat something special, something worthy of the capital, something civilized. After all, they had travelled a long way to get here!

'I know,' said Hrytsko, 'let us go to the Japanese!' And so they set out for the Japanese restaurant somewhere out in the suburbs. On the way Hrytsko recounted his adventure with the NKVD.

'Brother, the place is full of officials! It's frightening. I went in to see one of them and soon there were some ten of them — they had heard that a "distinguished hunter from the taiga, that Sirchenko, son of the most distinguished Sirko", was there. The devils! How do they get to know these things? Of course, much has been written in the newspapers; they even showed us in the cinema. And they chattered among themselves: "Did you read that? Did you hear this? Did you see the pictures in the . . .?" And to me: "Is all that true?" I pretended to wither under all this attention: "Of course — yes — I don't know. . . ." And they: "You see, he is completely wild. Yes — no culture, no newspapers, no theatres. What do you do there evenings and holidays? Probably drink!"

'"Yes. . . ."

'"Tell us, did anyone come to your place?"

'"No. . . ."

'"Think hard, try to remember."

'"Aha, someone did. . . ."

'"Who?" and they seemed to be all ears.

'"A militia man from the *Uniongold* last year. . . ."

'"No, we mean this summer, or autumn, or now in the winter. Think for a minute."

'I thought: You silly striped chipmunks!

'"No, nobody came."

'"A stout fellow!"

'"Certainly. And so we humbly ask for a permit. . . ."

'"Did you meet anyone in the forest while hunting?"

'"Apart from animals, nobody. . . ."

'Confound them! Why are they so inquisitive?

'They talked like that with me for about an hour, and pointed out continually: "If you meet anyone, ask him who he is; and remember, if he seems suspicious inform the officials."

'"Which officials?" I wanted to ask, but only agreed.

'"Well, that's a good lad! . . . Do you smoke?"

'"No. . . ."

'"Do you drink whisky?"

'"Yes."

'They treated me to some kind of womanish drink and repeated over and over again that I should be careful and attentive. They talked about "citizens' duties" and about rewards for sincere effort. . . .

'But they still returned the declaration. "Not possible!" Dumb oxen! Who in the world would seriously ask them for a permit? We have lived a lifetime there without asking their permission, and we don't propose to ask for it now. . . . Either we are the masters there or we are not.'

As he spoke Hrytsko waved his arms and raised his voice, forgetting that he wasn't in the forest now. Hryhory had to calm him down. He also had to guide him by the arm because Hrytsko did not know how to walk on pavements and did not recognize any rules for crossing the street. He insisted on jay-walking, and had it not been for Hryhory he would have found himself on several occasions under the wheels of one of the trucks that dashed back and forth, clanging their chains.

Eventually they reached the Japanese restaurant located in a suburb that was known as 'Ukrainska Slobodka'. This suburb was as old as the city itself; its name indicated not only that the Ukrainians were the original founders

but that they formed the bulk of the present population as well.

The restaurant was located near the city line of the suburb. The young men barged in, hungry as wolves, anticipating the taste of exotic food. Even the depressed and down-at-heel appearance of the place did not affect their mood. The place looked like the hut of the poorest 'Old Believer'. Wooden walls without paint or whitewash stuck out their naked ribs which were stuffed in between with moss and rags. Plain benches against the walls and equally plain wooden tables without any covers reminded one of a barracks. . . .

A Japanese stood in the doorway which led to another room. He was the only exotic thing in the restaurant. The perspiring window-panes wept copious tears which dripped from the sill.

They ordered the best the Japanese had to offer. After a few minutes a Chinese youngster trotted in and placed before them two large earthenware bowls filled with macaroni in a sauce. It looked just like a bunch of tangled white thread. There were no spoons, knives or forks, only two thin wooden sticks.

They looked at each other and at the bowls but found no suggestion as to how to begin. Hryhory tried to pick up the tangled mass with the sticks but it slipped off and dived back into the juice. He repeated this experiment several times without success. Hrytsko had the same results. 'The devils!' he said. 'We have eaten here before but they didn't give us anything like this.'

The pangs of hunger and the hopeless task before them drove them to despair. Perhaps that Japanese was already laughing at them, the devil, and saying, 'Look at the wild men!'

In the meantime two Chinese men had come in and sat down at another table opposite. They chattered first between themselves and then with the Japanese. Lo and behold, they too were served this flax fibre in juice (this

must have been the only thing available here) and the young men watched carefully to see what would happen.

The Chinese handled the situation swiftly: they leaned over their bowls, and using the sticks in one hand like elongated fingers, they lifted the tangled mass to their mouths and sucked in the whole mass in one breath like a stork swallowing a frog. And then, twisting very rapidly with the sticks, they made a fountain out of the juice and sucked it in; that was all there was to it. They finished what remained by tipping the bowl up and drinking from it.

Encouraged by this example, the boys did the same thing with the macaroni, and it proved to be quite easy, but they could not manage the fountain part of the performance.

'Hey, Hrytsko, you need a thousand years of culture to be able to do that' — Bah!'

They gave up trying, tossed the chopsticks aside and simply drank the juice.

The Chinese youngster brought in green tea in small porcelain cups, without sugar, and at no extra charge, but they didn't stop to drink it — they paid the bill and went out.

All that cost them only fifty rubles each!

'A whole calf . . . you could buy a whole calf for that!' laughed Hrytsko when they reached the street. Hryhory, too, was pleased with this incident. After all, you must pay for exotic atmosphere, and those chopsticks must cost something! As a result Hryhory named this restaurant 'The Tavern of the Dead Cat'.

Still, hunger is hunger, and even more so when it comes from the taiga. The problem of food remained unsolved.

They went into a kind of buffet which was also a tavern. It was filled to the brim with people, but as far as food was concerned there was only some kind of salad, whisky, *anissovka* and some candied sweets. They ordered the salad, a glass each of *anissovka* and two portions of candy. The man in charge of the buffet himself served the 'great masters'.

They drank the *anissovka*, smelled the sour food and tossed the candy under the table, paid three times what it was worth and walked out in anger.

In desperation they went into a barber-shop and had themselves shaved and powdered, looked themselves over in the mirror and had a good laugh — 'It's obvious why the eyes popped out of the girls' heads!'

Then they went into the 'Gastronom' which they had seen in the morning but had forgotten. There they found things out of fairy tales: all kinds of wines, whisky, caviar, chocolate, candy. . . . Here they loaded both rucksacks. Loaded like camels, they went out into the street where it was getting dark. In the frosty mist bloomed yellow lamps that looked like dead dandelions surrounded by frosty haloes. Somebody hurried off in the mist, the snow screeching underfoot. The problem now was where to settle down to devour these luxuries they had just purchased.

The *anissovka* went to their heads, and they felt light and airy. From across the street came the sound of brassy music. It was a restaurant, all lit up and humming like a nest of hornets.

'Let's go!' commanded Hrytsko, tilting his cap to a rakish angle. The street was grey and forbidding; and there, inside, it looked warm, bright and sheltered. They might as well go the whole hog!

At the entrance to the restaurant stood a general — no, not a general, a decorated doorman. He looked at the boys and hurried to open the doors, through which they could hardly pass with their coats and loaded rucksacks.

Inside was another more elaborate commissionaire with gold braid and lanyards, gold buttons and a beard like Skobelev. How had that beard been preserved for twenty years? He took their rucksacks. . . .

'Do they have beer here?'

The 'General' looked at them, smiled into his beard and replied in their language:

'There is, boys! — Beer and whisky and women. . . . Let

me have your vestments. God forgive, those are some fur coats!'

He hung their 'vestments' on a hook and gave them their tags. Then he showed them which way to go.

'Where are you from, Grandfather?' Hryhory could not resist asking as he combed back his hair. The old man gave him a crafty look, winked at him, and without saying anything opened wide the door.

The young men walked in—no, floated into the restaurant.

Everyone who was in the restaurant — dancers, drinkers, smokers, jokers — everyone turned. The fury of the foxtrot died down momentarily, and against this background of pale, exhausted and dissipated faces the two guests looked like people from a heroic planet rather than from this smoky, squalid earth. They might have been characters who had just come down from the screen during the showing of an adventure film of pirates or cowboys; or perhaps emissaries of some unknown tsar of these much-talked-of but little-known Ussurian forests. Apart from the clothes, the thing that caught everyone's attention was their faces, which looked as if they were moulded out of red bronze into which were set eyes which impressed you with their concentrated strength and brilliance.

Hrytsko walked lightly, without paying attention to anyone, and peered over their heads — trying to spot the prey.

The bandleader waved the baton, the oboe barked like a dog, everything quickened, but no one danced — as though in deference to the new arrivals. The women seemed to take the measure of their partners and quickly looked over to compare. . . . Some man, urged on by the instinct of a male, made some sneering remark, and someone laughed. . . . In the meantime the two young men had reached the centre of the room, paying no attention as though they were in the middle of the forest, and now they stopped, looking around for a place to camp. They didn't even notice one of the bare-backed women trying desperately to attract their attention. 'Oh, you great big bears!'

Only when they had reached their selected place did Hrytsko react: 'Did you hear? That must have been about you. I wonder why all the girls call us bears?' They had selected an empty table near the window and were making themselves at home. A waiter arrived: the orchestra broke into a tango. . . .

Hryhory turned the menu upside down and addressed the waiter: 'A carafe of wine! Two whiskies! Two caviars! Herrings in vinegar, twice; beefsteaks, twice; cabbage and onions, twice; scrambled eggs with five eggs and bacon, twice!' All this was in the form of a command. The waiter goggled. 'All that at the same time?' 'If you please, all at the same time.' 'Right!' And he disappeared behind the buffet where you could hear his happy voice repeating the orders — twice, twice, twice.

He came back with the wine and the whisky, but the boys did not touch it. They waited, mouths watering, feeling the claws of wolfish hunger inside. Hrytsko let his eyes wander over the room, which was now spinning in the midst of a tango. He saw the girls with their bare arms and backs but it did not excite him. All he could think of was *food.* Hryhory was studying the menu and recalling some of the pranks of his student days in Kiev.

The waiter eventually came back with a huge tray covered with plates and dishes . . . now the young men dug in. They had a drink each and then went at the food like two bears.

Things seemed brighter when the first pangs of hunger were satisfied. Everything was new and surprising to Hrytsko. For example, how did those dresses stay on the girls? Furthermore, why did they and the men walk around, swaying the way they did? Must be a game of some kind, he decided.

Activity increased all around them; a medley of sounds and bodies, painted lips, chalk-white noses, lean hungry-looking men. . . . The clarinet bleated like a goat, the crooner whined like a stuck pig. Somebody was making a

noise with little sticks which sounded like the thumping of a rabbit competing with a woodpecker; there was whistling and ringing and the bandleader walked, swaying, up and down; it seemed as though they were all drunk and behaving wildly. The guests and the orchestra moved together in a mad, furious, lascivious rhythm.

Hryhory watched them and his frown grew — he seemed to be under a black cloud.

The waiter came again and they ordered wine and beer; they ate and drank, and it all seemed to be going to their heads. The waiter brought two more dishes, dishes which were sizzling over bluish flames. Hrytsko was amazed. Wasn't that funny? Strange, those city people, selling fire on a platter!

Opposite them, behind a little table, sat two girls. They had ordered black coffee, drank it slowly and just sat there and stared at the two men. One of them began making eyes at the men; the other just stared with wide-open, misty eyes which showed neither surprise nor animation. Other girls in the room were being asked to dance, they were flirted with and brought back from the dance floor, pale-looking but apparently happy. They would sit down behind a table, eat, drink, laugh, and then rise and dance again, only to return later even paler than before. But nobody seemed to notice these girls and nobody invited them to dance. The two young men didn't pay any attention to them either; instead they just sat, drank, and ordered such delicacies as preserved apricots or crabs.

Somewhat intoxicated by now, Hrytsko spread himself out on the chair and laughed out loud. 'What a circus! We should have this out our way, out in the forest, eh?'

He was beginning to see double. Roused by the drinks and by the sights in this room, he laughed over and over again without knowing why.

Hryhory, on the other hand, looked grim. The more he drank the grimmer he became. As he observed this array of half-naked women his heart was seized with a great pity.

He felt as though someone had stepped on his heart with a jackboot. A woman tossed a paper flower at him; another was ogling him from across three tables, but he took no notice. He ordered cognac and drank, but even that had no effect; instead he was being overcome with a feeling of sorrow. He looked at this painted, pretentious, dissipated collection of humanity—at this exhibition of feminine beauty and masculine pride and honour—and clenched his teeth. He was filled to overflowing with disgust and negation. He had been trampled upon, pushed aside from the stream of life; crossed out, and by whom? Before him moved wave upon wave of perspiring painted and powdered human flesh — the builders and reconstructors of the world, impotent builders of empire galvanized by alcohol . . . aristocrats! . . . masters of situations! . . . lords and rulers! . . .

Trash! All these so-called 'commanders', pompous 'responsible persons' pretending to be 'European' — all this low-down trash, now moving around the room with their skinny knees stuck between the women's. And all these perfumed, shop-worn girls and women with blue-black rings under their eyes, eaten away by alcohol, lust, and syphilis. . . .

Through the stormy jazz he imagined he heard Zalivay . . . a happy excited bark . . . and in reply came the silver tones of Natalka's voice . . . she stood on a sunlit plank spanning a brook with her face raised to the blinding sun, laughing in gay abandon . . . and there she stood again in the rays of a rainbow above a waterfall, proud as a queen, free as the wind, happy as the sun; she waved her hand towards the top of a cedar . . . the forest queen, proud and untamed, beautiful and pure! . . . Only she was not his.

Perspiring, pale, stupid faces came back into focus and someone was shouting: 'Maestro! Foxtrot!'

And again couples rose quickly and the senseless storms continued. Hryhory went on with his grim, calculated drinking; he and his painful thoughts were far away from this place.

A young woman, overheated by wine and suggestive dances, dashed up to the two men and with flirtatious eyes invited them to dance. She stood there swaying in front of them. . . . Hryhory glanced at her well-developed breasts and turned to Hrytsko — 'Go ahead.' Hrytsko roared; the very thought that he should go out there with that woman to hop around and look silly brought on a laughing spell.

'No, no,' he muttered finally and poked Hryhory under the table. The woman did not take her eyes off Hryhory. Eventually she caught his eye, winked at him — then stopped; her eyes opened wide, and, unable to withstand his gaze, she turned and almost ran, shivering as though from cold. . . .

Only then did Hryhory notice the girls who sat opposite drinking their humble coffee. When the well-developed one finally gave up they looked at each other and laughed, then continued to stare at the men. Hryhory noticed them now and began taking them in out of the corner of his eye. He watched them sip their coffee. Both were pretty. One seemed inclined to flirt; the other was sad-looking. They looked tired and worn. . . . Apparently things were not going well with them and this coffee was to take the place of a meal which they could not afford. . . . Their clothes were old-looking and mended over and over again. They wore heavy old boots which they hid under the chairs. One wore a pair of rather ancient stockings and the other a pair of man's socks which left her legs bare. No wonder they weren't being asked to dance. Besides, their whole manner seemed to indicate that they were peasant girls.

Then Hryhory caught a phrase; and there rose in his mind the picture of the train loaded with childish tears and desperate maternal anguish; and that song about 'the tiny hazel leaf' — that poverty and suffering on wheels. . . . The girls had spoken in Ukrainian! And he felt as though someone had snapped a whip right across his naked heart: yes, there they are; daughters of 'dekulakized' parents, scattered over the Siberias. They were the ones fleeing for

their lives! They were trying to save themselves from hunger and cold, from lawlessness, and death — at the price of their beauty and youth and self-respect.

Hryhory took himself in hand and he suddenly remembered that the train left at about 1 a.m. and it was now eleven. Hrytsko was all for more drinks but Hryhory would not let him, though he himself now felt like getting completely drunk so that he would not have to remember or see or hear. He also felt that, slowly, he was approaching that blessed state.

The clock struck twelve. Half an hour to the station and half an hour for everything else. The train would leave at one. . . .

Hryhory rose, followed by Hrytsko. They kept themselves under control, but things were doubling and trebling before their eyes.

'Hrytsko! Go to the cloakroom, collect all our belongings and go straight outside. Wait there. Is that clear?'

'Clear,' and Hrytsko went as Hryhory proceeded to pay the waiter. He then waved to the two girls and went out. It seemed strange — his feet kept to the floor but everything else moved away at peculiar angles.

He met someone at the door — he was on his way out and the other person was coming in — and they couldn't pass. A phantom figure doubled itself in Hryhory's eyes — bars on the collar — a blue-topped military cap — oh yes, two of them! — two noses. . . .

Hryhory wondered: Is there one, or are there two? He blinked his eyes — yes, there are two! Two at once — funny! Somehow it — they — looked familiar. . . . Hryhory stood back and laughed, then frowned and clenched his jaws.

'Who stands in the way? Hey, there! . . .'

The figure stepped aside and Hryhory marched off to the cloakroom. He gave 'Grandfather Frost' a ruble and went out into the street. He didn't notice that the figure at the doorway stood frozen to the floor, watching his departure.

Hrytsko was waiting outside. They slipped their coats on

cape style — to allow the alcohol to escape — and walked off slowly. The street was cold, still misty and almost empty; only here and there the crackling sound of feet on snow could be heard. The street lights glimmered through the rainbow-like haloes.

* * *

The young men had gone half the length of Karl Marx Street and had passed the Far Eastern Bank when Hryhory sensed that something was wrong and that they were being followed. By that time the effect of drink was wearing off. He immediately recalled the phantom figure of the restaurant. What the devil! Who could it be? Probably the military. . . .

'Bend down, Hrytsko, and see whether someone is following us.'

Hrytsko stumbled, leaned over and looked backwards.

'There doesn't seem to be anything. What is it supposed to be? . . .'

'Put your coat on properly or you will freeze to death. That's it. Hang the rucksack over your shoulder and take the weight off your arms; so. . . .'

Hryhory then dropped his coat, bent over and looked. . . .

'Yes, we are being followed by a tall chap in a dog-fur coat and a cap with flopping ear-flaps. . . . Well, Hrytsko! Keep calm and quicken the pace. Don't look back.'

'What is this all about?'

'Nothing. You know how a tiger stalks wild boars? We are being followed. . . . Don't lag behind; stick close to me.'

They walked quickly. The street suddenly became crowded with people emerging from a cinema. The two young men merged into this crowd and then turned sharply to the left into a side street. 'Stick close to the wall.'

And without the slightest warning Hryhory pushed Hrytsko to one side and the latter reeled into an open gate. There they stood dead still.

A moment later a figure dressed in a dog-fur coat and

wearing a cap with flopping ear-flaps came running past them. Like a hound. . . .

They waited for a while until the crunching footsteps in the snow faded away. Then they turned back to the main street and set out at a fast pace.

In order to reach the station they had to walk the length of the main street, across a square, across some empty lots, through a bazaar, and finally for about one kilometre through the suburbs. Their coats were getting in their way so they took them off and carried them.

They crossed the large square with its monument to Lenin in the middle. With his hand raised high, Lenin seemed to be trying to impede their progress. He was pointing in the opposite direction as though intending to lead them off their course. After they crossed the open lots covered with weeds they set their course to the corner of a street which ran parallel to the railway. They had just crossed the ditch and stepped out on to the street when out of the darkness there emerged a figure. 'Hands up!' and Hryhory found himself facing a pistol.

Slowly Hryhory lifted his arms and at the same time kicked at the pistol, which went flying over the head of the holder and into the snow. Simultaneously Hrytsko struck with all his might right at the ear of the attacker. From the other side Hryhory kept him from falling with a similar blow and then kicked him straight in the chest.

The unsuccessful assailant coughed and was dashed into the stone wall behind him.

Hrytsko moved in to finish off the attacker, but Hryhory stopped him. 'Don't bother with him, he's just small fry. Let's go.'

They picked up their belongings and ran off to the station.

They reached the station from the opposite side, and came straight out on to the railway tracks. Just then a freight train was moving off south and they boarded it on the move. They found themselves in an empty car, and settled down in a corner to catch their breath. When the train crossed the

bridge over the Ussuri and picked up speed Hrytsko burst out laughing. 'What kind of a devil was that? What did he want, eh?'

'What did he want?'

'Yes.'

'Probably wanted to rob us. . . . Must have seen all the money we have. . . .'

'Certainly got what was coming to him, poor devil.'

Hryhory was silent; his mind was working madly in an effort to find a logical explanation for what had happened. He couldn't figure it out; perhaps he had rudely jostled the man standing in the doorway?

That must be it! At any rate he was sure he had scared him, he remembered that. He even might have said something, but he didn't think he had. He strained his memory trying to remember who that man was, but it seemed like a disconnected dream and he couldn't make any sense of it. He must have drunk quite a lot.

Or perhaps someone really wanted to rob them. That was possible . . . but his instinct told him that it was not so, and that this incident concealed a great danger. Finally he waved the whole thing aside. 'I only hope that we haven't signed that fellow's death warrant. . . .' They undid the rucksacks and ate their supper. Later they huddled close together in a corner and dozed. The freight train went on without stopping until it got to Lazo in the morning, where the two young men got off.

They made their way to Kim-gi-Soon's place, saddled their horses, ate a quick breakfast, had a drink each and started out. As long as they were in this world of civilization they felt uneasy and in danger. The incident of the night before had acquired a secret meaning of incomprehensible importance. They were in a hurry to get back to their own world, and not until they had returned into the taiga did they breathe freely. It restored their good humour, their self-assurance and peace of mind. Here they were at home! Here they were the masters!

As Hryhory listened to the greeting of whispering cedars telling their eternal story, or recounting the incidents that had happened during their separation, he felt a rising tide of overpowering primitive joy and the sense of invincible strength within him.

'Oh, ho, someone is manoeuvring against me. . . . But we shall see. . . . We shall see!' As long as he was here no power on earth could smoke him out, or take him alive.

Not knowing any other way of releasing their animal-like joy at being back, they galloped their horses, shot at stumps and fallen logs, and yelled like Asiatics.

* * *

Back home, Hrytsko told Natalka of their bachelor escapades, about the painted girls, about the music, the rouged lips, the peculiar dances — about the whole 'circus'. She sat sorting stag hides, preparing them for deer shoes, inspecting them closely, especially the four that came from the *isubra* who was driven crazy by lust and died. She listened to her brother's tale and grew very angry. She wasn't even pleased with the gifts they brought her, but when she was alone with her brother she questioned him closely about their doings, about the queer musicians, dancers and the painted ladies, and she listened carefully with sparkling eyes, trying not to miss a word. What a peculiar world that was! Did they too dance? Why, certainly they danced! These interesting ladies even flirted with them; and Hrytsko showed her how interesting these ladies were. It finally emerged that it wasn't they who danced with the half-naked ladies but the stupid townsmen. They only sat, watched and drank.

Hrytsko gave such a masterly description of this 'circus' and of those townsmen and imitated them so well as he pranced up and down the house that Natalka burst out laughing. She insisted that some day she would see these things for herself. She was specially amused by the account of the 'great gentleman' whom Hryhory pushed out of

the way at the door, and by the 'robber' who fared so badly at midnight. She was only sorry they had not brought his pistol.

'There you are, two fools, two complete fools, two stupid bears; couldn't dance with the girls, couldn't bring the pistol to me for a present, instead you brought a lot of trash as though I were one of those painted girls. Who, in God's name, picked out those candies and chocolates and combs?'

'I did.'

'Then you are a fool.'

'And Hryhory did.'

'Then you are two fools. Complete utter fools!'

10

After 'Cats'

'Well, what do you think, children? Shall we go?' asked old Sirko, hesitating to make the decision himself whether or not they should go after 'cats'. 'Too bad Mykola is not here.'

'Never mind, Father,' said Natalka solemnly. 'There are still three of us. We will go,' and she said this with assurance and determination.

Old Sirko thought for a while, looked at Hryhory, and then grinned. 'It's a special kind of business,' and he slowly shook his head. 'I have news. Two "cats" have been seen near Iman. They say there are a lot of boars around, and naturally wherever you have boars there are "cats". That's how that shepherd lives. But you see. . . . What do you say, my lad, um?' he asked Hryhory and again grinned.

The old man was looking for support. He had never wavered before, but now he wavered. The fourth one was missing. Mykola was missing. Hryhory was a good lad but this was the first time. . . .

Hryhory looked him straight in the eye, and although he wanted to say with the same determination as Natalka 'we will go' he did not think he had the right to decide.

Sirko continued his thinking. It was a very serious matter. A 'cat' is not a rabbit or a fox. . . . Now that Mykola was not with them who knew whether it would work? Old Mrs. Sirko was worried and tried to dissuade them. 'Let it rot.

Haven't you got enough? Are you tired of living? May the devil take the "cats". For heaven's sake stay home.'

This decided the matter. The old man waved his hand. 'Well, let us get ready. God is not without mercy and a Cossack is not without fortune. We'll try our luck. You will take Mykola's place, young man; do you think you can do it?'

'I'll try,' said Hryhory, 'but . . .'

'I know, I know, son. Never mind, I'll prime you a bit — but you are pretty well primed already.'

And so they decided to go.

Mother Sirko was worried but kept quiet. After all, would they listen to her? The worry smouldered in her heart and now and then she wiped away a tear. She recalled the events of last year when they brought her son home with a cracked skull. . . . My God, as though from a war. The damned "cat" had seized him with its jaws. May it be for ever damned!

Natalka tried to comfort her mother. 'Don't worry, Mother. After all, this isn't the first time. We'll soon be home. We'll just go out for a while and return. There aren't any "cats" around anyway . . . they have all run away.'

And the old lady blessed Natalka and the others as she had always done at such times. 'People are always dying here in the taiga; if the "cat" does not get him, he gets lost or drowns in the bog, or freezes to death, or a bear or wild boar rips him open, or he just catches a cold; and so gives up his spirit to God.'

This time they dressed differently. They wore padded trousers and short jackets with vests made of heavy elk rawhide and gloves made of the same material. They took, too, several spare pairs of belts also made of tough hide. In a word, the accent was on skin and hide, even to headgear.

The horses were loaded lightly — a tent, an iron stove, food, spirit, marlia, fodder, rope, wire and a good axe. They took

the dogs, four pairs of skis and set out. They rode most of the way, getting off only when they had to plough through snowdrifts. Sometimes they followed paths but usually they went cross-country, across ravines, down winding slopes and straight through the bush. The horses often slipped and fell; eventually they had to cut grooves in their front shoes. The reflection of the snow from the sun was blinding. The taiga stood frozen into stillness, and only the writing of large and small paw tracks in the snow informed those who could read that the place was far from being deserted. When they became cramped from sitting in the saddle with the temperature at fifty degrees below zero, they dismounted and put on their skis. In the open places Hryhory, Hrytsko and Natalka raced each other, or flew down the winding slopes until the wind whistled in their ears. Once in a while one of them would have a ski fouled by a branch or weeds lightly covered by snow and would take a heavy tumble, to the amusement of the others. Hryhory was quite skilled on skis. The type they used were better than the sporting type and no poles were needed. Sporting skis would have been too narrow here and would sink. Theirs were about three times as wide, somewhat shorter and covered underneath with rawhide with the fur lying the right way. They moved forward without any resistance, but in reverse the fur acted as a brake.

At night they made camp right in the snow, without pitching a tent. To windward they banked up the snow, then they made a big fire, and in between the snow and the fire they laid branches of spruce and pine. These camps were dry and warm. Here they would dry their clothes and drink tea, or old Sirko improvised 'hunters' tea, by using twigs of hazelwood together with the brown dry leaf, which they pronounced 'not worse than China'. In the morning they went on; the blinding sun and the wind burnt their skin, which turned bronze.

On the Bikin river they saw a wonder of wonders; a frozen waterfall glistening in the sunlight from a high steep

cliff about two hundred feet straight up. It stood there like an icy wall, shining with all the colours of the rainbow, which gave it the appearance of flowing — in fact it was dead still. One of nature's wonders! In the summer there rose in this area countless springs, and the water fell off the cliffs in hundreds of tiny streams, each carrying with it particles of the ground from which it came: green, reddish, brown, and yellow. When the frost came, the water continued flowing but part of it was constantly being frozen and so this wonder, from the bottom, from the river, right up to the little stream, was created. Painted in this way and further adorned by the azure sky and the turquoise ice, this wonderful waterfall stood and glistened. This was the first time Hryhory had seen anything like it and he couldn't take his eyes off its beauty.

In one place they went through the cedar forest. They wanted to get some nuts, but those that had fallen were deeply covered with snow, those that hadn't fallen were near the tops of the trees and out of reach. They shot some cones down and found the cedar nuts inside numerous and very tasty. The shell was about as large as a good cucumber, in appearance similar to pine cones, and under each scale, as if under a lid, were nuts about the size of a bean.

And so they arrived at the River Iman. This stream, so fast and turbulent in summer, now lay still under a heavy coat of ice and snowdrifts. The snow was clean and undisturbed except in the centre, where, under a layer of fresh snow, like veins under the skin, there were the marks of a little-travelled road and on top two recent narrow lines. Between these were the marks of horses' hooves. Someone had been through yesterday in two sleighs. From the width of the runners Sirko concluded that the travellers had been Old Believers going upstream. That meant they had gone down before the last snowfall. Now they were returning, so they must have been to Iman. This he read, and none could have convinced him otherwise. They turned and followed the sleigh marks.

Here Hryhory had a chance to read the taiga newspaper — the journalism of the virgin forests. But what he read made a greater impression on him than all the works of Balzac or Stendhal, which he had once read and had now forgotten. Only five words were written on the snow in large letters:

'Fiona sends regards to Medvin.'

It was as though someone had struck him on the head with a wooden mallet. What's this? Which Medvin? Could it be . . . ? No, that's not possible! Fiona — that's that beauty, the wife of the Tungus, Dyadorov. She's a Russian from among the Old Believers. What a misfortune to have bound his life with that woman. He loved her, worshipped her, did everything for her; and she — well, as they said, they were not matched. Her eyes were turned in other directions, and, my God, there were many volunteers. She was pretty, big and strong like a horse, and all the Party chiefs who visited this area, various officials from the militia or NKVD, all have grazed in that pasture. And Dyadorov is away for months on end hunting, and trying to provide. When he found out, he was going to cut her and all of them to pieces. They took him away, kept him for a while and finally let him out after nearly scaring him to death.

'Medvin' — that was the name of Hryhory's one-time persecutor who was first an interrogator and then section chief of one of the NKVD branches. That name shook him to the core; just that one name. But it couldn't be; that was ten thousand kilometres away. It must be a coincidence — some Old Believer. And although he was almost convinced that this was a coincidence his inner upheaval continued for a long time because that name brought to mind a storm of frightful memories of suppressed anger and of infernal, eternal hate.

The others did not notice what was happening to him; they read the message, laughed, talked about it for a while and went on. Nor could they have seen what was happening

to him, because the pain and bitterness over his broken life, over his ruined youth was not apparent in the bronzed face, except that the jaw was set harder than usual.

About a kilometre farther on the same message was repeated: 'Fiona sends regards to Medvin', and again his heart pounded in his chest in spite of what he knew was merely a coincidence in names.

This was repeated four times, as though some evil spirit was stalking his peace of mind.

Hryhory had worked his way to the front and now led the way accompanied by his misleading, disturbing thoughts. It was widely known that recently either a military investigation committee or some officials of the NKVD had been going around in the taiga. It was rumoured that they were about to build something somewhere, or perhaps to 'clear the frontier of enemies of the people'. Perhaps it was both. While still in prison he had learned from those who had been in these parts before that many military projects were under way in this area. He had learned then that along the frontier they were building a complete line of fortifications and that many of the hillocks which looked innocent had been made into veritable fortresses. As to the second objective — that is, clearing the frontier of enemies of the people — he had seen such operations carried out before.

These and many similar thoughts evoked by that hated name were now churning around in his head.

At the point where the Iman turned sharply to the right, southward, and continued to wind its way between the crests of Sikhote-Alin, they turned to the left and went eastward.

Eventually they reached the Zmiyna where an old Udeg lived all alone in a cave. He had been there for many years awaiting his end. He was almost completely blind and for some unknown reason he was called 'Inokenty Petrovich, the master of Yaurin'. Yaurin was a place somewhere in the small Khinkhan, and he had lived there most of his life,

completely alone in the vast area. He hunted and was his own master. When they opened the gold-mines there, he left and wandered off into the wilderness, eventually coming to this deserted spot. He looked more like a dried mushroom than a human being. He caught fish, birds and occasionally a squirrel, and his catch netted him enough for some vile tobacco, some pressed tea, and matches. This seemed to be sufficient for him and in a silence accompanied only by his memories he awaited death. The good folks did not forget him; occasionally hunters came by and left things for him, even a drop of alcohol now and then. Like a little chipmunk he lived there and smoked his pipe with his eyes closed. Long ago he had been a Shaman among his tribe. Even now he knew how to get on with his gods and they guarded and protected him. No one knew what his real name was, he was just 'Inokenty Petrovich'. With this name he was an eloquent symbol of his tribe, the now half-mythical tribe of Udegs which has reached the edge and is standing on the threshold of extinction. It was that strange naïve tribe of the children of nature who have now died out like small children as the result of the gifts of foreign colonization: from alcohol, syphilis, etc. These were the final days of the last of the Udegs, 'the last of the Mohicans', without even a name. This patriarch, this high priest and bearer of the traditions and the national pride of his tribe, was capable of only one thing — going off to this unapproachable bush and dying, branded with a foreign name.

Here old Sirko left the horses, because it was in this area, near the upper reaches of the Yrin, that the 'cats' had been reported. They gave Inokenty Petrovich a block of pressed tea and some tobacco, and the shrivelled beardless old man was as happy as a child. Not being able to speak either Russian or Ukrainian, he thanked them in sign language, and gave them to understand that he knew that they wanted him to look after the horses.

Now the tiger-hunters prepared themselves for the job

in hand: they put on their leather clothes of heavy rawhide, they packed their rucksacks with food and indispensable items. Hrytsko carried the small folded tent and around his waist some heavy rope. Natalka also carried rope and an axe. Hryhory carried an axe, rope, ammunition pouches and a campers' cooking pot. Old Sirko was away for a long time in the bush selecting a stout straight staff about three yards long and about four inches thick, which he smoothed with an axe. They fixed their skis, slung the rifles over their shoulders, put the dogs on leashes and set off at a walking pace.

The terrible frosts and wind had 'eaten up' the snow and what remained was hard packed and easily carried men and dogs except in the thickets where the snow was intact and sifted like sand. In spots it was knee deep, in the ravines and in sheltered places you could drown in it, but in the wide-open high spots there was hardly any snow at all.

On the way old Sirko coached Hryhory about his forthcoming role. He had had many opportunities to test Hryhory, who had passed each test to the old man's satisfaction. Without this confidence old Sirko would not have set out on the 'cat' hunt this winter. But he took great care to instruct Hryhory on the techniques involved in this work.

'Now listen carefully and don't forget. You are taking the place of Mykola. You see, this thing depends on complete co-operation; if we stay by each other success will come of it. That is why we worked only as a family, because an outsider is not likely to risk his head for one of us. Without this co-operation this business is impossible. . . .

'I don't know how they catch these cats in books; we have our own method — only four of us bare-handed, and the dogs, of course; you couldn't do it without them.

'Although a cat is big and clever, a human being is more clever. We do not catch mature animals because it cannot be done; we simply shoot them, and catch the young ones.

They are just as big as the old ones but they weigh less — about three hundred pounds — and they are not as smart as the old cats. Even so a young cat can grab a good-sized colt with its teeth, toss it over its back and carry it off, the devil knows how far. But when we get after it, it can never get away.

'The main thing is nerve, speed and yelling. Once we are upon it, then there must be yelling and shouting.

'At first the dogs chase it without giving it a chance to catch a breath. Probably it is not really afraid of the dogs, but we are always right behind them. The dogs chase it — sometimes a whole day — until it cannot run away any more. Then it makes for a rock or some other cover from one side, turns with its back to the cover and occupies a defensive position. The dogs attack and the cat fights back. Here is where we come in! This staff — that's the first thing. As soon as the cat sees a human being it forgets the dogs and turns on the person. I push the staff at the cat and it grabs at it with its jaws. The important thing is not to get frightened and to feint expertly. That is the way we did it: I went first with the staff; as soon as the cat seized it Mykola jumped on its back and put a noose around its neck. As he pulled it tight I tossed the staff away and grabbed its forepaws so that it could not claw Mykola. Brother, that has to be done quickly, before you can bat an eye, and above all you must yell with all your breath, with all your might, as though you were being cut to death. You see, that petrifies the beast, its nerves can't take it, and it loses its strength. So don't be afraid when we begin shouting, don't think it has ripped open somebody's stomach (even if it has) but just yell too, as though your stomach has been ripped open. . . . Do you understand? Well, there you are.

'Another thing: don't be afraid of it, it's only a cat. And God forbid that you should hit it with anything. You might wound it and then all this effort will be for nothing; a wounded one will not fetch a quarter of the price. . . .'

As they walked they carefully examined all the thickets. Hrytsko and Natalka walked on the flanks, the old man kept a sharp lookout and continued talking:

'There are times when the cat will knock the staff out of your hands and throw itself at you. Then you have to seize it by the jaws and choke it so that it can't get you in its teeth. It happened to me once. . . . If you had to hold it that way for a minute then it would tear you and your clothes to shreds, but it lasted perhaps a second before the boys had the noose around its neck and legs and brought it down to the ground. My boys worked well! They wouldn't allow their father to be eaten up, so don't you allow it either, because after it's through with me it will have you for dessert. That's how it is.

'When we begin chasing do not get ahead of the others and do not hang back. Watch me. One covers the rear, because if you happen to meet a crafty one it will come around from the rear and dispose of us one by one before we know it. Now then, as soon as you see me give it the staff, mount it immediately, hold the rope this way, then slip it this way, and yell! Yell, but don't sleep on the job; work fast or you won't even know when it snaps your head off. . . . Wait! . . .'

Natalka was standing holding back Zalivay and signalling to the others. They came immediately and Natalka pointed to two tracks in the snow. Two cats had gone through the deep snow. Old Sirko examined the tracks carefully.

'An old female and a two-year-old, this morning, walked quietly, not hungry . . . on their way to a lair. . . .' He whispered this information.

Hryhory was amazed by the change in the dogs. They sniffed the tracks, the hair stood up straight on their backs, and they kept pulling on the leashes but not violently. Every now and then they looked up at the people as though seeking an answer to a question. They were well trained.

From the behaviour of the dogs Hryhory could see that they had come across tigers. Zalivay was so angry that he

shook all over. Natalka had to hold him by the collar, not trusting the leash. He only growled deep in his throat, knowing well he was not allowed to bark or howl.

'The important thing now is to break up that pair skilfully.' Old Sirko doffed his cap and crossed himself — 'Grant us, O God!' — then he pulled the cap down firmly. 'Well, children, watch yourselves!'

They untied their ropes, prepared them carefully and slung them over their necks. Each loaded his rifle and slung it over his back in order to have his hands free. Sirko turned to Hryhory:

'Watch carefully. When I shout and start shooting, then you shoot straight in the air, load and shoot again and shout, then sling your rifle behind your back and follow me with all your might. And don't look back!'

Sirko took the leash of Rooshay, Hrytsko took Nepra, and Natalka took Zalivay, and they began following the tracks. Sirko went first, then Hryhory, then Hrytsko, and finally Natalka. She carried the Winchester in her hands and kept looking to the sides and to the rear. Her job had already begun, because cats are treacherous, especially when there is an old female with a young one. The cat could easily be near by, even now planning a campaign of action against her enemies.

The tracks were mostly parallel, only now and then crossing each other. They went into the worst thickets where a hunter will not ordinarily go. In specially dangerous spots old Sirko would go around never dropping his eyes from the tracks and at the same time examining every rock and fallen tree for any sign of the beasts.

Hryhory tried to mobilize all his hunter's faculties, especially his sight. A pain developed in his temples from concentrating on Sirko and the area in front. Hours passed as they covered mile after mile over high clearings, through valleys and impassable thickets. The tracks went on and on in a southerly direction from one patch of thick underbrush to another, over rocks and sometimes over clearings . . . every

moment they could expect to spot them, right here and now. . . .

They followed the tracks well into the afternoon without stopping to eat. In one place the tigers had danced around under a tree and Sirko inspected everything carefully. Then Natalka spoke: 'Look up there in the tree.'

There, about ten feet off the ground, between two stout branches of an oak tree, they saw a beautiful black tail. 'A sable! Who could have set the trap?' Although it was forbidden to trap sables, they took it since it had already been trapped. Here Hryhory understood the meaning of the various traps that he and Hrytsko had set. He also learned how careful the cats are; they had milled around here for some time but they had not taken the sable, having sensed that a human being had been here.

Hrytsko put the sable in his bag. 'One can't just leave two thousand five hundred to rot. The depot will accept it as Kamchatka sable.'

Farther on they found the spot where the tigers had rested under a tree. Old Sirko stopped and felt the snow, looked around, thought for a while and shrugged his shoulders. He concluded that the tigers had been there recently but that they might have been scared away. A little later they came upon some tracks of wild boar and quickened their pace, because the tiger tracks showed that the cats were now hunting.

Under the constant physical and nervous strain they forgot about food and continued following the cats until dusk, when the tracks led them to a river. 'Dawbikhe,' said the old man, speaking like a conductor announcing the next station.

The tigers had stood on the shore, looked at the snow-covered river with the sleigh tracks. These tracks and probably the scent of horses and humans made them turn sharply up and away from the river. The wild-boar tracks continued straight across the river.

'Stop,' said old Sirko. 'Nobody hunts tigers at night.'

The river meandered here between the high clearings and at this point formed a sharp bend. Sirko decided to camp right there. They put up the tent, pushed away the snow, collected a pile of dry wood and twigs and cut down some pine and spruce branches. They made a fire and boiled two rounds of tea, and ate their meat raw in thin shavings dipped in salt.

After supper Hrytsko skinned the sable, which had thawed out by then. 'Well, what do you think of it, Father?' asked Hrytsko, admiring the pelt. Old Sirko was an expert in furs. He picked up the pelt, examined it, described its good points and added in the tone of the inspector at the depot: 'There will be a fine of two thousand or six months in jail! But since it is his own fault for sticking his nose where he wasn't invited, we will report him as originating in Kamchatka or Sakhalin where hunting sables is permitted.'

The sable was really beautiful. The back glistened with a bluish-black cast and beneath that was a sky-blue down. Hrytsko held the sable next to his sister's face: 'This will be yours, my child, if you catch the cat.'

They set out with the first light of dawn, leaving the tent and everything else that wasn't absolutely indispensable. Apart from their hunting equipment they took only matches, some food and a flask of spirits. The old man figured that during the day they would catch up with and corner those cats — 'and if not today then at the latest tomorrow.'

The tracks wound back and forth as they did the day before; they could even see claw marks where there was little snow. In spots where the snow was deeper and covered by a hardened crust one of the tracks broke through constantly. 'That's the mother. A heavy devil! Might be over seven hundred pounds.' This gave them further assurance that the other one was young: between two hundred and three hundred pounds. Even so he would be as tall as the old one, only much thinner. He hadn't yet picked up his full weight and strength, and, of course, experience. That was why he was still with his mother.

Suddenly everything moved with lightning speed. In front of some thick undergrowth old Sirko dropped the staff and picked up his Winchester. Hryhory saw the quick movement of a striped body and then there was a shot! A huge cat leaped upward as though propelled by a spring. Hryhory fired at the animal, and other shots echoed from the rear. The old man was now shouting and screaming like a Tatar or a Chechen. At the same time he was firing into the air and moving quickly after the second animal which flashed by and disappeared. Released from his leash, Rooshay dashed off like the wind, followed almost immediately by Zalivay and Nepra, their howling adding to the infernal noise, which reverberated through the taiga.

Hryhory skied with all his might and, following the old man's example, slung the rifle over his back, ready for anything.

Natalka had turned and fired once more into the huge female which was lying in the snow, pawing the air. Then she caught up with her brother and pleaded:

'Hrytsko, dear brother, I will follow him! I will be the third . . . look after the rear . . .'

This wild, mad chase went on for one, two hours; but it seemed endless. Hryhory was afraid of only one thing: could he stand up to it, would he have enough strength, would he pass the crucial test? For the lives of these beloved people — the life of the old man especially — were now clearly in his hands.

The dogs were always within earshot, and their barking was punctuated now and then by howling and yelping. Then the old man pressed on harder and his frightful shouts echoed through the bush. It was his way of encouraging man and dog and of reminding the cat that, like relentless death, he was right here on its tracks.

Tiger and dog tracks zig-zagged right and left; often the top crust of ice could not hold the cat and it broke through, deep into the snow. In places there were brown

blood spots in the snow — the cat couldn't keep up this pace for long. . . .

'Hurry up, hurry!' yelled the old man. 'We will lose the dogs. It will tear them to shreds. . . .' — and as they followed the winding, tortuous course the overhanging branches tore gashes in their faces.

Now the yelping of the dogs was quite near, and old Sirko put on the heavy rawhide gloves which he had shed before. They could see the dogs in front of them dashing around beneath an overhanging rock. Immediately the old man slipped off his skis and, holding the staff like a spear, went forward. . . . As Hryhory bent down for a split second to his skis Natalka went past and he saw in an instant how she had slipped her skis and they went sizzling past his own.

Later he often recalled this moment but could not reconstruct exactly how all this happened. He was the first to reach Father Sirko. . . . He only remembered how Natalka yelled . . . how he leaped with every ounce of strength . . . a struggle . . . a deafening mixture of human, dog and tiger sounds . . . He slipped the noose on and immediately found himself at the bottom clinging to the tiger's neck . . . everything rolled over him . . . he tried to shout with his eyes and mouth filled with snow. . . .

The whole thing lasted perhaps ten seconds, but it seemed to him that it lasted through eternity . . . and then a sudden silence and Natalka's frightened face peering into his . . . and then friendly laughter. . . .

'Let him go!' — that was old Sirko, laughing, dishevelled and perspiring. 'Let him go or you will choke him. . . .'

'Is it all over?' The din above fell apart and he was dragged out of the heavily trampled snow. Only now Hryhory could see how he had dug his bare hands into the brown mane and they had frozen in that position . . . and he remembered that he had taken off the rawhide gloves so that they would not get in the way. . . .

The beast lay almost motionless, now and then twitching convulsively. Hryhory finally opened his fingers that had gone rigid. The seconds of general fear and apprehension had now turned into the prolonged laughter of relief. He was intact, nothing had been bitten off or broken. The tension was released; Hryhory, covered with snow, and exhausted, joined in the general mirth. Hrytsko was beside himself: 'And I was sure that it had eaten you. I could only see your deer shoes sticking out of the snow.'

They rested, and then they slowly picked up their belongings. Some of their equipment like the rounds of ammunition had to be dug out of the snow. The old man's cap was the last thing they found.

A large striped cat lay on the trampled snow. Its legs were tied together both ways, and a noose was pulled tight over its neck. It seemed to be dead; only the tail shook a little and curled slowly like a green twig in the fire. Occasionally a frightened convulsive tremor ran down its whole body.

'It's dying,' cried Hrytsko in fright. 'The noose is too tight!'

'Don't worry,' the old man quieted him down, 'this is a cat; you can't choke it as easily as that.'

They looked over the damage to themselves and to the dogs. Old Sirko's jaw was bleeding from a deep scratch which he dismissed lightly. He couldn't even remember whether it happened during the chase or here. Natalka had a good-sized bump on her head either from a rifle butt or from somebody's forehead. Hrytsko was all right except for his rear, which he rubbed on the sly. Apparently after the cat had been tied the beast had kicked out with its hind legs and sat him heavily on a rock. Outwardly Hryhory looked perfectly intact; the fact that his ribs ached and that his lip was cut inside was a personal secret.

The dogs lay in a row on the snow with their tongues hanging out as if it were midsummer. But they were much

worse off. Rooshay had a torn ear, Zalivay had a large chunk of skin torn loose on his side. He was licking it, carefully picking up the loose skin and spreading it back over the wound with his tongue. Old Sirko pulled out a knife and cut off the loose skin; the intelligent dog only yelped a little, and then licked the old man's hand.

'Never mind! This isn't too bad,' said the old man; 'it will grow over. . . .'

Things were much worse with Nepra. Somewhere along the chase she had pierced her eye and now it was flowing with blood and tears. She looked sadly at the humans. Sirko examined the eye and shook his head: 'Well, perhaps it will be all right . . . it's a pity . . . yet there never was a war without victims. . . . Perhaps it will pull through.' He then walked over to the motionless cat and loosened the noose. He muttered happily: 'This is truly good fortune. One of us is lucky!' He found his staff and pushed it through between the cat's legs. Then he went to work making a cage.

While he worked on the cage, tying it together out of stout poles, Natalka and the boys collected the skis, made a fire and began preparing a meal. They were just beginning to realize how hungry they were.

'Look, boys,' shouted Sirko after a while, 'this is the Sobor!' These rocks where the dogs finally cornered the tiger were well known to the old man. Hunters referred to them as the Sobor because they resembled a ruined church. They stood there separately like a building, worn down by wind, rain, frost and time. There were caves among the rocks; it was an ancient haunt of tigers.

'Go over in that direction.' He pointed with the axe. Hryhory and Hrytsko put on their skis and went off.

Before long they reached the spot where the two cats had been scared off; coming from a different direction they were amazed to find themselves on the spot where the chase had begun at morning. After a while they found the other cat. It was a huge female, a terrifying example

of an old Ussurian tiger. She lay there stiff on the trampled snow. Blood was spattered all around and the open jaws were filled with frozen bloody foam. She had received a mortal wound from the first shot and there were four more bullet holes in the body, the last one apparently right through the head.

Hryhory was amazed at the sight. They tied the fore-legs together and then put a rope around the legs and the head and hitched themselves to the rope.

'We will ruin the skin,' complained Hryhory.

'That's nothing,' said Hrytsko. 'This skin is worth only one-fiftieth of that little sable. Let's go.'

'Why so cheap? I should have thought . . .'

'I don't know why. We never skin a dead tiger; we deliver it to the depot just as it is. The biggest one will fetch about one thousand at the depot. They sell them, entrails and all, somewhere in China.'

The tiger slid easily over the crusted snow, and they soon had the dead one near the living. When they got their bearings they discovered that they had gone around in circles all day. They had caught the live one almost on the same spot where they had begun the chase.

The cage was ready. It was about nine feet long, low and narrow. The top was open. In the meantime the young tiger was coming back to life, and the old man hurried: 'Come along, youngsters. Let's take it.'

They lifted the cat, using the staff stuck between its legs, and placed it in the cage. Old Sirko covered the top with stout staves that he had prepared, drove the pegs home firmly and tried each of them for strength. When he was satisfied he pulled out the staff from between the legs.

'Well, praised be the Lord! Now we shall have breakfast, lunch, supper and a snack. . . .'

It was getting too dark to travel, so they spent the night there. They cleared away the snow and sat in the shelter of the rocks. They made a large fire and slept better than

they would have close to a stove. But before falling asleep they talked for a long time. As usual after a successful venture, the old man was in good humour and had a talking streak. He recounted many hunts and as he talked he dug around in the fire:

'You see how intelligently everything is arranged in this world. This cat, for instance, bears only one and then not every year, because if they bred like mice or pigs the tigers would have devoured everything in the world long ago. It seems that the bigger and the fiercer the animal the less it breeds, and the smaller he is the more he breeds. Why are so many mice born? Because everything eats them: polecat, marten, skunk, and ermine, and the owl and the fox, all feed upon them. So they have to breed fast and in large numbers so that their race should not die out. But no animal eats a bear or this cat. On the contrary, they need a great deal of food and that is why they breed so slowly.'

Yes, the old man had seen much of life, had thought a good deal about it, and in such matters could easily have advised many learned professors.

'And you know, one thing sticks to another like a flea to a sheepskin coat. If you want to find a skunk, look for mice; if you want to find a wolf, look for a deer; if you want to find this tiger, look for wild boars. You see, they are all shepherds and they are all specialists — engineers. . . .'

Now and then there was a burst of laughter, especially when the old man spoke about people, about his meetings with town people, and about his observations and his unexpected conclusions.

In the morning they set out for the camp where they had left their tent. Four pairs of skis were fastened together and the cage was placed on the top to form a kind of sleigh. The dead cat was tied to the back of the sleigh.

They reached the tent about noon. Now there occurred a minor incident which soon grew in significance and put an end to the epic hunt. All this happened quickly and

irrevocably like a sudden fire, an avalanche or an earthquake which hits where it is least expected.

Their tent stood intact and awaited its owners. They were surprised upon coming near: the tent was untouched and empty but someone had been there and had spent the night. Lower down on the ice there were the remains of hay where the horses had stood. Whoever had stayed there had drunk up all the spirit in one container and had taken another away.

'Where is the sable?' inquired Natalka.

'I hung it here. . . .'

'It's gone . . . and the axe we left here is gone.'

Old Sirko frowned. 'It was not a local person,' he muttered through his teeth. 'The devils, there were two of them. They were not of the taiga — taiga people would not break the law. . . .'

They all went down to the river and examined the tracks which showed that the sleigh had left recently, down the Dawbikhe to the Iman. . . .

Hryhory looked round near the tent and found the butt of an expensive cigarette, the 'Golden Brand'. His heart beat violently. . . . Silently, before the others could come back from the river, he freed his skis from under the cage, fastened them and set out. On the way he loaded his rifle. He went straight through the bush, across the neck of land formed by the winding Dawbikhe.

Hryhory knew the course of the river in this area, and he knew that if he went cross-country he could outstrip even an express train if it followed the winding course of the river. The only question was time, but from the tracks near the tent it was apparent that the 'guests' had left not more than an hour before. He moved fast as though he were again chasing the tiger.

Eventually he reached the river and the momentum of his skis carried him out on the ice. He listened but there was no sound; only a shot in the distance. He noticed horses' hoofmarks which were quite fresh; they must have just gone

by. Beyond this point the river made a large arc to the right around a high clearing and on the other side of the clearing it joined the Iman. Hryhory sighted a straight line along the centre of the clearing and started out again. . . . Again he reached the river bank with such speed that he was carried well out on the ice off the steep bank. He turned sharply; and immediately took down his rifle. . . .

A pair of horses came galloping around the turn. The wind blew in Hryhory's back. Not so long ago he was dragging a live and a dead tiger — their hair was still stuck to his clothes and his hands still bore marks of tiger blood. . . . Now he went forward, rifle in hand, to meet the oncoming sleigh. Two figures who had been sitting in the sleigh covered up to their ears now threw aside the blankets and displayed a 'Budenivka' and a Yezhov cap. They reached for their weapons.

Suddenly the horses caught the scent of the tiger, snorted, reared and turned sharply and sent the sleigh and its contents flying.

Hryhory glued his eyes to the two figures. He didn't even notice how the maddened team of horses made a large arc around him and galloped off with the overturned sleigh bouncing after them.

One of the figures got up and made a move towards the wooded shore. The other was desperately trying to free a rifle, and finally pulled out a pistol.

'Stand still!' shouted Hryhory. 'Drop the pistol! Up with your hands! Three paces apart! Stand there!'

Hryhory walked up to them, and suddenly his heart pounded madly in his chest. His eyes sank fang-like into the one in the Yezhov cap . . . and then he burst out in uproarious, frightening, joyful laughter.

'*Medvin!*'

My God! This moment, this moment of wonder, of irrepressible gladness. Yes, there is a God on earth and in heaven!

And Medvin, that brave hero, that terrible judge and master of the souls of 'puny folks', that detestable thief and breaker of the law of the taiga, stood there and trembled . . . yes, trembled; even his lips trembled, and the eyes betrayed the soul of a loathsome coward. Three bars on his collar — like three splashes of blood.

'The great chief himself? Yes. . . . Greetings. . . .'

The other one, with only one shoulder bar, a regional chief, was stepping backwards stealthily. The Devil paired them up, thought Hryhory, and then he spoke:

'Well, that must be all, "comrade investigator"! That's everything . . . the investigation is finished,' and then his voice became slow and hard:

'Now I shall be your tribunal!'

He raised the rifle and fired. The other man turned and made for the forest. Hryhory watched him and listened to his vengeful heart hammering in his breast. . . . The one who was running away turned and fired his revolver. By that time he had almost reached the bank.

'Is that the way you were taught to shoot?' announced Hryhory. Almost absent-mindedly he raised his rifle and fired. The figure threw up its arms, waved them in the air and rolled down the steep bank.

For a moment Hryhory stood motionless. His thoughts flew by on the wings of a hurricane. . . . Yes. That was everything — now to Manchuria, to China, to Japan or straight to the devil. . . . There it was. Now everything was cut off with one stroke — enemies, friends, and peace of mind — everything. . . .

Wait! Nobody is responsible for my actions. He looked over the clean expanse of snow and then wrote with his finger in large letters:

'Judged, and the judgement executed by me — Hryhory Mnohohrishny. As to the crime — this dog knows very well.' And then he signed it.

So . . . I wonder where those poor horses went? They will die. . . . A pity. . . . Well. . . . He stood for a moment,

sighed, waved his hand, hung his rifle over his neck and turned to go. And there stood Natalka looking straight at him!

'What have you done?'

Hryhory took her by the hand and led her away. She did not struggle — she walked quietly after him but he felt her hand trembling. It did not tremble from fear.

'What have you done?'

'Listen, Natalka! What I did I had to do. Do you understand? I have killed a dragon. You didn't see it; do you understand, you didn't see it! When I am far away from here — then tell your people about it. . . .'

She looked at him and her lips began to tremble. Her whispered question betrayed surprise and consternation:

'Where will you go?'

'Wait. Is your Winchester registered?'

'No.'

'That's good. Give me your Winchester and you take this rifle. It isn't registered either, but . . . perhaps Father will look after it. . . .'

'But wait, please wait . . .' she pleaded. 'All right, you did what you thought had to be done . . . perhaps you know best; but where will you go?'

Dear God, how much human feeling can be expressed in so few words! All those things she had kept silent about for months. . . . Hryhory felt a sharp tightening around the throat. And the girl continued:

'It is absolutely safe,' she cried, 'in our place. . . . And we could go farther into the wilderness. . . .'

Hryhory took her hand and held it tightly.

'Don't be silly, little girl. You don't know who this man was. In a week they will turn this wilderness upside down. They will search — this is an important dog. But now I know there is a God in heaven! Yes, there is! This dog hammered my kidneys, broke my bones, crushed my youth and tried to scratch my heart. . . . He tortured me for two years, and then sent me to an insane asylum; and all that

just because I loved my fatherland. And in the name of my mother I swore then that I would have his head for it. I escaped from the asylum . . . they caught me, and others of his type tortured me again. . . . Then they sentenced me to twenty-five years! I am only twenty-five now! And all that because I loved my unfortunate land and people. . . .

'I swore that I would kill any of them like mad dogs. I escaped from the prisoner convoy. They were taking me from the Ukraine to penal servitude, to a slow death, and they guarded me like bloodhounds. But I escaped. I jumped from that death train — into the night, to death, to fortune.

'And I had good fortune. . . . I found my way to you. Yes, I had good fortune; the brave are always fortunate, as your mother would say. . . . Embrace her for me and kiss her for me . . . sister.'

And then Natalka clung close to him and wept bitterly, helplessly, like a child. They were parting. This was for ever. And she kissed him, hungrily, desperately; she put her very soul into that kiss.

Then she broke away suddenly, clenched her teeth, quickly slipped off her ammunition pouch, gave it to him and took his rifle in return.

She turned and went away quickly . . . stopped . . . wavered, then turned again and disappeared. After a while he heard her voice from the thickets. It was almost sombre and betrayed the tears that welled beneath:

'Follow this brook until you reach the shelter . . . take a horse, food . . . and matches. . . . Father will not say anything. . . . I will explain to him when we get back. Then follow the valleys westward . . . to the Ussuri . . . and to Manchuria. . . .'

Tears did not let her finish what she might have wanted to say.

Poor . . . proud, primitive . . . wonderful Natalka. . . .

Hryhory felt as though his heart was being wrenched by

powerful tongs. He stood and clenched his jaws until they ached to keep himself from shouting wildly, desperately. Down his cheek rolled a solitary tear; it escaped somehow.

A heavy, flaky snow began to fall. It covered footsteps; it covered everything. . . . And a row of snowflakes, like white doves, sat along the barrel of the Winchester.

11

Nothing Venture, Nothing Win

Coming from the west the Manchurian frontier appears near Khabarovsk along the Amur, and from Khabarovsk southward the border follows the Ussuri river. The best place to cross the frontier is in Birobidjan where the forest is thickest and most primitive, the Amur river is narrowest and bordered on both sides by the Great Khinkhan. Hryhory knew this. He had learned this perfectly long ago, just in case. Now the moment had come. But could he? . . . No! He couldn't go just like that. He must go back there, to see — just a glimpse — for the last time. He must see Father, and Mother . . . perhaps the only close and dear ones on this earth. He must say good-bye, he must kneel before them and ask their blessing for this long journey into the dark, frightening unknown . . . perhaps even death.

Suffering this internal strife, for three days he walked through the snow. He could not, in the end, control this desire to go back. He had to go.

He reached the hunters' shelter and stood beside the horses near the haystack. They recognized him and whinnied. He patted his horse and looked to see that everything was well. The hunters would be back shortly. He did not dare take a horse but he took food, matches, a bottle of spirits and a handful of ammunition. The old blind Udig, Inokenty Petrovich, was not in his cave and Hryhory was glad. He took what he needed and left. That happened the day before yesterday. Yesterday he broke through the ice and had to dry himself. He went plunging ahead all night, and all

night he had thought the same thing, over and over again. Yesterday from far off he saw a little procession going along the river — 'ours' it occurred to him — he wanted to shout and run after them but instead he only sighed.

The procession moved slowly along the ice. The horses pulled a long sleigh loaded with the tiger and all their belongings. There was one skier in the front and two in the rear. A dog ran back and forth barking a complaint; nobody seemed to pay any attention to him. Hryhory felt an ache in his heart . . . there was Natalka . . . there was Natalka. She was leading the way, leaning forward against the wind. He visualized her determined look and his heart . . . No, you can't say what is in the heart when it is bathing in blood.

The party soon disappeared around that icy waterfall that glittered in the sun. A mighty mountain god had waved his wand and frozen the giant, painted him in all the colours of the rainbow, fitted him out with transparent glassy armour — and now he stood there glistening with cold light.

Hryhory continued to stand there for a long time listening to Zalivay's barking in the distance. He stood for a long time after the sound was gone.

* * *

It was still dark, there was just a suggestion of dawn, but a fire was already burning in the home of the Sirkos.

Hearing a slight noise in the distance, the dogs started barking. Hryhory whistled softly and the dogs were soon at his side, dashing back and forth, greeting him happily. They smelled the Winchester and were mad with joy.

A beam of light lay on the snow. As usual, the Sirko family was up early. But perhaps they hadn't been to bed, perhaps something had happened. No, things were as usual; they must be getting ready to go to town. . . .

With his head bent low, old Sirko sat on a bunk fully dressed. He sat there frowning as though trying to figure

out what else he should wear — a fur coat or a deer-skin jacket; should he saddle the bay or the chestnut?

Natalka sat sewing deer shoes made out of the hide of an *isubra*. She was embroidering them with white fluff. She was pale, and sullen like her father. Her head followed her work from left to right but her mind seemed far away.

Hrytsko sat near the fire trying to pour buckshot; he was going deer-hunting. But the work wasn't going well.

Mother Sirko was cleaning frozen cranberries which looked like drops of blood, or perhaps a broken string of red beads.

There was a depressing silence in the house, the same kind of depressing silence that had overwhelmed them on the way home when, in a few words, Natalka told them what she had seen, and what Hryhory had told her. When they reached home she broke into tears and kissed her mother.

Hrytsko was angry with his adopted brother for disregarding their friendship and going away without even a farewell. His heart boiled when he heard his sister's story. My God! He didn't have the slightest notion! His immediate reaction was to go back to search for Hryhory, but he soon realized that it was too late; and he was silent. Silence was the only thing left in the name of that friendship. It was the same with Natalka and with Sirko — like a conspiracy.

It was high time they were getting ready to go to the depot in the city to deliver their catch, but the old man didn't seem to be in a hurry. Somewhere out there in the cage the cat put out his paws and raised his proud head. In a detached, motionless way he looked straight ahead with his big moist eyes. For three days he had not taken any food, but he could do that for five days without dying. It was a proud and sturdy animal . . . and the old man's thoughts continued to wander between the proud creature and . . .

There was a sudden sound in the hall. The latch clicked . . . a cloud of frosty vapour rolled into the room, and changed into a man. Hryhory closed the door and stood there, snow and ice clinging to his clothes up to his armpits.

The Winchester was slung over his shoulder, and across his chest hung the ammunition pouches. Although his trousers were frozen stiff, where his upper garments hung open his chest was covered with perspiration. He stood there dead still. He looked exhausted and wind-burned; and he smiled in a childish way.

'You didn't expect me,' he said hoarsely.

The cranberries went flying all over the floor. 'Oh, my God!' whispered the mother, and with outstretched arms moved to the door. 'Oh, my son, my poor child!' and her tears flowed down her cheeks. 'What have you done, you poor unfortunate boy?'

Hryhory gave in to some invisible force, and without realizing what he was doing he took off his cap and fell to his knees. The terrible strain brought out heavy veins on his face; he could find only one word — 'Mother. . . .'

'My son, my son. God . . . God will forgive you, child. . . . God and the Mother of God will judge you.' She tried to help him up but she could not see him through her tears.

'Don't worry, don't worry,' said old Sirko with satisfaction. 'A Cossack's deed is for a Cossack!'

He had stood there since Hryhory walked in. Hryhory rose and looked questioningly into the old man's eyes. But the old man hid them under his bushy eyebrows where they seemed to be smiling under the frown. They stood there facing each other like Taras Bulba and Andriy, except that this was not Andriy, this was Hryhory and his head was not hanging down in shame; it was held high, proud and determined.

The old man nodded his head, satisfied:

'I knew you would come, son — yes, I did. . . . Well, then. . . .'

There was utter silence. Natalka had dropped her work. Now she stood deathly pale without uttering a word. How could anyone know or describe what was happening to her! Her eyes devoured the newcomer. Her brother looked at

her, then at Hryhory, and turned away. He knew his sister and he understood what this meant.

'Yes, I came. . . . But I must hurry. . . . I came to say goodbye to all of you. . . . Please forgive me if I have done anything wrong; perhaps we shall not see each other again' — and he smiled here — 'except in the next world. . . .'

His eyes moved from one to the other and finally met Natalka's. The girl blushed; she read in his eyes what was in his heart. Tears welled in her eyes and her crimson blush slowly turned to a deathly pallor. Through an inner storm she heard him say:

'I must hurry. . . . Forgive me and wish me well as I wish well for you! . . .'

She stamped her foot, then turned suddenly and went out, apparently to the pantry.

'God will forgive you, my son,' said the mother as she wiped her tears; 'forgive us, too, if sometimes . . .'

'May God bless your way, son!' said Father Sirko solemnly. 'It's a pity, but . . . Put a few things together for him for the road. . . . Don't delay, Hrytsko, because it will be daylight soon. Do you know the way?'

'Yes, I know,' said Hryhory. 'I have been studying it for some time. . . . I thought perhaps in the spring, but . . .'

'Be careful. In Manchuria — in Kharbin and in Sokhalin there are relatives of ours. But you know that already. . . .'

Hryhory nodded his head. 'Thank you.'

'Well, let us sit down so that we may meet again. . . .'

In keeping with an old custom, they sat down, Hryhory at the end of the bench. They sat in silence for a minute, and then, as though in response to a signal, they rose and began their farewells.

The mother, again in tears, brought Hryhory a fully packed rucksack. Sirko, with difficulty, tried to close a button on Hryhory's breast.

'May health be with you, son! Have you enough ammunition? Good. . . .'

At this moment Natalka returned. As she walked in she was still in the process of fastening an ammunition pouch; otherwise she was fully dressed as though she were going hunting. There was a determined look in the set of her lips and eyebrows. She was still very pale, but she was calm. She came in and stood beside Hryhory.

'And where are you going, daughter?' said the mother, clasping her hands. The old man half closed his eyes, evidently disturbed. Natalka stood bareheaded in front of Hryhory and looked at him questioningly, painfully . . . it was a short — no, an endless moment. And she found her answer in those eyes, in that mixture of love and regret occasioned by the consciousness of an unfulfilled happiness. Then she took him by a hand in which the blood pulsed violently, and knelt before her parents.

'Oh, my God!' was all the mother could say. Natalka looked at them through glistening eyes with unalterable determination:

'They may kill me . . . but if I am destined to be happy, then, Mother, let that happiness come my way. And you, Father! . . . Bless me! . . .'

There was a period of depressing silence. Tears filled Natalka's eyes:

'I will do what I must do . . . before God and man; no, before God and you. . . .'

Father Sirko looked grimly and questioningly at Hryhory who moved as if to speak. But Natalka forestalled him.

'Hryhory has no right to speak! I know what he will say, but he will be lying! . . . He will pretend for my sake. . . .

'I have maintained silence for months. I have struggled with myself. . . . I did not know, but today I know — now I know that otherwise I shall die. I am blood of your blood, I am your daughter . . . don't destroy me!' Again there was silence. Then Natalka pleaded once more:

'Father! Let me be happy, please. Perhaps I will be happy!' and she added reproachfully, 'I have never defied

your wishes, but I have your heart; you gave it to me, such as it is . . . let God be the judge.'

Old Sirko saw that there was nothing he could do. Yes, that was the voice of Sirko blood! And he listened to his daughter and looked at Hryhory from under his bushy eyebrows.

'Birds of a feather . . . ' and there was a suggestion of a smile in the brow-hidden eyes.

'Let God be the judge. . . .'

She was about to rise, but Hryhory, seeing what this might lead to, that Natalka might defy her father for his sake, went down on his knees beside her and bowed his head low.

'That's the way it is, Mother,' said Sirko.

Natalka caught the tone in her father's voice and hastened:

'If I should perish — what of it? Mykola perished. . . . But if Hryhory dies — then at least I will know where his body lies and I will come back to you. Do not stand in the way of our happiness, Father! Mother! After all, you can't escape death even on horseback. Mykola. . . .'

Her mother could no longer stand it and turned to her husband in tears:

'Why are you silent, Father? That is your seed!' There was no reproach in her voice — only confusion and love. She had solved with her heart what the old man was about to solve with his mind.

'Such are the times . . . such is life. . . . Well, what can you do? . . .'

That was all that the old woman needed. She wiped her tears, took down the ikon — her own blessing — and making every effort to appear cheerful (so that her daughter might be happy) she blessed it, passed it to the old man and then stood by him sobbing.

'Never mind, old woman! God is not without mercy. . . . May the ways before you be smooth and the people hospitable, and may you be happy all your lives, so that neither forces of darkness nor the evil eye, nor an enemy bullet . . . There you are . . . and don't delay, children!'

'Don't worry . . . I know every road and trail,' cried Natalka eagerly, 'and there I will have my aunt and so many relatives. We will take Zalivay and he will bring you a message when we reach safety. . . .'

Radiating happiness, she kissed her parents and her brother.

'You will see, everything will be fine. We will invite you to the wedding.'

The old man nodded his head and smiled as he looked at his daughter:

'Sirko blood.'

'May God grant it,' said Mother, 'and take this, you scatterbrain . . .' and she poured out a handful of old gold coins, rings and brooches. Then she took a gold cross from her neck and put it on her daughter's — 'It may come in handy.' She embraced them both and wept.

It was getting light outside. Hrytsko made a move to accompany them but Natalka stopped him, putting her arms around him and gazing at him tenderly.

'He is your adopted brother — leave him to me, I will be responsible for him. Yes? Mother and Father are left to you and you are responsible for them. Give me your word that you will not do foolish things, and that you will look after them. And when you marry you will stay near them.' When he gave his word she kissed him.

Before the day fully dawned two armed figures on skis, with rucksacks on their backs, emerged from Sirko's homestead into the frosty air. With them was a large Yakut dog. They crossed the valley and disappeared into the forest.

* * *

One night, at one of the outposts on the Manchurian border near the Pashkov village where the Amur, squeezed between two mountain ranges, flows in a clear narrow ribbon, there was a general alarm. Shouts went up along a wide front. The alarm began as the result of a distant fire and several explosions. Then it moved to Pashkov and finally spread for about ten kilometres on either side . . . it

seemed to be a general skirmish between Japanese troops and the USSR. But all this was only a pursuit of 'frontier violators' who made an armed foray across the frontier of the 'socialist fatherland'. Except that the authorities didn't know which way they had crossed. The night was very dark, the forest thick and the guard had too good a reputation to discover under the circumstances who was going where and exactly where the border was being pierced. The confusion was terrific.

The 'diversionists', not so much brave and experienced as reckless, dared to cross the frontier in the least expected place — in Pashkov itself, the little town stuck to the shores of the Amur. Here the roads are well travelled and tracks are easily covered, and the frozen Amur is dotted with high and twisting hummocks. They had to cross a village, a one-time Cossack station, now de-kulakized and converted into a border collective farm, with broken-down roofs and bare rafters. This was the extreme edge of Birobidjan. Here the former Cossack inhabitants, or 'Hurans' as they were called, had all escaped into Manchuria, and the place was now inhabited by patriots of the fatherland from Berdichiv, Tula and Orlov. In any case the 'diversionists' knew this and decided to cross right next to the border control point. But before putting their plan into operation they created a well-thought-out diversion.

This is how it happened:

Just before twilight two persons on skis, accompanied by a large dog, approached stealthily and, crossing the crest of a distant hill, stood and studied the terrain. Far in the distance on the shores of the Amur they could see snow-covered Pashkov. The whole of the left bank of the Amur was fairly low, with here and there a hillock covered with copses, dry grass and weeds. To the south this low land was cut by a high range of hills covered with brush. This range continued right up to Pashkov, and along it ran a road.

The right bank of the Amur, on the Manchurian side, was mountainous. The blue crests of the great Khinkhan

range reached to the sky. The great Khinkhan on the right and this range of hills on the left squeezed the Amur, forming a narrow gorge.

'There!' Hryhory waved his arm.

Soon they found a large snow-covered haystack — God knows when and by whom it was cut — and brought to it some dry branches and a few armfuls of dry weeds. Then Hryhory found two stout pieces of wood and dug holes in them with his hunting knife in which he placed several rounds of ammunition. These he placed in the hay. He pulled out a handful of cotton from his padded jacket, and into this cotton he put some gunpowder wrapped in a piece of newspaper which they had found in an abandoned forestry barracks in Birobidjan where they had spent the night. He placed this preparation in a pile of dry grass.

When it got darker, Hryhory placed a smouldering fuse in the cotton. They put on their skis and quickly departed, making a wide arc aimed at Pashkov. They had just reached the cemetery outside Pashkov when far behind them in the hills a fire broke out. It was later followed by a series of explosions. . . .

From the border point on the Amur several shots replied. There was an alarm in Pashkov, and someone was heard to shout, 'Sergeiev! Come here!'

A cavalry detachment galloped out of Pashkov towards the hills. Two figures and a dog walked on into Pashkov. They cut across the square and were just turning round the corner of a large building near the river when they ran into a figure hurrying in their direction.

'Stop!' the figure yelled in a drunken voice. This was the chief of the border guard himself hurrying to his duties, and fastening his belt on the way.

'Stranger!' came an urgent call from the girl. At that moment the dog struck at the chest of the stranger and grabbed him with his huge jaws. At the same time the butt of a Winchester was applied across his head, and the stranger fell.

'Come here, Zalivay!' and two figures and the dog disappeared in the darkness.

Firing went on along the border, tearing bright chunks out of the darkness. The Japanese border guards had also sent an alarm up and down the lines. Only in front of Pashkov, where the mountain fastness was impassable, was it quiet. From the distance came several loud reports; a machine-gun chattered in response. There was quite a commotion . . . a flare was fired from Pashkov; it lit up the crest of the great Khinkhan and the Amur with its blinding deathly light. . . . Frightened dogs howled in the distance.

The flare floated in the sky; and myriads of shadows floated among the frozen hummocks. You couldn't make out whether those were living creatures dashing about looking for a place to hide or just a mirage. Great chunks of ice, set edgewise at various angles, seemed to come to life with fantastic movements. A machine-gun chattered nearby along the Amur. Bullets whined and ricocheted off the ice blocks. Another flare went up farther away, and was followed by similar gunplay. The 'centre of battle' had shifted. Cavalry units rode by along the road which paralleled the Amur. They were off to fill the breach. The battle raged on. . . .

* * *

Across the Amur, high on the hills of the great Khinkhan, on the other side of the 'frontier fortress', stood the pair guilty of starting this battle. They stood there bare-headed, dishevelled, breathless and happy.

Overcome with joy, Natalka now clung to Hryhory and kissed him with all her heart and soul, giving full vent to her pent-up longing:

'You are mine! Mine!' she cried. 'We will go now towards your Ukraine!'

She pressed close to his breast, listening to the agitated beat of his heart. For the first time in her life she kissed her man freely and gave her heart free rein. Hryhory took

her in his arms and over and over again kissed those wild, unapproachable, untouched lips, those large mocking deer-like eyes, those frost-burnt hands which could be so fierce in combat but so tender to him. . . .

The large Yakut dog, Zalivay, stood on his hind legs, whimpered softly and tried hard to lick their noses.

Slowly the frontier shooting abated.

The fire had gone out and Pashkov was again quiet, only an occasional shot was still heard in the distance.

Natalka listened for a while, then opened Hryhory's rucksack, took out a large piece of meat and gave it to Zalivay:

'Eat . . . my very dear, my very faithful friend . . .!' She petted him under the neck. The dog licked her hand and whimpered very softly. He sensed in his heart some impending change in his fortunes, but he attacked the meat ravenously.

'Give me that message . . .'

Hryhory took out the tiny piece of paper which he had carefully prepared that morning. Natalka found a piece of ribbon, placed the message at the bottom of Zalivay's collar and tied it up with the ribbon. When everything was ready she still knelt there for a long time patting the dog, talking to him, pulling his ears; she was loath to part with him. But finally she got up and spoke in a determined tone:

'Zalivay!' The dog jumped to his feet and listened attentively. Natalka wavered for a moment and then spoke firmly, waving her hand:

'Go home!'

Zalivay turned sharply and ran off . . . then came back, and stood waiting. He whined sadly, beat the snow with his tail and his eyes questioned both Natalka and Hryhory: 'Why aren't you coming?' But he already knew what they wanted. He understood his mistress from the tone of her voice, but he did not want to leave her.

Natalka felt sorry for the dog, but there had never been

a time when she had reversed her orders. It had to be this way, especially now.

She bent down to the dog, who took advantage of this to lick her mouth. She repeated her order in a kindly tone as though she were trying to convince a human being:

'Go home! Yes, home . . . do you understand?' and shaking him gently by the neck she straightened up and, pointing in the direction from which they had come, ordered: 'Zalivay, go home!'

The dog milled around on the spot, looked from one to the other, barked softly, whimpered in anguish, then ran off as fast as he could go. He disappeared over the hill and they could only hear the rustle of the snow below. . . .

'Will he find his way?' Hryhory spoke his thought.

Natalka listened quietly for a few moments and then replied:

'If he finds his way out of Pashkov, he will. If he doesn't, he will turn and catch up with us. But . . . Zalivay will not return.'

Their road led into the unknown. They had burned all their bridges behind them. Now they had to be ready for all the problems, the difficulties, the struggles and the losses that might lie ahead of them.

Their road led forward but their thoughts flew back, through the snowbound wilderness and forest along which a lonely dog, faithful to the end, was now running in the direction of a snow-covered tiger-hunters' cottage lost in the forest.

* * *

The newspaper of the Far Eastern Country was filled with sensational headlines. The first page of the *Pacific Ocean Star* carried a black band of mourning. Under the grim headlines — 'DEATH TO THE ENEMIES OF THE PEOPLE!' and 'YOU DIED BUT YOUR CAUSE LIVES ON! WE SWEAR, DEAR COMRADES, THAT WE SHALL AVENGE YOUR DEATH AND NULLIFY ALL THE ENEMIES OF THE PEOPLE IN THE WORLD!'

— there were two pictures surrounded by a black border. Under the pictures there was a caption in heavy letters that in the taiga 'A LARGE BAND OF ENEMIES OF THE PEOPLE ARMED TO THE TEETH, and headed by a great enemy of the State, a prison escapee, spy and agent of fascism, Hryhory Mnohohrishny, AFTER A STUBBORN BATTLE AND IN A BRUTAL MANNER MURDERED COMRADE MEDVIN — Chief of the State Special Division of UHB, NKVD, for the Far Eastern Country, and the Chief of the N. Region of the NKVD'.

The paper enumerated all the services of the much-decorated Comrade Medvin, 'veteran of the Cheka — OGPU — NKVD, and a famous and upstanding chekist', who never faltered in his pursuit of the enemy and whose hand never shook . . . etc. Then followed frightful threats and curses against 'enemies of the people of every shade', their supporters and sympathizers. Special thundering blasts were directed at the 'kulaks and sub-kulaks' who were to be uprooted fiercely, mercilessly, now and for ever and ever.

There was much exhortation about the 'sanctified' duty of all — young and old — to help the organs of the Cheka. Below there was an announcement offering a large reward for the terrible 'leader of the band' — Hryhory Mnohohrishny. There was also the testimony of an eye-witness who had seen the band go eastward, obviously trying to break through to Japan. The band was said to have been last sighted on the shores of the Sea of Okhotsk.

Hrytsko had come to Khabarovsk with old Sirko to deliver the live tiger. The old man listened to all these unusual dispatches and frightful threats and curses and was strongly inclined to give forth with a grand homeric laugh. The whole thing struck him as being terribly funny.

He knew the story of the NKVD leader 'who fell in combat with a large band of enemies of the people'. But this did not interest him much, even though there was mention of a large reward. It was the other account, of the border attack, that appealed to his sense of humour. After all,

old Sirko was a crafty old wolf and immediately sensed the meaning of the episode. It was clear to him that the same cause lay behind this event. And from these accounts he had reason to be happy because they showed that 'our youngsters are frolicking'; they must be the 'two brigands with a gigantic dog'. The three of them must have cooked up that fracas, and there wasn't anyone else there. Of that he was certain.

The old man looked at the tiger in the cage, listened while some girl read these accounts to the workers at the depot, and he suddenly had a great urge to let the tiger go. 'Let him run. Ha! Wouldn't that cause a commotion!' He might even have done it, but the tiger was already in a padlocked iron cage. But much more important was the fact that the tiger would have torn him first, as the main cause of his predicament. Still, it was a noble, youthful thought.

So he listened and waited while the book-keeper made his calculations, and the usual deductions for a State loan etc.

'They don't seem to say what happened to those brigands,' and he told Hrytsko to buy up all the newspapers ('we will read them at home'), hoping to find a few words giving a clue as to what happened to them.

He listened to the talk around him, but the people did not reveal anything in particular because life, and this kind of propaganda, had drilled them in the habit of silence or of making only inconsequential remarks. After all, they were accustomed to similar and even more sensational accounts; without them life would be quite abnormal. All these 'diversions' — 'frontier disturbers', 'enemies of the people', 'trials', 'purges', 'firing squads', 'chekists', 'NKVDists', 'bemedalled heroes', 'prisons', 'diversionists', 'spies', etc. — were part and parcel of this mad country. This was part of their way of life. It was also the style to hunch their shoulders and to await a thunderbolt from a clear sky, like an ox in a slaughterhouse. But if you could shell their thoughts out as you do a nut, you would find interesting and unexpected

things. You would see how they scorned all these sensations; and you would see many more interesting things. . . .

Going home old Sirko did nothing but smoke his pipe, one pipeful after another. He had bought half a sackful of tobacco in the capital, and now he didn't say a word for miles on end. He seemed to be thinking hard, and his thoughts always returned to that one pertinent point:

Why didn't the papers say anything about what happened to those brigands?

When he arrived home, old Sirko spread the newspapers out on the table and his index finger wandered through them for a long time. But he found nothing that he did not already know. He ended his research by tossing all the newspapers in the stove.

* * *

On the evening of the second day after Sirko's return from Khabarovsk, Zalivay came home.

One-eyed Nepra and Rooshay began barking joyfully and old Sirko opened the door to see what was going on.

Zalivay lay on the doorstep. He was thin, worn out and wild-looking, the hair on his back stood up as it does on a wild boar. You could count his ribs at a distance.

'Zalivay! Oh, my God!' Alarmed and overjoyed, old Mother Sirko turned her attention to him as if he were a human being.

The dog gave a hoarse bark and crawled into the house. His feet were covered with ice — snow had packed itself between his claws and turned into ice-balls. He lay down and looked at them with wise, sickly eyes. He licked the old man's hand as he fondled his jaws:

'Aren't you a fool! You know, I read about you — yes, Zalivay, brother, I did.'

The dog whined softly as though he was telling them of his experience.

The old lady gave the dog some food while Hrytsko searched him. Then he found the message.

That was a happy day for the Sirko family. The old man spread out the tiny piece of paper and held it like a sacrament.

'A despatch has arrived!'

They lit the lamp and set about reading the message. Old Sirko guided his finger from one letter to the other and read:

'*Alive. Well.* (Oh! — that was Sirko.)

We embrace and kiss you.

We have crossed over to Aunt.'

Old Mother Sirko wept from the excitement.

'Go ahead, read it. . . .'

'What else shall I read? Isn't that enough? That's all there is.'

'Well, then read it again!'

But Sirko did not have to be urged. After a moment of reverent silence he turned back to the message and read it over and over again. He put it on the table, lit his pipe, puffed for a while, smoothed his whiskers, and then picked up the message and examined it carefully just in case he had missed something written in a corner. . . . Then he read it again, perhaps for the tenth time.

Alive . . . Well . . . Embrace . . . Kiss.

'Some brigands! I knew that. God did make them for each other.'

Sirko had never read anything more interesting in his life.

Finally his wife took the message from him and put it away. She kissed the piece of paper as if she were kissing both of them, and then tied it inside a piece of silk and placed it at the bottom of the chest, together with other things that had belonged to Natalka.

Then she knelt, and with tear-filled eyes prayed to an old ikon of the Mother of God. She asked very little — just to see them again, at least in the twilight of life, at least in her last years.

Hrytsko tied Zalivay down because his mother asked him

to. She tended the dog like a baby; she fed him, cared for him and talked to him.

But Zalivay was desperately lonely. He missed his happy mistress, his great friend to whom he was tied with bonds much more powerful than this rope.

On the fifth day Zalivay was nowhere to be found. The rope was there but no Zalivay. This reckless and faithful dog had his own concept of friendship and he followed the dictates of his canine heart.

He undertook the hopeless task of finding her. But — the brave always have good fortune.

THE END

ABOUT
IVAN BAHRIANY

He was born in 1907 in the Ukraine of a bricklayer father and a mother of peasant stock. He completed a full Soviet education, but failed to graduate from University because he was suspected of *political unreliability*. By 1925 he had started writing, but as a member of a literary group which stood aloof from the Party he became a victim of the Communist purge in the early nineteen thirties. He was arrested and sentenced to five years' penal servitude in 1932 after his writings had been severely attacked by the Party. Ever afraid that his sentence might be renewed, he escaped from the concentration camp in 1936, and lived in freedom for two years before he was once more arrested and imprisoned in Kharkov. He escaped to the West during the Second World War, and since 1945 has lived in Germany.

Letterpress U. S. A.

What the Critics Say—

The HUNTERS and the HUNTED

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"This novel is a grand reading experience, full of the appeal of the unknown and the exotic . . . Natalka is as charming a figure as W. H. Hudson's Rima." W. G. Rogers, *Associated Press*

"There it is then, the terror, the pastoral, the will to live, and a kind of love story so old that it is new again, all with a curious mingling of the somber and the blithe. And if its conclusion does not move you to stand up and cheer the actors, like the innocent at the play, you are a blasé one indeed."

—John K. Hutchens, *N. Y. Herald Tribune*

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