Ulas Samchuk

MARIA

A Chronicle of a Life

Ukrainian Literature

Ukrainian Fiction in English

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by

Ulas Samchuk

Translated by Roma Franko

Edited by Paul Cipywnyk

Author Biography
by Oksana Bryzhun-Sokolyk

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Translator: Roma Franko
Editor: Paul Cipywnyk
Editorial Assistance: Karen Yarmol-Franko

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last will

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Ulas Samchuk

Author dedication:

To the mothers who died of hunger
in Ukraine in 1932-33

Author Biography

Ulas Samchuk is considered to be one of the most important Ukrainian writers of the 20th century. He was born on Feb. 20, 1905, in the village of Derman in the Volyn region of north-central Ukraine, to parents Alexander and Anastasia Samchuk, who toiled on a small piece of land. In 1913, his family moved to the nearby village of Tyliavka, where larger properties were available. At that time, Volyn was under Austro-Hungarian rule.

Derman is an old village with a rich history that is first mentioned in written records in 1332. A fortified castle was erected there at the beginning of the 15th century and was later converted into a monastery. In 1602, the monastery became a centre for the printing of books. Samchuk wrote of his ancestors: "...we were not only farmers and hunters, but also warriors. In 1512, joint forces from Volyn crushed a 25,000-man army led by Khan Meñli I Giray..." For Samchuk, Derman was the "centre of the world."

After a few years in Tyliavka, Samchuk returned to Derman where a higher level of primary schooling was available. Subsequently, he attended high school in Kremenec, a larger urban centre. After World War I, Volyn came under Polish rule, and for the first time in his young life, he felt discriminated against. The Polish authorities were far from fair in their treatment of Samchuk and his friends who attended school in Kremenec from outlying Ukrainian villages. Samchuk later recounted these years in the novel *The Youth of Vasyl Sheremeta* (1947), which is considered to be partially autobiographical. His protagonist Vasyl says: "All around we hear 'FORBIDDEN.' We are the planet's only youth that does not have the right to take a step into the future... "

Disappointed, he initially succumbed to Soviet propaganda: "Ukraine is free, prosperous, everybody is happy and satisfied..." In July 1924, Samchuk decided to illegally cross the border into

newly established Soviet Ukraine and find his luck there. But he was caught at the frontier by Polish border authorities and jailed. After serving his sentence, he returned to high school. While still a student, he had his first literary works published in the journal *Besida* in Warsaw in 1926. Due to time lost in jail, Samchuk was the oldest in his class, and before he was able to complete his studies he was drafted into the Polish army, where Ukrainians were treated harshly. Samchuk deserted in 1927 and escaped to Germany.

At first he worked delivering coal. With the help of a supportive German family, Samchuk enrolled at the University of Breslau. In his spare time, he continued to write. The novel *Insult* and a translation of Thomas Mann's *Das Eisenbahnunglück [The Railway Accident]* were published in the *Literary-Academic Journal* in Lviv. He received modest remuneration for some of his writing.

In 1929, Samchuk moved to Prague, Czechoslovakia. He was attracted by the city's vibrant Ukrainian community and the Ukrainian Free University in which he enrolled, and where he was active in the Students' Academic Society. In the 1930s, Prague was a cultural and academic centre for Ukrainian exiles, and in this milieu Samchuk flourished. He became active in Ukrainian community life, and continued to write. In his memoirs, Samchuk wrote that it was in this period that he matured as an author. He also married, to Maria Zots. Years later he wrote about his wife in the book *On a White Horse* (1965): "With exceptional tenderness and love I reminisce about my first wife Maria, with whom I traversed a good part of my life in Prague which generally was filled with worries, little joy and great uncertainties..."

In 1932, while in Prague, Samchuk first heard about the artificial famine unleashed by Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin upon the Ukrainian people, which some sources say eventually claimed as many as ten million lives. Overwhelmed by the horror, he wrote the novel *Maria* (1934)—the first literary work about the famine, and a powerful characterization of village life at the time. That same year the first volume of the trilogy *Volyn–Where the River Flows* was published. The young author was not only honoured for the work with a literary prize, but was also nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature.

A second volume, *Volyn–War and Revolution* was published in 1935, and two years later a third volume *Father and Son* appeared. *Volyn* follows its two main protagonists, a man and his son Volodko, as they journey through life, and is to a large extent autobiographical. Volodko, a peasant boy, searches for truth, thirsts for knowledge and seeks to discover new worlds. His father personifies the Ukrainian peasant: hard-working and rooted to the land. And he understands his son's aspirations, and provides him with guidance and help. A critic wrote that the author did not take the traditional literary line of describing Ukrainian peasants as dim-witted simpletons but rather portrayed them as intelligent, rational people.

Samchuk concurrently wrote the novel *Kulak* (1937) about the eternal commitment of the Ukrainian peasant to tilling the land and the undying optimism of farmers.

Samchuk's next major work was the two-volume novel *The Mountains Speak* (1934) which explored Carpatho-Ukraine's struggle against Hungary. Carpatho-Ukraine nestled in the mountainous border area of Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia. It had a predominantly Ukrainian population, and had no desire to be occupied by any of its neighbours.

In the novel, Samchuk expresses his life's credo through the words of the main character: "It is better to die in freedom than to live as a serf."

Based on his experiences, Samchuk portrayed life in Germany and Czechoslovakia in the short stories *Rediscovered Paradise* (1936).

In 1938, Samchuk journeyed to Carpatho-Ukraine and joined in its struggle for independence. A passionate and respected orator, he ardently promoted independence. Samchuk recounts: "I criss-crossed the whole of Carpatho-Ukraine giving speeches, not missing even one city, town or larger village." Arrested and jailed by invading Hungarian forces, Samchuk managed to escape and returned to Prague.

Germany attacked the Soviet Union in 1941 and Ukraine was soon occupied. Samchuk moved to Ukraine where in Rivne he became the editor of the newspaper *Volyn* (1941-43). Rivne was visited by movie producer Ivan Kavaleridze and a cast of actors and actresses en route from a film shoot. Impressed with

the novel *Volyn*, Kavaleridze encouraged Samchuk to consider a screen adaptation. It was then that Samchuk met film actress Tania Prakhova whom he later married, having lost contact with his first wife Maria in the tempest of war.

Samchuk was arrested by the German occupation forces for writing the editorial *The Way it Was–The Way it Will Be*, promoting Ukraine's independence. After a month and much effort he was released, but forbidden to continue editorial work.

Samchuk depicted this turbulent period in the books *On a White Horse* (1965) and *On a Black Horse* (1975). *On a White Horse* recounts Samchuk's journey to Ukraine, the events he witnessed, the people he met, their mood and their daily problems due to the brutality of war and occupation.

In the book *On a Black Horse* Samchuk resumed his recollections as of October 1941. He was able to travel through parts of Ukraine and described in detail the war-torn country and its people under occupation.

Samchuk captured the horror of war in the book *Five after Twelve* (1954). It was based on his diary entries during the final days of World War II. The book begins with the words "I saw Berlin dying... Bombardment, fires, ruins...nervous apprehension, the unknown..." It ends with the words "The end of the gunpowder epoch. The atomic epoch looms." The book also notes the decision by the Allies made at the Yalta Conference that would profoundly impact millions: "...May 7, [1945]...Today, [General] Eisenhower's supreme headquarters announced that all Soviet citizens, whether they want to or not, will have to return to their homeland... Hundreds of thousands of hearts trembled in deathly fear on hearing this grim news."

Like many others fleeing the advancing Soviet army, at war's end Samchuk found himself in a Displaced Persons (DP) camp in the sector of Germany controlled by the western Allies. There he continued writing and again became immersed in community work, including organizing and heading the Ukrainian Literary Artistic Movement. Despite the ruined post-war infrastructure and a meagre subsistence, he managed to visit all the DP camps that housed Ukrainian refugees. Samchuk found it personally necessary to witness first-hand the daily grind of his DP compatriots, to learn of their problems and how they coped.

The first volume of his monumental trilogy *Ost–The Farm of Moroz* was published in Germany in 1948. The second volume *Darkness* was published in New York in 1957, while the third *Escaping from Oneself* appeared in Winnipeg in 1982.

The trilogy follows the lives of three generations of the Moroz family. The story begins with the Bolshevik revolution that changed the course of history, culture, and personal and collective freedom, and which established totalitarian control of speech, thought, association and movement. In Ukraine, independence was proclaimed after more than 350 years of Russian rule, but it was short-lived as the Bolsheviks invaded and seized power. The Moroz family, from patriarch Hryhoriy to grandson Vasyl, each in their own way are participants and observers of the drama unfolding around them.

Hryhoriy's four sons chose to follow different paths with the arrival of the new order. These paths included acceptance, persecution, adaptation, protest and forced exile, and gave rise to conflict and the fracturing of the family. The destiny of the Moroz family traverses the northern hemisphere from Siberia to Western Europe to Edmonton, Canada, after World War II. The trilogy incorporates dramatic moments in Ukrainian and European history while portraying man's struggle for survival and dignity while battling communist and Nazi regimes and ideologies, and eventually finding spiritual solace in Canada.

Samchuk's portrayal of life in DP camps in Germany was published in Canada, where he and his wife Tania had immigrated in 1948. *Planet of DPs: Notes and Letters* (1979) recounts the tragic forced repatriation of Ukrainians to the Soviet Union by the Allies, and the struggle to survive while awaiting an unknown destiny. To counter these threats, Ukrainians established self-help organizations and churches, which rapidly turned the camps into vibrant, tight-knit communities. While life was difficult, it was thankfully not under the boot of communism or Nazism.

Samchuk contemplated the question: "Why are we here?" in the book: "Who could possibly describe the number of extraordinarily grave thoughts and tragic feelings that have entered my mind and heart during these difficult years as a displaced stateless person... I am 42 years old, and yet I'm a beggar surviving on the aid of an international organization... It is a dreadful, all-encompassing

hopelessness." He concluded the book with the words: "Our liner slowly moves from shore. On deck, nearly motionless people stand with their eyes fixed in farewell at the final moments of a receding Europe, which slowly, almost frighteningly is disappearing in the expanse of the east... In silence we watch as the shore disappears in darkness. The shore of our past. And in front of us the shore of our future..."

Samchuk's first years in Canada were trying. Subsistence required employment and he worked as a labourer, often beyond his physical means. Nevertheless, Samchuk's Canadian period became one the most fruitful in the author's life. He wrote prolifically and his works were regularly published and sought by the Ukrainian diaspora. Upon arriving in Canada, Samchuk co-founded and became the long-time head of the Slovo Association of Ukrainian Writers in Exile.

The novel *What Fire Does Not Heal* was published in New York in 1959. In it the author portrays the heroic struggle of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army against all occupiers of Volyn during and after World War II. The centre of action is his home village of Derman.

Samchuk wrote about his observations of Canadian life in the book *On Solid Ground* (1967) which was dedicated to the centennial of Canada's Confederation and the 75th anniversary of Ukrainian settlement in Canada. Samchuk recognized Ukrainian pioneers "with a feeling of deep respect for their creative, industrious and organizational genius."

The book *In the Footsteps of Pioneers: The Saga of Ukrainian America* (1979) is an epic about Ukrainians in the United States. It is dedicated to one of North America's oldest Ukrainian organizations, the Ukrainian National Association established in 1894, its founders and Ukrainian pioneers. Samchuk writes in the introduction: "This book is about our people who first set foot in the United States of America and who first began to organize. The book is dedicated to the Ukrainian National Association and in memory of its benevolent founders, builders and flagbearers!"

Samchuk's love of music, and in particular for the Ukrainian bandura and the renowned Ukrainian Bandurist Chorus of Detroit, was expressed in the book *Living Strings–Bandura and Bandurists* (1976).

These are just some of Samchuk's works. Be they fiction, non-fiction or memoirs, they have a common thread—the chronicling of the Ukrainian experience. In the preface to the novel *The Youth of Vasyl Sheremeta*, Samchuk wrote "... I want to chronicle the Ukrainian realm of the era that I see, hear, experience..." Nevertheless, his works are not dry chronological recountings of events. Instead, they provide deep insights into the human soul set against a landscape often determined by fate. The works often incorporate poetic prose, at times with a sprinkling of humour. His characters are real people with feelings, purpose and aspirations. Samchuk's works are his life story. And the events that he writes about, the dramatic moments that shaped the Ukrainian realm that he was part of, are a look back at the 20th century.

Samchuk was friendly, jovial and extroverted. Being a prolific writer did not keep him from actively participating in the Ukrainian community. He traversed Canada and the United States to deliver lectures, drawing a large following. He attended concerts, rallies and public meetings, and found time to visit a Ukrainian Plast scout camp called "Cultural Paths" where he, with artist William Kurelek and others, promoted arts and culture. Registration for the camp was conditional on having read Samchuk's *Where the River Flows*, and the author rewarded each camper with an autographed copy of the book.

Toward the end of his life, Samchuk was stricken with debilitating arthritis. Though confined to a wheelchair, he made every effort to be part of the Ukrainian community in Toronto. He also paid close attention to events in his homeland of Ukraine. The land of his ancestors was dear to him and he always believed in the inevitability of an independent Ukrainian nation.

Samchuk passed away on July 9, 1987, in Toronto. At the Ivan Franko Home for the Aged where he and his wife last resided, Tania Samchuk funded the establishment of the Ulas Samchuk Museum. The museum opened on Sept. 18, 1988. After the death of Mrs. Samchuk in April 1990, the museum was transferred to Tyliavka in Ukraine, while archival material including manuscripts was transferred to the Institute of Literature in Ukraine's capital Kyiv.

Samchuk's writing had been banned in the USSR and he was labelled an "enemy of the state." The authorities feared that his works would reveal forbidden truths. When Ukraine declared

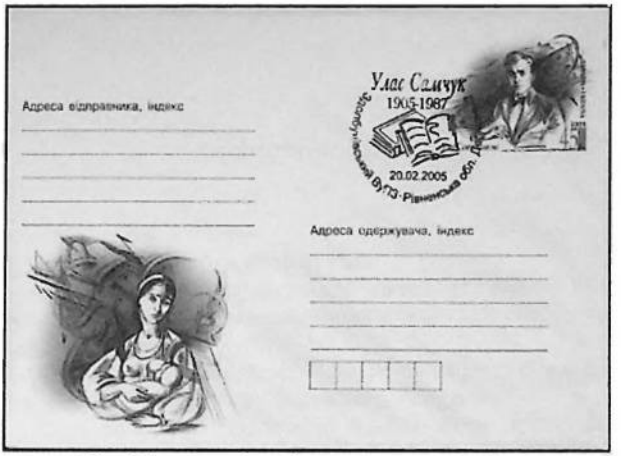
its independence in 1991, Ukrainians expressed a great thirst for his writing, and many of his books were reprinted. In addition to the museum in Tyliavka, Rivne and Derman also established museums dedicated to the author. The school that he had attended in Kremenec was renamed Lyceum Ulas Samchuk in his honour. Streets now bear his name in many towns and cities.

In 2005, the 100th anniversary of Samchuk's birth was widely celebrated in Ukraine. The federal government issued a two-hryvnia coin and a prestamped postal envelope honouring the author. In Rivne's main town square, Ukraine's Minister of Culture Oksana Bilozir unveiled a larger-than-life statue of Samchuk on his birthday. The Ostroh Academy National University sponsored essay writing and web-design contests for youth, while a number of universities hosted academic conferences focusing on Samchuk and his works.

No longer an "enemy of the state" in his homeland, the press noted that Ulas Samchuk had returned to Ukraine on a White Horse. He was lauded for his contributions to literature and was hailed as "Ukraine's Homer."

Oksana Bryzhun-Sokolyk
Co-executor of Ulas Samchuk's last will.

2-hryvnia coin minted by the National Bank of Ukraine on the 100th anniversary of the author's birth



Ukrainian postal stationery commemorating Ulas Samchuk and his novel *Maria* on the 100th anniversary of his birth

Statue of Ulas Samchuk in Rivne, Ukraine, unveiled on the 100th anniversary of his birth

Introduction

"To see a world in a grain of sand..."

These words by English poet William Blake remind us that minute, apparently inconsequential events in a life can represent universal truths.

Ulas Samchuk's character Maria is such a grain of sand—or in the context of the novel, such a kernel of grain.

The life of this uneducated woman spans upheavals in Ukrainian history from approximately the 1861 emancipation of serfs in the Russian Empire under the Tsars, to the nearly unimaginable horror of the communist-induced mass starvation in Soviet Ukraine in the early 1930s that killed millions, and is internationally recognized as an act of genocide.

Samchuk dedicates his novel "to the mothers who died of hunger in Ukraine in 1932-33," yet the story is much more than that, taking the reader through three stages: A Book about the Birth of Maria, A Book of Maria's Days, and A Book about Bread. Each is important in its own way, as Maria grows, matures, and reacts to the changes going on around her.

She may be just a bit of flotsam carried by a tsunami of social and political change, but her loves, trials and toil through three score and ten (the author tells us that she lived for 26,258 days, or nearly 72 years) enable us to picture a harsh existence that prompted hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian peasants to abandon their beloved villages and emigrate in search of land, freedom, education, and opportunity.

There is obvious symbolism in how Samchuk names his lead female character: Maria is a reflection of Mother Mary, and Maria's daughter is named Nadiya, or "hope." Yet Maria is no Virgin Mary and Samchuk honours his character by portraying her as a real woman, with the flaws that all humans have.

Land is a theme that runs throughout the novel, as is the grain, or bread, that it produces. Land literally was life for small-scale farmers. Life revolved around, and depended on, the cycle of planting and harvesting grain, vegetables and fruit. An ethos of hard work, of providing for one's family, grew from this bond to the land. Without hard work, without sweat, a family would not eat. And with backbreaking labour came the satisfaction and joy of putting food on the table, of perhaps getting ahead a bit by growing enough so that a small surplus could be sold to buy a cow, or a pig.

The 1861 emancipation in the part of Ukraine controlled by the Russian Empire was viewed by the peasantry as a chance to finally be rid of forced labour, to expend all one's efforts on farming one's own plot of land. While it soon became evident that the "reforms" still heavily favoured the landed aristocracy, there was more opportunity for diligent former serfs to rise out of poverty, and even prosper.

Maria's husband, Korniy, after years of being drafted into the Russian Imperial Navy, returns home haughtily speaking Russian and shirking his culture and his community, but the land works its magic on him and he undergoes a transformation:

> He is discovering an ever greater delight and joy in work. His vagabond-proletarian habits are fading into the past and being forgotten. The earth is drawing him into itself and filling his veins, his mind, and his entire being with solid habits. Korniy is now aware of this. His days as a freewheeling sailor are being forgotten and he is becoming a true human being. He slowly shakes off his vile cursing, begins using his native language, and this change restores him to the bosom of his family.

Samchuk's characters are not simply one-dimensional "peasants." They are human beings who labour and love, suffer and grow, celebrate small victories, and mourn terrible losses. The author shows us how similar experiences can have dramatically different effects on people—some lift themselves from

their wanton ways and find reward in work, community, and their church, while others take advantage of turmoil to further themselves at the expense of others.

For those who worked hard, there were rewards, simple as they may have been.

> Korniy, Maria and the elderly mother sit down at the table set with various dishes. There is everything here. Take whatever you want, whatever you feel like eating. Everything is good, everything is home-made, earned through the toil of their own hands and their patient endurance... Break off a piece of bread and eat it. Eat the bread, the cabbage, the varenyky. Eat the cabbage rolls and the fried fish. Eat the granular kutya and drink with it fruit juices from your own orchard. Wash it all down with honey gathered from the flowers of your native land.

But in the end, there was never enough land, and consequently Ukrainians began emigrating in significant numbers in the late 19th century to places like Canada, the United States, Australia and South America. That flow continued in spurts through the early 20th century, whenever the opportunity arose between wars, revolutions, and totalitarian regimes, with one final exodus following World War II, before the Iron Curtain fell, cutting off contact between the USSR and the rest of the world. *Maria* gives the modern reader a sense of how that love of land, combined with a lack of it, led to the conditions in which hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians left their native villages.

Initial reaction to the February and October Revolutions of 1917 that swept away the Tsar was often positive among the peasantry, with promises of more land, more freedom, more education... But with the new regime came the idea of creating a new Soviet man, and that meant destroying religion and age-old traditions, and replacing them with socialist slogans and "five-year plans" in which the central government imposed agricultural and industrial production quotas that had to be filled no matter what the reality of local conditions was.

When such quotas could not be filled, the next "solution" was collectivization, or the forced amalgamation of peasants' farms. Farmers no longer worked for themselves, they worked for the collective. Farmers no longer made decisions on what to sow, and when to sow it. All such decisions came from above, often with disastrous results as inexperienced administrators parroted demands from the central authorities.

There was no choice in collectivization. There was no opt in, or opt out. If a farmer resisted, land, seed, tools, equipment, and animals were all expropriated, and any further stubbornness was met with incarceration in a prison camp, exile to Siberia, or simply a firing squad. And the bolt-hole of emigration was sealed, not to open again until the 1990s, when Ukraine gained its independence.

While there were similarities in the governance of the Tsars and the Bolsheviks, for example both attempted to assimilate cultures and languages through Russification, in the end it was the Soviet regime that perpetrated almost unimaginable mass terror on Ukraine. Under Soviet rule, Ukraine, the "breadbasket of Europe," became a basket case. And when farmers en masse refused to join the shoddily run collectives, Stalin and his henchmen felt no compunction in sealing the borders of Ukraine, expropriating all of its grain, vegetables, fruit and livestock, and letting entire regions starve to death.

As Ukrainians died by the hundreds of thousands, and eventually millions, grain was being exported from Ukrainian ports under communist Red Army guard.

And this, unfortunately, brings the reader to the third "book" of Maria's life...

> Where were human hearts? Where was conscience? They take good care of an animal, they care for a plant, they care for an insect, they even take care of the lowliest worm, but they don't take care of a human mother.

The contrasts that Samchuk portrays through this chronicle of Maria's life through her family and her village are stark, but real. Readers feel the grit, the sorrows, the happiness, the disillusionment in the government, and the utter helplessness in the face of totalitarianism.

In a sense the novel is a history lesson, but it is written so compellingly that readers are pulled along by the thread of Maria's story. It truly is the life of a simple woman who lived through one of the most tragic periods in human history.

Paul Cipywnyk
Editor

§

It should be noted that this translation is based on the 1952 edition in which in the preface it is stated that the author made substantial changes to the third section.

§

Contents

A Book about the Birth of Maria

I

If the last three days are not counted, Maria lived for twenty-six thousand, two hundred and fifty-eight days. That is how many times the sun rose for her, how many times she experienced the sweetness of existence, how many times she saw or sensed the sky, the fragrance of the sun's warmth and of the earth.

The couple of days that she lived with her eyes closed after her birth are not included in this count. But that does not mean that she was not aware of both the sky and the earth. She was already conscious of them, for she was a living being who stirred, felt hunger pangs, and loudly made them known.

Whenever her glowing and joyful mother, the peasant woman Oksana, lifted her breasts out of her ample bosom, Maria sensed them from afar, twitched her tiny lips and tried hard to open what were soon to be her little eyes. Oksana, of course, helped her, pressed her breasts to the small spot that later became known as Maria's mouth, and two warm and tender pink petals avidly clasped them.

The milk rushed in and started flowing, and Oksana, sitting slightly bent over the swaddled Maria, held the tiny human being in her left hand and used her right hand to assist her breasts in doing their appointed task. Her head was tilted to the right, her eyes were lowered and shaded by long eyelashes, and her lips were closed in a soft and artless smile.

Oksana gazed with devout wonder and admiration at the fulfilment of her dream that—here, just take a look—was now a

living, wailing being whose name was Maria. Her little face was genuinely rosy with a teeny white mark on her tiny nose and wee reddish spots on her small cheeks. Her eyes would open soon. Yes. They would open and they would see. She had a forehead, and it sheltered a small bud of a brain that in a short time would begin to unfold, come into bloom, and learn to tell the difference between good and evil.

A fervent, joyful sigh, arising from deep within Oksana, was interrupted midstream by the fear that her breasts were not filling quickly enough with milk.

But there was no reason whatsoever to have such fear. Her breasts, you may be sure, had long since filled with milk. They were full, distended, tumescent. When the delicate petals of Maria's lips touched the berrylike nipples, streams of milk gushed forth and Maria drank with sheer delight and with the earnest determination typical of a true warrior fighting for his existence. Into her veins flowed fresh, invigorating particles of life that with incredible mastery built cells, divided them, and fashioned out of them the marvellous, exacting forms of creation's crowning glory. Great mysteries were transpiring and the first of them involved the opening of her eyes and the recognition of the sun's light.

It was springtime; trees were blossoming, birds were calling loudly, the moist black soil was steaming.

Days went by, and the sun rose every morning and set every evening. Blossoms dropped off, floated downwards like downy fluff, sank to the ground and withered. Small green buds formed on branches, shook off all signs of their birth, grew larger, and hastened to mature.

The sun laboured without ceasing. It sent forth downpours, drove in shaggy clouds, splattered rain, rumbled, and extended a rainbow of seven hues from one end of the sky to the other. At those times green leaves were weighed down by transparent droplets, and clusters of unripe apples were adorned with rubies, topazes, amethysts. Fields of drooping grain once again stood erect, like monks straightening their spines after a lengthy prayer.

The earth kept turning on its axis. Sweet cherries and sour ones assumed their true hues—the colour of blood and of the sun's rays. They were as dazzling as crystals. Apples, plums, and grapes were infused with juices and became translucent. It made one want to imbibe them and become intoxicated.

The forests were ablaze, flaring with colour. Flaming tongues tore away from branches, drifted slowly to the ground, and crackled underfoot.

And soon after that, the north made itself heard. The Big Dipper sank ever lower, and stars visibly began turning into crystals on the steely horizon. The earth shrivelled into an angry fist and pulled on a downy white glove.

Little Maria was now fully in step with the rhythm of life. Upon awaking from her sleep she would drink the sweetly scented liquid from her mother's warm bosom and become infused with joy . . . She would babble, lift her little feet right up to her nose, kick them vigorously while spreading her tiny, barely noticeable toes, and thrust her wee hands upwards in an effort to catch something distracting in front of her eyes.

There was so much to do, so much boundless space. Such wonderful, tasty milk! So tell me, how was one not to babble and drool with happiness?

II

And the time came when Maria turned six.

Her little head was now covered with soft black curls; her small eyes sparkled like tiny lumps of polished anthracite. She referred to her father as tato, and to her mother as mama. And she enjoyed doing this unceasingly.

But it was at that time that her mother caught a cold and came down with a terrible illness. She kept coughing and clutching at her chest. Those splendid breasts that had formerly overflowed with milk were now wasted and withered.

Her father worked in a quarry. In those days houses were beginning to be built out of stone, and her father spent endless hours at the excavation site. He had a large beard and a bushy moustache. In the evening he would came home exhausted, take off his wet footwear, sit down at the table, and begin to chew on a chunk of bread or a potato cooked in its jacket.

Maria would at once be at his side.

"Tato!"

"What is it, my little one?"

"May I climb up into your arms?"

"Well, come on, come on . . ."

She makes herself comfortable in his arms, and then what? Is she to sit quietly and listen to her father's breathing, watch him as he slowly chews, and look at how his beard moves and his moustache wiggles? Oh, no! What point would there be then in having both a beard and moustache that are so long and so soft? They were simply begging to have little hands dig into them and give them a good tug.

And so Maria gets down to work. What does it matter to her that her father is tired? He turns his head this way and that way, but remains silent, as if he does not notice anything. Tato is strong, tato is good. Maria is proud of such a tato, because there is no other tato like him in the entire world.

But one evening tato did not come home from work.

"Mama! Where is our tato? He's been gone for such a long time."

"How am I to know where he is. There's no sign of him. He's crushing rocks . . ."

Outdoors there is a hue and cry. The mother runs outside and breaks into a wail. Maria has no idea why her mother has run outside and begun wailing.

The door flies open, and a throng of men, covered with stone dust and shod in bast shoes and frozen boots, pour into the house. They are lugging something, and they carry it indoors and place it on a bench.

Maria is becoming very frightened, and she begins to cry. But no one pays any attention to her, and so she hides in the inglenook, huddling against the wall. Her mama is kneeling by the bench and wailing so loudly that it is truly terrifying. And there are strangers everywhere—on the benches, and at the table, and in the inglenook. People are also crowding into the porch and creating a ruckus there. She doesn't see her father among them.

And that was how things went on for two whole days.

Maria was terrified, she called for her tato, and she was very hungry. Why had everyone forgotten about her today, and why was it that whenever her mother did catch sight of her, instead of giving her something to eat, she would swoop her up in her arms, let loose a torrent of tears, and press her so tightly to her bosom that it hurt.

On the second day, strangers carried tato away someplace, and they did not bring him back. In the evening the people ate, drank, and even seemed to be quite happy. When night fell, they all went their separate ways, and only Auntie Kateryna remained with her mother.

A day went by, and then another one.

"Mama! Where's our tato? . . . Where have they taken him? Tato! . . . Tato!"

"Oh alas, my beloved child, alas, my dear little orphan!" her mother clasps Maria tightly and cuddles her. "Your tato is no longer with us, my child . . . A rock killed him . . ."

"A rock? But where's tato?"

"He's gone. They've buried him in the ground," and Oksana wipes away her tears.

"They've buried him in the ground . . . That will be hard for tato. Isn't that right—that it will be hard for tato?"

"Oh, my child, my dear little child! It was hard for him everywhere. Perhaps it will be easier for him there . . ."

"But why are you crying?"

"No, no, my dear child. I'm no longer crying. You see, my child . . . It's just that . . . I'm no longer crying."

Oksana caresses Maria, kisses her, and presses her to her bosom. Her eyes are flooded with tears; a heavy burden weighs on her chest.

Two months after that accident, Oksana took to her bed and never got up again. An aunt or a neighbour would come by, light a fire in the oven, cook something hot to eat, feed Maria, wash her, and say "Our Father . . . " with her.

Oksana lay in bed, she did not speak, she did not cry. Her eyes were large, bulging. Her nose was thin and sharp, her face was sallow.

Maria, feeling that something unutterably cruel was about to happen, kept running around on the benches and in and out of the inglenook without ever settling down.

And then there came the night when Maria was taken from the house in which her mother was lying and carried to a neighbour's home. Auntie Kateryna was sleeping with her. Maria fell asleep. At midnight she suddenly awoke and began to bawl.

"O-o-o-h, mama! O-o-o-h, mama, mama!" she kept calling out incessantly.

"Hush, my child. Hush, my dear. Mother will come right away. She went out, but she'll be back right away. Sleep, my child, sleep . . ."

Maria sobbed: "Ma-a-a-ma! Where's my ma-a-a-ma? Where's my ma-a- a-ma?"

Auntie Kateryna did not know what to do.

Maria kept stretching her arms in front of herself and calling for her mama.

The following day, the house was once again filled with people, and once again Maria was left hungry and afraid in the inglenook. Her mother, swathed all in white and surrounded by candles, was lying on the long table. Maria was afraid to cry. Mother was sleeping. Why was mother lying on the table for such a long time, and why were there so many candles burning? Her mother's eyes were tightly shut, her thin lips were pressed closely together, and her cheeks looked very sallow.

III

Many days went by.

And each and every day Maria called for her mother and waited for her, but the sun rose, and then it set, and Maria went to sleep, and then she got up again—but her mother was not there, she simply was not there. Gradually, she began to forget about her. She lived with Auntie Kateryna. After all, where was an orphan to go?

Auntie Kateryna took her in and, at first, things were fine. She was kind, gentle. But a person cannot remain kind and gentle forever when there are five mouths clamouring to be fed. Every one of them, without exception, wants something to eat every single day, this one needs boots, that one needs pants, another one has injured his foot, and still another one has come down with whooping cough.

Uncle Tyt tears at his thick dishevelled hair in despair. "Oh, woe is me, woe is me, woe is me! What am I to do with the lot of them? They'll be the death of me!"

He is continually on the go, doing whatever he can, coming up with stopgap measures, cramming something into their mouths . . .

And it was then that Maria realized what it meant to be an orphan.

Her soft dark curly hair had not been washed for many a day and it was matted and tangled. It became infested with lice that bit and tormented her. Maria frantically scratched her scalp until it was covered with suppurating scabs. Her small round head was plastered with snarled tufts of hair, and a grimy patched shirt hung loosely from her shoulders. And as for eating? What could Maria eat? She gulped down scraps of dark bread, gnawed on fruit that had not yet ripened, and gobbled up mouldy, watery potatoes—potatoes that had been boiled for chickens and piglets. Her tummy was large and distended.

After a year had gone by, Maria had to begin working. She had to earn her keep. Tell me, my good people, who would be prepared to feed an orphan for nothing? Maria, praise the Lord, was neither blind nor crippled. When she tore off at top speed, the ground reverberated under her feet. When she let go a shout—it could be heard in the neighbouring village. She had quite the voice, may the saints preserve her . . .

All summer long she grazes geese in the pasture. She rises with the sun, wraps a crust of dry bread in a rag, and herds her gaggle of geese to the river. Her little feet are blackened, blistered, and her toes are bruised. She walks carefully on the loose soil covering the road, and after that—on the dew. The dew softens the carbuncles on her feet, and the dirt gets in and gnaws away at them. She feels a sharp, stinging pain in her feet, and thick dark blood oozes out of them.

But Maria does not take any notice of that. She does not have time to notice. Over there a goose has crawled over a border of plants into someone's garden. Run after it, Maria, as fast as you can, because if you don't, the farmer will come at you with a whip, and then you'll be in for it. When he lets you have it on your bare legs, you'll crouch in pain. Besides, in the pasture there are many of the same kind of Marias, Mykolas, Hnats. She has to run around, play all sorts of games. She has to keep up with the rest of them, even though they are not at all like Maria—a small field mushroom, a little wet hen.

Dmytro Chornooky, a mean and loudmouthed boy, picks fights with her and calls her names. Maria remains silent, but there are times when she breaks into tears and then she does not know what to do first—wipe away her tears or wipe her nose. They play at casting spells, and Dmytro never chooses Maria to "say charms." He chooses everyone else, but he never chooses her. It's hurtful, painful. Others say: "Just you wait, just wait! I'll tell my mama—and then you'll see!"

But Maria never says: "Just you wait, just wait." There would be no use in saying that.

She slips away to a little stream where she whimpers and weeps until she feels better. And then she starts running and shouting once again. She rejoins the group and tries to assert her rights. Her cracked and blistered feet pound the ground, and her voice can be heard in the neighbouring village.

At the age of nine, Maria began living independently. She hired herself out as a servant to Martyn Zaruba. He was a respectable farmer. In his home Maria was washed, combed, and given enough to eat. In return, she grazed twelve head of cattle in the summer, and during the winter she carried water, spread straw in the cattle stalls, helped to spin wool and flax fibres, wound the yarn into balls, and spun hemp fibres for sacks.

Maria grew quickly. When she turned twelve she crossed the threshold into maidenhood and, after that, whenever she met up with boys she modestly lowered her long dark lashes.

The youths looked at her, eyed her for a long time, and said: "Oh, this one will be a fine girl!"

And Maria did become one fine girl! When she was just fifteen, young men began noticing her and following her with their eyes. After evening vespers at the monastery the youths would all try to curry favour with her, but she would duck into a crowd of girls and there was no chance of getting near her.

There was Hrytsko from Dibrova, Anykiy Balaba, Hnat Kukharchuk . . . Oh, what hope could Hnat possibly have in such an uneven competition!

"The devil take you, O Bushy Whiskers, you have such ruddy, bushy whiskers!" Maria was wont to say to him.

Short in stature, Hnat walked with a limp that favoured his lame right leg: one—two and a half! One—two and a half! That was the rhythm with which he walked. He had accidentally struck his kneecap with an axe when he was still a little boy, and his leg had bent and healed that way. But was it his fault that he too had taken a liking to Maria?

Maria, however, took no notice of him, except the odd time when other girls casually mentioned his attachment to her.

Martyn Zaruba had two households—one in the village, and the other on a farmstead. He ran the farmstead himself, while his mother Domakha looked after the household in the village.

The old woman liked Maria, but Maria preferred the farmstead to the village. There was more room to sing out there. You let your voice pour forth—and it spread over all the fields. And there were fewer grinning banterers out there . . . Those who bare their white teeth and giggle: "Tee-hee-hee!" You should be ashamed of yourself, young man. Both the sun and the people are looking at you!

But when the harvest begins, there is no time at all to think about grinning mockers . . . There is no time to even straighten your spine. For surely you know, don't you, what Martyn is like? He is a farmer. And men like that do not waste time . . .

But what does Maria care if the work is hard? She reaps, ties sheaves behind the mowers, and sings under her breath like a little bell. And all the while her eyes, dark and unfathomable, are flashing . . . A single glance—and you're singed . . . And her cheeks are full, rounded, with little dimples. Her curly hair is ablaze with black flames.

A *tableau vivant*—an irrepressible, melodious picture.

Out on a farmstead, after the sun finally sets in the evening, the air grows resonant, and when you sing, your voice winds sinuously upwards until it embraces the stars. Maria lifts her high bosom and begins singing . . . Her spirited, evocative song rings out time and again, resounds over the fields, wends its way like a seagull, reverberates in ringing echoes . . .

Alas, Maria! Oh, alas, alas! Maria does not always sing. There are times when something sticks in her throat, her grief overcomes her, and her tears begin to flow—her copious, searingly hot maidenly tears . . .

But Maria does not cry because she is an orphan. No, that is not why Maria weeps. Maria weeps when she feels that the wide world is closing in on her at a time when her soul demands unbounded expanses.

Martyn's sons and daughters are gaining wisdom in schools. But where is Maria to gain such wisdom? Their heads are crammed with knowledge, and Roman even knows why it thunders and where a rainbow comes from. They have books . . . O Lord, they have so many books!

They bring back new songs, a guitar strums, and a tune is heard, a soft, hesitant one, quite unlike Maria's songs. It cannot hold a candle to Maria's songs. Maria does not murmur, she sings. Roman instructs her and, he says, the result is a veritable solo. The song thunders, the song weeps, the song laughs!

One Sunday she listened with rapt attention to a book. A large, plaintive book. They had written only heaven knows what about some Moor who was being beaten. Oh, if only she could relate her own experiences, what she has lived through. If only she could give voice to her own thoughts. She listens to the thick book, weeps, wipes her damp eyes, and pleads to hear more. It would be so interesting to hear more. Let the book continue speaking. The book is not stingy with its words, there has been ample sorrow packed into it.

"Nothing will come of it, Roman. There's no point in pursuing Maria. You'll just bring down shame upon me. Don't lead an orphan into sin," Martyn cautioned his son. But his words were supperfluous.

It did not even occur to Maria to look upon Roman in that way. Youths from all the neighbouring villages flocked to see her. She would laugh with a youth, joke with him, but would she come out to see him in the orchard?

How is she to know . . .

Then who is to know?

She doesn't know who.

You're making fun of me, Maria.

Ha-ha-ha! If I'm not to your liking, then I'll pack up and leave. Don't come to see me and don't be bothering and troubling me. "I have mice that are evil, mice that are evil, be gone and go to the devil!"

My goodness, but you're a devilish creature, Maria! Just wait until I get my hands on you . . .

Maria turns abruptly—and vanishes. You're better off chasing a cloud than running after her.

Martyn Zaruba has ten cows, heifers, swine. Martyn has six horses that he keeps for working, not just for riding. All year round two maids can hardly cope with all that has to be done. He has male servants to work outdoors. For the harvest he hires additional help. His fields are wide, well cultivated. The soil is rich and black; wheat, hops, and beets thrive without any manure.

The orchard spreads expansively, the apiary is buzzing. In the fall the granaries are filled to the hilt. And around them there are stacks of wheat and oats. The orchard drops a glut of apples, plums. The cellars are full, the grain bins are full, the cattle enclosures are full. Is there any empty space anywhere? If there is, let's have it over here!

On the Feast Day of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary there is much merrymaking. An accordion puts in an appearance, a shot glass, and some much celebrated sausage. Aromatic, fried with onions, and roasted as well. You gulp down a shot, your eyes blink, and there are treats enough both for the body and the soul. Delicate cheeks become flushed, feet grow lighter and tap eagerly like spirited horses.

Korniy, blond and slim, strikes the accordion—and willy-nilly, like it or not—you squat and kick, and your cap, whirling and twirling, flies off the back of your head. He's a devil of a fellow, that Korniy. His whiskers are beginning to grow. His curly locks would suffice for twenty-five youths. Dizzy with love, he casts furtive glances at silky eyebrows and dark eyes.

Maria is dancing, tapping her feet. Her little feet shimmer daintily, oh so daintily.

Korniy also works as a day labourer for Martyn, "hauling stacks of sixty sheaves, three stacks at a time," as he himself brags to Maria.

Days . . . days . . . days . . .

Lost in a dream, Maria walks about, sings, works, sleeps. At work her arms betray her, her eyes lose their alertness.

So, that's how it is, Maria! Do you sense, my dark-browed maiden, what is happening to you? Do not blush and do not lower your eyelashes modestly. It won't do you any good.

Did you sleep last night, Maria? Did you sleep well? Why didn't you sleep, my dear girl?

I was exhausted, my hands and arms ached sharply; it felt as if there were wooden pegs in my spine . . .

Why did you toss and turn from side to side for such a long time, why did you go to get a drink of water, why did you bless yourself and go outdoors to be under the bright stars and to walk on the autumnal dew with your hot feet?

You're not saying anything, Maria?

It happened one wonderful evening.

Maria was drawing water from a well. The well was deep—about five fathoms. She pulled up pail after pail and poured the water into troughs; the cattle would soon be coming home from the pasture, and there had to be water for them. She drew up enough water, filled the troughs, and was about to set out for home.

At that moment there came the sound of a wagon rumbling down a hill and Korniy rode out from behind the orchard. His white teeth were flashing in his tanned face, and his curly hair was blowing in the wind. The horses were running along at a good clip, and he was holding the reins while standing upright in the wagon with his cap askew.

Well, actually, Maria didn't have to dash home right away after all. In fact, she still had to draw one more pail of water. She had almost forgotten about that. And so she fastens the pail on the hook and lowers it. Oh, her hands are so clumsy. Would they do her bidding, or wouldn't they? They were trembling as if they had gone mad.

Oh, honest to God, Korniy has already driven up.

"Whoa!" and the reins are drawn tautly like musical strings.

Maria is still struggling with the pail.

"Will you water my horses, Maria?"

"If you buy me coral beads, I will!"

"You're like a coral bead yourself."

"Laugh Matviyko—I'll give you a •kopiyka."

"Oh, Maria, take care, for I'll jump down from the wagon! Don't tease me!"

"So what will you do? Will you help me pull up the pail? But look here, I've pulled it up by myself."

"Maria, don't joke, because I swear by the Holy Cross, I'll kiss you."

"Ha-ha-ha!"

"Oh, you!" And he jumped down right beside her.

He seized her, embraced her, bent her over the curb of the well, and fastened his lips passionately on her succulent red lips. She was moaning, bending like willow, swooning. His firm arm did not let her flip and fly downwards and, as for Maria, she had forgotten that she was poised over a well. And it was so deep down there.

"There, serves you right!" he laughed as he set her down on her feet.

She came to her senses, and glanced around. It was a different world, not at all like the former one. A gigantic sun was just about to set. "Oh, Korniy, what did you do? What if we had fallen into the well? What if someone had seen us?"

White teeth, blue eyes and curly hair are roaring with laughter.

"We would have had a bath, Maria! And let anyone, whoever finds it enjoyable, watch us. But will you come to the vesper service on Saturday?"

"With you? May the saints preserve us! Come to your senses!"

"But nevertheless, are you going?"

"I've always gone, so I'll go this time, as well."

Korniy watered his horses himself.

IV

On Saturday evening, as the sun sets in a brilliantly flaming horizon, a large monastery bell begins to toll slowly. The ancient spreading village has entwined itself intricately around orchards, meadows, and ravines. Beyond it lie expansive fields, in the distance a forest takes on a bluish hue, little clouds soar like birds, and birds flit about like little clouds. The sun's rays graze the tips of poplars, of imposingly tall oak trees, and cling to the gilded cross on the bell tower of the monastery.

Dong! Dong! Dong!

The tolling of the bell surges and billows far and wide, flooding the expanses. Hardworking people bestir themselves in the fields, the orchards, and listen: Dong! Dong! Dong!

Maria is still out in a field, helping with the sowing.

Martyn scatters the wheat kernels, and Maria walks behind him and shoves the tiny seeds into the crumbly soil. The billowing of the tolling bell swoops down over them, and Martyn pauses, doffs his grimy cap, and blesses himself three times with a wide, sweeping motion.

Maria also blesses herself and suddenly an image of white teeth in a tanned face, blue eyes, and blond curly locks flashes before her eyes.

She glances down the length of the field. O God, the boundary was still so far away! And the field could not be left unsown. The ploughed loamy soil was pleading for seeds. And tomorrow was the "seventh day created by our Lord God"... The land would not wait; it was a sin to make it wait. We must finish the sowing and then we'll be on our way to the vesper service...

Martyn, stepping slowly and broadly, sows the amber seeds with an iron fist. The seeds fall to the ground with a rustling sound. The earth accepts them graciously and at once begins nurturing the juices and the aroma of the future grain.

"Maria, don't hurry like that," Martyn says. "I can't keep up with you. It can't be done just any old way. The kernels must fall evenly."

Maria slows her pace. Her bare feet sink deeply into the ploughed field. Horses pulling harrows follow the sowers and cover the seeds. Martyn unhurriedly, like a machine, continues to sow the seed grain with an even hand. A light, barely noticeable breeze lifts the kernels and deposits them in the soil. The sowers reach the roadway, turn around and begin sowing once again on an unsown swath.

And now the sun has almost set. Slipping towards an elongated cloud that looks like a double-edged sword, it is flooding it with gold and purple.

Maria looks at the sun and pleads with it: "O beloved sun, don't hurry like that, wait up a bit! Catch hold of that oak tree over there and sit down for a while, take a rest . . ."

An early evening calmness descends on the fields. Voices grow louder. On a dusty road in the valley, farmers are returning home from their fields. They are all hurrying to get to the village. Songs can be heard, the rumbling of wheels, the sound of a whip snapping.

"Good evening, •Uncle Martyn! May God help you!" they shout from afar. "It's time to go home! It's time!"

Martyn pauses and wipes his forehead with his rough right hand. "God give you good health! Thank you! I'm almost done. Just another scoopful to go and I'll be finished!"

"Oh, a scoopful, a scoopful!" Maria thinks. "When will that scoopful ever be over and done with!"

And the sun finally sets. The twilight deepens quickly. The last row is finished. Martyn wipes his forehead and shakes the remaining grain out of the sack. Maria hurriedly bustles about. She shakes out the sacks, folds them, and fastens the traces to the whiffle-tree. The sweaty horses make their way towards her. Quickly, more quickly! She rushes to help unharness them, and helps to detach the harrow and place it on the wagon.

As he settles into the wagon, Martyn observes: "You seem to be in a big hurry today, Maria, almost as if you were hurrying to get to your wedding!"

Maria does not respond. Praise God that we're finally on our way. At home she has a thousand matters to attend to, but she'll take care of them lickety-split!

She races around, tears through everything that has to be done, and in no time at all, having washed up and primped herself, she puts on her newest rustling skirt, grabs a kerchief, and rushes as fast as she can to the vesper service.

The village is not close by. It takes a good hour to get there on foot. But Maria is not walking—she is flying. The bell has long since fallen silent. There are many youths and girls over there. So many of them have gathered. Inside the church the monks are singing "O peaceful world . . ." and under the spreading chestnut trees by the church cheerful people are gazing admiringly at bright eyes and dark brows.

After the vesper service Maria will not return to the farmstead. She will go to Aunt Domakha's home in the village, and in the morning she will attend church once again, and only after that will she return to the farm.

She finally races up to the churchyard. Young couples are strolling around the church. The wide church windows are barely lit. Maria casts a quick glance all around.

She walks into the church, buys a candle for a kopiyka, and takes it to the altar dedicated to the Mother of God. It is very well-lit here, and the air is redolent of wax. The candles that have been placed in the stand are burning evenly and steadily. Silvery sacerdotal vestments are shining, and the Mother of God is smiling radiantly.

Maria sets down her candle with a trembling hand—someone might be watching her!—blesses herself swiftly and, blushing furiously, turns around and walks back.

She picks a spot on the left side of the church and, like a little dove, darts glances in all directions. It is overly peaceful here,

overly joyful. After a whole week of hard work, and finally tearing herself away to come here, it is so comforting to let out a sigh and to whisper a quick, quivering prayer.

She does not stay in church until the vesper service has ended. What young girl can possibly stay to the end of the service? She has said all her prayers, blessed herself many times over. In the choir loft the vesper verses are being chanted, and Maria cannot remain here any longer. Palazhka, Korniy's neighbour, is standing right over there. Maria nods meaningfully to her and they both walk out of the church.

Korniy is on the steps. The steps rise and fall. The stone foundation sways; the walls are unable to stay put. Maria hurries off into the shadows for fear that the traitorous lantern will reveal her eyes and her flushed face. She is as red as a strawberry.

Korniy has doffed his cap. He is holding it in his hand.

"Have you finished all your prayers?"

"You must think that I'm like you. All you ever do is chase after girls . . . You probably didn't bless your forehead even once."

"I blessed it a hundred times. I was inside the church twice. I was about to go in for a third time. I searched through all the nooks, I looked through all the orchards, all the hedges . . ."

"And just why were chasing around all over like that?"

"Why and what for? Well, if you want to know everything, you'll grow old too soon. May I come along with the two of you?"

"But who then will go on chasing and searching through all the nooks and hedges?"

"It's no longer necessary to do so . . ."

"Ha-ha-ha!"

Maria is not walking; she is floating. A hot palm touches her hand. A rosy mist rises in her eyes; her ears are filled with "O peaceful world . . ." and the rustling of dry leaves.

"Why have you fallen silent, Maria? Speak up, tell me! Which youths, which sorcerers have charmed you? And as for you, Korniy, you're not at all like you always are. Has a cloud tumbled down on you, or what?"

"Hush, Palazhka. Let's just walk quietly and listen . . . Listen how beautifully they're singing in church. Do you hear them?"

They walk slowly, steadily. A diaphanous curtain, folding and unfolding, emerges out of the mist; steps appear, they go up them, higher and higher; the singing is soothing, starry . . . They keep on going and going and going . . .

They return home through a wide, misty valley. Lanterns are glimmering, laughter and loud voices can be heard.

Korniy is seeing Maria home. His arm embraces her waist, and she does not say anything. They are walking like adults, like an old couple.

They are walking and taking pleasure in being together.

Korniy is telling Maria what is being said about her in the village. It is interesting. Word has it that Hnat Kukharchuk is getting ready to ask for her hand in marriage.

Maria giggles softly. It's funny.

"Oh, I'm telling you, if I ever get hold of that little chunk of fried bacon . . ."

"What would you do?"

"You'll see . . . If he ever falls into my paws . . ."

"My goodness, but you're angry, Korniy."

"I'll break his ribs and rip apart his other leg. He should know better . . ."

Maria is giggling. She finds it pleasant to listen to him.

They come to some shallow dugouts overgrown with meadow-grass and covered with fallen leaves. This is where hemp is soaked, and a heavy hempen odour spreads through the entire ravine.

Maria's and Korniy's paths diverge in this spot. Here is the stile, the grove, where the warbling of the nightingales pours forth in the springtime, and where autumn leaves are now falling; it is quiet here, and the wind gently rocks the tips of the slim aspens and the dangling tresses of the birch trees.

They come to a stop and just stand there.

Maria's hand lies in Korniy's ardent palm.

Maria lowers her head.

Korniy says that he is going to be taken to serve in the Russian forces. He is being conscripted and is slated to become a sailor. He has to serve for seven years . . .

It would have been better if he had not told her.

Maria sways. He clasps her closely and, moaning, they lose themselves in a kiss.

Maria swoons, and her legs buckle under her.

"You'll go and forget me . . ."

"Forget you? May lightning strike me dead if I should ever forget you. I love you, Maria . . . Do you hear me?"

Maria wants to say something, but her thumping heart prevents her from uttering a word.

What did she just hear? O God, what was it that she had just heard! And it was said by Korniy, the stalwart Korniy . . . And he was not too embarrassed to say it, and his tongue freely did his bidding.

"Maria? Why aren't you saying anything? Say something! I want to hear . . ."

Maria feels a sharp pain in her heart. Hard lumps are squeezing into her throat, and she cannot swallow them; she shudders and her tears burst forth in a torrent.

Korniy embraces her, cuddles her, holds her closely, kisses her damp eyes, lips, and cheeks.

"O my beloved! My beloved!" Maria whispers passionately. And she presses herself closely to him, clings ardently to him, winds herself like a hopvine around him. Now her passionate young body, her heart and her soul no longer belonged to her—they belonged to him.

They vowed not to forget one another, tore themselves apart from one another, and then came together once more, and began kissing yet again . . .

Why, O God, is the night so short?

V

They finished the ploughing, the sowing, picked the apples and the plums, dug out the beets, the potatoes, and cut out the cabbages.

Korniy was taken away to become a sailor. In the evenings Maria hid herself from everyone and poured forth countless maidenly tears. Her dark eyes wept, her tanned, rosy cheeks were wasting away with grief.

She would go out to the well to get some water, stand in the same spot where she had stood that unforgettable radiant evening, and wait expectantly for a wagon to appear. Do not stand there, my young maiden, and do not wait for it to appear. It is not possible for you to bring the sun down to the earth, or to lift up the mountains.

She often gazed into the depths of the well—was it possible to find succour there?

No, Maria. No. There is no succour there.

Hnat Kukharchuk limps on his lame right leg, but he is a farmer the likes of which there are few. He is one of three brothers. They are all judicious and hard workers. Last spring the middle brother set up his own farmstead, while Hnat remained with the eldest brother Mykhaylo and his wife Odarka.

In the springtime they laid the foundation for a brick house, made five hundred •karbovantsi just by selling their apples, laid bricks, stained the corners and the chimney, put on a metal roof, and painted it green. It made one's heart rejoice to look at it.

Hnat was the youngest brother and a jack-of-all-trades. He was adept at carpentry, and he knew how to lay bricks. He laid bricks alongside the bricklayers, built the windows, doors, and benches by himself and painted them a light reddish-brown.

The Kukharchuk horses were the best in those parts. Sleek and well-fed, they lowered their necks when they ran and the ground thundered. Everyone knew that as soon as the house was finished

Hnat would get married. It was not seemly to hold a wedding in the old house. And even though Hnat was far from being a handsome man, the girls chased after him in droves. But he did not cast his eyes at them.

He would go to the evening vespers and keep his eyes fixed on Maria. When Maria walked home, he would already be waiting for her either by a fish-pond or a stile.

Maria would glance at him, say "Good evening," and keep on going.

"Why are you in such a hurry, Maria?"

"Is that forbidden?"

"Well, no . . . But . . . Wait up a bit."

"People are paid for waiting."

And lo and behold Hnat has brought her something. He takes a bundle out of his pocket, and in it there are expensive candies, chocolate ones wrapped in bits of tinfoil. Maria has probably never even seen candies like that. And they are wrapped in a batiste handkerchief.

"Take it . . ." Hnat looks closely at Maria and extends the bundle to her.

No, she does not like candies.

Then take them and give them to someone. She can give them to some children.

Fine. Maria likes children very much. She will take them and give them to the little ones, but Hnat, do not buy any more candies.

That "Hnat" uttered by her is all the thanks that he needs. Hnat hears it, and something softens in his hard heart. He promises that he will not buy any more candy.

But then, after all, he did not promise he would not buy her any coral beads.

He went into the city himself and spent a long time picking them; and he picked such lovely ones that Maria, try as she might, would not be able to refuse them.

She saw them and her eyes sparkled, her pearly teeth involuntarily parted in a smile.

But Maria can't take those coral beads. Honest to God she can't. Oh, Hnat! Do not beg me to take them, do not plead with me. Everyone will know about it, everyone will be laughing.

"It is only this grove and this stile that will know about it," he said in a saddened voice.

"You're a strange one, Hnat. Why are you buying these things? What's the point of it?"

"There is no point. Just because. You get a notion to go and buy something. But for whom? Well, for whom are you to buy something? You have no girlfriend, no mother. So, for whom? And the thought just comes to me—for Maria. She has such lovely eyes and such lovely brows . . . Buy them for her. For her eyes and her dark brows. Thank her for them with the beads. And so I bought them."

"You're a strange one . . ."

"That's what I say too, but no one believes me. If you would just sing me a song, I would listen, and I would not ask for anything more . . ."

Maria sings him a song. Why not sing him a song?

She raises her bosom and a song pours forth: "Over the marshes a crow is flying."

Hnat listens.

"I look at you, Maria, and I stand in utter awe of you. I stand in awe of your beauty. You should be seated in a parlour, and you should attire yourself in royal garments and be someone's queen. No, no, there's no doubt . . . You ought to be a queen. You're just too beautiful, and your song—it's wonderful, it's simply wonderful."

"Don't say things like that," Maria says angrily. "I'll run away and you won't see me ever again. What is it that you want from me?"

"Nothing, Maria. I don't want anything at all. I just want to look at you, and nothing more."

"I had no idea that you were such a talker. They said that you don't say as much as a word for days on end."

"It's good that they at least said that. It's good when they say something. It's worse when they don't say anything," and he unobtrusively passes the coral beads to her.

Maria takes them; her eyes are entranced by them, and she is incapable of parting with them.

"Oh, Hnat! I'm begging you. Don't come to see me and don't buy me anything. I can't . . ."

But the next time Hnat meets up with Maria in another spot and he unfolds a silken kerchief before her.

Maria does not want to look at it. She turns to flee.

Hnat catches her and forcefully tucks the kerchief into her sash.

Maria wants to be angry with him, but she does not have the strength to be angry.

She scolds him, but he just stands there, looks at her, and smiles sadly.

That smile, oh, that smile! It almost makes Maria weep. Well, what's to be done with that kerchief? What is she to do with it? Is she to reject it? But how is one to reject it, if it is silken and if it is such a pleasure to look at. She can't reject it. She doesn't have the strength to do that.

She holds it and says emphatically: "Honest to God, Hnat, if you ever bring me another rag like this one, I'll throw it out into the mud!"

And Hnat smiles and thinks: "Well, if it's to be a rag . . ."

"Well, why are you smiling? Why are you standing there?"

"Permit me, Maria, to stand here and smile," he says calmly.

"O Hnat! . . You! . . Don't torture me! Listen, I'm begging you, don't come to see me, don't buy me things! I can't take it! What do you want from me?"

"Nothing, Maria," and he smiles.

Maria runs so swiftly down the path by the mountain that she does not feel the ground under her feet. It may or may not be frosty, but her cheeks are burning. Her heart is pounding sharply and erratically.

"Oh, my God, my God! If only he would write a letter, Just one little letter. O Korniy, my far-off Korniy! Hear my plea!"

"What's the matter with you?" Domakha asks.

"Oh, what's the matter with me! That Hnat Kukharchuk won't leave me alone. No matter where I go, he's there—he's there, he's there . . ."

Domakha shakes her head. "But he's a good farmer, you know, a good one."

Maria sobs through her tears: "A farmer, a farmer! All you think about is a farmer!"

"But what more do you want, my child? You'll have bread, something to eat with the bread, warmth, children. And what more do you want? Are you better off with us? No matter how long you live, no matter how hard you work, a servant is always a servant. Isn't that right? And just the other day Martyn said: 'If a decent farmer comes along—I'll give her two *desyatyny of my land. She's earned it, she's worked hard for it.'"

"Auntie, O my dearest! But it's Korniy that I love so dearly! I love him so very much!"

Domakha thinks: "Korniy? He has nice teeth and nice hair. But that's all he has. A small hut that is almost out on the pasture. And moreover, he's a sailor. You don't know yet what a sailor is like. Where he has been, where he has travelled. Seven years . . . He snaps his fingers, and he's forgotten you. Just think about what can happen."

Oh alas, but doesn't Maria think about that? Does she have to ponder it further? That's all that she does is think. She thinks, and many a time copious pearls fall thickly from her eyes and trickle down her cheeks.

VI

Mykhaylo's parents have already passed on, so his wife Odarka takes it upon herself to talk to Hnat: "Say what you will, Hnat, but Maria is not a suitable partner for you."

Hnat is busy fashioning a razor from a fragment of a scythe; he has been working on it for half a day, sharpening it and trying it out. His ruddy stubble is tough—the makeshift razor cannot cut it yet.

He tries it out and then continues sharpening it. Patience and stubbornness will win out.

He remains silent.

"There's Yukhym's Hanna," Odarka continues. "She has two desyatyny of land, five hundred karbovantsi, a pair of oxen and a cow. And you've seen, haven't you, how hard she works? Didn't you see how she coped with the clover by the machine? She sifted with two sieves all by herself . . . Didn't you see that?"

Hnat's razor is finally ready.

He begins lathering his heavy growth of stubble with soap and sings:

> Over time, cows and oxen will perish,
> A white face, dark brows . . .
> . . . will never wither away.

He finishes lathering his face—and the stubble crackles under the razor.

The sun is setting, and the monastery bell is tolling. Odarka sighs and talks about Tykhon who ignored dark brows and married a girl who had cows, and now he was a wealthy farmer, about a young hog that has been so well fed that it can no longer get up on its feet, about yesterday's incident with the horses when Mykhaylo came back from the oil-press, pulled to a stop, "and some son-of-a-gun scared the horses so badly that they bolted and

could hardly be caught, and the sled was shattered to bits. And why would one keep such miserable creatures?"

Hnat remains silent and continues shaving.

After finishing, he rubs his palm over his cheek—it feels good. He fills a container with water, leans over a little tub, and carefully washes up. Then he sidles up to the lamp, dips his fingers in the oil, and smears his hair with it. After he combs his hair it shines and glitters like gold.

He looks at himself in a fragment of a broken mirror, twitches his ruddy eyebrows, and tops it all off with a devilishly seductive smile.

A few moments later, Odarka catches only a glimpse of his back as he goes past the windows. He is on his way to the vesper service.

Winter, frost, and snow.

At times blizzards showed their tricks. The Pylypivka fast would soon be over, and then Christmas would come to visit and have a merry time. The older men would knock back their shots of liquor, the young men would dance with the girls and drag about a *kolodka. Here the kolodka was celebrated on the Feast of Jordan. Elsewhere, it was done on Shrovetide. All the young men shoved pints of liquor in their pockets, slapped on their woollen caps, and took off . . .

Returning home from the vesper services, Maria no longer avoided Hnat as much as she used to.

They walked side by side and, for the most part, remained silent. He agonized over what he should say, while she was in agony that he might say something. He inquired about her health, asked if they had finished harvesting, how many apples Martyn had sold.

Finally, after talking about the snow and the frost, he brought up the most gratifying conversation. The kolodka, of course . . .

It was necessary to come to an understanding, to stock up for it . . .

"Where are you going to celebrate the kolodka, Maria?"

"I don't know," she snapped curtly and frowned.

"In our neck of the woods it will be at Tykhon's home. There will be good musicians, and there's plenty of room to dance."

"Hmm . . . I don't know why I'd go to your neighbourhood."

"But why . . . Do come to our place."

"And what else would you want? Perhaps you'll say that I ran after you, right to your house? Do you want me to come and say: 'Odarka, take a cudgel and chase me out of the house.' She's already gossiping throughout the neighbourhood. 'She's a servant, a ragamuffin, and she's bewitched the young man . . . He doesn't sleep, he doesn't eat, he runs around like madman . . . The poor thing!' So tell me, who is it that has bewitched you like that? You're not saying anything, you won't tell me!"

Hnat smiled his usual smile and remained silent. Maria could not see that smile in the dark of the night, but she could vividly imagine it.

"You're not saying anything, O bewitched one? You could at least say something. Why are you carrying on with a ragged servant?"

Hnat thinks out loud: "When I get home, Odarka will get what's coming to her."

"O my dear Lord! Hnat! Have you lost your mind? Or are you just on the verge of losing it? If you cause any trouble, I won't ever be able to show my face there. She'll say: 'She put him up to it, she's egging him on to get into a fight.' Oh no, you must not do that. Don't even think about it."

The stile is where Hnat usually turns back.

In parting he takes her hand and holds it just a bit longer than he should.

Maria quickly tries to free her hand . . .

"Oh, you're pressing too hard. Let go! Why are you breathing so heavily, so unpleasantly?"

Hnat lets go of her hand.

"Oh, Maria, Maria!" The words are torn painfully and intensely from his lips.

He turns sharply and limps swiftly into the valley.

Maria is astonished. What has happened? She even wants to call out after him, but her tongue and her lips will not obey her. No. He would stop, or he would at least glance backwards . . .

The path in the snow is narrow and deep. The black figure sways on it, grows smaller, begins to disappear, and vanishes. He did not stop, nor did he glance backwards.

Maria is absolutely stunned.

The trees stand and listen ever so sadly. The silence is deafening.

Maria stands without moving and, utterly disconcerted, gazes into the drab grey night.

"Hnat!"

The name breaks softly from her lips.

Silence.

She listens intently.

There is no echo. The dull night has swallowed it and it does not reverberate.

The slim poplars and birches stretch upwards and softly sibilate among themselves up there, as if they are talking about her, the abandoned Maria.

VII

The holiday season is in full swing.

Kukharchuk's new house is filled with guests. Godparents, in-laws, neighbours. Pocket-sized bottles head for the table in a long line, are quickly emptied, and disappear. Godparents and in-laws are becoming flushed, and with every pint their conversations increase in volume. Loud bursts of laughter roll forth, jabbering women chatter and buzz. Carols, songs, crushing embraces, succulent kisses.

Everyone is rejoicing, roaring with laughter, and only Hnat is silent and looking ill at ease . . .

Christmas goes by, the New Year. The Feast of Jordan. Now dancing is permitted.

But Hnat is not the man he once was. He is no longer Hnat—he is a burned-out stump, dark with sadness. He has firmly resolved not to go, not to beg, not to plead for a single smile, for a single kind word. Love cannot be forced. A heart cannot be made to beat in the manner that you might wish.

Prior to the Feast of Jordan he went to a tavern, bought three pints, and went to the kolodka at Tykhon's home. He shoved one bottle in his pocket, and left two at home for a rainy day. Oh my, he would really tie one on today!

At Tykhon's place there was much revelry.

He walked in. "Good evening! I greet you with the Feast of Jordan."

"Good evening, Hnat. Please, sit down wherever you can find a spot."

Hnat placed the bottle on the table and settled down on a bench by some pillows.

Yukhym's Hanna, the one with the oxen and the cows, the one who sifted with two sieves at the same time, rushed up to him. First she took his cap and hid it, so that he could not run away. And then she sat down beside him and began chirping merrily.

The musicians arrived and a crowd of young men rushed into the room. The dulcimer rang out, the violin whined, the drum rumbled. Couples began swirling around the room, the girls were twirling their skirts.

Hnat was still looking grim and gloomy. He wasn't dancing, because he couldn't.

"And why aren't you dancing, Hanna? Go ahead and dance."

"But you know full well that I never dance."

"I have to admit that I didn't know that."

"There's a lot that you don't know. You don't even know how pleasant I find it to be sitting here beside you. The pillows are so soft. But why are you so sad? Don't be sad! Cast down your troubles. They're just grist for the mill."

Hanna is taller than Hnat. She purposely does not stand beside him so that this fact will not be noticeable. It isn't fitting for a woman to be taller than a man. Hnat is also aware of this, and he feels badly about it. He feels he has to drown his sorrow with something.

He goes up to the table and quickly tosses back a few shots. He had hoped that it would cheer him up, but it made him feel even sadder.

He glances at Hanna, sees Maria in his mind's eye, compares them, and feels like shouting in despair.

But maybe she would still come? Maybe she actually would? A spark of hope was still glimmering, and he did not want to extinguish it.

But hour after hour passed by and she did not appear. She would not come!

The dancing finally ends and it is time to serve the supper. Hanna leaves gloomy Hnat and goes to help set the table and bring in the food.

In the meantime the youths gather near the threshold and indulge in shenanigans. One of them sits with his cap on his knees, another one squats and hides his face in the cap. He puts his hands behind his back and anyone who wants to can come up and strike them. The one who is squatting must guess who is hitting him. If he guesses—that's good. And he makes the guilty one take his place. If he doesn't guess—there you go, he has to keep on squatting. Loud peals of laughter, excitement . . . O Lord!

While this was going on, the door slowly opened and a youth from the other side of the ravine walked in. He came in, greeted everyone—"Good evening!"—and fell back shyly. There are so many people here! He stands by the door and looks around, trying to find someone.

"For whom are you looking?" they ask him.

Andriy does not have time to respond. He has already spotted the person he is looking for. It is Hnat, who is right over there, and Andriy goes directly to him.

"I have something to tell you. Let's step outside."

"What kind of great secret have you brought with you?" Hnat appears to be resisting, but something invigorating shoots into his heart.

He jumps to his feet and goes out with the youth.

"Maria sent me to ask you to come to her," the youth says as he kneads his cap.

Upon hearing this news, Hnat is ready to leap up to the stars. But it is not seemly to show his enthusiasm.

Appearing to be indifferent, he asks: "And where is she?"

"She's at home . . . At Granny Domakha's place. They're also celebrating a kolodka there." Oh, Andriy was trying to speak so politely.

"I'll think about it. Perhaps I'll drop in."

Andriy sprinted down the path through the plum orchard.

Hnat remained where he was until the darkness swallowed the youth, and then he went back indoors. He stood by the threshold and raised himself up on his good leg. He grew taller by a whole head. At this point, he felt as if the room was not high enough for him.

He tossed the musicians a coin and they jumped into action.

"Hnat, are you dancing? Honest to God fellows, Hnat is dancing! That's how to do it!"

"I'm dancing! Let's have a *kozak dance!"

The dulcimer struck a kozak dance. Hnat lifted his coattails and sprang into action.

I'll kick up my heels, shake off my worries,
I'll kick up my heels, come what may!

Hnat stamped his feet in time with the music, using his crippled leg as best he could. Now it scarcely seemed crippled. It had straightened out and was twirling madly. Sweat poured from his forehead.

Other young men joined him in the dance. That's the way to do it, Hnat!

Yes, fellows, that's how one should dance. You haven't really known Hnat up to now.

"Make way!" they all shouted. "Make way for the kozaky!"

When his shirt became so drenched that you could take it off and wring it, Hnat stopped dancing. He wiped his brow, and turned to speak to the girls.

"My dear little chicks, my beloved little quails. I'm feeling very good, I'm very happy! I see you and my heart rejoices, and my feet won't stand still. To dance with you is like being in the most honorary place in paradise. But nevertheless, I must leave you now. I have to go home, because I have a very important matter to attend to. My brother has sent for me, and I must do his bidding!"

When Hnat finished his little speech, it was as if lightning had struck all those who were present.

"Who has ever heard or seen anything like that, young man—to leave a kolodka before supper is served!"

Hanna is at a loss to know how to handle the situation, what she should do to prevent Hnat from leaving.

"You're lying, Hnat. You're not going to your brother's home. I don't believe you."

"Come on, Hanna, give me my cap. I have to go."

The prepared food was being served at the table, but Hnat walked away.

The musicians struck up a march, and Hanna lowered her head.

Hnat stopped in at his house, took the two remaining bottles, and set out to spend the rest of the night in the other part of the village that lay beyond the ravine.

VIII

Night and frost. Silence.

The snow is silvery in the moonlight. It looks as if the straw thatches of the houses have been carefully wrapped in cotton batting. Smoke streams from chimneys and laboriously makes its way up to the very heavens.

Hnat is not walking. Why would he be walking when he has sprouted wings and can now fly. He flies through the orchards, the ravine, skirts the dugouts, the familiar stile, and rushes up the hill. The path is well-trodden, slippery. Hnat begins to feel warm.

He draws near Domakha's house. He is not a young whippersnapper, but his heart is beating up a storm. There is no way of stopping it, of holding it back. All the windows in the large brick house are lit. People are moving about, there is music, singing, a lot of noise.

Hnat paused, caught his breath, took off his cap, and smoothed down his hair. He lifted his head, stuck out his chest, and confidently moved ahead.

He entered the house . . .

He had hardly stepped over the threshold when Domakha rushed up to him.

"Ah, good evening! Best wishes to you on the Feast of Jordan, my dear one. But why have you forgotten about us? Why have you come so late? Please, please . . . Do come in . . ."

Hnat walked straight to the table and took out one of the two bottles. Seated at the table were Martyn, the landowner, and his son Roman.

"Have you come home from school for the holidays?" Hnat asked Roman.

He had to show his respect first of all to the student. Hnat understood this very well. It wasn't the first time that he was out in company.

Martyn made room for him to sit down.

"Sit down, Hnat. Fill a glass . . . Have a drink and a bite to eat. And what about a second one? Come on now, toss back another one. Look here, we've tossed back a dozen or so already. Where have you been dallying so long?"

Hnat downed a second drink. And then he had to pay homage to the Holy Trinity by downing a third one.

Maria, all flushed, suddenly appeared before him. Hnat almost made a fool of himself. She appeared before him and blinded him. His tongue refused to turn, the blood rushed to his face. And she found it amusing. She stood there and laughed. Oh, those devilish eyes! Fireballs!

"I didn't think that you had to have a special invitation. You knew that there was going to be a kolodka at our place, but you didn't stop in . . ."

Hnat did not respond. What can one say at a moment like that?

Fortunately, Martyn joined the conversation.

"And by now the threshing must be finished over at your place, right?"

"Yes, I guess so . . ."

"But as for me, I just can't get it finished. There's still the clover to be done. And how were the apples at your place this year? In our parts worms ate the blossoms and there were no apples. But over there, in Horby, the apple trees were laden down too heavily. It's really strange how these things happen. Over here, it's like this, and over there, it's like that . . ."

"At our place," Hnat interjected, "praise God, the apples were fine, but we sold them, you see, as if we were selling them to the devil's mother. We gave them away for almost next to nothing to buyers in the fall. If we had them now, we'd get a pile of money for them."

"Have you finished building all your chambers?" Martyn asked with a smirk.

"Oh, what kind of chambers are they! It's really just a little house of sorts . . ."

"Is it a warm one? Is there any dampness in the corners? When I built my house, the devil take it, there were wet spots in the corners for three years."

"We put good bricks in the corners and covered the foundation with tar."

"That's good. But my workers, the sluggards, didn't think of doing that . . ."

The conversation then turned to their cattle, horses. Martyn praised the Kukharchuk stallions. Such horses were worthy of belonging to the governor himself.

As they were talking, a procession of *varenyky, fried cabbage, roasted meat, pancakes, and cabbage rolls kept passing before them . . .

When the cooked buckwheat came along, Hnat went on strike. He simply couldn't down anything else. Even loosening his belt did not do him any good. He had also tossed back a good number of drinks.

Hnat began to loudly let loose a string of witticisms.

And he brazenly began to flatter Maria and send her impish smiles.

The musicians were not letting up: "The pigs are in the turnip patch, the pigs are in the turnip patch—oh, woe is me!"

The young men and girls were prancing all over the place. It was hot. The girl's handkerchiefs were vainly wiping away beads of perspiration.

Hnat maintained an air of self-importance.

He wanted to catch Maria alone, and he had already walked outdoors twice. Finally he bumped into her in the dark porch.

She did not resist or run away. She even took his hand, and it seemed to Hnat that all earthly kingdoms had been given to him, that he was as wealthy as if he were the Tsar himself. It is unfortunate, however, that at a moment like this you simply cannot think of anything to say. You just stand and look and breathe. He had thought that he would tell her everything. But there you had it . . .

"Where have you been traipsing around?" she asks.

"Well, where . . . Just . . . Here and there . . ."

"Oh, sure, here and there. Do you think I don't know? You're trailing around after Hanna, aren't you?"

Hnat cannot tolerate lies.

"That's a lie!" he contradicts her firmly and decisively. "I've never had anything to do with Hanna!"

"Then why are people wagging their tongues about it?"

"If only one knew why . . . Oh Maria!" he broke off what he was saying and fell silent. After a moment: "Listen Maria! I can't take this any more . . . It's either . . . or . . . Tell me."

She laughed. As if she didn't understand. But she, the deceitful one, understood very well.

"Will you be mine, Maria? Will you? Or else . . ."

"Or else what?"

"You'll see what. It's not a joking matter, Maria! I can't put up with this any more . . ."

"My, but you're impatient. And what about Odarka? Never fear, as soon as she hears of it—she'll chase me out of the house. She speaks badly about me, doesn't she? Of course she does . . . I know all about it, people are talking . . ."

"Just say the word . . ."

She interrupted him.

"The word, the word! What girl will come right out and say: 'My darling dove, take me . . . Do come to see me!' It's only your Hanna who could do that . . . You're quite the young man . . . But let's go indoors. It's cold . . ."

When Hnat was leaving, Domakha tied up a bundle of treats for him.

"This, you should know, is from her. She's the one . . . Well, you know how it is . . . The girl is young, foolish. She's good, but she's still young . . . She's balking, she's bashful . . . But don't shun her. Don't shun her . . . Drop by more often. She's no longer living on the farmstead. I took her in to live with me . . . Come and visit us!"

Maria threw a warm shawl over her shoulders and walked with him through the orchard.

He wanted to stay there with her for a while longer, but it was too cold.

IX

Maria, notwithstanding everything, is still waiting for letters from Korniy.

Oh, the nights! Oh, alas, those maidenly nights! Send me a letter, let me know what's happening, don't abandon me! Can you hear me? You neither hear nor see me! You're gadding about in distant countries; you've forgotten all about me, you've even stopped thinking about me.

Days, weeks, and months—and not even a short little letter.

She did not sleep for several nights, and then she agreed to marry Hnat, and they sealed the agreement with a drink.

But throughout the village, chatty girls had long since been singing: "Dear Hnat was shaking down pears, and darling Maria was gathering them, and darling Maria did not get married, she was waiting for dear Hnat . . ." Maria hears the singing and it seems to her that they are burying her, sending her off to her death.

A boisterous engagement party was celebrated. Mykhaylo and Odarka, as the parental figures, went to have a look at the maiden's dowry.

"Well, my dear in-law, what is there to be said about that kind of a dowry. What can there possibly be to see in an orphan's dowry. But he just wouldn't change his mind. No matter what we did, or what we said . . . No way . . . No, no, he simply wouldn't listen, my good people, even if you had tried to hew a stake on his head. Well, so be it. It's not for my sake that he's taking her—he's doing it for himself!" Odarka prattled on and on out in the street.

But at the engagement party, after Martyn arrived, and when the plum brandy and the cherry brandy were set out on the table,

and when the fried varenyky were served, and the aroma of sausage filled the air, Odarka began singing a very different tune.

After a few drinks she began saying: "You see, dear in-law, it's the neighbours who filled my ears with nonsense. And what, and where . . . But I, you see, say: May God grant them good health and peace in their household. It's through work that people attain happiness for themselves . . ."

"Well, in-law, when it comes down to work, you know . . . My workers don't sit idle. At my place, if there's work to be done, then it must be done. And, as you know, she's been in my home for seven years. She's a wonderful girl—good as gold. No matter what she starts doing—it's done in a flash! May God grant her good health!"

"May good health always be with them," and the in-laws continued drinking toasts to them.

"Oh, dear Hnat, you dear young man, lead your horses to the water; while you're watering your horses, you can visit with darling Maria," the bridesmaids chirped.

Odarka kept on sipping and sipping the sweet liqueur, and by the time the party was over, she had forgotten all about looking at the dowry.

Domakha and her daughter-in-law led her through all the pantries.

"This is hers, and this . . . Here's her sheepskin coat . . . We bought a sheepskin and gave it to a furrier to tan it. It's better if you pick it out yourself, and see to it that it's done properly . . . The marketplace is filled with such cheap junk, that Lord help us! Everything that you pick up falls apart in your hands."

They found pillows and a grey woollen coat. They also had a look at a cow. It was standing and peacefully chewing its cud. There you have the oxen and the cows, Hnat thought, and as for Odarka, she did not know what to think. She had not expected anything like that. People had said that Maria felt completely at home at Martyn's place. That he treated her like family. And it appeared that it was true. And so far, the most important matter

was not being mentioned. It's better if the groom doesn't know what he'll be getting. He'll love his wife even more.

The pre-Lenten period was short this year, so things had to be done in a hurry. There was much running around, much fussing and worrying. Hnat wanted to prove that he could get everything done, and Martyn also did not want to be put to shame. He would prove that he was a host beyond reproach.

The village girls kept dropping in to see Maria. She had no family, and so they all wanted to be her bridesmaid.

"It's like this, Maria . . . and it's like that, Maria . . ." They gave her advice, bustled around her. They told her what kind of a wedding wreath they would weave her, and how they would comb her hair . . .

The young married women gathered and spent entire evenings discussing which woman should be invited to act as mistress of the wedding, who should be the one next in line, who should be the best man, which guests would accompany the bride to the groom's home.

It was unanimously decided that Domakha would be the matron of honour. She was like a mother to Maria, and Maria could not complain about her old mistress. Martyn's wife Khrystya, you know, was stricter. She had quite a sharp tongue, and Maria often had to listen to a litany of reprimands from her. But as for Domakha, it would be a sin to say anything bad about her. She was kind and fair. She expressed her disapproval when it was called for, but she also knew when to offer her praise and commendations. And that's all that an orphan needs—kindness, a good word, and nothing more.

Maria recalled that she had godparents, but they had done so little over the years to care for their godchild that she barely knew them. Nevertheless, she went to their home to invite them to the wedding, and her godfather became the master of the wedding. After all, someone had to bless Maria for the marriage ceremony.

The *korovay was baked. The girls, gathering in a swarm around the table, sang as they decorated the *rizka.

Martyn's daughter arrived from the city and attired the bride in a fashionable manner. A white veil, so long that it trailed on the ground.

Maria was a trifle embarrassed, but she also felt a bit pleased for she knew that her girlfriends would be envious of her.

The finest horses in the neighbourhood were brought in for the wedding procession. A trio of musicians was hired. When they began playing, you simply couldn't stand still.

Hnat arrived early in the morning with his own horses. He drove into the yard so swiftly that the windowpanes rattled and his wagon almost tipped over. The bridesmaids and young candle-bearers were singing melodiously, the musicians struck up a march. The commotion swept over the entire village.

As dictated by custom, Maria concealed herself in a neighbour's storage room where she sat on a trunk and wept, but in her case the copious tears were being shed from the heart.

The bridegroom, accompanied by his best men, found her all in tears, brought her out, and led her into the house to have her •braid undone.

"The maiden whose braid is being undone, doesn't wish to have it undone," the bridesmaids were singing.

The best men and the master of the wedding sat the bride down on a pillow.

She clasped her head tightly and tried to protect her braided hair.

The master pulled her hands apart and began undoing her hair that had purposely been braided into countless little braids that were intertwined in firm little knots.

Oh alas, Maria, why, why are you weeping? My dear girls, my dear little doves! Undo her braids, dress her. Bless her, father, bless her mother! Once, twice, and a third time!

"My dear children, may God bless you once, twice, and a third time!"

They blessed them for the marriage ceremony with icons that were mismatched. There had not been sufficient time to go and

buy a pair of matched icons. One icon was of the Mother of God, the Nursing Madonna, the other one that depicted Jesus Christ was smaller in size, and this was a bad omen.

The neighbours were whispering softly. "No, say what you will, neighbour, it's not a good sign."

The wedding party got into the wagons, and the bridesmaids began singing:

> The gates are being opened wide,
> The orphan is going to her marriage ceremony . . .

Maria weeps even more . . .

Hnat's lips are trembling but he tries to control himself. It isn't fitting for him to bawl, but he finds it hard to refrain from crying. It's as if the songs had been composed just for him. His dear mother isn't there to see him, and his dear father isn't there to hear what is happening . . . People who are not his kin are seeing him off to his marriage ceremony, and the horses are straining, bending their necks, and the bridesmaids are singing.

Domakha walks around the wagons of both the bride and the groom, and showers them with grain that has been soaked in holy water. The gate is opened—giddy-up! The horses dash off; Hnat is in the lead, and Maria follows him. Prior to their wedding ceremony they are to travel separately.

During the marriage ceremony Maria is as pale as a fashionable young lady. Her eyebrows and her trembling lowered eyelashes contrast darkly with her pale complexion, and her black curls keep slipping out from under her veil.

Hnat looks stern and sombre. They are both holding wax candles.

"And you, O bride-to-be, who is named Maria, will you be faithful to your husband Ihnatius?" the priest asks.

Maria barely nodded her head, and from her trembling lips a word was blurted out—yes. All the candles burned evenly, not one of them went out. As they were leaving, the bride, in keeping with tradition, snagged the small •rushnyk on which they had been

standing and dragged it with her foot to the threshold so that good fortune would not be left standing behind them.

On the way back from the marriage ceremony, she and Hnat now rode together in his wagon. Several times along the way they were stopped and greeted with sheaves of rye, with bread and salt. Hnat placed the sheaves in the wagon and treated the greeters to shots of whiskey.

At Domakha's home the young couple was greeted with holy icons and bread. As the stand-in parents in the wedding party blessed them, they kissed the icons and the hands of these parents; they then entered the house and sat down at once at the table for they had not eaten anything that morning. It was not considered proper to eat before the marriage ceremony.

In the large parlour long tables had been set, and the guests took their places at them. Everyone was hungry. The food was served.

At first the atmosphere was quiet and solemn, but a short time later, after a few shots had been downed, the mood quickly changed. People began talking and singing.

During this time, the musicians were playing in the yard for the youths and maidens. The young people could be heard dancing out there, for it was not fitting for them to sit at the table with their elders.

Maria was sad. She ate very little and did not drink at all.

Hnat tried his best to encourage her to eat, picked out what he deemed to be the choicest morsels for her, fed her sweets as one would feed a child. Nevertheless, she remained heavy-hearted.

She kept thinking about Korniy, and she felt disquieted. It seemed to her that she had committed a great sin. She feared she would be punished for breaking her vow to remain faithful until she died. But where was he? Why had he never written to her, or sent word to tell her how he was doing? He had gone away and disappeared like a droplet in water. Where was he?

Scene after scene flashed by in her inner eye: how she had seen him that evening, how he had embraced her, embraced her

boldly, confidently . . . His shining blue eyes, his curly hair . . . Oh God, dear God!—a heavy sigh escapes her.

"What's wrong with you, Maria? Why are you sad? Have something to eat, beloved! Take this little piece here . . . No, this one . . . It's the very best one. And have something to drink. This plum juice is ever so sweet, it's thick, like honey . . ."

"Thank you, Hnat. Everything is fine . . . No, no . . . Nothing is troubling me. I'm fine. I just don't feel like eating, I can't . . ."

No, Maria thinks, he's really not all that bad. He's kind and generous. He doesn't talk very much, but O Lord . . . Not everyone has to be talkative. She would become used to him, begin to love him, forget the rest. What could be done, if such was her fate. It seems that one can't go against one's fate . . . If only he were a bit more confident . . . Like that other one. That one walked confidently, while this one creeps along warily. That one didn't bring me anything, or buy me anything. She even would have liked him to buy her something. No. He just took her as if she belonged to him, and kissed her, and laughed. This one gives her sweets, a kerchief . . . He creeps up furtively, doesn't say anything, and just waits . . .

But this one is also strong. Maria can sense his strength. His strength lies in his perseverance, in his patience.

Maria is deep in thought, but songs are ringing throughout the house. The in-laws, bridesmaids, candle bearers have raised such a ruckus that except for them, nothing can be heard. They are all flushed, their eyes are blazing. They jump up from the table and break into a dance.

When the gifts were being presented, Martyn ostentatiously threw a gold five-karbovanets on the plate and declared: "I'm giving you this money, Maria, to bring you good luck, two desyatyny of land to increase your wealth, and a cow for breeding!"

Elated and festively-pure, Maria was accepting all the gifts, and kissing everyone on the lips, but when it came to Martyn, she bowed down before him and kissed his hand as one would kiss a father's hand.

Hnat was taken aback. He had never expected that in addition to acquiring a beautiful wife he would also receive such wealth.

"With me it's like this," Martyn said to Mykhaylo. "If you work for me as you'd work for yourself, you'll be sure to receive what is owing to you. If she were marrying a good-for-nothing bum, I wouldn't give her anything . . . But since he's a farmer who I know will not waste it—here you go, take it! Take it, keep on working, and get ahead in life, so that your children and grandchildren will be well off . . ."

At nightfall they saw the young couple off to the groom's home. They piled the wagons high with all kinds of goods; the in-laws scurried stealthily through Domakha's household and yard, grabbed whatever they could, rushed off with it, and threw it into the wagons. Chickens, some kind of hemp, an old millstone. Well, what a lot of hearty laughter there was afterwards.

At the groom's home, the couple was once again greeted with holy icons and bread. They were escorted into the house, seated at the table, and another bout of eating and drinking began. Then they took the bride into the storeroom and made a mock-up that they led into the house in an attempt to fool the groom. They draped a blanket on an elderly woman and brought her instead of Maria to the groom and, singing all the while, asked him if he could guess who it was that they had led in. It was all very noisy and jovial.

Maria was making an effort to be more cheerful, she was talking more and turning frequently for advice to Odarka, who was her senior.

When Domakha had been seeing Maria off, she had said: "My dear child, listen to her . . . Don't forget that she is the senior one there . . . She is taking the place of your mother-in-law. Listen to her and be friendly . . ."

Maria tried to listen to her and to be friendly. Odarka was somewhat displeased that Maria had abandoned ancient customs and had not attired herself for the wedding ceremony in the traditional manner, but that's how things were now! You had to keep up with the times!

Hnat had bought Domakha a pair of boots. It was customary to buy boots for the mother of the bride, but in this case there was no mother . . .

Domakha was pleased with the gift, but she had to sing as she accepted them . . . How was she to sing with her old voice? "My good people, Maria will sing instead of me. Sit down, my dear child. You know how to do that, don't you?"

Maria sat down at the table. She was now dressed like a young married woman and her head was bound in an ash-grey silk kerchief tied with a red ribbon. Around her neck she had numerous strings of expensive coral beads. She looked fresh, beautiful, animated. Her eyes, covered by her even, comb-like eyelashes, were lowered innocently.

The boots, tied together with a ribbon, were on a large plate in front of her. Maria looked at them for a moment. The guests fell silent.

It grew absolutely quiet and Maria, raising her full bosom, began singing in a strong, ringing voice:

> These are the boots my son-in-law gave me,
> And in exchange he took my daughter . . .
> O boots, my dear boots,
> What trouble you have caused me . . .

Maria was singing, but her voice was weeping. In it you could hear lamenting, profound grief.

Hnat was looking at Maria, gazing at her as if she were a saint. It seemed to him that an angel had flown down from the heavens, seated herself at his table and was now singing a sorrowful, but charming song.

He felt like walking up to her, falling to his knees before her in full view of all the guests, and bowing his head down to the ground.

"He certainly got himself a fine wife!" his neighbours were saying. "He's such a cripple, but just look at the beauty he picked up! Ha!"

The guests drank, and ate, and amused themselves for a long time. The musicians continued playing. The young men kept on dancing their *hopaky.

There was so much revelry going on in the large porch that it seemed that the house could not withstand it, that the walls would give way.

Even Maria was becoming somewhat merrier. She was being invited to dance. For the most part, she refused. He did not dance, and so she also should not be dancing. She had to grow accustomed to that. She mostly stayed at Hnat's side and consulted him about everything.

Hnat was effusively happy and tore around like a madman.

They went together into the storeroom, looked at their gifts: kerchiefs, skirts, cloth . . . They had received enough of everything, praise God. It would last them for several years.

And Maria gradually calmed down.

A new life was beginning for her, and she had to come to terms with it . . .

X

Ordinary work days.

"If only he spent less time with me," Maria thought. "He doesn't say anything; he just sits and looks at me with lovesick eyes. Oh, why does he love me so much! If only he didn't love me so irritatingly, so urgently. He's always at my side: 'Maybe you want this? Maybe that? Do you need a new skirt?' And no matter how often he goes into town, he never comes back without a treat for me. He looks after me as if I were a little child."

He found out that Maria liked to listen when someone read to her. Every week he went to the school library and in the evenings and on holy days he read her all manner of books. At times there were books from which Maria could not tear herself away. Hnat had to sit and read for hours on end.

Maria empathized deeply with what was being read to her; she rejoiced and wept along with the characters that were being described in the books.

She experienced an even greater joy when she realized that she was pregnant. At least now she would no longer be alone. Now she would have something to think about. A tiny, screaming being was going to be born; it would be a boy, it simply had to be a boy. She would name him Roman. She had taken a liking to this name a long time ago.

Maria was happy and she worked as hard as she could. She truly did know how to work, and she did not try to get out of doing things. She knew how to cook, to bake bread. From the very first week, Odarka delegated much of the housework to her, and Maria completed her tasks conscientiously and skilfully.

And Maria did give birth to a boy, and she did name him Roman. This was a great event in their lives. Hnat rushed around in a state of euphoria. He was worried about Maria, he wanted to go God only knows where to fetch a doctor, but everything went off fine without a doctor. Maria gave birth to a plump little boy who filled the house with his screams. They called in Granny Ulita, and she tied the newborn's umbilical cord. Maria experienced a great feeling of joy as she nursed the infant. She hovered over this tiny little man-child who scarcely moved, and gazed upon him continuously.

The christening was held a week later. Maria asked Martyn's Roman to be the godfather, and the deacon's wife to be the godmother. Hnat was not given a voice in any of these matters, and after all, he did not need to have a voice in them. He was abundantly happy as it was. He rejoiced that the eternal sorrow that was present in Maria's eyes, even when she was laughing, had finally vanished.

Now she did not have a reason or the time to be sad. Now she was a mother—a young, smiling mother with heavy-laden breasts, and what else did she need? She was happy and she laughed, and she felt like embracing the entire world.

Hnat became more attractive and more dignified in her eyes. It was he who had given her a son. It was he, Hnat—the good and kind man of few words.

"Oh, my little birdie! Oh, my little screamer! My beloved little angel!" Maria cooed as she fussed with the infant. The little boy kicked his legs and awkwardly waved his arms.

"When he grows up we'll send him to school, Hnat . . . let him study. He'll become a doctor. Right? And he'll be a very good student . . . Look how smart he is . . . Oh, just look how smart he is. He's only two months old, but he already knows so much . . . What wise little eyes he has. He lifts up his little hands and he does such cute things with them . . . Look, he wants to say something. Well, what do you want? What are you trying to say? Oh, you, you, you! My darling, my precious, my happiness!"

Maria could not restrain herself. She swept the infant into her arms, clasped him to her bosom, and began kissing him over and over again.

The infant resisted, slobbered, and waved his tightly clenched fists.

Hnat built a cradle for his son. He fussed with it for a long time, planed it, and turned the legs and the railing. He painted it with white varnish.

"You're going to overfeed him, Maria," Odarka said. "The child is puking already, but you keep on feeding him and feeding him. When my Semenko was little, I didn't cuddle him as much and that was better for him."

"But if he's screaming . . ."

"Something must be bothering him. Check his diaper—maybe it's wet, or perhaps sores are stinging him. Sprinkle some ashes between his legs and his toes. And just look how white his tongue is. There's fungus on it. You have to wipe it off with a rag."

When Maria bathed him she added lovage to the water, so that the girls would love him. She dressed him in his shirt in front of the mouth of the oven; she warmed the shirt and blessed it with the sign of the cross. The cross and the fire chased away the evil spirit.

She trembled and lived in constant fear that someone might give him the evil look, or cast a spell on him. She called on Granny Ulita a few times to get rid of any fear. He didn't sleep well, kept waking up with a start and screamed.

The days went by, and little Roman grew. Every day Maria swaddled him and nursed him. What can be more pleasant than to feed a child in this way? One day, she unexpectedly felt a pain in her nipple. She was overcome with joy. She had to share her joy with someone. Where was the child's father? He was working out in the yard, raking some straw. She ran outdoors.

"Hnat! O Hnat! Come indoors quickly!"

Hnat dropped everything and rushed up to Maria as fast as he could.

"Just take a look. His little teeth are beginning to grow. Look, Hnat, just look!"

Oh, how happy Maria is that his teeth are beginning to grow. That means that he's on his way to becoming a true human being. It's hard to believe . . . Hnat takes a look, wrinkles his face in a pleasant grin, beams at Maria and the child from all angles and, having had his fill of happiness, goes back to his work.

The days go by. Maria grows completely accustomed to the little teeth. Occasionally he bites her so hard that she yelps, but she suffers through it. Little Roman is growing, putting on weight, babbling, and looking ever more wisely at his mother.

"Be-be-be! Ahee! Ahee! Ahee! Pa . . ." the little one philosophizes.

"What is it, sonny? What is this be-be-be?"

"Ahee, ahee! Na!"

"What is it, my little lamb? What are you trying to say? Say it! Say it: ma-ma!"

"Ahee, ahee!! Ma . . ."

"Come on, come on! Say it. Come on. Ma-ma."

But no matter how many times Maria says the word, little Roman is not capable of conquering such wisdom. Nevertheless, he is now sitting, crawling agilely and determinedly, and getting

dirty as fast as he can with anything that's handy. Every day brings Maria fresh surprises. Either little Roman comes up with a new sound, or he manages to get up on widely spread legs and to stand like that for a couple of moments. Maria holds him by the hand and teaches him to take a step. There is so much joy, when he unexpectedly takes a single step ahead.

And then, on one wonderful memorable day, her dear little Roman got up so much courage that he was able to say intelligibly: "Ma-ma-ma!"

Maria heard him, burst into tears, rushed up to her little wise one, and began kissing him so hard, that he was hardly able to refrain from screaming.

"Oh my dear one, my very own! Oh, my darling, my golden one! Where's your father? Why is that father of yours never here when he should be?"

His father was not at home. He had gone to the mill. She waited and waited for him to come home, and as soon as he rode into the yard she ran up to him in a flash: "Oh, if only you had heard what our little Roman said today. If only you had heard! He said the word mama, he said it perfectly."

"Hmm . . ." Hnat smiled, and leaving his horses still harnessed, he limped after Maria to have a look at this wise son of his who had finally managed to come up with such an unheard-of accomplishment.

Mykhaylo spotted the harnessed horses standing without a driver and he raised a ruckus.

"The devil take it! He leaves them standing harnessed and takes off. All that's needed is for some evil spirit to scare them, and then you may as well catch the wind in an open field! He wants to wreck the wagon. He's like a child."

Mykhaylo unharnessed the horses and removed the halters. Just then a cheerful Hnat ran out of the house.

"Now, now . . . Don't scold me. I ran in for just a moment. I was riding along, and I wanted a drink of water so badly that I almost died. It must have been the salted herring that I ate."

"But what if the horses had run off in fear and wrecked the wagon—you didn't think about that. You know what they're like. It wouldn't have been the first time!"

XI

A golden, fragrant autumn.

The orchards are heavily laden with apples and plums. Plums so blue, so full, and so juicy . . . In the gardens corncobs are being broken off, potatoes are being dug, cabbages are being cut out. Smoke drifts over the ravine, and there is the aroma of burning potato stalks. Cattle, wandering through the hazelnut groves without any herdsmen, rustle through the leaves and pick out the choicest morsels. Young herders run off to school and upon returning home in the afternoon build bonfires in the groves, bake potatoes in the coals, boil plums. While they are doing this, they break off armfuls of hazelnut branches, set them on fire among the coals, and then slam them loudly against a smooth tree or stump.

The Kukharchuk home is filled with great sorrow. The one-and-a-half-year old Roman has fallen very ill. He isn't eating, he has a high fever, a rash, and his parched lips are clamped tightly shut. Maria sits beside him and never leaves his side. Hnat has gone into town to fetch a doctor.

Recently, Maria had a strange dream. When she got up she told everyone about it. "I dreamt that Hnat and I had gone to our family graves for *provody. It was springtime, the trees were blooming profusely, there were lots of people everywhere, and the bells in all the churches were ringing loudly. Hnat and I were riding along, and our dear Roman was running alongside us. He was a big boy already, nicely dressed in a white shirt with a sailor collar, and wearing light boots with lacquered leggings—the way that I've always imagined him.

"We sat down by the graves, and just then my late mother suddenly appeared out of nowhere. I scarcely remember her, but

I could see her clearly and I recognized her. She came up to us, exchanged Easter kisses with us, took Roman by the hand and started leading him away.

"'Where are you taking him, mother?' I asked.

"She smiled. 'I'm going to the church with him,' she said. 'There are so many people here.'

"And she took him and they started off. Then she turned to look at us and added: 'Don't wait for us, go ahead and have lunch,' she said. And she disappeared among the people.

"And I just stood there, you know, and watched, and it seemed so strange to me. So very strange. It was as if all the people around me had vanished, and I was left standing all alone among the graves, and I wanted to shout, to run somewhere. But my lips would not open. My legs felt so heavy that I was unable to move them. And that's when I woke up."

Everyone who heard her sensed that something unpleasant was about to happen. That very same day, little Roman fell ill, and Maria had not slept for two nights now. The first day she had thought—oh, it's really nothing. On the second day, he looked worse.

Hnat rode off to get the doctor as soon as dawn broke, but he stayed away for quite a long time. He did not come home until late in the evening. Maria's heart was breaking. She was angry, ready to fight with everyone.

The doctor came, examined him. "You were too late in sending for me," he said.

He hurriedly wrote out a prescription and turned to rush off. A lot more people were still waiting for him. Maria flung herself at him and asked him what would happen.

The doctor shrugged. "He has a very high temperature. But maybe he'll survive. Go get the medicine as quickly as you can."

Hnat raced off on horseback to get the medicine, and Mykhaylo took the doctor back into town.

Maria continued to keep watch over her son. She just sat and didn't even have the strength to cry. They had called the doctor

too late. Why had they called him too late? That Hnat was always late. As if he couldn't have gone on the first day. And that's how it always was!

Her child was lying in her arms. She kept walking around the house holding the child and clasping him to her breast. She felt with her entire being that something terrible was about to happen. She clasped the child even more closely.

"Maria! Put him in the crib. You'll choke him to death! That's not good for him!" Odarka pleaded with her.

"Get away from me! Get away! I won't give him to you!"

Odarka was afraid to be alone with her. She ran out to call some neighbours.

Maria was left with Semenko. Little Roman began to howl and to fling himself about wildly.

"Oh, my God! Oh, my God! Dear child! What's wrong with you? What am I to do? O God, dear God! You can see what's happening. Don't let it happen—help me!"

People gathered in the house. They begged Maria to put the child down and to put cold compresses on him.

"Get away from me! Get away, all of you! O God, save him! O-o-o-h!" she suddenly shouted sharply and wildly.

Everyone rushed up to Maria. The child was jerking spasmodically as if his veins were being cut one after the other.

Maria clutched him even closer and continued screaming. It looked as if she was ready to rush out of doors in the middle of the night and run off somewhere.

"Hold her! Hold her!" Odarka shouted.

The people rushed up to Maria. A struggle ensued.

"Help! Save him! Where are you?" Maria yelled at the top of her lungs.

At that moment the child stopped jerking, went limp. The people took the child from Maria, and they all began to pray. The little boy was dead.

By the time that Hnat came back, little Roman was laid out on a white table. At his head there was a cross and three lit wax

candles. A votive lamp was glowing evenly under the holy icons. Coming in from the darkened kitchen into the parlour, Hnat glanced at the table, took a few steps, and dropped to his knees in front of a chair. He placed his hands on the chair, hid his face in them, and the sound of wailing and more wailing burst forth. His wails resembled the roaring of cattle. Fragmented, terrible. His shoulders were convulsing, and from the open pocket of his coat a bottle of medicine poked out, along with a large bun and some candies.

Maria was sitting in the icon corner like a phantom. She neither stirred nor wept. The light from the candles fell on her expressionless face. People were bustling around the room. Granny Ulita was fussing with the clean white shirt with the sailor collar, and one of the neighbours, a diminutive old man, was intoning monotonously from a psalter.

"They will take you up in their arms and your foot will not touch a stone . . . I hear weeping and lamenting, O Lord, accept my prayer . . ."

Odarka was wiping away tears. The women neighbours bowed their heads and remained silent. Hnat knelt for a long time by the table.

The night dragged on, dawn began creeping into the window, a new day arrived.

Carpenters were putting together a coffin in the shop. Smoke was billowing out of the chimney of the house. The women were cooking, baking. Mykhaylo rode off to the tavern, Hnat went to hire the church choir, to ask all the churches to ring their bells, and to call the priest. The funeral was scheduled for the afternoon.

People began to congregate. The priest rode up with the deacon, the choir members arrived. Not everyone could fit into the house, and so the Requiem Mass was held outdoors. The day was sunny, warm. The broad leaves of the nut tree that stood by the window were drifting slowly to the ground. There was mournful singing, smoke from the censer, the wailing of Maria and the women.

At the end the priest said: "Dear brothers and sisters! I hear the weeping and the wailing. A life that had scarcely touched worldly vanities has flown away from us. Our hearts feel sad and heavy, sad because a living person, who was just beginning to blossom into life, is departing into eternity. But the Lord God in His great wisdom created the world in such a way that if we look more closely at what he has created, we will not have the temerity to argue with His great will. Everything that happens to us, everything is necessary, everything is inevitable. We can weep, we can wring our hands in despair, but the will of the Almighty is unbending . . . It must be that it is better this way. This is what is desired by the highest will."

And, turning to Maria, he stated: "Sister! I feel your pain, the pain of a mother who is losing her firstborn. But remember, sister, the Holy Mother, the Maria who brought into this world the living God, the One who left these words for His people: 'Come to me all ye who toil and are weighed down by sorrow, and I will give you peace.' He was crucified for this. And remember the great Mother, who stood day and night by her crucified Son, awaiting His death. Recall her great courage, ask Her for the strength to live through your grief and to bear it in the same way that She, the greatest of all mothers, bore it . . ."

Maria dropped to her knees, lifted her arms to the heavens and began praying out loud: "O God Almighty! Why, why have you punished me? Give him back to me! Give me back my love, my joy, my happiness! O God! O God!"

The people fell silent. The sky was immovably peaceful, the sun was shining, and it did not change in the slightest. They raised Maria to her feet, because the funeral procession was about to begin.

Girls lifted the small coffin festooned with wreaths of oak leaves and periwinkle. The sound of "Memory Eternal" being sung drifted through the air. The procession set out directly for the valley, passing through gardens and orchards instead of going down the road.

Maria could not come back home, nor did she want to. She wanted to remain there, beside the little grave. She was forcefully dragged away and taken home on a horse-drawn wagon. She came home and at once lay down in utter exhaustion. She did not want to eat, she just lay face upwards with widely opened eyes that gazed indifferently at a single spot. She lay that way for a week. At night, when she dozed off, she would awaken with a start and search for someone at her side.

Hnat did not dare to approach her, he did not dare to show himself to her. She turned away from him, she couldn't bear to look at him. But nevertheless he did not leave her, he could not leave her all by herself.

"My heart aches and I'm sick with grief! What's going to happen to this woman? You see, my dear people, she swallows a few spoonfuls of milk and that's what is keeping her alive. Give us some advice. We have no idea what we should do!" Odarka cried heartrendingly.

And as soon as Maria could rise to her feet again, she at once went out to the graves.

It was sad and quiet there. She found the fresh little grave on which the wreaths had not yet withered, knelt down, embraced the grave and did not get up for a long, long time. The day was ending, the autumn evening was approaching, a light breeze was blowing, the dry leaves of the cranberry bush were whispering. But Maria did not pay attention to any of that. She did not see anything, she did not listen to anything.

She clung to the raw earth that had taken away her little boy, her dear little Roman, and she begged the earth to part and to accept his mother as well.

"My darling little boy! My beloved child! Where are you? Why have you forsaken me?"

Night was approaching, and it was growing dark.

"Go and get her, Hnat," Odarka said. "She's been gone a long time; she said she was going to the graves, and she hasn't come back yet. Let's hope that nothing has happened there."

Hnat took a gnarled cane and set out. He met up with Maria in the meadow. She was going home, barely dragging her legs. It was dark.

"Maria! I've come to get you," Hnat said.

"Why? Why have you come?"

Hnat did not know what to say, but the words "Why have you come?" hurt him so greatly that he wanted to bellow with pain.

They remained silent. What was there to say? He felt offended and spurned. She did not love him, she did not have a heart. She had no feelings for him. She wanted to fill the emptiness in her heart. She had filled it with a child, but now the emptiness was there again. Hnat was beginning to understand that, and he suffered greatly.

XII

At that time, Maria was pregnant for the second time. Half a year later, she gave birth to a stillborn child. But this loss did not touch her like the previous one.

And it was right at that time that Korniy came home on leave. Maria was pale and unattractive. Even though he lived not far from her, he never met up with her. She saw him only once in church. Tall, broad-shouldered, strong, with a red, clean-shaven nape. Maria's eyes grew dim and her legs felt weak. She watched him for any sign, but he stood unmoving, like a stone wall. He was dressed elegantly, neatly; in his right hand he held a cap without a visor, but with a ribbon. On the ribbon there was an inscription with an anchor at either end.

He set out for home with a young female neighbour, a girl called Hanna. He was joking, laughing.

Maria followed them at a discrete distance. She wanted to shout, to ask him to stop. What right did he have to ignore her like that? It seemed to her that he glanced around. Did he notice her? No? He couldn't help but notice her. She was not a needle,

she was Maria. Formerly he had spotted her among thousands of others. He was walking along, joking, laughing. No, no! He was doing this on purpose. It wasn't possible for a person to be that cruel. He would go a little farther, think about what he was doing, and look back. He most certainly would take a look back.

They were walking, walking, walking. Clearings, a stile. Their paths were about to diverge. The path for both Korniy and Maria lay straight ahead. The one for Hanna was to the left. It was in that direction that Maria formerly had also walked. She also used to turn to the left. But where was Korniy going? Korniy! Where are you going? You should stay to the right. No, no! He must have forgotten where his home was. He was turning left with Hanna. He turned off and didn't even so much as glance back.

Now they were walking uphill, and now they were disappearing from view among the branches of the trees in the same orchard that had once hid him and her. It was she who had walked thus with him.

Maria stopped at the point where the paths diverged. She stood there and looked around. Her eyes grew dim. A film floated over them, blocking the sky, the trees. The ground beneath her rose and sank. Over there some birch trees were standing, waving their tresses. To Maria they appeared to be reflections in a tumultuous body of water. They kept bending and stretching.

She stood there for a while, and then her feet moved and carried her along the path down which they had been taking her for the past few years. There is no going back for you, Maria. You have to go to the very end.

At that time Hnat did not exist for Maria.

He was at home, he worked, sat down at the table next to Maria, but it was as if he could not be seen or heard. He understood it all. The house was far too small for him, and there was so much work to be done in the shop. He kept getting new carpentry orders, and when he picked up the planer it did not just shave the wood, it flew over it. His axe bit into oak logs, making sparks fly. Slivers of wood scattered like splinters of granite. Yes, yes. Hnat knew

in what the peacefulness of his soul was hidden, and where the source of his strength lay.

Korniy stayed for two weeks and went away. Alas, Maria, Maria! Do not weep and do not walk about in the evenings where paths are woven with thistles and the ground is still warm from his footsteps. A fence, a hazel grove. Bushes in the hazel grove. Among the leaves a nightingale is warbling. The nights are redolent of blossoming hazel trees and a honey-like aroma. Young linden trees are unfurling their little leaves. Fragrant and sticky. They remind one of the palms of a newly born human being.

Maria's shadow passes through the small orchard; she burns her feet on young nettles, breaks a few dry twigs off the decayed wattle fence, and with her seared feet tramples the dew on the young grass in Korniy's neglected orchard. Go ahead and warble, warble, little nightingale. It will make Maria happier as she waits for the one who will not be coming.

Maria has forgotten about her dear little Roman, she has forgotten all about herself, she has returned to the distant kingdom of her girlhood, and now she is free, and with a thousand pains in her heart she is waiting for the early evening star. It doesn't appear. That can't be. She goes back home, burning her feet on the nettles and weeping like a young girl.

Hnat's days dragged on miserably. He shed his sweat liberally in desperate work. He became intoxicated with his work, lost himself in it. It is possible to become intoxicated with everything, but the intoxication occasioned by work and love is the most pleasant of all.

Maria was quickly filling out, regaining her health. She knew that Korniy had left and she no longer spent fruitless, painful nights wandering through groves. She had not met with him, nor spent time with him.

She began to feel sorry for her wasted girlhood. She wanted to take revenge on someone for that, and since Hnat was close at hand, he bore the brunt of it. It was he, and no one else who was to blame. He, this ruddy man with his small sharp eyes, had

clung fast like a bloodsucker to her succulent girlhood, and he had sucked out from it the first, sweetest juices. And she would make him pay for it.

She dressed in flashy skirts, covered her head in a maidenly fashion, braided her tresses that her bridesmaids had undone. Housework no longer interested Maria. She had worked and exerted herself for a very long time. Enough. Sunday gatherings, musicians, the laughter of evening encounters near hedges.

Hanna became Maria's best friend. She was a chubby-faced and vivacious girl. There were times when Maria cast a serpent's glance at her, and more than once she had the urge to sink her claws in those bright, deep, and innocent eyes. But she tolerated her, smiled, danced at evening gatherings, returned home late at night.

Hnat. Alas, Hnat Hnat! He heard at what time his dear little wife came home, listened as she undressed in the dark and undid her tightly drawn corset while smiling in the darkness and thinking about the last stolen farewell kiss. He heard it all and he knew. He knew everything. But Hnat—is a stone, Hnat—is suffering. He made room for her on the bed and listened closely from a distance as she breathed, as she fell asleep. Later he himself fell asleep, and early in the morning he was once again at his work with a planer in his firm grasp.

One ordinary work day, Maria dressed herself in holiday attire. She was going someplace.

Hnat did not ask where she was going. Did she not have many places where she had to go? It was better to go in holiday attire than to appear ragged.

"Hnat, if I don't come home before evening, you'll feed the young hog. You'll mash the potatoes in a tub and mix in some fodder."

She finished saying what she had to say and left. Hnat did not even think of asking her where she was off to. That was her business, not his. He went to his work and forgot all about the young hog and the fodder.

She came home, and the hog was bellowing at the top of its lungs. "Did you feed the hog? It's evening already . . ."

Hnat did not know what to say.

"You didn't! I can see by the look on your face that you didn't! Never fear, you wouldn't have overexerted yourself. And your sister-in-law is a fine one as well. If I don't do it, it just doesn't get done. You only know how to stuff your face, but when it comes to doing something, that's another story!"

Hnat remained silent. Maria was beside herself with anger. If only the damn blockhead would say at least a word. He just gritted his teeth and remained as silent as a stump.

Odarka also began to have it in for Hnat. "Listen, things can't go on this way. All she does is go off to parties and dances and more parties and dances . . . She's forgotten all about doing any work. She runs out in the street and there it's tee-hee-hee—ha-ha-ha, but at home she's like a wolf. What is this? Listen, it can't go on like this. Say something to her."

Well, what is he to say to her? What words are there for something like this?

And it reached the point where there were times that Maria did not come home to sleep. She said that she spent the night at Domakha's home, but evil tongues said that she was whiling away her nights elsewhere.

It was then that Odarka and Mykhaylo vehemently said their final word. It's either—or. Either Hnat hobbles his rambunctious wife, and she stays at home and works, or let her get out of their house and go to the devil! There's a storehouse over there, turn it into a house, and live in it as you please. We won't stand by and let people talk badly about us . . . We won't stand by and let people make fun of us because of your wife.

A quarrel ensued. The two sisters-in-law tried to outshout one another and, of course, Maria won the match. Hnat hastily turned the storehouse that was adjacent to the porch into a house, set up a table, benches, chairs, affixed a few icons in a corner, and moved with Maria into a separate household. The couples divided the

orchard, the fields, the garden. They fought over every tree, every foot of ground. It was fortunate that Mykhaylo was reasonable, and Hnat was taciturn.

"Oh, what a fool you are, Hnat, what a fool, ha-ha-ha!" Trykhon roared with laughter when he met up with Hnat. "You allowed yourself to be saddled with a woman and now you're finished. You once were a human being, but now you're worse than a bast shoe. If I had a woman like that I'd bend her over my knee and give her twenty-five good ones, never fear . . . She'd have something to remember and she'd forbid her children to do anything like that. She's gone crazy, because she's too well off. She's chasing after the young men, like a filly, while you sit here without even a spoonful of warm food. What about your shirt? When was it last laundered? Lice are eating you up alive."

Hnat just listens. Oh, go ahead and talk, go ahead . . .

Trykhon spat loudly. "You were a real man once, but now, forgive me for saying this, you're nothing more than an asshole! Tfu!" He turned around and walked away.

And Hnat also turned around and walked away. He slowly trudged home, fell deep into thought, carried tubs filled with feed to the pigs, watered the cows, brought some potatoes out of the root cellar.

The days, like droplets of blood, dripped from his wounded life. A year went by. A difficult, grim year.

During the winter Hnat once again tried to read books to Maria. Oh, those tales were of little interest to her now. She'd much rather sing. Hnat enjoyed her singing, but now it didn't sound like it used to. In it could be heard debauchery, a mocking of everything. Such songs are sung only when there are no icons in the house.

Where was Hnat to go in the evenings? He didn't feel like going to see the neighbours. There they just made fun of him and laughed at him. And so he went into the orchard, into the hazel grove. It was very pleasant here. And quiet, and there was no one around . . .

And when a warmer breeze wafted in, when the frost did not sting him, it was absolutely wonderful there. You'd sit down on a stump, lean your elbows on your knees, grasp your head in your hands, and think all sorts of thoughts. In the bushes an invisible co-conversationalist would be in hiding. He'd sit quietly with you, look at you with one eye, and understand you completely.

At times the wind would sway the trees. The snow would fall off the branches and insinuate itself behind your collar. You could sense that your silent co-conversationalist knew how to joke as well. You'd smile, shake the snow from behind your collar and go on thinking.

And when you came home, how tasty it was to have something hot. How pleasant to drink a cup of well-boiled milk. And Maria was sleeping. Let her sleep. Walk as quietly as you can, my good man, best of all—on tiptoe. Let her sleep. It's good that at least she's home. Praise God for that . . .

It was worse when Maria vanished for the entire evening. She would go to a neighbour's place where young men gathered, or pardon the expression, young whippersnappers, snotty-nosed youngsters. When Hnat was getting married, they were still herding calves, but now they were young bachelors. Maria is not ashamed to play cards with such grinning fools and giggle with them in dark corners.

At those times Hnat sat grimly at home in his empty, unwelcoming house. He took comfort in the Bible. He decided to read it in its entirety. He turned page after page, dipping into the wisdom of the prophets. The great ancient wise men came to him, talked with him as with an old man, and deliberated over the past and about the future. It seemed to Hnat that a strange and terrifying time was approaching. Everything would be ruined, not a stone would be left standing.

One time a neighbour, Hapka Khomykha, began talking with him. Her man had died three years ago, leaving her with a heap of poverty and three little blockheads. Everyone knew what made Hapka famous in her neck of the woods. Her renowned tongue

moved agilely and unstoppably. She was, my good people, a gossiper. A living street newspaper.

"Well, well, what are you up to, Hnat?" she began now that she had cornered Hnat with her "well."

"Uh . . ." Hnat uttered his unvarying, inevitable response. "Not much . . . You do this, and that . . . Just to make it through the day . . ."

"And how is Maria? Is she enjoying herself?" Hapka asked as if she didn't know.

"Uh. . . While she's still young . . ."

"You're saying that she'll stop when she grows old. Well, you'll have to wait a long while for that to happen. By then she'll finish you off. You'll be long gone. She'll do you in with those snotty-nosed youths . . ."

Hnat didn't even utter his usual "uh." He looked down dejectedly and breathed heavily.

Hapka eyed him intently and continued talking: "But I could help you . . . I'm not a sorceress, but I could help you. Well, how about it?"

"Uh . . ." Hnat refused, shaking his head and waving her off.

"What's with your uh and uh. If you'd only come to my place for a few evenings you'd see that I could help you."

After this encounter, whenever Maria was at home and Hnat had to make himself scarce, he would get up, shuffle his way outdoors, go out into the street, and finally end up at Hapka's home.

She would greet him kindly, tell him a lot of juicy tidbits, pour out her gossipy gleanings before him, as if from a sack . . .

Hnat would listen, say a few "uhs," and return home contented. Quite a few evenings went by in this way. Many a time, when Hnat was returning home, he thought that he wouldn't go to Hapka's place again. All he needed was to have people start blabbing all sorts of things, but when evening came, where was he to go? He'd think and think about it, rise to his feet and slowly wander over there again.

And actually rumours were beginning to spread in those parts that Hnat was cozying up to a toothless old granny.

Hapka herself ran around and jabbered away: "Yesterday, you know, he came, brought some candies. I'd never seen candies like that before in my life. It must be lords who eat candies like that."

The following day Hapka bragged about a kerchief, and before long, about a seven-gored red skirt. There were those who even saw that skirt. All the talk in those parts was centered on that red skirt.

Word about it even reached Maria. At first she just waved her hand dismissively: "As far as I'm concerned he can give even himself to that Hapka, I couldn't care less . . ."

That's what she had to say. You may or may not care less, Maria, but why are your eyes racing around like that, and why are your cheeks flushing?

And Hapka continued bragging about that skirt. Maria stayed home in the evening.

It grew dark. Hnat could see that Maria was not going anywhere. He put on his cap and reached for the doorknob.

"Stop!" Maria addressed him curtly.

Hnat stopped, took off his cap. He looked inquiringly at her.

"Tell me, where do you go every evening?"

"Uh . . . Nowhere . . . I'll just step out . . ." Hnat muttered.

"Don't uh at me, my dove, come out and tell me! What's going on? Why is it that every evening, as soon as you've stuffed your face, you take your cap and off you go. What are you—a young bachelor, or what? Do you suppose that I don't know where the evil one takes you? The whole neighbourhood is talking about your comings and goings. Instead of staying at home, reading me something, he has to wander off who knows where and hang out there night after night. I don't want any more of that! Do you hear me? This has to be the last time. Either you stay home, or you can go and live with that beauty forever! It's up to you. The choice is yours. As you will."

That evening Hnat did not go anywhere.

He didn't go out the following evening as well. Maria also stayed home.

For two evenings they remained silent, and then, on the third one, a small book bound in red glossy covers put in an appearance. It talked about an orphan boy who went to a foreign land and there he changed from a good, decent young fellow into a terrible cutthroat. But when he grew up, he fell in love with a nun. At first she did not return his love, but she promised that if he changed his ways and became an upright citizen, she would love him.

The young man changed. He became not only an upright citizen, he even earned much honour in the city because of his good deeds. During this time the nun truly did come to love him, but he fell out of love with her and he had to marry another woman. The nun, filled with grief and despair, left the nunnery, and gradually turned into a street person.

She died in the street, and the Devil came to take away her soul, but an angel with a sword blocked his way and said: "Get away, evil one! With her life this person saved a sinful soul from perishing. She saved him with her love, and so she belongs to me."

"But it's too late," Satan said.

"It's never too late when it comes to saving a living soul," God's messenger replied.

Maria listened intently and did not interrupt the reading, not even once.

When he finished reading, Hnat noticed that her large dark eyes were fastened on him with a look of gratitude. He could not withstand such an intense look that he had not seen for so long, and he lowered his eyes. Something warm stirred in his heart. It was the same thing that he had experienced on that autumn evening when he had heard the words in the darkness: "Why have you come?" But this was completely the opposite. In this instance there were no words. There was only a look and, it seemed, a tear, and this sufficed for Hnat.

He at once recovered his former self. He once again wanted to raise himself up, straighten his spine, and look boldly ahead.

That evening Maria made up the bed and did not go to the oven nook as was her custom. She undressed and lay down on the bed.

As he lay in the darkness, Hnat was afraid to move and to draw closer to her. He was even afraid to touch her, but then he felt a warm hand fly down from the darkness and land on his shoulder. He seized it, placed his lips on the hot palm, and moaned wildly and ever so painfully.

That night Maria became pregnant for the third time.

Later, when Hnat met up with Hapka, she grinned at him with her broken teeth and demanded a kerchief. Yes. Hapka truly did get a kerchief.

XIII

And Maria gave birth to her third child—a little girl. They called her •Nadiya.

Hnat forgot all about his "uh." He brought in godparents and plenty of whiskey, made peace with Mykhaylo and Odarka. The christening party turned out to be unlike any that had been held in those parts for many a year.

The newborn was lying on pillows. As soon as he managed to find a free moment, Hnat was at her side.

"Why are you always hanging around her, Hnat?" Granny Ulita admonished him.

"Let him be," Maria said. "Look at the child, Hnat . . . She has your lips. Doesn't she? And it looks as if she'll smile at any moment."

Hnat was beside himself with joy. He hopped about on his good leg, roared with happy laughter. After all, the child had his lips . . . and her mother's eyes. Dark eyes . . . Oh, how joyful the world can be at times. Isn't it worth living to experience such joy?

A tree grows, a rye stalk grows, and Nadiya also grew. With infallible accuracy she repeated the life of little Roman. Her teeth

appeared in the same manner. She began crawling the same way, rose up on her unsteady little legs the same way and took her first steps. And Maria took the same joy in the aptitudes of her child.

Life caught Hnat in its embrace with renewed strength. He rushed around, fussed over everything. He had enough work. His workshop had become so busy that there were times when he had to hire additional help. His young and growing household began to expand very quickly. His grain bins were filled with grain, his vats with flour, fruit. In his barn stood well-fed cows, a large sow was being fattened. He also acquired better horses. And he built a brand new wagon.

In two years Nadiya was running around, calling out "tato, mama," flitting around her parents like a swallow and chattering away with her childish chatter. Maria dressed her nicely, washed her, bathed her. On Sunday and on holy days, she took her to church, and the godparents and relatives took great pleasure in seeing her.

"O God, what a delightful child!" And they kept saying: "My dear little Nadiya, here's this . . ." and "My dear little Nadiya, here's that . . ." And one would give her money for candy and the next one would give her something else.

Hnat and Maria felt secure and confident. Everything that had transpired was forgotten. They led a peaceful, rural life. They sowed, gathered the grain, blessed their Easter *paska, greeted the sun and accompanied it on its way.

They didn't think, nor could they ever have thought, that all this could come to an end. The winter was a bad one. During Lent typhus and scarlet fever struck the village. There was no medical help of any kind. The authorities, whoever they were and wherever they were—beyond the white seas, beyond the tall mountains, beyond the dark forests—did not know and did not care to know what was happening with their innumerable nations.

In the autumn, people began dropping dead like flies. Every day they were driven off by the dozens to their place of eternal rest. Sorrow, despair, and weeping engulfed the village. Hungry

dogs howled in the dark, freezing nights. They sensed that cruel death was going from yard to yard and indiscriminately mowing people down, both the young and the old.

Death also stepped into Hnat's house, and a month later, the cheerful, chattering Nadiya left this world forever. Maria thought: there is no justice in this world. This is a most cruel injustice. It's madness. It was as if something was mocking her . . .

But after all, death was all around her, there was death and nothing but death. Where was life? When would life begin? People were dying in droves all around her. Why were people dying? Why were they not living?

Maria's grief knew no bounds . . .

To top it off, another disaster struck that somewhat deadened the first one. For an entire month Hnat lay ill and fought with death. He lay unconscious for a week. There was no firewood and no flour left in the house. It was necessary to go to the forest, to the mill, and as soon as he managed to get out of bed, he could not stay at home. There was so much work to be done that there was no time to be ill. One day he rode into the forest and got caught under a tree that crushed his crippled leg. He was not completely well yet, and could not cope as yet with all that he had to do. Hnat was brought home late at night, almost unconscious and having lost a lot of blood.

Maria could not understand what was happening. She ran around and pleaded for help from someone.

But there was no help. Hnat was taken to a hospital that was twenty-two versts away from the village. Maria was left all alone on the farm. Through some miracle, the typhus passed her by. No family was left untouched—people everywhere were lying prostrated.

Maria made a point of occasionally dropping in to Mykhaylo's home where everyone was ill; she would bustle about for a while, help them, but did not get sick.

Every week Maria rode off to the hospital to see Hnat and to take him some food. He was in need of good nourishment. He

fought against death for a long time, and finally he overcame it. They operated on his leg, removed the crushed splinters from it, and put a cast on it. They could not say when the wound would heal. But it would not be soon . . .

As all this was happening, the earth slowly began turning its face to the sun . . . A more gentle wind began to waft in, and spring arrived.

Before Easter, there was a notable event.

After completing his military service, the sailor Korniy Pereputka came home hale and hearty. Robust, with a ruddy complexion, speaking Russian, and blowing his nose in a handkerchief.

All the neighbours rushed in to see him, and he just stood there—a strong oak tree among the skeletons crushed by typhus—and spouted off a lot of nonsense. A heavy cloud of tobacco smoke filled his low hut. He stood there and his head grazed the main ceiling beam. Older men sat on the benches encircling him. They listened, and listened, and listened. He had even seen the Tsar and had shouted hurrah . . .

The sun helped to revivify life. The expansive field was steaming. It was demanding seeds. Farmers rose early, blessed themselves at sunrise, and went off to do some ploughing.

Maria met up with Korniy.

He glanced at her. "Ah, hello! How are you? So, you're a grass widow now, are you?" he addressed her in Russian.

Maria's tongue went numb with surprise.

"You're not saying anything?" he continued speaking in Russian. "I haven't seen you for many years, but you're still a fine one . . . A beauty. Your eyes are glowing like coals. Aren't you lonely all by yourself? You must be lonely. Right?"

How was she to know what to say in response? If only he would speak the way normal people speak, but God only knew what he was saying . . .

Maria blushed like a young girl. Among all the people who had fallen ill with typhus, she did look like a beauty. What did it

cost him to say that. He had a moustache curled up at the tips, a shaved nape, a watch on his pale, hairy arm.

"She's forgotten how to talk. Formerly, once she started talking there was no stopping her, but now she doesn't say anything."

Maria did not stop him from coming to see her. Let him. He could help her with this and that. It was springtime now, working hands were needed. Maria had to hire a youth, but he could not take care of everything that had to be done. Besides, at Korniy's home they didn't even have any grain. His mother and sister had managed things so well, that all that was left was a half-ruined hut.

Korniy busied himself on Hnat's farm as if it were his own. The youth who worked at Maria's place told the curious women neighbours how Korniy would pull Maria down from her bed in the middle of the night, curse her with the most foul of curses, and make her stand undressed near the threshold all night long, and she didn't even dare to cry loudly.

"Well," the women neighbours winked slyly, "he's not Hnat. That's just what the bitch needs."

Hnat was lying in the hospital, grieving for his ploughed field, for Maria. Out there, beyond the windows, the branches were turning green, a bird was singing madly, but he was unable to raise himself up—he was chained to his bed.

Maria must be short of time. She had not come to see him for two weeks now. Where in God's name was one to find that kind of time in the spring. There was so much that had to be done, a mountain of work . . .

There truly was a lot of work to be done at home. More than once Odarka saw how Maria tried to please Korniy, how she tiptoed around him. She saw her fill a small bundle with flour and take it to his mother Okseniya. When the hog was slaughtered, half went to Maria, and Korniy took the other half.

There was so much work to be done in the springtime . . . Maria was overwhelmed by spring . . .

Spring was everywhere! Surely you can see the spring, can't you?

The winter wheat is coming up slowly. The apple trees are covered profusely in pink and white blossoms . . . The nightingale's song is pouring forth . . . The sun is laughing. Just look how it's laughing!

Near the hospital window where Hnat is lying, an apple tree is blossoming. At dawn the red sky makes it sparkle. Its blossoms glisten with the dew amid the singing of birds.

Where, oh where, is Maria? The poor thing has so much work to take care of . . .

One time, Mykhaylo came instead of Maria to see Hnat. He brought him some pastries filled with cottage cheese. Hnat was still as green as a field in spring, but he could turn over on his side, lean on his elbow.

By the time that Mykhaylo finished talking, Hnat turned yellow. Oh, it would have been better if he had not told him such things. He didn't need to know about that.

Beyond the window the apple tree lost its sparkle, the sun turned dark like a black eye. He stretched out on the bed and fell as silent as a stone . . .

He saw Maria . . . a Maria who was pulling off a sailor's dirty boot . . . a Maria who was winding herself like a hopvine around the robust body of his enemy. He saw Maria as a slave, a Maria who kissed the hand that slapped her face . . .

Mykhaylo rode off.

XIV

At Whitsuntide Hnat came home. He was walking on crutches. Bluebells and pansies were blooming, butterflies were fluttering. On the first day he walked through the entire yard. He walked around it like a shadow. He peered into the barn, the storehouse, the root cellar.

On the second day he walked through the little orchard.

"Maria, you haven't dug around the apple trees."

"You were sick in bed, so who was supposed to do it . . ."

"But you also haven't dug up the ground for the vegetable garden . . ."

"Well, you shouldn't have stayed there so long, you could have dug it . . ."

Hnat remains silent.

Maria stands erect, she is strong, reinvigorated. In the evenings she walks over the stinging nettles with her bare feet, the dried branches of the rotten wattle fence crackle, the hazelnut grove hides Maria with its fresh, young leaves.

Hnat takes an adze, tucks it in his belt, and walks awkwardly on his crutches to the gate. Hnat is a strange one. Would he actually go through the gate? He stands there, his crippled legs tremble, the night passes. He comes home to find Maria in the embrace of inspired and joyful sleep. One of her eyes is peeping through her eyelashes.

Hnat pulls out the adze, places it on a shelf, and sits at the table for a long time in the darkness. Then he falls asleep.

He has taken over the spot in the inglenook where Maria had formerly slept. It is better there. Oh, his leg! Oh, how it ached, damn it . . .

Evenings.

The evenings go by, slip by, one after the other, like happy dark-browed youths. They pass by, singing all the while.

"Maria, we can't go on living this way," Hnat said one day.

"No, we can't, Hnat," Maria responded.

Hnat was at a loss for words. He fell silent. But Maria had plenty to say.

"I can't take this anymore," she said. "Let me get a divorce."

Hnat hung his head even lower. He had not expected that.

"You're not saying anything?"

"Uh . . ." he managed to squeeze out.

"Once again that hollow 'uh.' I'm talking to him like to a human being, and he comes out with his 'uh.'"

"Maria, don't think that way . . ."

"Oh, my God! My God! I don't love you. I've never loved you. I'm betraying you with another man whom I've always loved and without whom I cannot live. Do you understand that?"

There was a long silence.

Finally Hnat said: "But do you think that without you . . . that I can . . ."

"But . . . but . . . O my Lord God! This is impossible . . . That's not it . . . You . . . you! You're torturing me, Hnat! You took me by force . . . I've suffered harsh servitude for seven years. Seven long years. Even God does not want us to live together. Let me go, give me a divorce, don't torture both yourself and me . . ."

"No one knows what God wants . . . But all the same, you made a vow to me . . . you took a vow in church . . ."

Maria walked away in despair. What was she to do now?

A few weeks later, Hnat was once again able to do a few things around the household. They ran out of flour, he had to go to the mill. He rode off and was late coming back. When he came home, he did not find Maria there. He sat down and ate a crust of dry bread. Evening fell. He waited for Maria, thinking about what he should say to her.

And then, quite unexpectedly, he glanced up at the icons. It struck him that one of the icons was missing. The icon of the Mother of God was missing, the one that had been used to bless them at their wedding ceremony. A heavy realization enveloped Hnat. He walked up to the trunk—it was empty. He went up to the bed—the pillows were gone. He looked everywhere and did not find anything that belonged to Maria. She had taken everything.

The house was empty, silent. He sat at the table . . . Thinking, thinking, thinking . . . It was devastating and painful. So, despite everything, she had gone to him, the one people said beat her, tyrannized her. There was nothing to eat in his home. There wasn't even a single "tail" in his yard, his house was falling down. And yet, she had gone to him.

Whereas he had loved her, taken good care of her . . . He had never said anything untoward to her . . . He had suffered more

than even a horse could have possibly borne, but nevertheless, she had gone . . . Maria! Why have you left me? Come back, Maria! I won't say anything hurtful to you. Come back! If only you knew how painful it is for me here, how very painful . . . If only you knew . . .

Why have you gone away, Maria? Have I perhaps said a single nasty word to you in those seven years? Have I ever done anything at all to hurt you? Are you going to say that I didn't take care of you? Our children . . . Am I to blame, Maria, that they died? No, I am not to blame. I loved them, worried about them, agonized over their deaths . . . So am I to blame, Maria? Then why have you gone away from me?

That evening Hnat could not say his prayers. He would glance up at the icons, but the most holy one was missing. There was a vacant spot and cobwebs where the large, smiling Mother had stood. He could not find the words to pray. His hands would not raise themselves to make the sign of the cross on himself.

The night dragged on, warm, summery, fragrant. Somewhere out there flowers were blooming, roosters were crowing. A red sky was flooding the eastern horizon, in the orchard ripened apples were falling, the broadleaved apple tree was rustling.

Hnat did not sleep all night. How, pray tell, is it possible to sleep at a time like that? The sun rose as it usually did. It rose, climbed high into the sky, and blazed.

The day went by, and night fell once again.

So many days, and so many nights. More than one can count. They went by in weeks, in months, in years . . .

Days, days without end . . . How many thousands of them would there be?

But Maria was no more, she was no more.

No, Maria still is. She is living, feeling new pain. She is pregnant. Korniy found out and was furious. What a fine time to get pregnant! What could they now do with children? When the child was born he would throw them both out of the house. She could go back to Hnat.

No, no . . . The child won't be born. O God! See to it that it doesn't get born! I don't want . . . I can't . . .

She went to see some old woman. The latter poked around in her, tore at her living flesh as if she were burning up the foetus with hot iron.

Maria gritted her teeth, moaned, became awash in blood, but endured it all. She had to suffer through it, and she even wanted to suffer.

She came back to Korniy ill but empty, like a stripped pod.

And Hnat knew nothing at all about it.

Autumn. The village was gathering vegetables and curling up like a snail for the winter.

Hnat thought, waited, hoped, and decided to let her get a divorce. Let her divorce him. It was all the same to him. But she had to assume the costs of the divorce.

Maria rejoiced, but where was she to get the money? She needed it for the train trip, and for the divorce itself. She could turn to Korniy for help. No, she could not turn to him. He wouldn't give it to her, he would shout at her, and besides, he didn't have the money. She rushed to see a Jew. Begged him. Fine. He would give her the money, but on a firm guarantee. She must assume a firm guarantee. Maria is prepared to assume everything as long as he gives her the money. And he gave her the money, a large sum, thirty karbovantsi.

After she got the money she and Hnat travelled by train to the consistory. It was the only time in her life that she made a journey like that. There they were given a divorce, but Maria did not have enough money. Almost in tears, she begged Hnat, and what could he do but help her? He agreed to haul in ten *poody of grain, and that was the end of the matter.

At the train station Hnat said: "You haven't had anything to eat today, Maria, and it's evening already . . . Let's go in here. We can eat here . . ."

"No, no . . . I can't, Hnat . . . I can't . . ."

"Never fear . . . I have enough money . . ."

And so they went in.They sat down at a table. Hnat ordered some ham, bread, and mustard. Maria ate, she ate greedily, hastily biting into the bread and ham.

Hnat watched her. She had lost weight. She no longer looked the way she used to when she was with him.

He called over the waiter: "Give me some beer as well. Two tankards . . ."

Both Hnat and Maria have papers in their pockets. The papers state that Hnat and Maria no longer belong to each other. Everything that used to be, everything that they lived through, all that could now be forgotten and not thought about any more.

Maria has dark circles under her eyes, she is ravenously hungry, but she does not feel sad. No. She is happy. It seems to her that she has just been born, that only now can she begin to live freely, as she wants to live, and to look righteously at God's great world.

Maria does not speak, and Hnat also remains silent. He just looks fixedly at Maria. He can at least look at her as long as he wants to . . .

"Maria," he says, and then he pauses, he does not have the strength to finish all at once what he wants to say . . . "Let's rip up those papers, Maria . . . Come back to me . . ."

Silence.

Maria stops chewing, glances up at him.

He is holding his breath . . . Waiting. He is clinging to his last straw . . .

"Hmm!" Maria smiles crookedly. "Is it possible, Hnat, to even talk about something like that?"

"Eat, Maria, eat . . . You're hungry . . ."

Maria continues eating.

Hnat remains silent.

A Book of Maria's Days

I

Korniy's house stands on a hillock at the edge of the village. Here the sun shines brightly and the winds blow freely. A wattle fence and a boundary come up almost to the threshold. On the other side of the boundary is his brother's place, and beyond the wattle fence sunflowers and red roses bloom in the summer, while in the winter a huge snowdrift lies there. Behind the house there are a few pear trees, two large old sweet cherry trees, and a single spreading sour cherry tree that only rarely bears large, translucent, juicy berries.

Korniy has very little land. An orchard and a garden stand apart, without a laneway leading to them. He has to go through his brother's land to get to them, and when the brother is annoyed about something, he refuses Korniy admittance to his own garden. They mow the hay, the aftergrass, and carry it home in blankets on their backs. They pile it in stacks by the house. Korniy does not have a barn.

Maria took her two desyatyny of land from Hnat and she also took a cow and a calf. They had to sell the cow right away, because they had to pay the Jew what was owed him. They were left with the calf that was kept in a lean-to made of willow branches. That was all that Korniy had.

Of course, Korniy did have a fine droning accordion, bell-bottom trousers, and a few shirts with sailor's collars. On Sundays and holidays he would put on his bell-bottoms, pick up his accordion, and run his fingers over the keys . . .

Maria listened reverently to his playing. The young men and girls would come and start dancing.

The days passed by.

After some time, Korniy had to put aside his accordion. And he had to put away his bell-bottoms as well. He took off his wristwatch and hung it on a nail under the icons.

He also had to part ways with the Muscovite language. He kept only a single phrase: "Yes indeed, for example . . ." Everything else that he said was now spoken in the way that normal people speak. It sounded warmer to speak that way. In his yard, work awaited him at every step. His hands turned black, took on the highly-valued peasant roughness.

Maria bowed before him like a willow. Sneers, curses, drubbings, but she didn't dare to cry. Why would she cry? That isn't what she had striven for, what she had looked for. She herself was to blame, she had made a promise, but she had forgotten that promise; she had not waited for him. She had not believed in love, she had wanted wealth. So, do penance now.

But had he been faithful? Had he kept his promise? When he was with groups of young men, he spoke of dark Moorish women, how in Hamburg he had partied with "working girls." In Petersburg he had celebrated "Athenian nights."

That doesn't matter, Maria. Spring brings work with it. She would cuddle up to him, caress him, plead with him: "My darling, beloved! We'll borrow some grain, sow the fields, and our work will begin stirring, churning . . . Well? Won't that be good?"

He could see that himself. Wherever one looked—there was nothing. The macaroni, the rice, the rations ran out. But one had to eat. Maria could always manage to prepare something, if only there was something out of which to prepare it . . .

He began bestirring himself. It was embarrassing to go and work for Mykhaylo now. He had to start up something of his own. He decided to build a barn, and he went to the quarry. Stone posts were stronger. He put on some old rags, armed himself with a pickaxe, a hammer.

Maria rejoiced. She liked to see him in tattered clothes and with a hammer in his hand. He would come home from his work, and she would feed him, put him to bed. She did not have to lull him to sleep. Before she could finish saying "Our Father," his work had already put him to sleep. And you, Maria, go to sleep as well. You too did not sit idle all day long.

A start had been made. Korniy became more and more accustomed to working.

Korniy's lazy sister could not tolerate Maria's new regime; she got into a fight with her, and went to work as a servant for a Jew. Now there was one less mouth to feed. Maria's mother-in-law groaned and complained, but Maria did not pay any attention to that.

In the spring they sowed the fields, and began building a barn out of stones.

Maria once again became pregnant. The abortion had not harmed her. She was happy, but she was afraid to tell Korniy. What if he sent her once again to that old woman? She told him. It turned out better this time. He heard her out, waved his hand dismissively, and spat.

Up to this time they had lived common-law. Now Korniy himself revealed a desire "to exchange rings." He brought home a basket of small bottles of liquor, slaughtered a piglet, invited the neighbours, and celebrated a wedding. Khomykha swore to God that Maria already had such a belly on her that she was barely able to stand under the wedding wreath, but that was not important. It was enough that Maria, through her unflagging work and self-sacrifice, had finally won the right to belong legally to her husband. Her joy knew no bounds. She kept wanting to keep calling out his name—Korniy!

The sun is setting. Mosquitoes and little flies are whirring and buzzing. Maria is coming up from the valley carrying pails of water on a yoke. She gasps for air, stops, puts the yoke on her other shoulder, and tries to catch her breath. She carries in the water, rushes out to the meadow and, cupping her eyes with her

palm, looks towards the setting sun. It is from there that her well-fed heifer is supposed to be coming. The sun beats down on the green orchards, floods the white piles of limestone in the valley, and the undulating waves of rye on the opposite slope.

Maria stands with her palm cupped on her forehead, with an expectant look on her face, and with her stomach thrust forward. A light breeze is blowing from the west, lifts her skirt, and it encircles Maria's stomach even more tightly. Let it. She does not worry about whether someone will like it or not. And now here comes her future cow from the pasture. She has grazed her fill and is coming home. Here, here, over here! Come here, my beauty, come here!

In the evening a large bell tolls over the village. Tomorrow is Sunday. Maria cannot go to the vesper service. Why would she go there? She is no longer a maiden. She will kneel before the icons in her humble home, here before the Mother of God—a remembrance of the past—and she will fold her arms on her bosom and pray.

She is grateful to God for the sunny day, for the joy of standing with her hand cupped on her forehead to protect herself from the sun's rays, for the possibility of waiting for her heifer, and most of all, for her large belly.

Korniy comes home from work, sharpens a blade, and shaves for the next day. The stubble on his face is quite long already and quite prickly. He likes to prick his better half with it, and she is happy with a joke like that. Now Korniy is soaping up his chin. After a few swipes of the blade, he will take a few steps backwards, and this manoeuvre also brings with it its own pleasure.

A son was born. Maria wanted to give him a name that she liked. But Korniy took offence at that. He had a best friend in the flotilla who was called Demko. And so the child was baptized Demko.

Maria did not like this name very much, but if that's what the father wants . . . What could she do against the will of the father? When Demko wailed for the first time, Korniy walked up to him,

looked at him, and smiled discreetly. "He's turned out to be quite the little devil. He roars heartily . . ."

Maria is convinced that Korniy is enraptured with Demko. It could not be otherwise . . . She clasps her son to her bosom, nurses him; unfortunately, there isn't much milk—she doesn't have the best of diets. But just wait until they take in the crops from the fields. They're about to begin harvesting.

Maria begs: "Korniy, beloved. You have a karbovanets, buy a piglet. We'll fatten it up, and we'll have sausages for Christmas."

He went to the market and brought home a piglet in a sack. Maria fed it whatever she could find, and a few weeks later, he grew into a young hog. And over there the barley was almost ripe, and the potatoes were growing.

The time to harvest came. Korniy's fields did not yield the best crops. They were neglected, overgrown with weeds. But on Maria's fields, the wheat was wonderful! These fields had been looked after. Hnat's footsteps had not yet been erased from them.

Maria reaps the rye, the wheat. Demko cries out shrilly among the sheaves. She tears herself away from her work for a minute, nurses him, calms him down, and keeps on reaping. The wheat is as thick as a forest. The heavy golden spikes bow down to the east. The blinding sun blazes and sears her bent spine. Sweat is running down her sunburned face.

"You can be sure that when she was at Hnat's place, she didn't work nearly as hard," the neighbours buzzed. They can't figure Maria out. But she doesn't care what they think.

The sun sinks and hides. Maria continues reaping. The dew falls. Maria does not bind the sheaves, she casts the mown stalks in handfuls over the stubble—she'll bind them tomorrow after they have dried a bit. She must hurry. When she finishes reaping her crop, she can hire herself out to reap "for every tenth sheaf."

A huge triumphant moon rises in the sky. Demko, wrapped in a warm swaddling cloth, is dozing on the sheaves. Maria finishes her reaping, takes the sleepy Demko, and slowly makes her way home, burdened with her aches and pains.

Korniy also is not idle. It is embarrassing to be idle when one's wife is straining herself to the utmost. After all, he is not a servant here, he is the master. He gets up at dawn, sharpens a scythe, affixes a rake to it, and drags it to the hayfield. After mowing his own crops, he hires himself out to mow for others. Every day he earns ninety kopiyky; he has to earn enough to buy a horse in the fall. He has raised the walls of a barn, and as soon as he threshes the rye, he'll make some sheaves and thatch it. As for now, it still is gaping at the sky.

He is discovering an ever greater delight and joy in work. His vagabond-proletarian habits are fading into the past and being forgotten. The earth is drawing him into itself and filling his veins, his mind, and his entire being with solid habits. Korniy is now aware of this.

His days as a freewheeling sailor are being forgotten and he is becoming a true human being. He slowly shakes off his vile cursing, begins using his native language, and this change restores him to the bosom of his family.

When Maria comes home late from her work he does not yell at her, he does not demand that she dance attendance upon him.

"Go and rest Maria. I've already had my supper, and mother has taken care of the young hog. And I've already brought in some firewood for tomorrow . . ."

No, Maria is not ready to go and rest. She will find something to do, but now work does not seem hard to her. Those few kind words have swept away all her weariness.

And Maria has plenty to do without taking care of the young hog. There's little Demko to be cared for. She has to bathe him, nurse him, and lull him to sleep . . . Maria bustles about, her arms are fainting from fatigue, but a gentle smile hovers on her lips.

"Are you hungry, Korniy? Are you exhausted from your work? O God, dear God . . . If only we could get ahead a little sooner!"

"Now, now, that's enough. Don't worry and fret about that. Lie down and rest. And how's our little screamer? Does he scream a lot?"

"Oh, no. He's a fine fellow."

"May he grow and be healthy." Korniy walks up to his son, looks at him, and his face crinkles in a broad smile. "He's sleeping," he finally says without adding his customary "the son-of-a-bitch." His tongue refuses to say it.

Maria sleeps like a stone during the few hours that she steals for sleeping. She gets up at dawn feeling refreshed and reinvigorated. Korniy is already affixing a rake to his scythe, and his elderly mother is setting out to graze the heifer. The work machine has been put in motion.

On the fields the heaps of sheaves are lined up. The sheaves are heavy with grain.

The land is golden, the land of work and grain. The sun loves it, warms it, heats it up.

The world is sunny and sky-blue . . .

II

In the autumn, wheat, rye, oats, and barley fill the barn. It is now covered with a thick thatched roof. Korniy walks around and takes delight in all of it. A lot has been accomplished, but not enough. More needs to be done. More, much more. So that it will equal what the Kukharchuks have, what Trykhon has. He's not any worse. He'll work harder, and then just wait and see how well he'll do.

He feels a desire to expand. Happiness lies in growth, in the race . . .

And Korniy did prove that he was not worse.

He gathered what he had: apples, plums—sorted them, and found a buyer for them. He built a root cellar out of stones. He drove the stones into the ground himself, and made a root cellar that was as large as a stable. There were bins on both sides storing golden renette apples, fragrant rosy Tyrolean apples, yellow apples, grapes. Let them lie there, increase in fragrance and in

price. He sold half of them in the fall, and left the remaining half for the winter.

Maria took care of the cherry brandy, the plum brandy. On a shelf in the storage cellar large flasks are lined up. They stand there with their shiny paunches and lure one to them. Korniy does not touch them. Formerly, he could not have waited, he would have gulped them all down to the last droplet, but not now. Let them be. When the right occasion came along, then their turn would come. He would place them on the table before the guests and—see what a wife I have . . .

Korniy now has two scrawny horses. A dark bay horse and a light bay one. He paid twenty karbovantsi for them, dragged them home from the market, and managed to plough and to sow his fields with them. There was enough hay for the winter, and he'd find some oats as well, and in this way he would fatten them up and have good horses. In the meantime, he got hold of a wooden wagon. There wasn't enough money for an iron one. All in good time.

After he finished with the threshing, he again began mining stones. It was time to think about a house. He would build the best house in the entire neighbourhood. Stones were needed for the foundation, and he'd build the walls out of bricks. He planned to build a small brick-kiln the following summer and he was slowly gathering various supplies for the firing.

And Demko was growing and gaining weight. For Christmas fresh products were being prepared. The young hog could hardly get to its feet. Maria really knew how to feed young hogs. There would be sausages and *salo. Before the holidays, stacks of flat cakes and knishes were baked. Maria adorned the house with paper flowers and rushnyky. She bought a piece of wallpaper and affixed it under the icons. Korniy put up a large pile of good elm firewood. They would not be cold this winter . . .

He also gave some thought to Maria. Up to now, she had not bought herself anything. She was wearing out what she had brought with herself from Hnat's place.

Now Korniy rode into town, came home and, looking somewhat abashed and embarrassed, placed before Maria a new kerchief and some colourful material for a skirt. The material was not exceptional in any way, but Maria could not contain her joy. Never in her life had she received a more beautiful skirt. It had been bought for her by him, the one who up to now had never bought her anything.

She flung herself at him, embraced him: "Thank you, my darling!" And she kissed him passionately.

Korniy tried to resist, turned aside his unshaven cheek, and muttered uncomfortably: "Now now, Maria, now, now . . . Nothing has happened . . . That's enough . . . enough . . ."

But Korniy was experiencing a feeling of satisfaction that equalled hers. He had never guessed how pleasant it was to do something that brought another person joy.

A quiet, frosty evening. Korniy's little house lies half buried in the snow. A reddish light burns in the small windows. From the large chimney that is covered by a sparse thatch, smoke is issuing and spiraling upwards in two filaments. The moon has not yet risen, but reddish-lilac hues in the eastern sky announce its triumphant ascent.

It is quiet and solemn out in the streets. Peacefulness and holiness are flooding the frosty air. Occasionally a belated villager walks by, making crunching sounds with his frozen boots. Brilliant stars blaze in the steely-coloured depths of the heavens.

Today Maria did not light the table lamp. No, in front of the icons, she lit a small votive lamp made out of red glass. The house is warm, semi-dark, filled with the fragrance of fresh baked bread and other dishes.

Grain and hay have been scattered on the table standing in the main corner, and a white homemade tablecloth has been spread over them. In the icon corner there is a small bundle of hay, in which have been placed little clay pots of •kutya and stewed fruit covered with rye knishes. A •didukh, comprised of various grain stalks, is placed above everything.

Korniy has already finished all the outdoor work. There is nothing more to be done out there. An important holiday is drawing near. At the first crowing of the roosters, they have to get up and rush to the divine service.

Korniy, Maria and the elderly mother sit down at the table set with various dishes.

There is everything here. Take whatever you want, whatever you feel like eating. Everything is good, everything is homemade, earned through the toil of their own hands and their patient endurance.

Take the holy bread, O human being, break off a piece, and eat. It is soft, fragrant, tasty. Make the sign of the cross on your forehead and say: "Thank you, O God, for deigning to grant me your grace and for letting me pour the sweat of my brow on my own field in order to eat such tasty bread."

Break off a piece of bread and eat it. Eat the bread, the cabbage, the varenyky. Eat the cabbage rolls and the fried fish. Eat the granular kutya and drink with it fruit juices from your own orchard. Wash it all down with honey gathered from the flowers of your native land.

Korniy, Maria and the elderly mother sit at the table and eat the •Holy Supper. They are cheerful and filled with joy. Their faces are serene, radiant with happiness—short-lived and transitory though it might be, it is still happiness.

Maria's eyes seem to say that we do not demand much happiness. Our happiness lies in the fullness of our existence, but a few times a year, we gather it up into one great visible happiness, a happiness that radiates from our eyes, from our lips, from our souls.

Night is approaching, the great, holy night. One does not feel like sleeping on a night like this.

They chat about the past summer, about their work, they recall every droplet of sweat. Korniy tells Maria about distant lands where the sun is directly overhead, and where it is now summertime.

Summer at Christmastime?

"Yes, Maria. There are such countries. At Christmastime you'd think that frost should be nipping at people everywhere, but over there the sun beats down, trees are blossoming, and birds are singing.

"O God, how huge the world is!"

"But did you think that it was small? The world is big, very big. There are many types of trees in the world. We have oak trees, apple trees, linden trees. And over there, they have palm trees, banana trees. The people there are dark. Yes, Maria, there are many different kinds of people, and over there, they are black. The wild animals there are fiercer than ours. The lion lives there, huge snakes, and large, colourful birds. That's the kind of countries that there are, Maria . . ."

Maria thinks about it. "And what about the sea? It must be terrifying, right?"

"The sea? Oh, Maria! The sea is terrifying, but beautiful. The sun sets and you can clearly see it merge with the water. The wind blows, raises a wave, flings it into the expanse and rolls it out to the very limits. On the shore—there are granite cliffs. Tall, mighty cliffs. A wave dashes against the cliff and shatters, strikes it again, and shatters once more. The waves are as big as our hills . . ."

"Oh, my dear God!"

"Yes. And there are also countries that are cold, icy. I was there as well. The sun floats ever so low over the land and it is always red and always angry. And when winter comes, it hides completely . . ."

"For one night, Korniy?"

"No, Maria. Not for one night, but for many nights and for many days."

"But what is that like?"

"Hmm . . . What is it like? It's dark. It's dark on the ground, and a different kind of light shines there. There our wise God has placed another kind of light, a colourful one, like a rainbow, and it shines . . ."

"And are there people there as well?"

"Yes, there are. There are people everywhere. They kill the wild water animals, get dressed in their skins. There, the mountains are made of ice. There is the sea, water, and in the water floats a mountain . . . We don't have anything like that here. A tall mountain . . ."

"The kind that are in Mezhyhirya?"

"Oh, no. Taller ones."

"Like in Stovpka?"

"Bigger. We don't have mountains like that . . . They float over the water, meet and part. At times the wind pushes one of them against another, and they crash, and fall apart."

"Those mountains?"

"Of course. What else."

"Korniy! Did you see all this? But you know, I guessed as much. I guessed that you saw all that. And I was right. You see, sometimes a person doesn't understand something, but one's heart says: 'do thus and thus.' And you go and do it. If only you knew how much I loved you. It's not possible to tell you fully how much. No matter how you say it, it's not enough. It's impossible Korniy, to express one's love!"

"I understand. Do you think that I didn't love you?"

"You loved me as well? Korniy? You also loved me? I always thought you loved me. I did, honest to God, I did. One time you came home on leave, you were walking ahead of me, a girl was with you . . . I was walking behind you and I kept thinking: 'nevertheless, you do love me. If only you were kind . . .'"

"A sailor doesn't know how to be kind. He doesn't dare to be kind, Maria. That's how it is . . ."

"But what about you? After all, you're a sailor."

"I'm a farmer now. Do you understand? The land makes one grow tender, but the sea hardens you. It's like fire and water. That's how it is. At sea people perish at every step. At every step the sea says to you: 'You are nothing, O human being, in comparison to me. Just step onto the surface of the sea, and you will sink . . .' But

look at the land. The more firmly you stand on it, the more secure you are . . . The land and the sea . . . That's how it is . . ."

"And you loved me?"

"Of course. Like a wild beast. At times I thought: I'll go and choke you to death. Both you and him. I thought: he's a snake, I'll destroy him. And then you think: oh, may the mosquitoes feast on him. If you kill him—it's off to *Siberia with you. He's not worthy of your attention. And so I suffered as long as I felt that I was still a sailor, as long as the sea sparkled in my eyes. There, your comrades get together and roar with laughter, tell stories about women. And I thought: that's what my Maria is like. Today she's mine, and tomorrow she's the devil's."

"And do you still think that, Korniy?"

"A girl who is of the earth cannot be like that. I didn't know. A girl of the earth—that's trust. A girl of the sea—that's betrayal."

"Children," the elderly mother stirred in the inglenook. "It's time to go to sleep. The rooster will crow, and we have to go to the divine service. Go to sleep . . ."

Maria started in surprise. Next to her in the cradle was her child. Maria smiled. The old mother called them "children," but she was a mother, and Korniy was a father. But perhaps they truly were children?

"We'll go to sleep."

They settled in and fell silent. The votive lamp in front of the icons was still burning. On a night like this a lamp must not be extinguished.

They had been narrating and listening to tales, but outdoors another tale was unfolding.

The moon rose, large and bright, it stopped in the middle of the sky and gazed down at the sleeping village. The houses, drifted in by snow, were sleeping. They were dozing lightly so as not to miss the early morning service.

The first day, the second one, and the third one. All of them were holy days. The peacefulness passed. There was dancing, and songs and carols flowed forth. The days went by. New Years

Day. A few more days—and the Feast of Jordan. Kolodky are held throughout the village. Korniy keeps up with the best of them. He invites guests, and the brandies appear on the table. There is joy, laughter, musicians. After a lengthy silence, Korniy's accordion speaks again. Young maidens clap their hands and dance daintily.

Days go by. No one rues their passing. No one stops them.

The months go by, and when autumn came, Maria said to Korniy one evening: "Korniy, we're going to have another . . ."

"Infant? You don't feel well?"

She shrugged. "No, Korniy, I feel fine. But the season for hard work is approaching, and once again I won't be able to pull my fair share . . . and we have so much that needs to be done . . ."

"Are you saying that there won't be time to die?"

"Go ahead and laugh. I've counted the days, and it's going to happen right in the middle of harvest . . ."

"Well, so what? Everything gives birth then—the earth, and you . . . Why are you surprised at that? That's fine, wife. Keep at it. Our earth is big . . . Populate it, heap it up with humans. As long as they're people and not monsters . . ."

Spring brought work with it. Korniy now had horses. The heifer calved and was elevated in status. It was now a cow and had its own calf. The sowing was finished, and Korniy started work on the brick-kiln. He selected a sunny spot in the pasture under a hillock and dug an outdoor oven. The clay was there. He remodelled his wooden wagon into a water wagon, bought a large barrel, and carted water from a well.

Maria did not let her pregnancy slow her down. Tucking her skirt up high, she kneaded the clay with her feet, shovelled it onto a table with a spade, and Korniy formed bricks and laid them out on the threshing floor. By harvest time they had made a few stacks of sound red bricks. Next summer, they can begin working on their house.

And thus, with every passing day Korniy's confidence in his powers and in his abilities was strengthened. Maria matured into a housewife and a mother. She reaped, baked bread, gave birth.

Over there, grimy piglets were running about and squealing. Over here, their house was falling apart, the clay was breaking away from the walls, and rotten logs were peering out. Over there, little Demko had crawled into some nettles, stung himself, and was screaming.

Maria sees it all, hears it all, attends to everything.

Towards the end of the harvest, Maria gave birth. And two new little screamers were added to their family.

Korniy said that if the same thing happened every year, their family would grow into an entire tribe. But that's just a joke, Maria. Don't worry, it's fine.

Maria had no intention of worrying. She had no time to fuss over them, to be at their beck and call, but nevertheless they grew by themselves.

Whenever Korniy rode off to town, he took the older child with him. Let him start learning, let him get to know the Jews, and let him sit in the wagon. For doing that he would get a bun that cost all of three kopiyky and either a cap or shoes that were big enough for him to grow into.

And the days flowed by in an unremitting stream.

The time also came when Maria had to cook and bake not only for her own family, but for six other people as well. Today there was a work bee. The foundation was being laid for their new house.

It was not an easy matter. Money was needed—but where was one to get it? Manpower was needed, people were needed. The scrawny horses that Korniy had bought and fattened up had to be sold, and he bought cheaper ones. He also sold the fattened sow, and he hoped for a good crop of fruit in the autumn. Every effort was made to find whatever could be used to help, and the construction began, something new was being created, life was being renewed.

The place where Korniy's house was supposed to stand seemed to have been prepared precisely for it. A level area, facing the sun. Not like the one he had now, in the shadow of his

brother's threshold, where no matter where you went, you ended up on someone else's property. Now it was possible to expand the yard and to establish a decent flowerbed.

Closer to the gorge he parcelled off a small piece of land for a young orchard. He would plant it and let it grow—if not for himself, then for his children.

And the walls were going up ever higher and higher. The large windows were wide and high. Korniy had travelled and he had seen how people in foreign lands build houses. He constructed a wide roof and covered it with tiles. Finally the day came when Maria moved her belongings from the small, old-fashioned hut to the new, spacious house. A kitchen, a parlour. When you spoke in it, an echo rang out.

The neighbours came over . . .

Maria, barefoot, with her skirt tucked up, and holding a child in her arms, showed them the rooms. Little Demko was at her side, little Maksym was in the cradle, and she held little Nadiya in her arms.

"Right over there, my good people, is where I'll place new benches. And here is where the beds will be. We'll need some better quality flower-pots for these windows, and some kind of curtains . . ."

"That's it, that's it, that's it! You know, once you have a decent house, you want everything to be of a better quality."

"But we don't have the wherewithal to do it just now. You can't do everything all at once, as they say . . ."

During Christmas Korniy held a party. He had put off having the new house blessed until the festive holiday. There was more time then, and one could prepare properly for it. The neighbours drank and sang, wishing them "Many Long Years" in honour of this home.

Korniy was the master here, Maria was the mistress.

III

At that time, a war broke out. The cursed Japanese decided to attack the Russian Tsar.

They conscripted some of the men, and took Korniy away as well.

Maria was preparing a bag of baking for him, and weeping so hard that she could not see her own children.

"In whose care are you leaving us? And what are we to do without you, how are we to exist? We just managed to get on our feet, and all of a sudden, O dear mother of mine, such a misfortune!"

Maria is lamenting, spending sleepless nights. And it was not easy for Korniy to leave his home. Wherever he looked—he saw the work he had done. Everything was his, he had worked so hard and shed a lot of sweat here. Who knew if he would return. He was to go to war, and over there they kill people, everyone knows that. War is never a joking matter.

When he was leaving, he kissed the children, kissed Maria. All the neighbours gathered and he bade them farewell once, twice, and a third time.

"Forgive me my good people! Perhaps I have offended you, or spoken harshly to some of you, or had an unpleasant thought about you . . ."

"May God forgive you, Korniy, for we have nothing for which to forgive you. There has never been a better person. May the Blessed Virgin Mary and all the saints protect you . . ."

And Korniy rode away. The neighbours saw him off quite far beyond the village boundaries, and Maria went all the way to the train station . . .

They said their farewells . . .

"May God strike me if even once in my life I shed a tear, but on that day I couldn't help it!" Korniy admitted later. It is

heartbreaking to bid farewell to one's home, to one's native land. It would be better to die . . .

Maria came home feeling half-alive. The children were calling out to her.

"Where's tato, mama? Where's tato?"

"Oh, children, my dear children!"

After some time a letter came. The village head brought it to her himself. She took it to the neighbour's home to have it read to her.

Marko, a young pupil, opened it and slowly began reading: "My dear and beloved wife! In the first lines of my letter I'm hastening to inform you that I, praise God, am alive and healthy, and I wish the same for you from our Lord God. I bow down low before you and before my dear mother Okseniya, and I wish you, dear mother, good health from our Lord God. And I bow down before my sister Feodosiya and our small children and I wish all of you good health from our Lord God. Pass my respects to all the neighbours, both the young and the old, the ones that I know, and those that I don't know, and how are you, my dear wife, are you fattening a young hog or a piglet for Easter, and is mother coughing a lot, and don't forget about the horses, feed them well, if there aren't enough oats, boil some potatoes and mix chopped straw with grits and give them clean water to drink. Nadiya and Maksym have probably grown a lot, and when the snow melts, don't forget to drag the harrow over the winter wheat, the snow most certainly will stay there and the crop might rot. If it does rot, sow some barley. In closing I wish you and the children good health, I kiss you innumerable times, and may God grant you happiness, health and many years. Your husband Korniy Pereputko."

Maria listened and every word wounded her heart.

She at once went to a little shop, bought some paper, a blue envelope and a treat for the neighbour's boy, so that he would write a reply.

The neighbour's boy, proud that someone was coming to him with such an important matter, settled in at the table. Maria told

the children to be quiet, and, the pupil, after dipping his pen a few times, began his most important task.

"Our most dearly beloved husband and father. We received your letter that you wrote on February 25, 1905, for which we thank you and are truly grateful. We're informing you that we are all alive and well and we wish you the same from our Lord God. Your wife Maria bows down low before you and wishes you good health. Your mother Okseniya and your sister Feodosiya and your little children Demko, Maksym and Nadiya also bow before you and wish you good health from our Lord God. And we also beg you, you did not tell us anything about yourself, and we would like to know about your military life because your wife is weeping, worrying and waiting for the end . . ."

The young pupil did not know what else to write. Maria dictated to him: "Write him that I'm fattening a young hog for Easter, because the little sow is coming along very well and I'm thinking of sending it to a boar. Write him that his mother is getting better, and that our spotted calf is getting teeth and has grown very scrawny. She won't eat anything solid, and I have to heat up water for her. Write that our children are growing, but they've become so spoiled without you that they can't be tolerated. There is no one to rein in the oldest one, because he's the leader in everything. Write that the snow has melted a bit, and maybe Holy God won't let the crop rot. Don't forget to write that I'm grieving mightily both day and night, and I'm shedding bitter tears. In closing, come home as fast as you can, I kiss you countless times, your legal wife Maria Pereputko . . ."

The pupil wrote Maria Pereputko, and then added on his own: "I am waiting for your reply like a little bird waits for summer, and for the illiterate Maria Pereputko this letter was written by Marko Zakabluk."

"Oh Marko! I forgot! About the horses! Write! Don't worry about the horses. They'll be prancing around. I can't manage everything on my own, and I'll probably have to hire a boy to help me. Write us where you are and what you are doing. Write us what

the war is like, and don't rush in where you don't have to go. I am praying for you, and may God protect you from all that is bad. Come back as soon as you can! I'm slowly paying off the debt on the house, and I might pay it all off after the harvest."

And then she waited for a reply like a "little bird waits for summer."

All the villagers talked about nothing else but the war. No one could picture either that war, or the Japanese and everything that they, the evil ones, had started. Manchuria, Vladivostok, Sakhalin—these words were often spoken but no one knew where these places were to be found.

"I tell you, our Russia is huge! You could walk for a year, and not reach the end of it. You know, you have to travel by train for a whole month. And they say that the Japanese land is only as big as our province, but yet, may their mothers be slaughtered, they dared to . . . So ours will spit on them . . ."

And Maria did not sleep at night—she kept waiting for Komiy and expecting him to come. She prayed and her tears flowed. He had gone away, sent her a little letter—but he wasn't coming, he wasn't coming. Where was he roaming about? Was he alive? Was he no longer alive? May God forbid that the children should be left as orphans!

Once she ran into Hnat. She had not seen him for a long time. She avoided meeting him. It was best to stay away from memories and from sin. He had not remarried, he was staying at Mykhaylo's place once again and living out his days in this way.

Now he crossed the road to talk to her.

"I haven't seen you for a long time. Are you grieving for your husband?"

"Of course . . . There are the children, the farm, one has to tear oneself apart to do everything."

"Does he write to you?"

"If only he would. He wrote one short letter, and now he's silent. Maybe, God forbid, something has happened to him. I don't know and I have no way of finding out. I went to church,

paid for a prayer service. And here spring is on its way, there's the sowing . . ."

"Would you want me to help you?"

"Help me. How can you help me? I'll manage, Hnat . . . I'll manage one way or another . . . I'll hire a boy to help me with the sowing . . . Well, good-bye. I have to run!"

"Why are you in such a hurry, Maria?" he wanted to add, but she was gone. Was it possible to catch up to her?

Easter was approaching.

In the last week Maria fasted and went to confession. "You know, my good people, when you think about it—it's a sin to put it off to the last minute, but you can see . . . I don't have a single free moment."

"That's nothing to worry about, Maria. God sees and forgives."

It seems that Hnat also did not have enough time for he too did not fast until the last week. Every evening when they were going home from church, Hnat was beside Maria. Like it or not, they walked together. One doesn't spit in another person's eyes, and they walked silently.

Maria no longer was like her former self. Troubles, hard work had shrivelled her youth and her beauty. It was hard for her to walk uphill.

Hnat was hobbling along and breathing heavily.

In the thicket it was quiet and there was no one else there. Hnat was looking at her so strangely that she felt frightened. But they got to the top of the hill without incident. They were about to go their separate ways.

"Would you permit me, Maria, to come and see you?"

"Well Hnat, you'll come, and you know what people are like: their tongues will start flapping . . . It would be better if you didn't."

"Maria!" he said. "If you only knew . . ." and he broke off what he was saying.

Maria grew uneasy. O God, how little time she had. And she'd completely forgotten. The children were home alone . . .

"Wait, Maria . . . I can hardly get out the words I want to say, you know . . . But I love you nevertheless. Do you hear me, Maria, I love you! That's how it is . . ."

"It would be better if you didn't say things like that . . . It's embarrassing. I have children, a farm to run . . ."

"Children . . . a farm . . . I have . . . But what if, you see . . ."

She interrupted him. "Don't call down the wrath of God, Hnat. Get married and you'll live like all people live. You must live, Hnat . . . But you've got something stuck in your head. I can't . . . You know I can't . . ."

Maria finished speaking, bid him good night, and left. She was walking swiftly and vanished quickly in the darkness.

Hnat was left all alone.

It was peaceful, spring was in the air. The earth was giving off fragrant odours. Bushes and trees were beginning to bud. It was quiet. There was a slight frost. The sky was bright with stars.

Hnat stood there for a while and, instead of turning to the opening in the bushes to go home, he went along the wattle fence towards Maria's place.

The path was soft, his steps could hardly be heard. All around there were sparsely planted plum trees, and farther up ahead two spreading Tyrolean apple trees.

Under them, the old, fenced-off barn of Korniy's brother Konon was nestled like a heap of manure.

Hnat paused by the barn, stood and listened.

Then he got out his tobacco, struck a light, and began to smoke. He smoked for a long time, deeply drawing in the harsh smoke of the coarse tobacco.

And now someone was coming towards him in the darkness, drawing nearer, coming right up to him.

"Good evening," Hapka Khomykha said.

"May God give you good health!" Hnat responded.

"Is it you? What are you doing?"

"Can't you see? I'm standing here . . . I was coming home from the evening service . . ."

"You're coming home rather late from the evening service. You must have lost your way, my dear . . . Your paths don't go this way . . . Tee-hee-hee! By chance, it isn't Maria who is drawing you here, is it? I know, I know . . . That young woman is like an auroch . . . Even lighting won't strike her."

"Why are you going on like this, Hapka . . . Why are you flapping your tongue?"

"Tee-hee-hee! What of it? I'm not talking about someone who is yours, she doesn't belong to you. She doesn't even want to look at you with her backside. But she's sleek, like a mare . . . Do you want me to help you?"

"What evil spirit has brought you here, old woman? Who is asking you for your help?" the words flew out of Hnat's mouth.

Hapka screeched with laughter. "Never fear, if she found herself destitute with her little bastards, she'd remember about you . . ."

"Go wherever you were heading, Hapka," he said, turning aside.

He had confessed and taken communion today. He did not even dare to spit because he would be spitting out the holy body of Christ. He felt like swearing, and he could hear the heavy breathing of Satan. Harsh and searing.

He turned around and quickly hobbled off to his stile, cutting cross-country without following a path.

Hapka trotted off into the valley.

IV

At Easter churches are brilliantly lit. On the monastery bell tower, there are colourful lights. From evening until morning lamps on it glow brightly. The sky is also glowing, as are all the windows of the houses. In Maria's home, as in all homes, a small lamp is burning under the icons, the table is spread with a white tablecloth, and on it stands the food that has been prepared to be

blessed. When the roosters crow for the second time, it is time to get up and go to the church that is ablaze with lights.

But Maria's heart is filled with dread. A dark and heavy apprehension. She had dreamt a strange dream: she had received a letter from Korniy. "I'm alive and well, but don't expect me to come home soon."

Why, beloved? Why, my faraway one? After all, it's springtime, Easter. The fields and the children are waiting . . .

It is not right to sleep on a night like this. Sleep is trying its hardest to overcome you, but surely you know that the evil one flies over the earth all night long and tempts you: "Fall asleep for just a little while. Lie down and fall asleep."

No, evil one! I will not fall asleep. Wait, in a few moments the Royal Doors in church will open, and the words "Christ is risen" will break forth over the entire world and in the heavens and even in hell, and you, O black demon, will fall down in the face of the great resurrection!

Maria does not sleep. The elderly Okseniya also is not sleeping. The flickering red glow of the lamp lights up the stern face of God-Sabaoth. Even, frowning eyebrows. Wise, all-knowing eyes. A long white beard. God!

Maria looks fixedly at the icon so as not to fall asleep. It would be terrible to fall asleep on this most holy of all nights. It would be terrible to sleep through that moment when the Son of that Sabaoth was resurrected.

If you only knew, Maria, why your heart is aching. And now the rooster has crowed. Is it the first or the second crowing? She runs outdoors. It is dark, and the sky is studded with stars. On the distant monastery bell tower colourful lights are sparkling. No, it's the first crowing.

It's still quiet. People have not started moving about. They're waiting. Maria goes back indoors. The children are in bed.

"Mother, look after them. Don't fall asleep. I'll come home with the blessed food, we'll break our fast, and then you'll go to church . . ."

"Go, go, Maria. Have no fear . . ."

The rooster crows a second time. Maria takes the basket with the paska, glances once more at the children, and walks out of the house.

People are already on the move. Men and women, loaded down with their Easter baskets, are coming down all the pathways from the hillocks, from the ravines. A light rumbling can be heard. From time to time the monastery bell tower is lit up, as if by lightning; it shows up clearly in the darkness and then hides once again, and a long fireworks rocket tears into the dark, starry sky and shatters into countless brilliant flames.

The great holiday can be sensed. The body trembles. Something extraordinary has happened above the earth.

Maria ran up to the church in good time. There were fires by the church, and cheerful, enthused people. The church itself was packed. She pushed her way inside; she wanted to buy a candle, but she couldn't force her way through to the narthex.

She stood and prayed. And when the Royal Doors opened and the words "Christ is risen from the dead," suddenly burst forth from the choir loft, Maria could not hold back her tears. She thought about Korniy, and began weeping.

So much joy, and so many fires. Maria sees the flames, feels the joy, but she cannot refrain from crying. It is not her joy. Hers has not yet come. She has only sorrow . . .

At the end of the divine service, Maria walked out of the church: the people were gathered in the cemetery with their pasky. Candles were burning.

Maria also found a spot and settled in.

Just after all the Easter baskets had been blessed, some neighbours, gasping for air, rushed up to her.

"Maria! Misfortune! Run home at once. Your house has burned down."

Maria was struck dumb. She couldn't believe it. Her tongue turned wooden in her mouth.

"Hurry, Maria! Your children are there!"

Without thinking she dropped everything and raced home. She forgot all about her basket. It was picked up by others. She was running, crying out painfully, unaware of how fast she was going. Under her feet there were floating icy patches, and Maria could trip at any moment, lose her balance and fall. Her heart was pounding, she couldn't breathe. When she had to go up the hill she had no strength left and other people almost had to carry her the rest of the way.

When she came to her yard, it was all over. There was no barn left at all, just the stone pillars were still standing. The house had nearly burned to the ground, the beams, the rafters, the girders were still smoking. The fire had taken everything. Not a single little outbuilding was left. The neighbours had barely managed to save the burned children. The door had been tightly barred and they had to carry out the children and the old woman through the windows.

The old woman was unconscious. Sin had descended upon her, and she had fallen asleep. Satan had not passed her by. No one knew how the fire had started. Everything had started to burn at the same time. Had Maria locked the door? As if she could remember. She thought she had locked it. In the lean-to, the pigs were baked to a crisp. The horses were also crippled. The cow was in agony. There had not been anyone to rescue it in time. Everyone had been in church then. Everything had burned to the last speck of dust, to the last straw.

Only a few icons had been saved, the ones that stood by Konon's buildings and that were supposed to protect them. Maria's icon—The Mother of God, the Nursing Madonna—had also been saved.

Maria could not walk and she lay with a bound head. The children were crying. The neighbours took them in. It was thought that the old woman would not survive. At any rate, she did not want to live.

"It's such a sin! Such a sin! To fall asleep on such an important night, and for me, an old woman, to do something like that! At a

time when people were blessing their pasky in church. There are those nights, you know, when a person tosses and turns without sleeping all night long, but to do something like this . . . O my dear Lord, my dear Lord! What have I done to deserve such punishment?"

Fire at such an unusual time in the village raised quite a commotion. The people came in droves to see Maria.

"Christ is risen, Maria! Don't cry, my dear. Here's something for the children. These are *krashanky, a paska, and here's some meat. Don't take it so hard! God granted it to you, and God took it away. You'll work, and God will not abandon you. Don't cry, Maria. We'll all help—good people will help you. We know you, Maria, we won't let you and your little children perish."

The villagers called a meeting at once and decided how they would help Maria. They were all supposed to bring seed grain and sow her fields. They would also have a work bee and help her put a thatched roof on the house, or at least cover it with straw.

It wasn't long before rumours began spreading throughout the village . . .

Women neighbours were whispering by wells, in gateways, on outdoor benches that it was Hnat who had set fire to Maria's place.

"It was he, my good people, and that's why he came to church so late. And he ran up all sweaty and out of breath, and you should have seen how he kept looking back over his shoulder. And his eyes were racing around. They kept racing around."

"And did you hear, my dear in-law, that they think they spotted his footprints on the path? By Konon's place, on the pathway. One print was with a built up heel and a horseshoe, and the other was without that heel. Who else leaves footprints like that? Well, judge for yourselves . . ."

"That's it, that's it, that's it! And as for me, my good people," Hapka chimed in, "one evening just before Easter, when the sepulchre is placed in the church, and I had so much work. . . I thought, I'll bake something, so that I'll have less running around

to do on Saturday . . . The children had all gone off somewhere or other, and I mixed up some dough . . . And then, you know, it got so dark that I had to light a little lamp. I lit it, and it wouldn't burn. What in the world is going on, may the Lord forgive me! I took a look, and there was no kerosene in it. O my Holy God! And there was no one to send to get some.

"So I took a bottle, you know, and set out for Hershka's place on Shynkiwka. I was running, you know, when I noticed someone in the shadows by Konon's barn: some miserable person was standing there. I came up closer—good evening! Good evening. Is it you, I asked. What are you doing here at this hour? It was Hnat. He was standing and smoking.

"The thought struck me that he might be going to see Maria. The young married woman was alone, so who knows what might be going on . . . Oh, I said to him, watch out. When Korniy comes home, it won't be a joke . . . He spat, you know, and walked straight through the orchard to his own orchard. And I ran down into the valley."

"So that's how things are, you hear! And who would have expected it. Such a good farmer. Such a decent person. They say that he has read the entire Bible."

The women neighbours and gossipers whispered in this way for a long time until one day the village magistrate and the guards came to the Kukharchuk home and began to interrogate Hnat.

Hnat did not reply to any of the questions. He remained silent, or simply stated: "I don't know."

Witnesses were called. They hesitated, became confused. And it was bad this way, and no good that way. No one wanted to get Hnat into trouble, but all were convinced of his guilt. They called Maria as well. They asked her what she thought: could Hnat have done it?

She gave it some thought and said: "No . . ."

"Well then, how could it have happened?"

"I don't know. Maybe from the small votive lamp. The lamp was burning . . ."

"But the people are saying that the fire began burning everywhere all at once. The barn couldn't have started burning from that small lamp—it's quite a distance from the house."

Maria remained silent. No, she was not blaming him. She was not blaming anyone. The people, thanks be to God, had helped her. The field had been seeded, and the house was being thatched.

The magistrate did not believe Maria. Something was not quite right here. He took Hnat away, and after some time, an investigator came to the village. Maria's wound was almost healed. The children were healing, the mother was still groaning, but there was hope that she would recover. The cattle were slowly coming along.

During the investigator's questioning, Maria insisted that the fire must have started from the votive lamp or from the chimney. A lot of firewood had been burned prior to the holiday, the chimney was very hot, and there was hay in the attic. Who can say if the chimney had not cracked and if the hay had not caught fire from it.

"But why do you think that Kukharchuk didn't do it? There is so much reliable evidence against him . . . He lived with you at one time, didn't he? Yes? They say he truly loved you, but that you left him anyway . . . And then you got a divorce. He didn't remarry, and he kept his eyes fixed on you. Who knows what kinds of thoughts were swirling in his head. And then the right time came along to take revenge on you. Your husband wasn't home. You were without any protection. He thought that he'd destroy you, and then you would come to him for help. Maybe he thought that he could help you, and perhaps he will still offer you his help.

"People are saying that he came to church very late. Where was he up to then? Had he slept in? But his sister-in-law let it slip that he rose at the first crowing of the rooster, whereas at first she said that he had not slept at all that night, that he was reading a book. What does all this mean? Moreover, on the path near the barn of your husband's brother, there were a lot of his footprints. That's been proven. Why was he walking around there? Whom was he looking for?"

Maria does not know what he was looking for. But she knows Hnat, she knows how much he loved her, and she couldn't believe that he could come up with such a brutal idea. No, no . . . She does not believe it, she cannot believe it.

And Hnat remained silent and did not admit to anything. They kept him in prison, interrogated him, but two months later, they had to release him because of a lack of solid evidence. Not a single witness could be found to attest to Hnat's guilt. And so Hnat returned to the village.

V

By autumn, Maria's house once again had windows and doors, and a thatched roof overhead. Of course, it did not look the way it had looked before, but one could live in it. There was a bountiful yield out in the fields, and the people helped her harvest the grain. The orchard also cooperated and produced a good crop of fruit.

She wrote Korniy about her misfortune, and he sent twenty-five karvbovantsi.

"I am sending you, my dear wife, twenty-five rubles," he wrote poorly in Russian. "I would send you more, but I can't. I don't drink, and I don't smoke, and I save every kopiyka . . . Buy the children something, and treat yourself as well. Before long, I'll send you some more."

And truly, "before long" he did send another ten karbovantsi and informed her that "in a short time I hope to see you, and I remain alive and healthy . . ."

Maria was not as happy with the ten karbovantsi as with the news that she would soon see her faraway Korniy.

And as for Hnat, he continued living at home. He sat in his workshop, planed a barrel, or read thick books. He read ever so many books.

One time he went on a pilgrimage to holy sites: to Kyiv, Pochayiv, and he always brought back a lot of books and read

them in the evening. People began saying that he was studying "black magic" . . .

Once time he met up with Maria. He stopped her, looked at her, and laughed. What was that strange laughter all about? Maria felt uneasy.

"Why are you afraid, Maria?" he asked.

"And why are you laughing?"

"I'm laughing . . . Why not . . . What am I supposed to do, Maria?"

"What do you mean?"

"Are you not angry with me?"

"Why should I be?"

"What do you mean, why? Everyone is talking . . . Listen, Maria . . . I know you need help now . . . And I'd like to help you . . . I have . . ."

"No, no, Hnat! Thank you very much, but I don't need anything . . . I have everything . . . You yourself know that I have everything. But even so, I don't know how to thank you for all your former help . . . You've already helped me enough. And now I have to go . . . There's so much work to be done . . ."

"Wait, Maria . . . You think that I was the one who set fire to your place . . . Right? You're thinking, he's so clever . . . He started the fire, and now he's coming to me with his help . . . No, Maria," and he tore open his shirt and exposed his breast. "Here's a cross, and I swear on it and kiss it . . . I wasn't the one who burned your place down."

Maria stood dumbfounded. She kept staring at the cross and at Hnat. And he did not say anything else. He looked at her confidently and directly. His forehead became furrowed with wrinkles.

"It wasn't you Hnat? Is that the truth?"

"It's the truth, Maria . . ." he said firmly.

"I believe you. I'm glad, Hnat. I wanted it not to be you who set the fire. I believed that it wasn't you . . . and that's what I said to the investigator."

"I know. You did the right thing back then. You told an important truth. You're truthful, Maria, and that's why I wanted to help you. No one will know about it. No one. Do you hear me? No one, except for the two of us. And you'll never have to lay eyes on me again. You saved me from a heavy and undeserving punishment . . . You gave me the opportunity to go on living and to go on hoping . . . Perhaps I will still be needed in this world. Perhaps even you will still need me . . . Who knows. Who, indeed, can know . . .

"I had a strange dream, Maria . . . I dreamt that I saw a large dark cellar, and it was so very dark that I was surprised that I could see anything at all. And in that thick darkness, I saw your middle son . . . The middle one, I'm saying . . . That probably means that you're going to have just one more son . . . Yes, that's what I dreamt . . . For some reason he was completely naked in the darkness, and he was standing erect, like a soldier, and holding an axe. Just an axe. He was holding it like a weapon of some kind . . . And I thought to myself: what are you doing here, son? Why are you standing here? Why is there darkness all around and why don't you go out into God's world? And he just stood there, Maria, he stood there almost without moving, and he was looking fixedly at something directly in front of himself. What is it that he sees there, I wondered.

"I looked over there and I saw a single, almost unnoticeable iron door . . . On that door there were many rusted locks, all kinds of them, both big and small—some were like a person's fist, others like pebbles . . . Aha, I thought, someone is sitting behind that door and suffering . . . So he's guarding someone . . . And I had this dream in the jail when I was incarcerated for setting fire to your house . . ."

Hnat stopped talking for a moment.

Maria was staring intently at him, staring with widely opened eyes.

"Are you listening, Maria?"

"I'm listening, Hnat. Go on . . ."

"Yes, I thought. Someone is imprisoned there . . . and the cellar was horrible, the walls were very thick, the door was made of iron, the locks were very, very heavy . . . Over the door a large terrifying black eye had been painted. It was looking fixedly at your son, and its expression was satanic. Yes, I thought, Satan is looking. And why doesn't someone stab him, finish him off . . .

"At that moment the terrifying iron door began moving on its own. The eye of Satan and your son also began stirring and showing some anxiety. Your son was raising his axe higher and higher . . . And the door was shaking, the locks were crackling, some of them were falling to the ground.

"Finally the door opened up a bit, and through the crack there first appeared someone's fingers, and then a long, withered and weary hand. It kept making its way ever further through the crack, began grabbing at the locks with its fingers, but then your son moved quietly like a thief; he stepped forward on his tiptoes and began approaching the door. And when the hand, with an amazing lightness began tearing off the locks like bits of junk, your son swung his axe and brought it down on the hand . . . The hand made a crunching sound and fell to the ground.

"At that moment the door suddenly opened and I saw a pale, exhausted woman . . . Yes, Maria. I saw a woman who was holding her slashed hand in front of herself, and blood was not streaming from it, but falling slowly in droplets . . . And do you know whom I recognized in that woman?"

Hnat looked intently at Maria.

Maria asked quickly: "Whom did you see, Hnat?"

"You! It was you . . ."

Maria shuddered. "Hnat, don't say that. I can't . . . What are you saying!"

"Listen, Maria, there's more!" Hnat almost ordered her. "It was only a dream. I didn't make it up, I dreamt it . . . I dreamt it when I was in the prison . . . You were standing in the doorway with a chopped-off hand, and you were looking sorrowfully at your son and at his bloodied axe. Bloodied? But there was almost no

blood coming out of your hand . . . Yes. But the axe was bloodied. There were many bloody stains on it. And I saw that your husband Korniy appeared from somewhere. He walked in, calmly took the axe from his son and split his skull with it . . ."

"O God, dear God! What are you saying? Hnat, come to your senses!"

But Hnat was silent now. He lowered his head and stared at the ground.

After a few moments he said: "Your boots are ripped. Don't your feet get cold? It will soon be winter . . ."

Maria regained control of herself. "It's not the first time," she said.

"Not the first time . . . But why should they be cold . . . You have children. You should take care of your health for the sake of your children . . . Your children will grow up and feed you, maybe they'll even become good people . . . Mine died . . . May yours at least grow up . . . You know, I have two hundred spare karbovantsi . . . Take them from me, Maria . . . Do you hear me? Take them! No one will ever know, I swear to God here and now . . . I would like to show you my gratitude for your great righteousness . . . Take them, Maria . . ."

Maria remained silent and it appeared that she wasn't hearing anything . . .

"It seems to me that you're not listening to me . . . Maria!"

"What?"

"Weren't you listening to me?"

Maria was silent.

"No one, no one will ever know if you take this paltry sum from me. And I vow to you that no one will ever know that I was talking to you for so long here today, and I will never appear before you again . . . Well? Will you take it? I have the money here with me . . ."

He reached into his bosom.

"No, no, no! No, Hnat! I beg you, it's not necessary. I won't take your money . . . Even as it is I'm grateful to you for your kind

thoughts about me . . . I don't know . . . I don't know anything. . . It would be good, Hnat, if we were never to meet again. We won't meet again . . . That's right—isn't it? Well . . . Yes! I don't think badly about you at all . . . Believe me . . . But as for the money . . . Money has to be given back, Hnat. One can't just take it and forget about it . . . No, no . . . That's not right . . ."

"So you won't take it?"

"No, Hnat. I can't . . ."

"You can't . . . Fine . . . Fine, Maria . . . So we won't see each other ever again. I'll go away, and you'll also go . . . And I won't ask you where you're going, and you won't ask me where I'm going. We'll go down different paths, and will we ever meet again? Who knows? Maybe . . . But maybe not . . . You, I know, will go to your children, you'll sit down by them and you'll look at every one of them. Don't look at them sadly. Maybe fate is demanding a cheerful outlook from them because life will be hard, very, very hard, Maria . . . Farewell . . . Stay well, Maria . . ."

VI

The days continued going by.

The children were growing. Maria worried and waited for Korniy.

Where had Hnat gone off to? A few days after their conversation, Hnat vanished. He left home and did not return . . .

"He's a strange one, that Hnat," Maria thought. "No, no . . . Perhaps it truly was not he. Why would he swear, take on such a terrible sin . . . Oh, how he loved me!"

Thought after thought kept rushing by. She went to a sorceress. And that one gave her some herbs and told her to drink them. Maria stopped thinking about Korniy—she was thinking about Hnat. She drank the herbs and, it seemed that she felt better. What had he done to her? More than once she wanted to go and look for him. But where was he?

Winter, Lent, sadness . . .

Maria went to the monastery to pray.

The monks, as always, came out to the middle of the church and sang "O peaceful world."

Maria knelt, whispered her prayers . . . and suddenly . . . That crippled monk . . . Hnat? Was it Hnat? He glanced up and looked at her . . . He had no time. He turned away and: "O Holy Blessed One . . . O Jesus Christ . . ."

"Merciful God, help me, a sinner!" Maria beat herself on her breast. "O God! Give peace unto my soul . . ."

Korniy returned at Easter.

Maria came home from the divine service on Good Friday and saw him: "O my God! Korniy! Is it you?"

Maria was both crying and laughing. Now the upcoming holy day was truly a holy one. And as for Korniy, he had filled out and was standing erect. He brought treats for everyone. For Maria he had some silk material for a skirt, but . . . Where was she to wear such cobwebby material? If you ever put it on, everything could be seen . . . People would be sure to laugh at her. It would be best to put it away for her funeral attire . . .

The first thing that Korniy did was to have a look at the farm.

Not everything was as it should be, but it wasn't possible for her to do everything by herself. The horses were hardly able to walk. The one that was burned had almost died, and it wasn't clear what would become of him, for his wounds were not healing.

"In your opinion, Maria, who did this?" Korniy asked.

"God only knows . . . No one can say . . ."

Oh, if only he knew who had done this. He would know how to settle accounts with him. But how was one to find out . . .

In the evenings the house was filled with people. Korniy told them stories about the war, the revolution. The Tsar had issued a manifesto, and it seemed that all the land was to be given to the poor . . .

"Oh, that would be the just way to do it!" the older men chatted among themselves. "That's how it should be. The land belongs to

everyone . . . Whoever works on it—give it to him . . . If he doesn't work—get out! Don't get in the way, don't take up space . . . The land demands work and sweat . . ."

Easter truly was a holy day for Maria. She set out for church with Korniy and the children. The bells were ringing, the sky and the earth were laughing. Korniy was well-dressed, and so were the children; and Maria's clothing was no worse . . . They walked proudly, and were greeted from all sides.

"Christ is risen, Korniy! We greet you with your arrival!"

"Truly He is risen. Thank you."

"And how about that Japanese? Did he get what was coming to him?"

"No, not at all . . . It's ours who got it."

"Ours? How about that, may the devil take it! Such a small man, but so aggressive. But why didn't we let him have it!"

"Because of treachery. The generals aren't any good . . ."

"Yes, yes, that's how it is . . . But where was the Tsar? What was he doing?"

"What can the Tsar do . . . The Tsar can't keep watch over everyone . . ."

"That's true enough . . ." the old man spat through his teeth. "Well, may the devil take those cutthroats, if only I had been there—I'd hang the whole lot of them. People are shedding blood, and they're being treacherous. And that's the kind of order that we have in our Russia."

Korniy was standing in a group of older men; he was taller than all of them, and he was telling them about a lot of things. He told them all about the land, about the Tsar's manifesto. He told them about Manchuria and the Chinese, who do not talk at all the way that we talk, and who, to top it off, have braids like our women . . .

The older men roared with laughter. "Well, they're something else again . . . Whoever heard of decent men taking on women's fashions? There's no need to say anything more . . . Tfu! So much for that . . ."

The Easter festivities ended, and Korniy at once went out into the fields. The sun was shining, the meadowlarks were singing loudly. The plough sliced the rich black soil. Last fall Maria had not managed to do the fall ploughing. Crows were hopping down the furrows and plucking up the larvae of May bugs. It was pleasant to walk like this behind a plough, to feel connected to the earth. But it was too bad that the field was so narrow. You go over it a few times and you hit the boundary. Oh, more land was needed! More land was definitely needed, for the children were growing . . .

He finished the sowing and he began making plans to redo the roof. He would remove the sheaves and put tiles in place once again, but then an opportunity arose to buy some land, and Korniy put down a deposit on a desyatyna.

Maria rejoiced. It didn't matter that they would have to tighten their belts a bit. It didn't matter at all. A desyatyna is still a desyatyna. She was prepared to do all that she possibly could, because they would have that desyatyna. After all, don't you see that the children are growing and they'll need some land? Where else could they go, what else could they do? They couldn't all become gentlemen, and in order for a person to become a gentleman one had to go to school, and to go to school, one needed money.

On top of everything that was happening, Maria once again became pregnant. That was the kind of luck she had, to be pregnant in the summer, when there was so much work. Before Christmas, she gave birth to a boy, and he was baptized Lavrin.

"May he grow up and be healthy," the godparents wished them well. "It's better to have a baptism than a funeral . . ."

Oh, Maria had lived through a lot. There had been baptisms and funerals. It was nothing new to her. Obviously she had been born under such a star.

They slowly paid off the desyatyna. They had to scrape together all that they had to do it, but they did manage to pay it off. So be it. It's land, not capital, as Korniy liked to say.

VII

And the days continue passing by in an even, unbroken course, arranging themselves neatly into months and years. And how good, how full, how well-rounded these years are. Every sunrise brings with it work, every sunset—rest. The children are growing. Slowly more land is being accrued. Behind the house a new orchard has been planted, and every spring the young grafted trees are covered with tender, smiling blossoms.

Five years go by, and Korniy becomes an upstanding farmer. Korniy now sports a large beard, Korniy is a respected man in the community.

On Sunday mornings, after the spring sowing is finished and the rye and the wheat are beginning to undulate, Korniy goes out into the fields. For him, it is here that God is everywhere. Get down on your knees and pray. The sun, grand and eternal—the sun of the fields and of villages—emerges from behind the distant horizon and rises into the heights.

Korniy walks with a firm, heavy stride down the path between the fields of grain, looks out over the greyish-green waves of expansive fields undulating slowly like cats, listens to the indefatigable singing of the sunny, amusing birds above him, deeply inhales the invigorating, crystal-clear and fragrant air with his robust, manly chest. There is no end to it all. There is no limit. The wind, warm and soft, wafts and scurries over the fields; little white clouds, lightly tinged by the sun, float like water lilies on a gigantic azure-blue pond and then disappear from view somewhere beyond the dark wall of a distant oak forest.

And how is one not to go out into the fields at a time like this? How is one not to adore these fields? How many ears of grain there are here . . . O God, how many there are here! More than there are stars in the heavens . . . And who was it that gave them life? There goes Korniy with his stern look and rough hands. It is

he who has sown the seeds. It is he who has made it possible for them to wisely touch the ground, to send out their sprouts into the softness of this great planet and to grow into tender stems crowned with ears of grain.

Honour to you, Korniy! God Himself is inseparably with you out here in the fields with the wind, with the expansive heavens, with the sun! God Himself! And how often Korniy, for no reason at all, halts, doffs his new Sunday cap, and blesses himself. Why does Korniy bless himself? Before whom? Oh, Korniy won't say why he blesses himself . . . He just feels like doing it, and that's that . . . He feels joy, he feels greatness, he feels the presence of a higher, eternal power . . .

He returns home light-hearted and joyful, as if he has just come back from a prayer service. Over there they are herding cattle home through the dew. . .

Whose cows are walking over there? They belong to Korniy. There are six of them, delightful, leisurely animals, they are walking and bringing you, Korniy, fragrant milk. Behind them walks Korniy's daughter Nadiya. He catches up to Nadiya.

"Did they have enough to graze?" he asks.

"But can't you see, father? They haven't had enough. There is no pasturage."

"You'll herd them home and give them some clover."

Korniy doesn't only have cows. He also has horses that are sleek, well-fed. Korniy has a good farm. He has long since forgotten those times when he played the accordion and worked as a day labourer for Martyn. Those times are gone forever, even though Maria often recalls them.

Lunch is waiting for him at home. Maria was in church and she tells him what the people there were talking about. They say there's going to be a war, because supposedly the Germans have decided to fight "our Tsar."

Korniy and Maria ponder these rumours and are convinced that it would be a good idea to write to those Germans—to tell them not to go where they're not wanted . . .

Demko is already quite the young man. No sooner does he finish his meal than he's off to look in a mirror . . . He combs his hair, gets ready to go to a dancing party.

"Demko, don't be in such a hurry," Korniy says. "You'll still have lots of opportunities to have a good time. Think less about your hair, and more about farming . . . Where are you off to?"

"Wherever . . . I'll go into the village. I can't spend my whole life sitting in the inglenook."

"And who will take our horses out into the pasture?"

"Maksym will. What else is there for him to do . . . All he does is chase around the pasture with the boys."

"Maksym is a better worker than you . . . Oh, my sons. You better watch out. If you don't take care of things, you won't have anything . . . Nothing will drop into your mouths on its own . . . You have to believe me."

"He's such a smart one," Maksym snaps at Demko. "He's going off to a dancing party, and I'm supposed to graze the horses."

"What else do you have to do? That's all the work there is. I've done my share of grazing horses. You aren't expected to mow or plough," Demko says.

"Now, now, now. All we need is to have you start quarrelling. Demko, don't wander off anywhere; you'll lead the horses out of the stable and water them, and then he'll graze them. You have to graze them, Maksym. And make sure that I don't catch you fooling around with the boys like I did the last time, when the horses were in trouble . . ."

Demko is pleased with his father's orders, but Maksym does not find them appealing in the least. He is accustomed to running around in the street every day, gathering together a gang of boys, and chasing around with them out in the pasture and in the orchards. Pulling down a bird's nest, picking fruit off someone else's apple or pear tree, or doing some mischief somewhere . . .

Oh, Maksym is one of the best at doing things like that. Korniy often had to listen to his neighbours complain about Maksym's antics, and afterwards he would really let the mischief-maker

have it. Korniy does not loosen his reins. Every misdeed must be properly dealt with.

Maria remained silent in such cases. In her eyes, all are equal, all are good. She does not show any preference among the children, she does not stop their father from giving them orders, but she also does not prohibit them from doing anything. She especially does not stop Demko from going to dancing parties.

"He's grown up now, so let him have a good time," she said. "The time will come when he'll settle down. Youth must have its fling . . ."

Nadiya was the favourite child of both the Pereputko parents. She was obedient, cheerful, beautiful. She got up at the same time as her mother, helped her, never tried to get out of working. She would go out into the garden, do the digging, the weeding, and sing happily the whole time.

"She takes after her mother," the older people said. "She too was a singer like that."

"It would be better if she took after her father. As it is, she won't have good fortune . . ."

"Oh, that's just a lot of superstition . . ."

And everything went along in an orderly manner, like a machine.

Whenever possible, Demko went to dancing parties. His moustache had not even grown yet, but the girls were already casting their eyes at the slim, dark-browed young fellow. Maksym had to graze the horses. Korniy went to village meetings, and kept busy trying to buy more land.

Maria stayed at home; neighbour women dropped by, and a "parliamentary session" ensued. They talked about Khymka, the neighbour who hadn't shown up, went on to discuss household matters, turned their attention to courtships and weddings, and so it went until evening.

Little Lavrin, an active tyke with sparkling eyes would be tearing around somewhere, God only knew where. He would dash into the house in the evening and beg his mother for food. Maria

loved her youngest one, pampered him and took good care of him. And Korniy had nothing against that. Lavrin was doing well in school. His eyes were alert.

"He'll turn out just fine. We'll have to see to it that he gets more schooling. Let at least one of our sons become a doctor."

And when the holiday was over, it was back to work again. The village blossomed, brought forth fruit, rested, and blossomed once again. For a few years now, epidemics and crop failures had passed it by. The people got on their feet, grew wealthier, and gained ground. More brick houses were being built, hopvines were being cultivated, machines were being bought.

A couple of years later, grief first visited Korniy. Demko had become old enough to be a recruit, and he had to go to fulfill his duty to the Tsar. He was assigned to the artillery and taken away to the distant Caucuses.

Maria wept bitterly for her son, prepared him a bag of biscuits, sausages, and all sorts of goodies.

It was also a difficult time for Korniy. He was losing the best worker on his farm. He had just bought a mowing machine and it was Demko who was adept at using it. There was so much work at harvest time. There were workers over there, his family members over here. He had to oversee everything, do everything in good time. If you didn't tend to things, you wouldn't have anything. Korniy could not rely on Maksym.

"He'll never be a farmer" he said to everyone. "All he cares about is cards and dancing parties."

"The Tsar had no idea when and how our oldest son grew up. The Tsar only knows about my son when he needs him," Maria reflected. "When the war comes, they'll drag the poor fellow away, and who knows if he'll ever come home. The Tsar doesn't know how many tears, how much grief, how much anxiety my son has cost me. No, the Tsar doesn't know that. And he doesn't need to know. Why would he need to?"

After Demko's departure, more work fell on Maksym's shoulders, and he absolutely refused "to serve" his father.

"So, you miserable wretch, you think you're serving me? Do you think I'm doing all this just for myself? You lazy fool!"

They had a big fight, and Maksym left in a huff. He took off in search of an easier life. He went to the city and got a job as a lackey at a lords' club.

Korniy had to hire a young man to help him with his work.

It was a quiet and peaceful time.

Hnat was in the monastery intoning plaintive chants, reading "the daily prayers."

Maria continued going to church and, as always, she stood to one side and prayed for the health of her son. Occasionally she saw Hnat, and Hnat saw Maria, but they did not meet, nor did they talk. What was there to talk about? The old times were slowly being forgotten, and it wasn't worth getting into what was happening now. Everything was quiet, and let it stay that way. Fate was sleeping, it was disinterested. Whether it was a good fate or a bad one—it was all the same. Do not shout, do not awaken fate, tiptoe around it.

The village was silent, the village was working quietly, the village was waiting . . . In the bell tower flocks of doves were cooing. The bright sun was shining, and sparrows were chirping. In the evening, when the sun set and twilight approached, the sound of a gentle bell trickled and flowed over the village. A large moon rose in the sky, the dense shadows of chestnut trees, apple trees, and hazelnut trees spread over the ground . . .

In front of Hnat's cell with its grated windows bloomed a large rose bush. It cast a large shadow, and a pleasant fragrance wafted from it. A small gas lamp was lit and Hnat, all hunched over, was reading in the lamplight . . .

The moon was shining . . .

VIII

In the fields the firm, compact ears of golden wheat and silver rye were swaying. Yesterday we were still reaping. Yesterday we worked until we were exhausted, returned home, and rested peacefully.

Today the girls are coming home from the fields. On their heads they're wearing harvest wreaths. The fields are covered with long rows of stacks of sheaves. Joyful birds are flying about and calling loudly.

It was on this day that there was a great darkening of the sun. The sun did not want to shine and it grew dark; people looked on in amazement, and old bearded men predicted that there would be a great uprising and human blood would be flowing everywhere, throughout the whole wide world.

It was the unforgettable year of 1914. Trumpets sounded, bells rang out. Horses neighed. Mothers and fiancées wept.

Mothers! Why are you weeping, mothers? Are you feeling sorry for your sons? Don't cry. There are millions of sons in Russia!

Wives! Are you saying you can't get along without your husbands? That they'll perish? Don't worry . . . Russia will give you other husbands!

Girls! Wipe the tears from your eyes that are passionate with love, and laugh. Your sweethearts have gone off to a duel and will come home as heroes!

They keep on leaving and leaving, multitudes of sons, husbands, and sweethearts. They are accompanied by fathers, mothers with children, and girls.

Stacks of sheaves are lined up in a parade on the fields, but on the roadways horses are neighing and thousands of men's feet are raising clouds of dust.

Entire military camps and batteries go by.

Kozaky are whistling as they go. Farewell mothers, rye fields, stacks of sheaves, and girls!

> The German Tsar is writing, writing.
> He's writing to the Russian Tsar . . .
> All of Russia I will conquer,
> And I'll come to Russia to live!

Songs are rushing up into the sky, men's feet are trampling the dusty roads, horses are neighing and bayonets are sparkling in the sun. Ponderous batteries are set in motion and crawl along glumly, pressured to go forward by six elephantine-hooved horses.

In the sunlight at the foothills beyond the village stand mothers, fathers, and maidens. Cupping their hands over their eyes, they stare tensely over the stubble and the stacks of sheaves to where the peasant regiments and batteries are singing and moving off in waves.

Requiems are being served in churches. There is the smoke of censers and sorrowful singing.

A deacon, attired in black, raises his right hand and announces in a loud voice: "Let us pray once again for Dionid, the Christ-loving soldier killed on the field of battle who has given his life for his faith, for his Tsar, and for his fatherland, and grant this servant of Yours, O Lord, memory eternal!"

"Me-e-e-emory eternal . . . Me-e-e-emory eternal . . ." the singing pours out under the high vault of the church.

The people kneel down. To the left, near the columns, Maria has fallen to her knees on the stone tiles before a large icon. Her wails, shrill and wavering, move other mothers of Christ-loving soldiers. The singing of "memory eternal" muffles the sound of the maternal weeping.

Little clouds of smoke from the censers drift slowly upwards, reach the vaults of the domes, and disperse.

On the right side of the choir loft a scrawny old monk in a long black robe is hurriedly whispering a prayer. He does not see the weeping Maria. No, he does not see her, but he knows for

whom they are praying today, and he also knows that Maria is here, and that Maria is weeping.

Why does the monk not go up to her and say: "Maria! Get up! Recall that great Maria who stood under the cross of her crucified Son and awaited his death . . ."

Why doesn't the monk remind Maria about these words? After all, he remembers them. He has not forgotten them.

The monk cannot go up to Maria, he cannot speak words of comfort to her. Korniy is also standing right over there. He is no longer the man that he was back then. No, he is not. Now he is a stout man with grey hair. His large, weary eyes are filled with sorrow. There are many deep furrows on his forehead. Hard work and the passing years have carved them.

Someone came back from the German front lines and related that he himself had seen how the Germans had captured a Russian battery near Warsaw and how a tall German in a pointed cap had stabbed Demko with a bayonet.

After hearing that, Maria could no longer remain alone in the dark. The picture of the German stabbing Demko with a bayonet kept rising before her.

One time she went into the root cellar for some cabbage. It hadn't turned dark outside yet, but in the cellar it was almost like twilight. And, after Maria had gone down the steps, Korniy heard a loud, shrill scream from the cellar. He ran there and found Maria unconscious on the ground. Roaring like a wild animal, he flung himself towards her, grabbed her in his arms, and carried her out of the cellar.

They used cold water and rubbed Maria's temples to help her regain consciousness.

"Maria! O dear God, Maria! What happened to you?"

Maria looked at the people gathered all around her. She stared, recalled something and began to cry. It was only later when she could talk again, that she was able to tell them what had happened.

"I walked into the cellar, you know, without thinking anything of it. A few apples had rotted down there, and I thought—I'll pick

the apples over and get rid of the rotten ones. I took a step forward, you see, and in that smaller root cellar Demko flashed before my eyes. He was pale, terrified. A huge German caught up to him and stabbed him . . . Oh God, dear God! I can't talk about it. I can't, my good people. I don't have the strength . . . I screamed and collapsed . . ."

Many dark days went by, days that turned into weeks. And then one day Korniy received a postcard.

He read it.

"Maria! Maria! Demko is alive!"

Maria came running. "Where? Korniy! Where is he?" Maria was trembling as she grabbed the card from Korniy.

"Where, Korniy? Here? Is it written here? O eyes! Of what use are you to me if you can't even make out what is written here! Read it!"

"Dear father and mother. I am alive, healthy, I bow down low before you to the very ground and I kiss your bright eyes, your sweet lips, and white hands. I am in German captivity. If you can, send me some rye biscuits."

"Oh, my son! Rye biscuits! Oh, dear God, O God! Who has ever seen, who has ever heard of such hard times. Rye biscuits. But would I ever begrudge you wheaten ones, or anything else that you might want. Why, I would take you on a wagon to the ends of the world. Oh, my dear people! Do you hear how our sons are suffering?"

Maria wept. Korniy wiped his "glistening eyes." The neighbours felt sick at heart. How bad things must be if people over there don't have even rye biscuits. How hard that must be!

"And we've already had a requiem for him, wept for him as for a deceased person."

"God forbid that he should die of hunger somewhere way over there. It would be better to die from a bullet, than from hunger . . ."

"Oh, that's true. The most terrible death of all is dying from hunger. God forbid that even an enemy should die a death like that . . ."

A short while later Maria baked some dry biscuits with oil, packed them in a little box, put in some sausage, and took the package to the post office.

The box was weighed there, and she was told that only a third of what she had packed would be allowed to be sent, and that all the sausage had to be taken out.

"But my good people! It's for my son."

"We know. But that doesn't mean anything. It can't be done."

"But I can send a full wagonload to him. Praise God, we have enough, but he's hungry. We have as much as we want. We've never run out of bread as long as the world has existed, but there's hunger over there. You know that there's hunger over there . . . People don't have anything to eat. My son is sitting and waiting, sitting there and expecting all the while that we'll send him something, that we'll help him, but you won't let us send it, you don't want to let me help my son . . ."

The postal worker simply could not make Maria understand why she could not send as much bread to her son as she wanted to. It was wartime. Two countries were at war. It was not permitted to send bread over there. We do not dare to support them . . .

"But it's our sons who are there . . ." Maria insisted.

A whittled down little box was sent. A few days later Maria sent another parcel. A postcard arrived, and there was nothing in it about him receiving those parcels. In it was repeated again: "Send me some rye biscuits."

Maria wrung her hands in despair. She had sent them. Where were her parcels? Where were they disappearing? Maria kept sending parcels. She sent them and awaited a reply. She waited stubbornly, for a long time. Every day she watched for the postman, went to the village head, to the district chief. There was no reply.

A huge war was being waged. More and more recruits were taken away. Young boys went, old fathers. Maria's middle son went as a volunteer and busied himself somewhere in a military camp. He came home on leave. But there was no word from Demko.

Silence and sorrow reigned in the village. The singing died down, no one was getting married, baptisms were a rare event. It was only occasionally that someone died, but requiems for the dead were being served every day. They were not dying at home. They were dying somewhere far away, and that is where they were buried. And when that happened there was no one to comfort them and no one to weep for them.

IX

Slowly, imperceptably, the year of 1917 was sneaking up.

The winter was unpredictable. Blizzards, thaws. The snow melted, flooded ravines, meadows. Then the frost struck—and everything froze once again.

The wounded and the twice-wounded sat in the trenches. Young lads in bast shoes were in the trenches. They attacked while calling on mama for help.

The villages were subjected to more and more new demands. Cripples returned, related what had happened, cursed, tore the medals of bravery from their chests and trampled them underfoot. The quiet, longsuffering people bristled, grew increasingly angry, spread their claws. In the quiescent, forgotten villages a ferocious beast was stirring.

March.

The church bells were ringing. Why were the church bells ringing? The older men put on their military greatcoats—who in those days did not have such a greatcoat—and hastened to the church.

The priest stepped up to the pulpit and announced: "Brothers and sisters! Our All-Russian Tsar-Emperor, Mykola II, has renounced his throne. From now on our country will be called a republic!"

The people rustled like a forest in a storm. A wounded non-commissioned officer appeared by the church. A white bandage

around his neck supported his arm, on his forehead there was a large fresh red scar.

He hoisted himelf up on the church fence and from his lips burst out, for the first time ever: "Comrades!"

The people shuddered. This word had never been heard before. No one said things like that.

"Our Tsar, the All-Russian Emperor, did not renounce his throne. He was removed from it. We were ruled by all sorts of bourgeois and capitalists. We spilled our blood for three years on the front lines. Down with the war! Down with the bourgeois! Down with the landowners! All the land—the land for which our brothers have been spilling their blood for three years, laying down their heads on all the front lines, and coming home crippled for life—that land belongs to us! Do you hear? To us, to the farmers, to those who work on it!"

"That's right!" the people shouted. They shouted with conviction from the depths of their beings . . .

"New times are upon us. It's the beginning of freedom . . ."

"That's right!" the people shouted. "Freedom! Let's have freedom!"

They ran to the bell tower, rang the bells, shouted: "Long live the revolution!"

Priests preached freedom-loving sermons, cast anathemas on the bloodsucking tsars. Monks became revolutionaries. Who, upon hearing the words that the land for which blood had been spilled for three years was to belong to the people who worked on it, did not hear a great, unswerving, truth? To whose hearts did the words—away with the bloody war—not speak? Give us peace! We desire peace!

To everyone. There was no counterrevolution. Everyone was for the revolution. Under villagers' thatched roofs all talk revolved around the land. The land, the land, the land. Give us the land! The one who gives the land to the peasants will gain the soul of the nation! Land was needed, there was too little land, can the people be without land? For what then, are we fighting? For what? What

is the purpose of life, of that entire empire that has land without end, if a farmer is squeezed onto a small patch of land on which there isn't even enough room to build a decent building?

Revolution!

On with the revolution! La-a-and! La-a-a-and!

And a revolution unlike any other came to be. The summer passed by, the autumn. Winter was approaching. The sun of freedom was blazing brilliantly over the entire empire. Of what use was the front line? How long will the front last? Winter and the front. Enough!

And the front advanced. It advanced rapidly, like ice on a huge river in the spring. Millions of drawn, incensed people, their faces grimy with the mire of the trenches, rushed to join the underground and engaged in frenzied combat throughout the shattered empire.

In the village there was a camp of "the third rank." The calm, bearded rear-echelon soldiers were brewing tea, cooking gruel, swearing at one another, and obediently carrying out their duties. The sun of freedom flashed. The bearded soldiers rose up, stood at the ready, ripped off their stripes, tore the badges from their gray, rumpled peaked caps.

A hundred wagons, two hundred select Kirghizian horses. Horse harnesses, supplies. Down with the war! Let's go home. They abandoned wagons, horses. They elected a committee and began to plunder the village. Hey, bearded old soldiers! Hey you, what are you doing?

New Year's Day. The church is packed with people. At the very front of the monastery church two sailors are smoking cigarettes during the divine service. They are smoking and snickering. After all, there's freedom! When, if not now, could a man play such a trick?

The people look at them and feel sick at heart. They are gripped with fear. Why doesn't the earth swallow these terrible sinners, these blasphemers? Why doesn't fire swoop down from the heavens and devour them? No, fire will not swoop down and it will not devour them.

In the choir loft they are singing "all those who were christened in Christ," and Korniy Pereputka steps out bravely and confidently from the crowd and comes to a stop beside the sailors.

"Please, comrades, leave the church . . ."

"And just who are you?" one of the sailors asks in Russian.

"Oh, you son-of-a-bitch, who am I? Take this!"

And the sailor tumbled to the floor with a bloodied mug. His friend pulled out a revolver. Ba-a-ang! A shot rang out. The bullet whistled upwards and pierced a winged cherub in the vaulted dome of the church. A hubbub arose, shouting, but the Divine Liturgy continued.

The people, taking turns at kicking the sailors, shoved them out of the church. And outside, armed, bearded rear-echelon soldiers were tearing around, breaking down the doors to the monastery cellars, rolling out barrels of dried plums, and carrying away flour and anything else that they could find in the storerooms.

People began pouring out of the church. They were terrified by the spectacle unfolding outside, but at the same time they felt outraged.

How could this be! Who dared to rob them of what belonged to them? Hey, front-line soldiers! Where are you?

We're here! Here we are. The front-line soldiers rushed to the storerooms, to the cellars. An older man in a military greatcoat was struggling to position a sack of flour on his back. He picked it up, shouted, the sack came undone and flour spilled over the man's head, his eyes. He dropped everything and swore.

In the valley a conflagration was burning out of control. In the morning mists of the holy day the monastery threshing barn, packed with grain waiting to be threshed, had been set ablaze. People surrounded the fire, watched it burn. They even took some joy in it.

Fire, smoke. Hand grenades were bursting all around; the old rear-echelon soldiers were shooting. It's a festive day. It's a new year, the first revolutionary year. They were celebrating the holiday of the revolution. Why wouldn't they be rejoicing?

How could one not be happy? Even this was too little. More was needed. The front-line soldiers sang:

> We'll shake the old world to its very foundations,
> And then we'll build our own world, a new world,
> And those who were nobodies, will now be on top . . .

That's how it should be. This was still too little. Let's have more! Let's burn everything that calls to mind peace, well-being. Revolution!

The rear-echelon soldiers were walking through the village, seizing plum liqueurs, cherry brandies, getting drunk, shooting at one another.

And beyond the village, the finest Kirghizian horses, reduced to living skeletons, roamed about on endless snowy fields. No one was interested in them now. Everyone had forgotten about them. There was no war now. This was a revolution. Horses were not needed. O placid, patient creatures that bear the scars of battle, you are superfluous now. You have trekked through the Carpathian Mountains, you got us through the swamps of Poland. You kept on going and going—in the rain, in nasty weather, in blizzards. You did not grumble, you did not complain, you did not rise up in revolt . . .

And in return, O dear, mild creatures, you have now been cast out of the village into the open fields. You are not allowed to even draw near the village. You walk over the snowdrifts, search for dry blades of grass, gnaw at trees if you can find any. You are hungry, and every day draws you nearer to the terrible, inglorious end.

There's the village, and in it you can see stacks of hay, of straw. You pause in the blizzard amid the snow, stretch your long necks, and painfully beg humans for food. Your voices cut through the frigid air, but they do not reach human ears. And then you slowly approach the village, thinking that if they did not hear you, neither will they notice you. You think that you will find at least a small blade of straw, superfluous straw that has been thrown out with the manure, and that you will relish eating it. Oh no,

horses. You are mistaken. You do not manage to even draw near human habitations, when the people, infuriated by your intrusive search for food, take notice of you. They rush out with sticks and, without a shred of sympathy, rain blows on your protruding ribs. You find it very painful.

You are keenly aware of the horrible injustice and you think: "O people! How cruel and how unwise you are! You are chasing us away to certain death. And who but you is to blame that we must die out here on your fields?"

And the horses—brown, bay (mostly bay)—disperse in all directions, craning their necks, trembling in the cold. There's a prime example of a Kirghizian trotter over there. Formerly a bearded *Tambovets looked after him, fed him oats, gave him hay that he stole from peaceable women. Gently called him Vaska and curried him with a currycomb and a brush.

Now the Tambovets is no longer here. He abandoned everything, for he heard the call of the revolution. And now the horse wanders over the field. For three days it has not succeeded in obtaining anything for its undiscriminating stomach, and on the third night, in the midst of the frost and a blizzard, one leg got stuck in a snowdrift and it struggled to free it for such a long time that it became exhausted, collapsed and, after thawing the snow right to the ground with its remaining warmth, did not get up again.

By morning, the snow had drifted over and buried Vaska. All that was left was a rather insignificant mound of snow. One mound, a second one, many such mounds. It is the unknown heroes of the Great War that are lying there in their eternal sleep.

And when the nights are frosty and clear, when the huge, swollen moon shines down sternly, when the vapours of the hardworking, restless Earth swirl and settle nervously on the trees, when the orchard turns into a coral copse and stands immobile, enchanted, flooded by the coppery gaze of the sky, then Korniy's aging dog Sirko crawls slowly out of his kennel and, trailing his long shadow after himself as he breaks his way through the

untouched snow with his soft paws, comes to the edge of the coral grove and, pointing his snout at the moon, lets loose a cacophony of prolonged, piercing howls.

From down below, where rocks were once crushed, smoke billows forth in boulder-like clumps and disperses over the snow. From time to time a frenzied blazing flame spurts into the sky and then vanishes once again. A scarcely noticeable wave of homebrew vapour spreads over the ground.

Seated on large stone slabs, some older men wearing rumpled Caucasian fur caps dusted with hoarfrost are awaiting the first extraction. In front of them a bulging still is boiling and shaking. In its cooling coils the harbinger of the men's dreams is bubbling and steaming.

Their foreheads strain forward, their eyes are fixed intently on a single point, their nostrils twitch nervously. A fiery glow spurts from the oven, strikes the iron noses, the powerful, well-worn jawbones, and the unmoving leaden eyes. The old men are waiting expectantly for the first run. They are the shock troopers of the revolution. The first of the last soldiers who were not crushed at the front, who grew tough, became hardened, and melded into a cataclysm of volcanic outbursts of anger, indignation, and unheard-of loathsomeness.

Field jackets, boots, and riding breeches. With a clattering sound the terrible Russian peasant is shaking up the planet like the Krakatoa volcano. The Ukrainian land resounds with the stamping of revolutionary hordes. Trains travel far off into the distance on their steel roads. Beyond the horizon red streaks of conflagrations flare up and the thundering of vicious cannonades rumbles incessantly.

Maria's son Demko died. She kept waiting expectantly for him, watching for him. Her old eyes burned feverishly and shed copious tears. It was all in vain.

Maksym, however, did come home. Surrounded by eyes like grenades and outbursts fired from between white teeth like machine guns, the young peasant was donning a Bolshevik

skin. He sprang forth from the pounding of military boots, from the fumes of front-line meetings and, with his forehead jutting forward, thrust himself into the wild, frenzied maelstrom.

He was dressed in a field jacket and riding breeches. His brick-red face was covered with rugged bristles. Under his nose there was a prickly splotch of reddish whiskers. In his pocket—a six-shooter revolver.

And what did he care about God Sabaoth and the entire heavenly chancery? He raised his revolver, fired a shot, and an ornate Kyivan icon was shattered into smithereens.

Maria froze and could not utter a word.

"What's the matter, mother?" he asked in Russian. "Why are you staring like that? I've shot your idol," and he added a loathsome curse.

Maria did not know what to say. She went into the darkened porch and wept there. It seemed to her that Maksym had shot her, not the icon. Oh, what terrifying eyes he had! "O child, my child! What terrifying eyes you have. They're red, but your father's eyes remained blue."

Korniy was not at home. Maria gathered up the splinters from the icon, patched the hole in the wall, and hastily covered it with another icon.

"He must not find out what happened. It will be better if he doesn't know."

And Korniy did not find out.

"But all the same, it will not end with this. God will not come to punish him with a cudgel," Maria thought.

And from that day on, she was filled with fear. From that day on she knelt more often before the icons, prayed more fervently. She walked around fearfully, on tiptoe. Her voice grew softer and her eyes concealed an anxiety.

It was 1919.

Shaggy chestnut trees, rustling fir trees submitted to axes. The skeletal remains of ravaged manor houses were slowly burning out.

"Hey, Sydir! Where are you dragging the •'kartoplyan'?"

"Whoa! What did you say?" And Sydir pushes his cap off his forehead to the back of his head. He feels sweaty under it.

"Where, I asked, are you lugging that thing?"

"May the devil take it, but it was a hard one to load! What a time I had! I'm taking it home . . . It has spent enough time with the bourgeois. Let it spend some time at my place . . . Giddy-up, my bay one!"

X

Korniy set about rebuilding his damaged farm with a firm, experienced hand. He distilled several boilers of homebrew, but more as mash for his cattle than for himself. Spring was drawing near. The fields were tugging at him once again.

Maksym had not remained at home. He had quarrelled with Maria and Korniy, called them counterrevolutionaries and taken off. Lavrin was still going to school and in the evenings he read •Kashchenko's stories out loud.

Korniy listened and wiped away a tear. "It's written so mournfully, that O Lord . . . Oh, if only there were kozaky now."

Nadiya had been of marriageable age for some time. And the renowned sailor Arkhyp Pankiv, an only son, came home from the armed forces. He spotted Nadiya and started dropping by.

He was not an ordinary young bachelor. He had seen the world, •Kronshtadt, the •Aurora, and had even heard •Lenin speak. The latter avowal was somewhat dubious, of course, because he had come home before the •October Revolution, but who was going to argue with him about something like that.

Spring was approaching.

"Oh, if only some solid authority would come into power," Korniy observed. "It's time to do the sowing, but every day they keep calling meeting after meeting . . . They're dreaming up some kind of Ukraine . . ."

"But father!" Lavrin cried. "We're kozaky! Moscow ruined our •Sich. Ukraine will bring back the •Kozak State . . ."

"It's time to do the sowing, my boy . . . Let the kozaky be kozaky, but the fields won't wait. And I don't want to separate from Russia. That would mean that Siberia would no longer be ours. You just might want to travel someplace, but you'd come up against a border. No, my son . . . I don't want anything like that."

"Siberia! Siberia! What the devil do we need that Siberia for!"

"The land is good there, and there's a lot of it . . ."

"It's penal servitude that's good there, not the land! It may well be that the •moskali will chase us there one day, just as they chased the kozaky back in the olden days . . ."

"All that is stuff and nonsense," Arkhyp declared in Russian. "A new power is arising, a power comprised of workers and peasants. There won't be any moskali, and there won't be any kozaky. The people will all be equal, they'll all be brothers. Where has this Ukraine come from? I served for five years with the fleet, ate with comrades from one cauldron, called them my brothers, and now we're to split up."

"The moskal was never our brother," Lavrin argued. "They destroyed our kozak state, the Muscovite Prince Andriy •Bogolubsky and a thousand . . ."

"Nonsense! There are no princes now. Everyone is equal."

"Well, when it comes to everyone being equal," Korniy interjected, "you'll have to forgive me, Arkhyp . . . but that's not the way things are . . . Because, if that were the case, then any old swineherd could be the equal of a general or someone like that . . . That's absurd . . . In my opinion, we've had enough of that revolution. We have to get down to business. If only a strong, stable government was set up, because the devil only knows what we have now. Every day there are new declarations and more new declarations, but there's no real authority. Go ahead and do whatever you want to . . .

"They've set up some kind of •Central Rada but all they do is talk. Where's the authority? Where, I ask you, is the authority?

That's what is most important. If they want to give the land to the peasants, well, that's the right thing to do. I'm not arguing against that. The peasants need land, and that's why they don't belong to any party—they're just farmers. But other than that, just shut up, and that's the end of it."

And finally "a strong authority" was established. A *hetman came into power.

The peasants were all summoned to the district office and "required" to return everything that they had taken from the lords. But how was all that to be returned now?

Could a Hapka or a Priska return the down-filled quilts that they had long ago ripped apart to make pillows out of them for their daughters' dowries?

Could Sydir return the "kartoplyan" if it had long since ceased to exist in this world? It had stood in his shop for a long time, getting in his way, until one day he finally exploded.

"And why, in the name of the devil's father, did I lug this piece of trash here! It's too bad that no one took a stick to me to stop me!"

He grabbed an axe—crash, smash! And the "kartoplyan" was reduced to splinters. And now he was supposed to return it . . .

"It's understandable . . . It was wrong when it was said that everything that's yours is mine. Everything was taken away, destroyed, and now it's gone. But can a person know everything? Why then, did they give us freedom? That's freedom for you! They gave it, and now, peasant, you have to answer for it! That's not fair. Down with it!"

Through bushes, ravines, with sawed-off rifles, Colt pistols, and rusty Maxim machine guns, the shadows of insurgents slowly inch along, keeping close to the ground, listening attentively.

Night. Silence.

The train station is over there. One can see—the train has arrived, the whistle blows and the fires are crackling.

"Which son-of-a-bitch is smoking back there?" the leader hisses. "Not a sound!"

The black shadows fall to the ground, become absolutely still. The station can be seen as if it were on the palm of one's hand. The train is manoeuvering on the rails.

Under large lanterns a black figure in a helmet and with a bayonet at the ready is slowly pacing back and forth.

An insurgent's sawed-off rifle takes aim at it. It is a dark night, but a lantern is shining. Careful now!

Bang! The darkness flashes and roars.

The dark figure wearing a helmet doubles over like a pocket knife and tumbles to the ground.

The insurgents break into a run.

From behind the steel bulwark, a Colt cracks, rifles bark, a few grenades explode.

> We aren't looking for paragraphs,
> We're creating our own law . . .

Those over there begin rushing around, pouring out of the trains and dispersing in the darkness. In the morning they are left scattered on the uneven cobblestone road like trampled hempen sacks. Their steel helmets press against the paving stones and cover their eyes.

Ivan Kazmirets carefully pats down a corpse, searches for a watch, and curses vilely that the damn villain doesn't have one. Someone has already run off with it.

"Ivan!" his comrade Sereda Khot calls out to him. "Turn him over. He has another pocket on his butt . . ."

Ivan turns the corpse over. It's no use. There is a notebook there and a few photographs. He scatters them, spits, and lets loose another string of curses.

The stable authority ended, and once again an unstable one took over.

Announcements appeared on walls, screaming: "People of Ukraine, all power lies in your hands. Fulfill your holy obligation; join the ranks of the national army."

Ukrainian people were gathering under the poster.

"Yet another announcement, a lot of gibberish and more gibberish. Go ahead and read it, Petro . . . The damned bourgeois are once again pretending that they're peasants."

Petro slowly reads it out loud, and Ukrainians convulse with laughter after every word. "What fool is going to go to fulfill his obligation, may he go fly a kite. When the Tsar wanted to take you, he didn't ask, he just took you."

"And even then they didn't go," another peasant added.

"He blew smoke into his eyes, but he didn't go, ha-ha-ha!"

"They say they've come up with some kind of landowner called •Petlyura. He has twenty-five thousand desyatyny in Poltava . . . It's clear what he wants out of it . . ."

"And who do you think •Hrushevsky is? A capitalist. He has a soap manufacturing factory in Kyiv. I worked there myself."

"Of course, he's a devilish bourgeois. He stayed at home, grew a fat belly, while you shed your blood on the front line, and now you're supposed to begin doing that all over again. Oh, they're all the same. You won't fool me this time."

The village Hnyloryby wanted to fulfill its obligation, issued an order, and drove off with its heroes to the ranks of the national army. It was forty versts to the district centre.

They arrived.

"Where are they accepting people into the army? We're voluntcering for the Ukrainian army. Where is the office?"

They were shown to it.

Young buffoons in riding breeches and with cigarettes stuck in their teeth were rushing about there.

"Comrade peasants! As of yet, our administration doesn't have any weapons, so we can't accept you. Go back home . . ."

"Well, that's authority for you! When there was a real authority one could say that there was one. But spit on this! It's no authority. Some authority this is . . .

"What do they think we are? Dogs? They're making fools of us? Do they think we don't have any work at home? If only, may he be stabbed in the ribs, he had looked at us, and given us a

document of some kind. . . At least I would have known that I had been at the commission . . ."

A sailor whom they didn't know appeared among them, and a meeting was called. He rose to speak.

"Comrades! Why have you come here? Go back home, grab any kind of weapon, and go after all kinds of authorities. Landowners, capitalists. From the north a true government is drawing near, one that has a great slogan on its red flags—freedom and boundless land. Your own •soviets, ones that you yourselves will elect, will rule over you. There won't be any Petlyuras or Hrushevskys. Our leaders, Comrade Lenin and Comrade •Trotsky, are fighters for the proletariat. They are the bearers of a great idea—•Marxism. That means that all the power belongs to the working class—the workers and the peasants. All the landowners' lands, all the factories and plants. All the earthly and heavenly wealth—everything belongs to you, you're supposed to get it. The •Soviet power will give you all of that.

"And when Marxism is established, when the Soviet power is firmly in place and kicks all the bourgeois riff-raff out of our Russia, only then will the genuine paradise of workers and peasants come about. It is only when neither Petlyura, nor hetmans, nor Hrushevsky are the rulers, that you the peasants will become rulers yourselves. Then there will not be any authorities except for your own authority, and you'll do everything that you want to do. Long live the rule of workers and peasants! Long live Marxism and its great bearer Comrade Lenin!"

He finished.

"The son-of-a-bitch talks a good talk," the peasants buzzed. "But then, maybe it's true. Who can know for sure?"

The peasants returned to their village as •Bolsheviks.

And where was the Ukrainian authority?

What had the buffoons in riding breeches and with cigarettes stuck in their teeth been doing at that time? They had stood there, they had observed the meeting, but they had been too afraid to disturb the democratic principles of the new authority . . .

XI

Arkhyp Pankiw dropped in to Korniy's home quite often. And all the while he was also making homebrew. It was obvious where all this was heading.

Lavrin had intense debates with Arkhyp about the Kozak State and about Soviet power. They both were equally firm in their beliefs, and they were diametrically opposed.

Korniy did not take either side. He cared only about the land, and all the rest was of no interest to him. It was all the same to him: let the devil himself be in charge as long as the government was in order and it was possible to do one's work.

Lavrin was demanding the absolute independence of Ukraine. He read about the kozaky and was utterly convinced that as soon as Ukraine was free, he would at once become a kozak.

At long last, Arkhyp proposed to Nadiya. At first he wanted to get married without a priest, but Maria would not hear of it.

"It makes no difference," Arkhyp waved his hand dismissively. "If there has to to be a priest, then let there be a priest . . ."

And so they got married in church. There was enough homebrew, and the wedding was a great success.

At that time, cannons were already rumbling in the east. The older men were whispering that a "genuine" Soviet power was approaching.

Maksym appeared out of nowhere at the wedding, helped himself liberally to the liquor, and began running off at the mouth.

He started by saying that "religion was the opium of the people," and then he moved on to the topic of marriage.

"Socialism is bringing us a new life. A woman will no longer be a husband's slave. She'll sleep with whomever she wants to. It won't be necessary to get married. That's all just superstition dreamed up by priests . . . All sorts of love and things like that do not exist. There is only the satisfaction of sexual needs . . ."

"What's this nonsense he's going on about?" one grandad whispered to another.

"The devil only knows. He's drunk and he's babbling. He's learned how to do it . . ."

And Maksym kept firing away. From sexual needs he moved on to farming.

"Marxism will make it possible for people to work less and to have more. Instead of a horse and an ox, a tractor will come along and it will plough the field, pull a threshing machine, produce electricity . . ."

"It will chew it up and put it right into your mouth," a peasant interrupted him.

Everyone roared with laughter. Maksym stopped speaking momentarily and glared angrily at the old man.

The latter, flushed and jovial, abruptly rose to his feet and began spouting off: "All that, Maksym, is of no consequence . . . All that is just a lord's fabrication. We have a saying: as you make your bed, so will you lie in it. As you sow, so shall you reap. The land, young man, is such that if you don't work on it, and if you don't love it, no tractor is going to help you. On the land a man is the best tractor. Yes. You should know that's how it is. We know what kind of a farmer you were, and we know how much you understand about that kind of thing. You wandered about, loafed around, and now you've come to teach us.

"And as for a woman, if you wish you can put her beside anyone you want to, but I'd sooner die than have anything to do with such a—excuse me for saying this—such a whore. As for this socialism of yours, or whatever you call it, you'd do better to call it laziness and debauchery. That would be better . . ."

"That's right! That's true!" the elders buzzed. "To give birth and gobble food, why—excuse the language—even a sow can do that. It's all the same to it. There's no marriage ceremony, no birth celebrations, no death rites. The sow drops dead, and we bury it in the ground. But let me say this. Regardless of anything else, a man is a man. He was created in the image of God."

"But do you suppose that they still know God?" a third old man cried out. "For them, everything is nature. But who, may his mother drop dead, created nature?"

"That's right. And if my son said anything like that, Korniy, I'd throw him out the door at once. Only a fool can come out with things like that. A decent and wise person wouldn't say anything like that . . . He's a snotty brat. A fool! And I no longer want to be at this wedding . . ."

The man raised such a ruckus that all the guests became upset, the musicians stopped playing, the girls fell silent.

"O Holy Lord, whom does he take after?" Maria wailed despairingly. "It's always been like that. I've tried so hard to change him, I've wept so much because of him. Nothing helps. It happens that a monster like that is born . . ."

Korniy could no longer control himself; he went up to Maksym. "Listen, you smarty-pants! If you don't leave at once and go to the devil's mother, I'll call on the people to throw you out the door. Get out of my house! Just look at what a snotty brat we have here! He thinks he's going to teach us!"

Maksym flushed and began shouting, but seeing that the crowd had no sympathy for him, he spat, cursed vilely, and stalked out of the house. The wedding continued, but the old men muttered for a long time about the matters that had been raised.

The germ of disintegration fell upon fertile soil. The beginning of the end was approaching.

Maria's days were numbered.

The sun still rose and set as it always did. But there were signs in the east that pointed to the end that was drawing near. The cruel spirit of ruination was approaching, walking steadily, and conquering everything, and there was no stopping it, because Korniy and Maria, and hundreds, thousands of Korniys and Marias did not know, nor could they know, that their annihilation, their end, was drawing near . . .

A Book about Bread

I

The pounding began in the evening. Cannons were being discharged somewhere around Noumalyn or Verkhiv. The reverberations resounded over the valleys and through the groves. A soft, warm, ash-coloured fog was spreading over the lowlands, and people were gathering by Kukharchuk's stile, smoking their •makhorka and talking.

"Oh, well! It will all work out one way or another . . . And it might even make things easier for us," they said as they looked down at the orchards and it seemed to them that they could see the air itself undergoing changes.

Someone rushed in from Noumalyn and said the •Petlyurivtsi were fleeing as if escaping from an evil pestilence because "those" were approaching, and the villages were emptying into the ravines and thickets because their wagons were being appropriated and who knew when they would be returned.

And that's how it continued all night long. At first the pounding was in the east, then it circled around towards Klopoty and Uhryn, and in the morning it fell warily silent. The village, however, was stirring, and the bailiff's assistants were running from house to house and shouting under windows: "Go to the meeting! To the meeting! Go to Shynkovets for the meeting!"

It was a brilliant morning. Fresh, vivid, sonorous. Swallows were calling fearfully and darting about obliquely, and roosters beyond Pankiw's apiary were crowing hoarsely. Everyone was thinking: it's the end of the battle. No. When the sun drew near to where it should be at breakfast time, the same thing started up again somewhere over there in the meadows.

"When they finish shooting, Maria, you'll take our son and go to turn over the clover on the Dovhy meadow. I mowed it yesterday, and I wouldn't want it to grow damp in the swaths. And I'll go to that meeting . . .

Korniy finished what he had to say and went off. He looked agitated—grim and perturbed. Nothing was going right.

Maria hastened to call out after him: "Just don't stay there until it turns dark."

At noon the cannonade finally fell silent. Maria took a pitchfork, called Lavrin, and off they went. On the road that cut through Popov's fields, a military camp was on the move. Clouds of dust were rising on all sides, and neither the beginning nor the end of the travelling camp could be seen; a few horseback riders were trotting briskly alongside it. The men were unshaven, their unbuttoned shirts were grimy like the earth, their ashen chests were thrust forward, the sound of an accordion was fading away in the fresh morning air, and a hoarse voice was singing:

> Alas, Ukraine, your lands are fertile,
> But you gave your grain to the Germans,
> Leaving yourself hungry . . .

Maria and Lavrin went about their work. During these past years, there had been so many who had walked by and driven by that you could neither count them all, nor listen to them all. There had been so much shouting, so much singing. Maria and Lavrin continued turning over the swaths.

"Hey there, granny! How much for the clover? Hey, fellows! Clo-o-over!"

Shouts arose from the camp. From the wagons, from the dust, a few men emerged as from a grey cloud. Now they were swearing vilely, rushing about, and the clover was being dragged like long tails into the cloud, leaving tangles on the road . . .

More and more figures kept appearing, the swaths were disappearing, and the end of the travelling camp was not yet in sight when Maria and Lavrin had nothing left to do.

"O Lord! What's going on? Where have these people come from?" Maria cried out heartrendingly.

"Shut up, granny!" they shouted in Russian. "Lenin will pay you for everything! He's given you all the land, but you're still shouting! You're sorry to part with a crust of bread!"

"But after all, you're not *Tartars!"

"Ha-ha-ha! It's wartime!"

"But, my good people, against whom are you waging war?"

The travelling camp passed by slowly and noisily, dragging itself towards the flaming red sun that was setting behind the foothills, hiding itself from human eyes.

Maria watched them pass by, wagon after wagon, horses grey with dust, smaller wagons with battered wheels, people, seemingly made out of the earth, and on their chests little scraps of red material that looked like wounds.

They were our people! No. They were not our people. She had not seen any like these before. And where had so many of them come from?

Maria and Lavrin went home down a path that cut through a flowering meadow.

In the evening twilight, Korniy came home. Maria had already been wondering . . . Where could he have disappeared to: had he been taken away, or what? He had not had anything to eat or drink all of God's livelong day.

"What were you doing there the whole day?"

Korniy just spat angrily in response. Maria understood, and she brought in a large bowl of sour milk with cream.

"So, what happened there?"

"Don't even ask."

"Well at least say something."

"Be quiet! It won't make it any easier. We have to give up our cow."

"But to whom?"

"To the devil himself!" Korniy shouted and he flung down his spoon filled with milk . . . But then he at once thought better of

it, bent down to pick up the spoon, and said: "The son-of-a-bitch talked for half the day, cornered us, and we all voted for it. Even I raised my hand . . ."

"Why didn't you defend yourself?"

"Defend yourself, defend yourself, defend yourself! You go there and defend yourself, if you're so smart!" Korniy yelled loudly, as if Maria had gone deaf.

"Well, we also don't have any clover," she blurted out unexpectedly.

"What do you mean, we don't have any?" Korniy lifted his head sternly in surprise, and he raised his spoon threateningly in his hand.

"There isn't any, and that's that!"

"How can that be, I'm asking you? It's all gone?"

"They took away half of it, and the other half they trampled into the ground . . ."

A short, threatening silence.

"That's some governing power!" he cried angrily, and he flung down his spoon. "No wonder that monster son of ours went over to them."

They stopped talking. A tense silence settled in the house.

Lavrin rose to his feet and, as he walked out, said: "But I said, didn't I, that Ukraine was better!"

"Shut up about that Ukraine! Some soldiers they were! They fought and fought, and then gave in to a band of ruffians. We need a tough regime, but all they do is send out announcements every day. You won't get far with announcements!"

But Lavrin was not there to hear these words.

In the evening the older men once again congregated by the stile.

"Well. . . It looks as if these won't be treating us with kid gloves," Kukharchuk said.

"But didn't I say that?" Trykhon flung out.

"Well . . . We all said a lot of things . . . Our wisdom is coming out the back door."

"We shouldn't have done away with the Tsar! When the Tsar was there—everything was fine, with the Tsar gone—it will all go up in smoke," Trykhon spoke his mind.

Everyone remained silent. The night was both unchanging and passing. In the soft darkness of the village dogs were barking, travelling camps kept moving to the west, and a long boulder-like cloud of dust rose up to the stars.

A few days later, the bailiff's assistants once again appeared under windows, and once again there was a meeting. This time it was horses, not cows that were demanded.

A few tried to protest, but the new Soviet power dealt expeditiously with them—"line them up against the wall and shoot them" and that was that. So it was better to give up your horses than yourself.

For Korniy this question was not yet resolved. He was prepared, if necessary, to take a stand, because horses do not grow like mushrooms after a rainfall.

"May God beat you down just as you're beating us," he muttered to himself, but only a lone sorrel horse was listening to him. "Stand still! Why are you pricking up your ears like that? You're going to go and cart around the devil that wants to finish strangling us to death. Don't blink, don't blink, you won't be blinking for very long. They'll remove everything from the face of the earth, they'll trample everything into the ground. Whoa!"

He gave up trying to comb out the horse's mane, and waved his hand resignedly. There was no one for whom to do it. As he led out the sorrel horse, he felt needles stabbing him in his sides, his chest felt as if it was stuffed with after-grass, his eyes were damp with tears. It was not his horse that he was leading away—he was dragging behind himself his own living and aching heart that he had plucked from his chest. Drops of perspiration were dripping from his forehead, as if he were lugging a heavy load.

The commission did not tarry long. They untied the sorrel horse, gave Korniy a scrap of paper, and yelled at him in Russian "to take off."

"May a thunderbolt strike you, you smart-alecks!" Korniy thought as he folded the damn piece of paper ten times over, clutched it in his rough hand, and dragged his feet as if they were hundred-pood weights. He feared appearing before his wife and his son, as if he had committed a terrible crime.

But it did not end with this. Every day brought something new. A requisition for "leftovers" and "surpluses" for the Red frontlines, and when it came down to "everything for the revolution," the men began howling like wolves. They fought back, flung themselves in front of bullets, ran around here and there, grabbed pitchforks, sharpened scythes at night.

"There was no one to teach the people," they said to one another. "We know, we know . . . There wasn't anyone. It's only now that you're so smart!"

"Because there truly wasn't anyone. Even an animal knows what should or should not be allowed, but our people are just ignorant masses, beat them, slaughter them—it's all the same to them! They wanted a revolution, you see; they were feeling their oats, you see; the Tsar, they said, wasn't letting them live; they didn't have enough varenyky and brandy, and they didn't have enough of a good time, may their mothers be struck dead!"

"And there's still more to come, my good people, when they start making everyone equal, trampling on them, cutting off the heads of the bigger ones and killing off the lesser ones. They'll drain your blood out of you like cheap whiskey, drop by drop, and then they'll say: 'We're all equal!'"

"We won't let that happen! We won't give in! Down with the commune!"

The men stood their ground. Heavily and firmly. They all grabbed whatever they could: a sawn-off gun, a sword, an axe. Village after village took a stand like a wild horse rearing up on its hind legs under an unwanted rider. Every bush and every ravine was turned into a fortress. Blood was no longer spared.

At times they went forward, and at times they retreated with a roar, like a wave that beats against a cliff on a shoreline. And,

as soon as the situation eased up a bit, they hurriedly seized the handles of their ploughs because the land must not stay idle.

The years of 1920-21—the years of salt and bread.

Crowds of barefoot people in ragged clothing pass through the villages with sacks on their backs. They shuffle along for hundreds of kilometres on their rough blistered feet to get a pood of salt . . . They go all the way to Pochayiv, to the border, because for some reason there is no salt, the salt has suddenly vanished. And from the north, on trains fuelled with wood, come others with bags who travel day and night in search of bread.

"You fiendish •katsa-a-apy! You've befouled all of Russia, and now you're pushing your way into Ukraine."

They shake their grimy fists at them angrily, but the trains loaded down with bags continue coming. Without end.

To defend themselves, detachments are formed once again, blasting cartridges are placed under railway tracks, and the trains laden with bags are derailed. The bag carriers fly like firewood straight into the arms of the irregulars with sawn-off guns, and that is where brotherly embraces for "a common cauldron" begin, for the one and indivisible [Russia].

Bread. A cruel, incomprehensible word filled with life and death. Where has the bread disappeared?

And the trains keep coming, without ceasing, without end—come what may, blood is flowing, and the insurgents go through forests, and behind them come the communists, and behind them, more trains laden with bags. Wave after wave, for Russia is rich in people, but the expansive fields are covered in weeds from one end to the other, and there is no one left to rescue the soil.

The steppe grass rustles, weeds sway back and forth, crows screech as they fly obliquely over them, pursued by the wind and a feeling of terror. A diabolic force and darkness hover over the earth, neither life nor death, hunger comes with muffled echoes and spreads over the drab towns.

Broken windowpanes and shattered display windows stare with the dreariness of death. Clocks and streetcars have stopped

running . . . Even the whistles of steam engines resound hoarsely, and the semaphore signals come down wearily and resignedly.

Death hovers over the earth, an explicit, inevitable death. There is no heaven, no God, no devil, no good, no evil. People are completely withered, their faces are crushed, their eyes are extinguished.

The first year, the second, the third . . . and there is no end in sight, hope has completely vanished.

And then those over there, behind the walls of the •Kremlin, finally began to move. They defeated •Wrangel and •Deniken, routed Petlyura and •Pilsudski, crushed the peasant and the insurrection, did away with morality and ethics, but they could not overcome death. Death! Far-reaching death! An army of death. It flowed over all the expanses, it was already clambering up the walls behind which sat the highest of the high. And those could not withstand it.

And then suddenly a different spirit blew over the walls. A •New Economic Policy—NEP! NEP! NEP!—this little word sped over the wide expanses of the country, and everything began to revive, to move, to act.

The peasant insurgent crawled out of his forest thickets. He was overgrown with hair, his eyes had long since turned wild, his jacket had turned to rags. Terrifying, shaggy, like a caveman, holding a sawn-off gun, his teeth clenched. He cups his hand to his forehead and stares into the distance.

"Are they really gone?" He doesn't believe it. The days and nights go by—and he begins to believe.

"It's here! It's here! Victory!" and loud, wild laughter bursts from his dry throat and frightens off a flock of crows that were sitting on the skeleton of a hanged commissar.

"Amnesty! NEP! •USSR!" Exiled people begin returning from beyond the border.

"Hosanna, hosanna, peace and happiness to one and all!"

The first wheel begins to turn, the first smoke starts coming out of a chimney. The peasant stamps his victorious foot, roars

with a sunny shout, and savagely, like a parched lover, embraces the bloodied earth that had gone wild. His plough has rusted, dried out and fallen apart, the field is covered with weeds, and all he has are his grimy hands and his sunken chest . . .

He crawls into the harness himself and ploughs the hard turf with his dull ploughshare. The sweat is pouring off his maddened face, and curses are bursting forth from clenched teeth that he is grinding in his exertions, but he stubbornly ploughs and ploughs the land of his forefathers . . .

And the weeds vanish in terror, furrows cover the field, seeds of grain pour down and sprinkle the parched fertile soil.

And the earth hastens to send up the sprouts from within itself and grows lush with greenery—the sun, sweat, prayer, all blend together, cast themselves about in bright colours, in the singing of meadowlarks, in the waving ears of grain; summer is approaching, summer is thundering, summer is pounding out hymns under the ragged clouds to the delight of the sun and the bells are ringing once again on Sundays and on relaxing evenings when the swallow flies, and apple trees are fragrant with blossoms, and a deeply moved dove pleads for affection from her beloved.

II

A weary Maria dragged her admittedly aged legs home from the field, sat down under a pear tree overflowing with blossoms, and listened to the fading song of the sun and the echoes of the monastery's evening bell.

Korniy also came back from the field. His face was gloomy, wind-burned, overgrown with grizzled stubble; his grey hair was dishevelled, stuck together with sweat.

"Everything's fine. The wheat is growing nicely," he said as he sat down beside Maria. "During the past few years more cornflowers have taken root," he said after a moment, and he kept looking straight ahead.

"Nadiya brings home several bunches every day. Even the young hog eats them if they're mixed with some grain," Maria says as she casts a familiar glance at Korniy. "If only I had my strength . . . For some reason my legs are growing numb."

Korniy flicked his nose with his large grimy index finger. "But where's Lavrin?" he asked.

"He hasn't brought the horses back from the pasture yet."

"I told him not to stay there until it turned dark. There are so many mosquitoes . . ." And a moment later he added: "Thank God we have at least one son. What do you think? Shouldn't we send him to school?"

Maria glanced resentfully at him. "And who will be left here? Do you think that the one over there will take care of things?" and she directed her eyes at the other half of the house in which the disowned Maksym lived.

There was a brief silence, and then Korniy spoke up: "You know, Maria, I'm losing my faith. I always had faith in the land, but 'they' won't let us be. We haven't achieved everything that we wanted to, Maria . . ." And his feet, resembling two clods of earth, jerked spasmodically.

The sun was setting on the horizon. A breeze flitted by inaudibly, and a few petals took leave of their appointed places and descended peacefully on the *pryzba. Korniy was silent, but his soul was not at peace.

Words tumbled out of his lips of their own accord. "That apple tree over there was growing wild in the Solovey Ravine. As a joke I plucked it out of the straw litter and stuck it right there. And just look what happened, what a fine apple tree it turned out to be, and how it has more than paid for itself. And as for this spot . . . A single cherry tree was sticking out of the ditch over there. I walked about, gathered more of them—one wild cherry tree after another, grafted them and took good care of them . . . O God, O God! It's even hard to believe that it was your own hands that did all that . . .

"And I always told you, Maria, and I still say it now: God loves work. Work is rewarded, and my brain simply can't figure

out how it came about in our parts that those who love work are punished. If I had wasted my time like that monster son of mine who carries a gun, I'd go and gather now what I hadn't sown, and be a lord. I also was a sailor, and I too saw the world, but I didn't have the strength for 'what's yours is mine,' and yet he calls me a *kulak. Forgive that soulless, hardhearted creature, O God, for the poor thing doesn't know what his monstrous hands are doing."

"But perhaps 'they,' God willing, will settle down," Maria said.

"Judging by 'ours,' they won't," Korniy shook his head. "As long as they're in power, they won't settle down; they gave us that NEP to dupe us. They don't need either communes or NEP. The need power, they want to find ways to dominate, they have plans to take over the whole world, what they have is too little for them, you see, and at times it seems that everything is being extinguished under their feet.

"Those who sow death cannot let others live. Death is death. If it comes to that then I'll take a flaming stick and destroy everything that I've acquired. I won't let them make a fool of me in my old age. I didn't lie around doing nothing, I produced bread, the staff of life, my hands today are still eager to work, but they pour curses on those callouses.

"I won't join the commune . . . And that's that. I won't be duped into becoming a slave, an ox, a voiceless animal."

Yes. Korniy spoke his mind, and he did so more than once. It grew quiet in the yard. Somewhere in the distance, the village continued living. There were young people over there, and laughter, and singing.

Maria was also silent; with both hands tucked in her blouse she stared straight ahead into the distant twilight. On warm, peaceful nights images of the past rose before her; she heard the former laughter of years long past, glowing eyes gazed even now into the depths of her heart.

The evening was passing, the tolling of the bells died down, the dove calmed down and fell asleep.

And suddenly Maria spoke up: "Do you think that we'll actually be sentenced? That no one will stick up for us?"

All that could be said was expressed by Korniy's silence. Where could words be found to express the inexpressible?

From the barn Sirko the dog slowly emerged out of the dusk.

"Lavrin is on his way home," Maria said.

"Aha, a horse just neighed," Korniy responded as he called Sirko to come to him. "Oh, you, you!" and he tenderly petted the large warm head with his heavy hand. "My faithful friend! And you are no longer needed now, just like us."

The dog remained silent. Korniy got up. "I guess I'll go and help him. Come dog, let's go! And you fix us something to eat."

"Just come as quickly as you can," Maria replied.

Korniy walked into the darkness towards the other end of the orchard.

The evening was deepening. Dew was falling on the young grass.

From the misty valley came the neighing of horses and the youthful songs of young men. They were riding horseback from the grove and singing:

> Hey, whoever is in the forest, call out to us,
> Whoever is beyond the forest, answer our call!
> And we'll strike a light and smoke a pipe,
> Have no worry! Hey, through the valley, hey!

Korniy listened.

The sky and the earth were close to one another. His son was over there, he was here alone. Those young people were to remain in this world and continue living.

They would live differently, like "they" told them to live, "and without God." They didn't know, the poor things, that it was not possible to live "without God." Not for anyone, not for anything, and nowhere. But that's what we thought, whereas "they" think differently. It had been this way for thousands of years, from generation to generation. "They" suddenly put an end to our time,

and began their own. And that's why we do not understand one another.

And then the song in the valley broke off. The final echoes flew through the darkness and died away somewhere up there beneath the stars. The youths were watering the horses at the old well by the three willow trees. Whistles and laughter could be heard.

Korniy leaned on the old rotted fence that had been built before the war, and he also started to feel happy. Perhaps, he thought, our land and these strong people of ours will live through these ill times . . .

Sirko, standing beside Korniy, sensed his happiness and wagged his heavy, tousled tail. He felt like barking, but he did not dare to disturb the mood. He'd bark later, when those people finished shouting, when sleep captured them in its embrace.

III

Maksym—or Maksym Korniyevych, as some people now referred to him, or little Maksymko as others still called him—who had come home from "all the front lines" a few years ago, who had "suffered for the truth" and "shed his blood for the working class," was still wearing his worn and faded military leather jacket, and at times, in order to remind others of his former great glory, he would pull out his gun and demonstrate how he had succeeded in shooting the counterrevolution to death.

Oh, that Maksym was now a big deal. He was the authority—terribly so! He was a *Socialist-Revolutionary—don't you even dare to approach him. Just think how much the riding breeches that he had pulled off a Polish officer were worth, and the red boots that he had taken from one of Petlyura's soldiers, and the English greatcoat that he had taken from one of Denikin's commissioned officers. No, no matter what you thought of it all—Maksym was greatness personified.

It was this conviction that forced him to go to see his parents. Maria was not in the room. Korniy was gnawing at something at the table.

"You know what, old man," Maksym spoke exclusively in Russian. "You still have ugly icons hanging on your walls. Isn't it time to toss them, along with the old regime, into the stove?"

It was a good thing that his mother had not heard him say that. Korniy knew about things like that, it was nothing new to him, he had been a sailor himself and had heard a thing or two. He did not reply to "that monster," nor did he so much as glance at him, or blink an eye. He clenched his lips tightly and looked stonily straight ahead.

Maksym could not bear this, and he walked out of the room. It was good, very good, that he did so.

A week later the elderly parents moved from the large room into the small one on the other side of the porch. They left the large room for "that one." They did not call him a son, or refer to him by his name.

They took with them only a few dishes and the icons. Maria had looked at them throughout her lifetime, and they had been used to bless her when she got married. There was the darkened one, in which the sorrowful Maria, the Mother of God was nursing her infant . . . Perhaps for someone it was just an ugly icon, but Maria had her own opinion about that. In it she saw herself, the Maria who was created in the image of God, the one who had given birth and nursed her infants, and who had ached and rejoiced when she had carried under her heart her little Roman, her Demko, her Nadiya, and even that Maksym.

"Protect me and defend me, O All-Virgin Mother who gave birth to Christ, our God."

Maria prayed and thought, thought and prayed. Never before had so many thoughts gone through her weary head. And those thoughts kept coming from someplace, like autumn clouds, without end and without limits. There were so many of them that they could not fit into one head, but there was no one with whom

she could share them. Everyone had his own personal thoughts. Why did anyone need someone else's?

It was in these days, however, that Maria was exceptionally great. At times she walked down the boundary through the fields. The rye was already full-grown. It rolled in waves from boundary to boundary and disappeared somewhere in the sky that reached down to touch the earth. Maria walked through the greenery that came up to her chest, she walked upright, and the field flowers bowed to her, the sun kissed her.

O Lord, how wonderful she looked, that Maria! She even smiled at times because not all hope had withered as yet in her heart. She still had one son, a beautiful, sensitive, good son, the one who "was intent on staying in the city," who wanted to be educated and who was always immersed in books. She did not speak to anyone about the fact that even now she felt that she was still carrying that Lavrin under her heart, as if he had not yet been born. She continually rejoiced that something good would come of him, that he would make something out of a life that clearly was not in keeping with his mind or his heart.

Whenever Lavrin came home he looked as if he had been taken down from a cross. Where did those young people live in Kyiv? What did they eat? Whatever they chanced upon. Oh, Immaculate Mary, there were even those who lived in cemeteries, in old vaults, because there was not enough room in ordinary buildings. And they also ate something whenever and wherever. The devil had already had his say here, but God was still remaining silent.

Lavrin never stopped in to see his brother Maksym. He didn't explain why—he just didn't. He didn't go to see him, even though he too had joined the •Komsomols for appearance's sake. He stayed with his parents and slept on an old bench. Maria did whatever she could to improve his health, to bring some colour into his face. But his eyes always looked so troubled that it was frightening. What was going on in his head?

"My child," his mother said to him, "don't get too mixed up in all that . . ."

What was she trying to say?

Maria knew, and so did her son . . . They all knew, even though they never finished giving voice to their thoughts.

And that youth had so many books, and they were all thick ones. Books and more books. At times, when he was not at home, Maria would pick up a thick book like that but all she saw in it was black marks. Was it possible that something like that could open one's eyes to everything? To the earth, to people, to the entire world? Who was there to tell her, this mother, all that was said in it? No one was there to tell her. In her hands the book was completely silent. It needed eyes that could see, and not the kind that Maria had.

And Maksym was once again coming up with ideas . . . It was evident that he was getting ready to speak with his parents, but he didn't know how to begin. He squirmed as if he were tied to a post and could not move away from it.

Whenever he saw his mother, he stepped aside, and as for her, she would glance at him and smile as she walked past him. And why was she smiling, if there was nothing amusing? He did not stop to think that his mother was not laughing at him. She simply saw his difficult situation, his fall, and she wanted to support him. She was letting him know that in her generous maternal heart there still was room for him, and that he should not fall into despair. But who could say, perhaps he would come back to her?

No, once Maksym's heart was closed, it would never open up again. But why? Where had he imbibed so much hatred? At whom was he always so angry, and why were his bushy eyebrows always twisted in a frown?

"My dear son," his mother's smile said. "I gave birth to you the same way I gave birth to the others, so why are you afraid of me?"

Maria is not able to say this in so many words—where was she to find words like that? She was such an ordinary and simple person, but that son of hers was rotten to the core, to the nth degree, he had turned completely deaf . . . He no longer understood the

smile, because he said more than once that a human being had no such thing as a soul, so how could he be anything but truly soulless himself?

One time Maksym actually did go through the narrow doorway into the little room where his parents lived. He stood by the threshold, and his eyes were not so much looking as wandering about.

Maria rose from behind the table to meet him. "Sit down," she said. "Perhaps you'll have a drink of milk with us?"

He did not respond; he walked up to the plank bed and sat down on it. He turned to Korniy who was sitting gloomily without even glancing in the direction where "that one" was sitting.

Maksym said: "Well . . . You know . . . I, personally speaking, have decided to get married," he stammered out in Russian and fell silent.

Korniy lifted his head. "Go ahead and get married."

"Yes, I'm going to get married . . . That's right . . . And I need a bigger space . . ."

There was a short silence. "That's what you have," the father flung out.

"It's too little. I need the whole house."

Korniy got up and walked out.

There was nothing more to be said. Maria wanted to add something, but Korniy was already gone, and Maksym did not stay to talk with her because, you see, he became furious, and he leapt to his feet and ran after his father. He caught up with him in the small orchard.

"What do you want from me?" Korniy blurted out.

"I want you to move out of the house," the son shouted.

"And you have no fear of God?"

"Drop that stuff about God, old man. This is no time for games. Zakablukov's house over there has no one living in it."

"Go there yourself!" the shout came straight from Korniy's heart. "You're shoving me out into someone else's misfortune? I worked all my life . . . And . . ."

He did not finish what he wanted to say. What good were words in this instance? He should trample him like a worm, squash him underfoot . . . A violent hatred gripped his heart, an all-consuming pain, a poisonous feeling of injury.

Zakablukov's house truly had no one living in it. The innocent inhabitants had been plucked from it and packed off somewhere to Siberia. Everyone could still remember all too well how it had happened, how "they" had come at night, taken everyone, how the little children had cried, how Zakablukov's wife had read them the riot act, how the terrified people had looked on from behind fences, but could not offer any assistance. And in the morning it looked as if there had been an earthquake: their belongings, their food, all that was scattered on the ground, and no one dared to touch anything, as if it had all been cursed.

"And it's all because of that Ukraine," they whispered softly. "Oh, those don't forget."

After what happened, Lavrin went to see Maksym.

Maria sensed that he already knew everything, her eyes watched him, and her heart saw him. And when he disappeared behind Maksym's door she could not stop herself and she too went in after him.

Lavrin glanced at his mother and his look seemed to say: "What are you doing here?"

But he turned around and addressed Maksym: "You!" he flung out through clenched teeth. "You devil! Satan!" Lavrin shrieked with all his strength.

Maksym reached for his gun.

"Lavrin!" Maria cried. "My child! Chi-i-i-ldren!"

The mother lunged forward like a wave in the sea and crashed against her son.

To her right—a son, to her left—a son; she had given birth to both of them, her lips were trembling, her voice was breaking; she grabbed Lavrin by the hand—a hand that was no longer a child's hand but that of a man—but she grabbed it as that of a child and started dragging him after herself.

He did not dare to protest, because he sensed that it was her will that was dominant here, that it was his mother who was speaking to him. He sensed it and he understood all too well that if it had not been for that, something terrible would have happened here.

Twilight was already falling. In the shadows of that agitated darkness, of that twilight, a living misfortune was walking about barefoot. A misfortune that was visible and evident was floating in the warm air and pouring into every cranny of the soul and of the body, and Zakablukov's house was standing like an apparition, like the shadow of an insulted conscience.

Zakablukov's son Marko, you see, had yearned for an independent Ukraine, and now just look and see what that house is saying to us with its gaping holes.

Everyone was gone: the parents, the brothers, the sisters, and the children; and all the grandchildren and great grandchildren up to the tenth generation would also be gone—that's how distant that Ukraine was to them.

Lavrin walked away swiftly in the darkness—I'm the younger brother, he was saying to himself as he walked, and he was fleeing so that he wouldn't become a Cain, he was exploding and seeing blood in his thoughts. He was breathing heavily, and it was fire that he was breathing, not air.

Maria followed him, pretending that she was gathering up the laundry she had hung out to dry, but her heart and her eyes were following him and grabbing hold of his hands.

Korniy also came outdoors and started wandering about like a shadow. The son was over there, the mother was over there, and the father was over here, and above them there was the starlit sky.

Why were these people unhappy? No one asked them about that. They had been sentenced to death, you see, they had no right to be, and the world, and God, and human conscience remained silent. There are times when such a streak of sorrow falls over life, when the air changes so drastically, when such darkness envelops the sky and the earth, that it seems that God has no power.

Korniy gives in once more to thoughts about his flaming stick, and he can see everything turning into flames and smoke; he looks, raises his head, and it's as if he can see . . . The house is burning, the barn is burning, the apple trees and pear trees are burning, everything all around is burning, and the wind is blowing, and he stands as if petrified and does not make a move.

At that time someone comes up to him and whispers in a gentle voice: "You can't do that, Korniy. You're thinking evil thoughts." And he distances himself from himself, as if he is afraid of himself.

And as always happens at difficult moments like this, his dog Sirko walks up docilely to him. What does the animal want?

Korniy gently places his hand on him, and the words fly out of his mouth: "Come my dog, my pup! Let's go!"

And the night flows onwards, breathing and whispering, and the stars are twinkling, and a gentle wind is blowing in from the field and bringing with it the familiar odours of field flowers that it has gathered, dew descends on the grass, lungs breath more easily. Even though it's so hard, so terribly and intolerably hard, that a shout tries to tear itself out of one's throat.

Korniy and Maria move on, they leave what is theirs; they are no longer young birds, and it is hard on them, but there is no court of justice, and there are only the two of them.

The days keep passing.

IV

Occasionally people gathered and discussed matters, but it no longer was like it used to be—laughter and jokes. Who could say where those pleasant times in life had vanished, everyone now was so serious and troubled.

The young people did not play instruments, nor did they hold dances. Instead, Komsomols appeared on the scene—they were strange, very strange young people, always barking and growling and getting angry at others and at themselves.

Just look, that one over there still owned a cow. Take it away from him! At that one's home they were still eating varyenyky with cream. Take that food away! That one, you see, was still going to church—don't allow him to do that! Just take a look at Marusya—she had put on lipstick, but had Lenin ever said that lipstick should be used? And that one over there was laughing, so he must be an enemy.

And, oh, how much fun they all had when they harnessed old Fr. Spyrydon to a plough and ploughed with him "as if he were a horse!" Ha-ha-ha! No, that old priest really amused them. He fell down and could not get to his feet again, and so they pulled him "by his mane, by his mane," and they roared with laughter as if they were devils.

And when their parents stood and prayed in church, the boys and girls took an accordion, came up whistling to the church in a mob and started singing a rousing dance song.

It truly was a pleasure to live when such devilish creatures bustled about in God's world. It was beautiful and delightful, a scene out of nature, to watch these animal-hyenas, so fierce and sincere in their pitiful ineptness. They knew how to crush everything, to rip things to pieces, to carry them off in all directions.

Maria had the occasional happy moment.

One time Nadiya came to see her, and she was all smiles as she said softly: "You know, mother, my husband is also beginning to work on the land."

Maria looked at her joyfully and "Glory to God!" burst from her lips.

"I used to be so worried," Nadiya admitted. "Yes, I truly used to be very worried."

"Well, you know, at first your father also was like that. But if a person is decent—he'll settle down. It's only 'that one' of ours, God forgive me, who has turned out to be so stubborn." And Maria thought to herself: "What a terrible child that one is."

"My husband," Nadiya continued, "came to me yesterday and said: 'When all this stupidity is over and done with, then we'll

really start farming.' He admitted to me: 'It's too bad to be doing only the devil knows what on fields such as ours. They're talking to me about machines. Who will be able to work better with a machine—I or those blockheads? They plan to use the Komsomols to produce a supply of grain—they'll really fill up on that grain!'"

Nadiya is happy—she can't get her fill of happiness, and she can't stop talking. The cleverness of her Arkhyp gives her no peace. "He said: 'You need farmers' hands to work the soil, but they're working with swindlers and thieves and all sorts of riff-raff . . . But if things don't get worse, we'll raise a barn in the spring, because we have a house that's good enough, but we don't have any place to store the grain.'"

And there is still something else that Nadiya wants to tell her mother, and she blushes.

"Tell me, my child, tell me."

"I sense, mother, that I'm feeling heavy . . ."

Maria's face flushed with happiness. She glanced warmly at her daughter: "That's good, my child. If your husband is thinking about working the land, everything will be fine."

Nadiya quickly goes home, for there is no time to waste; she has said what she wanted to say, and it is time to go.

Her house is clean and cheerful looking. It has everything that is needed: rushnyky embroidered with roosters draped around icons as dictated by tradition, a large, somewhat mottled mirror in a black frame, and photographs of the boats on which Arkhyp had served. These, he would point out, are cruisers and not dreadnoughts. And these ones were small torpedo boats. Nadiya did not understand about such things, it didn't "go into her head"—just as it had once been with Maria.

What she was most pleased with was the fact that Arkhyp had made peace with Lavrin. It had to happen. The commune was a commune, just as paradise was paradise, but when hunger struck and people were plucked up and packed off to Siberia—Arkhyp could not approve of such goings-on. He had not expected that to happen when he had been on the Baltic cruiser *Peresvyet*.

He had thought back then that it would be a paradise, but as it turned out—it was not as easy to create a paradise as it was to flap one's tongue.

"Say what you will, but people are not dogs, and a good farmer takes good care even of a dog. But they treat these people as if they were worthless!" he said among his family members in his own home.

If he said something like that out in the street—he'd be sent to Siberia.

Nadiya was silent when it came to matters like this, for what could she possibly understand about them. Let the very wise men think about politics—they've thought about it so much that they aren't even happy with it themselves. A person didn't have a crust of bread, but they talked on and on for five years about paradise. But then, a woman's head was meant only for looking after women's matters . . .

At harvest time Arkhyp truly did get down to work. The fields were being divvied up, the better ones were going to the *kolhosp, the worse ones to private owners. "Activists" were put in place at the kolhosp, but things didn't seem to go too well for them. They hung portraits on walls, attached flags to their ploughs, shouted for days and nights on end, the authorities protected them, and they didn't pay any taxes, but there still was no grain to speak of.

"Work days" were established—workers toiled on the fields for a kilo or three-quarters of a kilo of grain from early morning until dusk—may the devil himself take charge of that kind of farming.

Private owners looked on from a distance and did not even draw near. It was their enemy that was over there in what used to be the lord's place. Because of them, they were forced to pay three and four times the amount of taxes, and the Komsomols hounded them day in and day out, but who kept life going—tell me truthfully. They were taxed heavily, but they still had enough, all the town bazaars were full of their produce, and just look, they were also getting ahead at home, constructing new buildings,

putting up fences, planting orchards. And they were not at all lured by that "paradise" on the former lord's land.

At one time Arkhyp had done his utmost for that system, but look at what he is doing now: he gets up early, mows the hay, reaps the wheat. Just take a good look at him, at this "communist"—you couldn't drag him into that "paradise" now by hook or by crook, and stacks of sheaves stand in neat rows on his fields.

"The most important thing for a human being is freedom," the elders said. "I'm here with what I own—and it's mine, but over there, it doesn't make any difference whether it belongs to the country or to the lord. Over there I'm just a hired hand. They give you what they want to give, and if they don't give you anything, you have to shut up. Two pounds of barley for a day of work? When and where was anything like that ever heard of?"

"That means that the Soviet power is robbing the people!"

And they are told: "Wait up a bit. It will all work out just fine! All beginnings are difficult."

"Fine. We'll wait. We'll see. But as for now, we have neither boots nor shirts. Just look, the children are barefoot and half-naked, and so I ask you: where has it all disappeared?"

Arkhyp need not worry about what is happening over there. Every evening he comes home late from his fields, washes off his sweat or just sits down as he is to eat his meagre supper that the very pregnant Nadiya has prepared for him. The poor dear is hardly able to walk, and this is a great disadvantage during the harvest season. But that's fine. They'll get through it one way or another. The main thing is that he is his own master, he is at home, he does not need to concern himself about that entire poor mob that is called a kolhosp and where there is no peace either day or night.

"Well," he says, as he lights a pipe of makhorka, "it appears that this year we won't have to worry about having enough grain."

"If those wise ones don't take it away from us," Nadiya blurts out involuntarily.

Arkhyp falls silent, as if he has bitten his tongue.

Ideas are already swirling in his head. I'll hide it! In the ground! I won't allow my family to die of hunger! Such are the thoughts of Arkhyp, a former sailor and communist. This is how different he has become once he began working the soil.

"It was fine to talk about these things, but when push comes to shove . . ."

After the harvest, Nadiya presented Arkhyp with a daughter. This was another small holiday.

Arkhyp did not like priests, but Nadiya said that she would not let an unbaptized child go out into the world among people. She said that, and it sufficed.

So be it. Arkhyp did not argue with her. He invited his father-in-law, his mother-in-law, godparents and neighbours, and from the baptismal ceremony they brought home little Christine. She was like all other infants, talked in the same babbling manner, and cried just as bitterly when she met up with what this wide new world had to offer her. The guests drank as much as they were expected to, it was noisy, and everyone congratulated little Christine, who was still somewhere off in her own unknown world . . . Give her at least a fighting chance to grow up a bit, don't trample her underfoot—you insane people!

It was still the "NEP," it was still those "good" times.

V

They talked and talked. They said many different things. They said: "It won't last long. The world won't let something like this happen. It was said, they won't endure it—they'll starve to death. It turned out that the "people" were right, perhaps "those" truly would not endure it.

The Komsomols shouted and shouted, saying that the old order was returning, so "why did we spill our blood?" The peasants sat on their haunches in front of the former tavern and kept whispering into one another's ears that "it won't happen."

No one knew where these rumours were coming from. It was being said that, NEP or no NEP, there was going to be one hundred percent •collectivization. Oh, that was just sheer nonsense. Who would listen to something like that? "We won't join, and that's that. Whoever wanted to join—joined, and those who did join are already coming back. They've had a taste of that paradise. It was enough."

If only the land here wasn't like it is, if only there were barren cliffs, if only there wasn't so much sun . . . Whoever had seen or heard of a famine in a place like this. It was a sin not only to say something like that, but even to think it.

Winter descended on the steppes, the ravines, the forests. Houses, smoke, and tiny flames glowing in little windows. The frozen gates creak. Ukrainians bundled up in sheepskin coats walk down the streets.

A blizzard roars like a factory in the steppe, the terrible wind blasts out and swings far and wide, rushing around like a wild beast. And the village clings closely to the ravine and it seems that it's not a village but a wood-tick that, gnawing its way into that famous •chornozem, had been sucked into it and had covered itself with grey straw mats—and let come what may.

The village is strong. It has lasted a thousand years. And all were kulaky.

There was a monastery in the village, the tolling of its bell spread far and wide over the expanses. With the approach of spring, and when the trees were covered with blossoms, it seemed that the bell was pouring forth like dew from the sky itself, and, say what you will, but that had a power of its own even if you thought differently . . .

And that's how it was for many centuries, the people changed, but the world did not change . . . They dug in the earth, everyone looked for something in it, some took rocks from it, some took trees, they put new posts in place, built cellars, raised beams, and always celebrated the blessing of the finished frame. This was a holiday that had been established from time immemorial—a cross

and a cluster of flowers on the main beam, and that meant that on the tables there would be the feast of feasts.

The cawing of crows foretold a change was in the wind. Spring came and brought with it the first good fortune—the •five-year plan. What was it supposed to be? A miracle! Everyone would finally experience paradise. A great hubbub arose about it in the newspapers and everywhere. The Komsomols were rushing about as if they had gone mad.

Without any warning, the bells were removed from the monastery and the parish church.

The older villagers resisted stubbornly. The authorities wanted the best for them—but they were resisting. They said to them: "Come!" But they said: "No!" But it was already too late. One couldn't go into the forest now, the sawn-off gun had long since rusted, and it was impossible to find a new one. Those at the top had already had the chance to catch their breath; they had sat there for years, typewriters had been clicking, everybody and everything had been counted. No! Now a peasant could not hide behind his peasant origins.

In the village the bells were replaced by the GPU—the State Political Administration. That was the government now. It was no joke, no toy. The village correspondents came, the ears and eyes of the GPU that saw everything, knew everything. Now it was not individuals who would be sent to Siberia, now everyone would be swooped up en masse, trains were already waiting in the station, just as they used to wait for cattle during tsarist times; there were no cattle now, but the empty space had to be filled with something. They would take away the kulaky, there were lots of them, packed to the hilt in detention centres. To Siberia, to •Solovki, to hard labour! What would come of it all?

"Mama! Where's our tato?"

"Hush, child. They've taken our tato away, he's no longer with us, O my poor orphan of a living father."

Like flocks of startled crows entire villages lift up and fly away like clouds into the unknown. People disperse like scattered

herds of bison. They are herded up in the forests, they are set on fire from all sides, they are shot like wild ducks. Into caverns, to Siberia, thousands, tens of thousands, millions . . .

Day after day, for months, for years.

No, these are accursed people, these are wild beasts.

Where else in the world could something like this happen, and why? They are dragged into collective farms with iron hooks, and punished with all manner of punishments—the saboteurs, the violent, the terrorists, the kurkuls, the subkurkuls, the bourgeois nationalists, the religious people . . .

There is no end and no limit, there are enemies everywhere, and their numbers do not decrease from year to year, they keep on growing. They began at the top, with those who have "twenty-five thousand desyatyny," down to those who have thousand, a hundred, ten. Today they are down to two-three desyatyny, but they're just the same, it's just that the lower you go, the stronger they are.

For ten days they burned the subkurkul Petro Kukurika on an iron plate heated with gas, and kept asking him: "Where did you hide the grain?" He wouldn't tell them. He was toppling over like a mown stalk but he remained as silent as a stone being split by a hammer. Who had convinced him not to join the commune? He remained silent like one who is cursed, and he didn't even peep when they mercilessly broke his bones. And so he was sentenced to ten years for his stubbornness.

General collectivization was moving ahead. Stubbornness was met with stubbornness. Everyone without exception. The Komsomols are scarcely able to breathe, they are exhaling the last spirit of the revolution, but they are being whipped by those who are above them, and so they work unceasingly both day and night, pressing forward, ever forward.

A diminutive, gnarled peasant with sly •Little Russian eyes and a finger cut off his right hand, bustles about the building of the communal kolhosp barracks for an entire day, for an entire week. A dozen others with eyes that are just as sly work with him.

Bezpalky is their foreman, and all of them are like shock troopers; they are the first to get their share, and they get it immediately, without any opposition.

The peasants roll their own cigarettes and smoke them as they rapidly build an extension to the barracks. And now it's ready, new and filled with the aroma of fresh resin. Evening comes around as it usually does. There have been enough of these evenings before this one, but on this last one a Bezpalky shock trooper forgets his half-smoked cigarette in the kindling wood. And around midnight, the barracks begin to burn, and by morning only ashes remain.

"They don't want to go along with the people, then let them go to the devil," the Bezpalky trooper thinks.

That's what the Bezpalky trooper was thinking, and thousands and millions of Bezpalkys were thinking the same thing. The time came for the first collective harvest. The newspapers were the first to announce it, and then the shock-troop propaganda brigades took over. They were shouting from Moscow, from Kharkiv, from all the cities and towns, but on the fields where wheat had once grown, O wonders of wonders, there now grew only weeds. A splendid harvest of weeds. Everyone was amazed how it could have grown like that, for they had sown wheat, not weeds.

The foremen ran around under windows at the break of dawn to awaken and rouse the sleepyheads. Weary, sleep-deprived hungry women and men went out on the kolhosp fields, and Yavdoshka Pelekhata, who was renowned for her philosophical bent, was assuring everyone that her late granny also had to work on the lords' fields, but that back then the foremen were called hayduks, and she was paid significantly more for a day's work.

That was what Yavdoshka Pelekhata said, but one time someone overheard her and Yavdoshka landed at the GPU. Well, so much for that . . . What's true is true. Yavdoshka had heard it from her granny. But the government also has its rights. It cannot abide having each and every Yavdoshka interfere with its plans.

Tractors made their appearance on the fields. There was a great hubbub. People marched alongside them. Sang to them,

hung wreaths on them, fastened flags to them, bowed down to the moist earth before them.

The tractors crawled along the former boundaries, and the peasants muttered among themselves: "You'll have your fill of all those weeds . . ."

And from the centre Russian commands were being issued one after the other: "Ukraine is falling shamefully behind!"

The telegraphs and telephones were shouting: "Give us grain, Ukraine! Grain." From all sides: "Grain." In railway stations, in editorials, in offices . . .

"They're doing everything according to the plan," sneers a sly-eyed one. He has already stocked up a supply for himself for the winter. He took home grain stalks in his pockets from the field, he and his wife and their three children—and they came up with about three poody of grain; he rolled it up at night in a hempen cloth and dug it under the hearth. And let those over there wait for "grain."

The sly-eyed ones simply do not know what those at the top are planning. Something is going on up there. One time the Komsomols became very agitated, and this was a sure sign that something bad was about to happen. They went from house to house, from storeroom to storeroom, from shed to shed, from cellar to cellar. They did not miss a single hole. Truly, those poor young things had more than enough to do. Perhaps they themselves were now unhappy, but there was no going back. Their souls had been sold. To themselves.

They dug around in the ground, ripped up wooden floors, knocked down ovens. Curses, only curses poured down on them from the heavens, from under the ground, from the air. Blood froze in veins when they seized a little pot of buckwheat from the old woman Hrushchykha who was seventy years old and lived on the outskirts of the village.

"Children!" she cried with her aged, toothless mouth. "O Lord, O dear Mother of God! That's all that I have—I have nothing else."

And she looked at them with such stricken eyes that even Lucifer himself would have vanished into the ground upon seeing them.

They also said that she knew charms, was able to confuse people, chased out illnesses caused by the evil eye, cast spells on black swamps that christened people do not know about and where they don't go.

Nothing helped.

They seized that buckwheat, they took away everything, a scrap of bread, a fistful of millet, a bit of mouldy biscuit, ten potatoes. They took everything that they could find. Moscow was demanding "grain."

And when there was nothing left, they called up some Karpo or Danylo and asked him: "Tell us, if you will, in a good manner—where do you have some grain?"

"There's isn't any," he replied.

"You know what? We can make such a joke out of you that your great-grandmother will begin laughing in the other world. Where's the grain?"

"There isn't any," he said, and he turned silent, as silent as a tree, dry, grey, unmoving.

They took him away, to the centre, twisted and tortured him every which way. Karpo endured everything, he no longer felt pain, he had become wooden, he no longer shouted or groaned, he was growing stiff.

They took one after another in that way, they took everyone, they did not bypass anyone. Oh, what a terrible country this is, oh, and what extraordinary firmness they displayed when it was necessary to be firm. Danylo Knyaz who did, after all, return home without confessing that he had some grain, said: "I, my good people, have even read some history. Things happened. Many things happened. But our country has never known such barbaric behaviour, and perhaps it will never experience it again."

Winter was looming over the kolhosp paradise.

VI

Korniy had vowed that he would not go and he did not go. They could shred him like cabbage on the spot. By saying this he meant that he would not go to join the kolhosp.

The Komsomols came to see him.

"Uncle Korniy! Sign up."

Korniy, who was chopping tobacco leaves with an axe on a stump and puffing on a pipe, responded with a question of his own.

"And how is this to be? Voluntarily or by compulsion?"

"Voluntarily, everyone is joining voluntarily."

"Well then, I won't sign up."

"It would be better to sign up before they come to talk to you."

"They'll talk, and they'll stop—and I'll just thank them."

"We'll see about that."

"Well, it's this way. You can't deal me more than death."

"We have a few things that are even worse than death."

"You're just saying that out of bravado."

"So, this means that you're waiting for the Tsar to return."

"It's none of your business, my son, for whom I'm waiting."

"Oh, you certainly won't get what you're waiting for."

"When you get to be my age, that's when we'll have a talk."

They came by every day for several days. It was all in vain.

He was called to the centre: "Where have you hidden your grain?"

And he calmly replied: "I'm not the one who has hidden the grain, you're the ones who have done that."

They left "the old grey devil" in peace, they didn't want to overdo things. But he had not told them the whole truth for he did have a few small pots of grain hidden in the ground. He lived on his own in Zakablukov's house with his wife Maria and his son Lavrin.

He farmed the three hectares that he had been left. Perhaps Maksym had exerted some influence, or perhaps the authorities were scared to commit a sin. He sowed all of it, harvested everything, gave what was required of him, and still had enough for himself. And it was all without weeds, as if his field was different in some way.

Even the authorities from the district office reproached the kolhosp members: "You see, there are no weeds on the fields of that loner. . ."

Unfortunately, they took away his machines—the son had grown wise, that "it was not proper" for a kulak like that to have them. He had to go back to using his hands, his feet, his scythe, his spade, his flail, but he did not throw up his hands in despair and give up. It was like a deathblow to him to part with his threshing machine, he bade it farewell as if it were his mother, and he wept his elderly tears. All of that had cost him so much, it had served him so well, had brought him such delight.

"The devil got it all," he said bitterly; he was now all alone, completely alone, no one would even come to help him.

The winter turned out to be bitingly cold. Lavrin was once again in the city. The old parents were living alone. From time to time Nadiya ran in to see them, and she wailed as if she had been shot; Arkhyp's arguments had not done him any good, he was dragged into the kolhosp at once and told to shut up.

"How I cried, how I suffered. They took everything to the last scrap, to the last thread, we were left with nothing. He slaughtered our horse himself—at least we'll have something to eat."

Now they were left destitute, with only what God had given them at birth—but Nadiya had a child. Maria gives her the food meant for her own mouth, she looks for anything that she can find, she won't eat anything herself.

And Nadiya goes on talking: "I'm sitting there, and I'm waiting for my husband . . . But he's in that cursed kolhosp, and he hasn't eaten or had a moment to sit down all day long. And when he comes home, you know, he's as hungry as a wolf and

ever so tired—he lies down and stays there like a corpse, may the Lord forgive me. I should give him something to eat, but what am I to give him?"

"And how is the child?" Maria asks.

"Oh, don't even ask, mother . . ." and Nadiya is engulfed in tears.

Maria looks and looks at her, and her lips whisper . . .

But she remains silent, grimly silent, because what good are words?

"We didn't want to join that kolhosp," Nadiya babbles on through her tears. "Oh, we really didn't want to. No one wanted to. When they were ploughing up the boundaries, we, the women, lay down in front of the tractor, and 'those' said to me: 'In the kolhosp, you will become wealthy. You will have an opulent life.' But yesterday they herded all the people from every corner to dig out potatoes from under the snow. We dug into the ground with pickaxes, and who has ever heard or seen anything like that . . . It's suffering, punishment, mockery—they're making laughingstocks of all of us . . ."

Maria was looking at the window, her lips had stopped whispering, her eyes were filled with pain. She had turned around on purpose so that Nadiya could not see her eyes, but she no longer had any tears—they had all been shed.

And Nadiya seemed to come to her senses, and she said: "Nevertheless, mama, we'll live through this one way or another."

And she was frightened by her own words for now her mother was also crying. Her mother was crying! Maria was crying! She was looking somewhere out into the world through the window and she was sending her complaints far into the distance—but who was to hear them, who? And where? Where were human hearts? Where was conscience? They take good care of an animal, they care for a plant, they care for an insect, they even take care of the lowliest worm, but they don't take care of a human mother.

O God, O God, if You truly do exist, look down at us! Come on, look down at us in Your great mercy. Truly there is no God

in life, because there is no life, and can that one-hundred-times accursed world be called a world, and can that grain, that grain filled with curses, provide a true life?

Maria did not know what it was like "in that trap hole of a kolhosp," she had not gone there and she had not seen it, but Nadiya told her all about it. She dropped by often and she could not refrain from blurting something out.

"We thought that we wouldn't have anything to worry about this winter, but just look at the misfortune that has befallen us. And what kind of hearts must those people have, and they say that it is our own people who are the root of the problem. We thought they would share out something for every person, but they took everything, absolutely everything—right down to the chaff.

"And what about us? What are our children going to eat? They tell us: 'That's not our business. We received an order, and you go ahead and eat what's left out in the fields. There are ears of grain on the snow among the weeds, there are potatoes left in the ground.' We had to rethresh the straw, you hear, to deliver as much grain as possible, because they're claiming there's sabotage.

"But who came up with those machines of theirs that don't do a good job of threshing? Didn't they see what kind of machines they were? You put in a sheaf, and it flies out untouched. And who is to blame for that? It must be us, the kulaky, who are the saboteurs. Not those at the top over there who thought up all of this, but we're to blame, we're the ones! We're making the famine. We thresh under the open sky, we make the rain come down, we've made manure out of everything that there was. We're the ones who chased people to work more quickly, rain or no rain, to gather up everything from the fields because we were hurrying to fulfill the command to produce one hundred and more than one hundred per cent. The rain came down—and everything turned mouldy . . . They'll eat their fill!"

Nadiya natters on and on. She says the same things today, and tomorrow, and the next month. Maria no longer even listens, she goes to the pantry, takes out whatever she has and gives it to her.

"Here, my child. Give it at least to the little one . . . That one most certainly is not to blame for anything . . ."

"And what about you? What will you eat?"

"Don't worry about us, we don't even have teeth any more; think about yourself . . ."

Nadiya went, and everyone could see that she was carrying something under her apron. The Komsomols also saw that, but they did not take it away . . .

At Christmas, Lavrin, looking wasted and unhappy, came home from Kyiv. He did not tell either his father or his mother how the students lived there, but all the same, the parents knew. He found hunger at home. He saw that Maria was fluttering about like a seagull trying to find something for him to eat. There was nothing. Nothing at all. A scrap of bread made out of oat-straw, frozen cabbage cores.

And Lavrin made the situation even worse by saying: "It seems that they're going to take me away."

"Where are they taking you?" Korniy asked.

"Over there . . . You know . . . Where they're taking everyone."

"But why?"

"Maksym. It's his doing. There's going to be a purge. The people are rearing up against them. I cannot remain silent. No one has the strength to remain silent any longer."

He stayed three days and left. Maria did not try to stop him, for what was there to offer him here? She just blessed him by making the sign of the cross. A storm was raging in her breast, and she sensed everything to the smallest iota, painfully, most painfully. She stood on the threshold and watched the snow cover his tracks.

He probably did not get far, because a week later Maria was on her way to the district town carrying a small bundle of bread on her back. Snow, a blizzard, the roads are blown in, the wind is stinging her eyes, covering her with snow, stopping her breath. She would go a few steps, and stop, go a bit farther and stop, catch her breath, wipe her damp eyes. She is not crying, tears are not flowing from her eyes, she has shed all her tears. It's just that

when she heard that "he was there," she took whatever she had, put it in a bag, and set out to fight the winds, the cold, her own frailty . . .

And it was only she, Maria, the mother, who could have done this. It was quite a distance to the city. It was the same city where Hnat had once been in the hospital. As she walked, she even recalled him: where was he now? They said that he was still alive. She kept on going, and if it had been necessary, she would have gone to the ends of the earth.

She went straight to the prison. "Is this a prison, my good people? As long as I've lived I've never had anything to do with a prison."

"We have no prisons, old woman," they told her in Russian.

"Well, you see . . . They pointed me in your direction. A detention centre, or whatever you call it. I'm old, you know, and my son is in there . . ."

She stood as if carved out of stone, eyes like dark pools, lips clenched, her withered fingers with their black fingernails clutched the top of the bag.

In front of her was a rotund, grey person with a rounded red face. He told Maria that her son wasn't here, that they took people like that at once to the district centre; but as to where that centre was only the heavens above knew that.

But Maria did not budge, but maybe, but maybe . . . No. He wasn't here. She should go home. He wasn't here!

"My lord, my dearest dove, my dear comrade! Let me see him!" She was not even aware when her legs buckled, and she fell down on her knees and kissed the ground, the frozen, hard ground.

"Well, what are you doing! What are you doing? What kind of a lord am I? He isn't here. Do you understand? Not here. He's not here . . . I'm speaking to you in Ukrainian now. They take men like that to the district centre . . ."

When she was getting to her feet, the ground bent under the weight of her great grief, black spots appeared in her eyes . . . She would fall down. She could not stand. "And where am I to

go now? And whom am I to ask? I was carrying and carrying this bundle, but you're saying that he's not here . . ."

Voiceless, a voiceless old woman. Maria hobbled to the street. It was not far . . . ten steps, but for her it was a vast expanse.

Twilight was already falling. A cold, grey darkness enveloped everything. Her eyes looked but could not see, her courage was flowing out of her heart, and her feet felt heavier. She had not eaten anything since morning. She had been carrying that bread to her child, and she had feared to take even a small bite of it. But now it was frozen and her teeth could not bite into it. They no longer had the strength. And the sharp wind was blowing down the length of the deserted street, and before her there was a field, a vast distance and night.

Maria walked up to the wall, pressed herself against the cold bricks, and stood there.

That same day, *The Proletarian Truth* published in Kyiv, included the following announcement: "I, Maksym Korniyevych Pereputka, renounce my kulak parents, who throughout their lifetimes have been enemies of the working class, maintained the principles of private ownership, and even now do not renounce these shameful principles. I also condemn, brand, and demand a severe punishment for my former brother Lavrin Pereputka who took up the cause of the Petlyurian counterrevolution and with his criminal activity knowingly harmed the growth of socialism in our blossoming fatherland."

The next day someone brought Korniy the newspaper and read it to him. It was just at that time that Maria came home. Some kind people had brought her home half-conscious; they said she had fallen on the street and the snow had been drifting over her. They put her to bed, she was breathing heavily, and then she gradually fell asleep. She had a fever.

"More quietly, read it more quietly," Korniy begged. "More quietly. Let her at least not hear that."

Maria did not hear it.

VII

Spring struggled and came out victorious. The trees, as always, burst into blossoms. Everything was as it usually was, but there was not a moment of peace.

Right at Easter the trouble with the church began. The monastery had long since fallen silent, but the parish church still stood. There was still a pair of small bells in it that had not been taken away, the gilded cross still shone, and the church itself was framed by old acacia trees, chestnut trees, and walnut trees. It had stood here for a very long time. Even the oldest people did not remember when it had been built. It was a good old building, the only building in the village that created a special place.

A church. The people always went there, especially the older ones, and they prayed there. It was interesting to go inside. The stairs were made out of stones, and they were worn down by the soles of feet. By the entrance, on the right and the left, there were the apostles Paul and Peter. These were the ones who long, long ago had walked among the people and determinedly told them to believe in Christ who would save them and bring them into the kingdom of heaven.

"You are Peter, your name means a rock, and it is on this rock that will I build my church and even the gates of hell will not conquer it . . ."

And here was this church: large, cold, empty. Up above there was a vaulted ceiling and an expansive painting of God-Sabaoth. At the front stood a dark iconostasis with many icons: the Annunciation of the Virgin Mary, the birth of Christ, His baptism, His preaching, His death and His resurrection. And above them all was the Holy Supper. Yes. This was it—Your church that even the gates of hell will not conquer.

This spring the Komsomols appeared in the village. They told that the villagers that this church was to be done away with.

There was to be a movie theatre in it. Yes. There had to be a movie theatre.

People from the district office came and also said: "There is supposed to be a movie theatre here."

The Komsomols climbed up into the bell tower and removed the last two small bells. But that did not suffice. They crawled up on the very top and started knocking down the cross. Bang-bang-bang! The cross toppled over, the cross tumbled downwards, there was much shouting and weeping, women, turmoil, police, thirty people standing off to one side had already been arrested—tomorrow they would be on their way to Siberia.

In *The Proletarian Truth* there appeared a note: "The citizens of the 'Red Star Kolhosp' have conducted an enthusiastic campaign to liquidate the remnants of the religious cult. It has been decided to use the building that housed the church for the needs of cultural education, and the metal from the bells is to be passed on for industrial purposes . . ."

Many people awaited God's punishment. Nothing happened, there was only hunger. Hunger everywhere. There was no spot on this land without hunger. The thought of food persecuted every person in this expanse.

"God will not come with a cudgel to punish us," the people said.

But there is no God! Where is that God? But at the same time He does exist. God is everywhere in what people are saying. They offend him, chase him away, and fear him.

In the springtime the newspapers were filled with articles about sowing. It was as if this was the first year that people would be sowing grain. They had to sow, for if they didn't—they wouldn't be able to live.

Day after day whole columns said the same thing over and over again. "The plan for sowing is to be executed a full one hundred percent!"

In order not to be late and to ensure that it was done one hundred percent, the grain was sown in wet soil. In *The Proletarian*

Truth it was written that an early sowing is the best sowing. They sent grain for the spring seeding from the district centre: oats and barley. The odd villager still had a gaunt horse with protruding ribs, and they rushed into town and lugged home the seed grain.

"First they take it away, and then they bring it back," an old peasant philosophized, because he simply could not understand this new way of doing things.

A tractor was sent out into the field. Once again there was a big to-do. Everyone came out of the village, the Komsomols carried flags, speeches were given.

"That's their god," the old peasants said.

The tractors tore through the wet furrows, the seed grain was cast into the muddy soil, and then harrowed. They wrote to the *The Proletarian Truth* that the sowing was completed up to one hundred and twenty percent, and from the district centre they received a medal for their victory and success.

In the meantime the earth melded together, the sun shone down warmly, the steppe wind blew in, and everything turned into concrete. The seeds tried to break through to the surface, but the hardness of the concrete won out. And what little did come through turned yellow and died off.

The *The Proletarian Truth* howled. Sabotage! The class enemy is not sleeping! He must be done away with completely! The GPU members rode over the fields, directors and brigadiers were flung headlong to Siberia. Tractors appeared once again, and this time The *The Proletarian Truth* wrote that "a late sowing is the best possible sowing."

Weeds came up on the fields.

"Hey, Uncle Stepan!"

"Hallo!"

"Do you remember a time when only weeds grew on our fields?"

"Hmm . . . I can't say that I remember anything like that."

"Then why is it that now there are only weeds and more weeds?"

"You'd better ask *The Proletarian Truth*. They know everything best there."

Among the weeds some stalks of grain appeared.

"Hey, Uncle Stepan!"

"Hallo!"

"Have you ever seen fodder oats sown together with green oats?"

"I have to admit that I've never seen anything like that."

"Then perhaps you've seen crystal barley sown with flat barley?"

"If truth be told, I also haven't seen anything like that."

"Then come on over here, and you'll see it . . . And why are they sowing in this way?"

"Well, as I said before: *The Proletarian Truth* knows everything . . ."

And this summer there is even less grain than there was last year. There's shouting from Moscow, shouting from Kharkiv, shouting from the regional office, shouting from the district office, the foremen are shouting. Grain! Give us grain!

Now it was not only *The Proletarian Truth* but also *Pravda* from Moscow that was saying: "The Party and the entire country are expecting Ukraine to completely fulfill the grain-collection plan. The most severe measures of coercion are to be employed against the kulaky and their accomplices."

As soon as the grain ripened the fields turned into a massive front line. The army came—drab, pitiful people wearing peaked caps.

At the other end there are emaciated, pathetic-looking little children. Their small bodies creep through the weeds, their scrawny hands reach for ears of grain. Back home, their father has collapsed and is lying motionless, their mother is not getting out of bed. At home there is death, and they, these little ones, are running forth to look for life.

But in those weeds there are as many soldiers as there are ears of grain. They are the soldiers "of the great and brilliant future"

who have come here from the distant north. They aim at every little head that raises itself towards an ear of grain. Shots, shouts, blood, little bodies topple over, small holes are dug, the ground is levelled.

There are times when the most beautiful moonlit nights settle over all of this, nights that are just like the ones that •Hohol spoke of: "Have you known a Ukrainian night? Oh, no! You have not known a Ukrainian night."

Then the harvest came. It began as early as in May somewhere way up there in the office of a central committee. People sat there clacking on typewriters, telephones rang, telegrams flew. Then rotating machines went into action, and printed pieces of paper flew by the millions to all corners of the earth. Everything and everyone was caught up in the harvest, everyone that was alive. The Party. The government. Generals. Learned men with beards. Lyrical poets, symbolist poets, futurist poets. Epic writers, realist writers. "The State Political Management." The great, the less great, the middling, and the mediocre. One hundred and twenty million men, women, old folks and children. All of these flung themselves at the weeds. "The Party awaits the complete fulfillment of the grain-collection plan."

Over the fields wandered sleepy, sluggish, drab, unwashed and uncombed beings. They know that grain is their only god, their only good fortune, their only salvation, but their pockets have been cut off and armed, craggy, long-legged monsters are standing guard over them. But their mouths have not yet been sewn up or cut off, and so these beings are incessantly chewing, their teeth are hard at work at all times. The sun scorches them from on high, and somewhere birds are singing.

The weeds are reaped, the weeds are gathered, they have to be threshed. Once again everything started from the office, from the centre, from the top. Once again there are orders, once again generals and poets, once again the GPU. There aren't many kernels, but even those keep vanishing by the moment as if they were dew and not kernels. All of it is threshed, and all of is gobbled down.

And what gluttons, one thinks, these ignorant people are. They thresh and they eat, they carry and they eat, they eat day and night.

There was no means of delivering the rest of the grain to the district centre, and so they dumped it in the church of the former monastery. The windows were blocked with the icons of •Cyril and Methodius, of •Volodymyr and Olha, and huge locks were affixed to the doors.

During these days and these nights, the village grew dark. The number of empty houses kept growing. Yesterday there were not all that many, today there are growing numbers of them, and tomorrow there will be even more. The Komsomols break into these empty homes, and everything in them disappears in a flash. Wobbly, stained tables, a few broken chairs, a bench on which the corpse of the householder had lain only moments earlier—all this is seized, carried out, lugged away.

A dragged-out silence, without a beginning or an end, descends on everything. The days are like corpses, and the nights, especially the autumnal, moonless nights, are like sepulchral underground caves. And there are no fires anywhere, and when the moon peeks out, the poplar trees stand straight and silent, and every shadow seems like an entrance into the nether world. A cemetery. An endless cemetery. The wind blows in the stench of corpses from all sides.

Where have the birds disappeared, why are owls not hooting, where are the wolves? There aren't any. Perhaps that's how it has to be. The earth finally got the urge to be empty, the air spontaneously grew putrid, the wind became dangerously infected, the sky smeared itself cadaverously.

Winter came. Korniy was still alive. His house was not yet empty. Maria had come out victorious from the previous winter, now she was half alive: lying down at times, walking at times. The summer sun had kept her on her feet, but then there came those winds, those frosts, and she couldn't breathe. And in the summer Korniy's fields had been cultivated, and the old man even dared to dream that the winter would not bring any fear with it.

No, it didn't turn out that way. The Komsomols had gone into his storeroom, his cellar, his attic, and they had left only hunger there.

And Korniy was taken, dragged once again to the regional centre. Once again—where have you hidden your grain? Korniy wanted to spit in their faces, but his mouth was dry, so he looked at them with eyes that blazed with fire.

"It's you who have taken away the grain," he said. "It's you who have brought about the famine."

They could see that there was no use talking to someone like him—you could ask him day and night for days on end, it wouldn't make any difference. They wouldn't be able to squeeze a single word out of him.

"My heart was on fire," Korniy said to Maria when he came home. "My brain was bursting in my head. Tell me—where have these people come from? What kind of mother brought them into this world . . ."

Maria bowed her head, remained silent.

Korniy understood, he slowly lowered himself to a bench and looked around helplessly.

"We're the ones, we're the ones who gave birth to them," he said slowly. "It most certainly wasn't you, Maria. I was the one. I'm the one he takes after, but . . ." He broke off what he was saying and fell silent.

As in the past winter, Korniy once again picked up whatever happened to be left behind by the Komsomols. Everything that they had scattered, that they had trampled. A bit of chaff, a bit of dried fruit; a skeletal old nag still stood near the trough, and old Sirko was huddled by the shed. That was all he had.

He stood and stared at the scattered rusty ploughshares that were his ploughs. He was staring but didn't see anything. It was dark.

"Who are you, that you're pushing me to my death?"

There was no reply.

"What have I done to you, devil, that you're killing me?" The words tore out of his throat.

He was met by the rustling of the wind in the dry weed stalks.

Evening. The oven is glowing, lighting up the opposite wall with its glow. There are streaks of light and shadows on walls, the bench, the old icons, pots. They flash, race around, grow bigger, grow smaller. Snow is swirling outside, the wind is wailing in the chimney.

Maria is lying down, she feels ill, something hard is weighing heavily on her chest. Korniy is sitting on a bench, he gets up, and then sits down again. Every so often he walks up to the oven and throws in some kindling or a piece of firewood.

"It probably will soon be Christmas, Korniy," a faint voice is heard from where Maria is lying down.

"It's probably this week," another voice is heard from where Korniy is sitting.

There is a pause. Christmas. Christ was born. The Saviour. Is that how things used to be?

"Is there still some chaff?" a voice is once again heard from where Maria is.

Korniy hesitates, as if he is standing in front of a fire that he has to get across.

"There's enough left for a couple of weeks," he gets up the nerve to say, and then he at once falls silent, quickly casts flame-like glances all around.

"For some reason, Nadiya isn't coming by . . . Maybe she's sick . . . If only that little one of hers manages to live through all this . . ."

Maria's words fall carefully and separately. Korniy hears every nuance in those words, and if he doesn't respond, it's only because there is nothing to be said.

There is only silence.

Darkness and silence.

That same night in that same village, but just a little bit farther to the east, in a valley, stand the remains of the ancient monastery. At its gate, over which hangs the icon of the Holy Trinity—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit—stands a guard. He is holding a machine gun. To his right and to his left stretch the old stone walls. They are the same walls that knew the age of the princes, the times of the Tartars—ancient times, and difficult, and terrifying, and dangerous. They have been superfluous for a long time now, they stood only as witnesses and as memories. In the gateway of these walls there have not been any weapons or any guards for a long time now. There wasn't even a portcullis . . .

But now the time has come when the gateway once again has a portal, and a heavy one at that, with locks, and a guard has appeared in the portcullis. What has happened? Medieval Ages? New hordes?

This time it is not hordes, it is hunger. Famine is waging war. Grain is hiding behind the stone walls, behind the locks, and all around hunger is slaughtering indiscriminately—attacking, rushing forward.

The Church of the Holy Trinity stands quietly, gloomily, warily. It still rises a bit over the village and it looks out in all directions. The fir trees are still rustling as they formerly rustled, and heavily barred windows still peek out among them.

But in the church there is grain. It has been poured like sand, like soil among the columns, under the iconostasis. Occasionally rain leaked on it, and it grew mouldy and hardened into clumps.

Everyone remembers how behind those grated windows the soft flickering light of candles used to glow every evening. The monks in tall black cowls entered, stood in a horseshoe formation and sang "O gentle earth, O Holy Immortal One." Looking down at them were the darkened Byzantine faces with the inscriptions Mother of God, Jesus Christ—in ancient flowery Slavic letters. The Immaculate Virgin—a sorrowful, dark face, with eyes

overflowing with love. How many millions of eyes had looked at her and how many lips had uttered: "•Mater Dei, ora pro nobis." In the universe, in eternity, in immeasurable expanses, in hearts.

On the other side of the Royal Doors that have already been torn off their hinges, there is another dark face with large eyes. It is He—•Ecce Homo! God. The Saviour. Christ. The Teacher. Even now He is holding an opened book, and in it a few words can be seen: " . . . and I will bring you peace."

The first sentence of this thought is ruined, someone had thrown a stone or something sharp at it and so there was now a hole where the words of comfort stood. Evangelists, prophets, angels. Every one of them had received a blow with something sharp—they all had holes in them. Christ is riding on a donkey into Jerusalem, cloaks and palm branches are being spread before him. Only the top half of Christ is visible, the donkey has tumbled into a hole. It's the same with the Holy Supper, with the Resurrection.

And all of them remain quietly in their places, all look on silently. The grain lies under their feet in a rolling mound, like a sand dune. From the gloomy walls drip the whispers "Ora pro nobis," black figures get up, walk about, and walk out, from afar echoes the singing: "O gentle world, O Holy Immortal One . . ." Mounds of grain stir, the kernels slowly flow and fall downwards, roll about, wise men and prophets with long beards look on, smile wrathfully. In their strong, muscular hands there are both ink horns and goose feathers. They are writing the book of life.

In the gateway of the bell tower there is a guard. The wind whips the snow around and there is a deep silence everywhere. There is no light anywhere. To one side, in the sentry box, where in Tartar times there was a watchman, four guards are now sleeping on an old, teetering cot spread with straw. They had played cards until late at night and now they were sleeping soundly; they have no reason to be concerned about what's happening out there in the wider world. They are guards, flesh, matter . . .

And a little farther on, to one side of the monastery stands the battered cover of the monastery's old well. Over the course of

centuries water had been drawn out of it with the help of a large wheel. Now this well is not used, its small thatched roof is ragged, its wheel has fallen off. Lower down, the remnants of icons, the tatters of vestments stick out in the water. No one takes notice any more of this abandoned, walled hole.

But then suddenly, in the dead of night, seven peasants emerged from this hole to the surface of the earth. They were carrying ropes, hooks, knives, and axes.

At the head of this group of seven was none other than Arkhyp, looking like an apparition. Yes it was he. He had remembered that a half-ruined underground passageway led from the outside into the well. He had known about it from the time that as a young school boy he had looked for treasure in it. Arkhyp recalled that now he indeed might find a treasure in it.

He convinced his neighbours, and a decision was made. "We're going to perish anyway," he said.

And now they were here. Everything was so familiar. Here were the ruins of the former theological school. The remains of the fence, the tombstones and crosses. Now everything was all drifted over with snow.

In the monastery yard there was a flurry of activity. Arkhyp rushed up to the gateway and his friends followed after him. Seven shadows were running next to the enclosure, next to the fence; they jumped over the tombstones of the deceased archimandrites, made their way to the portal of the gate. There was a brief scuffle at the sentry box, the guard had opened the gate a bit to see what was happening, but a moment later he was lying on the frozen ground.

Onwards! Onwards, fellows!

Now they are running once again along the stone walls of the church, they rush up to the forged door that has a large lock; their axes and cudgels get down to work, the hinges are ripped out, the heavy door is forced open. It is done! They have reached their goal.

A light flashes.

A heap of grain seems to step forward like an apparition to meet them.

Grain! My good people, there's grain! Right here in this pyramid, take it, eat it, and live.

All seven of them attack that heap. Their hands are sticky with blood, but they dig them into the grain, rake in the kernels, stuff them into their pockets, their mouths, their sacks. The kernels cling to their palms, to their fingers. The dim light of a candle is blinking weakly and is hardly able to reach the feet of the Virgin Mary and her son, Christ, who are watching them from where they are. Beyond the grated windows the wind is howling and whistling.

On that day something slightly different happened in the village. At dawn there was a funeral, a few coffins were carried to the cemetery. There was a funeral every day, but coffins were not carried every day.

Later that day, people from the regional office appeared in the village. Some of the living heard the news that a guard had been slaughtered at the monastery gateway, and the door of the monastery church had been torn off its hinges . . . And this was not a sensation. People who are dying are not interested in the death of a neighbour. For them it is all the same.

But on that same evening, a rumour was whispered throughout the village that coffins packed with grain were found in the cemetery.

Many people wept helplessly. Others cursed . . .

VIII

A sharp easterly wind tears through the valley, black poplars and alder trees by the monastery pond rattle their bare branches, poplar trees hiss with their sharp peaks. On a hillock to the east of the pond stands the old plum orchard that formerly belonged to the monastery; beyond the orchard there is a yard, the ruins of a

barn that had been burned down during the revolution, and now its brick posts, half-covered with snow, loom silently. Higher up there are old buildings, barns, cowsheds, and a small dilapidated guardhouse.

The wind is beating against the walls of the buildings, a bleary spot of light is visible in the window of the guardhouse. Snow is plastered on the window frame, frost covers the four small window panes.

The light testifies to the fact that there is life behind that window. A human being most certainly lives there.

Now, for example, the light has even moved. This has to be glaring evidence that there is a person in there. It means that a person has risen to his feet, taken the small lamp, and carried it from one spot to another. This is an interesting example taken from life. Everywhere, my friends, where there is life, there must also be light.

Yes. Someone is living in the guardhouse.

It is in there that the life of a little old man with a crippled left foot is burning itself out—"Lord have mercy"—it is the former Hnat. It is he.

The revolution came—Hnat lived. The Komsomols came—Hnat lived. He bent like a willow, clung to the ground like a leaf torn off by a storm, often became unnoticeable as if he had donned a cap that made him invisible. At times he crawled under the ground like a worm and waited his turn there.

And it was in this way that he had remained on the earth, here in the monastery that bore the name "Lord have mercy." And he was not even considered to be a "superfluous element." Oh, no. For example, he was a caretaker, and a caretaker had an important function now. Over there stood a few buildings, and in them there were chickens for breeding, several pigs, and even some rabbits and doves. Under the thatched roofs sparrows chirped as they had done in the olden days. Today this is called a •Radhosp—something very sickly, dying at times, and at other times coming to life with dramas, Komsomols, parades, and gunshots.

Hnat sees everything very well. From under his bushy grey eyebrows two greyish eyes that are still sharp look out at God's world. He sees everything, but he remains silent, he remains severely, sadly silent. Not a single word has escaped him in the past while.

It is objects that know how to remain silent like that, for Hnat knows that if he does not say anything he will continue living. And so he'll stick more closely to the pigs. It's better that way. Pigs are also living creatures, and they will always be given something to eat. They will not protest nor will they say that the devil is ruling the earth. It's all the same to them . . . And that is why Hnat prefers being a guard for the pigs so long as there are these pigs and the couple of cows that belong to this surreal, apocalyptic power that is called a state.

And so it is that Hnat has stayed alive, even though he should have died.

People and bits of news come to Hnat. This is not good. People and bits of news may bring with them hunger and death, but now Hnat is not able to flee any farther. There is nowhere to flee. He senses that death is now walking openly over the earth, it walks wherever it wants to, and no one can defend himself from it. Only this evening word came that the guard in the monastery sentry box had been slaughtered. One would have thought—he was a guard—but what had happened? Who had done it? No one had done it. That's how things should be. Death.

Hnat responds to everything and to everyone with a scrap of bread, and this saves him. He still has grain. Where does he get that grain? He gets it from the pigs. The animals give him the remainder of their barley, Hant gathers it up, sweeps it up, dries it, bakes . . .

In his guard house there is an oven, and very often in the evening the aroma of fresh barley bread wafts from there.

And, when someone comes by to see him, a conversation usually ensues.

"Hanna choked her baby to death."

Silence.

The things that they tell him. They go on and on, without end. And when it grows dark, Hnat tucks a piece of bread in his bosom and slowly, like a shadow, goes past the tumbled-down fences, among the empty houses, makes his way into the village to a certain corner of it and there, without saying a word, opens a stranger's door and leaves a scrap of bread. In most cases he does this where there are children, infants . . . Those who cannot talk as yet, whose bodies have not been finally formed, and whose souls are still asleep.

It was in this way that Hnat was at Nadiya's home and at Hanna's, and in the homes of many others. But what can he accomplish? There are so many of them, and he is but one. What can he do?

He comes back home, to his hearth, takes out a grimy book wrapped in rags, takes out a worm-riddled cross, and searches for an answer in them.

But everyone knows that Hnat has publicly renounced Christ. It was said that all of the monks, his colleagues, were taken someplace to Siberia, but Hnat stated clearly in front of everybody: "Religion is the opium of the people." Oh, how "they" all rejoiced, because, after all, who had said that? A Bolshevik? A Communist? A Komsomol? No. It was Hnat who had said this—a servant of Christ, a traitor. For saying this he received an award from the Komsomols: they turned him into a swineherd—a great and honourable social function.

At night Hnat stays awake for a long time . . . He sits by a small lamp and leafs through his book. The shadow from a little cross falls off to one side. At times his widely opened eyes roam the blank wall. Sometimes tears appear on the old man's cheeks and grey beard and trickle downwards. They flow, drop on the table, on the book, on his hands . . .

Changes that are big, very big, have come about . . . Changes greater than treason, than faithfulness, than sin, than goodness, than hate, than love. No one knows this. Everyone is living the

life of a worm and they are all dying in the same manner. Only Hnat knows this.

He said to himself, very secretively: "I will not die, because I will not go along with this world. I will choose another path, a different one for myself. I'll steer clear of them just as one steers clear of the plague, of a conflagration, of a misfortune. They think that they believe. No. They are disillusioned. They are throwing away one thing and substituting another. They say, idols. They persecute idolaters. They don't want God. They're blind! They don't see anything! They're ignorant and they're impoverished." And what he had said about opium, he had said knowingly. "What do those poor souls understand about the reality of the Highest Power on the earth and in the universe? What did they, these small-minded people understand? They are laughing at themselves while they are still alive, so what will happen in a hundred, in a thousand years?"

Hnat recalls the past.

It was like a great miracle. Life had been holy. It had been pleasant. It had been warm. It had been satisfying. A church, a garden, a gateway, an exit that led through a small back door beyond the stone walls. The sun was setting over Horodny, down below the pond was gleaming, and the leaves of the black poplars were rustling. What untold-of melodies were being sung by the heavens, and the earth, and all the beings on it, and above all of that there was God. Not the word, but God. "O gentle world, O Holy Immortal One."

Hnat recalls Palm Sunday.

Crowding together in the light of waxen candles, the people pushed and jostled one another to get a willow branch. A willow branch! Just as they crowded now to get grain.

"Forgive us, O Lord, that this is how things are on this earth. This is what You Yourself wanted. Why did You give us so little, after showing us so much? We are chasing after a mirage that You have placed before us, and we fall into mud, dust, manure. But then You Yourself can see how helpless we are."

Occasionally Hnat feels that he is being reincarnated, he abandons his nook, his soul flies into the unknown. There he sees those who are happy, fortunate, wealthy. They live as they wish to live, and they do not believe that next to them there can be something like there is down here. They have their own morality, they have faith in one another, they have faith in general. He hears singing, music, clarity. "It's really too bad, it's really too bad," the words burst forth from the very soul of that person. "Soon you will be no longer, just as we are not. You too will be gobbled up by the Antichrist. And you too will tell lies in the name of God, renouncing everything that you believe in . . . and you will die in the same way . . . "

People keep coming and coming to see Hnat. Occasionally they tell him things . . . They tell him that in Kyiv the church has been unexpectedly renewed, that somewhere over there a prophet has been born, a prophet who was supposed to come to chase away all these cursed ones and to restore human order.

One time they came and told him that yesterday "they came" once again and "took away" some people, and that Arkhyp was among them. All because of that wheat. That's what had happened. And Arkhyp would never come back.

"But he has a small child," Hnat spoke out unexpectedly.

"Uh-huh," someone murmured. "The child will also die. They'll throw Arkhyp's family out of the house. He dared to touch that accursed grain."

"Let's go, people . . . It's late already."

It truly was late. The people leave. Hnat is left alone and he closes the door tightly. It would be best if they didn't come here, because the very devil himself comes here with them. "They" would come and take him away, but his time has not yet come. Hnat does not want to go as yet, he is still afraid. Hnat still wants to live, he wants to see something. He has his secret and he is living for it.

That is why Hnat is not able to sleep well . . . Because what if "they" knocked on his door? They would say: "Come out, you

sorcerer. We've been waiting for you a long time." And they would take him in the middle of the dark night, and no one would know where he had vanished.

And later, when it grows completely quiet outdoors, when midnight is approaching, Hnat pulls out a piece of his barley bread, wraps it in a rag and sets out . . . Out there, in the darkness, he is looking for the house of Arkhyp's Nadiya.

IX

The months went by and it was growing warmer. There was less snow, the ground was covered with black patches. The wind was swaying the trees that had buds growing on their branches, and above them crows were flying and cawing.

One morning a warm rain started to fall. There were puddles of water from the continual dripping. Water was gurgling as it poured from the roofs in streamlets and formed large clear bubbles. Sirko huddled more closely to the wall, drew himself up more tightly, tucked in his head. A deep silence reigned in the village. Dogs were not barking. It was said that there weren't any left. They had been eaten. Only Sirko was still here. No one bothered him. The barking of dogs did not irritate him. He could sleep peacefully.

But Korniy was not able to sleep peacefully. He went to the storeroom, brought in a gallon of bran siftings.

"This is the last of it, Maria . . . Bake it somehow . . . You know how. Maybe add more bark . . . Add it, go ahead and add it, you hear? It tasted just fine yesterday . . ."

"Oh-h-h, if it weren't for that little one. It can't digest it . . ."

"That's right. . . But will it survive? And how is she? Is she still able to get up?"

Maria could not reply. A hacking cough was tormenting her. She finished coughing.

"She seems to be able to get up . . . She came by yesterday and she, that child of mine, asked about Lavrin . . . He hasn't come,

mother, has he, she asked me. I shook my head. Do you think that he'll come, I said. Never, my child, he won't ever come . . . But why, she asked, did they do that to him? For the same reason that they did it to all the others . . . Can all of them who are there even be counted?"

Maria baked up the last of what they had. She puffed and panted, coughed, took this last biscuit, broke it in half and set out for Nadiya's home.

Nadiya was sick, she could hardly get up.

Maria gave her the small piece of biscuit. "And how is the little one?"

"Sleeping. Do you hear how she's breathing?"

Maria stands over the child and thinks: "You'll die, my dear child. In this whole wide world there no longer is even a bit of bread for you . . . Just a tiny bit of bread . . ."

She looked out the window. In the yard the trees were budding. The earth was still feeding them, and the laws of Marx had not forbidden them to bring forth new life and new joy. Farther on, a foothill could be seen. The black patches of ground swam in her eyes. Spring was walking over the fields.

Maria went home.

At home Korniy met her with a bloody axe. She shuddered and took a step backwards.

"Why did you get scared? I slaughtered our old nag. We have to have something to eat. Is the little one still living?"

"She's still breathing. She's breathing rather strangely . . ."

"And what about her?"

"Oh-h-h!" Maria uttered and she recalled something from long ago. She just waved her hand dismissively.

"You say there's no hope? I was just walking home and I met up with three people. They were carrying someone to the cemetery. They're dying off already. The children are dying. If only we can make it through until the greenery comes up. We have only old Sirko left . . . I feel sorry for him . . ."

Maria did not say anything.

She went into the house and lay down. She lay down every day, and as she lay there, she was convinced that she would not get up again.

But then she would think about Nadiya. She thought about her little Christine and so she would get up again. And how could she not get up? She had to get up. She could not let a living child perish. Even a dead person would have to feel her pain and get up again.

She would get up, light a fire in the oven, bake or cook something, wrap it up in a bundle and set out with it. She walked slowly, breathing heavily, stopping frequently to catch her breath, looking all around as if she were bidding farewell every day to the fields, the orchards, the sky. Then she would continue on her way.

It was spring again. Oh, if only one could go out on the field at least one more time, look at its broad expanse and recall the past. One did not even have to try to recall it—it came to mind all by itself. Not an hour, not a minute went by but one remembered something.

People were roaming over the fields. What were they looking for? In the thawing ground you could find a rotten potato in the potato patch. Sometimes you could even find one that wasn't rotten; and you were lucky if there was no one else nearby.

Serhiy Hnyda and Karpo Fiyan were friends. They had been together all their lives and one day the two of them went out to gather rotten potatoes. In one place they happened to come across a spot that had not been dug up

"This spot," Hnyda said, "is mine. I'm the one who found it."

"Don't talk nonsense. I'm the one who found it. I knew back in the fall that this spot had not been dug up . . . I came here on purpose," Fiyan responded.

"Oh, listen! You'd do better to step aside. Keep on going. You'll find more over there! You know how many children I have, don't you?"

They both grew stubborn. Hnyda struck Fiyan with his spade, and the latter was left lying in the potato patch. Hnyda began

digging up the treasure in a panic; he was digging feverishly. What if the evil one saw to it that someone else came along . . .

Later there was a lot of talk in the village that Hnyda had hewn Fiyan to death. For some reason the authorities did not hear about it, because Fiyan's corpse had vanished, and no one knew where it had gone. There was no time to look for it.

Korniy is picking at a large horse bone and then he takes it outside.

"Here, Sirko, come here! Where have you gone off to? Here, eat it!" He gave the bone to the dog, and the dog started gnawing on it as Korniy stood and watched him. "Eat it, go ahead and eat it, because you might not get anything to eat tomorrow."

Maria is sitting in the inglenook. Korniy knows that it is his wife in there, that they have lived together many, many years. She wants to eat. What would she take to feed Nadiya tomorrow?

"We should somehow or other bring her to our place, Maria. You can't go on walking over there . . ."

"We should, but how are we going to do that? She can't walk on her own. She won't get here. And what about the child? Well, perhaps you could carry the child, but how will you be able to bring Nadiya?"

In the evening Korniy sharpened his axe and went outdoors. It was dark. There were countless stars in the sky, and the Milky Way was spread over its broad expanse. Maksym's house was brightly lit. People were bustling about in there, and a loud racket could be heard.

Korniy called his dog.

Sirko ran up to him, nestled against him, licked his master's hand—the hand that was holding the axe.

"Oh, you, you, you!" Korniy petted Sirko's big soft head.

And suddenly Korniy felt sorry for the dog. He dropped the axe on the ground, sat down beside it on the damp grass, and hugged Sirko. The dog whined and cuddled up to the old man.

And they stayed like that for a long time.

In the sky that appeared to be made of steel, there were stars and the Milky Way. In Maksym's house people were singing. Sirko and Korniy sat cuddled in an embrace and listened to the singing.

"Yes, yes, my good dog," Korniy's lips whispered. "Our time has passed. I found you as a little puppy and I thought: grow. I have a farm and you will protect it. And you have protected it, haven't you? And how . . . O my God! You certainly have . . . Night after night you run around and bark! And bark! I worked. Many a time I would come into the yard barely able to drag my feet. I would feel like dying, and you would do your thing, you always did your thing. . . Isn't that right? Isn't it? Don't cry, my dear dog. Don't cry. You at least must not cry . . ."

The night was passing, there was the scent of spring in the air. From the distant fields wafted the aroma of rich black soil. Korniy smelled that aroma and memories awakened within him.

"Go, my good dog . . . Go away, and I'll also go. Go and don't tempt me. I can't raise my hand against you."

He rose to his feet, took his axe, and went into the house.

"Are you sleeping, Maria?"

Silence.

"Are you asleep, Maria?"

"Do you suppose that it's possible to sleep? I'm thinking about Nadiya. What if I can't get up . . . You'll go to see her . .. . Maybe you can go tomorrow."

"Tomorrow I have to go and find something to eat . . . And it's cold in the house . . . Are there live coals in the oven?" He went up to the oven and opened it. "Yes there are. I'll put in some firewood. Don't you get up. Stay where you are, stay there. I'll do it myself."

He put in some dry kindling, and the fire started to blaze at once. He added a few sticks of firewood and warmed his old damp hands. Then he put a pot of water on to boil, took a pillow and blanket, warmed them by the oven, and tucked them around Maria.

"There, there! Just lie there. At least you can warm up a bit. I'll go somewhere tomorrow. Maybe I'll find something . . . and maybe I'll step in to see . . ."

A beam of light from the oven was flitting around the room. It leapt on a shelf, lit it up . . . Korniy remembered something; he walked up to the shelf and reached for the whetstone that he kept there.

"What are you doing, Korniy?" Maria asked.

"I'm sharpening the axe . . . I'm going out in the field tomorrow, and there's no point in going without an axe."

X

The next day Korniy went into the forest just as dawn was breaking. He did not go to the southern part close to his home. No. He made a lengthy loop through the village, crossed the riverbank near the former monastery mill, and came out where Martyn's farmstead stood.

There was just an open field here now. The verdant farmstead had vanished. The orchard was laid waste. The revolutionary hurricane had raged furiously in places where orchards had blossomed, where laughter had once been heard.

Over there stood an abandoned, filled-in well. Korniy walked up to it and stopped at the spot where Maria had once drawn water from it. How many years had gone by since then? And how many days? Many, very many, but they had survived everything, and it seemed as if it had all been just a single day.

The sun rose high in the heavens. The sky was blue and as clear as a child's eye. The sunny side of the field was already free of snow, and the ground was drying. Korniy used to plough over there, by the hillock where a single tree was standing. Back then there had been a small forest there, but the revolution had swept it away. Farther on there was a thicket. That was where he had to go. And Korniy walked haltingly in the direction of the thicket.

But it no longer was a thicket. It had been a forest for some time now. Korniy hobbled up to it, stopped under some young oak trees and took off his cap. Crows were cawing and flying above him, a hawk was circling high up in the sky. On a tall slim young oak tree, an energetic bird was building a nest. The buds on the trees were fresh, fragrant, swollen. It was wet underfoot, and it felt like spring. Even the damp soil made one sense it.

Korniy was looking for something edible. He was thinking about his wife, his daughter, and his little granddaughter. They all wanted to eat. They were all waiting for him to come home. And so he walked through the forest looking at the birds, the trees, and the plants . . .

What could he find here? All of this was not created to be eaten as food. He gathered up a few buds, shaved some bark off a birch tree. And then he went to the edge of the forest.

Sun and more sun. How strong the young sun was, and how much sunlight it gave off. The sun's rays spread as far as the eye could see, the earth was fainting with delight. It seemed that a holy mystery of procreation was transpiring.

He went right across the unploughed fields. And good luck, completely unexpected and completely exceptional, came his way. A dead rabbit was lying in a small ditch where there was still some snow. Korniy happened to find it, and he stopped and just stood there for a long time, because he could not believe that it truly was a rabbit that was not alive and ready to be picked up, torn apart, and eaten.

Korniy felt a surge of joy and, before bending over, he looked around to see if there was anyone else nearby and then let out a loud cry of satisfaction. Yes! That meant that he'd have something to eat. It meant that he'd bring it home and show Maria: "Look! Here's something to eat. This is what I found today, on this cheerful sunny day."

And Korniy picked up the rabbit. It had not even begun to rot. It was completely whole and completely fresh. He cut it open with his sharp axe and, after finding a dry spot, sat down to rest and to

have a bite to eat. Do you suppose that he had eaten today? Of course not. What was he to eat? He just got out of bed and walked away. It was a good thing that Maria had still been sleeping.

He thought about Maria. "If I only knew that I could get home, I wouldn't start eating the rabbit. It could be for the child. But that's the problem, that I won't make it home. How am I to get home if my legs are buckling under me and refusing to take a step. . . Try as you will, they just don't want to go, and that's that. All one can do is sit down and weep."

And now it was also windy. Such a wind had blown in that it pushed a man wherever it felt like pushing him. In springtime there are always winds, but he couldn't remember such a brisk, forceful wind. No, no . . . He didn't remember anything quite like it, a wind that didn't let you walk, that toppled you off your feet as if you were just a child.

He ate a few chunks of the rabbit meat, stood up, and began struggling anew with the wind. And the sun continued shining, it was flaming, so brightly, so implacably. Korniy felt that he had been walking for a long time, a very long time, but when he glanced backwards, he saw that the forest was not all that far behind him. By the time that he made his way to the mill, he had pains in his stomach, cramps, and then he could not stop himself from throwing up.

"And why did I go so far?" he asked himself. "Don't go for so many miles. You won't be able to drag your feet back home. Didn't you see what you were like? But no. You just kept on going. And so you've done it now. Now your legs are trembling, and just try to go any farther."

Korniy thought about what he should do, and as he did so he glanced down at the meat that he had just vomited. It was a pity to waste it. He slowly bent over and ate it again. Perhaps he would not throw it up again. Perhaps God would not permit that to happen . . .

As he walked through the village he carried the rabbit and his axe under his shirt. The streets were empty but it still was the

better part of wisdom not to tempt anyone. Who could know . . . In times like these, anything could happen.

At home he asked first of all: "Are you still alive, Maria? I brought a rabbit. Prepare it, eat some yourself, and take them a bit . . . You weren't at their place? Oh-h-h, o-h-h-h, oh-h-h! I don't have any strength . . . It's strange where that strength of mine has disappeared. I just came home, and now I wish I could harness a horse and drag it outside. You most likely don't have any firewood, right? What? You do have some? Well then, I'll lie down for a bit. I've never been so tired in my whole life. I can swear to God that I'm speaking truthfully. And I've had a bite to eat . . . . I sat down by the mill and had my lunch . . ." he said as he lay down on the bare bench and fell asleep.

Maria was busying herself with the rabbit, and she did not bother Korniy. Let him rest . . .

XI

Korniy woke up in the evening and saw Maria standing before him. "Why are you looking at me like that? What's wrong with you, Maria?"

"I arrived at her place, and she was lying in bed. I shouted: 'Nadiya!' She didn't hear me. I called out to her. Finally she opened her eyes and laughed so strangely, you know, she laughed so frighteningly. 'And where's the little one?' I asked. But she didn't understand what I was saying. 'What little one,' she said. 'Where's little Christine?' She laughed once again. 'Little Christine isn't here. She's gone . . .'"

Korniy stared wide-eyed. "She's gone? What are you saying? How can that be? How can that possibly be?" Korniy shouted. "That simply can't be!"

"The little one ate the biscuit yesterday. There was bark in it. She was just an infant. It gave her cramps. But . . ." Maria bent in more closely to Korniy and whispered softly: "She choked the

little one . . . She choked it . . . The child was suffering and so she choked it. And she looks so wild. Go to see her. She no longer wants to eat, she's swearing and laughing . . ."

Maria spread her hands helplessly.

Korniy stopped breathing.

He was listening and it seemed to him that he was having a terrible nightmare.

Maria lay down once again, and Korniy went outdoors.

He came back late, when night had already fallen.

Maria was lying on the bed and gazing into the darkness. She heard some noise and called out: "Is it you, Korniy?"

"Yes."

"Were you there?"

"Yes."

"Well, what?"

"She said not to come any more. Why keep on coming to see me, she said. It's no use . . ."

"Oh, my child, my child! Why go to see her? She doesn't understand why we go to see her . . ."

"Sleep, Maria. I'll go outside. It's so quiet there . . ."

And Korniy went outdoors. But as he walked out, he took his axe. It was dark and quiet.

Sirko ran up to him.

"Go away! Don't get in my way!"

Sirko hung his tail and slinked away, and Korniy headed straight towards the yard of his son Maksym. He was walking briskly. He felt strong, and his mind was functioning very clearly. He walked up to the door and knocked on it. No one answered for quite a while.

Finally a voice responded from the porch. It was Maksym's servant Hafiya.

"Who's there?"

"It's Korniy. Is my son Maksym at home?"

"They're sleeping . . ."

"Open up. I want to talk to him."

Hafiya opened the door, and Korniy walked directly to the room where Maksym was sleeping with his wife.

"Who's there?" Maksym asked sleepily as he woke up with a start.

But Korniy felt no need to respond. He saw before him the dim outlines of the bed and Maksym. He walked up to Maksym with a few quick steps and swung his axe forcefully once and then a second time.

There was a wild, desperate cry and then silence. The sharp blade of the axe had struck something soft, something that gave in easily, and so it burrowed itself deeply. From the white, warm bed there came a few groans, but they soon died off.

Korniy kept on striking and striking.

He was striking the way a little boy keeps striking nettles or weeds until his arm gets tired.

And then Korniy finally came to his senses; he stopped and listened to hear if everything was as it should be.

But where had Hafiya vanished?

He turned around: "Hafiya! Hafiya! Where are you?"

No one replied.

Korniy placed his axe on his arm and walked out.

The night was still and starry.

He came home. "She's sleeping. Let her sleep."

But Maria was not sleeping. She stirred: "Where were you, Korniy?"

"Oh, I just went out for a while. . . I went outside and walked around a bit. It's nice out there . . . And now I'm going out again. You sleep. Sleep, my dear Maria, rest."

He walked up to her, tucked her in tightly into an old sheepskin coat. "Are you warm enough, Maria? Well then, go to sleep. And I . . . And so it's all over . . . I want to say, that it's all over. . . We lived, we lived together for such a long time, we shared our grief and . . . Oh, is it really necessary to say anything?"

He got up and started to leave, but then he turned back. "Is there any rabbit left? No. I'm just asking . . . I don't want to eat. I

ate a bit, and I don't feel hungry. I hope there's at least enough for tomorrow. And you'll most certainly go to see Nadiya? Go, and tell her that I bless her . . . Tell her that maybe she'll live through this. Maybe there will still be . . . maybe our family won't vanish . . . Tell her . . . Tell her everything . . ."

"Are you going somewhere far away, Korniy?"

"I don't know. Where, far away? I'll just go and maybe I'll find something else. Maybe I'll find our sons . . . Maybe . . ." His voice trembled, and he cut himself off. His legs were beginning to shake and he walked quickly to the doorway. The door creaked and closed behind him. It was dark and quiet in the house.

"Korniy!" Maria called out softly.

There was no reply.

"Korniy!" she called out more loudly.

Silence.

Outside Sirko ran up to Korniy.

"Come, come my good dog! We'll go together. We'll go out into the world, we'll fall down somewhere, we'll hug one another and die together . . ."

Korniy hobbled straight into the field, and the dog trailed after him with a lowered head and a drooping tail.

They never came back.

XII

When Maria woke up she was surprised that Korniy was not there. She called him once, twice, a third time. He wasn't there. She called him during the night. When the sun rose, she called him and struggled to her feet. Where could he be?

And then—people started gathering. They were all strangers. It was those, the Red ones, with guns. They asked her where her old man was. How was she to know where he was. He went someplace. They were looking for something; they found the bloodied axe and took it with them.

And then things became clearer to Maria. She sat down on the rumpled bed and stared at the people with widely opened eyes.

They asked her questions, she responded.

They asked her how old she was.

She was silent and then she smiled. "I've lived for many, many years, O human children. You won't live for that many."

The human children swore at her and went away. Maria did not have enough strength to go to see Nadiya, but she still forced herself to try.

She went out in the yard and collapsed. And strangely enough, Hnat appeared out of nowhere. He had been on his way to see Maria.

He said: "I heard about everything that happened, and I thought I should come to see you. Get up Maria . . . Yes, yes, that's how . . . Lean on my shoulder. Now, now . . ."

He struggled, groaned, and got her to her feet.

Maria was not even surprised that he had come. It seemed to her that's what should have happened. She went into the house and lay down on the bed.

Hnat sat down beside her and silently looked at her face for a long time. Wrinkled, withered, sunken cheeks. Jaw bones that stuck out sharply; eyes, darkened, extinguished, that had settled into damp spots. Tufts of grey hair creeping out from under a torn, grimy kerchief.

"Well, then . . ." the words were squeezed out of Hnat. "And is this how it ends for us? Maria? What's wrong with you?"

"Oh-h-h . . ." Maria could hardly manage to say.

Hnat heard that short word and drew in his head. Evening was falling. The spring sun was setting and a strong ray fell on the bed.

Maria opened her eyes, looked towards the sun, stuck out her bony arm, and stretched it as far as she could. "The sun!" she said. "The sun! Just look at that sun, Hnat. Have you ever seen a sun like that?"

The sunbeams lit up the withered veins in her arms, fell on her sunken eyes, tinged her grey hair.

Maria did not close her eyes. She was staring calmly and expansively.

Hnat sat silently and in his heart the dead were being resurrected from their graves; people were rising from their coffins, people from distant times, forgotten, scattered over the entire earth. They rose joyfully and sang uplifting songs.

Hnat smiled. Then he raised his arm, took Maria's hand, the one that was stretched towards the sun, and kissed it gently for a long time.

He kissed it and said: "I'm kissing the hand of a mother. I'm kissing a great holiness. I'm kissing travail! O Maria! Maria!"

The sun's rays flooded the bed, Hnat, and Maria. In Hnat's soul a terrible judgement was occurring. "Maria! Hear my confession. Forgive me for what I did to you in the days of our youth. Oh, how brief our life is! How insignificant. So, I've lived, and what's next? Forgive me, Maria, once, twice, a third time!"

Maria turned her gaze on Hnat. "You, Hnat! You're a holy person. We'll go there together . . . You know? There, where our dear little Roman, our Nadiya . . . The first one and the other one. Where they all are . . . All of them, Hnat . . . But we're still here. How I long to meet them . . . Don't ask me for forgiveness, Hnat. God forgives, but I have nothing to forgive. There's Nadiya . . . If only I could go to see her, if only I could give her something . . . She's hungry . . . She needs bread. Oh-h-h, where's that bread?"

"And Korniy hasn't come back?" Hnat asks.

"There are many who have not come back, Hnat. None of them have come back. Not Demko, nor Lavrin . . . and . . . he also . . . has gone . . ."

Hnat remained silent for a long time and he watched as the sun set, as the brilliant light gradually faded and twilight descended. Then he started speaking once again.

"But you know what, Maria? You know, back then, on that holy night, at Easter? Do you remember that you were praying in the church, but when you came home you fell to the ground and wailed? Back then, when all the work of your holy hands went up

into the sky along with the smoke? It was I . . . I . . . Maria . . . I did it out of love . . ."

Maria was silent; but when he finished speaking, she lightly squeezed his hand. "Hush. I know. Be quiet!"

The sun set, and darkness fell on all of Ukraine.

Hnat left Maria all alone. He would come again tomorrow.

Maria was lying on her back, staring into the murkiness, into the boundless darkness, and she was beginning to slowly look at the pages of the book of her life that Hnat had opened for her.

Hnat did not come the next day. He also did not come on the day after that.

The sun rose, and the sun set, but he did not come. The wind was blowing gently under the windows and at times it peeked into cracks along with the moon that, suspended in the vast expanses, was coating everything with a copper colour.

During those days Maria was far beyond herself, beyond time, beyond space.

Hnat's arrival had brought about her awakening, and when he left, she could not quickly fall back into oblivion. Her hands began groping at everything around her. And her eyes lit up and burned with a quivering, tender flame.

In that revived glow Maria saw, and could not tear herself away from, the vision of her strange, very strange and guileless existence.

How many days had it been? And now they were all spread before her. She smiled because she realized that it had all been just like a single moment, and her lips whispered of their own accord: "O Lord, O Lord!"

And after that, not having received a response and not expecting any, Maria began looking over the book of her life, page after page.

She was surrounded by thoughts and shadows—sharp and undeniable that had been part of her during her days here on earth.

First of all, the children—those that she had given birth to, and a smile flamed on her blue lips. Her hands wanted to raise themselves in order to touch them. They were right here, and over there, and on all sides. Little Roman, and the first Nadiya, and Demko, and Lavrin, and even that Maksym, and the second, final, Nadiya. And Korniy her bane and her good fortune was also here with them. His face was dark, as if he was made completely out of shadows. Maria's lips whispered, as if she was pleading with the darkness.

Her eyes closed for a moment, and a few tears were squeezed out of them—tears that flowed damply over her congealed sallow wrinkles . . .

But among all of them Hnat was nowhere to be seen. He was still here in the flesh and he would still come to her. After all, he had even promised that he would come. Maria could still hear the echoes of his voice.

Wait, wait! Move aside a bit, make some room for him, and let him come. They all listen to her; move away and vanish.

An emptiness is created, one that flows at once into eternity, but not a single human face is to be seen in it. There is no one and nothing.

But Maria still waits, and that waiting granted her an extra three days and three nights.

Why wasn't Hnat coming? Never before had Maria waited for someone with such deathly tension. Never in her whole life had she wanted to see someone as badly as she wanted to see him. She wanted to see him, to ask him. He most certainly knew everything—that Hnat, that passionate, crushed soul who had been chased into the depths.

He would tell her everything, and it would be easier for her to part with this life.

But Hnat did not come.

Three days ago, right after he left Maria, he went into the village as always with a scrap of barley bread tucked in his bosom and, as always, he set out for Nadiya's house.

The door to her home was open wide, everything in it was overthrown, one of her icons was lying crushed on the threshold, and she herself was sitting in the icon corner on the ground with a noose around her neck. The top end of that noose was tied to a hook on which an icon had once hung.

He could see that something was swaddled in the long shirt clinging to her legs.

And it was then that Hnat went boldly into the village—people were no longer human beings. He no longer had any fear, he had seen everything, understood everything.

It was night, he waited like a dog until morning, called people to come; he did not find anyone, but he continued calling. And when someone appeared, he shouted loudly, with a voice that was broken, and he shook his withered fists at the heavens and cursed. A crippled, wizened old man holding a flail, he stood and preached.

And when the Komsomols came, Hnat went up to one of them and flung in his face the biscuit that he had been bringing for Nadiya.

"Here you are! Eat it! Eat it!"

Hnat was taken away that very same day. They snatched him from the road at once.

As he limped through the village he cast his words on all sides: "You will know disaster! Death will not bypass you as well! Farewell, Yevdokha!" he called out to an empty house. "The cannibals have eaten you as well!"

In the sky a huge avid light was burning. Clouds were floating over the blueness, a breeze was wafting in from the fields carrying with it the aroma of the damp earth.

The 26,258th Day

Maria was turning the last page of her days. She was with all of her family and she was waiting for Hnat. And over the course of her final days Maria slowly faded away, abandoned, alone. The setting sun did not forget Maria, it glanced in on her and kissed her dry, sallow face for a long time. She opened her eyes for the last time and smiled. And the lower that the sun descended, the wider and wider she opened her eyes.

Night was slowly approaching . . .

Is Maria sleeping? No, Maria is not sleeping. She has not slept now for the third night. She is lying on her plank bed and with the gaping, sunken holes of her eyes, she is looking at the window that is flooded with the radiance of the moon.

Orchards are blossoming, a wind steeped in blossoms is wafting in from the south, and a ponderous moon is flaming over the land and the sea.

Maria struggles long and hard to leave this life. The cold, coppery light of the moon pours over her swollen bare legs. Her long withered arms are flung at her sides. Her head is lying stiffly, rigidly. Every nerve is being severed individually. The moon is slowly fading. One after the other, thoughts vanish from her head never to return. Her eyes grow heavy and slowly close. Her dry lips turn cold . . . Her chest caves in . . . The last nerve is tensely severed. Her heart beats one last time.

Night.

A night without beginning and without end.

The night of eternity.

Glossary

The glossary of selected terms and phrases, some familiar, and some obsure, is provided for the convenience of the reader who wishes to gain a fuller appreciation of the historical, social, and political contexts of the novel.

Aurora	Russian naval cruiser, took part in Russo-Japanese war (1904-05); crew joined •Bolshevik revolution and fired canon to signal attack on Tsar's Winter Palace in St. Petersburg
Bolsheviks	members of the radical faction of the Social Democratic Party in Russia that called for seizure of power by the proletariat; after 1918, members of the Communist Party
Bogolubsky	Prince Andrei Bogolubsky of Vladimir (c.1111-1174) sacked and looted Kyiv in 1169
braid being undone	rite of passage from maidenhood to marriage
Central Rada	equivalent of parliament
chornozem	rich black soil [Russian: chernozem]
collectivization	•Soviet appropriation of private farmland by the state with farmers forced to form labour collectives and follow centralized seeding, harvesting directives
Cyril and Methodius	Byzantine Greek brothers who spread Christianity among Slavic peoples, developed Slavonic alphabet; canonized by Orthodox Church, and in 1980 recognized as co-patron saints of Europe by Catholic Church
Deniken	Anton Deniken (1872-1947) served in Russo-Japanese War; general in WWI; commanded monarchist White Army formed in 1917 after the October Revolution; fought against communist Red Army and anarchist Black Army; resigned after being defeated in1920; went into exile, died in Ann Arbor, Michigan

desyatyna	[pl. desyatyny] land measure of approx. 2.7 acres
didukh	sheaf of grain stalks in a place of honour on Christmas Eve; symbolizes souls of ancestors
Ecce Homo	[Latin] Behold the man
five-year plan	Under •Soviet rule, central governments set five-year plans for agricultural and industrial production; their "success" was often trumpeted through manipulated statistics
Hetman	[also otaman] leader of a •kozak army
Holy Supper	Ukrainian Christmas Eve Supper that consists of twelve Lenten dishes
hopak	[pl. hopaky] spirited Ukrainian folk dance
Hrushevsky	Mykhaylo Hrushevsky (1866-1934) Ukrainian historian, politician; key leader in early 20th c. Ukrainian national revival
karbovanets	[pl. karbovantsi] dollar in pre-1966 Ukrainian currency
kartoplyan	play on Ukrainian words for potato and piano
Kashchenko	Adrian Kashchenko (1858-1921) wrote about Zaporozhian •Kozaks, free and democratic Ukrainian forces in the 15th-18th centuries that defied foreign occupiers of Ukraine; his works were censored by the Russian Empire, published briefly in early 20th c. in a free Ukraine, and were then banned again by Communist authorities
katsapy	derogatory Ukrainian term for Russians
kolhosp	collective farm: see •collectivization
kolodka	[pl. kolodky] folk game; logs were tied to the feet of unmarried youths who had to buy their freedom with gifts
Komsomol	a communist organization in the former •Soviet Union for youths 16 years of age and older
kopiyka	[pl. kopiyky] hundredth part of a ruble; penny
korovay	traditional round braided bread adorned with dough figurines; parents bless the wedding couple with it before the marriage ceremony
kozak	[pl. kozaky] Ukrainian equivalent of "Cossack"
Kozak State	from 15th-18th c.; area controlled by free •kozaky that provided refuge to peasants fleeing serfdom;

had democratically elected council and military leadership; see •Sich

krashanka [pl. krashanky] Easter egg dyed in one colour

Kremlin Kremlin fortress in Moscow; traditional centre of power in Russia for most of the last millennia under both Tsarist and Communist rule

Kronshtadt island near St. Petersburg in Russia; traditionally headquarters of Russian Navy and Baltic Fleet

kulak [Russian] [pl. kulaky] well-to-do peasant/farmer; Ukrainian kurkul

kutya ancient ritual dish of boiled wheat, ground poppy seeds, and honey; the first of twelve Lenten dishes served at the Christmas Eve Supper

Lenin Vladimir Lenin (1870-1924) Russian revolutionary leader; •Bolshevik leader; •Soviet premier 1918-1924

Little Russian disparaging term for Ukraine and Ukrainians

makhorka strong tobacco, usually of bad quality

Marxism Karl Heinrich Marx (1818-1883); writer of *The Communist Manifesto*, and with Friedrich Engels (1820-1895) *Das Kapital*, foundational socialist works criticizing capitalism and laying the foundation for Marxism, Communism and various socialist movements

Mater Dei, ora pro nobis [Latin] Mother of God, pray for us.

moskal [pl. moskali] soldier; Muscovite; Russian

Nadiya the name Nadiya in Ukrainian means "hope"

New Economic Policy 1921 New Economic Policy (NEP); temporary relaxation of communist control allowing businesses to operate to prevent the •Soviet economy from collapsing

October Revolution overthrow of the Russian Provisional Government in 1917 by •Lenin's •Bolsheviks

paska [pl. pasky] rich cylindrical Easter bread decorated with elaborate dough ornaments

Petlyura Symon Petlyura (1879-1926) Ukrainian nationalist; briefly headed an independent Ukrainian government after WWI; assassinated in exile in Paris by an anarchist

Petlyurivtsi	followers of •Petlyura
Pilsudski	Jozef Pilsudski (1867-1935) Polish military and political leader; led Poland to freedom in early 20th c; strongly opposed both Imperial Russia and Soviet Union
pood	[pl. poody] weight equivalent to 40 pounds or 16.36 kilograms
Pravda	Russian Communist newspaper of record, literally *The Truth*; government mouthpiece
provody	blessing of graves on first Sunday after Easter
pryzba	earthen embankment around a peasant's hut also used as a sitting area
Radhosp	Radyanske hospodarstvo: state-owned farm
rizka	small decorative wedding tree
rushnyk	[pl. rushnyky] embroidered ceremonial towel
salo	pig fat cured with salt and eaten raw, fried, or boiled
Siberia	far-eastern expanse of Russian Empire; place of incarceration and exile under both Tsarist and Communist rule
Sich	Zaporozhian Sich; •kozak fortress located on an island below major rapids on the Dnipro River, a key transportation route that also splits Ukraine into geographically and politically significant Left and Right bank areas
Socialist-Revolutionary	Russian political party in early 20th c; gained most votes in first democratic election; destroyed by •Bolsheviks
Solovki	monastery turned into a prison camp under •Soviet rule on the Solovetsky Islands in the White Sea
Soviet	pre-1917 a revolutionary council; 1917 to fall of the •USSR a legislative body; adjective meaning: of the USSR
Soviet power	in this context, •Bolshevik or Communist power
Tambovets	a man from the Tambov district in Russia
Tartars	Turkic ethnic group subjugated by the Mongol Empire; swept across much of modern-day Ukraine and Russia in the 12-14 c.

Trotsky	Leon Trotsky (1879-1940) key •Bolshevik leader, second only to •Lenin; internal party split led to his being expelled from Communist Party and •USSR; assassinated by •Soviet agent in Mexico
uncle	term used by peasants when addressing an older man
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (1922-1991) a putative union of 15 nations under single-party Communist rule, dominated by Russia; also known as Soviet Union. The Ukrainian SSR, the second-largest republic, gained its independence in 1991
varenyky	boiled dumplings stuffed with a variety of fillings
Volodymyr and Olha	Volodymyr the Great (c 985-1015) consolidated Kyivan Rus (ancient Ukraine); converted to Orthodox Christianity and baptised his realm; grandmother Olha (c 890-969) was first Rus ruler to adopt Christianity; both venerated as saints.
Wrangel	Baron Pyotr Wrangel (1878-1928) officer in the Imperial Russian Army and later commanding general of the anti-•Bolshevik White Army in the Russian Civil War

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