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Elin Pelin
Short Stories

ELIN PELIN / SHORT STORIES

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Elin Pelin

Short Stories



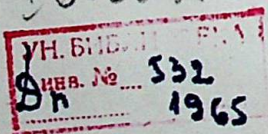
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Ellin Pellin

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE

ELIN PELIN

Dimitër Ivanov, who under the pseudonym of Elin Pelin became one of Bulgaria's finest classical authors, was born in the village of Bailovo near Sofia in 1878, the year of Bulgaria's liberation from the Turkish yoke.

He began his literary career early in the 20th century, a time when capitalism was advancing along countless paths into rural life, disrupting the idyllic, patriarchal life of the peasant, attacking his property, fragmenting his land and driving him out of his customary way of life. To cultivate his land, the Bulgarian had to pray the Lord to guard him from drought, floods and hailstorms, and he had to beg the chorbadjis — the village rich — to charge less interest on the money he had to borrow. And so his eyes turned more often to God; then from the heavens to the earth — that black, deeply furrowed, fertile Bulgarian soil, which the poverty-stricken peasant spent his life ploughing and sowing, which was his fate and his imperative need. This gradual disintegration of the old way of life led to the appearance of farm hands, share-croppers and seasonal unemployment, which sent men wandering in search of work, with their bags of bread and their scythes, frame-saws or axes over their shoulders.

Elin Pelin found his literary chief character in the farm hand. He revealed with insight his inner life as a man, who holds to the sound principles of life, who waters the land with the sweat of his brow, but is free and unbowed in his dreams. He has not been poisoned by the vices, the perpetual money-grubbing and the rapacity of his antithesis — the chorbadjii.

The working-class movement, which was then coming into being and thrusting the first roots of socialism into Bulgarian soil, was still outside the creative scope of this writer. Elin Pelin confined himself to the farm hand, but with merciless force he pointed to the evil in village life: the chorbadjii, the priest, the tax-collector, the mayor, the policeman.

The murmurs of protest against this wrongful life increased. Gradually and slowly the peasant grew aware of what it was that tormented and oppressed him. Disbelief crept in — disbelief in God and the priest, in the tax-collector and the state, in the townsman and the rich man. But he was not yet clear as to where he could turn.

This was the period, which nurtured the stories of Elin Pelin, which are some of the finest in Bulgarian literature — stories of unfulfilled dreams and unrealized impulses, that clash with the paradoxes of life's logic. This is the Bulgarian peasant in his classical aspect — with his hard work and his hard life, his drinking to 'forget' it, and his petty 'sins' of a tormented man who, despite the vicissitudes of fate, preserves his humour and his vitality. The peasant, who no longer fears God or Satan, who, in his poverty, even gets the better of the Devil. 'The Devil' — there he is in that gallery of rural oppressors, grocers and usurers, neither better nor worse than the rulers and masters in the towns.

But there was still much beauty in village life, there was still the rustling murmur of ripe wheat fields, the fragrance of mown grass, the blue mountains in the distance. . . . And that pure and natural love of youthful hearts, which leads to dramas and tragedies, but which keeps its beauty, and in which the character of the Bulgarian woman emerges — hardworking, generous, sensitive and dignified.

Elin Pelin is one of the most socially-minded Bulgarian writers of the turn of the century. With his sensitive use of words he depicts the beauty of nature, the daily life, kindness and intimate humanity of the Bulgarian peasant, and everywhere, in each line he wrote, he left the imprint of the folk song and story, the fragrance of flowers and the bitterness of tears.

Elin Pelin died on December 3, 1949.

But the unique quality and the variety of his peasant characters live on and still arouse sadness at their fate in his readers, and a smile at their faults. It also arouses pleasant expectation, a thirst for something that must happen, that time brings with it and that people await.

If the reader visits Bulgaria, he will find that much has changed in the countryside during the past twenty years. The beauty of the varied landscape, the charm and gaiety of the people, the magic of the folksongs, and even the peace of the vine-shaded monastery courtyards — all these he will find in reality. But the small-holdings, primitively and laboriously worked with the wooden plough and the sickle, have been replaced by the vast fields of the co-operative farms where tractors, harvester combines and even aeroplanes take the burden of labour from man. Dams, irrigation systems and rain-machines have banished for ever the scourge of drought. The majority of farmers already live in newly-built houses, and enjoy the convenience of piped water and electricity. Almost every village has, or is building, a new school, a cinema, a House of Culture and a health centre, or hospital, where treatment is free for all.

To appreciate the present, however, one must know the past, and if one wants to understand the Bulgarian countryside of yesterday, one can have no better introduction than the stories of Elin Pelin.

The Hand of God



terrible sickness was raging in the village, a fell disease, which spread from house to house.

Joy fled, the tormented people mourned.

It was as though evil spirits were hovering over the village.

Lord, what terrible sin have we fallen into, Lord!

And the church bell began to toll out its brazen tones over the careworn little village every morning, inviting old and young to prayer. Zealously the priest read service after service. The small church was open from morn till night, and the afflicted villagers, penitent and frightened, came two or three times a day to light candles, to pray, and to offer up their dearest possessions. Several times they blessed the waters, consecrated oil, covered the icon of the Holy Virgin with silver, heaped gifts on St. John the Healer, but all in vain. Day by day, the disease raged more fiercely, and mowed down the population more mercilessly.

The teacher considered the matter for a long time, and one day he said that the dread disease was propagated by the priest's well. On the village square in front of the priest's house, there was an old well, the waters of which had indeed a better taste than the water of the fountain. But it had no pail, and the peasants dipped into its stagnant waters with all kinds of vessels, and the water which overflowed from them ran back into the well. The teacher was quite right, but he was very young and the villagers would not believe him; they continued to spread the terrible infection all over the village. The fat priest, as superstitious as the best of them, supported them entirely.

'It is the Hand of God!' he said.

And to spite the teacher he blessed the waters of the well. So the sickness gained ground. Everything would go black



before a person's eyes, his head would ache violently, everything sickened him, and he would lie there, neither alive nor dead for weeks. He would pine and wither away. Thus died white Neda. Aglika and Irmena, too, a young bride who had been to church barely a few days earlier. Magda and Yagodin were buried, two sweethearts, in one grave, both young and strong, both the pride of the village.

Even hearts of stone were melted.

Everywhere one felt something terrible, something dark, intangible and sorrowful. All hearts were overwhelmed by despair and inconsolable grief; sadness cast its shadow on the good-natured peasant faces. In that season of hard work, of sweat, of toil and effort, what was one to do first — to see to the sick, or work in the fields?

The fine clear days seemed to grow overcast, the calm, quiet nights — disturbed. At night everybody went home, kept quiet and, from the four corners of the village despairing voices were lifted up, the wails of bereaved mothers, and widowed women, and you could hear them, sad and terrible until the early dawn.

Then yet another disaster overtook the village. There was a drought, and it burnt everything up like a devastating fire, dried up field and crop, springs and wells. For three terrible months there was not a drop of rain anywhere; everything wilted, dried up and became scorched. For three whole months there was not even the shadow of a cloud to be seen in the clear sky. The sun, as if in sheer malignancy, seemed to flame higher and higher every day, beating down more mercilessly than ever. Over the burnt-up fields and meadows, over the dark patches of fallow land and the cracked earth a terrible heat haze hung like a pall. It was as though the very air itself was burning, and when one breathed it in, it seemed to come from hell-heated pipes. People's lungs were seared, their mouths were parched, and their swollen lips cracked and bled.

Scorched nature assumed a mournful, deadly air. From the bare stony crags above the village and the crumbling red sand at their foot, a heavy, burning smell came wafting, like the smell from mounds of molten metal. Black dust blew from the forests, and stuffy heat took the place of their coolness. Forest brooks and rivulets, wells and fountains, marshes and ponds, streams and bogs all went dry. The cattle were perishing

for want of water; the merry birds took cover. Heavily, with beaks agape, the crows flew over the village, and their mournful cawing saddened the peasants' hearts. The stork stalked thoughtfully across the dried-up marshes. Skylarks, choked by the terrible haze, fell from the heavens, dead, with protruding tongues, their mouths full of the scarlet blood, which had welled up out of their tiny, bursting songsters' hearts.

The drought, like an invisible demonic bird, drove every tiny cloud from sight with its flaming wings, and grew more terrible and more deadly day by day. The sun-tanned, exhausted reapers returned in mournful sadness from the fields at night; from the burnt ears in the endless fields the grain, withered and breadless, dribbled to earth. Not a single reaping song rang out across the wide swaying golden sea of the fields. Silently the reapers moved about there from dawn to dark. Silently they bent down and straightened up again, silently, as if they were gathering up corpses on a battlefield, they piled up the empty sheaves and their hearts bled within them. The plain was as silent as a desert. Only from some lonely forest fringe, quietly yet continuously, came the touching lamentations of a widow or a bereaved mother, and their sorrowful echo which, as though thrown back from the vault of heaven, fell and struck the heart like a cold dagger.

Everywhere there was sorrow and silence, as if the Black Death were raging, or the Second Coming was close at hand.

In vain did the priest lead his congregation out in solemn procession, every Sunday, to the four corners of the village to pray for rain. In vain did the children carry the church banners around the fields and meadows every day. God did not hear the passionate prayers of old and young — for a drop of dew, for health and solace.

One had only to see the sad procession praying for rain to feel one's heart constricted by sorrow. Walking in a long mournful line, stretching out like a huge caterpillar in the plain, the peasants, worn out, barefooted, bareheaded, silently followed the white church banners. On all their faces sorrow was to be read, sorrow and repentance, and from their wrinkled brows fell heavy drops of sweat. Their bare feet dug up the hot sand and raised clouds of golden dust, which covered the whole procession and streaked their sweaty faces with black. Over their heads a fierce sun blazed. A heavy odour of in-

cense and wax wafted around them. For hours on end, they circled the village, crossing the plain; then, stopping, they gathered around the priest and prayed for a long time. And under that blazing furnace of a sky, amid that burnt-up plain, one barely heard the plea of these human beings, destroyed by sorrow and hopelessness:

‘Lord, have mercy upon us!’

But in vain! The steely echo of the croaking of frogs, which quivered over the burning plain and the mourning village all night, foretold a continuation of the terrible drought.

And the sickness spread more and more.

No help from anywhere, and no hope either. The unfortunate people quite lost their heads. The priest, pleased with his gains from funerals and blessing the waters, and with his victory over the schoolmaster, calmly sat in the tavern, glass in hand, and babbled:

‘Well, good folk, this sickness is not enough for you! It’s the plague, the plague you need! You are up to your necks in sin; you have sold your souls to the devil; you have forgotten fasts and communion; you all drink and you have angered the Lord. . . . Now lie on the bed you have made! I told you to rebuild the chapel below the village — but you wouldn’t! Now take what’s coming to you!’

And the villagers resignedly bowed their heads, embittered and ashamed. Only the younger ones chafed against the words of the priest and said openly:

‘So we’re sinful, are we? We’re drunkards, are we? Why doesn’t his Reverence take a look at himself?’

Meanwhile the schoolmaster ceaselessly taught them that the source of this terrible infection was the priest’s well, and warmly recommended that it be boarded up.

‘Only thus can we save ourselves,’ he said.

‘Hush,’ the fat priest shouted at him, ‘how dare a brat like you give advice to white hairs? He doesn’t want prayers, eh? Protestant! . . . Godless creature! . . . The sickness comes from my well, he says! It’s because of the likes of him that the Lord has laid His hand upon us. You dare to touch that well and your hands will wither! Whoever wants salvation, there’s the church — let him go and pray!’

But the schoolmaster went stubbornly on. One day he gathered the young men, who supported him, and, in the

presence of all the villagers, nailed the well down with stout oak boards. The whole village assembled on the square. The mayor, the chorbadi, the elders — they all murmured against the schoolmaster, but the young men paid no heed to them. The priest raised his axe to remove the board, but the schoolmaster's strong hand stopped him:

'Be wise, Father!'

'I'm to be wise, am I? . . . Get out, you brats, don't lead the people astray, or the devil will take you,' foamed his Reverence. His eyes flashed, and his beard trembled with rage.

Then high-spirited Mladen, the brother of dead Aglika, whose sweetheart, Neranza, lay ill in her home, stepped forward against him; he cried out desperately and terribly:

'Father priest, throw down your axe, or I won't answer for the consequences. . . .'

'You're a fool, Mladen! You haven't been to church once, and. . . ' stammered the priest, who was quite green with rage.

'Go to the devil with your prayers! They sent Aglika to her grave, they have laid Neranza on a bed of sickness. Get out. . . or I don't know what I'll do to you!' Mladen shouted, and his eyes grew misty as his fingers clenched into a steely fist. He wrenched a stake out of a fence near by and taking up his stand by the well,

'Let any one who dares come near!' he cried.

His old father, trembling with rage, raised his hand against him and roared:

'Never set foot in my house again, d'you hear?'

'Get back, Father, for I spare no one!' cried Mladen, beside himself. 'If we had done this sooner, Aglika would have been alive, and Neranza would be well.'

Two large tears gathered in his eyes and rolled down his tanned and manly face.

The old people stood about for a while, looked on, raged, and finally went away.

'The youngsters are getting above themselves! I don't know how matters will end,' Mladen's father told them. 'Did you see my son? He would have hit me for nothing.'

After that, the young men took it in turns to watch the well by day and by night. For four whole weeks, anybody passing by there could have seen, standing by the willow tree,

the tall figure of a young man with a large stick in his hand, young and energetic, watching like a soldier at his post.

But the drought continued mercilessly, and the steely croaking of the frogs still quivered all night over the wide burnt plain, and over the sorely tried village, foretelling that it would not end soon.

And a desolate mistrust laid hold of old and young alike. Malignant murmurings rose from the discontented souls and desperate hearts, which began to drown their sorrows and their sufferings in wine and brandy. The priest, tired and disappointed, gave up his processions for rain, and his blessing of the waters. No one set foot in the church any more, except the women and a few old men. But the taverns were full of desperate and drunken people. And there, amid the ugly noise, one heard sinful words too:

'The Lord is not merciful, do not pray to him. Let us curse and die, as the frogs do when their marsh dries up!'

The Windmill

Not even the unfinished and deserted skeleton of Lazar's windmill spoils the beautiful view on all four sides of our village. For ten years it has stood on the bare hill above it like a jagged monster, now become, according to popular belief, the refuge of evil spirits, who hopelessly shake its ragged wings, extended in the shape of a devil's cross.

This deserted building, with its foundations overgrown with weeds, a haunt of timid rodents, green lizards and poisonous vipers, this skeleton, bleached by rain and sun, with unplastered and gaping walls, through which the winds and the storms blow shrieking, although deserted and neglected, is the only windmill from level *Shopsko** to the endless *Philibe*** Plain. It is also the only reminder of the year of drought, left by the skillful and masterly hand of Lazar Dubak, famed for his jokes and his various plans and ideas, begun with enthusiasm and abandoned with a good-natured, deprecating smile.

Over the village and all the surrounding district, a terrible drought had set in, burning everything, drying up the wells and the springs and killing the cattle for lack of water.

The life-giving and babbling village brook, which springs from the big rocks above the village itself, began to diminish and dry up day by day. It seemed as if a three-headed *hala**** were imbibing its clear waves, which began to trickle helplessly from its source, only to be swallowed avidly by the burning earth. Along its bed, the rushes and grass withered and drooped as if struck down by hail. Its banks, which were always damp, were now parched and cracked.

And one day the lively and merry clatter of the many water

* Popular name for the district surrounding Sofia. *Shope* — habitant of that district

** Turkish name of Philippopolis, today Plovdiv

*** A mythical monster resembling a serpent

mills, which filled the valley with a noisy and joyful echo, fell silent.

The peasants' hearts were saddened and full of care. They were frightened by the silence of the watermills, whose heavy stones, humming until now, could no longer grind the dry grain to flour.

Lazar Dubak's watermill, the tiled roof of which peeped welcomingly out from between the green branches of our walnut trees, fell silent, too. Desolation and silence reigned all around, and filled Dubak's heart, always so merry, with heavy thoughts.

*note: 2nd
5th line*
'Granddad Korchan,' he said to his neighbour miller 'our lasses are sadly silent now, they don't sing any more. What shall we do, eh?'

And one corner of his mouth curled into a slight smile, more wry than waggish.

'Eh? What's that you say, Dubak?' Deaf Granddad Korchan, who sat in his shirtsleeves, with his shirt open to the waist, whittling something under the walnut tree, would ask loudly.

'I say that my lass and your granny don't sing any more, white-head! What are we going to do about it?' Dubak would shout loudly.

'Patience, patience is what you need, Dubak! Don't you fret, you'll get old if you do,' Granddad Korchan would answer.

He was an old man of seventy, strong and healthy, with greying hair, and a woodsman's wide, rosy face, and a winning, good-natured smile. Waggish, a little deaf and a little lame, everlastingly with a pipe in his mouth and a wheeze in his uncovered chest, he was unlike most people. He lived in his watermill, eternally pottering about, humming and smoking his thick pipe. His wife had died long ago. So had his only daughter, who had married in another village. Her husband had died, too. Only Christina, his pretty granddaughter, lived with the old man. A strange friendship, calm, inseparable and endlessly merry, bound him to Dubak, who differed from him in being young and a bachelor.

Dubak was a fair-haired gallant with an amiable face, to which his big blue eyes gave a special attraction. He was a bachelor and did not seem to give a thought to marriage.

In the villages, if a man passes his thirtieth year, it is difficult for him to marry. In his day, moreover, he had had a goodish time, and had gained for himself the enviable reputation of a wild young scapegrace and an inimitable *horodancer*.* But after wandering for ten years with the masons in Rumania, where he had made some money, he returned, sobered and gentle, mended the watermill — his only inheritance from his father — and spent most of his time there.

Here he made friends with his deaf neighbour, Granddad Korchan. They both had skilful workmen's hands, and spent days on end tinkering with the wheels in the sunlight between the two mills, and they were always joking.

Dubak's inventive brain sometimes made curious plans, which Granddad Korchan's miller's head also approved, and his tireless hands came to their aid. Urgent work would begin. The saw, the adze, the chisel and the axe got no rest for days. But when the work was half done, they would drop it.

Thus they once started to make a fullery. Dubak bought the materials and Granddad Korchan rolled up his shirtsleeves for work. They hammered untiringly for a whole week. And when four girders already formed the framework of the building, the deaf miller stepped back a few paces, smiled, and said:

'Why ever are we wasting our time, Dubak? There are at least three hundred and fifty fulleries!'

'Hold your tongue, Granddad Korchan, lest the devil should hear you!'

'If we were to make it a carding house, now, I know there would be some use in it, but a fullery. . . .'

'You're right, Granddad Korchan!'

And the unfinished framework of the fullery stood uncovered in the rains for a whole month, while Dubak and Korchan made plans for a carding house, but nothing came of that, either.

Now that the little river had run dry and their water-mills were at a standstill, the two neighbours became very anxious.

'Things are bad, Granddad Korchan, very bad!'

'Very bad, Dubak, very bad, indeed! And judging by the way the frogs are croaking, there'll be no end to this drought. And the way folks are going, it won't be the last. They fear

* *Horo* — a Bulgarian national dance, performed in a chain

neither God nor the Devil. Our watermills will soon be deserted, Dubak.'

'We'll build windmills, then, Granddad Korchan,' laughed Dubak.

The old man grew thoughtful.

This joke put the idea of a windmill into Dubak's mind, and he began planning it unceasingly.

'It isn't impossible,' he calculated. 'The windy hill above the village is just the place for it. A windmill would work there even when there was no drought.'

And Dubak opened his mind to Korchan. The latter laughed.

'Well, my boy, it looks as if the fullery and the carding house have taught you no wisdom!'

'Why? Can't it be done? There's always wind on that hill, and it's near the village. The stuff we got for the fullery and the carding house will all come in handy. We need another five or six beams. And I know all about windmills. They only need work.'

'Work from me, wind from you,' joked Granddad Korchan.

But when Dubak explained his plans at length to him, the old man approved and was carried away.

Soon several carts transported the stuff up to the top of the windy hill above the village. The next day a tall beam was erected there, with a cross and a garland nailed to it, and around it the two millers began to build a solid stone foundation for their glorious building.

'The fullery and the carding house were not enough for them, so now they must start on a windmill!' the villagers said, making fun of them, as they gazed at Dubak's windy enterprise, and they crowded the hill, watching with curiosity.

'There's wind enough for more than one windmill in their heads,' joked others.

But little the workers cared. The building grew from day to day, and in two weeks its wooden skeleton rose high above the village.

In spite of the general opinion that they would soon tire of this windy job, Dubak and Korchan worked on and on. All day long the village rang with the blows of their sharp axes and the tap-tap of their adzes. . . . Completely absorbed by the idea of this great creation, they spared no labour, felt

no fatigue, and took no rest. From morning till night, through the long summer days, under the burning rays of the sun, which dried the sweat on their faces, in their shirtsleeves, tools in hand, they worked on. Quite carried away, they did not even speak to each other. Only Korchan would sometimes say:

'Dubak, it seems to me that this job will come to nothing, too. As soon as we finish it, it will rain! Our lasses will start singing then and we'll leave this owl's nest.'

'Hammer away, Korchan! Let's finish it, then come what may,' Dubak would answer, and throw the old man a look full of strength and hope.

'Well, old ass that I am, why do I follow your whims?' the deaf man would answer, smiling, and, tinkering about, he would start humming, in tune with the blows of his adze:

'And I, old donkey,

Why do I fol-low your child-ish whims!'

Yet sometimes, when he stole a look at Dubak's sunburnt face, he would say, gently:

'Lazar, you should get married. Windmills wear out one's youth!'

Dubak would look at him with his big blue eyes, and start laughing heartily.

Day by day the windmill's slender figure took shape. And from the village one could see how the two builders went up and down its uncovered roof. Once Dubak shouted down that from its high wings Granddad Korchan had caught sight of a small white cloud far beyond Vitosha.* This happy news flew from the taverns to the houses, and from there to the tired workers in the fields. They left their work at once and streamed towards the village to welcome this long expected event. The end of the terrible drought, which had burnt everything up, was in sight. The church bell rang out as if it were a feast day. Strapping lasses began to dance the *Vai Doudoul*** and the lively rhythm of their song rang through the streets of the village.

* Mountain to the south of Sofia

** A ritual dance, accompanied by incantations for rain, also known as the Butterfly; the chief dancer, a young girl, who must be her mother's first born, is supposed to represent a butterfly

'The butterfly flew and flew
From the ploughman to the digger,
God, give rain!'

Laughter and shouts were heard and a cheerful clamour arose. For the suffering peasants, the day turned into a holiday. With drums and bagpipes, the lasses led the *Vai Dou-doul* right up the hill, to the windmill from the top of which the joyful tidings had been proclaimed, and they started a wild *horo* on the withered grass. Men came out with their gaily painted wooden wine flasks, as if they were going to a wedding. All eyes were turned to the west. There a small white cloud was hastening over Vitosha, and after it followed others, strung out in the distance. Towards them, from *Stara Planina*,* darted another cloud and, like the first one which led a number of other, smaller ragged ones, it scattered, disappeared, then gathered again and formed larger clouds, as black as eagles. And far in the blue distance, like small puffs of smoke, appeared still more clouds, growing, multiplying and hastening hither.

'It's going to rain! It's going to rain!' joyful exclamations were heard, and the faces of the peasants shone with happiness, their anxious hearts relaxed.

Dubak and Korchan worked on at their roof, unmoved.

Christina, Granddad Korchan's eighteen-year-old granddaughter, crawled up the high ladder and got up on the top-most part of the windmill, under the very wings, then she sang out teasingly:

'Granddad, see where I am!'

'Get down, you tom-boy, you'll break your neck,' shouted her grandfather.

'I'm holding tight, quite tight!' cried Christina gaily, and stood up on the highest spot, stretched out her white neck, peered over the edge of the eaves and clapped her hands.

'How high it is!' she cried.

'Stop playing, lassie, or we'll see you down there,' Dubak said to the merry girl, whose movements he was following from under his bushy eyebrows.

She turned and playfully stuck out her tongue at him. Then she pulled the adze out of his hand and began to tap the beams.

* The Balkan range, literally The Old Mountain

'Hey, Granddad, I'm a master-builder like you!'

'Dubak is a better one,' some one said jokingly from below.

'Come, child, give me my adze, don't hold me up,' Dubak said, pretending to be cross. This game pleased him.

Christina stuck out her tongue at him again. Her clear blue eyes rested on him a little longer. Her fair, plump, oval, pretty face shone with a radiance which transfixed the heart of the old bachelor.

'I'll tell your Granddad,' he said to her, jokingly.

'Tell him,' she answered, putting out her tongue again and continuing her work on the beams.

'Old man, just ask your granddaughter what she's looking for here?'

'Whatever she's looking for, she will find.'

The lads and lasses, who were watching from below, laughed out. One of them called out gaily:

'Dubak, don't tease the girl!'

Christina aimed the adze at him, as if she were going to throw it, then laughed again. The lad below called out:

'You're joking, but Dubak isn't.'

Everyone laughed. Dubak felt ashamed, but his eyes travelled over the tall, slender figure of the girl, with its supple arms, wide even shoulders and lightly heaving bosom, with a different curiosity.

'What a little wildfowl it is!' he thought.

The scattered clouds were slowly increasing and covering the horizon. A gay *horo* started around the mill. As quickly as a cat, Christina let herself down the ladder without leaving Dubak the adze.

'Hey, lassie, none of your games! Leave me my adze!'

'Come and fetch it!' she called from below, taking her place in the *horo*.

Dubak went down and stopped to look. Christina was dancing madly, as if she were making fun of some one, and mockingly glanced at the young miller. Then she suddenly left the *horo*, placed her left hand on her hip, and twirling her handkerchief in her right, stopped in front of the piper and ordered:

'A *Ruchenitsa*!*

The piper started off at once. Christina put her head on

* Popular folk dance, danced in couples, in contrast to the *horo*

one side, quivered from tip to toe, waved her kerchief on high, started first forward, then backward, gave a little skip, and started off dancing as if she were melting into the lively vibrations of the wonderful sounds.

People gathered around to watch.

The playing was expert. Gay and playful sounds emerged from under the piper's finger, they vibrated, rose and fell so madly that the clothes on one's back began to dance and one's heart began to beat, ready to whirl off like a plucked leaf in the whirlwind of this dizzy dance tune.

And Dubak, the once-famed dancer, was unable to resist it. His breath stopped short, his heart began to beat, and quite forgetting himself, he jumped out in front of Christina and, silently, his face as white as a sheet, he began to dance.

A shout of admiration went up from a hundred throats, a hundred pairs of eyes followed the two dancers. Granddad Korchan came down from the roof of the windmill to watch closer, his eyes twinkling with pleasure.

Dubak did not appear to touch the earth. Head bent, not looking around him, he danced like a whirlwind, moving his legs in an inimitable way.

Yet, after a while, he stopped, as if at a sudden thought. Christina stopped in front of him and said:

'I'll out-dance you!'

'Oho, will you, then?' called one of the on-lookers.

'I'll out-dance him!'

'May be!' said Dubak, sure that she could not.

'I'll out-dance you!' Christina stamped her foot. She was a famed dancer and had faith in herself, but she did not know what Dubak was capable of.

'I'll out-dance you!' she repeated, proudly and provocatively.

'You can't,' said Dubak, with a look which suggested that she was being naive.

'Oh, can't I?'

'Of course you can't.'

'Can't I? Very well! Come, let's bet on it, shall we?' Dubak laughed.

'Shall we bet on it?' repeated Christina.

'Very well, let's have a bet,' said Dubak resolutely, and

taking a scarlet cord with several gold coins strung on it out of his purse, he added:

‘If you win, they’ll be yours!’

‘Will you keep your word?’ asked Christina, all afire and in dead earnest.

‘That is my stake — I will! And what will you stake?’

‘Now then!’ some one exclaimed from the crowd. There was a burst of laughter. Granddad Korchan was beaming with delight.

‘Well, what do you stake?’ repeated Dubak, insistently.

Everybody thought that artful Christina was joking and would give up her bet, but she stood there, proud and straight. Resoluteness flashed from her eyes. Her face went first white, then flamed up in a fiery blush. She bent her head, ashamed, and bit her lip. Then looking straight into Dubak’s eyes, who was staring at her stubbornly, she said firmly:

‘If you out-dance me, I’ll elope with you!’

Dubak’s flashing eyes met hers.

‘Very well,’ he said with a smile. ‘Will you stick to your word?’

‘Kill me, if I don’t!’ Christina replied.

The eyes of both were alight. The crowd burst into loud and happy laughter. Granddad Korchan’s face was beaming. He felt like stroking his unruly granddaughter.

The bagpipe skirled. The crowd held its breath. Dubak rapidly started towards Christina. She ran forward lightly on her toes and passed him. Both looked each other over from head to heels, as if they wished to show each other their own superiority, then began to dance opposite each other. Christina waved her kerchief, arched her white neck like a swan and was wafted away lightly on the gay notes of the music; her face was rosy, her heavy lids dreamily half-veiled her eyes, her rounded breasts quivered.

Dubak had completely forgotten himself. With hands negligently crossed behind him, he leapt like a deer, placing himself before his rival with wonderful movements, dancing with such tiny steps that he seemed to be standing in one place. Then, shaking his head to rid himself of the large drops of sweat, which pearly his face, he made a movement as if to jump backwards. Christina, who was watching his every step, lightly and on tip-toe flew towards him, but he leapt

forward and she involuntarily found herself so near him that she felt his breath and the warmth of his fiery manly face. Little by little, he drew back, imperceptibly drawing her after him, as if he were joking. Superiority, a manly superiority was apparent in his every movement, and involuntarily Christina was falling under his power. As in a trance, she struggled to conquer, but after an hour she stopped, exhausted and breathless. And wiping the sweat from her face, she was hardly able to speak for exhaustion:

'I can't go on. . . . You've out-danced me!'

The piper stopped playing.

Dubak gave one last leap and, tired and breathless, stopped also.

Gay laughter broke from the crowd. A hundred breasts relaxed, a hundred pairs of eyes, strained from watching, moved away. Christina's friends began to tease her. Granddad Korchan stood there, smiling.

Dubak was wiping the sweat from his face.

'Well, you out-danced me — I admit it!' said his shamed rival hiding her face in her hands.

The crowd murmured gaily again.

'The bet must be fulfilled!' someone shouted, and began to tease Christina.

She raised her head and answered, almost through tears:

'What then? I stick to my word!'

The murmurs died away. These words were so bold!

'Yes, I stick to my word!' she repeated, turning to Lazar Dubak.

'Do you really?' he asked, wishing to hear her again.

'I do, really!' she said, firmly.

Dubak stepped up to her, and before them all tied the string of gold pieces around her neck:

'Then let me take you home.'

'Take me!' she said, seizing his hand.

Lazar smiled and led her off towards the village.

The crowd followed them, noisy and gay.

'Hey, Dubak, what about the windmill?' Granddad Korchan shouted after them.

'I've found another one!' Dubak answered gaily.

The old man laughed so heartily that his pipe fell out of his mouth.

The Samodivas' Rocks

 ne day, when we were lost deep in the sunlessest recesses of our mother, *Stara Planina*,** Choumak and I (he was a fine old mountain huntsman, who had spent fifty years wandering around the wild mountain forests and wildernesses) were resting calmly in the thick shade of the beech trees that bordered a noisy brook. Peace and the sublime stillness of the forest reigned around us, and seemed to engulf the wild echo of the music made by the brooks and the waterfalls, as it rang perpetually through the chill dark recesses, borne throughout the wild forests like an elemental and refreshing song. Above us the high peaks rose steadily, straight and precipitous, their bare and rocky brows fearlessly silhouetted against the blue sky, in all their rugged beauty. Still higher, above these haughty giants, an eagle soared slowly and calmly in the dove-blue sky — a mountain king in his daring, unattainable flight.

As I lay on my back, relaxed upon the damp green carpet of wild weeds and fragrant crane's bill, I watched the big, bony and powerful figure of Old Choumak, who sat beside me, bent and bareheaded, as he cleaned his infallible gun. Small and sweaty locks of silvery grey hair fell over his high, rounded and furrowed brow, wonderfully adorning that long, dry, but healthy and rosy face which always expressed the haughty calm of a free and hardened soul. His thick bushy brows, the keen hunter's glance of his brown eyes, and his long, silvery, silken moustache, whose ends fell on his shoulders, gave a strange charm and a venerable aspect to his whole heroic figure. He raised his gun, and aimed in fun at the black dot of the eagle in the boundless sky as it passed beneath the sun, like a small cloud, casting a dark shadow on the blue rocks and screes of the hills opposite.

* *Samodiva* — wood nymph or fairy, personification of nature

**Literally Old Mountain, as most Bulgarians call the Balkan Range

'If the gun measured distances as well as my eye, I could shoot that accursed bird.'

And he followed its flight in the sky. It circled long high above us, now slowly dropping down, and moving in wide circles across its breadth with motionless wings, now quivering powerfully and rising vertically to vanish in the sky. Finally it turned and swooped down like a demon, perching regally on the jagged crags opposite.

'Those are the *Samodivas*' Rocks,' Old Choumak said after a long silence. 'Since time began, no human foot has trod there and it is hardly likely that it ever will. In the villages and hamlets scattered all around near here, people believe that from the top of them you can see the end of the White Sea, in which the sun bathes every morning and evening.'

And, sighing, the old huntsman began to tell me calmly and evenly, in a voice that seemed to come straight from his heart, the strange legend of those *Samodivas*' Rocks, which we saw outlined against the sky, lit by the rays of the setting sun, needlesharp, high, distant, unattainable, hanging over us, overgrown with moss and lichen. All around them at their foot, there were ravines, scree, forests and crags, all in disorder, and precipices and abysses scattered at random.

Deep down, in the foothills of these peaks, there was a village, a mountain village with cottages scattered about in the forest as if they had lost each other. Its inhabitants, true children of the forest, lived freely, like these mountain eagles that know neither fear nor boundaries. All day long the shots of hunters' guns were heard in the dark forests, the bells of fat flocks echoed over the broad meadows, and the mountain recesses were filled with the songs of girls, the shouts of young men, and the sound of the honey-toned *kaval*.*

But those inaccessible rocks with their wildness and haughtiness cast some kind of a mocking reproach at the fearless hearts of the young men, for whom there were no unexplored recesses, no inaccessible heights. A secret shame weighed upon their young souls and they could not look without a secret sigh at these rocks, from whose pointed summits they might see the sea, in which the fiery sun bathed.

What youth would not wish to see the most beautiful thing from the highest place? But who would undertake this

* Shepherd's flute

path, full of dangers and the unknown? Every mother trembled at the thought that her child might be tempted by the glory of a great exploit. The young men thought and sighed.

Young Magdalena added another ache to the hearts of the young lads — she was the loveliest girl in the world.

Magdalena grazed her father's goats over these mountain meadows without a care in the world, she picked forest flowers, made wreaths and nosegays of them and sang. In the evening, when the sun was setting and bathed the heights, where her father's cottage was, in its last rays, it bade farewell to the loveliest shepherdess in the world who, skipping like a child, and decked with a wreath of golden primroses, came home, bringing in her beloved flock.

The young lads sighed for her in secret, and their honey-toned *kavals* sadly quivered in the gay woods, bearing Magdalena's fame far afield.

And from far and near handsome lads began to ask her father for her hand. The rich wanted to bribe him with the power of their wealth, the poor lads, with their ardent hearts, were ready to risk their lives to win this mountain queen.

'She's still too young,' her old father would answer.

But in the evening, when he saw her driving the flock, radiant with youth, with her warm red cheeks, her eyes as bright and clear as a mountain spring, in which the fire of ardent desires burned, he would grow thoughtful.

'I am not the master of her heart,' he began to answer, 'let her choose a brave young hero at her will.'

Magdalena calmly grazed her father's goats, and did not seem to pay attention to the young lads, who were mad about her and constantly lay in wait for her, meeting her with their flocks in the wild forests. This was a terrible insult for these young hearts. One night, someone — no one knew who — set fire to her father's cottage, and the flames lit up the whole mountain. This did not frighten her father. He calmly answered them all:

'If they were to burn up my all — I should not change. Let my Magdalena choose her mate herself.'

One morning soon after, he found his whole flock slaughtered. The blood flooded the old man's heart. Wrath and pain seized his old soul. He embraced his sorrowful daughter and said:

'I am not angry with you, daughter. You know what I have said. I am not the master of your heart. The lad you choose will be my choice, too.'

Magdalina said:

'I shall take him who leads me to the top of the *Samodivas* Rocks.'

The young lads were troubled and downcast. Was not this a mockery? Who could lead her up those inaccessible rocks? Who had the wings of an eagle to fly up there?

In secret from one another, each of them went around those *Samodivas* Peaks and returned thoughtful. It was impossible!

Only Peroun did not despair.

He was a young, slender and swarthy lad, with a high forehead, black eyes and a bright glance, and he held his head proudly. He burned with love of Magdalina, and decided either to perish or to win her. He never ceased following Magdalina and stealing her primrose wreath.

'Magda,' he said to her, 'you see that I love you. I am not afraid. I'll take you up!'

'Only then will I love you and be yours,' Magdalina answered, trembling.

'But what if we perish?' the young lad asked.

'We'll perish together,' she answered, and asked in her turn:

'But what if you can't take me up?'

'If you don't believe in me, you won't set out.'

The following day, dressed up as if to attend a wedding, people gathered from all the villages and hamlets around on the meadow at the foot of the inaccessible peaks to see how Magda and her fearless lover would scale the steep crags.

'Madman!' the old folk reproved him. 'To perish for a woman!'

'For a love!' the young lad answered.

'Magdalina, if you have no pity on yourself, have pity on him!' someone said to the girl.

'What if I see the wonderful sea?' she answered.

'Well, what if you do?'

'What, indeed? I shall learn whether Peroun really does love me.'

'What more?'

'I need no more!'

And taking him by the hand, she said:
'Let us go!'

With bated breath, from the meadow below, the people followed them as they jumped over bushes and boulders, clambering over the scree, and seeking a foothold on the rain-washed crags; they saw how tenderly and carefully the young lad supported his lass as he led her up to the clouds.

When Magdalina stopped to rest, he would move around to find a way up, placing stones to make steps for her, and bushes for them to hold on to. He would return tired, and lead her on up again. They sank into the precipice and were lost for long from the sight of the watchers, who bowed their heads in horror. Then again the daring young man would re-appear, hanging over the abyss, with his beloved lass in his arms.

They went up so high that the watchers could no longer see them. But the top of these dangerous rocks was still higher.

Many a long year has gone by since then, but Magdalina and Peroun never came back.

To this day no one knows whether they reached the top of the inaccessible rocks. But they all talk of and wonder at this love and this daring.

In the Next World

When the news of Old Mateiko's death spread through the village, nobody believed it at first, because he was fond of his joke, and nothing of the kind had ever happened to him before. But when Granny Yova told people about the last hour of his life, they were all sure that this time there was no joke about it. He got back from the forest, where he had been for wood, unloaded his small donkey, tied it up, put down some hay for it, and as soon as he got into the house, sat himself down by the fire and lighted his pipe; then he felt as if something was cutting him in two, lay down and began to groan, and. . . .

The neighbours gathered around, and Granny Yova went in to him, too. He was alone, poor old soul, wasn't he? He and his gentle little she-ass, as grey as a dove, as submissive and meek as a nun. Granny Yova went in to him, too, but you can't stop a soul when it sets out on its journey, can you? 'All I could do,' she said, 'was tell him to cross himself, and he tried as hard as he could, but he couldn't move. They brought him a small flask of *rakiya*** to help him. He took it, smiled, and his eyes brightened and. . . he was gone.'

He breathed his last with a smile on his lips. But whether it was because his soul had entered paradise, or because he saw a bit of *rakiya*, none could tell.

When poor Old Mateiko set out for the next world, he stopped first of all at a crossroad where there were lots of travellers, people like him.

'Well met!' he cried in greeting. and, without giving much thought to his words, asked: 'Well, brothers, which is the way to Hell?'

* This story was written at the beginning of the century

** Brandy

They all looked at him in amazement.

'Hell, the road to Hell, I said, which road is it?' Old Mateiko explained in a loud voice.

They showed him the road and he made straight for it.

'They're sure to put me there,' he thought, 'so I might as well get there on time. Paradise isn't for the likes of me, I'm a poor man. Paradise is for the big shots and for the rich. Who would let me in in these rags and with these chapped hands? For eighty years I've toiled and suffered like a dog, so are they likely to be giving me a rest now? Well, I have tried to stick to what's right, that's true, but who cares? God surely hasn't time to keep the reckoning for people like me! Our names have been down in the Devil's book ever since we were born. No matter how righteously I've lived otherwise, I must have sinned once through drunkenness. It's true, I drank from hardship and sorrow, but I drank just the same. There's no getting on anyway, I thought, so drink away! Drink, and come what may! I've got myself a warm corner in Hell! And that's where I'd better go at once!'

So Old Mateiko went on his way, deep in his own thoughts. But suddenly somebody at his back gave his sheepskin jacket a pull.

'Here, man, where are you off to?' he was asked.

'Why, I'm off to Hell,' the old man answered.

'Hell, eh? You've made a mistake, Granddad!'

'That I haven't. . . . I know who belongs in which place, even if I do look simple,' the old man answered.

'But you're down for Paradise. I'm an angel and have been sent to take you there,' the being said.

'Now, get along with you, me lad, and don't tease old people, because it's a shame, that it is!' Old Mateiko said.

Seeing that he couldn't manage him with persuasion, the angel picked him up in his arms and flew high up towards the bright expanse of heaven, where it smelt of wonderful Smyrna incense, and where radiant angels, with bunches of basil in their hands were flying about in groups and singing, so beautifully that it quite carried one away: 'Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Sabbaoth!'

'Where are you taking me to, me lad? Your masters will scold you, see if they don't. Don't you see that I smell of *rakiya*?' Old Mateiko cried, pulling away for all he was worth,

but the angel flew faster and held him tighter, carrying him up into the radiant heaven, until they reached the gates of Paradise. They were made of gold and precious stones and shone like the bright sun itself. Saint Peter stood waiting before them, with a silver key in his hands and a big ledger under his arm.

'What village are you from?' he asked turning to Old Mateiko and beginning to thumb through his ledger. There was nothing for it: Old Mateiko had to give in. He hummed and he hawed, and finally he got it out:

'Eh, I'm from Podouyené.'

'From Po. . . ?'

'From Podouyené!' Old Mateiko shouted, thinking that Saint Peter was hard of hearing.

'Po. . . Po. . . Po. . . .' Saint Peter muttered as he turned the leaves of his ledger. 'Podouyené! Very well — he's righteous!'

'Impossible! You must be mistaken, Saint Peter.'

'Why mistaken? This isn't a pudding, it's a ledger, properly numbered, signed and sealed by the Lord God himself,' Saint Peter said, scolding him.

'All right then, but let's hope you're not sorry for it later,' Old Mateiko answered.

'Why should we be sorry?' Saint Peter asked.

'Because I drank a lot, man alive, and I didn't believe I could be righteous.'

'You drank a lot, but you suffered a lot, too, so it's been forgiven you,' Saint Peter said, and opened the gates to him.

'Well, Saint Peter, couldn't I just bring my little ass. . . ?' Old Mateiko began to beg him, but the angel shoved him into Paradise, and he, agape with amazement, left the rest of his words unspoken.

As soon as he got into Paradise, Old Mateiko remembered his old woman, who had left the sinful earth a long time before him.

'If they've let me in,' he thought, 'after all my drinking, and seeing as how I beat her once in a while, they must have put her right in the middle here. She was meeker than the meekest, and forgave me for everything. Eh, what would have happened to me without her?'

And he turned to a small cherub:

'Hey, you winged youngster, is there an old Granny Ma-teitsa, Trena by name here?' he asked.

'What village does she come from?' the cherub asked.
'Podouyené.'

'There is,' said the cherub, and led the old man around Paradise.

'Eh, what beauties, what wonders!' the old man exclaimed, looking around at the marvels of Paradise, which only the righteous will ever see.

'What about Father Nikola, is he here?' he asked the cherub.
'Father who?'

'Father Nikola, of the little curch, who used to lend us money for interest. I'd be ashamed to meet him, for I owed him something, but he died, and the debt died with him.'

'Father Nikola is down, boiling in the pitch, Granddad,' the cherub told him.

'You don't say so!'

'Word of honour!'

'But wasn't he a priest after all?'

'No matter. They don't hold with such things here, it's each man according to his deeds. He was a priest, but he sinned. The Bishop was a bishop, but he's in Hell, too.'

'Eh, you don't say so!'

'He's been punished, too, Granddad. He was a bishop, that's true, but he was proud of his rank, he thought only the big shots were people, and never even looked at the poor. They disgusted him, and when he gave them alms, he gave them with disdain, doing his best to get rid of them as quickly as possible. He dressed himself richly, and ate too much every day, but taught people to be temperate. Isn't that sinful?'

Old Mateiko rubbed his forehead in perplexity, then said:

'How should I know if it's sinful or not? We're simple folk, we don't understand these things,' Old Mateiko said. 'Well, leave that aside, but take me to the pub now, and let me have a drink, for my throat's burning like an ember.'

'Eh, Granddad, there aren't any pubs here,' the cherub told him.

'Aren't there?'

'No, there aren't!'

'All these wonders, and no pub! Where's a man to stop for a rest and have a drink, to refresh himself?' Old Mateiko ex-

claimed. 'Look at me, I've come from the earth, all that way, I'm tired. The priest used to tell us there that in Paradise there was everything a man could wish for, and now. . . . I ought to have gone to Hell. Are there pubs there?'

'Yes, there are.'

'Just take me there, I beg you,' Old Mateiko cried, 'what's the good of all the peace here to me, if there isn't a drop of *rakiya*! Things are bad in Hell, I know, but I'm used to that: I'll stick it, and then, whenever I can, I'll have a little drink and things won't seem so bad.'

'Can't be done, Granddad!'

'Eh,' sighed the old man, 'this is more like a prison, this is! You can't go where you like!'

'You'll get used to it, Granddad!' the cherub told him, trying to comfort him.

'Eh, do I still have to get used to things?' Old Mateiko sighed again, then he tried slyness.

'Listen, me lad,' he said to the cherub, 'it would be a good thing to open a pub here. And if I meet the Lord God, I'll tell Him to His face that it would be a good thing. In the first place, there's nowhere for the tax-collector to sit, let alone anything else!'

'There aren't any tax-collectors here, Granddad!'

'What, no tax-collectors?'

'None at all.'

'Oh, Holy Virgin, Mother of God, I really shall be at peace here!' Old Mateiko cried, joyfully, and crossing himself, added:

'Well, that's what I like best of all about you here!'
And he hurried on to find his old woman.

Temptation

Have you tried it, Todor?
'I have, I have, Father!'
'Well?'

'Fine, delicious and sharp, sharp! It's sweet to the tongue, but it brings tears to your eyes. If you taste just a drop of it, you'll lick your chops like a kitten in the sunshine. Granny *Popadia** said the same.'

'H'm, so she tried it, too, did she, Todor?'

'She didn't say no when I asked her, but she only tasted a tiny bit, just like this, with the tip of her tongue.'

'Well, now!'

'There's no need to lie about it!'

'I know, I know, she's sensible, Todor, but she's in the habit, you know, of taking a drop. . . . So you find it good, eh?'

'And it is good, Father.'

The old priest swallowed.

This conversation was taking place in the church, in full sight of two or three pious little old grannies, and in front of the lectern before which Uncle Todor the Sexton had busied himself for the last ten years, in the hope of one day taking the place of the good, but white-haired priest, who was already quite old.

'M-mm. . . m-mm. . . . The Lord, Jesus Christ!' chanted Father Priest.

'To you, O Lord!' responded the sexton.

'And about how much is there in the bottle, Todor, would

* *Pop* is the word for priest in Bulgarian. *Popadia* is the priest's wife. When they are old women they are known as *Baba Popadia* — Granny *Popadia*.

you say, at a glance? . . . Mm. . . m-mm-mm. . . Let us pray-y!

'Lord, have mercy upon us! . . . Not much, Father, about enough to rinse one's mouth with. . . There might be a matter of a quart and a half.'

'The deuce take it, couldn't more than that be found?'

The priest thoughtfully stroked his beard and bent towards the sexton.

'Hm, so it's under the altar, you said, Todor. . . The Son and the Holy Gho-o-o-ost. . .'

'That's where it is, Father. . . A-a-a-men,' Uncle Todor answered as the priest went behind the iconostasis. He then began to read the canon gently in his quiet melifluous little voice.

This occurred on the feast of the Holy Virgin, a time when, in regions where there are no vineyards, the barrels went dry, and wine began to appear only in people's dreams. But old Father Seraphim, that venerable old priest, who had served his parishioners with unparalleled patience for thirty years on end, liked to fortify himself with several glasses of good wine, for which, like all men, he had a slight weakness. If he didn't do so, he wasn't good for anything. His hands and legs trembled, his eyes grew dim, and his tongue stumbled, and in such cases he couldn't even conduct so much as a blessing of the waters.

This was a rare occurrence, for the good old man knew his weak spot better than anyone, and took good care to have a constant supply of several quarts of wine in his cellar. And at critical moments, Granny *Popadia* always found means of bringing a fairly full little flask out of her chest. But, on such occasions, she would grow miserly and count the old man's glasses, which sometimes deeply offended him.

The deuce take his offended feelings, if there were only at least one small glass hidden away, just to remind him of its taste and refresh his eyes with the brilliance of its colour. But for one whole week, neither Father Priest, nor anyone else in the village of Gloushino had even so much as smelt such a thing. The lack of this red drop filled men's souls with despondency, tore their heart strings and left them with wry faces.

And on top of it all, it happened on the feast of the Vir-

gin! People had fasted for Communion, and not a drop of wine was to be had even for that. If only this had been foreseen earlier, something might have been done about it, but Father Priest had only thought of it that morning, when he went into the church. You should have seen his confusion! He sweated all over, poor man!

'Well, what now?' he thought, his soul in torment, and called the sexton in.

'Todor,' he said, 'we're in a mess, d'you know what has happened?'

'What?' asked Uncle Todor, his mouth agape, staring at the priest and expecting to hear who knows what amazing news.

'There's no wine for Communion!' said the priest in despair, and fell into deep thought.

'Ha! . . . What's to be done now? . . . ' the sexton exclaimed, starting as if he had made a mistake in the canon.

Father Priest folded his arms hopelessly.

'Whatever you say, that's how things stand!'

'What are we to do now, Father?'

'I don't know, Todor.'

The two stared at each other for a long time. Then the poor sexton scratched the back of his head.

'We can't leave matters like that, Father, but just let me go and ask here and there in the village — I might be able to find some. . . .'

Uncle Todor left the church like a man in a dream and quickly made for the tavern. He walked along, thinking:

'I'll set out from house to house, and I'm sure to find some somewhere!'

At the bridge in front of the church he stopped and began to count on his fingers, bending those of one hand down with the other.

'If there isn't any at the Ivanovs, I'll go to the Bozhichkovs, and if there isn't any at the Zagorskis, I'll go to the Chernitsis, and if there isn't any there, I'll go there, and from there — there. . . there. . . and afterwards. . . . Ha — wait a moment — Hey. . . but there's probably not even any water there, their daughters-in-law are so lazy!'

And Uncle Todor sighed. The river danced along under the bridge like a lass, nimble and clear, burbling and lapping the

stones, just awakened by the morning, hurrying down and crying goodbye, goodbye, goodbye. The sexton stared and stared at it and began to think.

'If only I could, like the Lord Jesus in Cana of Gallilee, turn it into wine, there'd be plenty for Communion, and for the people, too, but. . . Eh, well!' he sighed and set off along the street, deep in thought.

'What are you muttering about, Todor, have you forgotten one of your prayers?' his neighbour Angel, who was on his way to church, addressed him.

Todor stopped.

'If you only knew the trouble we're in, Uncle Angel, and if you knew the sin! There's no wine for Communion! . . . Father Priest muttered in church, and muttered, then he simply dropped down on his pew, like a broody hen, and he doesn't know whether to hold the service or not!'

'You don't say!' Angel, who was on his way to Communion, exclaimed in amazement. 'Come now, how can that be? We'll find some. . .'

'Who knows?' said the sexton, shrugging his shoulders.

'Listen, Todor, here's what I'll tell you,' said Uncle Angel, after turning the matter over in his small head. 'Run to my home and tell the wife to give you that bottle there. . . she knows. . . Say I sent you. I was keeping it for a good old time, but never mind that, if it's for Communion, I don't grudge it!'

At these words, the careworn face of the poor sexton grew radiant with joy. That man with the small head and the lapelled waistcoat seemed to turn from Uncle Angel into one of God's angels before his very eyes. So Uncle Todor ran off, took the bottle, and on his way back, stopped to boast of it to Granny *Popadia*. Then he had his conversation with Father Priest, with which I began my story; they grew calm and, as I said, Uncle Todor began to read the canon attentively.

His voice rang sonorously out in the quiet and almost empty church. A solemn and quivering echo rang in the blue vault of the dome, as if a choir of angels were chanting responses to every word. This deeply touched the poor sexton. And when, illuminated by divine inspiration, he raised his head and began to sing 'Glory to God in the Highest,' tears

filled the eyes of the pious women, tears shed from tender emotion.

In the meantime, Father Seraphim was zealously performing his duties at the altar, which duties are not so light as one might think. Why? You have to make so many obeisances. You must pray for at least half an hour with raised hands before the altar table, to mention the names of so many sinners in the village, and of double the number of saints in heaven.

Twice Father Priest raised his trembling hands before the holy altar, and long did he pray. Twice he took the incense burner and swung it around the altar chamber, twice did he make humble obeisances before the altar and kiss its stone pediment.

But the third time. . . .

When, with the purest humbleness of spirit and piety he bent his old body for the third time, to make his obeisance, he involuntarily caught sight of the bottle standing under the altar, a bottle in which the eyes of the Evil One seemed to glitter.

In a moment, the old man, stirred to the depths of his being, straightened his impressive figure, raised his old arms, closed his eyes and zealously began to recite a prayer. His long hair fell like molten silver over his shoulders, and his white beard quivered. But before his closed eyes, in an abyss of darkness, stood the spectre of the bottle, as if it had been nailed there, and it grew and grew, to fill the entire universe. And in it the glittering eyes of Satan laughed slyly.

Quickly the astounded priest bent down and made a deep obeisance. But his eyes opened involuntarily, and again saw the bottle beneath the altar, full of inexorable temptation. The poor old man straightened up again, closed his eyes, humbly folded his arms and whispered, from the bottom of his soul: 'Do not tempt Thy humble Servant, Almighty God!'

But in the dark, the tempting spectre of the bottle still quivered red before his eyes, at first like a small bright spot. That spot grew, getting bigger and bigger, until those brightly eyes grew perceptible, piercing the priest's heart like nails.

Finally he was left without strength, and submitted. He raised the cover of the altar, picked up the cursed bottle and almost unconsciously raised it, trembling, with both hands and drank, drank, drank.

'Why, why! . . . It really *is* good!' Father Priest muttered and licked his chops.

Then he listened intently.

Day had not yet dawned outside, and the dense half-light made its way through the dusty window panes and iron gratings of the small windows, filling the hollow church with a kind of mystery and in the stillness the voice of the sexton echoed solemnly. You could hear a little old woman sighing, or toothless old people's mouths mystically whispering prayers.

This appalled the priest.

'Oh! What have I done?'

And heavily, as if felled, he dropped onto his knees, placed his hands on the mouth of the bottle, put his head on them and quickly and breathlessly began to pray.

'Have mercy on me, Lord, show Thy great mercy to me, I have sinned before Thee and drunk of. . . .'

Swept away by his thought, he imperceptibly departed from the text of the prayer and muttered disconnectedly:

'And last of all, wash me clean of my sin, which I have committed by drinking of that cursed wine, which Todor praised to me. . . quite rightly, the good man. . . .'

Here the Priest interrupted himself in horror. Desperation cast him back to his pew. He closed his eyes, and unconsciously raised the bottle again, swallowing thirstily, quickly, in fear.

The sharp wine poured into his veins and had a wonderful effect. He felt power, bodily and spiritual power. His hands no longer trembled, his tongue was loosened. The words came clear and lucid from his mouth and rang out in the pleasant steely tone of his voice. The old man himself was conscious of this. Proud, majestic, smiling, he made the round of the church with the incense burner, everywhere carrying the gay mood of his heart.

The vivid look of his clear eyes, which gave a particular charm to his old face, radiated goodness, and filled the hearts of all present with love and a quiet sincerity, which raised people's souls high above all that was of the flesh and of the earth.

On that day the service was distinguished by its solemnity. Uncle Todor the Sexton had fallen into such a mood of tender emotion that, as he read, even the hardest consonants

grew softer than cotton wool in his mouth and sweeter than honey, more sonorous than a *kaval**.

When everything was coming to an end, and the rays of the rising sun penetrated above the altar, lighting the crucifix and playing over the crystal prisms of the chandelier, when the poor sexton, with his blissfully half-closed eyes raised to the heavens, was ending his 'A-a-amen', the congregation saw the majestic figure of Father Priest, standing in the pulpit, which was attached to the wall like a swallow's nest. Silence fell.

His Reverence was about to preach.

'Pious Christians,' he began with ardour, and stretched out an arm. 'Pious Christians,' he said, 'according to your piety will you benefit! Woe unto us sinners! Leave the women out of it, they're forever gossiping! . . . But what of the men? The wine-bibbers? What shall I say of them? . . . O, brothers mine, be not angry with me for speaking straight out to you! The truth is the truth! Your love of boozing, as it was in the beginning, is now and will be, world without end, is not a godly love and does not prepare any good thing for you beyond the grave! What have we come to, brother peasants! . . . Not to have a drop of wine in the village, not to leave enough for Communion! But just as you, here on earth, dry up the barrels, so in the other world, up there in hell, your tongues will dry up for a drop of water. . . . Peasants, think what you are doing while there is yet time. Woe unto you when Judgment Day comes! . . . Amen.'

When the service was over, only the sexton learned what it was that had inspired his Reverence to such a sermon.

* A shepherd's pipe

A Summer Day

Gorno Rovinishté is a small and ugly village of the plains, with low, ramshackle little houses, cheerless and not whitewashed, scattered about haphazard among the unfenced, rubbish-filled yards, in which dirty and mischievous brats play all day long. A nameless and waterless river, which serves only to carry off torrents, spreads its broad stony bed through the village and makes the picture still uglier and sadder. In summer, when the water dries up entirely and the stony bed of the river is baked by the sun and turns white, this bare, almost treeless village, without a scrap of greenery, takes on a joyless aspect. The old church with its lichen-covered tiles, the low belfry with its shabby roof and the crooked wooden cross upon it, the half-withered poplar tree beside them, the yellow faces of the goitrous women, and the sandy screes in the streets cast a gloom on a man, and make him flee.

This summer I passed through it, perhaps for the twentieth time in my life, and it seemed uglier to me than ever before. It was harvest time. The village was deserted. The closed, deserted houses were sadly silent. Two or three dirty, half-naked children were idly squabbling in the hot sand of the street. A blind old woman sat motionless in the shade of a gate, and from time to time shouted something at them, in a voice that sounded like the barking of a beaten dog. A sick man lay lifelessly in front of a house. The long figure of the watchman with his gun slung over his shoulder appeared suddenly from behind the deserted watermill, and disappeared again. In a word — stillness. Stillness and boredom.

It was a heavy sultry day. The sun had stubbornly halted in the middle of the blue vault of the sky, and was pouring fire and embers down from the heights. A terrible exhaustion could be felt. Here and there in the gardens the solitary elms

and fruit-trees stood motionless, their leaves drooping, as if they were waiting to melt under the burning rays of the sun. I quickly left the suffocating village and made for the little taverns along the road near by. An infernal heat-haze quivered over the wide plain, encircled by a garland of blue and distant mountains. A heavy brooding silence reigned in the fiery air. The white kerchiefs and shirts of the harvesters could be seen in groups all over the ripe fields in the plain. Not a quail sounded its note, not a lark sang. Far, far away somewhere, girls' voices had taken up a harvest song together. Its quivering echo swayed over the plain in quiet waves, touching and sad, sorrowful to the point of tears.

The sun beats down — burning up the ears,
The wind blows — scattering ripe corn,
Black eyes — fine tears are weeping,
Oh, have mercy, Lord!

I stopped at the little tavern by the roadside. Here, too, there was the same desolation and cheerlessness. A building, low and long, like a barn, with something like a garden in front of it, served as a tavern, and, although it stood on the road, its uninviting appearance did not attract travellers, and only the inhabitants of Gorno Rovinishtë remained its constant customers.

It was cool inside. The uneven floor of mud tiles was swept and had been watered. The wide eaves of the roof did not allow the sun's rays to penetrate the windows, and semi-darkness reigned inside, soothing to the eyes, and, in a way, refreshing. There was an old counter in the corner opposite the door, disfigured by flies and more like a cage, through the wooden grating of which one saw the head of the Wallachian proprietor who had fallen asleep among the glasses. Five drunken peasants were drinking noisily around a low small table to one side.

They fell silent when I entered. Suddenly a puny little fellow with a childish, but old and wrinkled face, on which there was no trace of beard or moustache, rose up from behind the table. This beardless fellow, dressed in rough hand-sewn homespun clothes, was called Marko, and was well-known all over the district, although he was a simple tailor. In Turkish

times, long ago, he had been a schoolmaster, and since the Liberation he had been perpetually petitioning for a pension. We were old friends.

He began to skip round me, as gay as a child, and squeaked in a high comical woman's voice:

'Ah, wanderer, wanderer! Welcome, my lamb!'

His little grey eyes twinkled merrily under his colourless brows.

He began to question me slyly about this and that, doing his best to appear wise and a friend of importance. Raucous and squeaky laughter kept his mouth wide open, and from it protruded a crooked green tooth which bit into his underlip.

'I'm drinking, as you see. . . whoever is mad, let him work. . . . You give me wine and. . . wo-men, he-he-he!' And he laughed gaily, with all his heart at his inappropriate joke.

In the middle at the table sat Gavril, the mayor, full of his own importance, blue-eyed and so fair-haired that he was almost white — a bony peasant as stout as an oak. His copper-red face was radiant with satisfaction. He was in a good mood.

He greeted me, winked slyly at the beardless man, athirst for love, and began to roar with laughter. This Gavril was a strange fellow. His long moustaches, curved like sickles, gave a heroic aspect to his masterful presence, and inspired respect. After the Serbo-Bulgarian war of 1885, in which he had been wounded, he had served long as a police sergeant, then got his discharge and returned to his village. He was a poor man, but did not feel like working and liked to behave like a *chorbadji**. He had begun to drink from the time they had first elected him mayor. He liked women and was always having affairs.

Next to him, with drooping head, and quite drunk, sat Ivan *Dyadka*** . He meekly put out his hand to me, crushed his hat down over his eyebrows, sighed, and did his best to appear sober.

'Hey, *Dyadka*, don't you go to sleep, give us a song! Come on, *Dyadka*, give us a song! Oh, you dratted fellow, you!' Marko cried, pulling him by the shoulder.

* Rich man, master

** Little Old Granddad

Dyadka did not move. Sorrow lay on his shrewd face. When sober, he was a good man. He was about forty, and was respected in the village because he was literate, sensible, gay in character and sang in church. But since his wife had died, he had changed; he had yielded to despair and begun to drink.

'*Dyadka*, sing!' Marko insisted.

'Come on, *Dyadka*!' cried Gavril.

'No!'

'Sing, *Dyadka*, come on, sing, do!'

'Don't thump me like that! I won't sing!' And sighing deeply, *Dyadka* shook his head sadly, and sank into thought. Gavril handed him the glass.

'*Dyadka*, have a drink!'

'As for drinking, I will.'

'That's right, don't be a woman!' the mayor cried.

'Don't take it to heart so, *Dyadka*! Don't be so down in the mouth. . . . Drink — that's all you'll get out of life! Were you born just to sing in church to the old women? Sing, and I'll sing the second part for you. Eh!' cried the village watchman, who was as long as a pole, as he brought his fist down on the table, his eyes shining. His dry, dark face grew frowning, and his thin bloodless lips quivered nervously.

'Sing my song, *Dyadka*, do. Pelinko's song, sing it!' he cried enthusiastically. 'Sing, to please us all! Come on!'

Pelinko loved Milena,
Milena, the innkeeper's daughter,
the innkeeper's and the *chorbadji*'s. . . .

Ivan *Dyadka* never moved. Pelinko sighed, and made a gesture of disgust.

'Well, you're no good for anything.'

He was a young man of twenty to twenty-three, swift in movement, wiry and unrestrained. Hot blood ran in his veins and made him unappeasable. In Gornó Rovinishtë, they will long tell tales of his pranks at chain dances and working parties. Milena, a *chorbadji*'s daughter, a trim and pretty girl, had fallen in love with him. The *chorbadji* had no son, and wanted to take him in, but Pelinko refused, although he was as poor as a churchmouse. Simply out of waywardness.

'I'm not for the likes of them, and they're not for the likes of me.'

And he left the *chorbadji's* house, where he was a servant. But afterwards Milena became pregnant, and shamed her father. They sued Pelinko, but some widower took Milena away to a village near Zagora, and the matter was hushed up. They made a song about Pelinko in the village. That did not prevent him from marrying. But his wife died soon afterwards, so now he was a widower.

'*Dyadka*, drink and sing!' He cried, still thumping the table.

'May I die if I sing!'

'Well, die then — you'd better die!'

Gavril began to laugh, loud and long. This offended *Dyadka*.

'What are you laughing at, mayor?'

'You're funny.'

'I shan't sing!' said *Dyadka*, raising his head. 'I'm ashamed to. . . . I feel sad. The plain is burning. My children are there, working. . . . And I've got drunk. . . . I shan't sing!'

Dyadka brought his hand down on the table and tried to run away. Gavril embraced him with his strong hands and began to kiss him on the mouth.

'*Dyadka*. . . you think too much! Don't be an ass, but sing! We'll all sing! Ha, do you want us to?'

'No.'

'Then sing alone. . . come on!'

'I don't want to sing alone either.'

'What are you thinking about? You've got children, let them work, and you rest. . . . What have you reared them for? There, pick up your glass, and let's clink them. . . . We're all poor devils, *Dyadka*. . . poor de-vils! Whether you work or not, it's all one. That's all that'll be left us!'

'And in sin did my mother bear me,' said *Dyadka*, and drank up his glass to the last drop.

'That's how I like to see you, *Dyadka*,' said Gavril and patted him on the shoulder.

'All is vanity. . . all. Vanity of vanities,' said Marko.

'You're right. For beardless men like you, that's how it is,' *Dyadka* answered bitingly.

'That's so!' the watchman cried, striking the table.

'Grasshopper!' cried Marko, and began to curse.

'Hush!' said the mayor sternly, and stroked his sickle-shaped moustaches.

The fifth man, Old Yorgo, who was sitting to one side with a drooping head, slid down on the long seat along the wall and began to snore.

The watchman looked at him with a mocking glance, and with a wave of his hand, remarked:

'Your day is over, Granddad!'

And he nodded his head.

Marko sighed. Gavril tossed down one more glass. *Dyadka* began to hum a song softly. The clock on the wall, which had seemingly stopped, suddenly began to tick. The Wallachian's sleepy head straightened up among the glasses, he cast a glance at the drunkards, yawned, sneezed, and dropped his head on the counter again. Marko began to sing a church chant in his squeaky voice. *Dyadka* accompanied him with his sweet tenor, Gavril and Pelinko sang after them:

Since my ear-ly youth
Many pas-sions have pur-sued me. . . .

Their hoarse voices quivered long, getting ahead of each other, catching each other up, blending with each other, and in the end rose unharmoniously and softly.

The copper water jars, hanging over the counter, gave a soft ringing response.

Suddenly Pavel, the Deaf-mute, came into the tavern; he was *Dyadka's* son. He looked angrily at the drunken men, and going up to his father began to pull him by the shoulder.

Pavel was a tall and strong seventeen-year-old, with a clever face and a high forehead. He was born a deaf-mute. When his father got drunk, Pavel trembled with anger and hatred, and often threw him out of the tavern and beat him, without anyone being able to stop him. His red face and the straws on his waistband showed that he had come from the field. He pulled harder at his father and began to mutter something, gesticulating and moving his eyes about.

'He's calling me — I'll be off,' said *Dyadka*.

'Nonsense, much he needs you now,' remarked Gavril.

The Deaf-mute was shouting and waving his arms. He

was obviously angry. Perhaps to show himself magnanimous, Marko poured out a glass of wine and handed it to him. The Deaf-mute seized it and threw it out of the door, and gave the beardless man such a look that the latter trembled.

'A . . . bbb . . . pp-p,' Pavel raised his huge fist and showed it to the toppers threateningly, his eyes flashing. The Wallachian came out from behind his counter.

'Well, come along, *Dyadka*. . . . Come, you'd better go!' *Dyadka* rose from his seat.

'Well. . . as you won't sing to us — get along with you! There'll be no supper for you!' cried Pelinko. Gavril began to gesticulate, trying to communicate with the Deaf-mute.

Dyadka was holding his balance in the middle of the tavern, and called to the Wallachian:

'Put down. . . there. . . what do I owe?'

'No! Pay up, *Dyadka*, that won't do!'

'I haven't any money. . . . Put it down and hold your tongue, or do you see that Deaf-mute — he'll beat us both up.'

Pavel seized his father, drew the gadget with which he bound the sheaves out of his waistband and went off. *Dyadka* tried to follow him. Pavel gabbled something loudly, waved his hand and quickly went out.

'He doesn't want me, the donkey! He says it's sinful for me to go drunk to the field where the bread is being born. . . . Well, he's right. . . he's wise one, my Pavel! And why didn't he beat me? I deserve it!'

Dyadka sat down at his place again. Gavril handed him a glass.

'Drink. . . . Pavel is cleverer than you are. . . much cleverer!'

'Very much cleverer. . . . He takes after his mother, God rest her soul! . . . Eh, well, this old head has had many a hard time!'

'You'll find another wife, *Dyadka*,' said Marko, and began to laugh.

'You hold your tongue, Beardless,' *Dyadka* said, giving him a dirty look. 'I'll never marry again. . . ! It's over — it's all over!'

'Let's marry you, Marko,' Gavril cried, laughing loudly. 'That butter-fingers left you, but you'll find another....'

'Beardless, tell us the truth, why did Stanka leave you,

eh? We're alone here. And she married again, the cursed woman! To have her as your wife for a year, and leave you after that! There must be some reason for it,' Pelinko began teasing him.

'Reason, the devil of a reason,' objected Marko.

'But is it true that when she married again, she was a virgin, eh?' Pelinko asked, winking slyly.

Loud and general laughter rang throughout the tavern. Old Yorgo woke up and began to rub his eyes. Marko began to curse fearfully. This made his friends laugh still harder. He brought his fist down on the table several times, and made to leave.

'If you're such donkeys all of you — I'll say goodbye!'

'Marko, stop! I'll sing,' *Dyadka* called after him.

Marko returned and smiled.

Pelinko took out his *kaval** and began to put its sections together.

The day was already drawing to a close. Outside the heat had abated, and sad harvesters' songs came to them in waves from the plain.

'Pelinko, give us a tune! Why didn't you say you'd brought your pipe?' asked Gavril.

'That's it — play for us! That's how I like to see you,' *Dyadka* spoke up.

'Play us a sad tune,' Marko demanded.

Pelinko looked at him in silence, and bending his head, placed his lips to the *kaval*. They all fell silent. Old Yorgo sat up on the seat and fixed his eyes on the player. The Wallachian leaned against his counter. Pelinko half-closed his eyes, like one inspired, and blew on his *kaval*.

The first tones sounded like a deep and prolonged sigh, and they died away, little by little, as if they had sunk into a boundless sea of passions and sorrows. Then they began again, more sadly and at a higher pitch, falling on the men's hearts, seizing their souls and lifting them up like wonderful magic dreams, drawing them up in their light waves. They all glanced at each other, and each seemed to understand his secret sorrows. . . . The player had grown pale. *Dyadka* drew out a handkerchief and began to wipe his eyes. Old Yorgo listened with his mouth agape. The Wallachian was dreaming. Gavril

* Shepherd's flute

was leaning against the counter with his head on one side, as if he were flying somewhere high, high up, and had closed his eyes, quite carried away. Marko's eyes had grown twice as big. The *kaval* drew them out of themselves more and more. It grasped the subtlest, most tender and most secret wishes and sorrows of the soul, melting them in its wonderful sounds, and talked and talked, telling of something touching, endlessly sad, yet so wonderful and pure!

And suddenly it came to an end. The copper jars on the counter echoed the last sound.

For a minute no one spoke. They were all silent in a kind of expectation. Pelinko gave them a triumphant look and drank up his glass.

'The Lord take your soul, Pelinko!' Marko cried, enthusiastically.

'That's what I call art, there! And you, you just cry. . . sing, sing. . . . What's my voice worth!' *Dyadka*, whose eyes were wet, said plaintively.

Gavril only sighed and ordered wine. Old Yorgo shook his head in silent wonder, and clicked his tongue. Then they all grew noisy again, and began to talk of women, of work, of Turks and politics.

The day was over and the sun was setting. Pelinko blew on his *kaval* once more. A gay and playful tune rang out like a whirlwind in the tavern, and changed the mood. *Dyadka* rose to his feet and began to dance solemnly, keeping his eyes on his feet and uttering cries from time to time: 'Ouh, ha-ha. . . come, stamp. . . ouh, ha-ha!' Marko joined hands with him in such a gay mood that his green tooth stuck out more than ever. Gavril watched them, laughing loudly and encouraging them.

'That's it! . . . Stamp away! . . . Ha, *Dyadka*. . . carry on. . . take off your waistcoat. . . that's it. . . Ha-ha-hal'

The tavern rang to his laughter.

Pelinko suddenly stopped his playing and began a sad tune again. The dancers went back to their places and began an argument. Gavril signed to them to be silent. The *kaval* swept them away once more.

The sun had set. I bade them farewell and went out. Outside it was cool and fine. The west was burning like fire. A pleasant coolness lay over the plain. Tired harvesters were

returning to the village in gay groups, laughing and singing. I set off across the meadows to my own village. Little by little the west paled and the soothing shade of evening crept over the plain. The frogs croaked in the thickets along the river, and their voices quivered in unison over the plain, like the echo of thousands of little steel bells. Somewhere a man's song was heard and died away. The crickets chirped all around.

It grew dark. The songs died away. Stars spangled the sky. Somewhere far in the distance an inexperienced little shepherd began to play and then to sing:

'Kera, shall I, shall I, shall I,
Kera, shall I come. . . .'

Then everything became silent.

By the Mill

Granddad Ougrin, the old miller, once again attentively examined the rotten and slimy gutter of the mill and the ruined building below it, and barely managed to limp to the door with his crutch, where, exhausted, he sat down to rest. Violent pains shot up the broken bone of his leg, stirred by this little walk. The old man gave a dull moan, took off his hat and leaned up against the wall.

'Oh, dear, I'll be quite crippled. . . in my old age!'

The sun had set beyond the distant blue mountains in the west. The last crimson hues were already fading away, and little by little they disappeared in the dusk of evening, deep, blue and boundless. A hot summer day drew to its end and the cool of evening wafted over the earth. Somewhere out in the plain, the distant echo of a sorrowful harvest song rose right up to the heavens far away and sad, then it died away. The dusk of evening slowly and imperceptibly grew into darkness. One after the other bright stars quivered in the sky. The frogs began to croak in the nearby pool, and the steely echo of their chorus quivered soothingly and dreamily in the quiet of evening. Along the road above the mill, leading to the village, the noisy talk and laughter of the harvesters died away. The regular tinkle of a bell came from the crooked path above the river.

The noise of the water mill seemed to grow stronger.

Granddad Ougrin struck his flint a few times, lit his pipe and made an effort to rise, but his broken leg prevented him from doing so.

'Milena. . . Milena. . . where have you got to?' he called, somewhat disturbed, and staring into the darkness.

'Why, I'm here,' a clear woman's voice answered from the little garden at the back of the mill. 'I'm here, out here.'

'Come along in, it's late!' the old man called, somewhat imperatively.

'Well, let me water the garden. . . . The heat has burned everything!' Milena called.

The slow and regular sound of the bell came nearer and stopped on the road, right next to the garden. A cigarette glowed in the darkness. Milena straightened up, and looked timidly towards it.

Next to the fence, in the dark shade of the bushes, stood a man, and a well-laden donkey calmly nibbled at the thistles beside him.

'Good evening, Milena!' a young man's voice spoke quietly and somewhat uncertainly in the darkness.

Involuntary shivers crept over Milena's body. Barefoot, in her shirt, with a small white kerchief on her head to keep her abundant fair hair in order, she stood in the middle of the garden like a samodiva*.

'God send you good, Svilen,** she answered, confused, and started to run away.

'You're watering very late,' Svilen spoke again.

Milena stopped.

'Oh, dear, dear, dear!' she thought and did not reply.

'Where do you keep yourself? How are you? We haven't seen each other for a long time,' Svilen said, boldly this time.

'Well, you know, it's the work season now,' Milena answered bashfully.

'Since you married, you don't often go out, do you?'

'Why should I go out?'

'Eh, why indeed. . . . Who knows? I daresay you're happier at home. . . with Stoyan!' Svilen said, mockingly.

Milena broke off a twig from the nearby willow, and without answering began to pull off its leaves, her head bent.

'One gets used to everything! . . . The human heart changes!' Svilen began again.

He was leaning on the fence and smoking. His donkey stood beside him, humbly and gently.

Milena was still tearing the leaves off the twig nervously and could not find an answer. She felt how offensive Svilen's words were to her, and wanted to tell him that he wasn't right. Her heart was beating quickly, and something moved her so

* Wood nymph

** Traditional answer to good day or any other similar greeting

deeply: that her words were choked, and her eyes filled with tears, ready to pour down like hail.

'There's nothing for it — that's the world! That's what people are like — they've no hearts. . . . Perhaps it's better so,' Svilen continued slowly. 'Love this lad, marry that one, and live in comfort. . . . Sell yourself, and live in comfort. . . so long as you're all right that way.'

'Svilen, don't say that, when you know who. . . .' Milena spoke dully.

'I can't hear.'

'When you know who was responsible for. . . things turning out like that, don't reproach me,' she repeated again, dully.

'I can't hear you! Come closer, now, see how timid you are!'

'I must go in, for Dad is ill. . . . I left my mother-in-law alone today and came here to him,' said Milena, and went timidly up to him.

'Well, won't they scold you?'

'I don't care if they do. . . . I shan't leave my father in this state for their sakes.'

Svilen fell silent.

'And you, Svilen, how are you, how are you getting on?' Milena asked.

'I? I'm all right. I live, I work and I drink. . . . The gay, spirited Svilen you knew died. The Svilen you see now is another man — sullen, wicked and drunk!' Svilen answered, and puffed at his cigarette.

A faint glow lit up his round fair face and his blue eyes, and Milena saw him again, as handsome as he had been years ago, when they had loved each other so madly. And his words rang false to her.

'What a one you are!' she cried, shaking a finger at him. 'You haven't changed at all. . . . I hear talk of you and Kounka Popova. . . .'

'Well, I haven't got over you yet!' he remarked after a short silence. 'And it seems to me that I shan't forget you easily, just as you won't forget me. . . . You're women, and you haven't a pennyworth of constancy.'

His voice trembled.

'Svilen, don't say that. . . you don't know how much I... think of you. . . and how much I still love you. . . .'

Sobs choked her words. She covered her face with her hands.

Svilen stretched a hand over the fence, and drew one of hers from her face.

'Hush! I don't want tears!' he said tenderly. 'I don't want tears! You still love me, you say. Only pain. . . . Such a foolish love. . . hidden, secret. Eh! . . . Nonsense! . . Come, now, don't cry! We've met for once in all this long time, and you cry!'

'Svilen, Svilen! . . . Do you know how unhappy I am? . . . You don't,' Milena sobbed, 'you don't know anything, anything at all!'

'Well, well, be quiet, be quiet!'

Svilen drew Milena closer to him and put a strong arm around her slim waist. She yielded to his embrace and, as in former days, their lips met in a kiss, a sinful kiss now.

The willows softly and calmly whispered to each other. The mill rumbled dully. And up in the blue sky the stars twinkled beside each other, twinkled steadily.

The old man's helpless voice was heard from the mill:

'Milena. . . Milena! Where have you got to, child?'

Milena started.

'I'm coming, I'm coming!' she called. 'Eh, Svilen, how much I've thought — dearie me, why don't I meet him somewhere, just to have a talk!'

'Is that all, just to have a talk?'

'Well?'

'Well, talk then. . . let me listen. . . .'

'Oh, Svilen, what a one you are! Why don't you get married? It seems to me that I wouldn't be so unhappy then, I wouldn't be thinking of you. . . . I'd get used to those people, too. . . . How I hate them now! That's what happens when you betray your heart!' Milena said, stroking the forehead of the gentle donkey, which looked at her calmly and meekly.

'Marko, Marko!' she said to it. 'Lovely little grey donkey, don't you tell anyone. . . . You simple little animal, how often you've been our witness! . . . Hold your tongue, be silent, little grey Marko!'

Svilen laughed.

Milena had forgotten herself.

The old man's helpless voice cried again:

'Milena! . . . Child!'

'Eh, I'm coming!' Milena called aloud, and added: 'Why does he call me now? Let him wait. . . . Oh, Svilen! . . . I don't know whether you still love me, but I. . . . Stoyan is good, as meek as a fly. . . . Believe me, if I were to beat him, he would cry like a child and not say a word, not a single word to me. . . but I hate him just the same. . . perhaps that's why I hate him. . . . You're so crazy, so bad, but. . . .'

'We hadn't the luck to live together, and that's the truth!' sighed Svilen.

'That's your fault, yours, Svilen!'

'It's poverty's fault! I told you. . . . I live in a stranger's house. . . . I'm always a servant, a servant, I'm someone else's slave. And you would have suffered along with me, even more than me. . . . Why should I darken your youth and poison your life? . . . I thought and I thought. . . . I thought a long time about it, and I couldn't make up my mind.'

'If you had loved me more, you would have.'

'You always say that! . . . You reproached me for it before.'

The old man called again:

'Milena!'

And his dry cough was heard behind the willows.

'I'm coming, I'm coming!'

'Stay a while,' said Svilen.

'Svilen, let me go, I beg you, it's late. . . .'

'No, stay a while!'

And Svilen jumped over the fence.

One next to other, the stars in the heavens twinkled calmly. The gloomy shadows of the tall willows whispered quietly to each other; the mill rumbled steadily and dully.

'Milena,' the old man called again. 'Milena, where have you got to?' and he began to call more often, but for a long time no one answered him.

Much later the copper bell began to tinkle in a measured way along the road to the village. In the stillness, a soft man's song rang out suddenly, and echoed strangely in the night:

'Oh, you youthful years,

How quickly you have passed! . . .'

The voice sank low, trembled sadly, forlornly, and stopped.

All Souls' Day



damp and misty autumn day enveloped the village. Fine rain fell steadily, bringing down the last yellow leaves of the now sparsely covered poplar trees, which stood around the little old church, as sad and sorrowful as widows. The old unfenced cemetery was full of women moving restlessly hither and thither, sad and serious. That day was set aside for the souls of the departed, and each and every one sank his own sorrow into the common sorrow for the dead. The old, crooked, moss-covered stone crosses were decorated with bunches of dried autumn flowers. On the oldest graves, now barely discernible under the weeds, which had grown over them, people had placed bread and plates of boiled wheat on the gaily-coloured table-runners which they had spread there.

White-haired *Pop** Seraphim, censer in hand, hurried from grave to grave, reading prayers and the names of the dead, and crossly scolding the women. After him came his twin sons, lugging a sack, which Uncle Todor, the verger, zealously filled with hunks of bread.

Under the low-hung porch of the church stood the school children in orderly rows. Their schoolmistress, a tall, thin, withered spinster, blue in the face with the cold, ceaselessly scolded the naughty ones.

The women served the wheat with painted spoons, brought from the Holy Sepulchre, crying:

'There — and say "God rest his soul!"'

The children sniffed, stretched out their hands one after the other and cried:

'God rest his soul! God rest his soul!'

Along the church walls, by the rainpipes, a row of poor

* *Pop* — priest

orphans squatted on their bare heels, looking like ant heaps in their old garments which were far too wide for them; they stretched out their hands and waited with pitiful eyes to be given something. Next to them mad Hristo stood guiltily, perpetually wrapping himself up in the torn skirts of his wide coat, through which his flesh showed, blue with the cold.

Further on, a blind beggar was singing pitifully.

And over this whole mournful picture, sunk in the damp and misty air, permeated with the penetrating smell of wax and incense, hovered an indistinct hubbub, amid which the priest's deep voice could be heard, clear and monotonous.

Amid this crowd of women, the tall figure of Stancho the Field Watchman appeared, carrying round wheat for his late wife, as if he were a woman. The general sad and serious air was stamped on his withered and sorrowful face with its long drooping moustache. He went from group to group, from child to child, handing around the wheat, thoughtful and reverent at the memory of the late Bozhana. He caught sight of his *koumitsa** in the distance, and made his way through the crowd to her side.

'Help yourself, *koumitsa*, and say "God rest Bozhana's soul."'

'O-oh, *koum*, I didn't see you — may evil never see you either! How are you, how goes it with you? How are the children? Why didn't you bring them to honour their mother's memory, God rest her soul?

'Eh, they're not fit to be seen, *koumitsa*, and that's the truth of it!'

'God rest her soul, poor Bozhana,' the *koumitsa* went on, full of sympathy, 'she was cut off in her prime! And she left you alone, like a cuckoo, for people to make jokes about and to have the womenfolk fear you, as the saying is! But it's not so bad for you, *koum* — you'll sorrow and then you'll stop sorrowing; you'll find another woman, and you'll forget Bozhana, as the saying is, as if she had never been. But the

* A woman to whom he has been *koum*, i.e. stood sponsor at her wedding. The *koum* and *kouma*, usually a married couple, who are sponsors at another couple's wedding, and are considered their spiritual parents, are always highly honoured, and considered close relatives

children, the children, poor things! They'll never find a mother. They'll cry for her like chicks. God rest her soul and give her his kingdom, and put her at his right side, as the saying is, so that all will be well with her there at least.'

And Aunt Divdena, the *koumitsa*, shook her head, and taking the brandy flask, shook it close to her ear, then took a long pull of its contents.

'There, *koum*, have a drink, too! Eh, dear Lord, I'm that busy, I can't come and see the children — dear little things. I'm sorry for them, that I am!'

'Eh, if Bozhana were living, things would be different,' Stancho said sadly, and his eyes filled with tears, 'now I have to look after them alone!'

'God's will, *koum* — there's nothing to be done about it!'

Stancho sniffed, then blew his nose with emotion.

'There, *koumitsa*, have another drink, have some more! Trouble is for us people. That's what we're born for, to have troubles — what else are poor folk for?'

'Never you mind that, *koum*, good and evil go hand in hand. The one comes and then the other. There, you have another drink! God rest the souls of the dead, say I, and give health and life to the living.'

Stancho took the lead brandy flask and took a good pull at it.

'God rest her soul!'

'God rest it, *koum*, and that's that. Don't worry and think about it so much, but try to find someone — anyone — to look after your house. You know, that's life. As for the dead, may the soil rest lightly over them, but live with the living,' the *koumitsa's* tongue was wagging fast now.

'God rest the dead souls, and give the living a full crop,' Stancho answered, cheered by the brandy and his *koumitsa's* comforting words.

'To tell you the truth, *koumitsa*,' he added, 'I think so, too.'

'That's right, *koum*. Good or bad, just you find somebody,' the *koumitsa* answered.

His mother-in-law, the late Bozhana's mother, came up to them.

'O-oh, Stancho, my lad! Poor fellow, I'm that upset

when I see you. You've given yourself up to grieving, my lad! I see you shying away from people like a horse. You shouldn't, my boy; you should mix with people. Bozhana, God rest her soul, such was her fate!

These words saddened Stancho again. His eyes, dark sufferer's eyes, filled with tears once more.

'Well, Granny,' he said with a sigh, 'it had better have been me, not her.'

'Eh, so it had, lad, so it had, but that's the Lord's business. Children get on better without a father than without a mother. . . .' the old woman said, by way of comfort.

Stancho fished a handkerchief out of his waistband and began to wipe his eyes and nose.

'Don't you cry, my boy! Stop mourning for Bozhana and get yourself a wife, a wife, a housekeeper, you can't go on living like that.'

'I can't find anybody like her,' Stancho answered, raising the brandy flask to his lips.

'I know, my boy, I know; you're not much of a fellow, so it won't be easy to find somebody — women are hard to please. But when it comes to work, you're like an ox. Oh, my boy, what a state you're in!'

Stancho looked down at the ragged and dirty sleeves of his shirt and sighed deeply.

'We're all so sorry for you, *koum*,' the *koumitsa* went on again after having been diverted into a conversation with Piomiya the nun. 'We talked about you the other day again; your *koumets* Dimo and I. "Tell him to get married again," he says, "and not to go about like that. He's too young," he says.'

'Eh, I'm young, says he,' Stancho said shamefacedly, and wiped his drooping moustache. 'I'm not young any more, but. . . .'

His eyes filled with tears again. He raised the brandy flask to his lips.

Other women claimed his *koumitsa*'s attention, his mother-in-law went off with the priest's wife; Stancho found himself standing alone again, like a pole, and wandered about aimlessly, dish in hand.

Everybody looked at him pityingly. A man — and there he was carrying wheat around: a lone man! He seemed to have

taken pains with his appearance, having changed his clothes, and done his best to make himself neat and trim, but he looked funny just the same in his old trousers, which he had washed and mended himself, sticking the patches on the outside. Two or three mocking young married women glanced at him slyly, whispered something, giggled, and the next minute remembered that it was All Souls' Day, and looked sad again.

And the rain, as fine as dust, came down unceasingly, wetting people's clothes, and the cold damp penetrated everywhere.

People began to leave, some alone, some in groups, disappearing like shadows into the damp blue mist. The withered schoolmistress led her shivering charges away, scowling, and, little by little, the cemetery began to grow deserted. Stancho looked this way and that, then sat down, quite tired out, on the stones under the eaves of the church, and began to eat some bread and cheese.

Stoïlka, the widow of the late Yanachko, the cowherd, came up to him then. A tall, bony pole of a woman, with a long face, fairish hair and grey eyes, with wide lips, which she kept closely pressed together timidly, as if to guard her big white teeth; but she was a good and careful housewife for all that.

'Stancho, I had almost forgotten you!' she cried in a sing-song voice when she caught sight of him. 'How are your children getting on, are they growing big?' she began to question him loudly and sharply, in the same way as she used to speak to her Yanachko, who was somewhat hard of hearing.

Stancho shyly drew in his long legs, muttered something through his full mouth, and handed the flask to Stoïlka.

'Eh, we, too, live somehow, along with the others, Stoïlka. There, take it and drink to her rest!'

She took the flask and handed him hers.

'So we do, and that's the truth. Drink to his rest, Stancho!'

'God rest the souls of the dead, Stoïlka, and give the living health and a long life! And how are you? Are you getting used to being alone?'

'God spare us all, Stancho!'

Stoïlka took two long pulls at Stancho's brandy.

'God spare us all, as you say, Stoïlka, but he hasn't spared us. . . .'

'Well, that's how it is; it's the Lord's will.'
'We've been left lone and lorn, Stoilka,' sighed Stancho, and grew thoughtful.

The mist was growing dense, darker and damper, Stancho and Stoilka sat on the stone, their eyes fixed on the mist, deep in thought.

'It's very hard like this, Stoilka,' Stancho said after a time, shaking his head sadly without looking at her.

'That it is, very hard,' Stoilka answered, her eyes firmly fixed on the ground, and she sighed again. 'I sit there thinking and thinking the livelong night, and really don't know. . . .'

'I think a lot, too, and I wonder what to do. I can see it can't go on like this. I'll have to do something about it. Mostly because of the children. Someone's got to look after them. If a man's in it, he might just as well be up to his neck in it. Bozhana, poor woman, used to annoy me terribly. . . . Eh, if you only knew how she used to nag me! But I was fond of her, and I never laid a hand on her, as the saying is. A man who beats his wife, beats his angel. . . .'

'Come, Stancho, don't say that. . . if you only knew what some of them are like! They deserve the stick all right,' Stoilka said, swaying sadly, like a dried up tree.

'I'm not that sort,' Stancho answered. 'Would you believe it, since she died, I'm not the same man! I'm miserable!'

'My Yanachko was a good chap, poor fellow, may the soil rest lightly on his grave. But I was in luck when he died. The way he was carrying on, if he had lived another year, he would have drunk up all he had,' Stoilka said, holding her hand over her mouth, to hide her big teeth. 'We would have had nothing left, nothing, nothing at all! The children would have been crying for a bit of bread!'

Stoilka took another pull at the brandy flask and handed it to Stancho. He took it from her without looking at her and grew more thoughtful.

The cemetery was already quite deserted. The old crosses stood there sad and lonely now with their faded flowers. The mist grew denser and denser. The eaves of the old church seemed to be weeping large tears. The raindrops pattered down sadly and made little runnels in the wet sand. That old, low building, crumbling under the weight of its years, seemed to be weeping disconsolately. Down through the cemetery passed

Bogdan the Beggar, leaning on his big stick, and wrapped in his rags. In the tavern opposite a bagpipe skirled out sadly, then piped a few dancing notes and fell silent. After it came a short gay drunken cry, then silence reigned again.

Stoïlka and Stancho looked at each other.

'Who can be having a good time?' Stoïlka asked, still deep in her sorrow.

'Poor people,' Stancho answered. 'They're drinking.'

'What are you thinking about, Stancho?'

'What am I thinking of? . . . Just nonsense. They're trying to persuade me to get married.'

'Well, do get married.'

'All very well, but how do I know how it'll turn out? First of all who would have me — me with four children? And I'm old already, and ugly, too.'

Stancho wiped his drooping moustaches, pulled their ends and coughed.

'You're not all that old. . . . And you're not all that ugly either; though you *are* lean and black,' Stoïlka comforted him. 'You're a man, and it's easy for you. All you have to do is say the word, and there'll be at least ten willing to say yes; but we womenfolk. . . .'

'You womenfolk are dreadful hard to please, if I may say so, and a man simply daren't. . . .'

Stancho had another drink and handed the flask to Stoïlka. She took it and smiled. That's all her big teeth were waiting for to shine forth in all their splendour.

'D'you know what, Stancho, people have often spoken to me of you. Why should Stancho want me, I says to them. He's used to a handsome wife. Bozhana was that handsome, I says. . . .'

'So she was. Bozhana was handsome. What eyes she had!'

A flock of memories came into his mind of his past youth, and choked his words. He sighed, bent his head, spat, and fell silent.

'They tell me: "Stancho is a good man, you'll live like a queen with him,"' Stoïlka took up the attack again.

'Well, if you want to know, they've talked to me about you!'

'And you wouldn't hear a word about me,' Stoilka interrupted him, and wriggled her shoulders like a girl.

'Well, how was I to know what you would say to it? And then the mother-in-law started in with "Stoilka's this, and Stoilka's that! Even if you dream of her," she says, "drive her away. She has a baby every year, and will saddle you with a pack of children. What'll you do with 'em?" she says.'

'Oh, shame on her, Stancho!'

'You know what a cussed and evil old hag she is, don't you? Bozhana was just like her.'

Stoilka sighed. She was sitting on the stones, bent almost double, her hands thrust into her sheepskin jacket, shivering with the cold, and ashamed to look Stancho in the eye. She felt saddened by the old woman's words.

'D'you know what?' Stancho went on. 'If I asked you, would you have me?'

Stoilka wriggled her body and said nothing.

'Let's put our troubles and our children together, and the Lord help us,' Stancho plucked up courage to say. 'There, I've been alone a year and a half. Why? — I ask myself, looking at the world wagging around me. Eh? What d'you say to that?'

'Eh, d'you know what I'd say to that?' Stoilka answered blushing. 'What a one you are! Just making a mock of me.' And she gave him a coy look.

'You leave that alone; we're not bachelor and maid to play about. Our day is over.'

'Perhaps it isn't, after all,' Stoilka smiled, with her hand over her mouth.

'Just so! There, I give you my word, and if you're willing, all right!'

'Eh, I'm willing enough — why shouldn't I be? How can I manage alone? If I don't have you, it'll be another man.'

'That's how it is! If you like, we'll go to the priest at once and tell him.' Stancho got up. Stoilka looked around with her grey eyes, picked up her dish and rose to her feet.

The two set out together in silence. The rain was still falling, wetting their faces with its cold wet drops and bringing colour into them. Stancho's head was swimming from the brandy, and his feet were unsteady. Stoilka walked beside

him, doubled up with the cold, carrying the two brandy flasks and the two dishes, and cursing the weather.

More mist came down from the hills, dense and grey, crowding over the village.

Stanco was suddenly seized by a gay mood. He gazed into Stoilka's eyes, as grey as the mist, like a boy, and kept repeating:

'D'you know what I'll tell the priest? "Father Priest," I'll say, "the Lord has taken Bozhana, but has sent me Stoilka!" Eh? . . . That's what I'll say to him, just you wait.'

And Stoilka smiled happily at him, hiding her mouth with her hand.

Love

That evening *Pop** Loukà sent his harvesters to rest early, and allowed no *horos*** and merrymaking as he had done on the other evenings.

Ivka, his trim and pretty daughter, saw her friends off at the gate, laughed and joked with them in the dusk, and returned, somewhat frightened, to work guiltily with her mother in the house.

Her father's action had aroused forebodings in her soul. She trembled at the thought that he knew everything.

All that day in the field, she had felt that his stern, cool, questioning look had been following her.

'He has guessed! Dear Lord! Why wasn't I careful?' was the thought which flashed through her mind.

She was dazed by the sweet and lovely memories, still fresh in her mind, of the teasing, the songs and the jokes, of the unspoken words and the secret looks, which she had exchanged with Dobryan, their farm hand.

She loved him. Oh, how she loved him!

All day long she had dreamt of that evening. She longed to dance in the dusk, to sing and laugh a while. To dance the *horo* together with Dobryan, to whisper with him in secret, so that no one would see them, and no one would hear them.

But instead. . . .

Her father was a rich man, well-known and of good repute. He was grim and stern — she knew that. He had not sent the harvesters off so early for any good purpose.

But Dobryan had not held his tongue; he had spoken to her hurriedly.

'Ivka,' he had said, 'do you realize why your father is doing this? He has sensed our plans and is going to foil them. . . he's going to part us.'

* *Pop* — priest

** *Horo* — round or chain dance

'Why, no, Dobryan, he just doesn't feel well,' she had said, trying to rid herself of the thought.

'I know,' he had said, smiling venomously, and made for the threshing ground. When he was alone, he sighed deeply. He was unhappy, too.

'Eh, Father Priest, Father Priest, if you knew all!' he thought, with triumphant indignation, and stretched himself out on his back on a pile of fresh green grass. His gaze wandered over the great and boundless picture of the deep blue night skies, girded by the bright star-studded belt of the Milky Way. Dobryan's soul grew clear, as little by little it rid itself of spite and indignation, and became filled with peace and awe. There, under God's quivering stars, Ivka had sworn eternal love to him.

'And her father. . . Oh, let him growl!'

Sitting up on the hay, Dobryan blew on his *kaval** with inspiration.

In the profound stillness of that calm summer night, wonderful tones trembled in the air. At first the *kaval* played softly, playfully, then suddenly stopped, sighed despondently and with unending sadness it began a song about quiet, intimate village joys, amid the hard and unrelenting labours, playing as though it were sobbing. One after the other the sounds quivered, melted and blended into each other, rising into the night like inconsolable weeping. Then they moaned dully, as if imploring forgiveness for uncommitted sins, desperately crying to heaven for help.

After supper, Pop Loukà had stayed in the cool of the garden. He listened callously to the *kaval* and thought indignantly of Dobryan. His pride had been badly hurt. Fancy Ivka, his spoilt only daughter, loving a servant, who slept in the stable with his horses!

And when he saw the house door ajar and the timid and stealthy slender figure of Ivka lit by the radiance of the fire, he jumped up, stung by anger, and, clenching his teeth, he cautiously set out towards her.

'I'll give her a good beating, to make her come to her senses,' he thought.

But Ivka shut the door and disappeared.

Pop Loukà made for the threshing ground. His long figure,

* *Kaval*, shepherd's pipe, a primitive flute

lit by the moon, moved slowly and cautiously, as black as a spectre. His huge dark shadow stealthily followed him along the white wall of the yard.

Dobryan heard him and stopped playing. When *Pop Loukà* approached, he put the *kaval* away, and stood up respectfully.

'Dobryan,' said the priest in a dull, firm voice, stopping before him, 'you have served me well, but. . . .'

The priest did not know what to say. He was trembling with anger, but restrained himself and tried to find words that were gentler and less offensive. Dobryan could not imagine what the priest was about to say to him and waited in silence.

'I am pleased with your work,' the priest continued, much more gently now, 'but I see things, which. . . .'

Dobryan understood and dropped his eyes, unexpressed shame made his cheeks flame.

'What you are doing is shameful. . . but it is best for you to go and not set foot here again. . . . And don't think that anything can come of it. . . . Do you understand?'

Dobryan was silent.

'That's all,' the priest broke off, and made for the house with measured steps.

Dobryan staggered about the yard bewailing his lot, then opened the gate and disappeared into the deserted street, his soul full of pain and spite.

Pop Loukà went into the house frowning and angry, as he had been all evening. *Ivka* and *Granny Popadia** were busy around the fire. The *Popadia* gave him a questioning look.

'Father Priest, where have you been? It's late,' she said gently.

Pop Loukà sat down on the chair beside the fire, over which bright flames were dancing and said nothing.

'Come, you'd better go to bed, you've been out in the sun all day,' his wife said gently.

'I'm not sleepy', the priest replied, and added after a pause. 'I have sent Dobryan away.'

Ivka, who was busy bending over the sink, straightened up, startled and looked at her father. *Granny Popadia*, puzzled,

* *Popadia* — Priest's wife, from *Pop* — priest. When old they are addressed usually as *Granny Popadia*

gave her husband a long look. The bright flames of the fire danced as happily as ever over the white walls and the copper dishes, and a pleasant, joyful light shone over everything in the kitchen. The cat was purring contentedly in the niche by the hearth. *Pop Loukà* had bent his head in thought and nervously rattled his rosary, brought from the Holy Sepulchre. His face was immobile and expressionless. The soft light of the fire played over it, too, and lit it up strangely. After a long and painful silence, without moving, he spoke, as if to himself:

'I had to drive him out,' and he sighed, displeased.

'Whatever for?' the *Popadia* asked.

'Let *Ivka* tell you,' the priest said, in offended tones, without looking at his daughter.

'Come, now, good man!' said Granny *Popadia*, wishing to smooth things over.

'*Ivka* will tell you,' the priest repeated.

Ivka, who was standing holding some kind of a pot in her hand, left it on the sink and turning, put her hands over her face and began to cry quietly. This irritated her father.

'You're crying, eh?' he shouted. 'I know why you're crying. . . . Out with you!'

'Now, don't scold the child, good man,' said the *Popadia*.

'Let her get out of my sight, I don't want to see her. I'll beat her to death!'

'Hark at him! Are you out of your mind, Father Priest?'

'Hold your tongue! It's your fault, too.'

Ivka went out. The *Popadia* began to scold the priest. He shouted something at her, then went into the garden through the small door and, smoking a cigarette in irritation, he began to walk to and fro, followed by his big dark shadow.

The village had long since gone to sleep in the embrace of that cool and wonderful July night. The moon, gay and round-faced, floated across the sky. Not a sound was to be heard anywhere. Only the village watermill rattled dully in the distance. The small low village houses, modestly tucked away among the fruit trees, rested sweetly, carefully guarding the tired peasants, worn out by their work. High above the dark village landscape, the church cross — the talisman of village hopes, the comforter of tormented hearts — shone against the moon. A row of tall poplars stood along the church, like giant gloomy monks.

Pop Loukà walked around his garden, irritated and thinking. The next moment a frightful woman's cry broke the stillness, rising, desperate and ugly, and, as if cast back by the vault of the sky, it fell, terrible and sinister, over the village. Then it was repeated, a second and third time. The dogs, awakened, howled ominously. The night seemed to bristle with horror.

The priest stopped, startled and stupefied. Suddenly *Granny Popadia* came towards him, as if from nowhere, terrified and demented, like a madwoman, and pulled at his cassock. Then, casting herself on the ground in desperation, she screamed again.

The priest trembled.

'*Popadia*, get up,' he cried raising her, terrified, 'what is it?'

In horror she tugged at his cassock, mute and desperate.

'*Ivka*? Where is *Ivka*?' *Pop Loukà* asked, appalled by a vague and ugly presentiment.

Unable to speak a word, the *Popadia* was dragging him towards the house by his cassock, bent to the ground, shaken by smothered sobs, which rose from her breast like whimpers.

In the shadow under the stairs lay *Ivka*, bloodstained and lifeless. . . .

The *Popadia* fell on her body.

From all the streets in the village people came running, sleepy and frightened, and crowded the yard of Father Priest's house. Screams and sobs rang out. *Ivka* lay dead. She had plunged a sharp knife into her heart and her lifeless hand still held it there. The moon cast a gentle light over her sweet pale face, with its thick black lashes lying on the cheeks. On the white chemise which hid her breasts, there were scarlet stains, like roses. *Ivka's* young friends surrounded the dead girl, weeping sorrowfully, and lamenting. *Granny Popadia* had fainted.

Pop Loukà, supported by men, stood there, taller than them all, staring vacantly about him and waving his hands, helplessly, crazily.

People crowded around in amazement, asking what could have made this young and good girl thrust a knife into her heart. One old man said, as he crossed himself:

'We are old. . . . We cannot understand young hearts.'

The Mowers

Night fell, a wonderful summer night, cool and fresh. The boundless Thracian Plain sank into the darkness and gave itself up to rest, lulled by the monotonous tune of the frogs and the crickets. Peace and serenity stole down from the vast starry sky, the earth opened her arms and surrendered in ecstasy.

The muddy waters of the Maritsa lapped against their wide, dark banks, overgrown with willow and osiers, as, flowing with lazy calm, they bore along their burden of the drowned. Moisture and coolness emanated from their mysterious depths.

From the meadows a man's clear voice rose and sank into the stillness.

'An-dre-ya-a-a, An-dre-ya-a-a!'

'Coming, coming,' came the answer from afar.

known
Thrace

A little later a glimmer of fire shone out. Playful flames shot up. In their faint light, swallowed by the surrounding gloom, the figures of people appeared. They were five villagers from the Zagora districts, who had come, with their scythes over their shoulders, to seek work in distant Thrace where the grasses ripened earlier.

Lazo, a lean, wiry lad, was squatting by the fire and poking the sticks about. The others, wrapped in their heavy *yamour-louks**, were lying around the fire, staring wearily at the play of the flames in silence. The oldest of them, a man of fifty, was leaning his head on one of his sinewy hands, his arm bared to the elbow, like iron in its dark sheen; he was smoking dreamily. Opposite him lay Blagolazh, moving ceaselessly, restlessly, trying to hide his legs under the short cape. His fair bristling moustache covered half his face, and under his thick bushy brows there twinkled a pair of sly, intelligent eyes.

* A heavy peasant cape of broadly-striped brown and white homespun

‘What’s the matter with you, Blagolazh? Get on with it,’ Lazo said, piling sticks onto the fire and lying down.

Blagolazh patted the little white dog, which had curled up beside him, stirred again and began:

‘Once upon a time, in a far-off kingdom, there was a king’s daughter. . . . She was beautiful, so beautiful there was none like her. Her hair flowed behind her like a river of silk and it shone like gold! Her eyes were black, as black as this night, and whoever beheld her died of love for her.’

‘Eh,’ sighed Lazo.

‘Be quiet!’ said the others.

‘He tells awful lies,’ Lazo said.

Blagolazh looked him straight in the eye.

‘This is a story, brat!’ he said.

‘Just drivell! A pack of lies!’ said Lazo, peering about him hesitantly, almost fearfully, in the dark where, a few paces away the black silhouette of a donkey was calmly poking about among the osiers.

‘It’s a story, do you understand?’ said Blagolazh firmly, as he went on to explain. ‘What do you want with the truth? Suppose I were to tell you about Old Todor’s ragged trousers, or Father Priest’s crushed hat? Or shall I tell you about us poor devils, who have set out with our scythes over our shoulders and a loaf of maize bread in our bags, to tramp our way for a whole week down into Thrace for the mowing? All that is truth, mate. But what good is the blasted truth to you?’

‘And your fanciful stuff, what good’s that to me, either?’ retorted Lazo.

‘Fanciful, yes, but beautiful! You listen, you listen, and you lose yourself. . . . And suddenly the marvels begin to seem like the truth, and you sink into it and are off. That’s what stories are for, that’s why people have made them up. And the songs are for the same thing to. . . to drag you out of the truth, so that you may know you are a man.’

And Blagolazh went on:

‘This king’s daughter was like fire, you know! She was married three times to three king’s sons, and all three of them died in her arms the first night, smothered by the waves of her hair. . . . With her fiery kisses, she sucked the blood from their mouths like a viper, the scarlet blood, and drank it. . . .’

These last words were spoken sharply, with clenched

jaws as if the speaker were driving a dagger home. His hearers responded with loud exclamations. They involuntarily drew a long and audible breath. Lazo brought his fist down on the ground and groaned:

‘Eh, the witch!’

Carried away by the story, his mates signed to him to be quiet.

‘And then?’ Lazo insisted eagerly.

‘What more do you want?’ said Blagolazh calmly.

‘The witch!’ Lazo sighed again. ‘Eh, Blagolazh, I wouldn’t mind a death like that, I tell you, I wouldn’t mind it.’

‘You — wouldn’t mind it? I’d like to see you!’ said one of his mates, poking the fire, and he gave a slight, crowing laugh. ‘What’s more, your Penka has golden hair too. And you’re still alive, for all that!’

‘My Penka’s another matter altogether. She. . . .’

‘That’s why you left her, and came a-roving all this way! Your heart’s dead too, mate. It’s not a month since you married, and you’ve had your fill of her and left her,’ Stamo remarked. He had been silent so far, thinking about something.

His face was grim and immovable, and the firelight played over it as if it were a stone. His voice was hard and rough.

‘That’s my own business,’ Lazo answered dully, and swallowed hard.

‘It’s her business, too, to find another, if she hasn’t done so already,’ Stamo retorted.

‘Don’t you believe it,’ Lazo answered, quaveringly, stung by a vague doubt.

A prolonged silence fell. The last flames of the dying logs fluttered over the fire rapidly and impotently, about to flicker out. Far away somewhere a shrill wail rose like the pitiful cry of a soul in pain; it rose high and eerie, then, as if it had struck the dome of the sky, fell back into the mysterious waters of the Maritsa, to drown there, and it died away. The mowers looked at each other, startled. Their eyes questioned each other. Blagolazh lifted a finger warningly, listened long and said:

‘It’s an owl.’

The dull tinkle of the frightened donkey’s bell came from the osiers. The dog jumped up and began to bark at the

darkness. The brooding stillness of the night seemed to have become sinister in some way.

Lazo sighed deeply.

'Sigh away, lad — you've good cause to! . . . It's a young bride you've left behind you!' said Blagolazh banteringly, as he resumed the speech of his tales.

'Young blood is wild, boys! No wonder brides are unfaithful when their men-folk leave them! Do you know what Missaïl the monk said when he cast off his cassock and shaved his beard? "What is on me I can cast off, but I cannot cast out what is in my heart." Drat the heart, that's the way it's made!'

'It's easy enough for Penka, she has old sweethearts,' Stamo remarked, and stretched himself out.

'There's nothing wrong with her either,' another said slyly.

Lazo cast another troubled glance at the darkness. Stamo's hard words had struck him to the heart.

The fire died down. It grew quite dark. The group fell silent. A star fell, leaving a fiery trail in the sky.

'Some poor soul has given up the ghost,' Lazo said.

'More likely some young bride has given herself to another man,' said Blagolazh imperturbably, and asked:

'Lazo, have you heard the song about Stoyanitsa, the unfaithful bride? It isn't a marvellous one like the story. Would you like me to sing it to you?'

'It's all one to me. If you will be such asses!' Lazo answered.

Immediately a sweet, sonorous, throbbing voice rose in the darkness, taking up a sad and passionate song. Like brightly-coloured, scented flowers the words wove themselves into a garland, pouring out with immeasurable pain in a stream of sound, telling the story of Stoyan's faithless wife.

Young Stoyan went to barracks for his term of service, and told his wife, if she loved him, not to go to Gourgoul's well for water. Barely had Stoyan left, than Stoyanitsa remembered young Gourgoul, who had been her sweetheart. She dressed herself up, stuck a nosegay behind her ear, and shouldering her yoke with its pair of gleaming buckets, made for the cursed little well.

... There young Gourgoul met her
His young heart leapt,
His black eyes flashed. ...'

Blagolazh stopped short, and slightly raising himself asked:

'Do you like the song, Lazo?'

Lazo did not answer.

'He's asleep,' Blagolazh said, leaning on his elbow.

'Asleep, or else crying,' remarked Stamo.

'If I were he, I should go home, believe me,' said Blagolazh mockingly.

Lazo lay there, thinking. The gibes of his mates pierced his heart like sharp needles, and made him breathless with pain. For a moment the jokes seemed possible to him. Penka did indeed love him, but — out of sight, out of mind.

'He married me yesterday and left me to go a-roving,' she would say to herself, and then. . . . The sad tale told by the song took him back to his village. There was a well there too. It was hidden in the underbrush below the village. And every morning and every evening Penka went there. . . .

A painful sigh tore itself from Lazo's breast.

The night dragged on, and all those around him were sunk in slumber. The donkey's bell no longer tinkled. Curled up in a ball, the little dog had fallen quietly asleep beside the dying fire, over which an occasional flame flickered up, and vanished again.

The waters of the Maritsa quietly lapped against its sleepy banks, telling weird stories to the night.

One after another the mowers fell asleep. The fire was almost out.

Only Lazo could not sleep. The banter had upset him and his imagination began painting pictures for him, one more painful than the other. His thoughts took him back to Penka and his village. She stood at the threshold of the house, looking sadly down the dusty road which wound down through the plain towards distant lands. It was by that road that Lazo had left her. Times were hard, what was to be done! Tomorrow morning early she would get up, and would go to the little well for water, as nimble as a deer.

Perhaps she would find. . . oh, he knew too well whom

she would find there! He had always hung about her at the dances. A madcap, and he knew how to. . . . And Penka was a woman. . . . What trust could one have?

There. Dark leafy bushes hiding the little well. Penka's lovely face white against them, and a man's hand passing over it, caressingly. Another man's hand. . . .

Lazo started to his feet.

'What am I doing here?' he thought throwing off his cape.

The night was silent. Only the crickets softly repeated in unison: Penka, Penka, Penka. . . .

Early in the morning, when the half light of the coming day had aroused the mowers, they saw that Lazo was not with them.

1903

Mud

That morning Nikola Nonnin, the schoolmaster, once more awakened feeling out of sorts. His head was heavy again, the objects in his room, together with its four walls, whirled before his eyes, and carried him off into a black abyss. A sickly weakness spread over his body and it seemed to him that all his joints had separated, and all his body had unravelled, part by part. There was a bitter taste in his mouth, as if something loathsome were disintegrating in his stomach.

Yet last night when he had gone to bed, he had felt so strong and fit.

At first Nonnin paid no attention to his indisposition, because he thought it was due to drink. But when he remembered that he had not had a single drink all day yesterday, or in the evening, either, he began to get frightened.

'What can be the matter?' he wondered. 'Can I be dying? Death sometimes comes so stupidly and unexpectedly.'

And placing his hand on his heart, he tried to find out if it was beating.

'One. . . two. . . three. . . ,' he began to count its beats, 'four. . . four. . . four!' he waited to hear it but his heart did not give a fourth beat.

The schoolmaster felt that it had stopped beating.

'I'm dying, yes, I'm dying!' he thought again. And lying on his back, he raised himself quickly up on his elbow, made an effort to get up, and shouted fearfully, his eyes fixed on the door:

'Help!'

But his voice, weak and powerless, choked in his throat, and in the big room it sounded rather like a moan, dull and ugly. His own voice sounded alien and comical to him. The

schoolmaster looked around, looked out at the window, through which the faint light of early morning was creeping, and laughed at himself. Then, dropping back on his pillow, he began to think.

'What am I shouting for?' he asked himself. 'What am I shouting for, and whom am I calling? And if I am dying, who can help me? Who? I'll die, and that will be that! Schoolmaster Nikola has ended his earthly course, and rid himself of himself, and people have been rid of him. H'm,' he said, smiling once more. 'What are people to me, and what am I to them? Nothing. . . nothing — yes! But in my horror whom did I call on for help? People! I may be nothing to them, but I need them. Yes! . . . Who will feed my ambition, my jealousy?'

The schoolmaster frowned. Then he raised the shabby dusty curtain of the window, which was beside his bed, and looked through the dirty panes. The joyless autumn landscape of the village seemed uglier to him than ever. Leafless branching trees, on which rooks were perched. A cloudy sky, frowning and lowering over the horizon, and mud. Horrible, thick, black, sticky, impassable village mud, in which everything had sunk — houses, and people, and cattle. Through that mud a peasant, or an old woman, dressed in clean clothes, would pass from time to time, slowly, cautiously, sinking into it and talking to themselves, and then they would be lost to sight across the small square, making for the church.

The smothered sound of the bell came suddenly from there, and the pious tones echoed dejectedly in the damp air.

'What mud, deuce take it, what mud!' the schoolmaster said aloud, and taking a book down from the cupboard beside him, he began to turn its pages.

Out in the yard a clear childish voice was heard, reading indifferently and in syllables, probably something out of the Bible reader.

'Tea-tea-ch-cher, teacher, g-e-n gen. . . tle, gentle. . . gentle teacher. . .'

Nonnin listened and smiled.

A little later the voice began to sing cheerfully and playfully:

Gen-tle tea-cher,
Gentle teacher!

Then little by little it was lost. It seemed to Nonnin that this childish voice, too, had sunk somewhere in that impassable mud. He began to think again.

'Slavka, too, has sunk into the mud,' the thought came involuntarily into his mind. 'Yes!'

Nonnin began to feel indescribably unhappy. The picture of Slavka stood vividly before him, and began to remind him, line by line, of a happy past. Until yesterday he had loved Slavka, and she had loved him. She was not very pretty, but she was a nice, energetic girl, as light as a bird, with black sparkling eyes, such as he had seldom seen. He could not understand at all how he had first fallen in love with her and why. He clearly remembered the minute when he had first told her that he loved her; however, before he had done this, everyone had known that he was in love with her. And whenever he had begun to speak of her, his fellow schoolmasters had said: 'Schoolmaster, you've swallowed the bait.'

'What a stupid story, and what a sad end!' sighed Nonnin.

It had been last year, at this same time again, in the autumn. Nonnin had gone to school early, as always, sure that he would find her there, as always, but this time determined to reveal his love.

He remembered how incapable he had felt at hiding the unreasoning emotion that had seized him when he had gone up the stone steps of the school, and how long he had hesitated at the door of the teachers' room. And when he had gone in, he could not hear his own words, the words he had spoken to her in greeting. She was confused, too, and embarrassed. For a long time neither she nor he knew what to say, and could not look each other in the eye. Finally, she had taken the first step. He had begun to tell her something funny and unimportant, to give himself courage, and she had interrupted him suddenly, crying:

'Oh, how you're lying! How you're lying!'

And she had given a playful skip. That was a challenge! She was more fearless than he. . . she. . . a simple girl! She was coquetting, being artful, pretending.

Schoolmaster Nonnin repeated that sentence many times, and his thoughts got entangled in it, like a net on a burr, and could not get loose.

'Was she pretending?' he asked himself many times. And

he always answered: 'Yes, she was. . . . She began to pretend from the very first day, the very first hour of my love. How comically and theatrically she stood before me then, how tragically she repeated:

'Oh, how you're lying, how you're lying!'

Nonnin went back to his memories of that moment and the net of his thoughts caught on a new burr, around which it twisted for a long time.

'Nonsense!' he said, aloud.

That word thrust his memories forward. There was the scene, the comical scene of his solemn love. Slavka kept repeating:

'You're lying!'

'No, Miss Slavka, I'm not lying!' And he rose to his feet.

'You're lying!'

'No!'

'You're lying!'

'No!' And he stamped his foot to frighten her. She ran away; he ran after her, caught up with her, and embraced her madly. . . .

'Yes. . . yes!' he said aloud. 'I embraced her, and she changed, she trembled, she hid her little face in her beautiful hands and pressed against me. . . .'

He remembered how ardently he had whispered to her: 'I love you, I love you madly, my little Slavka, Slavka mine!'

For a long time she had answered nothing. Only kept her face hidden in her hands, trembling and silent.

He remembered very well the tormented voice in which he had asked:

'Slavka, are you crying?'

Then she had suddenly begun to tremble violently and sob terribly. . . . That frightened him. What if their fellow schoolteachers appeared?

'Slavka, don't cry! Have I hurt you? Does my love offend you? . . . Forgive me, child!'

Nonnin's thoughts stopped long on this. How he had begged her, how he himself had nearly burst into tears. How afterwards he had found courage, and how he had taken her hands from her face, how she had smiled and leant over the table. The picture, full and complete, with all the details of the dusty school setting, stood before him. Amid that picture he saw

his own confused and frightened figure, repentant before that black-eyed, pretty girl, flushed like a peony with shame.

'H'm,' he said aloud again, smiling. 'I humbled myself like a pitiful slave, I cursed myself, I condemned myself, and repented. . . . And she? I remember now that there wasn't a single tear in her eyes. She hadn't been crying. She was pretending, she was lying and being artful.'

Through his mind, one after another, clearer than ever, there passed all those events and meetings, which had been so dear to him! How much hypocrisy, how much feminine treachery he found in them now. . . . She used to tell him that she loved him, but at the same time she wrote love letters to the hateful man whom she was going to marry that very day, whom she sneered at, whom she mocked and condemned.

'I got entangled in a web of deceit, deeply entangled! How did all that happen? How, indeed? I can't understand even now.'

From the village down below the tones of a clarinet came up to him, piercing and prolonged, then a drum began to beat. This sharp beating was drawing slowly nearer.

Nonnin started. Slavka's wedding was beginning.

'Is this a dream, or isn't it?' Nonnin wondered. 'Can those hopes, which I cherished until yesterday, the dreams that lived until then, raised so high, built on such a love, can they be falling into ruins?'

The schoolmaster was tormented by jealousy and a feeling of being insulted, and in his helplessness he did not know what to do.

'Shall I kill her. . . or shall I carry her off from the wedding, from the altar?' was the strange thought which passed through his mind. And his helplessness bore him up in a dream.

'Is she being deceived? Perhaps she is being ruined! I must save her! She only got engaged a week ago. One day after my happiest parting with her. How could she have done so? No, she is being ruined! Perhaps she has repented, perhaps she is eagerly waiting for a word from me, for my hand! I'll work a miracle, deuce take it!'

And, after dressing himself, the schoolmaster slipped on his coat, and began to walk quickly and nervously up and down his room, carried away and absorbed by the enticing idea of becoming a hero — of carrying Slavka off, or killing her.

'I need strength and will!'

He stood still in the middle of the room. He straightened up and it seemed to him that he grew tall, much taller. But suddenly his head began to turn, everything went black before his eyes, his legs began to tremble and seemed to be disappearing beneath him. He threw himself down on the bed and closed his eyes.

'I'm ill, ill!'

Outside the dull tones of the bell rang out again in the damp air. It seemed to the poor schoolmaster that, like everything else, the bell had also sunk into the terrible mud, and was peeling beneath it.

The music down below in the village was growing louder. The clarinet shrilled and the drum beat slowly and monotonously.

The schoolmaster lay there, weak and ill. It seemed to him that he had sunk entirely into the impassable village mud, and was sinking deeper, ever deeper. . . . In the burning imagination of his sick head, his ruined youth fluttered hazily. . . . Ruined. . . . Yes, ruined! He had desired much, he had aspired to much, he had loved much, he had studied much. But where was all this? What was it? Had he ever begun anything, had he done anything? Nothing, neither for others nor for himself. . . . At each attempt, at each effort, instead of soaring up, he had sunk deeper and deeper into the ugly mud of life. He had not achieved one desire, had not done a single thing for others, had not seized a single minute of life for himself. . . . He mocked at everyone, he sneered at them all, yet he himself was like them: weak, willess and cowardly. . . . There was Slavka. . . . He loved her, and could have married her. . . . But what had happened?

Someone knocked at the door.

The schoolmaster jumped up, startled, and unconsciously cried:

'Come in!'

The door opened, and one by one two lean and one plump schoolmistresses slipped into the room, followed by the paunchy headmaster, red, in short, muddy trousers, in a faded old frock coat, comically creased.

Nonnin was troubled by this unexpected visit and did not know what to do. The schoolmistresses surrounded him,

and shaking their heads, with their powdered faces, began to talk to him and question him:

'Well, Mr. Nonnin, what a one you are! There's a wedding on today, and you're not up yet!'

'I'm ill,' Nonnin answered, and he felt horribly uncomfortable.

'We know what the matter with you is. . . but you must just pull yourself together!' And the plump schoolmistress giggled with half-closed eyes, and open mouth.

This laughter angered Nonnin, but he smiled. Yet he thought: 'I haven't even got will enough to drive them out!' And when he saw their muddy shoes, he felt almost sick.

The headmaster with the short trousers spoke in a hoarse voice:

'Come on, schoolmaster, no one dies of that illness. Slavka is getting married — let her. Deuce take it! There are girls enough and to spare — there they are,' and he pointed to his companions — 'They're not so bad, are they?'

'Oh, thank you, thank you, headmaster!' the schoolmistresses answered in chorus, and gracefully curtsied to him.

Nonnin also smiled. But he felt horribly embarrassed and ill at ease. He caught sight of his thick cane in the corner and thought, 'What if I got up, and seized it?'

The plump schoolmistress suddenly turned to him:

'Mr. Nonnin, can you explain how it all came about? It's odd, very odd!'

'What is?'

'Well, don't pretend you don't know. . . .'

Nonnin did not answer.

'I was told. . . . And you can't think how amazed I was. . . .'

'There's nothing to be amazed about here,' the headmaster remarked. 'She loved Nonnin, but she's marrying Vurbanov. You know, that's perfectly natural, and quite in order. . . . Perfectly reasonable.'

'What do you mean? Reasonable, headmaster?' the thinnest schoolmistress asked. 'There's no reason about this, simply. . . .'

'Feelings, you'll say, I suppose.'

'Feelings, indeed! The Lord preserve us!'

The other two laughed.

'There's neither reason, nor feeling,' the plump one an-

swered, 'just nonsense. Just think what she's been saying: "Vurbanov," she said, "is a hardworking fellow, he's gentle, and doesn't make such a row as those brats. And he's got some money, too. I'll have a good life with him. I shan't wander around from village to village, to be mocked at, and never to have my own home or any peace. While Nonnin was dreaming and flying after all sorts of wild ideas, Vurbanov planted an orchard of several acres.'"

'She's quite right! So he did,' the headmaster answered. 'Nonsense!' one of the ladies cried.

'What do you mean by nonsense? You talk, but you don't reason. Nonnin is a wonderful chap to love, he's tender and sentimental. Vurbanov is another matter. He's a practical man, born to be a husband. No matter if he is stupid. He has money, he saves it, he works like an ox, he keeps bees and plants gardens. What does all that show?'

'Yes, but he's just a stick of wood. Isn't it surprising that Slavka should be marrying him? She with all her airs until yesterday, proud and high and mighty, wanting to better herself, to reach the skies. And suddenly she gives in, becomes wise and practical,' the plump schoolmistress drawled and stamped her foot.

'Slavka will rue the day,' her lean companion said.

'She's doing this without a struggle and without an effort, she won't rue it, never you mind.'

'All women do it,' the headmaster said, turning to the schoolmistresses. 'You'll do the same, my dear young ladies!' he drawled, and began to laugh loudly.

'Who, I?' asked the lean one. 'Never! I give you my word of honour. I would rather die an old maid than sell myself so cheaply, betray myself so basely.'

'Oh, oh, not for the world!' the plump one cried, and her red face, wreathed in smiles, looked like a full moon.

The headmaster began to make fun of them, supported by two young schoolmasters, who had just arrived. This went on until they finally quarrelled, and the schoolmistresses grew angry.

Half-lying on his bed, Nonnin listened impassively to the silly talk, the pitiful posturing at life, and he felt bitter, and dispirited. The schoolmistresses' powdered faces and badly curled hair made them look three times as foolish as usual.

He stared out at the small square through the window, across which several clerks were making their way, stepping through the mud and cursing the weather, preceded by ladies, large and small, who lifted their petticoats helplessly, and he thought:

'Everything, everything has sunk into the mud — souls, and hearts, and minds, and men, and cattle, and everything. Eternal wretchedness, eternal helpless straining, eternal, hateful wallowing in this slime. There are no wings, nor is there space. But the soul in bondage wants to live freely, spaciouly and fully. . . . Freely, spaciouly and fully! What sense is there in those words?'

The clarinet struck up with renewed force, quite near, accompanied by the dull beating of the drum.

Nonnin felt desperate, as if that terrible music was thundering in his brain.

His visitors, deep in arguments, discussions and repar-tees that were full of stupidity and dullness, rose at once.

'Come, Nonnin, get dressed for the wedding!' cried the plump schoolmistress.

'I don't want to come,' Nonnin answered. 'I'm ill.'

'Over nonsense like this, if you please — it's nothing! If I only had your youth!' cried the headmaster, patting him on the shoulder and opening the door. 'You don't want to come, eh? Well, they'll laugh at you for wallowing in sentimentality like an old woman.'

'I'm not going, leave me alone!'

'As you wish.'

The visitors went out.

Nonnin sat sadly down by the window.

The shrill notes of the clarinet and the beating of the drum drew nearer and nearer and grew clearer. Soon the wedding procession came streaming along the streets, sinking into the mud of the square, and making for the old church. The gypsy musicians came first, unconcernedly splashing through the sticky mud and the puddles. After them ran children, shouting gaily. Then came the bride with the man of her choice. After them came the sponsors, the in-laws, bridesmaids and people. And all this procession splashed through the mud, sinking into it, getting muddy, talking and making a noise. The sky was gloomy and cloudy as before, hung low

over the earth. The clarinet shrilled and the drum thundered through the damp air, and their wild music sharply pierced one's ears.

The procession passed by the window.

Slavka, dressed all in white, veiled with a long fine veil, held her bridegroom's hand lightly, raised her skirts and trod carefully to avoid getting muddy, crying from time to time:

'Oh, dear, what mud!'

Her bridegroom, a broad, stocky and elderly man, with fat drooping cheeks, with white gloves on his hands, strode along pompously, and tenderly supported her, as he said:

'Actually. . . there aren't any paths. . . .'

Nonnin, hidden behind his window, heard this talk and it made him unhappy and sad. Slavka was just as lovely, sweet and young as ever, and Nonnin felt that he still loved her. But now she was distant, a stranger to him. The thought of carrying her off flashed through his mind once more, but he did not even dare to show himself at the window.

His eyes grew dim. He felt dizzy and ill again. The room and everything in it began to spin before his eyes; he span with them, and fell on his bed, then together with it he began to sink in a bottomless pit of sticky mud, sinking ever deeper, and deeper and deeper into it.

Andreshko

We'll get there early, sir. While it's still light. There's the village — right there by the little forest. D'you see? When we cross that hill over there, the low one, we're almost there.'

And, cracking his whip over the horses, the young carter shouted to them loudly and encouragingly:

'Gee-up, hey! . . . Gee-up, gentlemen!'

The four wheels of the cart splashed faster through the liquid mud of the village lane. Its rickety frame rattled dully through the mournful, deserted and rain-soaked plain. The peasant shouted again, settled himself more comfortably on the wooden case upon which he was sitting, tossed back the damp hood of his heavy cape and began to hum quietly and indifferently to himself.

'What's your name, boy?' the fat gentleman who was sitting in the cart asked from the depths of his enormous fur coat.

The youth went on humming.

'Hey, boy!' cried the gentleman loudly and hoarsely. 'Eh?'

'Your name, your name? What was your name?'

'Andreshko.'

'A-ah, Andreshko. . . . You're a sly one. That's what you've all become. You peasants are all cunning now. . . . You only know how to lie and be sly. . . . And how you pretend! I see you in the law-courts. . . . A very sheep, a fool, but in reality a veritable wolf! They just play with the judges.'

'We're simple folk, sir, it's just that people slander us. It seems so to you, but it isn't so. Our villagers lie from simplicity. Simplicity and poverty.'

'Ah, poverty, poverty, indeed! A thrashing is what they

deserve. They complain of poverty and drink like swine.'

'And why do you think they do? Because of their fine lives? No, no. . . . They certainly drink, they all drink. To forget their troubles, not because they have none. . . . A man like you should take good note of that.'

'A-ah, you seem to have had a drop, too, friend! Yet you're still young, your moustaches have scarcely grown yet. . . . Your peasants. . . write them off as a dead loss, and that's that!'

'You'd better write them, sir, we don't know how to write,' said the youth and turning to his lean horses he called to them:

'Gee-up, gee-up, gentlemen!' and fell a-thinking.

The horses jogged on quicker and also fell a-thinking. The gentleman raised the collar of his immense fur coat, sank into it and fell a-thinking, too. A raven with ruffled feathers perched on the lonely tree by the roadside, swung on its withered branch, cawed depressedly and also fell a-thinking. Across the ragged sky, damp and gloomy winter clouds crawled heavily and slowly and were sometimes torn asunder to show pieces of blue sky equally moody and cold. The earth had sunk into mud and dampness. The scattered landscapes of the villages, rivers, distant forests and mountains were dead and sorrowfully dark. Large pools shone in the plain, cold and fixed, like the eyes of the dead.

The little cart staggered through the deep, liquid mud, sank, emerged and zig-zagged along. A loose board at the side rattled constantly, monotonously, hollowly and senselessly; it persistently struck the nerves of the stout gentleman in the fur coat, and made him lose patience. He undid his collar, thrust his fat face out and demanded:

'What is that dreadful rattling, devil take it? It gives me no peace. . . .'

'My cart has a screw loose, sir. It rattles away like a learned man — it doesn't understand itself, neither do others understand it.'

'You're a sly one, Andreshko, a sly one! You must be one with the girls if you are not married. You people usually marry young and have pretty little wives.'

The gentleman put down the collar of his coat.

'Say what you like, sir, but they are nothing to the

ladies. . . . I know that very well! What are you, sir? What brings you to our village?

'I'm a bailiff.

'So you've come to sell some one up, have you?'

'Yes, of course. One of your people has been leading me a dance, but this time I'll show him what's what. I've been after him several times, but he's always given me the slip. . . . I got on to him, though; I found out he was tricking me, and tonight I'm going to catch him, and he'll have cause to remember me all right. . . . I'll sequester his wheat! That'll teach him what's what and give you an example; you'll know better than to play tricks on us another time. You cheat the tradesmen, you cheat the townspeople, selling them bad eggs and rancid butter. But you just wait, you sly peasants — you can't cheat the authorities so easily! They have a tight grip — a good tight grip! A whip's what you need, that'll learn you! . . . You've become drunkards, you're rotten, you'll be bad taxpayers and ruin the state. Ah, why haven't I more power! I would make angels of you!'

The bailiff undid his coat and his body moved inside it like that of a chicken about to leave its shell.

'Well, Mr. Bailiff, God made the world and decided that women don't need beards, so he didn't give them any. He decided that the donkey needed long ears and gave it some,' answered Andreshko with pretended naiveté.

'Don't chatter so much, but drive on, because it's getting dark. . . . You charged me a lot, you devil! So much money for twenty kilometres! You know how to stick it on. . . . Drive on, then, drive on, your jades have gone to sleep!'

'Gee-up, gee-up, gentlemen!' shouted Andreshko and twirled his whip.

'You call them gentlemen, eh? Better call them brothers,' remarked the bailiff crossly.

'That would annoy them, Mr. Bailiff! I would offend their honour if I didn't call them gentlemen! Their service is like that of officials — it goes by the clock. They get up by the clock, go to bed by the clock, and are fed by the clock. After that we harness them, that is to say, they enter their offices and that's that. And sometimes in their stalls they even read their papers.'

'Just tell me where you drank, my friend, and don't

chatter, drive on, because we're late. You've sly eyes, very sly.'

'There are no wolves, sir, don't be afraid,' said the carter in such a tone that the respectable official glanced around in alarm.

'I'm not afraid of wolves, my friend, but it's getting cold. I haven't time to catch my death.'

'Wrap yourself up in the sacking. My horses never complain of a cold. The sacking is very warm.'

'What beastly weather!' thought the bailiff and said sternly:

'Drive on, drive on, you swine!'

And swelling with angry pride, he sank onto his big coat and fell silent.

'A-ha, you've fallen into good hands, friend,' thought Andreshko to himself. And turning around he asked in a serious tone:

'So you're going to sell some one up, are you? And whose heart are you going to warm?'

The bailiff was silent for a while, then answered crossly:

'There's one. . . . Stanoicho they call him — shortish. . . with a thick neck. . . .'

'I know him. So it's his wheat you're going to sequestrate, is it? He's a poor man, Mr. Bailiff, leave him alone.'

'A poor man, indeed — a very devil!'

The bailiff fell silent again. It was getting dark already. The horses were barely crawling up the little hill behind which the village probably lay. Andreshko no longer called to them, neither did he twirl his whip over them. He stopped talking and humming and began to think.

When they were going down the other side of the hill into the plain beyond, night had come on, but the village was not yet visible. A cold penetrating wind began to blow over the earth, which was sunk in dampness. The blue cupola of the cold and frozen sky cleared, widened and soared higher. Soon stars began to twinkle in it, bright and icy stars. The air became very cold. The bailiff was in a state of constant irritation.

'Drive on there, you *Shoppel*!* We'll freeze to death!'

* Name given to the inhabitants of the Sofia district, also known colloquially as the *Shopluk* or *Shopsko* — land of the *Shoppes*

Andreshko shouted indifferently to the horses and lazily twirled his whip over their heads. They were pulling the cart along carelessly and moodily as if they heard nothing. Andreshko was thinking of poor Stanoia, whose wheat was going to be sequestered the next day by the bailiff, whom he was driving.

'That man must be helped somehow, he must be helped. . . .' thought Andreshko. 'He must be told to hide the wheat during the night and sweep the barn well, otherwise he'll have to tighten his belt all the year. . . . I must help him — I must!'

It was dark and nothing could be distinguished on the earth except mud, deep thick mud. The road vanished in that mud and led nowhere except to more mud.

At one spot Andreshko jerked the reins and stopped the horses:

'Wait a bit. I seem to have missed the road!'

And the youth began to peer around in the darkness. The bailiff watched his stern face on which there was no trace of his former joking spirit, and said:

'Have a care, boy, or I won't answer for the consequences. . . . You'll get a drubbing!'

Andreshko jerked the reins, twirled his whip and shouted: 'Hold tight, Mr. Bailiff!'

Far ahead in the darkness shone the lights of the village. Judging by the barking of the dogs, it was obviously near at hand. A few paces to the right, a large sheet of still water shone with a pearly gleam. The cart turned straight towards it.

'What's that?', asked the bailiff.

'A marsh, Mr. Bailiff. . . . The road runs through it. It's quite shallow, don't you be afraid. There are only a few holes here and there. . . . How many times I've crossed it both on foot and in the cart and. . . . Gee-up, gee-up, gentlemen! Hold tight, Mr. Bailiff!'

The horses entered the cold water, in which the sky was mirrored, and cautiously splashed forward, going in deeper and deeper. The deadly still, shining, nearly green water of the marsh moved and came to life.

'Stop, you animal!' shouted the bailiff at one moment and stood up frightened in his coat. 'You'll drown me, you Shoppe! Can't you see that the cart is full of water? Stop, stop!'

The bailiff, enraged, began to swear.

Andreshko stopped the horses. The cart, up to its bottom in water, stood amid the marsh the end of which was lost in the impenetrable darkness.

'Gee-up. . . forwards!' shouted Andreshko to the horses. His powerful and vigorous voice echoed loudly in the night and sank into that impenetrable void. Close at hand some wild duck flew up with a great noise and disappeared.

'We, too, shall have to turn into ducks to get out,' remarked Andreshko thoughtfully, 'otherwise. . . .'

'Oh, you swine! If we ever get out — I'll give you the thrashing of your life! We'll be drowned! . . . You dolt! . . .'

'No, no, Mr. Bailiff, don't be afraid. . . . In this darkness anyone might make a mistake, just keep calm,' Andreshko spoke up and busied himself about the straps. He undid them and did them up again, swore, and damned their eyes; finally he sat back again on the case, twirled his whip and shouted:

'Gee-up! . . . Forwards!'

The horses made an effort and started. One of them got loose from the traces and splashed off through the marsh free. The other stood there alone with the cart.

'Heavens! What has happened?' shouted the bailiff standing in the cart trembling and frightened.

Just then Andreshko quickly mounted the other horse and started off after Dorcho, calling him incessantly:

'Dorcho, Dorcho, Dorcho!'

'Where are you off to. . . hey! What are you doing, you swine? Dolt! Oh, you lousy peasant. . . . I'll teach you!'

Malevolent laughter answered him from the darkness.

'Hey, you swine, you've left me here! . . . To perish! To be torn to pieces by wild beasts! Don't do it, boy, I beg you!' the bailiff now spoke in a piteous voice in which there was a hint of tears.

'Don't be frightened, don't be frightened, Mr. Bailiff,' Andreshko's voice was heard. 'The wild beasts won't go into the marsh. Wrap yourself up in the sacking so that you don't catch cold. . . . Tomorrow morning bright and early, I'll come. . . . There's some straw in the cart, spread it out. . . . I shan't charge you anything!'

The bailiff could hear the malevolent voice coming from the darkness and was filled with horror. What? Stay here?

In the middle of the marsh? Amid that cold, green, marshy water, the end of which could not be seen?

'Come here, Andreshko! I'll give you money, as much as you like! . . . Have you no heart, you dolt?' he shouted in desperation, but nobody answered any more.

Then, desperately and unreasoningly, the bailiff roared towards the village:

'Hey dolt. . . swine. . . cannibal. . . ox. . . fool! Come here! Save me! Have mercy! Animal. . . . Lout. . . . *Shoppe!* Oh — oh! . . . Help, help!'

Then, sitting down in the cart, he sank into his fur coat and wept like a child.

But the darkness did not answer him.

Spring Delusion

Early on the holy Sabbath Father Ignatius jumped onto his nimble little black pony, crossed himself, emerged from the wide monastery gates, and set off down to the plain to make the rounds of field and meadow.

The burning face of the May sun appeared in the East, behind the blue mountains, floating up from a sea of light and glory, and the newly awakened fresh green plain bathed cheerfully in its rays and made holiday. Everywhere it smelt of spring, of fresh verdure, of rye and blossoming fruit trees. From somewhere in the distance a dove called, and bees hummed in the plum trees covered with blossom. Quail chattered along the boundary ditches, mischievous sparrows lovingly skirmished in the hedgerows, rising in clouds and vanishing all a-twitter over the green fields. The heart of spring beat fast and strong, and the new life over the earth feverishly prepared to make the best use of the fine day. The pious sound of bells came from the nearby village, quivering pleasantly in the fresh morning air.

All this delighted Father Ignatius. He sat happily on his horse, it trotted along cheerfully snorting through its nostrils, well-pleased with itself, and reared playfully. From time to time its rider stroked its trim little mane and spoke to it in friendly fashion:

'Loukà! Loukà! Oh you, Loukà! . . . Are you pleased, my son?'

Loukà understood, snorted harder than ever, and rubbed his light mane on his master's hand.

Father Ignatius had not left the monastery for quite a long time, so the advanced spring enthralled and somehow touched him. He rejoiced at the plain, all covered with verdure, and his face shone with pleasure. He talked to the bees, which hummed around him, and to the gaudy butterflies, which

fluttered lightly over the green grass. His cold monk's heart had blossomed with tenderness like a flower. He peered around, like a sparrow escaped from its cage, and looked on all sides, at all corners of that green picture, those distant mountains, so clear and so sharply outlined against the blue spring sky — he looked, breathed, dreamt, and hummed gay little songs to himself, and seemed to grow visibly younger. Let us say he went back to his childhood, because he was not old in any case.

'Loukà! Hey, Loukà, are you pleased?' he cried, patting the pony on the mane.

It would rear, set off at a fast trot, and Father Ignatius bobbed lightly up and down on his saddle, crying:

'Hop-hop, come, hop!'

When the sun rose over the plain it grew hot, Father Ignatius took off his cassock, put it beneath him on the saddle, and, feeling particularly enraptured, he drew a bottle of *rakia** out of his saddle-bags, and took a long drink. Then he felt like singing a bit and in a semi-ecclesiastical voice he softly took up a gay motif from a peasant song:

The village cried out against
Nona, the fair widow,
The widow, that was left,
Oh, what a foolish village!

Father Ignatius was still riding among the fields on which the rye had grown high, and was ready to form ears. He had a deep voice, but sang softly, sweetly, more to himself, and he looked like a big black beetle, which had flown out after rain from under the forest leaves.

The plain was deserted. Not a single soul was to be seen along the roads which crossed it. This solitude was pleasant to Father Ignatius, because he could dream freely and sing to himself whatever he had a mind to.

He had had several more drinks from the bottle in the saddlebag, and his monkish soul had freed itself of the black cassock, which had covered it so long. The strength of the fertile earth flowed in his blood. He sang a church song, blessed a couple of sparrows, who were mating on a branch before

* Plum brandy

his eyes, and sent up his thanks to the Lord by a skylark which flew up into the sky. And taking frequent sips from his bottle, he smiled at a beautiful thought which laid hold of him, and began something like a song:

'If there but were... eh!
Could I but meet... eh!'

Father Ignatius purred this a long time, monotonously repeating the same tune.

'Could I but meet... eh!
If there but were... eh!'

But after raising the bottle to his lips again, his ideas worked loose from that thorn. He dug his spurs into the pony, and added, at a higher pitch, but in the same tune:

'A woman...
A woman...
If there but were... eh!'

And with a deep sigh, he cried enthusiastically to his pony:

'Eh, Loukà, Loukà! Have you ever loved? Loukà, ah, Loukà!'

Loukà snorted again as if he did not understand, and quickened his pace. Father Ignatius bobbed harder on the saddle and cried:

'Hop-hop, come, hop!'

And took up his song:

'If there but were, eh!... A woman!
Could I but meet... eh!'

The sun beat down from on high, and one could feel a slight haze in the air. The crickets began to chirp loudly all around. The fields rippled slightly. Suddenly Father Ignatius stopped his pony, stood up in his stirrups and began to stare attentively at a distant spot in the fields. The shadow of an anticipated happiness passed over his dry swarthy face, which

was now flushed. He seized his curly black beard, raised himself higher in the saddle, and stared ahead still more attentively. Somewhere far away, on a boundary line between the green fields, something shone white, and stirred slightly.

'It's a woman,' Father Ignatius decided, 'in a white kerchief, she must be sitting down.'

He prodded his horse on, then pulled up and had another look.

'*It is a wo-man — yes, it is! She is alone — yes, she is!*'

Father Ignatius drove the pony on again, without taking his eyes from that white kerchief, which stirred amid the green waves of that sea of wheat, yet stayed in one place the while. The poor monk began to talk to himself again.

'*It is a woman — it's a woman all right! She is alone — she's alone all right. She must be quite young!*'

He drove the pony on faster, not taking his eyes from the white kerchief, which moved calmly in the fields. He stared and stared, until his eyes grew misty and he wiped them with his hand, then he stared again.

'*It is a woman — yes, it is! She is alone! Yes, she is! Whoever can it be?*'

Not a human soul was to be seen all around in the whole wide plain. This made Father Ignatius wonder all the more.

'A woman — alone in the middle of the plain! Has she come out to weed all that distance? No! She has fallen asleep amid the fields like a just soul! There must be something not quite right about her.'

Father Ignatius smiled.

'Who knows? Perhaps she isn't asleep!' he thought. 'I know all about women. She must have seen me and thought, now wait, and I'll pretend to hide, and lure him.'

'Don't you hide, don't be so sly, I'll come anyhow!' he said aloud.

All the women he knew in the village passed through his mind, the ones he saw from a distance in the fields, and he tried to guess which of them it could be.

'Stop, Loukà! Stop, and let your old man think a bit!' he said, as he pulled up his pony and looked long ahead; and it seemed to him at one time that that white women's kerchief began to nod at him and to call him.

'Wait! Wait a bit, don't hurry — I'll come!' the monk said, and stared ahead for a long time.

'Devil take her, who is it, who's playing such a game with me?' he asked, smiling, then whipped up his horse and made fearlessly for the spot.

'Forward, Loukà!'

Loukà flew ahead quickly. Father Ignatius bobbed up and down on him, and the woman, who showed up, and then hid again in the green waves of the rye, was always in his eyes.

When he reached the hedgerow, behind which the woman was, a few feet away, the kerchief was lost from his eyes, because the hedgerow was tall, and the path was sunk low beneath it. Then he coughed, and called loudly:

'Good morning. . . good morning!'

The rye rustled softly and lightly, and ripples passed over it. From the field no one appeared or spoke. He raised himself on his stirrups, and called again, louder:

'Good morning. . . good morning!'

But no one answered again. It seemed to Father Ignatius that a silence set in over the field like that in church. He spurred his pony, went up into the field and looked around.

Several feet away, on a low stake, a horse's skull shone white in the sunlight before him, gazing indifferently at Father Ignatius out of its big empty eyeholes, and laughing impudently at him with its big sparse teeth.

The Schoolmaster's Soul

The peasants of the village of Krivo Shkolo had known for a long time that their schoolmaster was ill, and that some day he would surprise them and die.

He had begun to pine away from a treacherous sickness, and his face grew darker day by day, his figure grew lean, while his eyes burned and grew quite light — horribly light, somehow. A dry cough had settled in his narrow chest tearing them mercilessly, without his being able, poor fellow, to cough it out. The peasants saw the sick schoolmaster return from school every evening, tired and weak, stopping every twenty paces to cough a long time.

'That's a rare cough schoolmaster's got,' they would say, 'we'll be nailing his coffin soon.'

'That awful schoolhouse has swallowed his health. That pigsty has done for him!'

The schoolhouse was, indeed, low, narrow, with a sunken floor, no boards, narrow windows and dirty rooms, crowded with children right up to the doors. The schoolmaster worked here, and for years on end his weak lungs had incessantly inhaled, together with the air given by the Lord to refresh the blood, the dust and filth in which the village diseases flourished.

And one fine day, after finishing his classes in school, the schoolmaster went home, lay down and died. Things had come to a satisfactory end. Well, all is mortal!

Out came the poor schoolmaster's soul, leaving the lifeless, withered body, and sat down at the door waiting for the heavenly messengers to take it to wherever its place was — in Heaven or Hell.

'What's all this?' it thought, sitting on the threshold of the school. 'Thank you very much, I know enough to get back!'

But it looked at the withered dead body, which it had supported a short while ago, and realized that it would not be very happy if it went back. That would mean wandering from village to village again, more creditors, more mayors, more mud and cold. . . .

And the soul began to be fiercely indignant.

'What injustice! To keep me here, smelling that dead body, which is lying there so foolishly, and which dragged me around with it for so many years, to feed me only on dreams and ideals. I've had my fill of that. I've dreamt of another world, and I'm passing on to another world. Let's see how they manage things there! Or I may be forced to send letters to the papers.'

The soul trembled with anger and cold.

It was winter. Dry frozen snow covered everything. A cold blue mist covered field and forest like a shroud, and the trees creaked with the hoar frost. Not a living soul was to be seen on the roads.

But suddenly out of the mists two unknown travellers appeared, running. They came so quickly one after the other that eddies of snow dust rose around them.

'Well!' cried the soul, and started. 'Can that be an inspector coming? Now we've done it! It's a week-day today, and when he visits the school, he'll find it empty! Where's the schoolmaster? — He's dead. How dare he die without leave? And then there'll be reprimands, fines, dismissals. . . . But it's all the same to me now.'

The soul had barely recovered from its fright, when the two travellers arrived.

They were the Angel and the Devil. They were so tired they could scarcely breathe.

The schoolmaster gave them a sour look and did not even want to shake hands with them.

'Excuse us, dear friend,' the Devil said, turning to him quite freely, in a friendly manner. 'We're late, and we let you freeze here. . . . It's the Angel's fault. "Schoolmasters' souls," he said, "are used to standing things. We've still got some less patient higher officials, here and there. They get angry, you know, if you don't serve them on time. Let's fetch them first," he said. "Very well," I said, "why not?" But when he dragged me off!'

The Devil began to laugh with all his might, rubbing his frozen hands.

This pleased the soul.

'Just see what a nice gentleman this Devil is,' it thought, 'yet he's always described to us with a tail and horns, and who knows what else! What a cheerful fellow!'

'Friend, I should like to introduce myself.'

And the schoolmaster's soul put out its hand.

'Oh, we know each other already,' the Devil said, squeezing it, and he began to laugh heartily.

'How I would like a smoke,' the schoolmaster said. 'Have you any tobacco?'

'Here you are,' the Devil said, and handed him a cigarette. 'It's a mere nothing, but it gives pleasure, doesn't it?'

And he laughed again, gay and carefree.

'Don't let yourself be taken in, my lad!' the Angel said in admonishing tones, as he stood to one side, thoughtful, silent and with folded wings. His voice was stern and there was a commanding look on his face, just like a head of department at the Ministry.

'Be more polite, Mr. Angel,' the soul said, 'I'm no lad, I'm quite an elderly man, as you see!'

'There,' said the Devil, pointing at the Angel, 'that's what they're like, the Angels. They haven't a pennyworth of independence, but talk like chiefs. They're proud of being the Lord's servants. They're servants, and nothing more. We Devils are something quite different, we're free — and that's our strength.'

These words pleased the soul.

'You please me very much, Mr. Devil!' it said.

'So, my friend, let us be off!' the Devil said to it. 'Sit on my wings!'

'No!' the Angel protested. 'He belongs to the doubtful ones. His reckoning must be looked at. He has suffered so much! He may turn out to be one of the just!'

'Yes, I suffered very much,' the soul said.

'I know you have,' the Devil objected. 'You people are very foolish. You always like to boast of your sufferings. Boast to me of something else, something you've won with effort, something you've overcome, that you've acquired with power, with an effort of your will! But what do you say? — Yes

I've suffered a lot, I've undergone many hardships! As to these Angels, they're forever reckoning! A man dies to get rid of reckonings, but they insist on having them.'

'They ought to leave us in peace here at least, and rid us of these reckonings,' the soul added, for it had liked the Devil's words very much and was already looking at him with admiration.

The Angel opened a big book and gazed at it for a long time; then it spoke in a squeaky voice, like that of a village schoolmistress:

'You're one of the just, schoolmaster, and I order you to follow me to Heaven!'

'You order me, do you?' the soul said, ironically. 'That "I order" clearly betrays your policeman's soul. . . . I hate such souls!'

'You are for Heaven, just soul, and you must come!'

'What is there in that Heaven of yours that you deceive people with?' the Devil asked.

'Everything you can possibly want! Milk and honey flow from the rivers, it is bright, light and clean everywhere. Everybody knows everything, and there are no secrets there for human minds.'

'Just look at him, schoolmaster, see what he boasts of — milk and honey!' the Devil cried, laughing. 'Every rich man on earth can boast of these things, friend. Milk and honey. Why, does man's happiness lie in that? Everything is clear, everything is bright and obvious! A human soul cannot live happily without mystery, without darkness, without the unrecognizable. It is prouder than they in heaven realize. It needs darkness, because it wants to become a sun. Man struggles against a wall made of riddles. And without this struggle he cannot live, my dear fellow, he will perish, he will grow mouldy. . . . I expect you in Heaven don't know what mould is. Smell an old professor, and you'll find out what it is.'

The Devil began to rub his hands because he was cold; he jumped about and whistled.

'It would seem that you are cold,' the soul remarked, and added: 'I'm cold, too.'

'But the little Angel is even sweating,' the Devil answered, and grinned slyly at the Angel.

'I'll complain of you to the Lord God again,' the Angel

said and wept with rage. 'Just you wait and see! You've muddled the head of so many simple souls with these philosophies.'

'There they are,' said the Devil, 'slavish souls! All they do is sing songs to their Master, serve him and inform against people. They don't know anything else, and, if you offend them a little, they begin to cry.'

The Devil began to whistle again and to laugh.

'Well, dear friend,' he said, patting the weeping Angel on the shoulder, 'I don't complain to anyone, and no one complains to me! There I am — my own master and my own servant! Free as the wind. Tram-tara-ra-ram, ra-ram!' he carolled, and turned to the soul. 'Come on, schoolmaster, come with me and leave this sentimental little Angel!'

'Shall I really be as free as the wind with you?' the schoolmaster asked.

'Of course!' answered the Devil. 'That's our principle — to make all people free! Thanks to the Angels the earth is full of unhappy people and slaves.'

'Shall I be able to speak wherever I want to? I mean. . . parties, newspapers, politics!' the soul asked enthusiastically.

'Well, aren't you a one!' the Devil cried, stopping its mouth with his hand. 'Let's go!'

'Let's go!' cried the schoolmaster.

'Stop, you're one of the just! Don't go with him!' cried the little Angel.

'Get out of my way!' the soul cried contemptuously, giving him a push, and jumping onto the demon's wings, it flew up into space, as free and merry as the wind.

The Lawyer

The district court was in session. The case of Mitré Marinin, of the village of Goressek, was being heard; his neighbour, Peter Marinin, had accused him of killing his horse.

It was insufferably hot. From the street, through the windows of the courtroom, the white walls of the buildings opposite shimmered in the light, tired and dejected. The air was heavy in the courtroom and there was almost nobody there. Only two or three peasants, who were witnesses in the case, sat motionless and timid in their seats and listened to the proceedings, their mouths agape.

The lawyer for the defence — a short, stocky man with a big paunch, a bald head and shabby clothes — was addressing the court. He had fixed his eyes on the president of the court, and from time to time drew his hand out of his pocket to point at the defendant; he spoke with desperate efforts to deafen and astound everyone. But his voice was dull and hoarse, as if it issued from a cracked pipe. He shouted and ranted, pointed at the heavens, raising his eyes to the ceiling, thrust out his breast at every sentence and stretched out his arms. But the apathetic and immovable faces of the judges, showed, as always, that impassive judge's patience and indifference which never inspire any hope.

The president was deep in meditation. One of the judges was drawing ponies. The other, who had a talent for music, had drawn a big semibreve on the paper before him, and was carefully enlarging it with his pencil.

Mitré Marinin, the defendant, a small fair-haired peasant, barefooted and in his shirtsleeves, stood there hat in hand, and, as he did not understand a word of his lawyer's speech, he watched a big blue-bottle that was buzzing on the window panes, unable to get out. At one time, when the lawyer stopped

talking to get his breath, Mitré turned to the court messenger, who was calmly cleaning his nails by the door, and said aloud:

'Hi, friend, just get that there fly out, it's buzzed enough!'

The judges looked at him with amusement and pity. The president pressed his bell-button.

'Mitré Marinin, you must realize that your position here as defendant is not a very enviable one. Propriety requires that you be silent.'

'Ah! It's got out!' said Mitré, pointing to the window.

The judges laughed again. The lawyer looked at his client sternly, then putting on a mild smile again, continued:

'Yes, your honours! It is these circumstances that should, so to speak, be taken into account. In other words, the psychology, the moment, has to be explained somehow! Imagine a night, as black as pitch, a night in the village! So dark you can't even see your hand! My client is lying out in the yard, or somewhere on his threshing ground, and he is guarding his sheaves, his wheat that he has harvested with the sweat of his brow as every citizen has the right to do. He is guarding his toil, as it were. There he lies, exhausted by his daily labours! He has forgotten everything. (The witnesses looked at him, dumbfounded). Everything, wife, children, even the heavens, as the poet has it! Labour has sent him sound asleep. But suddenly... what do we see, your honours? What, indeed? Words cannot express it! The human tongue is silent! Yes! And in a moment my client is awake and looks around... Oh, horrors! My client's life hangs by a thread! Over his head stands a huge monster, ugly, fearful, ready to swallow him up! In his fear, quite naturally, my client, your honours, loses his presence of mind, in a manner of speaking. He sees tongues of flame coming from the monster's mouth, he sees its bloodshot eyes, flashing in drunk... in greed... My client trembles in horror. He forgets where he is, he doesn't know what is happening! Still half asleep, he seizes his gun and — bang — he shoots! The monster falls, then rises to its feet again, jumps the fences, finds a pile of straw, thrusts itself into it in pain... and dies! Well, your honours, I ask you, what fault is it of my client's that this monster was none other, in a way, but the horse of a certain Peter Marinin? A horse, did I say? A sorry nag, which would hardly fetch fifty leva. Yes! What crime is there here? What, indeed?... And so, your honours,

consider, consider and think the matter over! Take two laws into consideration: God's law, which orders us at every moment to guard our lives from monsters, and from everything in general, and the human law, which divides actions into criminal and non-criminal. According to both these laws, my client is not guilty!

The lawyer looked around triumphantly, wiped the perspiration from his brow, and smiled at his client.

The judges began a whispered consultation. The president pressed his bell and cried:

'Mitré Marinin, the defendant!'

'Present!' Mitré answered, in a soldier-like way, and stood at attention.

'What can you tell us about this business?'

'Who? Me?'

'Yes, you, of course, it's you I'm talking to.'

'Well, I'll say that's how it was.'

'Well, how was it exactly?'

'About the hoss, then,' Mitré cried at the top of his voice. 'It kept jumping into my yard. I often told Peter, that I did: "Neighbour," I says, "keep your hoss locked up, or the wolves'll get him!" It did me a lot of damage, didn't it? It trampled my garden. As soon as it was dark, there it was, a-jumping over the fence. It ruined me! I didn't mind the rest so much, your honours, but the pumpkin, I faire ate my heart out about it, to tell you the truth. It was such a pumpkin! You never saw the likes of it, as big as that! That nag squashed it! I stood it and stood it, and then I said: "You just wait, and I'll teach you to ruin my pumpkins!" I loaded the gun well, and I waited. At midnight, I was just going to bed, and there it came, a-jumping over the fence. What else had the brute to do?'

'Well, what happened then?' asked the president.

'Well, I ups with my gun and shoots it down.'

'And then?'

'Then, the wife and I, we dragged it out to the end of the village. We buried it in the straw, to hide it like, but. . .'

The lawyer listened to his client's simple story of the event and quivered with rage. He tried to catch Mitré's eye, to strike him dumb, but the peasant seemed to have forgotten his defender, and only gazed at the president.

'And what was the horse worth, in your estimation?' the president asked him.

'How do I know what it was worth? It was a good horse,' Mitré answered.

The lawyer angrily threw down his papers and rose to his feet.

The judges retired to consult. The lawyer dragged Mitré out into the corridor and shouted at him, trembling with rage:

'You fool! If you don't know how to lie, why do you take a lawyer?'

Then he angrily went down the stairs.

A Visit to the Godparents

What is there to a spring day? It comes to an end like any other of the Lord's days. Nothing new will have happened in the village, nothing unusual. Always the same troubles, always the same joys and sorrows. The next day was a holiday, and the cracked church bell proclaimed this to the sinful village with its quivering echo. Out in the fields the workers heard it, and hurried back to get home before sunset. Carts creaked along the crooked village streets, the ploughmen's voices rose in talk, then everything grew quiet in an eve-of-holiday stillness. Men and beasts would rest. The fields would bathe in the pleasant spring sun, the black furrows would grow crumbly, and the golden seed and golden hopes would be buried in them to wait for the fruit.

The sun set red and fiery, and dusk fell. A lively *horo** tune rose around the well below the village, and girlish laughter echoed loudly.

Everywhere it was quiet and still.

Only at Drazho's house was there a joyful bustle.

His son Stoicho and his daughter-in-law Yana, a young bride, brought to the house barely a month ago, were preparing for a long journey. They were going to visit Godfather Milen, who lived beyond three villages, in the fourth. They would travel all night, and get there at dawn next morning.

Uncle Drazho, the old father-in-law, was himself greasing and preparing the hay-strewn cart.

The mother-in-law ran between the house and the cellar, bringing out gaily-coloured bags full of gifts, as gay and nimble

* *Horo* — round or chain dance

as a girl. Stoicho, dressed in his best, clean shaven and trim, held the halters of the young oxen they had harnessed and, hiding from the old people, stole looks at his bride Yanka, decked out in all her bridal finery. She was standing meekly to one side, and shyly holding a painted wooden flask of wine.

Uncle Drazho looked over the cart once more, glanced at his young Stoicho again, young — still little more than a boy, and said, paternally:

'Now, keep your eyes peeled, and see that nothing goes wrong, or you won't be able to get there. . . . Now then! Pull!'

Stoicho pulled the halters, crossed himself and set off. Yanka kissed the hands of her father- and mother-in-law and followed the cart, seen off by the old folk with many a blessing, and three hundred reminders to give Godfather Milen their regards.

The cart noiselessly emerged from the narrow streets and stopped above the village. The two got up on the soft bed of hay, Stoicho prodded the oxen, and the cart set off at a faster pace, rattling as if talking to the young people.

The quiet night caressingly embraced everything. From the sky above, thousands of tiny stars, like the eyes of little angels, looked down and gazed lovingly at the sinful earth. A full moon floated over the ridges, smiling sweetly and stopping for a moment looked around here and there, then calmly set out among the stars, like a young shepherd amid his dark-eyed flock.

That was the night Yanka and Stoicho had been dreaming about all day! Alone in the cart on the deserted road! Darkness and silence! No old father-in-law to cough, no jealous mother-in-law to eavesdrop. What greater bliss could one possibly want?

And Stoicho called to the oxen, waved his goad threateningly, and put an arm around Yanka's slim waist.

'Don't, Stoicho, they'll see us,' Yanka said timidly and nestled up to him.

'We're not in the village to be seen,' Stoicho answered, and began to stroke her rosy young face.

'Dear, dear, and I never thought we were out in the plain!' aughed Yanka.

'Godfather Milen is a merry fellow, he'll give us a royal welcome,' Stoicho said dreamily.

'What kind of a gift do you think he's prepared for me?'
'As for Godmother, she wouldn't sleep a wink, nervous as she is, if she knew we were coming.'

'Tomorrow morning early, we'll just turn up and give them a surprise.'

'Won't they be pleased!' cried Yanka, clapping her hands.
'Godfather Milen loves visitors — the wine he'll be pouring for us!' Stoicho said.

'Oh, you never think of anything but the drink', Yanka scolded gently.

'Yanka, don't scold me, or I'll kiss your throat!'

'Why, just look at him! . . . Aren't you ashamed of yourself!'

'Just wait and see if I am or not!'

'Don't, don't! Eh, Stoicho, see what you've done, you've creased my kerchief!'

'Now, don't make a noise!'

'Look at him, am I to keep quiet then?'

Laughter and giggles rang out of the cart, and a scuffle began, freely and gaily.

Yanka's white kerchief vanished below the sides, and the long goad slowly dropped. . . .

Everything grew still.

The young oxen stopped calmly and unconcernedly in the middle of the road. No loud voice drove them on nor did a long goad wave threateningly over them. They stood thus a while, ruminating, then lay down, yoke and all, and began to chew the cud sweetly and indifferently. . . .

The pale moon smiled slyly up in the sky and whispered something to the playful little stars there in her own tongue. They gazed slyly down, winked mischievously and looked long, long until day broke and the sky grew pale.

The gold sun rose over the mountains, climbed high up and sent its warm rays down everywhere, caressing the cart, which still stood motionless in the middle of the road. The oxen, pleased with their rest, lay there, chewing their cud. Stoicho started up, and shook Yanka.

'Yanka, the sun is almost at noon!'

Yanka woke up, looked around timidly, and clapped her hands.

Their hearty laughter rang out careless and free over the wide plain.

Baked Pumpkin

On one occasion when Doushko Dobrodoushkov, keeper of the records at the district office, took certain papers to the home of the governor for signature, he found the latter, together with his wife and children, eating pumpkin, baked whole in the oven.

After signing the papers, the governor cut off a little piece of pumpkin and amiably offered it to his record keeper.

'Help yourself, Mr. Doushko, just see what a wonderful pumpkin! It's a little bit burnt, but never mind. You'll excuse us.'

'Oh, thank you, thank you, Mr. Governor!' the record keeper answered, quite confused. 'I . . . I . . . really don't care for pumpkin.'

'Don't you really? You come from a village and you don't like pumpkin!'

It was always unpleasant for Doushko to be reminded, purposely or not, that he was village-born. He blushed with shame.

'Yes, but . . . my stomach, you know, Mr. Governor, is no longer used to such things,' he answered, shaking his head and frowning.

His eyes involuntarily ran over the sugary piece of pumpkin with its red and temptingly burnt crust, and saliva gathered in his throat. He dared not swallow it, lest his weakness should come to light.

'Come, come, help yourself, don't be shy!' the governor insisted amiably. 'I've not put such a piece of pumpkin in my mouth for years, and my stomach accepts it just the same!'

'I can't, Mr. Governor, it disagrees with my stomach, I can't even taste it!' Doushko answered, and thought: 'What a fool I am! I ought to have taken it!'

And, to avoid facing the temptation, he bowed meekly, said 'Goodbye' and went out.

Once he was out in the street, he swallowed his saliva freely, and reproached himself once more:

'I'm a fool, a damned fool, and that's that! Folk say "If people take a stick to you run, but if they offer you something — take it!" but with a fool's head like mine! . . '

And Doushko struck his head disapprovingly with a finger. The tasty morsel of pumpkin danced before his eyes — lovely, warm, and sweet, with such a thin tempting wisp of steam coming from it.

'Actually, if there's anything I like best in the world, it's baked pumpkin,' he meditated as he walked along the street with bent head. 'I eat it like a pig. If only its stupid name were different! Pumpkin! It sounds so common somehow, devil take it! A silly peasantry thing. People will say: that fellow eats pumpkin — keep him at arm's length — a man who has no culture, a boor, in a word — a pig. I'll go to my village one day, and eat my fill of pumpkin! Far from people!'

And his imagination began to serve nothing but pumpkins before him, sweet, lovely and aromatic.

From that day on Doushko Dobrodoushkov became restless and nervous. The spectre of baked pumpkin began to pursue him.

He would sit down to work in his office, but the thought of it left him no peace. He would write something, write until he was ready to drop. But it always seemed to him that the pen, squeaking rapidly over the paper, whispered to him: pumpkin, pumpkin, pumpkin. . . .

Whenever he quarrelled with one of his companions at the office, he would call him a baked pumpkin at once, or — what are you blushing like a baked pumpkin for, or — just look at yourself, if you please — what a drunkard you are — steam is rising from your head as if it were a baked pumpkin!

At night, as soon as he fell asleep, the tormenting spectre of the pumpkin would haunt him again. He would dream of a plain, but what a plain! Long, wide, you couldn't see the end of it! Along it rolled those baked pumpkins, what pumpkins, and sweet steam floated over every one of them! Doushko would walk around that plain, looking at the pumpkins, and wanting to pick them, but as soon as he bent down, they would vanish! He would walk on in the plain. It was a plain, yet it

wasn't one, but some kind of an office — a very wide office. A huge pumpkin would appear from somewhere, and begin rolling towards him, and grow, and grow, until it grew as big as a house, as big as a church, as big as a mountain, bigger even, and then it would begin to roll harder towards him. Doushko would tremble with fear, and he would run and run, while his legs grew shorter and shorter. The monstrous pumpkin would catch up with him and throw itself upon him.

The record keeper would wake up with a start, streaming with perspiration.

That dream began to torment him every night.

One evening the clerks at the district office gave a party.

They had a *gyuvech** baked at Kalcho's inn, and got together to have a good time. They had made it nice and peppery to give them a thirst for wine. Of course, the record keeper was also invited.

There was wine, and speeches and songs! Every kind you please from love songs to patriotic songs. Then they drank toasts. They drank to the health of Mr. Governor, and, between ourselves of course, to the fair sex in the town, to the greatness of Bulgaria, to the Tsar, to the Bulgarian people, to the fleas in the office and so forth and so on.

Finally Mr. Doushko rose to his feet, got up on a chair, cleared his throat, and raised his glass in an inspired manner:

'Gentlemen, honoured gathering, dear colleagues, my very good companions!'

But in the middle of this flow of words, that awful baked pumpkin, which pursued him so relentlessly, quite unceremoniously rolled into his thoughts, and muddled all the ideas he had collected in his head during the course of fourteen years' service.

Doushko tried to continue. He gesticulated energetically, and raised one hand to the low ceiling, his eyes enthusiastically fixed on his companions.

'On an equal footing, so to speak. . . partly. . . more or less. . .'

But the pumpkin rolled into the flow of his thoughts again. Doushko felt quite helpless. He dropped his hand, tur-

* Turkish dish of mutton with all kinds of vegetables, very popular all over the Balkan Peninsula

ned to his companions, and spoke in a gentle, feeling and soft little voice, quite detached from the ardour of an orator.

'D'you know what, gentlemen, let's have a pumpkin baked for us one day! Just like that — between friends. It doesn't cost all that much! And we'll have a good time again.'

There was a brief silence. Then they all cheered, and Kalcho's restaurant rang to their applause.

'Hear, hear! Hear, hear!'

'Let's do it this evening,' cried a voice.

'Hear, hear! He-ar, h-e-a-r!'

And in five minutes they had opened a subscription, got a certain sum together, bought the pumpkin and sent it to the bakehouse.

Doushko abandoned himself to happy thoughts.

And when, an hour later, the pumpkin was baked, he asked to be the one to go and fetch it.

But. . . .

Just as he was returning with the tin, from which rose the aroma of baked pumpkin, Mr. Governor met him in the darkness.

'A-ah, Mr. Doushko!' he said to him. 'So you've had a pumpkin baked! I'm very glad to see it, very glad! Your stomach must be all right now!'

Doushko was tongue-tied and unable to utter a word.

When he took the pumpkin in to his companions, they all noticed that he was as yellow as a corpse.

'What's the matter with you?' they asked in surprise.

'I feel rather ill,' Doushko answered and dropped weakly down on a chair in a corner, where he remained, gloomy and mute. Deep in dark meditations, he did not even look at his companions who were eating the sweet pumpkin with delight and relish.

'Doushko, have some, brother,' they said, offering him a helping.

'I don't feel like eating,' he answered, mournful and crushed, and added plaintively: 'I feel ill, I feel very ill, boys! I shall die. . . .'

An Artful Fellow

P

etko *Lissichka*,* a petty thief under arrest, marched ahead, and three steps behind him went police constable Ivan *Kyossé***), his rifle over his shoulder.

The plain was deserted. The road muddy and endless. The whole earth was dead and wet, like a drowned old woman. The sky hung over the earth in clouds, ugly and hopeless.

'Is this the weather you've chosen to send me along, sergeant? You could have waited,' *Lissichka* grumbled, and splashed through the mud, his hands thrust into the pockets of his shabby baggy trousers, muddied up to the waistband. His little grey eyes turned this way and that on all sides, as if they were looking for something to steal.

'That's no business of mine! The chief gave orders, and I'm taking you along!' the policeman answered, stumping along in his boots after him.

'If the chief's blind, can't you see, and have you no mouth to tell him what you see?' the arrested man objected.

'How could I say anything? He's the chief and I'm in duty bound to carry out his orders. I can't talk to him about anything,' the policeman answered pompously and wiped his non-existent moustache.

'Well, I talk to you, don't I?'

'That's a different matter.'

'Why should it be different? Let's say you're a chief and I'm your subordinate.'

'You're not my subordinate in service,' the policeman explained, 'but just accidentally. You're free. . . .'

'The Lord give you this kind of freedom!'

Lissichka turned, and laughed quietly in the policeman's face.

* Little fox

** Beardless

'Well, supposing the chief ordered you to beat your brother, for instance, what would you do, sergeant?'

'I'd beat him, and that'd be that!'

'You'd never do that! Wouldn't you be sorry to think that for an insignificant wage you were beating your brother? Wouldn't your conscience bother you?' *Lissichka* reasoned.

'Well, if a man begins to think too much — that's how it'd be. . . . But orders is orders. . . you can't disregard them!' the policeman answered guiltily.

'Then there's no call to be sorry for you!'

The arrested man bowed his head and splashed on through the mud in silence.

'What a crossgrained fellow you are!' the policeman scolded after him. 'You pick out the worst mud. Can't you see the footsteps?'

'I've always followed in other people's footsteps, and that's why I fell into your hands, sergeant!'

Lissichka was perfectly well aware that the policeman was not a sergeant, but was flattering him.

'Your words show you're a clever man, friend, but why do you have to go and steal?'

'If only fools are left to steal, the Lord help Bulgaria, sergeant!'

A silence followed. *Lissichka* walked with bent head, thinking something over. The policeman raised the skirts of his great-coat and swore at the weather. The road left the plain and crept up a hill, covered with scrub. Large drops of the recent rain hung from the leafless bushes. To one side of the road lay big wet boulders, tumbling over each other like some strange animals, that seemed to be asleep, like everything else around them. A bird flew noiselessly over the travellers' heads.

'Ah, why aren't I a bird, too!' sighed the policeman, who was barely dragging his big, heavily hobnailed boots along. 'How easy it would be for me!'

'A fine thing that would be. . . a winged policeman!' the thoughtful prisoner laughed. 'You're forever leaving droppings where you should and where you shouldn't, so what would it be like if you were birds?'

'We wouldn't need to fall into snares like you,' the policeman retorted.

Silence fell again.

A hare jumped out onto the road and stopped in alarm a few feet before them.

Lissichka stopped and cried aloud.

'Take aim, sergeant!'

The hare, startled, escaped into the bushes. The policeman and the prisoner stopped and gazed after it for a long time.

'Well, you are a slow-coach, sergeant! The moment you see one, shoot! You've missed the game. What are you carrying that popgun over your shoulder for? You've set my huntsman's heart a-beating. . . . To see a hare and not shoot at it! I'm ready to burst with disgust. . . .

The prisoner sat down on a boulder and took out a cigarette. The policeman sat down, too.

'So you're a hunter, are you?' he asked *Lissichka*.

'Eh, well!' sighed the prisoner.

'I'm that clumsy with my hands — I can't even hit a hay wain!'

'To tell you the truth, friend, I'm very angry with you. We've missed that hare. . . . Why, shoot a bullet at it, and make its heart beat! Are you keeping them for me? Never you fear, I've not killed anyone, to want to run away. I'd have gone where they sent me without a convoy, too. The most I'll get is three months, and then they'll let me go. Don't you be afraid I'm going to escape, sergeant. I shouldn't like to have my house closed to me. Eh, I'd have hit a sparrow at three hundred feet with your gun!'

'I've got an uncle, he's like that, too. He's got an eye, you know!' the policeman sighed proudly.

'As for me, you may think it's a lie, but when I was in barracks, I hit a sparrow's egg with my gun at three hundred feet.'

'You could have, why not! My uncle. . . he could hit a millet seed in a bag!' the policeman remarked mockingly.

'D'you see that jay on the tree up there?' the prisoner asked, pointing. 'If I don't shoot it with one hand. . . then I'm not a man!'

'It's too far. . . .'

'What if it is. . . . I'll hit it, and it won't move! Let's have a bet on it, sergeant!'

'You'll lose.'

'No, I won't! Give me the gun!'

Gently, without taking his eyes from the jay, *Lissichka* took the gun from across the policeman's knee, as the latter was lighting a cigarette, and took aim. The policeman watched attentively.

'I'm badly placed. . . wait!' *Lissichka* said, and rose to his feet. Then he looked at the policeman and called to the jay:

'Psst!'

The bird croaked and flew off.

'Now up you get, sergeant! And I'll walk behind you for a bit! Come on, forward march!'

When he saw the gun in *Lissichka's* hands, the policeman went pale with fright.

'*Lissichka*! Don't joke now! Give me that gun!'

'Are you going to get up? Well, that's your business. If you don't want to — goodbye!'

The prisoner rustled into the bushes.

'What are you doing, hey, *Lissichka*? . . . Come on, come, let's go!'

'You go by yourself, sergeant, my road lies in another direction!'

Lissichka quickly jumped through the bushes, crossed a little dell and came out on its other side.

'Where are you off to, hey? Stop joking!' the policeman cried, half out of his mind with fear. 'What are you doing? Do you want me to go to prison instead of you? Come back, man! You'll pay for this, I say!'

'So long as I keep out of it, let those who want to go to prison, go!' called *Lissichka*, without turning, and was lost in the forest, over which a thick mist was falling.

The policeman looked around, as if he were seeking help, but the road was deserted. The hills stared sullenly at each other. The forest was silent. A scattered stony flock of boulders showed white among the bushes. A chattering jay flew over his head, laughed at the silence, and flew on somewhere.

The policeman sat down by the roadside, and, not knowing what to do, began to cry.

In the Furrow

Once the rain began, it went on for a whole week. Quietly, gently it came down, by night and by day. It rained, rained and rained, watering mother earth well; then a gentle breeze began to blow; it cleared the sky, and the warm autumn set in. The fields dried, the weather grew fine and settled, things were just right for ploughing.

Bonné Krainenets harnessed Sivoushka and Belcho again and set out after the plough. His field was in a fine wide dale. It was sheltered by forests on all sides. The soil was crumbly and dry, like granulated sugar. He waved his stick and shouted:

'Gee-up there, come on, brothers!'

The echo answered him from the forest. Old Belcho waved his tail and set out calmly. Sivoushka — a lean little cow, half as big as Belcho — made a big effort, and walked along beside him.

So they made one furrow, then another, then a third, till they had ploughed a section. Bonné's sad face lighted up a little. He forgot his misery and began to whistle.

'Don't be in such a hurry, Belcho,' he said to the ox, 'Sivoushka can't keep up with you. Come on, Sivoushka, come on, lean one; come on, little one. You're tired, I know, but what am I to do? I'm tired, too. Gee-up, now, go up! Now down!'

Belcho, a tough old ox, snorted and stepped out, full of his own importance. Little Sivoushka strained with all her might to keep up with him. Her mouth was open, her spine was humped up; her tail stuck out. For every step Belcho took, she took two. But she kept on, though her tongue was lolling.

There was nobody near them. It seemed as if autumn

were rustling softly through the forest on its bare feet, and the dry twigs were snapping softly beneath them.

'Come on, Sivoushka, come on, little one!' Bonné cried to her and saw with fear that his cow was growing more and more exhausted and losing her strength.

'Whoa, there! . . . Let's have a little rest now!'

The tired cattle stopped. Bonné went up to them and stroked their foreheads.

'Belcho, don't you understand? You mustn't tire Sivoushka so! Isn't that so, Sivoushka?' he said to them.

Sivoushka and Belcho looked at him calmly and dispassionately with their sad eyes, and panted heavily. Foam dripped from Sivoushka's mouth. She looked at her white mate, looked at her owner and sadly hung her head.

'What is it, little one? Tell me! Tired, are you? Sivoushka, weakling! Your heart is weeping, little one. We'll work today, and tomorrow's a holiday, so we'll rest all day long. What are you looking at me for, Belcho? You're a strong lad,' Bonné said to him.

But Sivoushka did not raise her head. Her master's words did not seem to warm her sick heart. Her lean body throbbed quickly and hard. Her legs quivered.

'Tell me, little Sivoushka, what's happened to you?' asked Bonné frightened, and began to stroke her like a child. Then he picked up the plough handle again and cried:

'Gee-up, come on, get going!'

The echo answered him again from the forest.

Belcho set out again. Sivoushka made one more effort, but her legs trembled violently and she fell down; she fell as she was, yoked, and lowed sorrowfully.

Bonné threw his stick aside in a fright, quickly unyoked Belcho and stood by Sivoushka, anxiously. She lay motionless, with outstretched neck, her muzzle sunk in the sandy soil, her eyes closed, breathing heavily.

'Get up, Sivoushka, get up!' Bonné said as he freed her from the yoke, and tried to pull her up by the horns.

Sivoushka barely opened her eyes, gazed pleadingly at her master, as if she were saying to him, 'Let me die in peace,' and closed them again.

Bonné busied himself about her, whimpering, not knowing what to do. The field, part ploughed and part unfurrowed,

lay in the burning sunlight. Only the sun looked down on them from the sky, and little by little moved away from noontide, sinking behind the hills. There was no one near them. The forest was still.

'Come on, Sivoushka! Get up! Look, Belcho's laughing at you! Get up. Don't play tricks on me, little one. . . look how soft the earth is, just fit for ploughing!'

And Bonné took the cow by the horns again and began to lift her up slowly. She thrust her feet into the earth and made a last effort to rise, but scarcely moved. Then she let her head droop sickly on the soft earth again, breathing more heavily still.

Bonné sat down beside her, took her head on his knee, stroked her forehead and began to kiss her.

'Don't do that, little one! Have pity on me! Listen! Only this field is left. Let's plough it and get it done, then we'll rest. . . . I'll never yoke you again. Your little Galitsa will grow up and will help Belcho. And you'll just lie in the cowshed all day, chewing the cud. The children'll bring you water in the white cauldron, they'll curry you every morning, and give you bran. . . . You'll get better, you'll grow fat and strong, won't you, little one? Galitsa and Belcho will do the ploughing then, you'll just be turned out in the pasture to graze, you'll watch them and cry to them, "Work away, work away!" And you'll be glad to see them! And on an evening, when I turn Galitsa loose, she'll lick you and say to you, "Goodevening, old mother!" Get up, little one! Get up, come on!'

But Sivoushka never moved, nor even opened her eyes to look at him. She was shivering as in a fever.

Bonné got up, broke off a piece of bread, put some salt on it and put it near her mouth:

'There, Sivoushka,' he cried. 'Have a bite!'

Sivoushka opened her eyes, looked pleadingly at her master and closed them again.

Bonné sighed in despair. He looked at the field with its crumbling soil, he looked at the forest that lay there silent, he looked at the sun, hurrying over the sky and saw that he was alone in the dale, that there was no help to be had anywhere.

Then he turned to the sick Sivoushka again.

'Get up, little one! Get up, for the bear's in the forest and will come to eat you up!' he said to frighten her.

Then he took a torn old rug from the cart, put it over him and went into the forest where he began to roar like a bear and to crawl towards the poor cow on all fours.

'Bow-ow!' he shouted as he approached her.

She opened her eyes. Deep within her tormented and sorrowful eyes there was fearful terror. She raised her head and lowed desperately, but was unable to rise.

Bonné threw off the rug and stood beside her in despair; then he crossed himself and burst into tears.

Sivoushka lowed once more, opened her eyes fearfully wide and stopped breathing.

Belated Harvest

The wide plain lay silent under the impassive August sky. Fiery summer had already trampled over it and the labour of the peasants had left an ugly scene.

On both sides of the road, as far as eye could see, lay trampled stubble without sheaves or swaths, and mown meadows around which the cattle had been driven out to wander aimlessly. Ripe maize rustled sadly and from out of it grey sparrows rose in clouds and clouds to drop like hail along the dusty roads. Blackbirds flew low over the mown meadows. Overhead a crow croaked hopelessly and flew off, leaving sorrow to reign in your heart and torment it.

Harvest was long over.

Yet far off, beyond the village, amid the wide plain, an unreaped field stood lonely with blackened and bowed ears of wheat. From early dawn a slim young wife had moved about in white shirt sleeves, the ends of her kerchief hanging loose. A sharp sickle flashed in her hands and under its keen edge swath after swath fell quickly. Over-ripe grains of wheat fell like rain from the burnt ears and dropped like pellets onto the stubble, pellets which dropped like lead on the heart of the young harvester. From her black eyes the tears rained down like hail, dropping silently and ceaselessly.

Next to the furrow under a thorny pear tree, hung a gaily-coloured cradle, from which suddenly a hoarse little voice cried out, the voice of a well-loved baby, piercing the mother's heart like a sharp blade. She threw down the sickle and ran to it like one possessed; tired and perspiring, she huddled the little thing to her breast and rocked it gently, bending over it and whispering lovingly:

'Be still, my darling, still, little daughter, be still and let me reap!'

And drying her own tears she sang to it.

The baby grew still, winding her tender little arms around her mother's neck she seemed to listen to that sad song, which her forefathers had sung, which her father and her mother sang, and which, perhaps, she herself would sing one day to that same sad tune. She listened, looked at her mother and a smile spread over her thin cheeks.

Near by, in the shade, old Sava, who was ill, lay wrapped in a ragged rug. His tousled white head rested listlessly on a golden sheaf. Life was barely visible on his small and withered face, wrinkled and dark like the earth. The weak breath of his powerless lungs barely moved his cracked and dried lips. The mayor had sent him from the village to fetch his daughter-in-law, as some policemen were looking for her, and the poor old man had barely dragged himself there with his stick, his legs giving way beneath him with exhaustion.

'A little water, daughter!' he scarcely gasped, moved a little and moaning raised his dried-up body, lost like a rag in the straw on which he was lying.

Lazarinka quickly left the baby and, full of care, lifted the pitcher to the sick man's mouth.

'Oh, father, why did you come? When you can't manage it, why not stay at home. . . .'

'What was I to do, daughter? They came, they ordered me off, so what could I do? . . .'

'Couldn't they see you were ill? Are they trying to kill you?'

'I'm sick of the house, daughter! I'm tired of lying around.... I said to myself, I'll take a walk and maybe my bones will limber up so that I can help you. You just go, daughter, go, since they have sent for you. I'll lie here for a while, and little by little I'll get home.'

'I shan't go, father, d'you hear? What do they want me for? They've shut Doyno up, haven't they? Let them get what they have to from him. . . . They must leave me alone!'

'Eh dear!' sighed the old man and fell silent, as if he had sunk into a pool. Afterwards his blackened lips moved again:

'Doyno — Doyno! . . . He has done for me, that he has — may the sin lie on his soul! And he has darkened your days, too, daughter!'

Lazarinka did not reply. She saw the truth of her father-in-law's words, but still they hurt her, still they offended her.

And a secret protest troubled her soul. She loved Doyno and was miserable when people spoke ill of him. Years ago he had seized her like an eagle and carried her off from her father's cottage right up into the mountains. What days they had lived through, what days! . . . Since then Doyno had been everything to her, and she could not bear to hear him condemned and cursed, although he had been imprisoned a month ago for murder.

But the old man, tormented as he was, could not restrain his muffled voice, quivering with helplessness:

'He. . . to become a murderer! . . . Was his father a brigand, eh? Couldn't his mad head stand it? . . . Look at me! What hasn't happened to me in this life, but I've stood it, stood it like a dog. . . . Poverty, poverty, but I've lived to a good old age with honour! Yet he? Ah, he! . . . I would curse him, daughter, were it not for you and the little one.'

'Just you curse him then,' said Lazarinka choking with emotion and she burst into tears. 'Father, didn't he love you, didn't he look after you?' and she sobbed quietly.

'Who said he didn't, daughter?' the old man wept. 'Who said he didn't? . . . Doyno, may God send him a long life!' he barely uttered the words and put his hand on his heart, softened and broken. 'But should he have gone so far, so far? To kill the man! God, God!'

A sharp cough drowned old Sava's weak words. He moaned and again let his white head sink onto the golden sheaf.

'I told him, father, not to quarrel with him. The man was rich — how could Doyno fight him? I told him,' said the wife.

'Well, as you knew what he was like, why did you tell him about that, eh? If you had only held your tongue. . . .'

Lazarinka dropped the kerchief low down over her eyes, her face aflame with shame.

'I couldn't hold my tongue! How could I hold my tongue? . . . If it had been only once or twice, but every day, every day! He dallied with me, offered me money. . . . How could I stand it? What do you take me for to stand his impudence?'

'Oh!' moaned the old man. 'Doyno, my son, what will become of you!'

'They'll let him go, father.'

'For murder? Let him go? . . . Oh, my child will perish!'

moaned old Sava. 'Couldn't he have just put up with it? One has to be a bit submissive.'

'Submission, submission, always submission! That fellow wouldn't have let me alone even now, if Doyno hadn't done for him!' said Lazarinka harshly.

'You, too, daughter? Are you of one mind with him? That is why they drag you around the law courts, too! Go along now and see what they want you for. . . . It is clear that reaping won't be finished today.'

The old man tried to raise himself but failed to do so.

'You just lie there, father, lie there. . . . I shan't go!'

'Go, daughter, go, don't let them drive you by force!'

'I shan't go. . . . What fault is it of mine, that the field should lie unreaped?'

'Go, daughter, go!'

The old man's helpless words were drowned in a sea of grief. Tears welled up in his sunken eyes as if they had sprung out of two dark wells, and they poured down his withered face. Lazarinka bent over the baby's cradle, where it lay cooing like a dove, and she wept as she crooned over it.

The sun seemed to cling stubbornly to its noon-day height. Over the silent plain the sky lay spread, three times as silent, blue and deep. Unknown travellers passed along the road and stopped to gaze in amazement at that lonely, unreaped field from which one heard the hushed keening of a woman, as in a grave-yard, then they passed on again to the distance. . . .

Harvest Time

Harvesting was in full swing on the flat plain of Sofia. From one end to the other, as far as your eye could see, the golden fields swayed, and tired workers moved hither and thither from early dawn. The Lord sent terrible heat on those days. The blue vault of the sky lay over the earth, pouring down fire and red hot coals. An infernal heat haze quivered over the broad plain. The distant forests and mountains lay limp and exhausted in the blue haze, seeming to expect the plain to burst into flames at any moment. The birds had flown far away to the cool forest depths, and no sound of their voices was to be heard. Only a dove occasionally cooed from a shady pear tree, or a lonely grey pigeon whirled its wings on its way to the forest.

It was torrid and stifling.

The sun had stopped, fiery and merciless in the sky, but its burning rays did not drive the industrious peasants from the fields.

They reaped there tirelessly, piling up the golden sheaves. Sweat poured from their foreheads, their spirits were drained of strength, but there was no rest. Ripe wheat will not wait.

The Lord had provided a plentiful harvest that year, and had sent neither hail, nor locusts, nor any other terrible pest for the sinful peasant souls, that had suffered their fill. He had delighted them with beneficent rain in May and did not want to deprive them of the cherished hope of a rich harvest.

How many words, prayerful and pure, had been torn from the hopeful peasant souls!

'The Lord is helping us! Let us work, let us work!'

In those hectic days, under the infernal rays of the sun, songs echoed over the golden plain, rising in waves right up to the sky, like thankful prayers. Girls' voices rose together

somewhere at the end of the plain, a song soared up — young, free, as broad as the plain and as sacred as love.

From other parts, beyond the villages, another would rise, gentle and high, sending forth hope and strength.

Nikola, a strapping fellow, often laid down a heavy sheaf, and listened long. Then, smiling and energetic, he would watch his old mother and little sister reaping all alone.

She would turn and tease him gaily:

‘Brother, you can’t recognize Penka’s voice!’

And her plump, sunburnt little face, youthful and fresh, would light up in a smile.

‘I catch it. . . but faintly; it blends in with the others and is lost!’ Nikola answered, then added:

‘Mother, rest a while, and listen to them! If you hear Penka’s voice, you’ll know that she really will be your daughter-in-law.’

His old mother straightened up, smiled lovingly at him, then went on with her reaping, saying:

‘If you can’t tell her voice, how am I to do it, my son?’

‘Let her sing alone — and I’d know her even if she were singing across the sea.’

Suddenly the chorus fell silent, and the plain grew quiet. But from somewhere far away a voice rose alone — high, ringing and quivering. It rose lightly and quietly, then little by little it grew stronger and soared in strong waves over the plain.

Nikola dropped the sheaf and clapped his hands.

‘There she is — that’s her!’

And he listened long.

The song spread its wings, free and youthful, as pure as a spring, full of hopes and desires. It strung sweet, lovely words together and sent them with love to someone somewhere. It would stop for a moment, then rise fearlessly again, as if fighting an endless sorrow, a sinister doubt, then triumphantly rose still higher, soaring up proudly and swiftly.

Nikola could resist no longer; he stood up in the middle of the field and called:

‘E-e-e-eh!’

Ringling and approving laughter answered him from the neighbouring fields.

The ripe corn ears swayed lightly and gaily whispered to each other.

Penka heard him from afar and sent him a teasing and loving song.

Over the field hope flew, seeming to carry a cross in its hand, and after it came joy.

The tired souls were refreshed and the plain echoed again to laughter and song.

But suddenly from the far end, a barefooted boy came running to say that Penka had died of sunstroke.

The dreadful news flew from mouth to mouth all over the plain.

Penka had died of sunstroke!

Dear Lord!

Another victim!

Even hail would not have hurt people so much.

The harvesters cast aside their sharp sickles and ran towards her field, frightened and sad.

'Dear Lord, if only it isn't true!'

Young women and girls, men and elderly women, and mothers ran to Penka's field in horror.

She had fallen on her back beside a golden sheaf, as if a bullet had struck her down — Penka, the well-loved village child. A white kerchief had fallen carelessly across her forehead, shading her lovely face. Her thick lashes lay dark on her cheeks, her lids were closed in death. From her half-open mouth, a thin streamlet of blood trickled down, staining her white throat. One hand still held the sharp sickle, the other carefully clutched a handful of wheat.

Sunstroke had killed the girl.

Nikola, stupefied and desperate, pushed the crowd aside, and fell stricken beside her cold dead body.

'Penka, my joy, my song!'

And his voice was choked with sobs.

The following day the sun burnt down as strongly and cruelly as ever, but there were no workers out in the fields, although it was a weekday. The golden ears shed their grain and burned in solitude.

The plain was holding sad holiday.

They were burying Penka.

The Madwoman

Pop * Sava, old and white-haired, but tall and powerful, was standing full of inspiration at the altar gates, preaching a sermon. His thunderous voice rang clearly out under the wide domes of the church, and, thrown back by the walls, sounded as sweet as a song, and fell with prophetic force on the hearts of the pious peasants, who bent their heads in repentance.

A solemn silence reigned in the House of God. From the little window high up above the altar a bunch of sunbeams slipped in, lighting up the pale face of the crucified Redeemer, and playing timidly with the prisms of the dusty chandelier. On the candelabra the candles were burning out with faint splutterings. Pale floatlights quivered before the icons and mysteriously lit up the tender, martyred faces of the saints.

The pious peasants listened to the sermon of their old priest, and, ashamed of their sins, which he was mercilessly unmasking, bent their heads in fear and trembling.

‘He... the God-man, voluntarily accepted a martyr’s death for us. His great love, in the name of which He lived, and the name of which He glorified, was His all-powerful force. . . . And He laid it down entirely for the remission of our sins. . . .’

The priest spoke clearly and movingly:

‘Let us fall on our knees, brothers, before His pure steps, and let us confess our sins in repentance. For our souls are burdened.’

But at that moment, a strange inhuman voice, stifled in desperate sobbing, was heard from the end of the church, and it interrupted the priest.

‘Father! Why doesn’t the Lord guard us from sin? . . .

* Pop — priest

Eh? Why? Is He God, or. . . what is He? Should it be thus? Is it thus?' the voice cried.

Confusion ensued. Everyone turned to the women's part of the church from which the terrible voice had come. There the sexton, helped by two or three women, was dragging out another woman, pale and as thin as a wraith, ragged and terrible. She was waving her hands, trying to pull herself away from them, and crying:

'Why do they lie to us? . . . Every day, every holiday. . . . I want them to tell me, to tell us the truth. Why doesn't the Lord guard us from sin? Eh? Why? Let them tell us, does He love us?'

She screamed madly and did not want to go out. It was clear that she was out of her mind.

'Take her out!' said the priest.

'What? Who dares to drive me out? This is a temple for us all!' the woman screamed again. 'I want the truth, the truth, the little truth! We have judges, we have mayors, we have a bishop, we have a Tsar — let them not be silent. . . . Let them tell me, where is the truth?!'

The priest went up to the woman and raised the holy cross in prayer above her head.

'Now, cross yourself, Ilchovitsa*! . . . There's the cross, the holy cross. . . . Kiss it, you'll feel better!' the women said to her.

'May the merciful God send you consolation, poor soul. . . .'

'You all lie to me, good people! Why do you speak? . . . Hold your tongues. . . hold your tongues! The truth, the truth, you've eaten it up, you eat it away!' Ilchovitsa cried, beside herself.

'She's lost her mind because of her little girl. . . . That wretched Tsvetana — what she's brought down on her mother's head!' the women said among themselves.

'Father, tell me truly: shall I pray?' she turned, suddenly gentle, and almost lucid. A terrible sorrow was apparent in her suffering face, which was as pale as wax. Big tears welled up from her big dark eyes, so deeply sunken.

'Pray, Ilchovitsa, pray to be saved! Pray! May the Lord send you healing!' said the priest.

* The suffix *itsa* is added to the husband's name in designating his wife

'Father. . . . Do you know where my Tsvetana is? Eh? Do you know? Have you heard? She's taken to evil ways. She's sold herself! She's sold her honour. Father, why? Father, who did that? Father, why didn't the Lord preserve her? She was lovely, she was good! She was my only child. She was shy. . . . Who ruined her? Who. . . who. . . who?'

The madwoman fell on the floor, and lay there, beginning to whisper quickly through her thin dry lips, which quivered nervously. Her eyes, wide open, stared fixedly at the heights of the gloomy dome.

'I sent her there, ah. . . . Father. . . . You know, don't you? I sent her to the big city into service, so that she might feed me, so that she should not die here. . . . Father, so that she should not die here. . . . She sank there, she got drowned. . . . Have you heard what people say? . . . There, they all say that Tsvetana has become. . . . Oh! . . . Is there a God? Is there a God, or are you lying to us?'

'Ilchovitsa. . . rise up, calm yourself, don't talk sinfully, this is a church, this is the House of God. . . . Rise up and go!' the priest began to persuade her with gentle words.

People crowded around her, horrified and affected. Some of the women were crying. Under the dark domes of the church the ugly picture seemed to raise up a new cross of human suffering, and aroused pity and a strange fear. People looked on in silence and did not dare to speak to each other. The candles burnt weakly down on the candelabra. From the icons the pale images of the saints looked down as calmly, as tenderly, as kindly and as impassively as ever.

But the madwoman screamed, stifled by her agony:

'There is no truth. . . . There is no God! . . . Do you hear? . . . The Tsar must be unsared. . . . The priest must be unfrocked. . . . Father. . . do not lie to us. . . . Help us. . . save us. . . Tell us the truth! . . .'

St Saviour's Hill

 Old Zaharia walked slowly and carefully along, carrying little Monka on his back. The boy had clasped his skinny hands about the old man's neck and let himself go, helplessly. Streams of sweat furrowed the old man's tanned face, wetting his neck with his strain-tautened sinews. He was choked and tormented by Monka's little hands so that blood-stained mists seemed to be passing before his eyes; but he walked slowly, carefully carrying his load.

The sun was already setting. Somewhere around in the scented meadows of green fields, in the underbrush or darkening groves stretching far into the distance, the night lay in wait, mysterious and quiet, holding its breath.

And there were people, so many people! . . . On all sides, along all the paths, people were coming, one after the other, catching up with each other, passing each other, all going to that steep, sharply-pointed hill, which Old Zaharia had long known as St Saviour's Hill. One could see the bushy old oak at the top and a small white chapel next to it. Over the broad slopes of the hill people were moving like ants. Old Zaharia looked and wondered. Where had so many people come from, what was this marvel! In carts, on horseback, on foot, from far and near, from everywhere people came hurrying towards the top. And what strange sights there were among them! Some were poor and ragged, their bare flesh showing; some were rich, dressed in new clothes. Some had broken backs and dragged themselves along like reptiles, some used crutches, others had festering wounds on their bodies, still others were blind and infirm.

'Granddad, where are all those people going?' asked the sick child.

'They are all going there, child,' the old man answered.

'Are they all ill, Granddad?' the sick child asked.

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‘The whole world is ill, my son,’ the old man said. ‘Some suffer from this, others from that. There are no entirely healthy people in the world. You see a body made of iron, yet the soul is rotten.’

From the hill were wafted the quiet and churchlike notes which spread like a blessing all over the green fields around, strewn with the hopes of so many people.

Old Zaharia sat down exhausted beside the road and sighed.

‘Cross yourself, child,’ he said.

Monka unwound his arms from his grandfather’s neck. Sitting in the green weeds along the roadside, both of them crossed themselves many times.

‘Granddad, I want to walk,’ the boy said.

‘You’re weak, my little boy, you’ll get tired,’ his grandfather answered.

‘I want to walk a little, Granddad,’ Monka insisted, almost crying.

Old Zaharia raised him carefully and taking him by the hand set out again. Monka, a boy of ten, a weak and sickly orphan, walked beside his grandfather like a shadow. Big blue veins showed through his thin, wan face, his legs staggered with weakness, his arms hung down like sticks. His big blue eyes, terribly wide open somehow, moved restlessly in all directions, following first the sky-lark, whose song rose to the sky, then the grey doves, who disappeared in the radiance of evening towards the dark wood to the west, then the golden flies which quivered like drops of water in the air.

Old Zaharia walked quite slowly so as not to tire the little one, but when he saw that the sun was already setting and the people along the road grew fewer, he again placed the child on his back and quickened his pace.

‘People are already looking for places; we are late, my son,’ said the old man.

‘Granddad, will God come down there early?’ Monka asked.

‘Of course he won’t come early! He will wait until all who have started arrive,’ his grandfather answered.

‘Some come from afar, some are lame or blind, there are some who do not know the way and may have got lost. When all are gathered and have fallen asleep, God will call a little angel to carry his crozier and will say, “Come along!” to him.

They will glide noiselessly down from above between the stars, and little by little they will come down. God will pass among the people who are here, quietly so that none may hear Him, or see Him and He will give healing to all. Afterwards, little by little, just as He has come, He will arise and go back to the heavens, just as He ascended once from the mountain, why, on that very self-same day, tomorrow, St Saviour's Day.'

Monka listened to his grandfather's mysterious words and, although he did not understand them, they warmed and illumined his soul. He put his wan face on his grandfather's shoulder, fixed his gaze on the tall wooden cross on the hill and began to think. They would all, all be healed. . . . Some now, some in five, some in ten years. . . . Why, if God was going to give people health, didn't he give it to them at once? Tomorrow they would all go home healed. Here Granddad Zaharia had exhausted himself bringing him to this place, and he might not get well for another ten years! No, Monka wanted to be healed that very night, so as to go home strong and well, to run about in the meadows and pick flowers, to chase butterflies and to play ball; how very much he wanted to play!

'Are any left for after twenty years, Granddad?' Monka asked suddenly.

'God's will, child! It may even be twenty,' Granddad Zaharia answered with conviction, and sighed.

Monka grew thoughtful again. In twenty years! The sick boy's childish brain could not grasp this at all, and the shadow of disappointment fell over his pure soul, filled with hope and joy. Had he known this, he would have begged his grandfather to take him to a doctor. Everybody said, it is true, that the doctor wanted a lot of money, but if one explained how poor they were and begged him to, he might take less.

'Doctors can cure people all at once, can't they, Granddad?' Monka asked again.

'What can a doctor do against God's will?' Granddad Zaharia answered and added a little reproachfully: 'See what questions you ask me!'

Monka said nothing.

In silence and with great effort Granddad Zaharia walked along the crooked path up the hill, and streams of sweat followed one after another down his face.

When they reached the top it was already dark. Stars were scattered thickly over the sky, one next to the other, as never before. Their soft and wonderful radiance pressed the darkness down on the earth, and besides the sleepy shadows of the hills around, Monka could see neither the wood nor the plain, nor their village, nor the road along which they had come. His grandfather was gathering dry leaves and sticks among the brambles to build a fire with, and he moved around him, looking timidly at the darkness, while a mysterious kind of fear filled his soul. The small window of the chapel looked out at the darkness like a bright eye, immovable and terrible, while the silhouette of the bushy oak next to it stood there like a large and ugly bear with an open mouth. In the darkness human shadows, like ghosts, moved about silently and mysteriously, suddenly appearing out of the earth and disappearing into it again. Here and there, fires were burning and around them one could hear half-finished sentences, deep and painful groans, which made little Monka's hair stand on end. From somewhere in the darkness, a helpless woman's voice moaned as if in song:

'Mother, mother, lift me up, mother. . . . I'm dying!'

'Granddad!' whispered Monka, and snuggled between the knees of his grandfather, who was making a fire.

'Don't be frightened, child, don't be frightened!' his grandfather said, stroking him.

When they had supped, Old Zaharia wrapped Monka up well in his coat, and they lay down next to each other beside the flickering fire. But Monka did not feel sleepy. He listened to the fragmentary talk of the people who lay, dark and motionless, around the fires, listened to the deep sighs of the sick and saw in his mind's eye the big icon in the village church, in which the Judgement Day was painted, with hell and devils and the sinners over whom God flew through the clouds, with a terrible face, large and angry, and a golden wreath on his head.

'Granddad, when will the Judgement Day be?' Monka asked.

'What?' Old Zaharia asked in his sleep.

'The Judgement Day?'

'Come, come, go to sleep, my child,' answered the old man sleepily and snored again.

Monka tossed the blanket off his head, turned over on his back and looked at the sky. Over it, one next to the other, stars quivered gently and prettily, like the living eyes of children. Monka looked at them smiling and his small heart was filled with a joy as quiet and gentle as their own light. He would not go to sleep, he would wait to see how amid these beautiful little stars God and the small angel would appear and descend on earth. Monka's imagination could already see this All-powerful Healer, God. He was big, eh, very big; He would descend from the heavens with a golden wreath on His head, just as He was painted in the church. Behind Him a small angel would carry His crozier, looking proudly at the children around, like Tsenko Popov when he waved the incense burner before his father at mass.

Suddenly Monka felt ill. Sharp shudders passed over his body, his head grew dizzy. A black veil fell before his eyes, then another, a third, a fourth. He wanted to call his grandfather, but the black veils disappeared one after the other and he felt light and well, as if someone were rocking him, oh, so gently. He opened his eyes and saw how the sky and the stars were raised very high up. . . . One little star was torn from the sky and fell to the earth. It grew light, quite light. The sky opened and God with a golden wreath on His head descended to the earth, coming straight towards Monka.

What a gentle, what a good old man God was! As soon as He descended, He took Monka by the hand and said to him: "Be well, and come with me, I will take you to your mother." Monka had never seen his mother. He set out with God towards the sky, towards the stars. All around it was so wide, so beautiful. From somewhere songs were heard, echoing like brass bells. Monka walked beside God, feeling so light, so light, and happy that he was going to see his mother. They went up higher and higher — the earth was left somewhere behind. 'Mummy!' he cried for the first time. 'Mummy!'

And that wonderful word sounded so sweet, so dear. His soul was warmed by it, and he held tightly and gladly onto God's hand.

* * *

Early before dawn Old Zaharia woke up and looked around. In the dusk along all the steep and stony paths of the

hill people were running like mad. Men, women, children, the blind, the lame, some on crutches, some carried, others on horseback or in carts, all ran and disappeared like ghosts.

Old Zaharia remembered that according to the custom one must run from the place before dawn to leave the sickness behind. And he shook Monka gently:

'Monka, my child. . . . Come, my son!'

But Monka was lying on his back motionless and cold, his face turned towards the sky, with quietly closed eyes. A bright and wonderful smile had frozen on his lips.

He was in heaven, in his mother's lap.

Alone

Heavy wet snow was falling and it covered the village of Sunnino, the fields, the forests and the whole world. Large pieces fell quickly and steadily, blinding the eyes and covering everything with a thick blanket. From time to time, a wild wind blew in from the plain, driving the large snowflakes, raising white whirlwinds on its way, and passing on, who knows where. The old village school, squatting under the burden of its hopelessness, barely let the smoke through its crooked chimney. Inside, the pupils hummed like bees, and this lively, incessant noise flew out in gay waves. The wind made a dash at them, seized them, thrust them into the snowdrifts, wrapped them up in snowy whirlwinds, smothered them and went on its way. But, in its wake, they came to life once more and laughed gaily and playfully: ha-ha, ha-ha, ha-ha! . . .

The schoolmistress sat at the table in her room, watching the snow through the dingy panes of the small window, and thinking. There was sadness in her lean and sickly face. The noise made by the schoolchildren reached her from the classrooms; it got on her weak nerves and tormented her. The wind whistled in the chimney of the stove, and whirled her thoughts in painful eddies. Next to the roaring stove, Granddad Kola, the old servant, sat dozing against the wall. A smelly pipe smoked in his hand. His paunch stuck out of his dirty shirt, which, as usual, had lost its dicky. His ancient lungs whistled different tunes, like a damaged hurdy-gurdy, and accompanied the wind, which sang in the stove-pipes. Two dusty pictures looked sadly and sleepily down from the walls. Mice squeaked and chased one another behind the cupboard.

'Is it Friday today?' the schoolmistress asked without turning her head.

Granddad Kola started and opened his sleepy eyes.

'What did you say, schoolmistress?'

'It's Friday today, isn't it?'

'It is. Are you asking about the post? It's still too early; the messenger comes at three or half past, in such weather!'

The servant dozed off again.

The schoolmistress sank back into her joyless thoughts. She was a pretty young girl, an orphan, who had grown up in the home of distant relatives. This was her first year as a schoolmistress, and it seemed hard and unbearable to her. She felt she couldn't stand it much longer here, and wanted to run away. She did not know what she would do afterwards. But she had a distant hope before her. When she had finished her studies, a sub-lieutenant had fallen in love with her, a handsome gay young man, and she had given him her whole heart. He himself had brought her to that village and settled her there, pretending to be a relation of hers, and for the first two or three weeks they had exchanged burning letters, full of love and tenderness. But after that he had not written again, nor answered a single one of her letters. Marinka suffered agonies over this, but she did not want to believe that he had abandoned her. If he had done so, he would have written; he was so decent that he would not leave her in such uncertainty. Perhaps his letters got lost. Village posts were so badly organized and uncertain. So every Friday and Tuesday, when the village messenger came from the neighbouring village, Marinka spent her time in a dream, carried away by her thoughts, growing absent-minded and not feeling like working with the children. Granddad Kola often saw her cry.

She had awakened that day full of hope that she would receive a letter. In her dream she had heard the sound of a shot.

'Granddad Kola, what does it mean if you hear a shot in your dream?' she asked the servant.

'You'll get a letter,' he answered, knowing that the schoolmistress had long been awaiting some kind of a letter.

'The dream-book says the same thing. . . .'

'I've known that since I was a child,' Granddad Kola assented. 'And when our Ivan was in barracks, his mother used to say to the younger ones, "Children, I'll have a letter from your brother today, I dreamt of a gun." And if it wasn't by that post, the letter came by the next one.'

Marinka did not believe in dreams, but her soul was warmed. In her thoughts she read and kissed that letter which the courier was bringing somewhere behind the snow-covered forests. Her Stefan asked for forgiveness, told her that he had been ill and had not wanted to write to her, so that she would not suffer at learning this news. Marinka composed an answer in her thoughts. She forgave him, she who had no one in the world, no one to whom she could complain or with whom to share her thoughts, her joys and her sorrows. She had only him — the only one, the handsome, goodlooking, lively, gay one. . . .

She kissed him, rejoiced in him and waited every day for him to come, so that they could see each other.

The snow still fell, sticking to the window-panes. The wind sang in the stove pipes and Granddad Kola's hurdy-gurdy accompanied it.

The children, left to themselves in the classroom, were making a dreadful noise. One sang, another wept, others ran about the passage, chased one another out in the snow and shouted at the top of their shrill voices. But Marinka did not hear the racket. She was far from this world.

Suddenly the hoarse sound of the courier's trumpet was heard. The schoolmistress jumped impatiently to her feet.

'Granddad Kola, run to the municipality. The courier has come. Bring me the letters. But, please, don't delay. Come back at once!'

Granddad Kola rose to his feet and went out slowly, muttering something about the bad weather.

Marinka moved impatiently about the room, and looked through the window.

A little later Granddad Kola returned, all white with snow.

'There's nothing, schoolmistress!'

The schoolmistress grew pale, bit her lips, sat down at the table in despair, hid her face in her hands, and stayed thus for a long time. Granddad Kola shook his head, and looked at her pityingly, in surprise.

'Don't cry, Miss. You may get one by the next post!'

When she had cried her fill, the schoolmistress took up her pen and wrote: "Dear Stefan, This is the fifteenth letter that your Marinka, whom you have already forgotten, has written to you. What are you doing? Why haven't you writ-

ten? Even if it were only one word. It would be enough for me, because no one writes to me; I have no one in the world. Here, buried in the snow, amid the forests, far from town among these strange and unfamiliar people, I wait for a word from you, for your love to save me, to help me. Stefan, do you exist, or are you the vanished, beloved dream of my childhood years?'

Big hot tears poured from her eyes. She felt that she had no strength to write, to tell of her sorrow, she dropped the pen and wept long, with her face hidden in her apron. Through her smothered sobs, she heard the mayor and the clerk come into the room, saying angrily, hoarsely and roughly;

'Is there a schoolmistress here, or isn't there? The children will tear each other to pieces outside! There's no one to keep them in order. No discipline, no pedagogical guidance! God help us!'

Misfortune

What can have happened to make the merry, eternally smiling Father Piomii, always so full of *joie de vivre*, sit on the threshold of his cell, sad and thoughtful as never before?

Was that fine summer day made for sadness?

There! In the wide monastery courtyard, full of sunshine and joy, the untroubled life of the brothers, all contented and happy, flowed along in peace and quietness. Father Sissoi, who was now very old and whom the brothers called Granny Aglida, sat there as always, calmly and mechanically spinning at the big monastery gates. Two young ladies, visitors to this holy cloister, walked about the courtyard arm in arm, full of their own importance and talking gaily to each other. Young Father Ignatius passed by them from time to time, bowing respectfully to them, with a smile that stretched across his face from ear to ear. Doves were courting on the lead roof of the church. In the courtyard two beautiful peacocks were preening themselves in the sunshine and screaming gaily. All around, the forest and the calm high summits of the mountains were bathed in the pure blue of the sky. Everything lived in the old way, in proper order and submission to fate, and gratefully rejoiced at the Lord's fair world.

Amid this calm, pious stillness, one heard the sweet monotonous sound of the two monastery fountains, whispering tenderly to one's ears, to one's heart and mind, and to one's soul, and singing sweetly: sleep, sleep, sleep. . . .

Only Father Piomii remained aloof from this happiness. Lost and distant, he sat on the threshold of his cell, deep in thought.

The brothers passed and repassed before him, each going about his business, and he barely answered their greetings, and never raised his eyes to look at them. An hour passed,

then two and three, noon was approaching, but he never moved from his place.

The abbot, with a big fishing rod in his hand, was already returning from his fishing expedition, all red and perspiring. As he passed Father Piomii, he took from his pocket two big trout, which were still stirring and, being a gay soul, he showed them to the monk, saying in a teasing tone:

'Father Piomii, do you see them? There's still life in them!'

Father Piomii raised his head and looked at the abbot with such a crushed and pitiful gaze, that it made the latter retreat a couple of steps and become serious at once:

'What is it, Father Piomii? What *has* happened?' the abbot asked, frightened and sympathetic.

Father Piomii sighed and rose to his feet. His face was as white as those on the icons. And he himself looked as if he had just been run over by a cart.

'What can have happened, Father Piomii? You're not ill, are you?' the abbot repeated, more frightened than ever. 'You sit, you ponder, and you sigh! How can you do that? You, such a stout fellow!'

'Do you know what, Father,' Father Piomii spoke in a voice that seemed to come from the tomb, 'to put in so much work, time and care, and when you rejoice at what you have done, you. . . .'

'Lord, have mercy on us sinners!' the abbot exclaimed crossing himself and quite stupefied. 'What can have happened, Father Piomii?'

'I'm crushed, Father Abbot, I'm in despair! How uncertain is man in his hopes!' said Father Piomii and sighed deeply.

'Calm yourself, Father. Perhaps all is not lost.'

'No — all, all is lost!' said Father Piomii in a trembling voice.

'Do not despair, Father. Tell me, confess to me! Is it a sin? Is it a temptation, a sickness?'

'Far worse, Father!'

'God Almighty! You can't have fallen in love again, have you? Deuce take it all! Come, tell me!'

'This is how a man loses faith in good and in the Lord, and in work and in everything,' Father Piomii dropped his arms and sat down on the threshold again. 'The wine, the little

wine — the three-year-old wine — it's gone, it's done for!' he said suddenly bursting into tears, and added through them: 'Do you know, Father, what it was going to be like? It flowed out, just flowed out and is gone forever!'

'Surely not!' the abbot cried, clapping his hands together.

And both monks were silent for long, not daring to look at each other. The one had confessed his misfortune, the other had understood it fully, and felt it himself. Then the abbot sat down beside Father Piomii and questioned him in the touching manner of souls who love the same thing, believe in the same thing, and who fully meet and understand each other on that thing.

'Why, deuce take it! How did it happen?'

'During the night one of the bands of the barrel broke, and the wine ran out to the last drop.'

'To the last drop?'

'To the very last drop!'

'What a misfortune!'

'Come, just come and see,' said Father Piomii, rising to his feet. 'I'm so upset I haven't touched it. I saw, I shook it and I ran away, so as not to see it!'

Just then the swift-footed Father Gerassim passed them. When he saw the two brothers so worried and sad, he stopped and asked in his *false* *setto*:

'What has happened, please?'

'What has happened, indeed! Father Piomii's sealed barrel has run out,' Father Abbot answered rather sharply.

'O-o-oh! . . . A-a-ah! What now?' cried Father Gerassim, joining his sorrow to theirs.

A little later Father Nikiphor came; he was followed by Father Maxim, who was followed by Father Theodosius, and all the brothers of the monastery gathered together. Even Granny Aglida left his spinning wheel and came, too. And they all clicked their tongues, and they were all annoyed, and they all whispered about something, as if there were a corpse in the vicinity.

Father Piomii took them into his small cellar where the misfortune had occurred. They all crowded curiously around the barrel, from which a few drops oozed through the separated staves.

A faint light came through the single little window and

lit the late barrel in a melancholy way. The fragrant aroma of the spilt wine filled the little cellar. The fathers silently crowded around the barrel, and a profound regret could be read in their bearded faces, as if they found themselves not before a burst barrel, but before a big human heart, which had burst at some misfortune.

'The Lord rest its soul!' someone said in a solemn voice. And they all looked, sighing, at Father Piomii, who stood to one side, crushed, having lost faith and hope, and all were silent, and not one of them could think of a single word of consolation for him.

Iglika

The little flock of sheep and goats, scattered in the sunshine on the hill, was sweetly grazing on the fresh grass, rustling through the bushes, which were only just in leaf, and bleating. A gay little bell tinkled regularly and gently, singing like a cricket; its sound carried far in the fresh air, imbued with light and the fragrance of spring. The life-giving sun scattered broad warm waves over the refreshed earth. Life was awakened once more within it, feverish and swift, seething and renewing everything around.

Sixteen-year-old Iglika*, barefoot and without a jacket, walked slowly amid her flock, spinning the wool from her distaff, carried away by her childish dreams and, from time to time, she called to one of her mischievous beasts, like a mother to her child.

'Psst, Zvuncharka! Oh, where have you got to, pushing about in the thorns and catching your wool!'

'Murkoushka, I'll hit you!'

Some of the sheep came meekly up to her, licked her hands with their moist tongues, and looked at her kindly and significantly with their dull, simple-minded eyes, as if they wanted comfort for their profound, silent and eternal sadness.

Iglika would thrust a hand into the big bag slung over her shoulder, take out some crumbs, give them to them in her hand and then shoo them kindly away.

'Come, come, off with you, or the others will be wanting something, too.'

The sheep, with their eyes full of gratitude, would take the crumbs, eat them up, and pass on with bent heads, as if they really did want to hide from the others.

At a meadow, full of yellow primroses and crocuses, the

* Iglika — Primrose

young shepherdess cast her distaff aside and eagerly ran forward to pick flowers. Her childish face, fresh and innocent, was as radiant as that spring day, and in her deep blue eyes, gay and pure, shone the dew of a joyous and carefree spirit.

She ran over the meadow, picking flowers and making them into a posy, talking to them and singing the while.

Suddenly the sheep around her scattered in fright. The little bell tinkled quickly in alarm.

Iglike jumped, scrambled onto a big boulder, onto which a goat had climbed, and looked around, as timid as a deer that had sensed hunters.

A forest ranger appeared from the bushes with a rifle slung over his shoulder, all flushed and perspiring with weariness.

'Good day, lassie!' he cried in a loud, energetic voice, as he caught sight of her on the boulder.

Iglike was frightened and felt embarrassed. She had twice caught sight of the unknown forest ranger in the forest. Previously, Old Martin, whom Iglike knew well, had guarded this part of the forest. He was a good old man, short and lean. He wasn't at all like this big, tall young man with the big black moustaches and eyes that shone like those of a forest beast.

She came down from the boulder, shooed the sheep away and set off after them, hurrying to escape from this man, although she herself did not know why she felt so frightened of him.

'Where are you off to? Look, you've forgotten your flowers,' he said, speaking to her as if she were a child and handing her the posy.

'You've picked some lovely flowers!'

The ranger took out a big multi-coloured handkerchief and began to wipe the perspiration from his face, saying:

'I don't know the place yet, so I lost the path and tore my clothes in the bushes. . . . Deuce take it. . . how hot it is!'

Iglike forgot about going, and stood before him, rooted to the spot, listening to him, watching him wipe his face, and observing how every time he pressed the handkerchief to his face it went as white as parchment, and then grew red again as if it had been burnt.

'Whose lass are you?' he asked suddenly.

'Nikola, the miller's.'
'So you've got a mill, have you?'
'No, but Father works someone else's.'
'Well, never mind. It's all the same.'
'It's not all the same,' Iglika answered and smiled.
'What's your name?'
'Iglika. . . .'
'The lass is lovely and so is her name.'
The ranger tapped her cheek playfully.
Iglika blushed with shame. She felt like running away, but stayed.

'How many sheep do you graze?' the ranger asked, and sat down on a stone.

'Eleven.'

'And goats?'

'Nineteen.'

'And one of you,' the ranger cried, clapping his hands and laughing gaily to her face.

'And I one, so that makes twenty,' Iglika answered quickly and jokingly, and her round little breasts swelling under her tight clothes like ripe fruit, stirred at her gay laughter.

'You're very merry, miss,' said the ranger, bringing his hand down on his thigh.

'Are you a townsman?' Iglika asked, for the word 'miss' sounded strange and comical to her.

'I'm from the very middle of Sofia.'

'Oh!' cried Iglika in childish naïve surprise. 'If I were you I'd never leave the city. It's much nicer there.'

'No, you're mistaken, miss! I much prefer living in the country because there are lovely girls here. There are none like them in town. And I've resolved that when I marry I'll choose a village girl. . . .'

'Oh! Aren't you married already?' Iglika cried, more surprised than ever as she listened attentively to the ranger, and stared steadily at his handsome red face. 'A man with such big moustaches and not married yet! You're fibbing!'

The ranger laughed loudly, then asked in a low voice, stroking his moustache.

'Haven't you a lover?'

'Why, aren't you ashamed of yourself!' Iglika answered. 'I'm still too young.'

And, quite flushed with shame, she prepared to go.

'You're young, but there you are. I fell in love with you as soon as I set eyes on you,' said the ranger, and gave Igluka such a long and shameless look that she took fright.

'Stuff and nonsense!' she answered angrily and set off across the meadow, driving her flock before her.

'Look here, Igluka, don't be cross now. We'll meet again here. You'll come, won't you? And then you'll tell me if you love me. If you don't come tomorrow, we shan't meet again,' the ranger called after her.

He looked long after the girl, who hid in the bushes, covering her bare, rounded legs, which were grazed and scratched. Then, slinging his rifle across his shoulder, he dived into the forest with the pleasure and satisfaction of a hunter who has cunningly set his trap.

Igluka thought she would never come to that place and never meet the new forest ranger again. But, on the following day, when she drove her flock out, she herself never realized how she came to find herself on the same meadow.

'I'll be cross with him and I shan't talk to him any more. How dare he say such things!' she said to herself by way of justification.

And when her flock had settled down, she picked primroses and sat down on the warm earth to make herself a wreath.

She made it slowly and carefully, singing and talking to the flowers as she had done the day before.

But that day she talked to them of the forest ranger.

It was a fine warm day again. It was light and fresh all around her like yesterday. Tiny flies darted about in the air and their wings sparkled in the sunlight as if they were made of gold. Igluka caught a pretty ladybird, put it on her palm and addressed it with a little song, full of the mystery of a childish imagination and rather like a dream.

'Ladybird, ladybird! Tell me where I'll marry!'

The insect slowly opened its little wings, quivered and rose high, high up and disappeared.

Igluka lost sight of it, and her heart fell. Everything around her was perfectly quiet. Even the bell had stopped tinkling. Frightened at the sudden stillness and by her secret, which she had confided to the little ladybird, she looked timidly around her, and went back to her wreath.

But suddenly the flock scattered. The little bell tinkled in alarm. The forest ranger came noisily jumping out of the bushes, as red and handsome as yesterday.

‘Good day, lassie!’

Iglika wanted to answer, but was unable to speak a word.

The ranger sat down beside her, picked up the unfinished wreath and began to examine it.

‘Why don’t you finish it?’

‘Give it to me!’ she cried, snatching it out of his hands.

‘There you are, but when you finish it, you’ll give it to me.’

‘That’s as may be,’ Iglika answered sharply.

And suddenly she felt angry with this moustachioed man. She remembered Old Martin, who was so good, and felt sad.

‘Where is Old Martin?’ she asked abruptly.

‘He’s been transferred.’

‘How good he was! . . . And what lovely brightly-coloured distaffs he knew how to make!’

‘Good! Of course he was. . . . How can an old man like him be anything but good? He hadn’t a tooth in his head. Just look at mine!’

The ranger showed his teeth like a wolf does to a lamb, and laughingly added:

‘If I wanted to, I could eat you up!’

These words did not please Iglika. She jumped to her feet.

An unpleasant silence fell.

‘Why have you grown so thoughtful?’ the ranger asked. ‘Sit down and finish your wreath.’

Iglika grumbled a little, then collected the flowers, which she had scattered on the grass, sat down and began to finish her wreath in silence.

‘You’re prettier when you’re cross,’ the ranger said.

Iglika did not answer.

The ranger fumbled about in his bag, brought out a lump of sugar and tossed it into her lap.

Iglika picked it up and angrily threw it away.

The ranger threw her a second lump.

‘What a one you are!’ she exclaimed and could not help smiling.

The ranger tossed her another one. Iglika picked it up

and took aim to throw it at him. He opened his mouth and thrust his head forward.

'Throw it into my mouth!'

Iglikla hit him on the forehead with the lump of sugar and began to laugh gaily.

'Now do you see!' she cried.

'Open your mouth and you'll see how well I aim,' said the ranger.

Iglikla, who, like any child, quickly forgot her anger, was absorbed by the game. She opened her mouth.

The ranger went up to her, stretched out his hand and put the lump of sugar into her mouth, which was open like a rose in full bloom.

Iglikla crunched it up and laughed.

The ranger poured a pile of sugar onto the grass and began to arrange the lumps around her one by one, surrounding her.

'Let's see if there'll be enough of them to surround you!'

'Leave a gate, hey, so that I can go out!' Iglikla said gaily, as she watched him move around her. Each time he bent down, she felt the warmth which came in waves from his handsome manly face. The game pleased her. The ranger no longer seemed bad to her. He wasn't a bit like other people. He had so much sugar; he was so gay and full of jokes, and he said such nice things to her! She gazed at him as in a dream, feared him, and trembled, but she could not leave him. He seemed to her like a rich and strong king, to whom everyone submitted, and who could do everything he pleased.

'There, that's our house,' said the ranger, when he had surrounded her, 'and let's say you're my bride.'

He stared the girl fixedly in the eye, like an eagle watching a small field mouse from on high.

Iglikla averted her eyes.

'Much good this kind of a house would be to me. A little rain and it would melt away!' she said.

'I'll make another one for you. If only you'll have me,' the ranger said and seized her hands in his powerful paws.

'Let me go! You're deceiving me!' Iglikla cried, beginning to pull away.

Then the ranger embraced her and held her like a child in his strong arms, and began to speak to her in a quiet and tender voice:

'Iglika, you're beautiful! You're not a small girl any more! You're quite a lass! I love you and I want to have you. You'll be like a queen over there in the town. The loveliest of them all. I'll have dresses made for you, any kind you want, and I'll give you everything, everything. Whatever you say.'

Iglika, overcome and lost, relaxed on his breast, like a young slaughtered calf, melted by his tenderness, fainting with shame, bewitched by his words.

'Tell me, will you have me, Iglika?' the ranger whispered above her, and, in the wonderful stillness of that spring day, his rapturous words seemed to come to her from the heavens.

'I will, I will,' she barely managed to say.

That evening, when the lovely spring day was drawing to a close, Iglika walked after her flock with bent head, driving it to the village. Beside her walked the ranger, his rifle over his shoulder, twice as big as she was, and saying to her:

'Don't worry. Take the flock there again tomorrow. This week we'll meet every day. Then we'll get engaged, and everything will be easy.'

Iglika listened trustingly to him and her childish dreams painted a wonderful future, in which she was lost like a tiny fly in a golden web.

The following day she drove her flock to the same meadow.

It was a lovely day, as warm as the preceding one. But Iglika no longer sang, and did not call to the sheep which grazed meekly in the bushes. She sat on the big boulder as if it were a throne, barefooted and bareheaded, with her distaff in her hand, looking like the orphaned king's daughter of the fairy tales. Her eyes were fixed down in the distance, where the road wound up to the forest. As soon as a figure appeared on it, she would jump up as nimbly as a wild goat, stand up on the boulder, anxious, nearly fainting with emotion, and would gaze down for a long time. Her eyes grew dim with the strain. She would wipe them and, shading them, look again. Her nostrils widened, she was shaken by a sweet and incomprehensible shiver.

She spent the whole day in feverish expectation, but the ranger did not come. The posy behind her ear faded. That night she returned to the village downcast and desperate.

The following day she went back to the same place and

waited again. But in vain. The flowers she had picked for him faded and died in her hands. The gentle sheep came meekly up to her, looked at her long and calmly, and in their impassive eyes there was a sad, silent and friendly question. But Iglika did not stroke them, did not give them crumbs to eat from her hand, and they passed on with deep sighs.

The ranger did not come again. He did not come on the fourth, or on the fifth day either. Instead of him Old Martin came.

'Is it you again, Granddad Martin? Where's the other one?' Iglika asked in surprise, and trembling.

'He's gone off to the Varna district. He's been transferred there. His wife is ill, they say. And how are you?' kindly Old Martin asked.

Iglika did not answer. Her head began to spin. She sat down dizzily on the boulder.

And her poor little heart was constricted by such pain as she had never experienced before.

My Friends

Willow Meadows is the name of a little dale, far from the village, opening like a pocket between high, forest-covered summits, and warmed by the sun like a room.

Amid the dale there is a lovely clump of slender birches, tall spruces, old hazels, young beeches and two tall poplars. A clear little brook flows through this clump, coming down from the summit. At this spot, in the branches of this big clump of trees, a picked group of winged singers gathers for play and love trysts, coming from the neighbouring forest every day, from early April to the end of August.

I loved to steal quietly away to this place, to lie down on the fragrant grass and watch them. I knew many of these singing friends personally and in May I used to go and visit them almost every day. Two nightingales, garbed in grey and modest in their behaviour, had their nests here. Their young wives were hatching. A podgy dark red sparrow used to arrive from somewhere; everybody liked him because of his wit, but he was not respected. He courted a gaily-coloured goldfinch most impudently. On the top of the birches two blackbirds used to perch next to each other; they announced the rising of the sun and were a living example of conjugal fidelity. A coquettish robin with a big breast, who envied the lady blackbird, and gazed amorously at the careless sparrow, used to perch on one of the hazels. An unprincipled cuckoo, who was always late, had her perch on the old cornel tree. Opposite it hopped a silly jay who set too great store by the beauty of its feathers and mocked the perpetual mourning garb of the cuckoo. High up in the spreading branches of a sycamore tree, two goldfinches had built their nest; they were still honey-mooners and frightfully jealous of each other, although they were dying of love for each other and dogged each other's footsteps.

Nevertheless, the lady finch had already pledged herself to the merciless sparrow.

A lonely dove, sad, deep in his meditations, used to perch, at a respectable distance from this spot, on a tall pear tree with partly withered branches and which stretched towards the sky like arms raised in despair; from time to time the dove cooed dreamily to himself. Despite the obvious love-challenge of the jay, he never took any part and did not make the acquaintance of this merry society.

I used to lie on my stomach like a big insect in the fragrant flowering grass, and my straw hat, which sheltered my head, looked like a mushroom, sprouting in the pasture. The gay population of the clump paid no attention to me and never suspected my presence. Only the sparrow, filled with suspicion once, flew low above my head and twittered anxiously, but I shushed him hard, and he didn't tell tales about my business. Moreover, I bribed him twice by throwing several grains of wheat to him in secret.

The nightingales would perch on the ash-brown branches and become almost invisible. I could only see their nests, where their beloveds were patiently hatching with wonderful dreams and hopes, by looking long and steadily at the deep shadows beneath the big leaves. The two nightingales would take up their stand each opposite his mate and sing for hours without moving. With drooping and quivering wings and raised heads, they sang and their small bodies quivered all over with inspiration and creative fever.

The dark red sparrow was a great mischief. He often made such pointed remarks that the shy redbreast dared not raise her eyes and look around for an hour at a time. Sometimes he was in a particularly good mood. He would gather them all around him, begin to tell them something and suddenly ask such a question that they would all begin to argue and there would be a terrible noise in the clump of trees.

The jay, like any foolish bird who doesn't understand clever talk, would only cry from the side:

'Fools! Fools!'

While the robin redbreast would hop on a lonely thorn at the side, and whistle with a sigh:

'Lord, how I love that sparrow! What a bad fellow he is and how I love him!'

The goldfinch would look at him tenderly, and giving her jealous gaily-coloured mate a push, would say naively: 'What a witty and carefree sparrow — he doesn't care about anything.'

'Leave that bad fellow alone, he has no future. Just see how black his collar is,' the goldfinch's young husband would answer, trembling with jealousy.

'On the contrary, dear, I think he's dressed in the best of taste. Just see what a lovely dark red colour his wings are, like the skin of a ripe morello cherry. Look at his eyes: see how gay he is. Don't you like him?'

'Yes, yes,' the jealous spouse would shrill, still trembling. 'I know you like him, I know that very well, and I don't want you to prove it. No, I don't.'

The lover's voice would tremble. His eyes would fill with tears, and he would fly off, so that no one would see the tears and his weakness.

His poor mate would feel sorry for him. She would quickly fly to him, find him in the boughs and cover him with tender caresses, twittering sweetly the while.

Melted by her tenderness, he would beg for forgiveness, with tears in his eyes, and call his gaily-coloured mate by thousands of lovely pet names.

'Dearest, darling! You tiny part of the rainbow, brought down to me by a sunbeam! You, for whom the Lord created sunflower seeds. Forgive me, Goldy, Goldy mine, don't be cross with me! Don't be angry with your bad and jealous husband. Believe me, my little bright wings, I suffer terribly for having insulted you, but that's because I love you, because I'm jealous. Oh, if I thought you would not forgive me, I would surrender to the falcon's claws of my own free will!'

'I forgive you, I forgive you, I forgive you, darling! Oh, don't talk so! Your little goldfinch knows that you're silly and forgives you.'

These quarrels were repeated every hour.

When the cuckoo, who was a learned bird and a passionate advocate of free love, heard them, she would tell them straight out:

'Whew — you poor wretches, your silly love disgusts me!'

'What about you? You, who lure other people's husbands away from them for mercenary motives and lead their wives

astray?' the jay shrieked at her with a voice quite hoarse with hatred.

The cuckoo laughed negligently and flew off with the words:

'Prejudices, prejudices!'

'*Amour! Amour!*' the dove would say in French from his old tree, and sink back into his meditations.

A black woodpecker often came here, too, a pedant to the marrow of his bones. He was considered learned. He was a doctor of philosophy, made speeches on aesthetics, hated the sparrow and talked with inspiration about the nightingales, on whose trees he collected ants. He had acquired his profound learning and all his knowledge from the countless letters, which time draws on the trunks of old trees, and from the hieroglyphics which humans scratch on the grey bark of the poplars.

The sparrow had no respect for him, and called him a liar, a prig and a charlatan. The other birds feared him, and did not like him because of his haughtiness and his evil tongue.

As the woodpecker had once greatly complimented the goldfinch on her beauty, she began to play the coquette with him and asked to take private lessons from him on the theory of poetry and on aesthetics.

The sparrow nearly died of grief when he heard this. He met the goldfinch's husband and the Lord only knows what he said to him.

But the husband hated the sparrow, for obvious reasons, and did not believe his intrigues.

So the sparrow went to work.

Early one morning he came here, bowed amiably to the redbreast and perched beside her, without a glance at the goldfinch, who was examining a heart cut on the white bark of the birch near by.

'Thank you, thank you for the attention,' she said turning to him with hidden jealousy, and a mortally wounded heart.

'Excuse me,' said the sparrow, 'I was afraid of drawing your attention away from science. Did you hear that your professor has opened a school for young nightingales in the forest — he's teaching them how to rhyme.'

'Yes, I heard it from his own lips. What fine work!'

'He's also thinking of opening a school for love,' the sparrow said, 'but he still lacks experience.'

These words struck the goldfinch straight in the heart. She flew up to a bough and burst into tears.

Meanwhile the sparrow began a conversation with the shy redbreast.

'You look as if you were in love,' he said. 'You're always sad, always alone and thoughtful.'

'Each of us knows the secrets of his heart,' the robin said wisely.

'Just the same, you're in love.'

'With a fine gentleman, who doesn't care a rap for me.'

'He may think about you more than you suppose,' the sparrow said, and moved up to the redbreast, who was quivering with love.

Then the goldfinch flew up from her bough and perched on another, near and opposite to them, to get in their way. She was ready to tear the redbreast's head off with her tiny claws, to pluck the red feathers from her throat, and drop them in the mud, but she restrained herself.

The sparrow's perceptive heart sensed all this. He bowed to the redbreast, said goodbye to her and flew off to the forest.

The little goldfinch, offended and ready to make desperate scenes, soon flew after him.

The robin, in whose breast her fleeting hopes died away again, remained alone once more, and softly began to sing a sad song. A sad song about the brevity of happiness, the fleeting quality of love and the cruelty of spring.

It was a clear and lovely morning. The crickets were singing in the pastures. Butterflies chased each other over the flowers. The grasses mirrored themselves in the brook. It was quiet and sunny. The nightingales were singing morning songs to their beloveds. The blackbirds glorified the sun from the tops of the birches. God blessed the dawning day for new love. The owl opened his red eye in the pastures, and the white daisies talked to each other about the tender hands of girls in love.

The goldfinch's husband arrived at the clump of trees and did not find her in her nest. He asked the blackbirds if they couldn't see her anywhere from their high perch. They did not answer, because the name of the fallen goldfinch of-

ended their morals. Then he flew up to the top of one of the poplars and called for a long time.

'Goldy, Goldfinch, where are you, darling?'

No one answered. He went down to his nest. Its desolation and loneliness appalled him. He perched on a small branch near it and began to lament pitifully and inconsolably. The nightingales looked at him pityingly. Shocked by his sorrow, they stopped singing. The redbreast, who knew all about it, and had a kind heart, fled deep into the forest so as not to hear the laments of the unfortunate husband.

'Hey, there, stop it!' the jay cried to him, as she flew up from the forest. 'A faithless wife doesn't deserve such grief. You're weeping for her here, while what do you think she's up to with the sparrow in the forest?'

And the jay laughed impudently.

Astounded at this news, the goldfinch's husband stopped weeping and flew resolutely off to the forest.

Soon a terrible noise, cries and shrieks were heard from there. The birds in the clump of trees fled, bristling and frightened.

Then, the sparrow and the goldfinch's husband fell in the grass in the middle of the pasture, grappled furiously to each other. The two enemies inflicted terrible blows on each other's heads with their strong bills, and threshed about in the grass like two rubber balls, pulled by a string. The goldfinch flew shrieking over them, crying desperately:

'Help, help!'

The battle was growing terrible. Blood stained the breast of the husband, who was fighting for his honour. Two feathers fell from the sparrow's tail.

'Help, help! Is there no one to separate them?' shrieked the goldfinch, seeing with horror how her husband was growing weaker, struck by the sparrow's strong bill.

'Help, help!'

Indignant at this noise and shrieking, a falcon flew up from the forest, hovered over the pastures and looked down. All the birds around took cover, wherever they could. Only the deadly enemies fought on in their life-and-death struggle in the grass, seeing nothing around them.

The falcon soared above the fighters and, swooping down as swift as the wind, seized them both.

After this event, life in the clump of trees changed.

The redbreast, crushed with sorrow, went to live in a nunnery, without confiding her grief to anyone. The cuckoo and the jay still hated each other. The nightingales and the black-birds hatched their eggs and were busy for days on end, feeding their young.

The little widowed goldfinch wept for many a long day, not knowing for which of the two she grieved most. She gathered from the battle ground the feathers, which had fallen from the two, and put them in her nest for remembrance.

She wept, because she was alone, but was terribly proud because two had perished for love of her.

But the dove, as lonely as ever, would perch on his withered old tree, deep in thought, and whenever he remembered the terrible event in the meadow, he would say in French:

'Amour! Amour!'

The Old Ox

Whenever I remember my childhood, the warm hearth of my home, my little native village, perched on high, facing the sun, and the little river where we played, I see in my mind's eye the big and bony figure of Belcho, our old ox.

After dragging the wooden plough behind him uncomplainingly for many a long year, he had already grown weak and old. My father had reared him from the time he was a tiny little calf and knew his whole life, spent in work and submission to fate. He loved that old fellow-worker — his companion — and remembered no evil of him; he pitied the ox from the bottom of his heart and, although the beast was already unfit for work, he would never consent to sell him or torment him further with work; and Belcho was allowed to live out his declining years in ease and freedom.

Poor Belcho! What a martyred appearance he had, and what a gentle soul he bore! He was the biggest beast in the village, as white as the driven snow, with big dark pearly horns, curling over his brow like a lyre.

Belcho usually lay in the yard, under the shed, surrounded by the care of us children. We combed him, caressed him, took him his feed and decked his horns with big posies. That made him look like an ancient wedding guest; he looked comical, but was never cross with us. The kind old beast would stare at us in a friendly way out of his big black eyes, so calm, gentle, wise and pitiful, as if he wanted to say something. We would gaze at them and ask him, in the same friendly way:

‘What is it, Belcho, eh? Tell us, do you want anything?’

Belcho would shake his head, sigh deeply and slowly begin to chew the cud with his toothless gums.

We gave him lots of food. He was perpetually eating, perpetually chewing the cud, but just the same he was terribly

gaunt. His haunches had sunk in deeply, his ribs could be counted and the bones, shoulderblades and vertebrae of his spine stood out like the rocky crags of the *Stara Planina**.

Every morning Belcho would get up, shake the straw off himself, lick those parts of his body that were sore with lying on them, come out from under the shed, and set out for the river to drink water. He moved slowly, calmly, indifferently and held his head proudly, as if he was well aware of the great work he had left behind him. And with his sunken haunches, his beautiful horns, which still bore our posies, the cleanliness of his hide and his whole big masterly figure, he aroused respect and everybody stopped to look at him.

Belcho would go to the river, drink some water and then calmly again, without looking to right or left, return to his place in the shed. In the evening he would go out once more alone, uninvited and without being driven by anyone, and then return. He never erred in the hours of these strolls and people told the time by them as if by a clock.

In the summer we sometimes sent him out to graze with the village herd. But they went far into the forest, climbing up hills and crags and that was hard for him. He would lag behind them in the evening, and come home late. Once he got lost and my father spent the whole night looking for him in the forest.

He was found abandoned and exhausted, lying on a road.

Then my father decided to send Belcho not with the cattle, but with the calves. They did not go far and never went into the forest, so that there was no danger of his losing himself.

On the first day Belcho would not set out with those mischievous brats and returned, offended, before leaving the village. The little cowherd had tried in vain to drive him along. Belcho had snorted at him so angrily and lowered his horns at him so threateningly that he had been frightened and left the beast alone. On the second day we drove him off again. He went. But at noon he returned, cross and displeased with his pride wounded. The calves, those mad little creatures, with their curling tails and wilful gambols, had offended him with their pranks.

In a few days Belcho's stubbornness was overcome. He

* *Stara Planina*, The Old Mountain, the popular name of the Balkan Range

submitted to fate with the resignation of a sage. People used to come out on purpose to see him set out. When the calves gathered and set out in a cloud of dust, driven by their cowherd, Belcho would walk along beside them, like a schoolmaster beside his children. From time to time, he would bellow at a mischievous calf and show him his sharp horns.

Early in the morning, as soon as Belcho heard the cowherd's voice, he would come out at the gate and stand in the village square, his eyes fixed on the green plain, over which the first rays of the sun were just melting the dewdrops, and he would look long at the fields he had furrowed, the meadows in which he had worked and had once grazed, when he was young and strong. His moist eyes would look long and sadly, and could not look their fill. He would sigh deeply, like a man.

What could have been happening in that uncomplaining, silent soul?

Once Belcho fell ill. He would not leave the shed, or go to the square to look at the plain, but stayed there, lying down. His body was bloated, the hairs on it bristled, he trembled feverishly, his eyes looked sick and there was pain in them: We covered him with a horse blanket, and offered him food, but he would not look at it. We gave him water, and he dipped his nostrils into it, turned his head away, as if in disgust, and lowed heavily. We sent for the blacksmith at once, for he knew how to doctor beasts, too. He examined Belcho carefully, pulled his tail and his ears, turned his lids up, and finally blew some kind of peppery black powder into his nose with a tube and left him.

For several days Belcho lay there, suffering and exhausted, never looking at his feed, nor at the water which we took him. He grew terribly gaunt. His body became as flat as a board. When he began to eat and to stand up, his legs could barely support him.

One fine spring day, it was a holiday, people were coming happily back from church, dressed in their best. The old plum trees in our garden were in bloom and were leaning towards each other, smiling like old women, decked out for a wedding. Rain had fallen during the night. The air was fresh, the sky clear and blue. The sun had risen above the hills, bright and lovely, in holiday mood, as if it had come out of church with the people.

Belcho looked better. Delighted at his recovery, we tied big posies of young nettles, primroses and plum-blossom on his horns. We combed him and cleaned him. He looked at us in his friendly way and blinked with pleasure.

At one time he rose and slowly moved away from us. Then he set out, and holding himself upright with difficulty, went out through the gate, as majestic as ever, handsome as he was, but much gaunter. We wanted to stop him, but Mother told us to let him take a little walk. We set out after him.

Belcho set out along the road to the river. People who had not seen him for some time, stopped and said, 'Poor Belcho!'

He stopped at the little bridge, drank some water, stood there for a long time and, as never before, did not go home, but waded through the river and made for one of the fields near by, where the rye grew fresh and green; quail were chattering in its hedgerows and butterflies hovered above it. Belcho stopped at the field, looked at it as at something familiar and akin to him, and cropped a few stalks of grass from the boundary strip. Then he took a few steps forward and suddenly swayed and crashed down with a sick deep sigh. Frightened, we ran home to tell the family.

When we returned with our father, Belcho lay dead beside the field, his head stretched out on the flowered boundary, his eyes wide open to the blue sky, sad, silent and beautiful, but with no expression in them.

That is how this old worker died, this silent friend of ours.

We buried the old ox in a deep grave, as one buries a man, by the field, which he had once ploughed and beside which he had come to lay his weary head. Wonderful grass grows over that grave, surrounded by white stones.

People call this lonely resting place Belcho's Grave.

And to this day, whenever I visit my village, I never forget to stop at two loved graves — my mother's and Belcho's.

Angelinka



unt Stanka had a distant relative of sorts, a town dweller, who lived in Sofia, where she had a house of her own and received a pension for some kind of services rendered by her late husband. She was called Aunt Dumsha. There was not a day on which Aunt Stanka failed to mention her relative at least three times. She never met anyone without saying something about her. And how she pronounced her name! What a happy smile lit up her red face, when she pronounced the words: 'Our Dumsha' or 'Your Aunt Dumsha!' With what cordial joy she poured forth an endless stream of words and praises without measure. And if by any chance, she happened to fall silent, to cough, to catch her breath or do something in a hurry, one could even see in her eyes how her thoughts continued to smile at her bright ideal.

Aunt Dumsha! She was Aunt Stanka's great pride.

We children had never seen Aunt Dumsha. She existed in our childish imagination as a distant, all-powerful and unattainable sorceress, who lived somewhere or other in a fabulous city and kept a tally of all our actions, good or bad. Her image was presented to us as wonderful and smiling, surrounded by a bright halo. Our naïve dreams sought her in the blue and heavenly world in which we placed Our Almighty Father and his sorrowing mother, the Immaculate Holy Virgin.

Whom did she love best? That was one of our most frequent childish discussions, which sometimes even ended in blows. Aunt Dumsha! She was Aunt Stanka's strongest weapon against our sulks and pranks. She had only to say: 'Hold your tongues, or I'll write to your Aunt Dumsha!' and we would become meek and quiet, and our virtues would crowd under the sacred banner of this invisible Aunt Dumsha, like a meek flock of lambs.

In the same heaven in which Aunt Dumsha sat on her sunny throne, another creature lived, too, gentle and good, fair-haired like a star. This was Angelinka, Aunt Dumsha's child. Her name was always mentioned together with that of Aunt Dumsha, and aroused stifled envy in our hearts.

I was twelve years old at the time. My work at Auntie's was to graze the sheep, and every Saturday, sitting astride the donkey, to carry food to the cowherds in the mountains, where I would sleep two nights, two wonderful mountain nights under the very stars. Lying beside the smouldering fire in the small hut, I would listen to the wonderful tales of the herdsmen, watch the light of the flames playing over their tanned faces and go to sleep, bewitched, as if I lay in the lap of a forest *samodiva**. Outside the supreme silence of the mountains reigned, and I only heard the slight sound of the *samodivas'* *horos*,** the sleepy whining of the dog, the mysterious voices of the birds of the night, the sweet chewing of the cattle and the heavy sigh of a cow. Through the small open window in the roof above me, the white stars watched meekly from the blue vault of the sky. In these nights, filled with visions and fear, I thought of no one in the world but Angelinka. Her name brought me thousands of innocent and happy thoughts. I imagined her small, flying, rather like a little white sparrow, with a radiant and smiling face, like those of the cherubs painted in the church. In my thoughts I was her stout protector, accompanying her over the world and guarding her from all evil. I would slay the fiery dragon who wanted to carry her off. I would seek her in the mysterious underground kingdoms and save her on the wings of an eagle, which I brought down from the skies merely with a glance. I would break the terrible spells which had turned her into a golden bee, and conquer unknown lands over which I reigned together with her.

How greatly, how very greatly I wished to see the queen of my fantasies, with whom I always lived.

One Monday, on my return from the mountains, Aunt Stanka, wild with delight, met me at the gates.

'There, read it! A letter from your Aunt Dumsha.'

* Wood nymph

** Round or chain dance

As I looked at Aunt Stanka, it seemed to me that everything about her was smiling joyfully: her face, and her kerchief, which was askew and lightly powdered with flour, and her clothes, and her ear-rings, and her rolled-up sleeves, and her hands and arms, covered with dough up to the elbows.

The children had crowded around her and I, leaning against the donkey's neck, almost fainting with emotion, began to spell out Aunt Dumsha's happy letter, written in a childish hand, without capital letters or punctuation, a simple and naïve greeting: 'I am writing to tell you, dear sister Stanka, that on Ascension Day we are coming to pay our respects and offer a gift to your church. That day is its feast, and I have pledged myself before the Lord to bring my daughter to it.' At the end there were greetings for all of us by name, except for me.

'D'you see, d'you see!' Aunt Stanka, who was moved to tears, exclaimed, and made me read the letter a second and a third time.

Everybody was delighted, except I myself, I, the stranger in this house. I felt all the miserable tears gathering in my orphaned heart, and setting out for my eyes. I led the donkey off to the stable, and hidden from the fortunates of this earth, I embraced its head like a brother and poured out to it all my unbearable bitterness.

I felt three times more unhappy when I thought that on Ascension Day I would not be at home, but up in the mountains, and I would not be able to see either Aunt Dumsha or Angelinka.

Aunt Stanka set to work with feverish haste. In two days the whole house was transformed. The walls were white-washed, the courtyard and the road in front of it were watered and swept as if not Aunt Dumsha, but the Lord Bishop himself were coming. But I did not rejoice; I looked on sadly at everything.

When, on the Saturday before Ascension Day, I mounted the donkey and set out for the mountains, seen off by Aunt Stanka, I was unable to hide my hurt and, while still at the gate, I burst into helpless tears, like a girl.

Kind Aunt Stanka, who loved me and looked after me as if she were my own mother, was quite amazed.

'But what are you crying about, Auntie's boy? Why,

just look at you, how can you! You're a big man — and yet you're crying! What will your Aunt Dumsha say when she sees you?

At these words of Aunt Stanka's, the man whom she was comforting with such tender reproaches, wept harder than ever. He brought his head down on the donkey's mane and was barely able to speak through his sobs:

'I'm going to the mountains and I shan't see Aunt Dumsha.'

'Oh, don't you stay there, Auntie's boy! I forgot to tell you. Come home early tomorrow morning.'

She stroked me with her horny hand, made the sign of the cross over me and sent me off. I prodded the donkey and flew away, soothed and full of hopes. When I turned, I saw Aunt Stanka running after me, and, with terrific waves of her hand, shouting as loud as she could:

'And don't you stay there, come home, d'you hear?'

Early in the morning of Ascension Day, I was riding hurriedly down the steep mountain road to the village. I was thinking of Aunt Dumsha and Angelinka, and my soul was stirred. I hurried, sang and teased the birds with my shouts, as they awoke and hopped about on the branches. I dismounted at the meadows and picked primroses, still wet from the dew, and shining yellow among the bushes. I picked a perfect sheaf of them, and carried it before me, hugging it with both hands, like a child.

When I got down, forded the river and set foot in the pastures, I was met by the pious morning ringing of the church bell, which accompanied me right up to the village.

I got home and unsaddled the donkey, but hadn't the strength to go into the house, so deeply was I stirred by my emotions. My arms and legs trembled, my face must have been paler than the primroses I carried.

At last I set out timidly, reached the threshold and peeped in. In the middle of the kitchen, sitting on a three-legged stool as if it were a throne was Aunt Dumsha, the pride of good Aunt Stanka and our sacred ideal. On her head there was a crushed black hat, trimmed with two faded roses, next to which two skimpy black ostrich feathers stuck up, trembling, almost up to the ceiling. With these feathers Aunt Dumsha looked like a big black butterfly, which had spread its antennae out and was waiting for something. Over her shoulders hung a

small red shawl. Her face was withered and bony, the colour of a tanned bagpipe, with a big downy space between her nose and mouth, sparse long hairs on her chin, and eyebrows that had dropped at the sides, pulled down by the countless wrinkles around her half-closed eyes. She spoke loudly, and two old greenish teeth showed in her mouth, like stones at the mouth of a dark cave. She looked at me kindly, and in her gentle, cow-like gaze there was so much affection, simplicity and goodness that, without anyone urging me on, I went up to her of my own volition, and kissed her sinewy hand humbly and with awe.

Around Aunt Dumsha stood the children, lost in contemplation, and at her knee sat Aunt Stanka, moved to tears, as if she had a miracle-working icon before her.

Before I could gather my wits about me, a being emerged from the room beyond, and stood in the dark kitchen like a spot of sunlight, falling through the cracks in the ceiling, a being of a kind hitherto unknown to my imagination. It was Angelinka. She was smaller than I was, all dressed in white and covered with red and blue ribbons, with golden hair, also tied with ribbons, falling freely over her shoulders. There was nothing earthly about her. She surpassed my dreams. I felt weak and unworthy, but my heart was filled with joy as a coloured glass is filled with rays of light. I bore my big sheaf of primroses, hugging it to my breast. Some of them began to fall from my trembling hands.

Angelinka sat down on a stool beside her mother. The ribbons all over her quivered and rustled, and it seemed to me that thousands of butterflies had come into the kitchen from the fields and begun to flutter about. She turned at once, and her big blue eyes fixed on me with admiration. She opened her mouth and said in a wonderful voice, as if she were singing a song:

'How many flowers! How many flowers!'

Then I advanced, trembling, dying with shame, and placed all the primroses on her lap, as if it were an altar. The sheaf scattered and fell at her little feet. Angelinka accepted the flowers with a grateful and joyous cry.

Aunt Stanka and Aunt Dumsha laughed and said something approving, but I heard nothing. I was unable to stay longer for very shame; I turned and fled to the sheep.

On the following day Aunt Dumsha and Angelinka left without my being able to see them again.

But for a long time after, whenever I went out, playing on my pipe and following my meek flock, a small heart, boundlessly in love, beat in my breast beneath the torn shepherd's jacket.

To this day, whenever I remember that little Angelinka, I cannot understand whether this was real or whether it was just a dream.

Samodiva

I spent that summer in my village, my lovely village, perpetually warmed by the sun, perched on a picturesque ridge, from which in a wide framework of distant mountains one could see a boundless view of hills and plains, shining under the sky, covered with big banners of black fallow land, green fields and flowered pastures.

I was eighteen years old. I had no cares. I had a gun and a dog and a passion for shooting burnt within me. Summer nights in the village, fragrant with the faint breath of meadow herbs, lulled me in a sweet sleep on Mother Nature's breast. In the morning, when faint light mists rose like white veils over the sleepy forests, melting at the first sight of day, I would shoulder my gun and wander till the evening around the wooded surroundings, which were full of springs and game. I breathed the mountain air, drank water from the brooks, ate the hard bread I carried in my bag, talked to the birds and imitated their voices, hugged the big mossy beeches and the slender branches of the young oaks, and played in the forest like a young animal. And when the youthful song of the girls rang out from somewhere, as they worked in the fields, I would start and feel the beat of the warm blood which filled my veins, and would call to them, shooting with my rifle, and the forest would shiver at the enthusiastic echo. In the evenings, when the mountain summits turned to gold, and the valleys were filled with shadows, the forest would grow quiet, and night with its strange spectres would invade it stealthily; then my dog and I would make our way down the stony crags and return to the village along the road past Lilo's homestead.

I always chose that road home. At that time Lilo's Kalinka, a little shepherdess, would be bringing in her flock, and something drew me there.

* *Samodiva* — wood nymph

As I passed along the valley, I used to see Kalinka's slender silhouette outlined on the ridges beyond it, at the big rock near the road, cut out against the evening sky. She would stand on the rock, barefooted, bareheaded and with a stick under her arm, knitting a stocking and singing. A scattered flock of sheep grazed meekly around her, and the soft voice of the bells tinkled soothingly in the dusk. As soon as she saw me she would stop singing, call out something to her flock and hide. Once I was some distance away, her sonorous song would sing forth again, high and long-drawn out, with strange cries.

There was a somewhat wild note in her voice as it floated away in the calm stillness of evening; it aroused in my mind memories of terrible doings, of bandits, robbers and bloody deeds. The dog seemed to sense danger, too, and would walk at my heels, staring around timidly.

Kalina was sixteen years old, slender, shapely and sweet. She was known as *Pshenichkata**. Her eyes were big, as blue as cornflowers and shining. Her face was soft and tender, as if the sun itself had guarded her.

Something drew me there to hear her, to see her, and it seemed to me that she, too, waited for me. But whenever I wanted to say anything to her, she would blush, shoo the sheep and run after them.

Once I found her at a spring in the forest. She was bending over and splashing the water into her face. When she saw me, she started. Her wet face, rosy from the cold water, breathed freshness and youth. She was confused, picked up the ends of her kerchief, and stood on the flat stone beside the spring like a little wagtail. I wanted to greet her, but felt tongue-tied. The dog went up to a puddle and began to lap up the water noisily.

'How, thirsty it is!' she said.

'It's tired.'

'Of course it is, you roam around so much!' she smiled and began to examine the dog attentively, as it stood at one side, with water dripping from its mouth. It snorted and licked its chops. She made a gesture of disgust.

'Oh, what a dog, I can't bear to look at him!'

Then turning to me, she said:

* The little grain of wheat

'You wander around so much, and yet I've never seen you go home with any game.'

She realized that her words had touched me on the raw, and laughed. I did not answer a word. She looked stubbornly at me with her wonderful blue eyes.

'I've seen lots of that kind of hunter!'

An enigmatic, insulting, but lovely smile played over her face again. Her teeth flashed white and as white and clean as the sheep which lay around us.

'The day before yesterday, if it hadn't been for me, you would have shot a hare. . . .'

'How's that?'

'The dog was after it and running well, but I lured it aside and confused it.'

'Why?'

'Just to annoy you.'

She smiled again. Her smile was like a sun, which pierces the clouds for a second, shines over the plain and hides itself again.

'So you hate me, do you?'

'Why should I hate you? I can annoy someone and not hate him.'

Again a cloud covered the sun.

'Where have you been?'

'I've been looking for a bell. . . Haven't you found a bell anywhere? Murkoushka lost her bell yesterday.'

'Which Murkoushka?'

'Murkoushka, one of our sheep. I don't mind so much about the bell, but the collar, it was the first collar I plaited with beads. How pretty it was, and how small I was when I made it!'

'You're quite small now, too.'

She took offence at this and her face grew stern.

'I'm not so small as you think. Oh, dear,' she said, 'everybody teases me because I'm small. And everybody makes fun of me.'

'I don't believe that. Such a lovely girl. . . .'

'Yes, lovely. See how fair I am! They've nicknamed me *Pshenichka*, because they say I look like a ripe ear of wheat, and my eyes are like a cat's. In our parts they don't like fair people.'

'You look much more like a peony in the middle of a field, and not like an ear of wheat.'

'There, now you've made up something else. Oh, dear, and whom can I possibly be like! I'm not like anyone in the village. They're all as black as Gypsies, and I'm as fair as a *samodiva*.'

'You ought to be proud of that fair hair and those eyes like the sea.'

'Like what — like the sea?'

She laughed aloud, a high ringing laugh, as fresh and liquid as if it had bubbled up from the spring. Then she suddenly asked:

'Do you like fair people?'

'Of course.'

'How silly you are!'

Kalina gave me a long and touching look. Joy struggled with hurt feelings in me. I felt I was drowning, that I was entirely captivated by this little creature, who was like a doe, and like a vixen, and like an ear of wheat, and like a flower, and like a sparrow, and like a little devil, too.

The dusk of evening was slowly creeping into the forest. Kalina and I set out in silence. Everything was still around us. Only a dove cooed incessantly and anxiously somewhere. The air smelt of water and foliage. Without saying a word to each other, we crossed the hill from which we could see her homestead, and set out along the stony path downward. The fire in the West was dying down. My soul was filled with something warm, pleasant and inexpressibly wonderful, melting like the day into the tenderness of the quiet summer evening. Kalina — *Pshenichka* — walked beside me, bending down from time to time to pick a flower here and there among the bushes. She seemed to me more beautiful than the king's daughter in the fairy tale. She walked lightly, and I thought that a vision was walking beside me, a vision that had come out of the forest to see me off with this forest posy.

'Whom do you love?' I asked.

She stopped, looked at me and did not answer. In the dusk her eyes looked dark.

'Our labourer, Loukan, often talks to me of you.'

She smiled, and turned off at once into the bushes on the way to her homestead.

'Goodbye!'

I was left alone, and pain seared my heart.

I don't know why I had mentioned Loukan, our labourer, to her. He was a young man of twenty-five, poor, shy and quiet, with a good, calm dreamy soul. We used often to spend the night at the wooden cabin near our field, where work on the maize was beginning, not far from Kalina's homestead. In the evenings, as we sat around the smouldering fire, Loukan would tell me long tales of poor lads, who married kings' daughters with the help of witches, miracles, ravens and vixens. His quiet and monotonous speech was like the monotonous rustling of the maize. Sometimes he would sit at the door, take out his *kaval** and play long-drawn-out melodies sadly and pensively. His whole dreamy soul became a stream of sweet and tender sounds, in which there was the breadth of the plain, the sound of the rustling rye, the playful burbling of the spring, the song of the river, the distant echo of girls' laughter and songs, and the awe-inspiring mystery of the forest depths.

'Do you know Kalina *Pshenichka*?' he asked me once.

'I do.'

'A lovely lass, isn't she?'

'Very lovely.'

He sighed.

'Why? Do you love her?'

'How can such a thing be? How far, how very far she is from me. She is the sun, and I — the muddy earth.'

He said this beautifully, warmly and finely like a poet, and looked at me sadly with his gentle eyes. A sweet dream flashed in them and went out. A sigh full of longing was wrested from his lungs. His face grew sad and stony.

Once I met Kalinka in the forest again. She had put a wreath of beech leaves, flowers and weeds on her head. Her eyes were unusually blue. She was waving a long stick in her hand and skipping down the path, singing a playful tune. When she saw me, she grew confused.

'Are you still looking for the little bell?' I asked.

'No — who knows where it has fallen. If you happen to find it, will you give it to me?'

'I shall give it to Loukan to give you,' I said involuntarily mentioning Loukan to her once more.

* Shepherd's pipe

My joke was out of place. Kalina grew angry, flashed like lightning, took her stand before me as straight as a rod and as spiteful as a viper and gave me a furious look. I felt uncomfortable and was struck with remorse, or rather, I grew afraid. But, impelled by a jealous, sharp-toothed feeling, which I was unable to resist, I continued:

'Loukan is a good lad. I know you love him.'

She said spitefully:

'What right have you to thrust this Loukan on me?'

Then added abruptly:

'I love him, of course.'

These words stung my heart like venom. I felt it contract with pain.

She came up to me, clenched her teeth, struck her fists together and said:

'Now, burst with pain, do!'

Then she burst out laughing, loud and accursed laughter which could be heard far away in the forest. I nearly burst into tears. She softened at once, glanced at me with compassion, threw down her stick, opened her tiny hands, cast herself wildly and silently at my neck, pressed her lips firmly against mine and stayed thus a long time.

I hugged her quivering little body close against mine, breathed the forest fragrance of her hair and did not know what to say. She left me and jumped back.

'Do you understand?'

And, striking me tenderly in the face with a flower, she said caressingly to me:

'Little townsman!'

Then she vanished in the bushes.

I was left there dazed and unable to call her. My legs were trembling with emotion and I sat down on the grass. The sun's rays were playing through the leaves of the forest and dropping like gold coins on the ground. My soul was filled with these playful rays, and all day long it was light and warm there, and the whole forest smelt of Kalinka's wonderful hair.

When I was walking down the goat path towards their homestead that evening, I was faint with emotion.

Kalina was standing on the big rock beside the road, barefooted, without her jacket, without a kerchief, somewhat tousled, her stick under her arm, making a wreath. Her sil-

houette stood out against the fiery horizon like the bronze statue of some saintly shepherdess of biblical times.

She was singing, with loud cries. It seemed to me that a merciful bird was calling to show someone the way.

When she saw me, she broke off her song and disappeared from the rock. I wanted to see her. I had waited for that evening hour all day. I stopped at the road, faint with a sweet weariness.

Suddenly a sheaf of flowers came pouring down on my head, and Kalina's sonorous laughter rang out. The swift pattering of her bare feet told me that she had fled. I hugged the flowers, that had fallen on my breast, pressed them to my heart and waited a long time. But she did not appear.

That night, as Loukan and I lay on a bed of fresh hay in the wooden cabin, we talked of Kalina until the pale light of day appeared in the sky and the stars began to melt away in the clear heavens.

The following day she was returning from the spring with her water jars full and passed along the path through our field. I stopped her.

'Let me have a drink!'

'The spring isn't far — if you're thirsty, go and drink,' she said sharply.

Her look was stern and mocking.

'Will you give me a drink? That will be your fine for passing through the field.'

'Don't you want anything else?' she asked cuttingly.

My blood leapt with the insult, anger and love, and choked my words. She was still looking at me questioningly and mockingly with her big blue eyes and it seemed to me that her look breathed coldness.

'What have you to say?' she asked. 'You needn't think I'm burning up for you!'

She laughed aloud and left me. It seemed to me that all the flowers in the meadows died, that all the crickets fell silent, that all the birds flew away and I was left quite alone, neither in heaven nor on earth. My bright youthful world grew dark, shadow upon shadow fell on my sunny mood.

Early the following morning someone knocked at the door of the cabin. I heard Kalina's gay voice:

'Hey, sleepyhead, the hares are waiting for you!'

I went out quickly. Loukan had gone to work. Kalina was standing in front of the cabin.

'You sleep like a child. I envy you! And I've been up that long. D'you know what?'

She was radiant with joy. The black clouds which had fallen on my soul lifted one by one.

'What?'

'I'm alone all day today.'

I stood at the door, melting with love. I trembled with fear of driving her away again.

'Let me see your cabin.'

I moved aside from the door.

She went in like a sparrow to its nest and threw herself down on the straw.

'You've got a royal bed. Come inside. Don't stand there like a log.'

I went in submissively. She kicked the door shut.

From that day on, I seldom went out shooting. Kalina became all in all to me. We often met in the cabin, in the forest, at the spring, and at the clump of elders in the corn field, where we had made a wolf's lair for ourselves. At each parting we died of longing for new meetings. Kalina *Pshenichka* became transformed into a wonderful vivid, ravenous flower, which sang all day, shouted and wanted to be embraced. I grew thin and pale, and everybody saw my guilt in my eyes.

Just at that time some distant relatives from the city came to spend the summer with us. Two old ladies, and lovely Miss Nikolina, just out of high school. She had long chestnut hair, which fell over her shoulders in two thick braids, tied with blue ribbons. She had never been to a village and looked as if she had fallen onto another planet.

On the second day I took them to the field where I spent the night. Miss Nikolina ran about the grass and began to shout and sing like a bird that had been let out of a cage. This was a new world to her, she had never seen mowers or storks. That big blue bird which flies over the pastures, eternally alone, made a deep impression on her. She asked me the names of the trees and flowers, of the hills, marvelled at my knowledge and looked upon me with awe. I had cast aside my dirty shooting clothes that day and was well-dressed, I had a collar on and a new straw hat. We had a snack in the shade

of the big oak tree and got up to take a walk. Nikolina took my arm, and we went off to drink water. The old people stayed behind.

Miss Nikolina held onto my arm, pressing close to me, and her questions and her enthusiasms had no end.

Kalina was at the spring. When she saw me arm-in-arm with an unknown girl, she went white. I cannot have been very calm myself, because after looking at both of us one after the other, the young lady asked:

'Who is that?'

'Good day, Kalina!'

Kalina did not answer. She quickly collected her water jars and went off with her head bent.

I was unable to see her that evening, as we had arranged. I met her the following day at their homestead. She was returning with an armful of wheat and a sickle in her hand. When she saw me she quickly moved off the road. I went to meet her.

'Why are you running away?'

She looked at me reproachfully and with spite, and said angrily:

'Get out of my way. You're engaged.'

'That isn't true!'

'I saw. Get out!'

The sickle flashed in her hand. She raised it to strike me, to peck at my eyes, then fumed something spiteful and threatening, and fled.

For several days after this event I did not meet her anywhere, nor did I see her slender silhouette on the boulder, nor did I hear her song. That tormented me. I went around their homestead many times, lurked in the cornfields, but I caught no sight of her anywhere. Loukan already slept alone at the hut in the pasture. I asked him several times if he had seen Kalina lately. He answered drily that he had not.

One moonlit evening, when I was coming out of the cornfields where I had been to wait, it seemed to me that a woman came running out of our cabin and was quickly lost in the grove. After that I heard the sound of Loukan's *kaval*. His noisy passionate and longing sounds filled my soul with pain and jealousy.

Who was that woman? Wasn't it Kalina, my little *Pshe-nichka*? I could no longer bear it.

I decided to watch them. One evening I sat hidden in the grove until late, then crept quietly out and climbed onto a hay wain that had been left in the meadow for the next day. From there I could see Kalina's homestead, lit by a fire, around which human figures moved for a long time. When everything had grown quiet, the dark figure of Loukan passed through the meadow, and came up below the wain on which I lay; he sat down, and blew on his *kaval*. Never before had he played with such depth of feeling, so movingly and so dreamily! And a heart came to answer his passionate appeal. A light woman's figure, with a white kerchief appeared quietly and crossed the meadow at a run. Loukan's *kaval* fell silent. I heard whispering, and Kalina's familiar voice. They were under the wain.

Whispers of love! A silent *kaval*! A quiet summer night. The scent of hay. Jealousy, curiosity, a guilty conscience. It seemed to me that I was evaporating into tiny particles like the scent of the hay, and that only a superfluous and pitiful nothing was left of me.

'I can't!' I heard Loukan say sharply.

'Coward! When he's asleep, shoot at his bed with your rifle, set fire to the cabin, and run for it!'

'Don't make a joke of this!'

'When is he going to sleep at the cabin?'

'Tomorrow night.'

'Think it over until tomorrow night, or you'll suffer, too.'

'Kalina, I'll tell him.'

'Ah, Loukan, Loukan, you don't love me,' she began to whisper and to kiss him.

They fell silent, and for long I could not hear a thing. At last I saw their two dark shadows, pressed against each other, pass across the meadow and disappear like spectres.

The following day I was sitting in the garden at home and thinking of last night's occurrence. I wanted to find Kalina, tell her how much I was suffering, reveal her plan to her and forgive her with lofty pride. Loukan came to me, thoughtful, and never raised his eyes to look at me. He only said with a stammer:

'I don't like the weather tonight.'

'Why? I was thinking of coming and sleeping at the cabin with you.'

'I don't feel like going there tonight. I shan't go.'

'But I want to go.'

'The nights are cool now, the hay's in, there aren't any people out in the fields. What will you do at the cabin? Let's sleep here at the threshing field this night. I'll tell you a fine tale. Isn't it the same thing?'

For a long time Loukan tried to persuade me to stay, and his voice was timid and desperate.

'Let's leave that damned cabin. We're not wolves to sleep in the forest. And to tell you the truth, I dreamt a bad dream. Something about the cabin. . . .'

I was silent for a long time. Loukan scratched his neck and waited. I could see that he was afraid of Kalina and wanted to save me.

'If that's the case, I shan't go,' I said.

Suddenly the poor lad's fine eyes lit up and grew moist. He turned aside and moved off slowly. He was relieved.

The following morning I went to the meadow, going around by way of the grove. The hut had been burnt down. The last dying embers were smoking where it had stood. Up on the rock beside the road stood Kalina, her eyes fixed on the smoke. When she saw me, she started, gave me a strange look and fled with the shrill cry of a bird.

Sulza Mladenova

The examinations had been successfully concluded a few days ago and Sulza Mladenova, the schoolmistress, bent over the tiny table in the teachers' room, was busy finishing the children's certificates. Cobwebs had already appeared on the walls. Sadness, sleepiness and a lack of faith in knowledge was wafted from the cupboard, in which two or three dog-eared books lay, from the old map of the earth's two hemispheres, which hung on the wall like a broken wing, from the panels on the walls, from the abacus, from the dusty globe, on which stood the shabby cap of the school servant, from the crooked iron stove, whose heart never seemed to have burnt. The human skeleton, with its ironic grin, had been returned to its corner, while the stuffed black raven looked down on it, with its head on one side, from the top of the cupboard, ready to speak a sinister 'Never more!' like Edgar Poe's fatal raven.

Outside, the gentle May sun beat down on the wide unfenced yard, and a goat, tied by one leg, timidly nibbled at the thistles, and bleated nervously. People were out at work, and nothing was to be heard in the village but the sweet hum of the bees and the squabbles of the sparrows.

The schoolmistress wrote nervously, quickly and never raised her head to look outside. From time to time she pushed back her fluffy curls and continued to write. She was in a hurry to get everything done, because she was to be married in two days' time.

'Two or three days are left,' she thought, laying down her pen. 'Two or three days?'

For an entire week now she had been counting the days one by one, and always got them mixed up. She was so busy that she did not notice them passing, but, nevertheless, it seemed to her that time was somehow passing abnormally and

that after every night the preceding day began all over again. There, she didn't know what day it was today again — Wednesday or Thursday.

'Granddad Penó, what day is it today?' she asked suddenly, and turned to the corner behind the stove.

But the crooked, good-natured figure of Granddad Penó, the school servant, no longer dozed there. His work was over, together with the exam, and her question remained unanswered.

Sulza Mladenova smiled at her absent-mindedness. Her small birdlike face was blissfully radiant, her dreams bore her to her happiness, which was no longer far off, and for which she was giving her whole heart, all her love. She saw herself as a bride, holding the hand of her darling, all dressed in white, like a plum tree in full blossom, with a diadem of tiny white artificial flowers, which she would keep for ever as a sacred memory. A veil as fine as a sunny haze was wrapped around her from head to heels. She stepped gracefully along in her tiny white shoes, and greeted her fellow citizens with a look, as they watched her enviously, gathered in groups at their gates all along the street of their small town as far as the church. The sun shone festively. Roses were in bloom in the gardens, and peeped out at her over the fences. The band played solemnly. People heard, opened their windows and said: 'Sulza Mladenova is getting married today.' All the schoolmasters of the county were gathered here and another twenty schoolmistresses, of whom she was the loveliest. She entered the church door. All eyes were fixed on her. And she, picking up her skirts as she well knew how to do, would pass through them all, arm-in-arm with the man she loved, triumphant and fortunate, all in white, happy and in love.

Yes, a girl's wedding day is, indeed, the most important day in her life, and that is why it should be celebrated with all possible pomp. She had dreamt of that day since she was quite small, and now it was near. It was coming, sunny and smiling.

The short history of her love rose before her, and her heart began to beat at the memory of that lovely, warm little poem. Early in the school year, when the leaves grew yellow and fell, she had stayed on late once in the neighbouring village. One of the schoolmasters there had taken her home, she had just made his acquaintance. Dobryan Gorev was his name. She liked the name very much; it was so like him that she

wondered how they could have found it for him. Dobryan Gorev was a schoolmaster in his native village. His father was the mayor, his brother the tavern keeper, and he was a schoolmaster, but busied himself besides with fruit growing, bee-keeping, poultry breeding, making hives, cupboards and winnowing machines.

On the way they had talked only about teaching, about corporal punishment as a means of upbringing, about methodical units and other important matters.

'People,' he said, 'have invented gramophones, cinemas, X-rays, radio, flying machines, but in teaching they're still bothering with outdated forms, outworn ideas and formalism.'

He talked, and she walked beside him, looking at his big, clever eyes and their expression, which did not in the least correspond to his broad peasant face, flattered her warmly. It was evening. The moon was up and Sulza did not realize they had reached her village. And quite simply, the next day she got a long love letter from him.

After that they saw each other every day, she grew to love him, became friendly with his family, and in two days she was going to marry him.

In accordance with her wish, they were to be married in the little town where she had been born. Everything was ready there. Sulza Mladenova saw herself once more as a bride, all in white, like a plum tree in full blossom, arm-in-arm with him. . . .

The schoolmistress started. The door opened and one by one, her fiancé Dobryan, his father with his coat thrown over his shoulders, and Zlatana, their *kouma**, a woman whose youth was over but who was powdered and painted, came noisily into the room. They moved slowly and solemnly. One could see immediately that they had come on an important mission. Several pairs of footsteps stopped outside and whispers were heard.

'Why, Sulzitsa, it's such lovely weather, and here you are, shut up by yourself,' the *kouma* began.

'I thought I'd better finish the certificates.'

**Koum* and *kouma*, a couple who stand sponsors to the bridal couple at a wedding and are afterwards godparents of their children. They are considered as blood relations and greatly respected

'Listen, daughter-in-law, d'you know what we've decided?' the father said, moving his shoulders to settle his coat.

The schoolmistress started. She felt she was not going to hear anything pleasant.

'We've decided,' the old man continued, 'to have the wedding in the village.'

'It's better so,' the *kouma* added.

'We thought we'd better not go in for unnecessary expense, that's why. I'm sure you won't mind,' the fiancé said in a persuasive voice. 'These wedding formalities have long been out-of-date, and there's no reason why we schoolteachers, persons who have no prejudices, should give the public pleasure with all manner of spectacles.'

'It'll be much jollier in the village,' the rouged *kouma* added.

Sulza Mladenova grew pale and bit her lip. All these people with whom she had been on such intimate terms until yesterday, now seemed like heartless strangers to her. They stood before her like thieves who had come to steal the jewels of her luxurious dream, and she saw herself helpless, pitiful and insulted, and did not know what to say. Dobryan stood aside, almost indifferent, calculating something in a notebook, pencil in hand.

'Do you know how much a wedding costs in town?' he asked, giving her a quick glance. 'Why should we spend so much money on nothing?'

Sulza Mladenova sat down and hid her face in her hands.

'Now, now, why those tears?' cried the *kouma*.

'Nonsense!' exclaimed the old man.

Dobryan went out. Whispering began at the door.

'Why should you spend your money?' a hoarse voice was saying to him. 'She should be thankful you're marrying her.'

A little later the old man went out.

'I told him to marry a peasant lass, but he won't listen to me. There's a lady for you, to cry at you as long as she lives!' he said sharply outside.

'A peasant lass is all very well, but she would not bring me such an income every month. . . .'

'Does she get a hundred and eight?' an unfamiliar voice asked timidly.

'A hundred and eight,' said Dobryan, gaily.

'And you get a hundred and eight.'

'That makes two hundred and sixteen,' said Dobryan and gave a throaty laugh, adding: 'Not so bad for me, is it?'

Sulza heard these offensive words of her fiancé's as in a dream, and her heart was filled with bitterness.

'Well, you'll cry, and you'll cry, and you'll get over it. You needn't think because we're peasant folk, you'll get the better of us!' the *kouma* said, and left the room, her loud laugh blended with the talk out in the passage.

Sulza raised her head and looked around. There was no one in the room. Outside her fiancé was still talking. His voice was dry, hateful, heartless and cynical.

'You must break a woman's spirit while there's still time!' he said. And added: 'A hundred and eight and a hundred and eight make two hundred and sixteen.'

Amid these rough peasants, the poor little schoolmistress felt like a lamb among wolves. Her heart, overflowing with bitterness and wounded by the insult, wept within her. She put her head down on the table and gave free rein to her tears.

Behind her, the human skeleton, which had been turned round by accident by one of the persons who had entered the room, grinned sardonically. The stuffed raven looked at her with bent head from the height of the cupboard, and, like Edgar Poe's fatal raven, seemed to be saying:

'Never more!'

Dreamers

Uncle Goran, the village doctor, was wading about, bent over the river, looking for leeches, with the legs of his baggy trousers turned up, and a bag slung over his shoulders. He went slowly, attentively overturning every stone asleep in the calm water, and staring at the velvety sand along the banks, caressed tenderly by the water. His hat was tilted back and barely was held on by one ear, but, absorbed in his work, he did not find a moment to set it right and went his way, bending down, his neck stiff, smoking the little pipe stuck crookedly in his mouth, and searching. The noon rays of the May sun fell straight upon him, and a swarm of shiny little flies, harbingers of a dry summer, stuck to his sweaty shirt.

He went down the valley thus, thrusting his way beneath the bending willows and the osiers, and emerged in the broad spaces of the meadows, where the river flowed slowly, spreading wider and toasting itself in the sunshine between banks that were almost bare. The broad meadows, covered with lush grass, seemed to laugh in the sunshine, the crickets struck up in unison, zealously and in festive mood. The river, caressed by the sun and welcomed by the thirsty expanse, flowed quietly and softly, stroking the gold sand along its banks and lapping it lightly from time to time, as if it were sighing. The grass and the flowers all around stretched out to its refreshing breath.

Uncle Goran straightened up and looked around.

Far away in the meadows a man was wandering about. He stopped at every step and rooted around for a long time in the grass with his stick, as if he were looking for something.

Uncle Goran put his wet palm to his brow, stared for a long time, then taking his pipe out of his mouth, shouted: 'Roustem, hey, Roustem!'

The lad stopped in the middle of the meadows, listened, and turned. Uncle Goran waved to him, and Roustem made for him with a smile, which seemed to have been left forgotten on his face. He came up to Uncle Goran, stopped on the bank, and leant on his stick, like a shepherd. The smile disappeared from his lean, youthful, swarthy Gypsy face. Under his shabby and worn fur cap heavy black locks of hair hung down over his ears. His torn and dirty shirt was wide open, and under it his thin gaunt breast was visible. A ragged scarlet waistband was wrapped around his tall, slender body like a turban. The legs of his patched baggy trousers, worn with age, were unbuttoned to the knee and flapped freely around his bare legs. He stood on the bank, as light as the wind, like a water insect ready to dance over the reeds and osiers. His black eyes looked out from deep sockets, and a distant dream burned in them.

'What do you wander about the meadows for, like a silly fool, have you lost your purse with your money in it?' asked Uncle Goran.

The Gypsy lad smiled, bent his head, embarrassed, and began to tap a pebble with his stick.

'Well, I just go about — what else am I to do?'

Uncle Goran bent down again and splashed off in the river.

'Do you find any?' Roustem asked, and set off slowly along the bank, alongside the doctor.

'There aren't many, but as it's for healing, some are found.'

'Is it true the doctors don't allow leeches now?'

'What do doctors know?' Uncle Goran said snapping, and straightened up. 'They only know how to take money and that's all. And how much do they understand? You fall ill, they get you into hospital, tap you here, tap you there, say "stick out your tongue, open your eyes, sneeze, breathe", and when they can't make out what your trouble is, they give you a penny-worth of poison and that's that. The next day they smoke their cigarettes, laugh, and rip you up to see what you suffered from.'

Uncle Goran emerged from the river, wiped his hands on his baggy trousers, filled his pipe and continued passionately, with a wave of his hand:

'Who, do you think, has bred these diseases, which have

conquered the world now? The doctors brought them from Europe, to make experiments. Once upon a time we only knew measles, small pox and carbuncles. And they only appeared rarely, and the cure for them was simple. What happens now-a-days? Guts get tangled up, there are various consumptions, nerves, headaches, and God only knows what other ills. And they don't know the cure for any of them. There are as many cures as there are doctors.'

Uncle Goran puffed quickly at his pipe a few times, and set out slowly for the willows near by.

'Let's have a rest.'

Roustem followed him. When they got to the shade, Uncle Goran unslung his little bag, sat heavily down on the grass, and took off his hat. Sweat furrowed his long, tanned face. The little Gypsy stood opposite him and watched him eagerly and happily smoking his pipe.

'Sit down, do,' said Uncle Goran, who was still silently fuming at the doctors.

The little Gypsy gently lowered himself to the ground and stared at the hazy distance.

'Quacks, and nothing more,' Uncle Goran continued. 'My nephew tells how he fell ill when he was in barracks and was taken to hospital. They gave him all sorts of bitter stuff and powders to drink and nearly poisoned the lad. One day they brought him a bowl of soup. He began to eat it, then what d'you think he saw in his spoon? . . . A human finger and a ring on it. . . .'

The little Gypsy gaped timidly at Uncle Goran.

But he said nothing. His eyes were fixed somewhere far off in the meadows. People were going along the road to the village in group after group. They moved along the fields of ripe wheat and filled the whole road. The shrill notes of a bagpipe could be heard.

'Is that a wedding?' asked Uncle Goran, giving the little Gypsy a questioning look.

'No — elections!' said Roustem. 'That lot are coming from Shouplivtsi.'

'May the wolves eat their heads!' cried the doctor and spat through his teeth. 'They drag around to elections, they fight, they bash each other's heads in, they do hateful things, and what for? Things get worse, they don't get better! People —

may the wolves eat their heads! They let themselves be taken in by those folk who wear city trousers, by doctors and ne'er-do-wells, and think they're getting all kinds of wonderful things done! If you're poor, friend, it's all up with you. You'll always be deceived, you'll always be just a tool in other people's hands. You've nothing in your house, and you go about, poor devil, looking for a sack of flour with which to feed your children, and that fellow, with his city trousers, whoever he may be, says to you: you think, friend, that you haven't got anything, but that isn't so, you've got the greatest wealth in the world — you've got the right to vote, he says. And that chap, he goes and sticks a ballot paper in your hand; you scratch your head, and then you go and drop it in the ballot box, and the next thing you know that bandit has come to govern you. I don't go to such things. My soul revolts when I see all that, and I teach my children to do the same. They've no need of such doings. Let the sheep elect their shepherd — if it's not Vulkan, it'll be Vulchan*, and they're own brothers, drat them. . . "Stand aside, boys," I tell my children, "bark, growl, but don't become sheep. Keep away from these loathsome doings!"

Uncle Goran knocked his pipe out on his palm, broke off a straw and began to clean it. Roustem sat there motionless, alien to the doctor's indignation and ideas. His eyes wandered in the distance and shone emptily. The sun blazed down, and the river seemed to have stopped in the shade of the willows, and never stirred.

'E-eh, poor human heart, even if you haven't had your fill of suffering, you'll never suffer more!' the doctor sighed.

The water murmured sleepily along by the roots, and fell asleep again.

'I go about the plain, lad,' he continued after a long silence, 'I lie in the shade, and I think: "Dear Lord, why don't you give me just one gift; simply to have whatever I say come true." I'd make the world a paradise for you, that I would. There'd be no sickness, no suffering, and no poverty, either.'

The little Gypsy sighed. He turned to the doctor and asked him timidly:

'Can one find a four-leafed clover in our parts, Uncle Goran?'

* Names derived from *Vulk* — wolf

The doctor looked at him from under his bushy eyebrows and said:

'You can! You can, but it's hard to find one.'

'Oh, if I only could,' sighed the little Gypsy, stirred by a distant happiness he had not experienced.

'It's a rare thing, Roustem, a rare thing!'

'I've been looking for it for two summers now, Uncle Goran, and I'll look for another two, but I'll find it.'

The little Gypsy seemed to be burning like a small taper in his vague hopes.

The two fell silent. In a second everything grew still. A small cloud passed beneath the sun and disappeared. A nearby woodpecker struck prophetically three times on the bark of an old willow, and then was silent, too.

'When a man has that leaf, he doesn't need anything else,' sighed Roustem. 'He can have what he wants: a horse — he can bring the stars down, he can find hidden treasure, and take any girl he wants.'

'H'm,' said the doctor, smiling. 'Akima has addled your brains, lad. Never show weakness before womenfolk — no four-leaved clover will help you. You'll wander over the plain like a shadow, and your heart will suffer.'

The little Gypsy blushed for shame, and his eyes filled with the moisture of love's memory.

'Akima doesn't want me any more.'

'If she won't have you with a will — carry her off.'

'I did, once, Uncle Goran, but she begged me so, and cried, and I let her go. I felt sorry for her.'

'You're a weak soul, laddie.'

'She told me last year: "Roustem, I've waited for a year for you, I can't wait any more. I've locked up my heart. Only a fourleaved clover will unlock it." Since then, wherever I go, I look for a four-leaved clover. I've gone over the plain, blade by blade. I don't eat, I don't drink — I just wander about, looking for it.'

'Look for it, my lamb, look for it, you may be lucky,' said the doctor, deep in thought. 'How can we live if we don't chase illusions?'

He untied his tobacco pouch, knocked out his pipe and began to fill it, grunting the while. The sun had long passed

its zenith, and the shadows of the willows had cast themselves over the river, as if they were thirsty.

'Roustem, have you ever seen a white cuckoo?' the doctor asked significantly, shaking his head pompously as he began to smoke his pipe.

'I haven't, Uncle.'

'Well, I haven't, either.'

'Is there such a thing?' the little Gypsy asked, his eyes popping out of his head with curiosity.

'There is, there is, but where is it? If I could only find it, you'd see what I'd become. There was a time when my father and I went as far as Touzlouka looking for it. People had seen it there.'

'What would you want with that bird? In summer it cries cuckoo, cuckoo, and in winter — its kingdom is across the sea.'

'Eh, you know nothing at all, lad! There's a church treasure hidden somewhere since olden times, in a cave. But what a treasure it is, to be sure! Three hundred buffalo skins full of gold. When it was hidden, folk dug five hundred steps in the rock up to the door of the cave, and then effaced them one by one. A snake is on guard at the door. And what a snake! A terrible one, I tell you.'

'O-o-oh!' breathed the frightened little Gipsy.

'But it isn't a live snake. It's made of a hundred *okas** of wax, lad, and its scales are made of gold pieces, and its eyes of precious stones.'

The little Gypsy clicked his tongue, dazed with amazement, carried away by the doctor's magical words.

'The white cuckoo lives in that cave, for the Lord has blessed it with immortality. That is, it is not to die, world without end. That white cuckoo was once a king's daughter. She fell in love with the poorest soldier who guarded the king's palace. Her father grew angry with her, and cast the soldier into a fiery furnace. For very grief, his daughter threw herself into it with him and was burnt to death. The Lord turned her soul into a white cuckoo.'

The doctor coughed, and was silent. The river murmured softly and evenly on, as if it were continuing the wonderful tale. Roustem's heart, stirred by the feat of the enamoured girl, was beating unrestrainedly.

* Turkish measure of weight, of nearly three pounds

‘Well, and then, Uncle Goran?’

The doctor stretched out his tired legs, sighed deeply, and rose to his feet.

‘If you see that cuckoo,’ he said, ‘and fall on your knees and bow to it, and cry three times “Sister, white cuckoo, he loves you still!” it will take you to the cave and hand the hidden treasure over to you.’

The doctor waded into the river again, bent down, and began to gaze intently at the sand.

‘If I had a four-leafed clover, I might see that cuckoo, too!’ cried Roustem. And rising to his feet, he glanced up at the sun, set out across the meadow, and began to root around in the grass with his stick.

The day had fallen silent and, holding its breath, it was listening to the dreamy song of the river, to its deep occasional sighs, hints and griefs.

A woodpecker struck the bark of an old willow sharply several times, and began to listen, too.

The First Snow



strong wind had blown that night. In the morning, the storm died down, and it began to snow. Small snowflakes began to fall from the low grey sky, chasing each other, swarming densely through the air, and quickly covering the ugly earth with a white fluffy blanket, virginally pure.

The village lay muffled up, as if it had fallen asleep under the tender, silky rustling of the snowflakes, and fine blue smoke rose sweetly from the chimneys, wafted up to the sky as if it were the smoke of ritual incense.

Uncle Kola Radin sat curled up at the small window, well-sealed with yellowed newspapers, and gazed dreamily out through the only little piece of glass — the eye of the low, gloomy, little room, with its smoke-blackened chimney, full of rags, tools and all sorts of domestic utensils. Next to the warm iron stove, Aunt Kolevitsa, looking like a ruffled broody hen, sat carding hemp for her distaff. The sound of the hemp and the quivering noise of the sharp pins of the carder filled the room with a dull, indolent and lulling melody, like the hum of a distant swarm of tiny metallic flies.

Outside, the snow spread and covered everything: the yard, the straw roof of the pig-sty, the wattle fence, overgrown with thorns, on which hungry sparrows fluttered, the hay stack, the wood piled there, the cart, even the top of the post, on which a magpie perched, turned, said something, and fell into deep thought. The rooster stood on one leg under the eaves, sullenly, with a drooping tail. The hens had gathered around him in a heap, nestling against each other, thoughtful, staring out and blinking dreamily. The dog emerged from somewhere, stood still in the middle of the yard, blinked at the flying snowflakes, yawned, stretched slowly and lazily, and went off towards the cowshed.

'Eh, what fine weather for hares!' Uncle Kola sighed and tilted his shabby fur cap over one eyebrow.

'You and your hares! You dream of them. You won't get up like a man to do an honest job of work. Bring in a few logs, or. . . ' said Aunt Kolevitsa, yawning hard, and went on carding her hemp.

Uncle Kola held his tongue disdainfully. He never paid the slightest attention to women's talk.

'If I only had a dog and a gun,' he said to himself, 'you could chatter away to your heart's content then.'

And his head sank into his shoulders as he meditated.

Uncle Kola was a man of fifty, stocky, with a short neck and protruding shoulder blades, which made him look slightly hunchbacked. He was a hunter, and from constant thought about hares, his face had acquired a hare-like expression. His ears stuck out backward, always on the alert. The upper lid of one eye was missing, so that it was always open, even when the other one was asleep. His scanty fair moustache stuck out in all directions in disorder.

Now he was sadly gazing out of the window, and his thoughts were chasing hares over the snow-covered ridges, as if he were a hound. Alas, Uncle Kola had neither gun nor dog! He had pawned his gun at the tavern for a debt, and his dog had died of grief at having no one to go hunting with.

Donné Kozitsa, Uncle Kola's neighbour, came mincing across the yard, his hands in the pockets of his worn-out, baggy trousers. He was the same age as Kola, as poor as he was and a hunter like him. Only Donné had never had a gun in his life. He went out hunting with an axe or a pickaxe. He never went for hares, but for badgers and martens he would have given his life. He would set traps and snares, dig pits, cast bait, and he lived with the dream of profit from the skins of the wolves and bears he never caught. In winter, dressed in his wife's white chemise so as not to show up against the snow, Donné Kozitsa would spend whole nights freezing and waiting for foxes near the village, and he would slyly crow like a rooster to lure them. But apart from severe colds he never caught anything.

His blood had been set tingling, too, that morning, when he had seen the first snow. But for the last two days he had had no tobacco, so he was sick of the whole world. He watched

the snow falling for a long time, scratched himself beside the hearth, and said to himself:

'Just let me go to neighbour Kola, to get a cigarette and tease him a bit.'

Despite his poverty, Donn  was a cheerful soul, who liked to irritate quick-tempered Uncle Kola, because the latter's inexhaustible oaths amused him.

He stamped the snow off his sandals at the threshold, and came as stealthily as a fox into the room where Uncle Kola was sitting. His face, entirely covered with sharp hairs like a hedgehog, was blue with the cold. He said 'good morning', and pursing up his mouth, the corners of which almost reached his ears, he made such an expressive face that Uncle Kola understood at once that he was dying for a smoke. Kola answered his greeting, and began to shake the dust out of all his pockets until he had got enough tobacco together for a cigarette. Donn  rolled it with trembling fingers, made another face, in which his eyes took part, and said:

'Where can that marten have hidden now, for I'd like to skin its warm little hide!'

'We ought to have gone out today, Donn ! We're losing!' Uncle Kola sighed portentously. 'Look at the weather! Those dratted hares, they've left their fresh tracks on the snow, all ready for you to read!'

'Eh, eh, eh!' Donn  emitted longing sounds, and shook his hedgehog's head at least ten times.

'What weather, eh!' Uncle Kola said, taking his smelly pipe out of his mouth.

'The weather's all very fine, but you're not the chap for a fellow to set out with! I was thinking of calling you early this morning. With this snow, all you have to do is go into the forest as if it was your own house, catch the marten and come home again, to look after your jobs.'

'Well, how easily you catch them!' Uncle Kola exclaimed, irritated.

'Why, that I do, but I can't manage alone. And, as you only care about hares, you're not the chap I need. You've only an eye for hares.'

'If you can't catch the swift game, you'll never catch the sly ones!'

'If you got them, it wouldn't matter, but all you do is frighten the beasts,' said Kozitsa.

'When I go out with a Jonah fellow like you, of course I can't bag anything.'

'I don't know which is the Jonah!'

The two neighbours were quite ready for a quarrel.

'You two sit there arguing like children, but the hares and the foxes go about the forest fit and well,' Aunt Kolevitsa remarked with a mighty yawn.

'You'd always find a hare's bone in our yard, but in yours there isn't even that much,' Kozitsa said, provokingly.

'Well, Donn  , flour's more necessary than hare's bones,' Uncle Kola retorted, giving him tit for tat.

'That's why you always borrow it from the neighbours and never give it back.'

'You'll excuse me, Donn  , but I think we've returned it.'

'You'll excuse me, Kola.'

'But we took it out on the three hare's skins, didn't we?'

'We exchanged the three hare's skins for your share of the marten, didn't we?'

'The marten was mine, Donn  .'

'That it wasn't, we caught it together, didn't we?'

'You'll excuse me, but you took two shares of the one we caught together.'

'So you've caught a marten by yourself, have you, eh?' Donn   said, laughing spitefully.

'No, I always catch them together with you.'

'A hare hunter talking of martens. Why, you don't even know a marten's tracks.'

Donn   rose to his feet. He had wounded his rival right in the heart. Uncle Kola lost his temper. His ears began to wriggle. His lidless eye flashed. He snorted hard several times.

'Listen now, you fool, who d'you think you're talking to? I, who've sold skins by the cartful, I!'

'You have, but only when your sheep died of starvation,' Kozitsa answered with devastating irony.

Uncle Kola began to swear. He got up from his seat; and seized the stick, leaning against the wall behind the stove.

When Donn   Kozitsa saw that he had achieved his aim, he thrust his hands in his pockets, huddled himself up, dashed out of the door, and crossed the yard like a weasel.

At his own gate he stopped and began to laugh loudly. His voice echoed all over the neighbourhood. The dog began to bark at him. Uncle Kola stood at the house door, furiously angry, trembling with rage, and began to hurl all the oaths he knew at him. When the Bulgarian oaths gave out, he used those which he had learnt in former days in Rumania.

From the neighbouring, silent houses slatternly women and tousle-headed children came running out and peered curiously into the street.

Aunt Kolevitsa put her head out at the door, covered with the fluff of the hemp, and tugged at her husband.

'Now then, you've cursed enough! Go indoors, and don't make an exhibition of yourself in front of people! Don't you see, Donn  s only teasing? The Lord curse you, Donn  !'

'He'll tease me, will he? Me! If my gun wasn't pawned, I'd teach him a lesson! I'd shoot him like a hare.'

Uncle Kola slammed the door and went in, but he returned once more. He had forgotten the biggest oath. When he had spat it out, he went in again with terrible grunts.

Donn   Kozitsa stood laughing in the street, telling the shivering men, who had gathered around him, how he had irritated his neighbour.

But the fine snowflakes kept falling softly, racing each other, and quickly covered the silent village.

Nanné Stoïchko's Willow Tree



wonderful willow tree had grown up in *Nanné** Stoïchko's poverty-stricken yard. It had branched off at ground level into five wide-spreading brothers, all equally stout. Each of them spread its crown wide, and all together they made a huge bunch, which rose high above houses and barns, and in the evenings cast a shadow like a hill on the wide meadow, which stretched from *Nanné* Stoïchko's house right up to the next village.

From time immemorial, there had been a dozen stork's nests in the branches of this wonderful willow tree, and every spring twelve couples of storks came here and hatched their eggs — they were *Nanné* Stoïchko's most numerous flock.

What a joyful event it was when those long-legged visitors arrived at the nests of their birth after the long journey! At the first life-giving breath of spring, when the fruit trees were barely in bud, when the children had barely begun to run barefoot over the warmed but still damp earth, and the sky had barely cleared, a swift shadow would pass across the streets and courtyards of the village, flash at your feet, crash into the wall opposite, from there onto the roof, and then vanish. You would raise your head, and what would you see?— A stork flying over your head. Slowly, calmly and festively he would circle over the village, rise on high, drop down low, swoop over the familiar roads and courtyards, dash over the meadows, and make his first visits to the familiar corners of home. After that he would turn swiftly, and swoop down on his nest in *Nanné* Stoïchko's willow tree. The children would

**Nanné* — *Shoppsko* dialect for Uncle. *Shoppsko*, name of a big region around Sofia

dash out joyously, running over the unswept courtyard, where the donkey was basking in the first warm sunshine, meditating sweetly; they would begin to jump up and down, shouting:

'Mother — a stork! Mother — a stork!'

And hopping from one foot to the other, they would begin to sing:

'A stork squats — I fly!
A stork squats — I fly!'

The hens, frightened by the noise and the stork's unexpected shadow, would scatter, clucking anxiously. From the dung heap, the rooster would give a reassuring signal, quickly hop up onto the cart and stand there on the alert.

Surprised at the commotion outside, Aunt Stoïchkovitsa would appear at the door, her hands covered with dough, her *soukman** dusty with flour, stretch her neck out from under the low eaves with curiosity and call out in a voice that could be heard all over the village:

'What are you yelling about, you dratted brats?'

But as soon as she caught sight of the stork, standing on his nest, turning his neck this way and that and looking around his country in all directions, she would stand there, filled with tender emotion, and say caressingly:

'Dear Lord! Visitors have come to us — welcome home!'

Then, from somewhere under the low sheds, the master of the house, *Nanné* Stoïchko, would emerge. Long straws hung from his clothes and from his shabby fur cap which was flattened on his head. He walked indolently and looked impassively at his wife.

'Stoïchko — a stork!' his wife would call, excited by the festive appearance of their poverty-stricken yard, and pointing to the crown of the willow tree.

'Father — a stork!' the children would cry, wild with excitement.

Nanné Stoïchko would pretend to be deaf at this outburst of childish joy and would try to hide his curiosity under his

* *Soukman* — sleeveless overdress, worn over a chemise with embroidered sleeves, hem and breast piece. An essential part of the women's national costume in many parts of the country

eyebrows. His soul was never shaken by anything and his indolence had made him as calm as the cattle and as indifferent as a stone to the joys and sorrows of the world around him. For days on end, he never set his hand to anything, wandering heavily around his yard, dragging himself from one tavern to another, listening malevolently to the talk and the joking, and returning home as sharp and hot as an Albanian pepper, and as black as a thunder cloud. If hardworking Aunt Stoïchkovitsa had not been there — God help the children!

However, no matter how indifferent *Nanné* Stoïchko may have been to everything around him, his soul was aroused by the gay shouts of the children. He would take off his cap, raise his head to the storks' nests, wriggle his hairy eyebrows, which fell over his eyes like straw eaves, for a long time, and gaze up through half-closed eyes.

'That's the Snake-Catcher,' he would say pompously.

'No, — it's the Frog-Catcher,' his wife would say.

'No, it isn't! Don't you see the yellow ring above his knee? The Frog-Catcher hasn't one. The Sexton has, but it's on the left leg, below the knee.'

'Well, it may be the Snake-Catcher, the dear,' his wife would agree, conciliatingly.

From that day on, joy entered *Nanné* Stoïchko's house and the village was in holiday mood. The great willow tree came to life. Twelve loving couples clattered their beaks over the twelve nests. The happy willow tree seemed to have been waiting for this — suddenly it would burst into leaf all over, and life would begin in every nest. All day long the storks would fly up and away, then back again, courting, bringing twigs, rags, straw, arranging their households and enjoying life in peace and harmony with Stoïchko's family. They grew intimate with it and walked around the courtyard, where the dog lay, weary with laziness and as ragged as its master.

One day, *Nanné* Stoïchko was hewing away at something on the chopping log in the middle of the yard. The sun was blazing down and *Nanné* Stoïchko had cast aside the eternal sheepskin coat, from which he was never parted in winter or summer. His hempen shirt was wet with sweat. Beside him, among the chips, he had cast his shabby fur cap, rotten with sweat and as greasy as a cheese pie.

The Snake-Catcher was wandering around, looking for

twigs and straw, and carefully examining all the rubbish lying about. When he saw the fur cap, he stopped beside it, gave it a couple of pecks with his beak and, as he liked it, picked it up and carried it off to his nest, whether to eat or to use as bedding — that was his own affair.

Stoïchko, on seeing his fur cap rising in the air, jumped up quickly, seized a handful of chips and threw them at the thief. But the stork was already on his nest, beating the cap with his red beak.

'Psht! . . . Hey, you pesky beast, give me my cap,' cried Stoïchko, and began to swear.

'Tack. . . tack,' the stork went on striking it, trying to tear a bit off.

Stoïchko lost his temper, bent down, picked up a stone and hurled it at the widespreading branches of the willow tree. Badly frightened, the storks flew off the twelve nests in disarray. The Snake-Catcher left the cap on his nest and fled. More enraged than ever, *Nanné* Stoïchko began to look for stones in the courtyard and to throw them at the willow tree, over which the storks circled, anxious and alarmed about the fate of their eggs. But then the Snake-Catcher returned from somewhere, perched on his nest and struck the cap again.

'You wait, you son of a bitch, I'll teach you a lesson!' *Nanné* Stoïchko shouted as he seized his axe and struck the bole of the tree with it several times. The stork remained calm, and, as if in defiance, he began to peck the cap again with his beak, holding it down with one claw.

Stoïchko flew into a rage, began to shout and shush, but the stork, deep in his work on the cap, did not fly off. Then, angrier than ever, Stoïchko seized his axe and began to chop down the willow tree.

The children appeared from somewhere and began to shout gaily:

'The Snake-Catcher has taken Father's cap! The Snake-Catcher has taken Father's cap!'

'Get out of here!' Stoïchko roared, and drove them away. His eye-brows were locked over his nose and his ears wriggled with rage.

The children scattered, and hid wherever they could.

Stoïchko wielded his axe again. Its edge bit swiftly and deep into the soft body of the willow tree. White, succulent

chips flew far and wide. The tree's mighty body shook with pain, and the five huge branching brothers shivered in their death agony.

The storks flew about in horror. They would fly off quickly somewhere, disappear and return again, bringing whole swarms of their mates with them. A dark cloud of anxious and frightened storks gathered over Stoïchko's yard, whirling in horror over the shivering crowns of the willow tree, where twelve nests quaked and fell apart from the shaking.

But the infuriated Stoïchko continued to wield his axe with savage relish.

Soon the huge tree swayed terribly and bent over. Its branches quivered in mortal agony, and its bole cracked, as if screaming in pain. The murdered tree bent slowly and fell on the meadow with a crash and a curse. Its tender shoots broke with a cry. Dust rose from the ruined nests.

Stoïchko jumped back and growled revengefully. Then he thrust himself into the branches, found his fur cap, which had flown off the nest, slapped it down on his knee to shake out the dust, jammed it down over his eyes, and made for the gate, muttering something.

When she heard the crash of the falling tree, Aunt Stoïchkovitsa dashed out of the house in a fright. She stood, dazed, on the threshold, then wailed:

'Stoïchko, Stoïchko, may you be chopped into a hundred pieces! How could you, shame on you, the Lord slay you!'

'Hold your tongue!' roared Stoïchko, turning fiercely on her.

His wife fled into the house and shut the door. Stoïchko went to the tavern.

For two whole days the storks circled over their ruined nests.

A Meeting

The company of veterans to which Uncle Stoyan Gashtnik belonged followed in the footsteps of the advancing troops, now serving as a garrison in the towns, now keeping watch on bridges, now guarding transport units and the railway lines, and now sending prisoners on their way.

From town to town, from village to village, Uncle Stoyan, wrapped up in his striped *yamourlouk***, armed with an old flintlock, wandered over the entire newly conquered land, and there, somewhere at the end of the world, settled down for a longer time, as watchman at some kind of a bridge on a long highway.

The place was distant and deserted. Even in the deepest stillness of the night, when the little river itself seemed to go to sleep, neither the cheering bark of a dog, nor the waking voice of a cock reached the place from the villages.

Here Uncle Stoyan was left on guard with several of his mates. They made themselves a wide, warm dug-out, with a hearth and a chimney at the end, hung their clothes and their bags up in it, made themselves beds of straw, and devoted themselves to their duty.

Their stern, silent figures, as massive as rocks, stood around the place all day and all night with such faithfulness and vigilance, that a bird could not have flown over them unnoticed.

Endless caravans of transport units wound incessantly along both sides of the muddy highway. The oxen zealously and submissively drew the laden carts and their strenuous movements spoke of the universal, mighty, elemental power

* Written about the First Balkan War of 1912

** *Yamourlouk* — heavy homespun cape woven in broad horizontal brown and white undyed wool, traditionally worn by shepherds

of war, which drove them all onwards. During their long and companionable work with men, their animal instinct had been trained to realize the difficulties of the task and the importance of the distant goal, so they dragged the carts tirelessly. They did not wait for the threatening cries of the carters, nor the intimidating flourish of the goad. In the slow and heavy tread of these noble helpers and companions of the peasants, of these fine, silent and poetic symbols of duty and labour, there was zeal and voluntary exertion. Like their owners, they were now doing their duty as soldiers, and knew that it was not ploughs that they were dragging.

Uncle Stoyan, wrapped in his eternal *yamourlouk*, with his old rifle at his feet, watched these endless files of carts, and did not miss a single detail. The oxen, the carter, the wheels, the sides of the cart, the original devices made by some ingenious carter to provide comfort — all this passed before the observant gaze of Uncle Stoyan's little eyes, lost under his bushy eyebrows.

Sometimes he would make remarks in a high sharp voice, as if he were talking to deaf men:

'Hey, my lad, are you asleep, hey! Pick up that bridle or the ox will step on it and tear it.'

Or:

'Hey, uncle, you'll lose your tar tin*!'

When they were not on duty, when Uncle Stoyan and his mates toasted themselves blissfully at the fire in the dug-out, the talk would be of the day's events, and he would again reproach the unknown carters, who had passed on into the unknown, and whom he had caught in negligence.

'His cart was as lop-sided as a drunkard. Tighten it up, man! Is that the way to go on such a long journey?'

But Uncle Stoyan took no part in the political talk that there frequently was in the dug-out.

He would sit, bent over the fire, smoking his short little pipe, and poking the logs from time to time.

It was rainy and foggy weather. Not a glimpse of the sun was to be had for days. You couldn't make out when day dawned and when night fell, and that was why the nights seemed long and hard to them. They had no watch, either. This did not bother Uncle Stoyan, who had spent so many years without

*Tar or pitch was put on the hubs of the wheels or the axles

one, but one of his mates, a village grocer, thought of nothing else, and asked anyone who came across on the road what the time was.

Once Uncle Stoyan said to him:

'I'll find you an alarm clock one day, not just a watch.'

And one day, as soon as he went off duty, he disappeared somewhere, and only returned that evening.

'There's an alarm clock for you, boys,' said Uncle Stoyan, grinning from ear to ear, and drew a big rooster out from under his *yamourlouk*.

They made room for it in the dug out, and shut it up in its cage every evening. Uncle Stoyan did that, saying:

'Now, let me wind the clock.'

Exactly at the fixed time in the night, and particularly in the morning, the clear and ringing voice of the 'clock' echoed all around and told the old soldiers what time it was.

One evening a big transport unit stopped to spend the night at the dugout. Fires were lit, a bagpipe began to shrill, and there was an unusual stir in that desolate spot.

Uncle Stoyan went to the carters for a talk — to ask where they had come from, where they were going, to hear the news, and have a look at the carts and the beasts. He liked the carts particularly.

'I can see these carts don't come from our parts,' he said, 'these are Zagora carts — made there. Fine things.'

He went this way and that around them, peeping underneath them, pulling the tail end, and approvingly tapping the sides, as if he were patting an acquaintance on the back.

As he was examining a gaily striped yoke, the ox, which lay in it sweetly chewing the cud, thrust out its neck and blew in Uncle Stoyan's face.

'Why! That's Belcho, our Belcho,' Uncle Stoyan cried in joyful emotion. 'He knew me, hey, he knew me. The wife wrote that he had been requisitioned, and I said, fare you well, we shan't see each other again. And there. . . . Oh, dear Belcho, oh, good Belcho!'

Uncle Stoyan squatted down beside the ox and began to stroke it and scratch its forehead tenderly. The animal stretched out its head and placed its moist muzzle on its old friend's knee.

'He knew me, hey! A beast, and yet it knows,' he turned

to the carters who had crowded round him. Uncle Stoyan's mates came up, too.

'There's Belcho, I've told you about,' he said to them, 'look at him, he's come to pay me a visit and I thought I'd never see him again! A fine beast, isn't he? And how he hauls, how he pulls!'

Uncle Stoyan began to stroke the ox again.

'Dear Belcho, he's gone to war, too! He's good for anything!'

'Hey, lad,' he said, turning to the carter, 'see to it you look after the beast well, d'you hear? Let me have the curry comb!'

Uncle Stoyan took the iron curry comb from the carter and set about cleaning his visitor, who had brought him such joy.

'Up you get, Belcho, up with you! That's right! Put up your tail! Oh, how muddy you are!'

And speaking the kindest and tenderest words to him, Uncle Stoyan carefully and attentively cleaned him, combed him and swept him down finely with the broom. After that he found some bran, mixed it up with warm salted water, offered him the feed, and stood back to watch him. The tired beast ate gratefully, ate his fill, licked his chops and turned his gentle eyes to his friend, who never left his side.

'Ah, I know, you must be cold,' said Uncle Stoyan, and looked up at the icy sky, on which the frozen stars were twinkling.

He took off his *yamourlouk* and covered the beast.

'There, get nice and warm! You're my visitor, I don't want you to freeze! That's right, you see, we don't forget the good we've done each other.'

Night had long set in. The old soldiers were already asleep by the fire in the dug-out, but Uncle Stoyan was still stirring around his beloved visitor.

He went in late, and was unable to sleep all night. All the happy tender memories of his home, his children, his land awoke in his soul, evoked by the happy meeting with Belcho. . . .

The following morning he did not wait for the rooster's early call, but got up still earlier and went to see to Belcho again.

When the transport unit set out, Uncle Stoyan set out

beside his Belcho, and saw him off quite a distance. At parting, he stopped the ox, stroked it and kissed its forehead.

'Goodbye, Belcho mine!'

Then he turned to the carter:

'Listen, my lad, look after the beast well and... God aid you!'

And thrusting his hand deep inside his shirt, he brought out a bag, untied it, took out a *grosh** and handed it to the lad.

'There, have a drink with this, and look after the beast well, clean it and feed it.'

When the caravan passed on, Uncle Stoyan looked long after it, and returned sadly to his mates, as if he had parted with his nearest and dearest.

* *Grosh* — twenty-centime piece, at that time worth one-fifth of the gold franc

Joy

Veles had already been free for two days. The church bells rang joyfully and solemnly and the streets were full of people and soldiers. The citizens, dazed and excited by their new and unexpected happiness, ran up and down, smiling joyously at every soldier they met. Each of them had taken several of these well-loved visitors into his house, and their hearts were filled with Bulgarian pride. The sufferings and the terrible memories of their bondage** of yesterday were forgotten, and their souls, enraptured by the sweet moment of freedom, were triumphant.

Fine rain was falling. Somewhere a stirring soldier's song rang out, and the muddy Vardar echoed it noisily.

A small boy of ten was walking along a narrow street, stopping from time to time to shelter from the rain under the sloping eaves.

He had thrust his hands into the pockets of his shabby trousers and his bright eyes watched the passers-by with curiosity. For a long time he stared at the groups of soldiers who, accompanied by citizens, walked along the streets, or entered the nearby houses in gay and animated talk.

When soldiers walked by unaccompanied by anyone, he would follow them closely, timidly examining their greatcoats, their buttons and their rifles, overtaking them, as if he wanted to say something to them, listening to their manly throaty speech, then he would drop back, abashed, and stop again under the eaves of a house.

The soldiers passed on, and no one paid any attention to him, no one understood what his lively childish eyes wanted.

The rain kept falling. The child set out along the street, went down to the bridge, where there was more traffic, pushed

*Written during the First Balkan War of 1912

**Macedonia had been under Ottoman rule until then

his way into the crowd, and began to examine the soldiers again. He stopped with particular curiosity before the mustachioed sentry, who stood at the bridge, rifle in hand. How handsome, how inaccessible that bearded hero looked to him!

'Uncle, Uncle!' cried the boy, going up to him.

But a wave of cavalymen clattered over the bridge and separated them. The soldier stood to attention, sternly. The child saw this, and when the cavalry had passed on, he did not dare call out, but turned and walked back.

A young soldier with a posy on his breast passed quickly, whistling as he went.

'Uncle, Uncle!' the boy called timidly.

But the soldier did not hear him and passed on.

After him came an old bearded veteran in a wide greatcoat, walking heavily.

'Uncle,' the child called after him, but his voice choked with emotion and the veteran did not hear him.

Then, along the cobbles at the bend of the street the lively and regular beat of horses' hooves was heard. A young horseman appeared quickly. A sword was slung over his shoulder. The horse flew beneath him, and his hooves struck sparks. What a fine soldier!

The child opened his mouth to call to him, but the horseman vanished like a flash of lightning.

Then the child sat down on the threshold of a shuttered shop and burst into tears. Big childish tears rolled down his cheeks, flushed from the damp air, and dropped down one after the other. Several people passed but did not notice him. The child cried on, rubbing his eyes with his hands.

'What are you crying about?' asked a man's voice.

Taking his hands from his face, the child saw through his tears a young and handsome soldier, with a posy on his breast, standing before him.

'Why are you crying, little one?' the soldier asked him kindly

The child's face cleared.

'We haven't got a soldier,' he said through his tears.

'Why haven't you got a soldier, eh?'

'We live right at the end of town, and we're poor, that's why nobody has come to us,' the child said, beginning to cry again.

Those tears, so naïve, coming straight from his heart, touched the soldier. He understood the childish heart. No Bulgarian soldier had entered their home. Not one of those loved visitors longed for for years on end, had crossed the threshold of their poor little house, and the child's grieved soul wept with pain.

'Come on, get up,' the soldier said to him. 'There, I'll come with you to your house — do you want me?'

The child's face cleared and he smiled happily.

'Yes, I do,' he said, and took hold of the soldier's great-coat. 'Come to our house. Mother and Granny have made a cheese pie.'

'Very well,' said the soldier. 'Come, now, lead the way! Give me your hand!'

The child gave the soldier his hand, and led him away along the crooked little streets.

The sun of happiness quickly dried the tears on the handsome little face.

A Soldier's Field

Behind the village, on the slope below the forest, right opposite the sun and the plain, there was a solitary blackened field, lying fallow, and in the middle of it, solitary, black and immovable stood a young, branchy, self-sown blackthorn. There were no other fields around it, only grey pastures, dead in winter. Further up the hill there was a big dense and old forest, whose small, bushy suckers lay nestling up against one of the boundaries of the field, like small children.

This was Stoiko's field.

In the nearby hollow, the chimney of Penka's homestead, surrounded by cowsheds and sheep-folds, where their big flock spent the winter, sent its thin stream of smoke straight up to the sky.

It was quiet here. The sun shone all day long. Snow never lay here long, and it was warm even when clouds veiled the sun for weeks on end.

Spring was on the way. Winter felt its slow and loving steps and its own frozen pulse came to life again. Along the high slopes of the distant mountains the snow was melting, so that strange cross-shaped patches of earth appeared, heralding the approach of Easter, while the plain turned to them, full of hope. The enthusiastic hymns of rivers and brooks, now set free, already echoed in the valley. A quiet rustle went through the forest. A youthful and mischievous wind played among the branches. The buds swelled in a burst of happiness. The tough hardhearted cornel tree above Stoiko's field could not resist, and one quiet evening, full of longing, it burst into blossom, and its branches were covered with tender little yellow flower-ets, as if the sun's rays had fallen only on them. Yellow crocuses sprang up in the meadow nearby, like lighted candles, and near the heavy blossoms of the hellebore, the blue eyes

of the virgin pansies peeped out shyly, and their fragrance filled the bushes.

One morning three gay whistles, full of life, rang out in the forest. They were quickly and energetically repeated.

Ah! So the starlings were back! There was no doubt about it then, spring was on the way.

Stoiko's field lay stretched out in the sun. How long and wide it was! Its fertile bowels burnt with passion. Warm and tender moisture filled its soul.

Oh, where was Stoiko, the young ploughman, to set the plough in motion, to plough up the field and sow it, to sing over it, bareheaded, while the echo answered him from the forest, so that Penka would hear him from the sheep-fold and come out, and softly, on tiptoe, approach behind the bushes to steal a look at him with her blue eyes, and then run away, frightened, stirred, to lie down in the garden beside the golden bees, unable to still the terrible beating of her heart for a long time.

Oh, where was Stoiko?

Ploughs appeared all over the plain, but they were guided not by men, but by women and children. The fallow land, overgrown with weeds, soon grew black, and basked in the sunshine, sown, clean, consecrated by labour.

But Stoiko's field was not ploughed, it would be quite overgrown with weeds, and hard-baked in its sorrow.

Penka came out to bring in the lambs at play in the meadow.

The boundaries of Stoiko's field were blue with pansies.

'O-o-oh!' cried Penka gaily, and ran up to pick them, but suddenly started back in fright.

'Dear me, what if Stoiko were to see me?'

Her heart began to beat.

She stopped and smiled. Why had she taken fright? Stoiko was away at the war. A letter had been received from him the day before. He had no folk of his own, no relatives either, and that was why he had written to everybody in the village. At the end there was a greeting for her. If she could have done so, she would have sent him one from here. She had already sent him a pair of socks in secret, but neither he, nor anyone else would ever find out who had sent them.

She was making a shirt for him now. She would send that, too, in secret.

A small bird, as grey as a piece of a soldier's greatcoat, perched on the blackthorn in the middle of the field, and began to sing merrily. Penka gazed at it. It was neither a sparrow, nor a wag-tail, nor a tom-tit, nor a nightingale. Birds of that kind were rarely seen.

'I wonder if it comes from there, where he is,' Penka thought. 'O-oh, tiny bird, if you would only fly back to him and tell him how I think of him!'

'Psst, go, dear little bird!' she cried and threw up the pansies she had picked. They fell on her soft hair. The little bird flew off with a gay cry.

Penka felt sad. She looked over Stoiko's whole field, his only field. Who would plough it for him? She stood beside the field, and a sudden idea made her stand straight up. A slight breeze caressed her hair and her face, rosy with youth.

She picked some more pansies and returned.

'Mother, I want to ask you something, but you won't scold me, will you?' she said caressingly to her mother, who sat spinning at the threshold.

Her mother raised her eyes to her and looked at the girl calmly. She thought Penka looked lovelier than ever. There was a shy blush on her cheeks, and a look of ardent resolution in her eyes.

'What is it, my child?' her mother asked.

'But you won't scold me, mother, will you?'

'Eh, why should I scold you? What is it?'

'I want to plough Stoiko's field. He's away at the war, with Brother, and he hasn't anyone. I want to plough his field and sow it, with our oxen and our seed.'

The mother was silent for a long time, then asked:

'How did that idea come into your head?'

'Eh, how!' Penka barely managed to bring the words out, then she fled, overcome by shame.

Her mother followed her. She found her daughter at the apiary, her head leaning against the bole of the apple tree. Two tears, like two pearls, quivered on her lids, ready to roll down her cheeks.

'Listen, Penka, the Lord himself taught you this, my child. Plough it for him, daughter, sow it for him. It's a sol-

dier's field, so it's the people's field. They are fighting for us all there, child, they are dying for all of us. As the Lord has taught you what to do, listen to him, my child!'

And the mother put her arms around Penka and stroked her pretty face gently.

The following day Penka, who had decked herself with pansies, held the plough firmly in her girlish hands, as she turned up deep furrow after deep furrow, and sowed Stoiko's solitary field. The sun poured its rays down on the young worker. The little nameless bird came to the blackthorn again, sang its song and flew away. Perhaps it went to tell Stoiko who was ploughing his field.

A Poor Man's Joy

Market day was drawing to an end. Although the sun still stood high in the heavens, carts, horses and ox-carts were emerging from the Klepoushanski inn and quickly setting out for their villages. Peasant men and women were going hither and thither about their business. Some were watering their horses; others were attending to their gaily-painted carts, laden with a variety of articles.

The big buildings of the stable, the barn and the shed cast sharply outlined shadows on the courtyard, paved with round cobblestones. The peasant lasses, powdered and rouged, stood there crowded together. Around them circled young soldiers in wide jackets, their arms round each other's shoulders, and love light shining in their eyes.

At the end of the yard stood a new iron-bound cart, its sides gaily painted, as pretty as a child's toy. It was half-packed with hay, and over the hay a brand-new striped rug had been thrown. Its ends fell over the sides. Its gay and lively colours sparkled festively, seeming to smile kindly. Upon it, wrapped in a bought scarlet quilt, slept a small baby. It was entirely covered up and nothing was to be seen of it. At one of the front wheels of the cart, her back leaning against it, stood its mother, a middle-aged *Shoppe** woman, eating a bun, which she broke respectfully, morsel by morsel. The sun shone on her silver jewellery, her big belt buckles, her thick old-fashioned bracelets, and her big necklace of imitation gold pieces.

A short, stocky *Shoppe*, dressed as if it was Easter, shaved and with curling moustaches, appeared at the door of the tavern.

**Shoppe*, man or woman, inhabitant of *Shoppsko*, the district around Sofia; Elin Pelin's own folk, for he was village-born

'Pena, Pena, come in for a bit, do,' he called, motioning her in.

'What about the little one?' asked Pena, and she stopped chewing her bun.

'Well, what's it doing?' the *Shoppe* asked, smiling, and went up to the cart.

'Gently, it's asleep,' said the mother.

The *Shoppe* peeped in at the sides, gave a happy, caressing squeak and said quietly:

'It's asleep, the little dear. . . . Let it sleep and you come on in, for I've found some friends from Shilyovtsi. Come and see them.'

And, giving his wife a kind and protective look, Stoyan set off. Pena put the bun in her pocket and followed him.

The tavern was full of peasants. Some were already drunk. They were all talking loudly, pompously and always about business, finished or unfinished. There was a smell of wine, tobacco and stews.

Stoyan had had a drop too much. Three men from another village, old folk, and two women, were sitting at the table to which he took his wife.

Pena kissed the old people's hands and shook hands with the women, who were distant relatives.

'That's my wife, Granddad Mitré. Do you know her?' said Stoyan, and gave Pena another protecting look.

'I know her, of course I do, I've known her since she was a child,' Granddad Mitré said in a dull, hoarse voice, and his withered old face, with its small red eyes, smiled kindly and affably.

'Oh, Granddad Mitré. . . . Mother, God rest her soul, respected you very much. You burnt out her bad boil* for her. . . .'

'I remember, I remember, *nevesta***'. She would have died, the good woman, if I hadn't been called in. God rest her soul. Well, how are you, how do you get along?'

'Oh, Pena and I get on very well,' Stoyan said impatiently. 'We only had one sorrow, and the Lord has rid our hearts of it, so now. . . . For ten years, say, we had no child, and the Lord has given us a fine little boy. . . .'

*Carbuncle.

***Nevesta* — usual form of address for married women

'Long may it live, long may it live,' all the people at the table cried in sympathy.

'Your house is happy now, I know, I know,' the older woman said.

'Well, Aunt Maria, you can't think what Stoyan is like now, since the little one was born, I can't get him out to the tavern even.'

'Stuff, I go to the tavern all right, but....' Stoyan said smiling, turned his head and called: 'Bring a kilo of wine, boy!'

'No, no, Stoyan, we'll get drunk.'

'I won't take no for an answer. It's my treat, I've got a son! I've got a son, I tell you!' Stoyan cried loudly, so that everybody in the tavern turned towards him.

'Congratulations, congratulations, Uncle Stoyan!' friends called from other tables.

'Thank you, brothers. And I thank the Lord, too. I was withering and fading, poor man that I am, like a barren plum tree. . . . Now I'm in full blossom, like an apple tree. I want to treat you,' Stoyan cried aloud, rising to his feet and waving his hand.

'Hey, boy, put a kilo of wine on each table from me.'

There was a stir. The people there, most of whom knew each other, got up to congratulate Stoyan and shake hands with him.

A shy smile lit up his wife's face, and she seemed to grow younger and prettier.

The boy set out around the tables with wine. Glasses were filled. Everybody came up to clink glasses with Stoyan and his wife.

'I'm a poor man! Without a child I was twice as poor. Now the child is my wealth. The Lord gave it to me. All of you here, friends and acquaintances, and those we don't know, from our village and from other villages, let us drink a glass to little Ivancho,' Stoyan cried.

'Long live your Ivancho, long live your Ivancho!' people shouted on all sides.

'May the Lord give such happiness to everyone! Eh, my brothers, do you want to see my little Ivancho? He's still very small — not two months yet. Wife, go and fetch him.'

'But he's asleep,' said Pena.

'Is he?' cried Stoyan. 'If he's asleep, let him sleep! Then

we'll go to him. A small child is greater than a king. Whoever cares to, brothers, come out and see my son. He's asleep in the cart. I made it for him. It's a new one.'

Stoyan made for the door, people rose from the tables, fumbled in their purses for a gift for Ivancho and followed him*. Pena followed them, as anxious as a broody hen, made her way through the crowd and got to the cart first.

The golden rays of the sun still fell upon it, though it was lower over the roofs of the town.

Stoyan got up into the cart, bent down to take the child, then suddenly straightened up in alarm.

'Good Lord!'

His hands dropped as if they had been cut off, and struck his thighs like paddles.

'Another child. . . . Someone has left me another child. Hey, people, whose is this child, eh?'

'Oh Stoyan, oh goodness me!' Pena cried, and climbed up into the cart. People crowded around them and peered curiously over the sides.

Upon the soft cover in the cart, next to little Ivancho, another little child was sleeping sweetly, wrapped in clean diapers, with a small wooden cross on a thread on its breast. Awakened by the noise, it moved its head. Its little red face contracted in comical grimaces. It stuck its tongue out several times, pursed its mouth, went through the motions of sucking, and began to cry.

'Oh, it's hungry, it's hungry, poor mite,' Stoyanitsa wailed.

'Nurse it, *nevesta*, nurse it,' said the other women. 'It's been abandoned and may be hungry.'

'Shall I nurse it? But what about Ivancho?' Pena wailed again.

'You'll nurse Ivancho, too.'

The new baby still moved its lips as if it were sucking. Stoyanitsa took it in her arms, pulled out her breast and suckled it. It clung greedily to her.

'Oh, how hungry it is!' she said, bending tenderly over it.

Stoyan was shaking his head and exclaiming in annoyance.

'What am I to do, brothers? I'll take it to the police station.'

*It is the custom to give a new-born baby the gift of a coin

'That's right, take it there, to the police.'

'I won't let you, I won't let you take it anywhere,' said Pena, and hugged it closer to her, maternally.

'Why, take it, Stoyan, take it. You've longed for a child for so many years — the Lord has sent you two. That's fate. It's sinful to send it back. See how small it is. Rear it,' the women said.

Stoyan bent over to see it and looked at his wife. She looked at him, too.

Then he bent lower over the child and looked at it in silence. The longer he looked the more his face cleared, as if a cloud were very slowly lifting from it.

'Shall we take it, Pena?'

'It's mine already,' Pena said tenderly.

'Come, come, we congratulate you, Stoyan,' said the peasants. 'Come, treat us for this one, too.'

That evening the setting sun saw Stoyan's new cart off to his village. He called gaily to his horses, while Stoyanitsa sat inside, holding Ivancho and his new little sister on her knees.

The Beginning of a Day

Night had not yet left the mountain recesses. The first glance of the sun had just fallen on the summits, and the wisps of mist, which lay over the forest here and there, began to move. In the deep gorge between the crags a muddy river was awakening, and its noise grew stronger.

With the first rays which caught the crags, the nimble figure of a man rose above them. He crawled up stealthily, stood up and looked around. The barrel of a gun flashed in his hand.

Frightened by his shadow, a swarm of doves flew up in a cloud, rose high up in the air and flew away.

A shrill joyous cry rent the air. A young falcon flew over from somewhere, circled on its wings, not yet fully grown, hovered in the air, and shrieked again. Its cry rang out, living and alarming in the fresh morning air, and small birds fluttered about in the forests around. A dove rose like a stone flung from the crag. Suddenly, awakened by the young falcon's cry, it flew drowsily straight towards it. The young bird of prey fluttered in the air and gave chase.

The man raised his gun. But the two birds were too far off, and he dropped it without firing.

The dove returned, horrified, and made straight for the forest opposite. There it suddenly wheeled sharply, probably taking fright at something else, and returned to the crag.

But the hunter stood there, and the metallic sheen of his weapon looked sinister to the innocent dove. It broke its straight flight and dropped low over the deep muddy river.

The young falcon was not afraid. It did not yet know

what man was. Its terrible instinct as a bird of prey drove it towards the grey dove. The soft whirr of the dove's wings excited it. It turned, put on speed and caught up with its prey. The terrified dove sensed the falcon above it and dropped quite low over the water. The falcon shot down like a falling stone above it. Then the dove, which was more experienced, glided right down over the water and then rose high. The falcon was unable to check its flight and fell into the deep muddy water its wings outstretched.

A loud shot shattered the stillness of this solitary spot amid the mountains, and several summits spoke to each other in a clear echo. The grey dove, which had escaped the danger of the falcon, turned in the air, and fell dead almost at the hunter's feet.

The water carried off the inexperienced young falcon. In vain did it flutter its wings to rise in the air again. Its legs found no support and the icy drops of the water, which it beat with its wings, fell like lead pellets on its feathers.

Exhausted, it relaxed on the light waves, and the water slowly and calmly carried it off. But it did not lose hope, it turned its head in every direction and its round eyes did not miss a single straw which floated on the water. It pulled away with effort and its curved beak turned up to the heavy, towering crags which peered down over the river, as if it were asking them for help.

Finally, the current took the bird to the foot of a cliff, and dashed it against it. The falcon shrieked and clung to an old root; little by little it pulled itself out, and stood in a small hole under the cliff. In front of it the river spread its water, above it there was no space, and its wings were wet. The little falcon cowered there, trembling with cold and the fright it had had.

From the forest opposite a cry was heard — a pitiful, anxious call. The mother falcon was looking for her child. She passed over the hunter's head, shrieked above the screees, opposite, circled over the crags, the caves and the precipices. She dropped down low over the earth, then rose high above all the summits.

And there from the sky, her maternal eye caught sight of her trembling child and her heart sank. Several sharp cries echoed over the crags. She dropped like an arrow, trusting to

her strong, experienced wings, she passed over the river so low that she touched the water with her talons. She circled around the inexperienced little falcon and found no place on which to perch beside it. Then she tried to lure it with her flight. But it was wet and frightened. It beat its wings, shrieked, but dared not rise.

Then the mother swooped down and pecked it on the head. The little falcon jumped up in surprise and, finding itself on its wings, it flew up with a joyous cry. The mother circled around it and brought it out of the dark shadow of the crags into the pure air, imbued with sunshine, and her joyous cries swayed like golden chains, caught from peak to peak.

A second terrible shot scattered the morning stillness. The mother falcon dropped her wings in the sky, and fell downwards.

The joyous cries were silent. The peaks around spoke to each other once more in a clear echo.

The sun had risen above them.

The Starling

Children, who were out grazing the buffaloes, came running back to the village with frightened faces, saying that they had found the Starling out in the fields, dead.

It was a holiday, a day in May, when the weather was fine and the village was in a gay mood, the taverns were full of men, there was dancing on the green, and the news spread quickly. The mayor took steps to deal with the matter immediately; he sent for the clerk, the forest ranger and the cowherd, took his books, and pen and ink to describe the event, collected the men from the taverns, and set out for the spot, where the body was said to be lying. The dancing stopped, and boys, girls, women and children dashed after them.

'The Starling is dead! What an unexpected event!' He did not belong to the village. Everybody knew him, but no one knew whence he had come. He had not been there long, but he played the rebeck, amused people, stood their rough jokes, sometimes smiled and was always kind. He belonged to no one, but everybody liked him, and when the news of his death was heard, everybody was surprised and sorry for him. Everyone felt that something would be missing from their lives from now on, and the village suddenly seemed to be deserted. It wasn't only the Starling who had died, a soul had been lost, and a song had been cut short for ever.

The Starling had appeared in the village the previous autumn, as ragged as a scarecrow, barefooted and hungry. They found him asleep on the bench in front of the village hall. The mayor asked him a number of questions, thought him suspect, and shut him up in the village lock-up. He intended to send him to the county town the next day.

As soon as the key was turned on him, the gay and lively notes of a rebeck were heard coming from the lock-up. Zouza,

the daughter of Old Mehmed the Gypsy, was passing that way; she stopped to listen and peeped in through the iron bars of the small window.

'Hello,' she said naively to the young man, thinking she saw a member of her own race, 'what are you doing there?'

'Nothing, they've locked me up,' said the player and set his rebeck aside. Then he screwed up his mouth and began to whistle, imitating the nightingale's high liquid notes in a long, lively melody.

The girl laughed, and came close up to the window to have a better look at him.

The mayor came out of the village hall.

'What are you doing there?' he asked the Gypsy girl sternly when he caught sight of her.

'I heard a starling singing in the lock-up, so I thought I'd listen a while,' she answered.

'It's a fine starling I've caught, but let's see what will come of him,' the mayor remarked.

The Gypsy girl straightened up, was silent for a few moments, then said impulsively, in a pleading voice:

'Let him go, Mr. Mayor, please let the Starling go. He's not a bad boy.'

'Is he one of your folk?' the mayor sneered.

'Whether he's one of our folk, or one of yours, I don't know, but let him go, Mr. Mayor!' the girl pleaded.

Zouza turned lithely and put out a hand to stroke the mayor's coat, then she raised her black eyes to his with a childish look.

'Let him go, Mr. Mayor, let the Starling go!' she repeated.

Just then the Starling struck up another tune on his rebeck. A man and a woman passed by and stopped to speak to the mayor.

Zouza went on begging.

'Let him go, Mr. Mayor, let the Starling go. My brother's getting married tomorrow. Let him play at the wedding.'

'Suppose he runs away?' the mayor asked.

'If he runs away, you can lock me up. I'll stay in prison three years for him,' Zouza said, in jest, then she began to plead for him again.

The mayor was a good soul. He thought a while, looked at Zouza in surprise, then let the Starling out.

That was how the lad came by his nickname.

Zouza took him to her father in the tavern. Old Mehmed was there, drinking with other Gypsies, who were his guests and had come from the villages all around for his son's wedding. The Starling sat down at one side and began to play his rebeck. Old Mehmed liked his playing, called him to his table, gave him a glass of wine, and placed him at his right hand to play for him. Zouza stayed at the door, watching the menfolk for a time, then she went off.

The Gypsies made merry all day and all night. The Starling played for them. Many peasants stayed on in the pub, drinking with the wedding guests. The Starling kept them all amused. He whistled for them like a nightingale, like a starling, then imitated a quail chattering, then a magpie, and a rook. People took a liking to him, marvelled at him and enjoyed him. The smile that never left his face won their hearts.

The Gypsy wedding began next day, and lasted the whole week. Drums beat, *zourlas** were blown, and *horos*** were danced. The Starling played all kinds of tricks on his rebeck, such as no one there had ever heard before. Everyone crowded round to see and hear him.

After the wedding the musicians, who came from another village, took the Starling with them, and went the rounds of the weddings in all the near-by villages. But a month later, he reappeared. Old Mehmed, who liked to sit in the tavern, drinking, took him there to play to him.

Old Mehmed's son soon quarrelled with his father and left the house. He went to live with his wife in her village. Then the old man took the Starling in to help in his smithy and to play for him at the tavern.

From that time on, the Starling, with his ragged clothes, his pale face, his lively smile and his curly hair, made his home in the village, and the rebeck was never silent. He never put it back now in its leather case, which he carried slung over his shoulder, but let it hang from his lapel, next to his restless young heart.

There wasn't much work in Mehmed's smithy. An axe to grind, a pair of tongs or something else to make, and that was all. Mehmed never even went into it these days. The

*Primitive kind of wind instrument, played by peasants and Gypsies

**Round or chain dances

Starling and Zouza did all the work. Zouza worked the bellows, turned the grinding stone, and the Starling wielded the hammer.

In the evenings, when Old Mehmed carried the Starling off to the tavern to play for him, Zouza was left at home alone. She often grew restless then, but never went out to wander around the village, or to see her friends. She would sit on the threshold of the smithy, stern and thoughtful, waiting for them. And when they stayed too late, she used to go to the tavern, call them out and take them home.

One day she said to the Starling:

'Don't go to the taverns with my father any more, d'you hear? I'll cast a spell on you if you do. I'll poison you.'

The Starling threw her a frightened look. Zouza's eyes were burning angrily and sternly.

'What am I to do?' he said. 'If I don't obey him, your father will send me away.'

'Let him send you away.'

'I shall miss you terribly, Zouza,' he said.

Zouza smiled, and her white teeth flashed.

'I'll go with you,' she said resolutely, and tenderly wound her arms round his neck.

Just then Old Mehmed came in. He wasn't drunk this time.

'So that's how the land lies, eh?' he cried. 'Come, Starling, be off with you, don't let me set eyes on you again.'

And he showed him the door.

Frightened and troubled, the Starling left the house quickly. Zouza followed him.

'You stay here!' her father cried. 'I'll cut your throat, that I will!' He pushed her violently inside, went out and locked the door behind him.

From that day on, the Starling disappeared. So did Zouza, because her father kept her locked up in the smithy. For two whole weeks he never let her out. He gave her food and water through the small window that looked out on the yard. Zouza stood it all patiently.

Finally the old Gypsy thought she had got over it, and let her out.

Zouza's face had grown dark. It had faded, the light had gone out of her black eyes. Her smile had vanished. She never

went out, never saw her friends, never went to the *horo*, nor did she ever sing, or go to fetch her father home from the tavern.

People saw her, in the evenings, leaning up against the door, deep in thought, her eyes fixed on the west, where the sun was setting amid the burning clouds above the mountains. Behind them the sky was aflame with sparks that seemed to have come from a terrible forge. Zouza would gaze long in that direction, and her soul burned in the same kind of flames. She would stand there till late, until it grew quite dark, then she would go indoors again, silently.

One evening Old Mehmed did not find her at home. He went out to look for her. He went all over the village, but Zouza was nowhere to be found. Nobody had seen her anywhere.

Rumour had it that Zouza had run away. It was said that the Starling had come and fetched her. The Old Gypsy went to the police to ask for help. They looked for her everywhere, but she was nowhere to be found. Nor was there any trace of the Starling in the county, either.

One month later a policeman brought Zouza home. She had been found in a distant village. She had walked hither and thither looking for the Starling. She came home exhausted, starving, ragged and bare-footed. Only her fiery black eyes had remained unchanged.

'I was looking for the Starling. I wanted to live with him. But I can't find him anywhere, God's curse on him. He's forgotten me, he's left me,' she said to her father, and never spoke another word about it.

Quite a long time passed, and this story was more or less forgotten. Then once, about a week earlier, in the night, the sound of a rebeck was heard in the village. Its sorrowful voice went all around the village, crossing every street.

'That must have been the Starling,' folk said the next day. 'Eh, how sorrowfully he played!'

But there was no sign of him.

Now they had found him, dead in the fields. The whole village crowded out there. Only Zouza stayed away.

On the flower-grown bank of a small path, between the tall wheat, the Starling lay, as if he were asleep. He held his rebeck in one hand, and a small white handkerchief in the

other. His youthful face was pale and lovely, and he looked as if he were just about to break into song. The long lashes hid the black eyes. People crowded around curiously, staring at him and pitying him, but no one's heart ached for this stranger.

'His heart must have burst with song,' said one.

'He died of hunger, poor soul,' said another.

'He died of love, the dear,' one young girl said to her friends.

And they were all right.

A Chance Word

Doctor Haralampi — for that was what everyone called him — played cards with his usual companions, as he did every night, got home at two o'clock in the morning, and slept until ten o'clock.

He lay in bed for a long time, rose slowly, put on his velvet morning jacket, went into his study, and sat down to read the papers, which his servant always left in the same place.

Doctor Haralampi had long said farewell to his fiftieth birthday and was drawing near his sixtieth, although he wasn't in any hurry to reach it, as he liked to put it. In the last ten years his life had run on a smooth and even surface, guided by established habits, like that of every old bachelor. He had inherited a good fortune from his father and had no particular cares in this world. He had a surgery and there was a sign on his door, with his reception hours on it, but he had no patients and he did not try to have any. Medicine no longer interested him. Sick people disgusted him, and he preferred not to see them. That is why he did not spend much time at home, and when he was there, he always gave the maid orders to say he was out.

Doctor Haralampi took very great care of his appearance. He always wore good suits, changed them often, and had a special weakness for neckties. This actually amounted to a mania with him. There were hundreds of ties in his wardrobe, each more original than the other. He spent the day partly at home and partly at the club. He dined at the same restaurant, with the same group of people, among whom there were even some celebrities. Their fame imparted glamour to the round table at which they ate and made it popular. After dinner, the doctor visited families of his acquaintance, at whose houses he played cards until late.

A calm, monotonous life, lacking in beauty and in tempo, but, for that reason, untroubled.

Before he had had time to unfold the papers, the maid came in.

'There's a woman wants to see you, doctor.'

'What woman?' the doctor asked, raising his head. 'Why didn't you say I was out?'

'She insists on seeing you, sir. She's been waiting at the door since this morning.'

'All right, let her in,' said the doctor, without the slightest interest.

A little later the door opened softly and a woman slipped in quietly and timidly, a poor, pitiful crushed being, wearing black glasses, with colourless hair and a shabby, yellowish coat. She held a big bunch of red and white carnations in her hand and, when she entered, stood irresolutely at the door. The hand, which held the carnations, trembled and her gaunt face was distorted by a strange and guilty smile.

'What is it?' the doctor asked coldly.

'Excuse me, perhaps I have come too early,' the woman muttered and the same guilty smile appeared on her face once more.

'Sit down,' said the doctor, indicating the chair.

She sat down, shamefacedly on the very edge of the chair. Her black glasses were fixed on the doctor, and the carnations in her hand swayed as if a wind were blowing them.

'Are you ill? Tell me, what is the matter with you?' the doctor asked, noticing her confusion.

'Forgive me, doctor,' said the woman. 'I'm not ill. It's your name-day* today, and I have come to congratulate you and bring you this modest bunch of flowers.'

She rose like an automaton and handed him the bouquet.

The doctor had completely forgotten that it was his name-day and this strange reminder made him laugh inwardly. He took the flowers with a slight bow and said:

'It's most kind of you. Thank you for reminding me of my name-day, I had forgotten all about it.'

'You have probably forgotten me, too,' said the woman. 'But I have not forgotten you and I never will. . . . I am Na-

*Name-day, the day of the saint whose name a person bears, is celebrated in Bulgaria instead of a birthday

dya. . . Nadezhda Nikolova,' said the woman, and smiled again.

'Oh, yes, yes. . . I'm glad to see you,' said the doctor, 'please, do sit down.'

The doctor said this out of kindness. He couldn't remember any Nadezhda Nikolova, and he racked his brains for some time.

'No, you can't remember. I know. You've forgotten. It was twenty years ago, and you had just finished your studies and returned from Europe. I was a young girl of sixteen. We had gone to the mountains for a walk. My sister and I were among your group. Do you remember when the storm came up? . . . A terrible storm. I've never seen such a terrible thing in all my days. But it's the happiest memory of my life. The storm scattered the whole group. Everyone hid wherever he could take cover. Lighting fell, thunder broke the sky to pieces. Then you took me by the hand, and the two of us hid in a cave.'

'Yes, yes, I remember something of the kind,' the doctor said, as if he were dreaming.

'It may be just "something of the kind" for you, but for me it is a great deal — it is everything. I clung to you, and you hugged me close to your heart and said:

"Nadya, how sweet you are! Nadya, I love you. . ."

'After that no one in my life ever said that word to me. I lost all my family, I was ill for a long time, I lost the sight of one eye, I was unable to finish school, and began to live on the charity of others; I worked, I went into service, I suffered, I lost my refinement and I grew ugly. . . . But I never lost courage. I bear my burden submissively. There was something which sustained me. Those wonderful words you spoke to me then. I spent my youth with them, endured my sickness, my sufferings and humiliations because of them. They warmed me, they sustained me. Those wonderful words, which I heard for the first and last time in my life. How grateful I am to you!'

The woman fell silent.

'Yes, I remember,' said the doctor, who felt uncomfortable at these memories of something so insignificant, that he had completely forgotten it.

The woman rose to her feet.

'Doctor, I want nothing of you. Only tell me, did you say that sincerely to me? Did you really mean it?'

The woman burst into tears. The doctor glanced at her, and for the first time in his life his soul was filled with pity.

'Yes, yes,' he said. 'I remember very well, and I often think of it. I told you that from the bottom of my heart. You were so sweet, that I fell in love with you at once. What a pity that chance never brought us together again!'

'Thank you. Thank you very much. I shall be happy to my dying day, and I shall bless you.'

The woman rose to go.

'Forgive me if I've bored you. Now, goodbye.'

And she opened the door almost at once and went out.

Doctor Haralampi was left alone. He went to the window and looked out. Nadya Nikolova was walking in the middle of the street, tiny, pitiful, insignificant, like a cigarette stub someone had thrown away, but she was smiling happily. For a second she turned and looked at the house through her black glasses, and set off again.

It seemed to Doctor Haralampi that he was seeing that street for the first time, that street along which the houses on one side were in the shadow, and on the other lit by the sun. That street, along which he passed every day like a blind man, was now revealed to him like an unfamiliar road, which led to another life, a real life, full, interesting, imbued with good and evil, with terrible suffering and unknown happiness. But he stood far, far from that life, shut up in his lonely house, as impassive as a corpse.

Laboratory

T

he village awoke in a fog — a dense autumn mist, which covered everything and hung in rags over the eaves, the trees, the wattle fences of the yards, overgrown with thorns.

Nikolai Senov came out on the verandah of their house and looked out. When he saw this impenetrable fog, in which everything was lost, his face took on a sullen expression and he felt even more miserable.

Eight months ago, Nikolai Senov had returned from abroad, where he had taken a degree in chemistry. For the last two months he had been in the capital, looking for work, and last night he had come home in despair.

He had put all his energy into job-hunting, and had done everything which a man with an excellent diploma in his hand, and special recommendations from his professor — known all over Europe — could do to find a post, but had failed. Moreover, he had humiliated himself and had asked for recommendations from outstanding politicians, too — men who had just come to power. He had even gone to see several ministers, but in vain.

He had returned humiliated and insulted, had thrown his diploma into the small cupboard which held the books, which he had collected while still a schoolboy at high school, refused his supper, said nothing to his family, and had gone to bed gloomily.

He had got out of bed just as gloomy that morning. His handsome, youthful and clever face was sad. The smile, which always lit it up, had vanished. Now that he had lost all hope, he stood on the poor village verandah, facing the dense fog, as impenetrable as his future.

‘What is to be done?’

For the last two months he had repeated that question a

thousand times, and he repeated it now, too, but there was no answer. The answer was that impenetrable fog, which lay before him and in which everything was lost.

His old father emerged from the house with his perpetual cough, and vanished somewhere in the yard.

Nikolai Senov hid his eyes in his hands.

'I'm ashamed on account of the old man. He got deeply into debt for me, ruined his property and his health, and what am I to do now? How are the hopes of years, with which he lived until today, to be justified?'

The humiliating, unworthy pictures of the last two months flashed before Senov's eyes, a period in which he, together with hundreds of job-hunters, hung about the doors of the Ministries and waited in the crowd at the doors of the offices of various department chiefs. At the same time, he remembered the wonderful, light, spacious, beautifully arranged university laboratories, in which he and his fellow-students had worked, dressed in long clean white lab-coats.

What happy years he had spent in those wonderful laboratories! Nevertheless, he had been in a hurry to leave them. He wanted to set to work in life which, in his youthful purity, had seemed to him like that light, spacious laboratory, where quiet, a keen thirst for knowledge and calm work reigned.

But life had turned out to be a different laboratory, dirty, unattractive and disordered. Here there were no calm workers, thirsting for knowledge, no concentrated research workers. Here covetous, evil, suspicious, dishonest and mediocre people stretched out their hands, and each did his best to wrench the living from another's mouth.

What was to be done?

Nikolai Senov went indoors. His mother, though she was an old woman, was nimbly going about her work at the fire, cooking something.

She saw her son's gloomy face, and tried to cheer him up, beginning to tell him a lot of amusing tales about the girls in the village. Nikolai remained gloomy. He did not even hear the old woman's words.

'I'm making a lovely dish for you today. You used to love it when you were small, but I shan't tell you what it is,' his mother began again.

Nikolai looked at his watch.

'No, mother,' he said. 'I shan't stay for lunch. I'll take a walk to Listovo.'

'Oh, in this fog, son?'

'Never mind that, it's near. I want to see my friends.'

'Are you going to the schoolmistress?' his mother said gaily. 'She came to see us. I liked her very much.'

Nikolai said nothing; he dressed and went out.

He arrived in Listovo about noon, and stopped at the school, where he had old friends among the schoolteachers. Then some of them went to the tavern where they had their meals together. There was no fog in Listovo. Here a lovely autumn sun was shining and Senov's spirits grew lighter.

In the tavern, at a table surrounded by five young peasants, sat Lolyo, the police agent*. They were all drunk. Lolyo was talking loudly, but when the schoolteachers entered he fell silent, and impudently fixed his eyes on Tsvyatkova.

'How unpleasant,' she said, quietly as if to herself, and led her friends to a corner table away from the other group.

'Well, well, just look at the schoolmasters, the intelligentsia — they won't even say good day to you,' Lolyo remarked provocatively.

'We did say "good day", Lolyo, but you paid no attention to us,' one of the schoolteachers said, jokingly.

The schoolmistress bent her head.

'Who is that?' Nikolai asked quietly.

'He doesn't come from these parts. He's some kind of a police agent. An organizer for the new rulers. He appoints people to jobs, gives recommendations and drinks. Every other day or two, he brings himself along here. Let Tsvyatkova tell you about the rest,' said one of the schoolmasters, and smiled.

Tsvyatkova bent her head in confusion.

'What can I say? He's loathsome. He threatens me with dismissal. He writes me silly letters.'

Senov raised his head and gave the drunken agent a contemptuous look.

'What are you looking at me for?' Lolyo asked, turning to him. 'Look at her. You've come for her, haven't you? . . . Don't think I don't know. I congratulate you, Miss Tsvyatkova.'

* A police functionary in pre-war Bulgaria, who did not wear uniform and who was, to a certain extent, more concerned with keeping the party that had won elections in power, than with other duties

Your long-expected visitor has arrived at last. Congratulations!

Senov jumped up, but the schoolmaster who was sitting next to him held him back.

'Don't get into a quarrel, Nikolai. You'll only have trouble. We had better leave this place.'

'Let's go to my home,' Tsvyatkova said. 'There's no school after lunch, we'll stay there a while.'

They rose quickly and went out with Senov, who was trembling with rage. They heard cynical laughter at their backs, and a threatening growl.

Senov walked along in silence, wrathful, his head bent. This event disgusted him. He remembered the wonderful university laboratory again, and saw himself there, among his young fellow-students in their white lab-coats, standing around the long marble-topped tables, crowded with glass jars, test tubes and various instruments. A soft, pleasant, dull light fell from the glass ceiling. There was a gentle bustle of work, and the amiable and energetic figure of the old professor appeared here and there. But here?

Tsvyatkova was walking beside him. She saw his sad, thoughtful face, and gently touched his hand.

'Don't pay any attention, Nikolai. That's something quite common here. People have become bad, but what's to be done? Come to my home. I've such a lot to tell you. Dear me, you've forgotten me completely.'

'It's offensive to me,' Senov said, 'it's offensive and shameful. It seems to me that I'm sinking into an unclean bog.'

'You're in a bad mood. You'll get over it.'

Senov and the schoolmasters stayed with Tsvyatkova till late. The autumn day drew to a close. The schoolteachers left. He left with them. It was already dark, and the fog, which had lain over their village that morning, had now fallen here as well.

Olga Tsvyatkova saw him out at the gate.

Senov turned up the narrow little street, crossed the little dell in which a muddy brooklet flowed, and came out by the market gardens. From there, up the little hill, the road to his village began. It was dark. The fog seemed to have grown damper, and he barely managed to find his way. He walked quickly. New bright hopes had awakened in him after his meeting with Tsvyatkova.

When he passed the last fences of the gardens, from behind the thick plum bushes which hid the road, several men with big sticks in their hands, jumped out in front of him, shouting:

'Stop!'

Senov stopped, surprised and frightened. Before he could gather his wits, several blows fell on his head, and he dropped to the ground.

Senov lay there for a long time. Finally he came to, raised his head and sat up. It was quite dark. Dogs were barking in the village. He felt dizzy.

He touched his face. It was all covered with sticky, half-dried blood. He got up quickly, stood for a moment, thought of returning to Listovo for help, then turned and set out in the darkness for his own village. As he climbed higher up the steep slope, the fog got thinner and thinner until at last, when he got to the even place at the top, the clear, star-spangled sky stood high above him.

His legs felt weak, and he sat down beside the road to rest. Somewhere far in the distance he saw the lights of his own village. He felt cold.

Sharp pains seared the crown of his head like embers; he put his hand on the wounded spot, felt faint and lay down.

Neither anger, nor hatred, nor ill feeling burnt in his soul. A hurt had gathered there in a ball, which had settled in his breast like a terrible tormenting thirst, that he could not slake. He felt insulted and ashamed.

A sweet, light doze took possession of him. He tried to rise, but it held him down, and overcame him.

It seemed to him that he was lying on a marble table in a laboratory, under a huge magnifying glass, through which his old professor was examining him, turning him this way and that with small pincers. All around at the tables, dressed in long white lab-coats, young people were bending over instruments and working with concentration. They were all hurrying, they were all thinking about life. And each of them wanted to finish his studies as quickly as possible, to go there, to work and be the first.

Totka

Day was breaking. The village was just awakening, and here and there, early-rising housewives were moving about their yards.

Aunt Todorana, whose five-year-old little granddaughter, Totka, was walking beside her, clinging to her *soukman**, entered the village from its upper end, and as soon as she reached its first houses, called throatily:

'Cornel cherries, hey, cornel cherries! Cornel cherries for hemp!'

Totka, who was walking along thoughtfully, her little hand thrust into the breast of her chemise, was startled by her grandmother's cry, drew out her hand and dropped the hard crust she was holding. She raised her head, wrapped in an old yellowish kerchief, and looked at her grandmother, who began to call still more throatily:

'Cornel cherries, hey, cornel cherries! I sell cornel cherries for hemp!'

The old woman paid no attention to the child, but walked along calling, while the child, frightened and ashamed, pressed closer to her, put her hand back in her breast, and walked along taking tiny steps with her small feet, shod in hard sandals.

Aunt Todorana's cry was borne over the sleepy street, and frightened several sparrows, which had perched on the straw-covered wattle fence. A dog growled from behind a small gate near by.

Threshing was over. The roofs, wattle fences, trees and everything, were covered with fine straw dust, and straw was scattered over the roads and courtyards.

**Soukman* — sleeveless overdress, worn over an embroidered chemise in many national costumes

Aunt Todorana walked slowly, with a slow, calm and care-free gait and called. She was a fat woman, with a look of ease about her, with a protruding stomach, an open face, almost without wrinkles, and calm, lively eyes; she went bareheaded. Her uncombed hair was full of dust and pieces of straw, which had fallen from the trees along the road. Her narrow old *soukman*, with its numerous patches, on which the thick thread of the seams showed clearly, barely held her fat figure, and her big breasts distended the dirty front of her chemise and left it gaping with the strain of holding them.

'Cornel cherries, hey, cornel cherries! . . . Get up, you lazy women, I sell cornel cherries!' she cried and raised the heavy bag she carried on her back.

Her voice woke people up. Women came out of the gates, barefooted and bareheaded, in their frayed clothes, their hands tucked into their bosoms. Children ran up, too.

They crowded around Aunt Todorana.

'What is it, Aunt Todorana?'

'Cornel cherries, cornel cherries. . . mountain cornel cherries. I sell them for hemp.'

Aunt Todorana stopped at the square and put down her load at the stone wall of the church.

Totka stood beside her, nestling against her and frightened at the strange people, hiding her head in her granny's skirts.

Women and young brides began to come up with bundles of hemp. Aunt Todorana began to measure out her cornel cherries in a little green dish.

'Why is the little one trembling?' someone asked.

'It's cold, and she's tired. We set out at midnight.'

'But why have you brought her along, poor little creature?'

'I'm giving her away, women, I'm giving her away. She's an orphan, without mother and father, and there's no one to look after her. Is there no childless woman among you to do a good deed and take her in?'

Totka listened to her granny's words, she did not understand them, but a feeling of fear filled her soul, and she pressed up to the old woman harder than ever.

'Childless people ought to take her in. She's a good child, a clever child, and obedient. Come, let them give me something, a little wheat, or maize or wool, whatever is to be found, for I'm alone, and I've nowhere to get it from.'

'Why don't you get married, Aunt Todorana, you're not too old. Look, your face is like a girl's,' someone teased her.

'I shall, why shouldn't I? Find me a man, do,' Aunt Todorana replied gaily and calmly, and cried again:

'Come, cornel-cherries, come! Cornel cherries for hemp.... Come, and I've a child to give away.'

'Why, she's a pretty little thing. Look at her. . . . What eyes she's got, the little darling!' a young woman said, and put a hand out to stroke the child's head.

'What's your name?'

Totka hid her head in her granny's hand. Fear filled her soul and she began to cry.

'Don't cry, darling, don't cry,' the young woman said sympathetically.

'Childish nonsense!' Aunt Todorana said curtly and carelessly, and almost shouted at the young woman:

'Take her, *nevesta**, if you haven't any children, take her.'

'There, you see!' an old woman spoke up. 'You wanted to take a foster-child, Stoyanitsa,** there it is, brought to your feet.'

'I don't know what Stoyan would say, Granny Doina. He wanted a boy.'

'A boy! What d'you want with a boy? He'd become a drunkard, most likely, and sell your property. Take the girl, she's gentle. She'll bring joy into your life. She'll help you. She'll bring luck to your house!'

Flushed and embarrassed, the woman slipped out of the crowd, ran across the square, and turned into the little street.

'Look here, Todorana, Stoyanitsa is a good woman. The child will be lucky if she takes it.'

Totka listened to the talk and pressed her face up against her grandmother, choking with sobs.

'Don't cry, you silly,' her grandmother said, giving her a push, 'don't cry, you'll have a mother. D'you hear? They'll be glad of you, those people.'

'I don't want to, I don't want to,' moaned the child.

Stoyanitsa soon came back with her husband.

Stoyan took the little girl tenderly by the hand, and tried

**Nevesta* — usual form of address for young married women

** Stoyanitsa — the wife of Stoyan

to turn her face in order to look at it, but the child drew back and cried harder than ever.

Aunt Todorana had sold her cornel cherries.

'Let's go to my home,' Stoyan said to her.

Todorana tied up the bag with the hemp she had collected, and took Totka by the hand.

'Come, child, we're going on a visit!'

The child clung tightly to her grandmother's *soukman* and set off.

On the way, Stoyanitsa tried to stroke the little girl and spoke to her with kind words:

'Don't cry, darling. Stay with me for two or three days. Just to be my little girl for two or three days. I'll make you pretty new clothes. I'll buy you little shoes, and a new kerchief; I'll buy you a necklace, too, and bracelets...'

Totka stopped sobbing, and listened to this unknown woman's warm and caressing words. Then she began to sob again.

They went into Stoyan's house, clean and neatly kept. Stoyanitsa placed gaily coloured cushions on the ground for Totka and her grandmother, and invited them to sit down.

Totka grew quieter and, still clinging to her grandmother's *soukman*, turned her tear-filled eyes and looked around.

'Is it nice in our house?' Stoyanitsa asked her gently.

'Yes, it is,' Totka answered through her tears.

'Do you want to stay with me for a couple of days?'

'No, I don't.'

Meanwhile Stoyan, half-smiling and a little shamefaced, sat at one side, talking to Aunt Todorana:

'The Lord has given us everything but this — there is no one to bring us joy.'

'Well, Stoyan, you will be doing good to this orphan. The Lord will bless you for it.'

She turned to the child.

'Totka, come, child, stay here with these people. Granny has work to do — I'll come and fetch you later.'

'Granny, don't leave me,' screamed Totka, 'Gra-an-ny, dear little Granny, don't leave me! Let's go home.'

'Oh, the poor little darling!' cried Stoyanitsa with tears in her eyes.

'She'll get used to it, *nevesta*, children easily get used to things. Take her, and carry her into the room.'

Stoyanitsa seized the child in her arms, hugged her, and carried her into the other room.

Todorana collected her bag and quickly went out of the house.

Totka began to scream. Her little hands touched Stoyanitsa's fine clothes and drew back. They were seeking the old torn clothes of her grandmother.

Stoyanitsa's arms, which had longed for so many years for a child's warm little body, opened with tenderness, and held the little girl with motherly warmth. She rocked her gently and from her soul tender, sweet, caressing words welled upwards, which she had never spoken to anyone before.

This soothed the child. Exhausted and worn out with crying, the little girl, still sobbing, placed her face next to that of the kind unknown woman and, lulled by the sweet whispers she had never heard before, she fell asleep.

Sin

It is a cruel thing to be a hunter. I have always been sorry for God's wonderful creatures at which I have aimed my gun. The agony and the blood of my victims has often tormented my conscience. But I kill again. Alas, it is nature's curse for us to destroy each other mutually in order to continue our genus, and that curse weighs upon me, too. In vain do we say that man is noble. No! His blood is not purified. It flows in the veins of present-day people, exactly the same as it flowed in the veins of our primitive ancestors.

We had gone out wild duck shooting. We spent a fine night in the warm and comfortable little hut which was our cover, and, in the morning as soon as day broke, we carefully opened the little loopholes.

The sky was clear and pure. The swamp shone as if it were made of silver, and thin sheets of ice lay on it here and there. There was hoar frost on the willow trees opposite, which marked the bed of the Isker River. The first rays of the sun fell on Mount Vitosh, all frozen and covered with snow. It was cold.

The decoys tied in front of the cabin greeted the rising sun with cries and dived into the icy water. Nothing appeared in the clear icy air, which tinkled with the cold.

I looked around on all sides for a long time. There was nothing. But when I was about to shut the loophole again, a black dot appeared from behind the hoar-covered willows far in the air.

I recognized a duck. It was flying straight to our swamp, and was soon circling over it.

The decoys raised their heads and began to quack nervously and sharply.

The wild duck, without circling cautiously, as they usu-

ally did, dropped lightly down, and perched at the far end of the swamp and, without delay, made quickly for the decoys.

I raised my rifle and got ready. The duck was coming straight towards me.

'Don't shoot,' my friend said quietly. 'Two more are circling above. Let's wait.'

In the meantime the duck had come up to the decoys. It was impossible to shoot. It dived into the water once or twice more, then swam up to the very edge of the swamp, right under the barrel of my gun. Then it turned this way and that, put its head under its wing, and went to sleep.

The two ducks, which had circled overhead for quite a long time, did not perch.

For a long time I watched the duck sleeping in front of my loophole. It was so near that I could have stretched out a hand and caught it.

It slept gently and sweetly. It must have been tired. It had probably lost its mate and flown from swamp to swamp all night, looking for it.

I watched it with tenderness and pity. It breathed innocence and calm, and I felt as if I were watching a sleeping child.

It was one of those dark brown ducks, with a yellowish-rust coloured head, and a little tuft of feathers over its brow. The tips of its wings had exquisite dark grey patterns on them.

I quietly drew my gun in, and shut the loophole, so as not to wake it.

But alongside with the tender feelings, which that gentle, sweet and pretty creature had aroused in me, someone said within me:

'No, it won't escape! It's yours.'

And a joyful sense of pleasure ran through my veins.

Who said that? Probably it was one of my ancestors, who had lived some three million years ago. His spirit had found me here.

My friend, who was watching through his loophole, whispered excitedly:

'Two have perched in front of me. Let's shoot at the same time. I'll shoot the two and you shoot yours. Get ready!'

Suddenly my reason left me. All the fine feelings which had stirred me vanished. My ancestor of three million years

ago awoke in me. With cruel calm I opened my loophole, carefully and quietly thrust my gun through it, and looked out.

The duck had been awakened by the chattering of the decoys or by the sound made by its mates when they dropped into the water.

It had raised its pretty little yellow head on high and was trying to see at a greater distance.

The muzzle of my gun was barely a metre from it. I aimed at its head.

My friend gave the signal:

'One, two, three.'

'Bang!'

Wildly excited by the shot, I drew in my gun and looked out through the loophole.

The pretty little bird lay on the water with outspread wings. Its yellowish-rusty head was missing.

The shot at close range had blown it off and destroyed it.

That was a long time ago. Since then I have shot many wild duck, but I always remember that one with real pity, and I think that I committed a great sin.

Father Sissoi

With your permission I shall not disclose the name of the monastery, where I spent a blissful summer as the guest of the good abbot, Father Sissoi. On every one of these long, idle and peaceful summer days, we two lunched together in the shade of a thickly leaved vine, growing over a pergola, the exquisite ornament of that holy monastery. It spread its blessed boughs over us, as the cedars of Lebanon had spread theirs over Abraham's head, and it blessed us with its cool shade. Our lunches were unconstrained, wonderful confections by Father Sissoi himself, in which he blended much of the sweetness of his own wisdom with the aromatic mountain herbs.

The wine, for which the humble abbot had a particular weakness, he always cooled beforehand in the fountain, which sang sweetly under the shade of three sad old willows in the middle of the courtyard. We would sit for a whole afternoon at the little wooden table, under the vine, in quiet and enlightened conversation about God, the world, the vanity of life and the riddle of death.

Father Sissoi's long and stormy past had brought him great experience of life, while the theological books and the Bible, over which he spent his solitary hours, had enlightened his soul with holy wisdom.

'Books are like people,' he used to say; 'when they grow old they become wise. Science and wisdom are the work of the past. The present has always been a sea of feelings, through which human souls, uncertain of their course, plough their way. Men's tears, their plaints, joys, aspirations, deceptions and the triumph of their souls, their thoughts and experiences, fall into the depths of that sea like precious pearls. And when it withdraws into the distant past, people find at its bottom

all the treasures which have fallen into the depths, and draw wisdom therefrom.'

I am certain that if such words had come from the mouth of our bishop, he would have been as much puffed up with pride as a patriarch, but Father Sissoi would sit there calmly, picking up crumbs from the table and throwing them with his beautiful priestly hand to the hens and the sparrows, which gathered around him and perched on his shoulders without fear.

He was not very tall, but was healthy and had a youthful light in his eye; he had a pleasantly-smiling face and a greying beard, yet from under his black abbot's hat there peeped locks that were as white as the eternal snows of the mountain. His thoughts moved slowly, branched out, wound up like the vine and bore many leaves. Of himself, he would say:

'I am unworthy for two reasons: because of my love of good living and my condonation of sinners.'

I shall tell you some of his stories, so full of morals and profound wisdom.

Soup from the Sins of Father Nicodemus

The day, although it was only an ordinary weekday, was wonderful. The sky seemed to spread above us in a holiday mood, and the sun seemed to shine in a similar way; there was something almost prayerful in the stillness of the forest, in the pious song of the fountain; something meek in the walk of the black tomcat, who crossed the courtyard thoughtfully and slowly went up to the verandah.

Father Sissoi and I were sitting at the table in the shade of the pergola, enjoying the beautiful day. Far down below us spread the green smoothness of the plain, surrounded by the bluish silhouette of the mountains and their wooded ridges, which mildly raised their rounded tops to the sky as if they were praying.

Leaning on the bench, Father Sissoi slowly and peacefully passed the beads of his amber rosary through his beautiful well-rounded hands. His silence was pregnant.

Wrapped in his white apron, the deaf cook passed through the courtyard, dishes in hand. Father Sissoi waved a hand at him.

'Is it ready?' he cried to him loudly and clearly, as he drew a watch from the pocked of his velvet belt, then looked at it.

'Why, yes, soon,' the cook answered, signing to him to be patient, and set off for his kitchen without waiting for another question.

A smile, radiating benevolence, lit the face of Father Sissoi.

'Do you know what we are going to eat today?' he asked, turning to me.

'You have prepared something very tempting again, Father,' I said, glancing at the bottle of wine, which was cooling in the trough of the fountain.

The bottle standing there always foretold something special for lunch: a *gyuwech**, a specially sharp mutton stew, a roast chicken or *shish kebab***.

'No,' said Father Sissoi, placing his hands on the table. 'Today we are having something simple in itself, but full of meaning. Today I shall regale you with soup made from the sins of Father Nicodemus.'

I looked at him in surprise, relishing the good joke.

'I'm not joking, my friend,' said Father Sissoi, and bent his head thoughtfully, 'I am telling you the very truth. Today we shall eat soup made from the sins of Father Nicodemus. It's a year now since he went to his rest in heaven, poor man, and his grave is there, in the monastery cemetery, under the quince tree which he planted and cared for himself. The humbleness of his life has helped the name of this good man into oblivion, yet his soul lived in the fear of God, and in constant striving after heavenly grace, always torn by uncertainty.'

'I found him here, a year before his death, aged, but well-preserved, strong and healthy. Even now I seem to see his large, tall, straight, broad-shouldered figure, which could not enter the church door without stooping. He walked heavily, slowly and with dignity, with the presence of a patriarch. There was a mysterious and wonderful look in his wide, round eyes, above which jutted thick bushy eyebrows, and it did not go with the strength, which his figure breathed.'

'In the mornings, when he emerged from the shadow of his cell and stopped at the church door to cross himself, the rays of the sun falling on his broad shoulders, which stretched his faded old cassock, seemed to fall on the ridge of a mountain.'

'And, God forgive me, I always used to think that it was not fitting for a man like him to pray, because he seemed stronger than any sin, against which he should have lifted not fingers gathered to make the sign of the cross, but his clenched fist.'

*A dish of mixed vegetables and meat, greatly appreciated in Bulgaria

** Small pieces of pork or mutton stuck on skewers with pieces of hot peppers and pork fat between them, then grilled, preferably over embers.

'Father Nicodemus lived alone in his little room and did not wish to associate with me. He ate alone, and was punctual and regular at all services — both matins and evensong. He looked after the flowers in the garden with love, and was particularly fond of white roses, of which he planted several different varieties here. On the lovely May mornings, when these roses blossomed and the garden seemed to be full of little white angels, Father Nicodemus used to go down and walk among them, smelling them, and always he would pick only a single rose.

'It was strange that that rose was always found left on the bench, beyond the Monastery wall, in front of which lay the loveliest of our meadows. Today I know that this peculiarity, although wrapped in mystery, was not without significance.

'On the fine days of spring and summer, Father Nicodemus spent most of his time by the river with a fishing line. That was his passion.

'He used to wander about the shady valley, along the river, struggling through the bushes, which cover its banks, climbing over the big rounded boulders, which had gone green with age, and he knew no exhaustion. On such days, he would miss evensong. But many people would see him straighten up when he heard the bell, leave his line and cross himself until the bell was silent.

'Father Nicodemus had entered the monastery as a very young man, barely twenty years old, and had always been an eccentric. Many times had he been asked to become abbot, but he had always meekly refused.

'Now he rests and has found peace under his quince, which bends its thick bushy branches over him, covered with young green fruit. And we are going to eat soup made of his sins.'

Father Sissoi smiled wisely, raised his hands to toss back the long sleeves of his cassock and continued:

'Yesterday, at the bottom of a hidden cupboard in Father Nicodemus's cell, which is now empty, an earthenware pot was found, full of haricot beans, and covered by the dead man's prayerbook. Each bean was wrapped in a separate piece of paper.

'On the flyleaf of the prayerbook is written. . . .'

Father Sissoi took a small book in an old binding out of his breast pocket and read:

‘For each of my sins in deed or thought I leave here a bean — black for unforgivable sins, and white for those, which throw my soul into doubt, and which my thoughts cannot distinguish whether they be sins or not. For the black sins I repent deeply before God, and for the white ones, I pray for mercy.’

Father Sissoi closed the book, placed it on the table and took from his pocket a handkerchief, in which something was wrapped. When he had unfolded it, he shook out onto the table a whole heap of creased little papers, which scattered when he sighed.

‘These are the little papers in which the beans were wrapped. On each of these is written one of Father Nicodemus’s sins. I read them one by one, and I see that perhaps the soul of this poor monk was needlessly tormented, and that our merciful Lord received his prayers with a kindly and good-natured smile. Let us read a few.

“‘I remembered the worldly life and my youth. I remembered my love, which became the reason for my entering this monastery. I remembered her whom I loved and the white roses she liked to wear” — a black bean.

“‘Every day on the beech tree in the meadow beyond the monastery wall, I leave a white rose for whoever finds it. Let an unknown soul be gladdened by it, as once she was” — a white bean.

“‘One thought gives me no peace — why did I fly from life? Did I save myself or not?” — a white bean.

“‘In saving his soul, does not man destroy his body?” — a white bean.

“‘I meditate, and I do not know which is highest in man: his soul or his body. Are they not one substance indivisible and does not the soul triumph at the happy inclinations of the body?” — a white bean.

‘Thus, in all these marked bits of paper dropped into the pot, he recorded not the sins he had committed, but memories of his youth, thoughts, which awoke doubts, and doubts, which tormented the soul of the late Father Nicodemus.’

When he had read the papers, Father Sissoi carefully

wrapped them up again and put them away in his pocket, then with a searching look at me, he said:

'What a thing is man!'

'A black bean,' I replied.

'Both black and white,' smiled Father Sissoi.

Just then the cook began setting the table, for it was already noon, and he brought a large dish of smoking aromatic soup, made of beans, some of which were white, some black.

'There, that soup is made from the sins of Father Nicodemus. As for the wine, which is cooling there, I thought we would drink to the peace of the good monk's soul,' said Father Sissoi, and invited me to take my seat for luncheon.

The Silent Bells

It was the Feast of the Assumption on the following day, the feast day of the church at Zhrelino Monastery, famous for its wonder-working icon of the Holy Virgin, and for its three sweet-toned bells, whose echoes sent their blessing across the fertile valley, above which the monastery was perched, high in the hills, dominating it with its white walls.

Following ancient custom, the bells were rung only at Easter and at the Feast of the Assumption, and the first peal was rung by the abbot himself. Then their sweet tones would echo far and wide from the belfry, sonorous and solemn, as if coming straight down from the heavens, spreading out in broad waves, descending to the villages, raising all spirits to God and turning all eyes to His realm — the skies.

And pious folk from the nine villages of the broad valley, as well as from further afield, would come to the church in the old monastery, to bow before the wonder-working icon, offer their gifts and beg for healing of body and spirit.

Father Joachim, the old abbot, looked at the sun, which had already sunk behind the monastery's big walnut tree, and saw that the shadow of the long balcony had half covered the small church, and his heart was filled with anxiety. Even-song was approaching, and he had to ring the bells.

Was he ready?

He looked at his hands to see if they were clean, he looked round the clean-swept courtyard and at the people who stood in a group around the belfry, looking upwards. Then he went up, with quick steps crossed the long, wide balcony of the building where the monks' cells were, descended the wooden staircase with its steep stairs again, and disappeared in the courtyard. For the last two days the good old man had known no rest. He wanted to be ready for the great feast day, to have

everything neat and tidy and spotlessly clean. All sorts of people would be coming, simple folk and persons of note. Even the bishop might come. Every single cobweb had been swept from the church, every corner had been carefully examined. The stone flags had been washed till they gleamed. But it was the golden halo, which a rich man from a distant city had placed on the wonder-working icon of the Holy Virgin, that gave the abbot particular joy. The rich man had also placed an expensive purple silk curtain on the screen in front of it.

Father Joachim had come many times to stand before the icon, to straighten the folds of the curtain and rejoice at the golden halo.

Everything was ready. The solemn hour was approaching. The brother monks were already in their cells, preparing for evensong.

But the abbot wanted to check everything again. There might be something he had forgotten. And he entered the church again. It was a small and low old church, built no one knew how long ago, holding memories of ancient kings, and which had survived the days of bondage and lived to bless the new kingdom. The evening dusk had entered the church and seemed to be praying in front of the lighted lamps, the tiny flames of which were lost before the gentle smiles of the saints. They were touchingly solemn on the eve of the great feast.

The abbot stopped on the threshold in surprise, for in front of the holy icon he caught sight of the dark silhouette of a woman with a child in her arms. The abbot grew angry. Nobody ever entered the church for this evensong before the bells had been solemnly rung. Such was the custom.

He tiptoed up to the woman and looked her up and down. She was in rags and unwashed, her head was bound with a soiled kerchief, so that only her eyes were visible. She had stepped on the flags with her dirty bare feet, leaving her foot-steps on the floor, and this even further angered the neat old man. The woman did not hear him. She was praying aloud and sobbing, as she held her sick child up to the Holy Virgin, a little child that was as pale and withered as last year's flowers. It had closed its eyes, and was breathing heavily and moaning in pain.

'Save him and preserve him for me, Holy Mother of God, for I have no other,' whispered the woman, bowing low as a

tree bows to the force of the wind. Her tears dropped on the cold flags, just as the wax dropped from the burning tapers.

The woman took a small, blue-headed pin from her bosom, and pinned it to the new silk curtain.

'Accept this from me, Holy Mother, for it is all I possess.'

'Why have you come in here?' the old man asked angrily.

'The bells have not yet been rung. Don't you know the custom?'

'Indeed, I don't, Father,' the woman said in confusion.

'Go now. Come later,' the abbot ordered.

The woman turned away submissively, tightly clutching her child, and went. Father Joachim followed her with his eyes. And when she passed across the light at the door, he again noticed how dirty and ragged she was.

The abbot saw that spots of mud had been left on the flags on which the woman had stood. He saw the ordinary blue-headed pin on the curtain. Its head stood out like an insect on the lovely curtain and spoiled its beauty. Father Joachim took it out and threw it into the corner. Then he crossed himself in front of the icon, carefully rearranged the folds of the curtain and went out.

Apart from this incident, everything else was in order. But his kind heart forgot it when he saw the courtyard full of people, holding tapers in their hands and waiting for the bells to ring before they entered the church. The monks were ready too. They had come down from their cells and were talking to people about the approaching feast day.

The people who had gathered there were awed by the appearance of the abbot. The men bowed to him and the women came forward one after another to kiss his hand. The feast had begun. The old man's spirit was softened and he blessed them aloud.

The sun was sinking and a slight breeze was blowing from the mountains, softly shaking the leaves of the walnut tree as it passed and moving on down into the valley to play with the river.

The old man washed his hands at the fountain. A young servant handed him a towel, he dried his hands on it, then crossed himself and went up into the belfry. The monks took their places by the church door and the people crowded after them in humble expectation. All eyes were turned to the top

of the belfry, where the abbot was standing to perform the holy rite.

He crossed himself again and pulled the cords which simultaneously swung the three clappers of the bells. He struck the three iron clappers on the bronze mouths of the heavy bells. Once, twice, thrice.

But the bells remained silent and gave forth no sound. The bronze bearers of sound had fallen silent.

It was terrifying to watch the heavy iron clappers strike the pure metal and yet hear no sound. There was something dreadful about it all! The three bells swung and strained, as horrified as the deaf and dumb who wish to give warning of a terrible fire, yet cannot do so.

The old man tugged at the ropes with all his might, bending low and straightening up. But the bells remained stubbornly silent.

Terror seized the abbot. He could not breathe and all went dark before his eyes. He dropped the rope and fell in a heap on the small platform in front of the bells.

The people in the courtyard were struck with wonder, they crossed themselves, but none dared speak. The monks went up into the belfry to bring the old man round. They carried him down. He clung to their arms, as white as a sheet, distraught, chastened by this great miracle and scarce able to speak.

'It is God's omen!' he cried. 'Pray, brother Christians, for a great sin has been committed!'

They took him into the church. The people crowded in after him. All fell on their knees, crossing themselves and whispering prayers. The women cried aloud, the frightened children screamed.

Father Joachim fell on his knees in front of the wonder-working icon, crushed, beside himself and in despair. He struck his forehead on the cold flagstones and so remained for a long time. His aged face was wet with tears.

He realized that something terrible had happened, that God was wrathful, that a great sin was weighing upon the earth. But he did not know what it was and could not find words for his prayer.

Helplessly he raised his eyes to the Holy Virgin, whose

image, encircled with gold, gazed mildly down on him between the two purple wings of the silk curtain.

The abbot rose to his feet, began to cross himself, adjusted the curtain with an absent-minded gesture, and glanced in a daze at the icons, the stalls, the floor. In the corner, under the altar screen, he saw the small blue head of the pin he had cast aside. He bent down, picked it up as if in a dream and pinned it to the curtain.

Suddenly from outside came the sound of the bells, glorifying God, and it floated solemnly over the monastery, entering the church like a living thing.

The congregation hurried out, all went into the courtyard, the monks and the abbot too, and fell on their knees again, amazed at the miracle they had witnessed.

There was no one in the belfry. But swaying strongly, freely and lightly the heavy bells themselves were ringing.

The Merry Monk

The old Monastery of the Holy Trinity is high up in the mountains; it is hard of access and therefore almost deserted. Nestling against the foot of large crumbling cliffs, which in the course of time had acquired the strange forms of monsters, with its ruined stone buildings overgrown with weeds, its crooked tumbled-down cells, blackened with time, its grass-covered courtyard, in which stand several dying trees, the place is depressing in its silence and solitude, and its deserted appearance is frightening.

The little church, a survival of who knows what times, seems to be crushed under the weight of its moss-covered tile roof. Its crooked stone walls are supported by thick rotten timbers and although the plastering has been patched, they have sunk into the earth, and the solitary vaulted door looks more like the mouth of a cave than anything else. You have to bend almost double to go through it. Inside, the church smells like an empty tomb. Deadly cold seeps into you from the big uneven flags which cover the floor. The sunlight, which falls straight on to the church, cannot get into it through the small deep-set windows, covered with cobwebs, and the figures of the icons are as pale as dead men. Their sunken eyes gaze out at you impassively and hopelessly.

The vast forests, which once gave freshness and beauty to the surroundings, have long since disappeared. Torrents have furrowed the steep slopes and swept away the roads. Purple screes gleam on the bare slopes, like evil-looking scabs. The numerous springs in the valleys have run dry, and in their place there are only slimy pools of stagnant water, to which no animal comes.

The Lord himself has taken his blessing away from this place, and people have ceased to come on pilgrimages. An old monastery cook and a monk, sent here by way of punish-

ment, spend their time in idleness, and their surliness drives everyone away. The eagles up in the crags have left their eyries, the swallows no longer twitter beneath the eaves. The dove's voice is never heard and all the owls have fled. Only spiders weave their webs in the dark corners and swing along the walls of the empty rooms.

Down in the hollow, not far from this dreary spot, there is a lovely place. A wide smooth meadow, surrounded by high crags, overgrown with moss and crane's bill, wet from perpetually running streams. Cold springs babble at the foot of the crags gathering their waters into a quietly flowing rivulet. The holy grave is in the middle. An ivy-covered stone marks the place, and below it there is a spot on which, as if by a miracle, all the flowers to be found in the mountains grow one next to the other, as though they had been collected and planted by a virtuous *nevesta**. They flower, one after the other from the first spring violets to the autumn crocuses, on which the first snow falls. Thousands of birds gather all around; and at night many animals come down from the mountains to drink at the rivulet. They come down to the meadow calm and tame, and not one of them attacks another. Wolf and deer, fox and moor hen, slake their thirst side by side.

That is why people, too, come here to seek healing for their wounded souls. The sorrowful, those who suffer grief and gloomy thoughts, those who are hopelessly in love, happy newly-married couples, orphaned children; the childless, and those who have many children, come to pray at the holy grave and to wash their faces in the blessed water.

No saint or martyr, whose name is recorded in the calendar, rests in this grave, nor will you find a song about him in the ecclesiastical books. Even his name is little known. but the Lord has accepted his works and with invisible care eternally tends the flowers on his grave.

In this small grave, over which all the flowers of the mountain flower in turn, rests Enicius, a young monk, once known as the Merry Monk.

He was left an orphan at an early age, and was reared by strangers, who sent him to serve at the Monastery of the Holy Trinity, which had just been founded, when he was barely ten years old. The monks made him shepherd of their flock

* *Nevesta* — young married woman

of goats, and on Sundays and other holidays taught him the church services and the Word of God. The youngster spent most of the time in the forests, alone with his silent flock, playing a pipe, which he had made himself, and lying on his back in the meadows, staring up at the sky, listening to the beating of his small heart, and pondering on life and the world which was so distant from him. There he came across different animals and got used to them, always without fear. He learnt to imitate the calls of birds and animals so successfully, that he could call wolf and rabbit to him. He could gather rooks in flocks. He lured does and talked to them so sweetly that they would come to him and take bread from his hand. Sparrows perched on his head and shoulders, and were overjoyed when he spoke to them. He carried grain for them in his bag and fed them. Hares came to him, standing up on their hind legs before him and staring at him for hours. He tamed snakes with his pipe, and they crawled over him, caressing his hands and his neck, gentle and obedient. He used to assemble all kinds of forest birds and sing them songs, which he made up, and they listened to him gratefully. He knew where the doves' nests were and brought food for them when they were sitting. Wolves would lick his hand and never touched his flock.

The old monks were amazed one evening, when they saw their shepherd boy bringing in his goats, while two large wolves walked at each side of him, fawning around his knees.

'Drive them away, you are playing with the devil,' the abbot told him sternly.

The boy said something to the wolves, stroked them, and they ran back and took cover in the forest.

The monks gathered together after evensong and discussed the matter at length. Fear had seized their spirits.

'Satan himself has a finger here,' said the abbot. 'Or else this boy is the Tempter himself, who has stolen among us to destroy us.'

So the pious monks decided to hold vigils that night, and pray over the boy, and to hang a consecrated cross around his neck. If he were an incarnation of the Artful One, he would burst and vanish.

The boy heard the prayers meekly, and when they placed the cross around his neck, he kissed the hands of all of them and wept with tender emotion. Then the monks were convinced

that the boy's soul was pure and innocent. And when he was twenty years old, they made him a monk and received him into their brotherhood under the name of Enicius.

Every day, after evensong, together with the newly-ton-sured monk, they would go up the steep path to the small meadow above on the high rocks surrounding the monastery: there they would sit, and hold pious conversations.

They had given up all that was earthly and of the flesh, and had withdrawn for seclusion and repentance to the peace and quiet of the monastery in the mountains. By prayer and fasting, abstinence and exhausting their bodies, they hoped to raise their souls to the Lord and go to his kingdom in purity. Enicius, the young monk, humbly listened to their teaching, turned his fine blue eyes to the heavens, and his soul was filled with bliss, just as the mountain was filled with the scent of linden blossom. As his soul blossomed forth in beauty so did his face grow more beautiful. Despite fasting and abstinence his body grew big and supple, breathing strength and health. His red cheeks, which were the colour of a well-baked wheaten loaf, were covered with a small soft and curly beard, his hair grew in dark gold ringlets, and his blue eyes had the depth of the azure sky and a sunny look.

The monks gazed at him in wonder and feared lest this gush of strength and health might destroy young Enicius's soul. All day long he worked, humble and carefree, sweeping the small church, planting flowers in the little garden, watering them, and when they blossomed, picking big bunches of them and placing them in an earthenware cup on the small table in his cell. Sometimes he would stick a flower behind his ear under his monk's cap, and walk hither and thither singing songs which he had learnt from the boys of his village when he was small.

This did not please his fellow-monks, and one evening, after their talk at the rocks — which Enicius had attended with a sprig of crane's bill stuck behind his ear — the abbot said to him:

'Enicius, your love of flowers is a worldly passion, and that is why it is sinful. Flowers remind one of love between man and woman. The self-denying man, garbed in black, must avoid such thoughts.'

Enicius looked at the abbot with his fine eyes and said:

'Flowers are the loveliest of the Lord's creations. He sowed them upon the earth to serve as examples of beauty and purity.'

'What about the songs you sing?' the abbot asked him, frowning, and bent a questioning look upon the young man.

'They are flowers which grow in man's soul, inspired by the Lord, garlands of the purest words. Birds praise the Almighty Creator with song too.'

'Enicius, your thoughts are heretical.... Beware of blasphemy,' the abbot said and rose.

The monks followed him in silence. Enicius remained alone on the rocks. The sun was setting and the valleys were filled with shadows. The young monk fixed his thoughtful gaze down below, where a broad plain lay spread at his feet, and where people lived in poor little villages, and said to himself:

'What can those people down there be thinking, earning their bread by the sweat of their brow?'

At these words someone laughed loudly in the solitude. The monk shivered. The laugh seemed evil and sinister.

On looking around he saw the Artful One sitting a few steps away from him, swinging his feet over the precipice.

'Aren't you Satan?' Enicius said to him, sternly.

'You have recognized me,' the Horned One answered.

'I recognized you by your gloomy face and by your laugh, which is not like that of a human, because it sounds like the noise of stones being rolled down the precipice. Why have you come?'

'Your thoughts attracted me, and I came to have a talk with you.'

'I was not thinking of you.'

'But you think as I do.'

'God forbid,' said the young monk, crossing himself.

'Your cross does not frighten me, because your appearance attracts me.'

'So you've come to tempt me, have you?'

'I've come to ask you something. Whose salvation are you worrying about, you and your brethren of the monastery? And why do you flee from men?'

'So as not to touch the evil you cause, we have withdrawn

into solitude, to purify our souls and prepare them for our Creator's mercy.'

'You care only for yourselves.'

'Everyone must think of his own redemption.'

'You are my slaves.'

'No, Tempter, we are your enemies.'

'Leaving your neighbour and thinking only of yourself means that you are my submissive servant.'

Satan gave a harsh dry cough and his eyes glittered triumphantly.

'Avaunt!' cried Enicius, and felt a sharp pain in his soul, 'Begone!'

But the Artful One sat there, swinging his feet and staring persistently and impudently at the young monk.

Enicius crossed himself three times, turned and began to go down the steep path to the monastery. And until he was out of sight, he heard at his back the malicious laughter of the Devil, which was like the noise of stones rolled down the precipice. Enicius felt that his own soul was that precipice.

He went back to his cell, prayed long, and went to bed late. But the calm sleep which had been his every night so far did not come. Nightmarish thoughts tormented the young man who had consecrated himself to the Lord. He tossed in his white bed, and one thought gnawed at his conscience:

'Whom do I serve, in truth? Do I serve the Lord? He created me a man, but do I serve Him as a man, as His other creatures do? Do I serve myself? Will He receive a soul which has renounced all the exploits, misfortunes and joys, that He has created for it? Or do I indeed serve the Tempter, who visited me?'

The following day Enicius appeared before the brethren pale, sad and with a desperate mien. They asked him what the matter was, but he was rather silent. He forgot to water the flowers that day. And when they went out that evening for their customary talk above the rocks, Enicius kissed the abbot's hand and said:

'Brethren, I want to make my confession before you all. Last night, here at this place, the Artful One visited me and I talked with him.' Amazed at Enicius's words, the brethren began to cross themselves. The abbot looked at him in fear..

'What are you saying, my child! Are you yourself, or are you raving?'

'I am speaking the very truth, father.'

With downcast eyes Enicius recounted his meeting with the Devil and repeated the conversation which he had had with him. When he finished, a cold harsh laugh was heard on one side, and cold shivers shook the monks. On the rock, at the same spot where Enicius had seen him, sat the Devil, calmly. His horns rose above the bushes, and his feet swung over the abyss. When he had stopped his impudent laughter, he turned to the monks and said:

'You are old, and life does not need you. Those whom life does not need, are needed neither by the Lord, nor by me.... But young Enicius is mine.'

These words froze them all. But Enicius jumped up manfully, his eyes blazing, and he cried, threateningly:

'You lie, Artful One, I shall not be your servant!'

With swift steps Enicius went up to the Artful One and kicked him in the back with all his might. The Devil groaned, fell from the rock and crashed down into the precipice. They all heard something burst like a skin and an appalling stench was wafted all around.

'I've killed him,' Enicius cried triumphantly. 'The Lord gave me the strength to destroy him.'

Amazed at the miracle, the monks returned in silence, crossing themselves incessantly as they went down the path.

In the morning, when the sun rose, they saw that the rock from which Enicius had kicked the Devil, was bespattered with blood, and that strange weeds with an intolerable smell had sprung up below it.

That same day Enicius's soul was relieved of the heavy burden he had borne. His face grew rosy, and his eyes regained the purity of the azure sky. His heart was merry. He picked a bunch of gaily coloured flowers and stuck it behind his ear. He got the birds together and sang to them. He watered the flowers and talked aloud with the mountain echo.

'Enicius,' the abbot said to him, having sadly followed the young man's actions, 'you think you have destroyed the devil, but I see that he has entered into you and that you please him with your actions.'

'No, father, my soul is at peace. I am merry at the Lord's

command, and at his command I want to give up monastic works and to devote myself to work among men. People live in villages and hamlets, the poor and the rich, scratching the earth the livelong day, suffering, dying and having no joy whatever. I want to go and serve them.'

'How can you serve them, being inexperienced and unprepared?'

'I shall play to them, I shall sing to them, I shall take them laughter and joy. And if they are evil they will become good, and if they are good they will not become evil.'

The very next day Enicius pinned a big bunch of lovely mountain flowers to his black cassock, took his shepherd's flute, left the monastery and went down to the villages, where people lived.

Although it was a holiday, the village which he first entered was sad and deserted. There were no people in the streets. The dogs scented the stranger, they dashed out of the dirty yards and began to bark at him, but his gentle voice and his sunny smile quietened them and they began to fawn at his feet and whimpered happily. Enicius took out his pipe and began to play it. Sparrows flew down from somewhere and perched on his shoulders, his hands and his tall monk's hat. The dogs followed in his footsteps as friends, while the cocks and hens flew up to the wattle fences to see the curious procession.

Children ran up from somewhere and began to shout aloud:

'Run for your lives, a madman has come, a madman, a madman!'

They began to throw stones at the monk, booing all the time.

Father Enicius stopped, turned to them and said:

'Come, children, I'll give you a sparrow each and I'll sing to you.'

His smile was so warm, kind and merry, that he won the children's hearts at once. They surrounded him, but kept their distance, because they were afraid of the dogs, which followed in his footsteps. Then the monk turned to the animals and told them to go back where they had come from.

The dogs stopped submissively, then turned and trotted off to their homes. Then the children went up to the monk and stared in round-eyed amazement at the sparrows which

had perched on him as fearlessly and calmly, as if they were on the branches of a tree.

'Now I'm going to give each of you a sparrow,' Enicius said, and putting out his hand he ordered the sparrows to perch on the children.

The little birds fluttered up and perched on the caps and shoulders of the children, who began to jump about, crying aloud for joy. Enicius began to jump with them and to sing a merry song.

Soon curious men and women came out to the gates, and stared at the merry monk in amazement.

'Dearie me!' some old women exclaimed, crossing themselves. 'Is he mad, or drunk, the poor fellow?'

But the monk's handsome face shone with happiness, and a warm smile curved his lips, while goodness and wisdom shone from his gentle eyes.

News of this strange monk soon spread throughout the village and the curious dashed out down all its little streets to see him. Men, women, children and even helpless old folk crowded the square where Enicius had stopped, with the children squatting around him, the sparrows calmly perched on their caps, staring fearlessly around.

'A magician, a magician,' the women began to whisper.

'No, that's the Devil, the Devil himself,' some cried, 'catch him, let's bind him and shut him up.'

Several men pushed the crowd aside, and laid hands on the monk with threats.

'Wait awhile,' he said to them smiling, 'you know nothing yet. I am not harming anyone. I only want to cheer you up. I see, you are gloomy and out of sorts, tired with work, I see young men old before their time, and girls who wear their kerchiefs as if they were widows for lack of joy. This is not pleasing to our Lord. Just look at the fields, see how green they are, look at the meadows all gay with flowers, see the fruit trees, covered with blossom, watch the little flies, the busy bees, the flowers and plants, how joyful they all are. They praise the Lord their Creator with their joy. Yet you people, why are you so gloomy? Lasses and lads, run home, put on your Sunday best, come here, join hands in the dance and I shall play for you a while.'

Enicius spoke simply and with such a smile that they

all felt gay and a life-giving quiver, a vague and wonderful hope awoke within them. The men who had seized him let him go. The lasses and lads burst out laughing and ran off to return very soon dressed in the clothes they only wore at Easter and to crowd round the monk in merry groups.

He said to them:

'You have beautified your youth and refreshed your spirits. See how wonderful you all are now and how you shine like the sun in your gloomy village. Your youth must always be its sunshine! Today angels fly over you and the Lord has taken you under his wing.'

Smiling, Enicius took out his pipe and began to play a gay and lively tune. The young people formed a *horo** around him, and began to dance. Until evening the village was in a festive mood and the following day the plain rang to the songs of the industrious girls.

The monk went from village to village and people waited for him with open hearts. When he passed through the plain he stopped with the workers in the fields, singing or playing to them on his pipe; in the evenings he would stop off at the wells and fountains, where the lasses and lads got together, giving them the flowers which he had picked during the day in the meadows and spinneys, and he taught them new songs and chain dances which they did not know.

The whole poverty-stricken region through which Enicius passed came to life. Hope flooded people's spirits, the hope which had abandoned them. Envy and malice disappeared. People began to look upon each other as brothers, and began to help and love each other. Enicius never spoke of God, and never threatened any one with his wrath, but He came Himself to the spirits newly-filled with hope, and they became better. People began to consider work not as a burden but as a blessing. They cleared the fields of tares and thorns, and their crops were trebled. And thus their hearts were refreshed.

But the Devil, man's immortal foe, was displeased. He dogged the monk's footsteps and did his best to tear hope from the hearts of people, in which he had planted it. He found souls in whom he cast envy and slander. Soon the high authority, which made laws to prevent souls from becoming fal-

* Horo — round or chain dance

len, proclaimed Enicius a godless man, sent guards to seize him, shut him up in a dungeon, and condemned him to be burnt alive as a tool of the Devil.

On the appointed day, the people among whom Enicius had walked were brought together. The women and children were brought to the pyre by force, and the monk was led to it, bound. His handsome face was merry, not pale with fear. When he saw his friends who, gathered around him, were weeping secretly, he smiled and began to sing. He sang a carefree little song, which had always cheered the young people. The guards lit the pyre. Wild flames shot up, licking the dry wood.

They laid hands on the monk to cast him upon it, so that the sentence might be carried out, but he stopped them with his smile and said:

'Let me mount it alone.'

And singing a song of praise of the Lord, he approached the pyre, mounted the thick burning logs and entered the flames. Cries and laments went up from the people. The women fell on their knees, hiding their faces on the ground, and began to weep. No one wanted to raise his eyes and see the sufferings of the merry monk, who had cheered them, revived them and changed them with his songs, with his merriment and gentleness. But suddenly, the song was borne to them from the pyre. The monk was singing, smiling, handsome, gentle and inspired, and the flames around him were turning into flowers, twining their green stems on high, and from them fell sweet-smelling blossoms, white, scarlet and pink. Enicius broke them off with both hands and threw them to the people, who began to shout and sing a song of praise to the Lord, dancing madly around him. Senseless with fear, the guards fled, and the people followed the monk who, unscathed, came down from the pyre which had turned into a bower of flowers.

He set out once more among the people with his joyous songs, which brought hope. People did not lose hope and courage any more. The desire to work and achieve a happier life awoke within them. They dug deep wells in the arid soil. They brought water from the mountains and fountains flowed in the villages. Gardens grew green, fruit trees blossomed in the yards, and pots of gaily coloured flowers adorned the windows of the houses. Women and girls grew lovelier, men grew handsome and hardy. Something new had come into being

in that corner of the earth — hope had come to warm people's hearts, cheer them and bind them more closely to life.

The merry monk died. The Lord, whom he had served with all his heart and as best he could, gathered him to Him, and the people buried him below the monastery, on the lovely little meadow amid the forest, and angels plant many different flowers there every spring.

Written in 1934



Elin Pelin

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SHORT STORIES

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