

IVAN NECHUY-LEVITSKY

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A LONG STORY

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**ІВАН НЕЧУЙ-ЛЕВИЦЬКИЙ**

**МИКОЛА ДЖЕРЯ**

**ПОВІСТЬ**

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# I

Near the town of Vasilkiv, the small Rastavitsya river quietly flowed across a wide valley between two rows of gently sloping hills. Clumps of lush, tall willows dotted the valley where the village of Verbivka lay engulfed in their greenery. A high, white-walled, three-domed church was clearly visible in the sun, and beside it a small bell tower seemed entangled in the green branches of old pear trees. Here and there, whitewashed cottages and black roofs of big barns peeped out from among the willows and orchards.

Communal vegetable fields and meadows stretched across the village on either side of the river. There were no fences; plots were separated only by boundaries or rows of willows. A footpath wound its way through Verbivka along the grassy riverbank. Looking around from that path, one could only see a green, green sea of willows, orchards, hemsps, sunflowers, corn and thick-growing sedge.

The meadows spread like green carpets, and the fleece-like grass and fine, thin sedge reached almost down to the water. In some places, dark-green osiers, some round-shaped, others peaked like poplars, were scattered over the green-and-yellow fields of the banks. The Rastavitsya snaked between those velvet-soft banks, as if trying to give the impression of a big river, just as children sometimes pretend to be adults. Farther ahead, it wriggled among the



tall willows and osiers which walled it on both sides; but then the willows drew away from the banks and dispersed in clumps over the green grass. Fine kitchen gardens stretched all along the river. They were studded with thousands of yellow-headed sunflowers which seemed to be standing on tiptoe, straining to catch a glimpse of the river over the corn. Still farther on, tall hemps invaded the banks, filling the air with their sharp, heavy smell. In one place, there were large cherry orchards; and closer to the houses, wild apples and pears spread out their branchy limbs above the sunflowers. And there one could also see a huge pear tree nestled in the middle of a vegetable plot, its branches extending so low that the yellow sunflower heads had become entangled in them.

In the middle of the village, the Rastavitsya flowed into a large pond surrounded by black poplars and more willows. In some places trees stood in closed rows, in others they were clustered into a giant column or zigzagged like ruffles. A small island with old tall poplars seemed to be floating on the pond. From the dam, another two lines of very old, hollow-trunked willows leaned down to the water, screening with their branches a large mill owned by the local landlord. Re-emerging from the pond, the river again wound its way among green meadows and willows and then disappeared in an oak wood before emptying into the Ros.

All the streets in Verbivka were lined with tall willows that seemed to have been planted there on purpose. Actually, they were willow fence poles which had taken root. The whole village was criss-crossed with luxuriant lanes. When hot summer sunshine poured from the sky and the village stood in a blaze of silver and gold, the entire tree-

dotted valley seemed to be flooded with turbulent, transparent seawaves which had rushed into the valley, filled it and frozen at their highest mark. One never tired of that view and could never breathe one's fill of that hot, fragrant air.

On the edge of the village, near the river, stood old Petro Dzherya's house. Its white walls could hardly be seen behind a thick row of willows. Beside the house, there was a small old orchard. The closely planted willow pickets, which ran all the way to the riverbank, had sprouted long branches, turning into big trees. Even the barn and the shed, made of the same material, had struck roots in that damp soil and now promised to develop branches as well.

It was Sunday. The sun was sinking in the west, and dusk began to fall. Behind Dzherya's house, a lad was sleeping on the grass under an old pear tree, having placed his white coat under his head. His black sheepskin hat had slipped from his head onto the grass. The boy held one hand under his head, while his other lay outstretched on the grass. His black hair and straight black eyebrows were in sharp contrast with the white coat. His flushed face was handsome but very young. A black sash coiled, like a snake, around his thin waist. His name was Mikola and he was Petro Dzherya's son. The hot sunshine found its way under the tree, pouring fire onto the dark-haired head and the white shirt. Mikola felt the heat on his cheek, rolled over to one side, blinked and shut his eyes again.

In his sleep, he heard a girl singing in a high voice. Her song filled him with wonder. He dreamed that he was awake, looking up at the branches. The green leaves on those branches had turned to glass, and through them he could see the blue sky and watch the beams of sunshine pierce through every

single leaf stirred by the gentle wind. The leaves were brushing one against another, rustling softly. And he dreamed that the voice and the song were pouring down on him from above, that every leaf was singing, even enunciating the words, and that those words were softly falling onto his face, hands, chest and heart. Looking up at those wondrous leaves, he strained his eyes and made out a magic bird with feathers of gold and silver perched on the very top of the tree. The bird spread out its broad wings, unfolded its tail, magnificent like a peacock's, and continued singing as it descended from branch to branch. Fiery sparks fell from its golden wings onto the shining crystal foliage, and the leaves rang and sang even more sonorously. It came lower and lower, until Mikola tried to catch it... He reached for the sparkling bird, but it flew back to the very top. Only burning sparks showered onto the grass and on his hands and cheeks.

Then he awoke — and the wonder was instantly gone. The green meadow shone before his eyes, the pure water languished in the sun-flooded river, and on the opposite side a pretty-faced girl was singing as she drew water from the river.

Mikola could see she had a slender figure and wore a blouse of coarse linen and a string of red beads. He also saw she had black eyebrows. The girl pulled out a bucket of water with a yoke, picked up another bucket with the other end, deftly hoisted the yoke onto her shoulder and went up the sloping bank sparsely covered with cherry trees.

She looked back at the river and at him, and he had another glimpse of her oval-shaped face, thin, straight nose, black brows and two thick black braids. She went on singing until she was hidden from view by willows growing on a meadow across the river.

Mikola failed to recognize the girl; she was not from Verbivka. He looked at the stone on which she had stood and seemed to again see that supple body and that face which was so pretty despite being slightly burned by the sun.

Young Dzherya put on his hat and flung his coat over his shoulder, wondering who she was and where she came from. He walked toward the house, but could not forget that song and that face. Mikola went through a small orchard and, turning round the corner of the house, walked into the yard. Outside the house sat his mother, Maria Dzherya, a woman past her prime with a pale, lean face and dark eyes. She wore a dark homespun skirt and a thick linen blouse. Her head was wrapped in a muslin kerchief through which one could see a tall cap, traditionally worn by married women, with big red flowers on a bright yellow background. Her old boots were blackened with pitch up to the ankles, and only the tops preserved their original tan color. Even at a distance, one could make out her black eyebrows set off by the white edge of the kerchief. She was flanked by four more women with big shawls tied over their caps.

Old Dzherya stood in his shirt-sleeves by the gate, leaning against the fence and talking to somebody. The women were engaged in a lively conversation, chirping like birds in a tree. For about the tenth time, Maria was telling them how her son had first read *The Deeds of the Apostles* in church last Sunday, how he had opened the book, gone to the middle of the church and stood there, shy, blushing and shifting from one foot to the other. She was obviously happy, for she kept rolling her small shining eyes.

"Oh Lord! Of course, I've had to fork out plenty

of chickens, eggs, linen and money! But at least that deacon has taught my Mikola to read, thank merciful God. When he sings in church, I'm beside myself with joy; bowing, crossing myself and praying... As I've been saying to my old man, the time has probably come to marry our son. I'm not getting any younger, so it's about time I had a daughter-in-law helping me about the house. Only I haven't decided yet where I should send the matchmakers."

The women discussed all the village girls, rich and poor, finally agreeing on one of them; that was Varka, the daughter of one of Verbivka's wealthiest peasants, a young and vivacious lass.

Maria, however, did not consider Varka to be that much better off than her son. She knew that all the girls followed Mikola with their eyes as he walked down the street, even rushing to the gates to have a look at him and leaning against the wattle fences till they creaked.

Sunbeams slanted down from behind the roof. One half of the yard was flooded by bright reddish light, while the other half lay in shadows. Emerging from the cherry orchard, Mikola turned toward the house.

"Speak of the devil, and he's sure to appear!" Maria said, seeing her son. "We were just talking about you, son. You must have sensed it, unless you were eavesdropping."

"So what did you say about me?" he asked.

"We agreed it was time to marry you," she said and began heaping praise on Varka.

"Sing her praises as much as you want, only make sure you don't stretch it too much," Mikola said, and even as he spoke, he seemed to hear the song sung by the unknown girl and see her beautiful young face with those fine black brows.

Presently, a horse's hoofs clattered among the willows on the street. The head of the horse appeared from behind a tree, followed by a tall black hat and a beefy red face with a shaggy black mustache. A pair of unkindly, bulging eyes shone above the gate. It was the steward riding about the village with orders for the next day's labor.

"Tomorrow the men go with scythes to the fields to mow the oats, and the women shall cut the master's rye with sickles!" the steward shouted right over old Dzherya's head, without bothering to take off his hat or even to greet them.

The horse and the man moved on past the gate until the willows hid them from view. There was silence in the yard. No one had greeted the steward or so much as nodded to him. "Damn him," Mikola said in a low voice. "Yelling like a fool, as if we were deaf or something!"

The steward's voice sounded the end of the holiday. The women rose to their feet, said goodbye and went home. Maria also got up and went inside. Her son followed her.

Maria took off and folded her kerchief and then helped Mikola to neatly fold his white Sunday coat.

The evening sunlight poured in through a side window, gilding the white table cloth and the whitewashed walls decorated with painted red and blue flowers and green leaves. The flowers looked much nicer than what was usually daubed on the walls by the village girls: they had been painted by Mikola. At one end of a shelf, near some pots, lay a board with a miniature watermill wheel complete with tiny mortars. Mikola had carved the toy with a knife made from a broken scythe. The wheel was so skillfully done and the workmanship so fine and clean that the toy looked as if it had been made by

a true craftsman. Beside the toy lay Mikola's books: a primer, a breviary and a thick psalter.

Mikola had been learning to read with great zeal. He had read the breviary and the psalter from cover to cover, and on Sundays and other holidays his father and mother would often tell him to read the psalter for the tenth time. Then they would sit in silence, their hands in their laps, sighing now and then, as if they really understood it. They only knew that it was divine reading, but what it was all about was something beyond even Mikola's comprehension.

As she put the Sunday clothes away in the chest, Maria again brought up the subject of rich Varka.

"Let us send matchmakers to them in the fall. Her father owns oxen and cows, and she's got fine black brows. What else could you possibly want? You can bet she won't bring an empty trousseau chest into our house. Isn't that right, son?"

"It may be right or it may be wrong. Nobody can tell how it'll turn out."

"Why? What have you got against her?"

"It's just that I don't want to marry her."

"But why don't you? God be thanked, she's a healthy, hard-working girl. She'd give us a lot of help."

"Just leave me alone, Mother. You talk about that Varka as if there weren't any other girls in the village."

"Now don't get started! You know your mother wants the best for you, don't you?"

Mikola was annoyed to have to hear so much about Varka. He would rather hear his mother praise that girl whom he had seen filling pails at the river.

"Whom are you going to ask then? Someone poor maybe? As far as I'm concerned, you may go and

marry a poor girl, but that won't make you any better off, because we aren't rich either."

Having put their Sunday best in the chest, Maria lighted the stove and began making supper. Mikola took a violin off a shelf and started tightening the strings. He had made a small violin as a boy, learning to play the Kozachok dance all by himself. He had since become a true musician, bought an inexpensive violin, learned more tunes from other musicians and now often played at dances.

After tuning the instrument, Mikola ran the bow across the strings — and a plaintive melody filled the house. He tried playing a merry dance, but the bow, as if of its own accord, turned back to the sad tune. As she listened to him, his mother grew sad herself.

"Don't play such music, son," Maria said. "It's so sad it brings tears to my eyes."

Old Dzherya came inside. He was a lanky man with a pale, wornout face, a long grayish mustache and sorrowful eyes. Hard work had bowed his back early in life. Deep furrows running across his cheeks and forehead, his rough hands and the wrinkled, sunburnt back of his neck indicated that living in this world had not been easy for him. The skin on his fingers and even on his palms was so cracked and creased that it looked as if his hands had been burned by fire. The fingers on his left hand shook incessantly, even while he slept. During his long life he had mowed, threshed and winnowed much of his master's grain with those hands.

The sun was slowly sinking beyond the village. The family sat down to supper by the door outside. The father and mother kept telling their son that they would have to look for a daughter-in-law in the fall; they had already grown old, and work for the master was hard and taxes high.



After supper, Mikola took his coat and went to sleep in the straw on the threshing floor, but sleep would not come. He lay there, facing the sky, and looked up at the darkness strewn with stars, like a black field strewn with ears of wheat. It was a warm, quiet night. Willows, pears and cherry trees stood like stone statues, and the deep black sky spread out over the treetops. Countless stars glimmered overhead. Mikola could not tear his eyes off the sky, shifting them from one constellation to another, gazing at the dense cluster of Pleiades, Ursa Major, Coma Berenices. It seemed to him that the sky was one big wondrous book, and the stars were miraculous words he was unable to read. He spotted two bright stars close together and decided that one of them was his destiny and the other the destiny of that girl whom he had seen on the river in the afternoon.

Girls could be heard singing on a street across the river. Mikola sprang to his feet, got his arm through one sleeve of his coat and ran toward the river. He crossed over a rickety bridge which consisted of two planks supported by wooden cross pieces and a rail on one side, and went to the common where boys and girls had gathered under the willows.

They were just getting together, flying in like birds from all sides. Mikola could see big white spots under the trees; those were the girls' blouses. He walked toward them. But the unknown girl was not there! The girls were laughing as they tried to remember some strange name. Nobody could remember it exactly though.

"In our neighborhood, the Kavuns have hired some girl from the hamlet, and she's got such a funny name that I'll be damned if I can make it out," one girl was saying to another. "I'm trying to remember it, but I just can't!"

"Wait till you see her on the street and ask her," one of the boys broke in.

Mikola guessed that they were speaking about the new girl and settled down to wait. The girls sang for a long time, and the boys stayed there late into the night, even though in the morning they would have to rise early and go to work for the master. But the new girl with the strange name did not show up. The girls teased Mikola in fun but he just stood there gloomily. Then they dispersed, just as quickly as they had gathered. But there was no sign of the girl. Disappointed, Mikola slowly walked home, back to the threshing floor, and plunged into a young, healthy sleep, forgetting all about girls and stars in the sky.

By the time the sun rose the next morning, Mikola and his parents had already had their breakfast. Old Dzherya took a rake attachment for the scythe and went to mow the oats, and Maria went to cut the master's wheat. Putting a piece of bread for lunch into his sack, Mikola went to the master's fields along the river. Some girls with sickles were walking ahead of him. Seeing a snowball bush in a meadow that was already laden with red clusters of berries, the girls darted to it, broke off little branches with the berries and green leaves and stuck them in their hair. They were afraid of being caught stripping the bush and, like so many scared birds, broke into a run, dropping the snowball branches when Mikola appeared from behind a willow.

Catching up with them at a fence, Mikola immediately recognized the girl whom he had seen at the river. He recognized her slender, lithe figure, black brows, broad forehead, round face and two thick braids circling her head, where red berries amidst green leaves now gleamed in the sun.

He could see that her eyes were dark as blackthorn and that she had very long eyelashes. She looked at him and lowered her gaze, and her eyelashes were like black silk on her young cheeks. The girl was very poorly dressed, and the sleeves of her blouse were barely ornamented with a bit of embroidery and small pale stars.

Her name was Nimidora. The priest had a grudge against her unruly father and had given such odd names to his children that the villagers seemed unable to learn them correctly. After each such baptism, the midwife would invariably forget the name even before she returned home.

The priest had baptized the girl Minodora, but the village folks called her Nimidora.

Just as Mikola joined the girls, they broke into songs, warbling away like birds in springtime. Nimidora sang with the rest. Mikola recognized her high voice and recalled the dream he had had under the pear tree. His heart filled with such joy and happiness that he could not see the path under his feet. It seemed to him that the snowball trees and the entire blue sky were singing with Nimidora.

They overtook another bunch of reapers, turned from the meadow onto the road and took up stretches on the master's field. Mikola worked next to Nimidora.

The sun rose high in the sky and it soon grew hot. Mikola and Nimidora reaped their way deep into a plot of tall, thick rye and started to talk. He confessed that he had seen her on the river bank the day before and asked where she was from and who had hired her. The boy's gentle tone sounded like her mother's voice to her, and before she realized it, she was telling him all about herself.

"I come from Skripchintsi, a hamlet not far from

here," said Nimidora. "My mother died when I was still a child. I don't really remember her; but when I think of her and try to remember, it seems to me that she was tall and black-haired, with a beautiful face that made her better looking than any other woman I have ever seen. She wore a string of fine beads, a fringed red kerchief and yellow boots of soft leather. Even now, when I see a tall black-haired woman wearing a red kerchief and tan boots, it seems to me that I see my own mother. When I was a little girl, I would often dream that my mother combed my hair, braided ribbons into it, fondled and comforted me. My father died soon after she did, leaving me an orphan. My uncle took me into his house.

"I lived with my uncle until I grew up. His wife treated me in a very bad way. She was very kind toward her own children and often gave them gifts, but never to me. If her children did not behave, she would get angry with them but would take her anger out on me. She would scold and beat me worse than she would her children, too. She would barely touch one of her own, but she would give me such a beating that I didn't know where to run. I never had new clothes and never had any ribbons; all my blouses were threadbare. I often saw my Aunt petting her children and I thought about my mother: if she had been alive, she would have taken care of me, bought me gifts and embroidered my blouse with flowers and given me plenty of flowers and new ribbons. I'd often go to bed weeping and thinking about Mother, and then I'd see her in my dreams, looking just as I imagined her.

"Then I got older and a man hired me as a nurse for one and a half rubles and a new blouse a year. Oh, God, how I suffered looking after those children

of his! His wife would thrust their hefty baby into my arms, and I was still practically a child myself! I nearly killed myself lugging that baby. The masters would go to work in the fields leaving me at home with the children. I'd see others playing and chanting rhymes, but I couldn't walk away from those babies for a minute. Oh Lord, did I want to play and run about with the rest! 'Oh, Mother!' I'd think to myself. 'Why did you have to leave me when I was still a little child?' So I've spent all my childhood and girlhood in strange homes with strange people, never hearing a kind word.

"Then I grew up and went to work for a wealthy couple. They weren't really bad, but all the same I had no time to sing or dance, or embroider a blouse. Just work and more work all day long. When night came, I'd just flop onto a bare bench and go out like a light. Then at daybreak the mistress would wake me up to milk the cow and drive it to the herd — but she'd stay in bed, of course. So I'd go outside with the pail. The sky would be just beginning to grow lighter, and the nightingales would warble away in all the gardens. I'd settle down to milk that cow and dream that I was standing by a burning stove trying to get a pot out of the fire. And I'd milk her and go right on sleeping. If only my mother had been alive, she wouldn't have gotten me out of a warm bed at dawn."

Nimidora grew silent, as if checking herself. It struck her as strange that she should be telling so much about herself to a lad whom she had met for the first time. But another look at his handsome face reassured her, and she saw nothing wrong in going on with her story.

"You've sure had some hard luck," Mikola said in a low voice. "Did you work long for that family?"

His gentle voice seemed to touch the very bottom of her heart. She decided that he had nice brown eyes and fine black brows and that they would somehow make her tell him the whole story. So she went on.

"I served them for three long years and even was a bridesmaid at their oldest daughter's wedding."

"They must've given her a large dowry," Mikola said.

"They sure did. The master went to a fair and bought her a fine large chest on small wheels, painted green with big red flowers. Lord, I thought, I wouldn't mind having such a chest myself. Her mother had a pair of red boots made for her and bought six fine necklaces of cut amber with silver coins. We spent the whole Christmas fast spinning thread for towels and table cloths. Then in the spring we went to a meadow to bleach them. And as I soaked those towels and spread them on the grass, my eyes were wet with tears. I just couldn't help wondering if I'd ever make my own towels and embroider them with flowers. It only gave me pain to see that girl having parents and being happy."

Nimidora started telling him how she'd love to have her trousseau and wedding party but then stopped, blushing like a field poppy. "My goodness," she thought, "why should I be telling this boy about my wedding?" Then she stole a glance at Mikola, and his black brows again told her to go on.

"Once I was sitting under a willow watching those towels bleaching in the grass and embroidering a hop pattern on a blouse. I heard cuckooing from a nearby tree. 'Oh, stop that,' I said to the bird. 'Don't predict a long life for me. What do I need my youth and a long life for if I'm to spend it all as a hired servant?' The bird flew away, and then my mistress, who had sneaked up behind a willow, bawled me out for doing

my own work instead of guarding their things."

Tears rolled from her eyes down onto the sheaf and the straw tie, and they seemed to sting Mikola's heart. And it came to her that this young lad with fine brown eyes and gentle words had suddenly become all things to her — mother, brother, something she had always sought and cared for. She even found it easier to reap the master's rye in the scorching sun now that he was working side by side with her. It was as if she could feel the pleasant coolness of a shady grove.

"Well, how do you like it with the Kavuns?" he asked her.

"Who'd like it working as a hired hand? He's not a bad man, but the woman couldn't be worse, nagging me all the time the way rust eats away iron. If he as much as drops a kind word to me, she shoots off her mouth right away shouting curses. That's why I'd rather hear no kind words from him at all."

Meanwhile Mikola had finished his shock and started reaping more for Nimidora. He cut his way deep into the field, away from the rest, and now kept tossing bunches of stalks onto her heaps. He even forgot that the rye was not his own.

Then he walked home together with the others. His mother made corn porridge for supper. The family ate in silence; the hard work had left them with little desire for conversation. The father and mother no longer mentioned Varka, and Mikola kept thinking about the Kavuns' servant.

"Mother, do you know what a strange name the Kavuns' girl has?" he spoke.

"And what could that be?" Maria asked indifferently.

"She's called Nimidora," Mikola said. "She reaped the rye with us today out in the field."

"A strange name, indeed. Well, I wouldn't like to have a daughter-in-law with such a name," his mother said absent-mindedly, just to say something.

He pursed his lips, frowned and made a wry face.

"Will you go out Saturday?" Mikola asked Nimidora on the following day.

"I'd love to, but my mistress won't let me go," she told him.

"Don't ask her. Break the window if you have to, but go out by all means."

"I might... we shall see..." she said.

Saturday night Nimidora washed the plates and spoons, gave her hair a good wash with soft water, tidied herself up a little and settled down to wait until the Kavuns fell asleep. She lay on her bench by the window, leaving it open a crack. Outside, night had fallen and the room was totally dark, as if someone had blacked out the windows and draped the walls in black. Only stars glimmered in the windows. She lay fully awake; sleep had abandoned her and drifted away toward the rushy marshes. Her cheeks were flaming, her heart was throbbing and her whole body was shivering. Through the open window she could hear girls singing on the street. Somebody whistled outside, then again, then once more. Nimidora rose from the bench, trying not to make noise. With shaking hands, she groped for the bolt, slid it back and began to open the door. The door creaked softly.

"Who's there?" cried the mistress in her sleep but then again began to snore.

Nimidora stood frozen to the spot. For a while she listened to the woman's snoring and wheezing, then opened the door some more, barely squeezed



through and ran outside. Mikola was waiting for her at the back of the yard. She bumped against him giving a muted cry.

"Did you wake her up?" Mikola asked.

"She's asleep and snoring," Nimidora replied. Then they went to the street where girls were singing away and she felt as free as a bird hovering in a blue sky over a boundless steppe, and as carefree and happy as though her mother had risen from the dead to bring her happiness from the other world.

The village youth sang late into the night. Then Nimidora bade Mikola good night and went back to the Kavuns, feeling as if she were going straight to hell.

Reaching the house, she tried the door but found it locked. Apparently her mistress had woken up, discovered her absence and bolted the door.

The girl sat down by the house and wept. But then she had an idea and went to the side of the house where a thick pole was set against the wall for the hens to climb to roost in the loft. Scratching her hands, Nimidora climbed up the pole which bent under her weight until it nearly snapped. But she groped for the beam, lithely swung herself onto it and stealthily crawled into the loft. A roused hen cackled nearby. Reaching the ladder which led to the loft from the passage, she put her foot onto the top rung and felt a cluster of burrs. The whole ladder was hung with them. Nimidora pricked her hands and feet and decided to try to climb down the passage door instead. She lowered her foot onto the top of the door, which stood ajar, found the latch with her other foot, jumped down lightly and went inside the room, where she threw herself onto her bench and instantly fell asleep.

Sunday morning, the master rose from bed, went

out into the passage, saw the ladder hung with burrs and shouted, waking up both his wife and Nimidora:

"Why the devil have you decorated that ladder like a bride for a wedding?"

"Don't go spouting devils before church!" his wife retorted from the room. "You'd better cross yourself. Can't you hear the church bells ringing?"

Nimidora grabbed a pitcher with water and fled outside to wash her face.

"I've done it to discourage your servant from roaming around with boys," the woman explained.

"And what if she does roam around? I don't mind as long as she does her work. Didn't you run about before you got married?"

"No I didn't."

"Oh, come on! Leaping over fences and gates like a hound — that's what you did!"

"At least I wasn't a servant like Nimidora. If she's got a job with us, let her keep to the house. Otherwise, what good will she be to us during the day? She'd just doze over her work all day long."

"Do you mean to say that you ran about with a spade at night to get those burrs?"

"What's it to you if I did? Why are you defending her as if she were your wife? Burrs are nothing! Next time I'll cover the whole ladder with hairpins and nails."

Kavun did not speak. His wife clenched her teeth and cast sidelong glances at the girl. She did not say a word to her, though.

"I cannot go out to meet you any more," Nimidora announced to Mikola on Sunday night.

"Then I'll send the matchmakers to you. My father and mother want to marry me in the fall anyway."

She flushed and nearly fainted. But she began

preparing her wedding towels and saving money for the trousseau chest.

Then fall came and the landlord ordered that the weddings be held all at the same time on an appointed Sunday. Those who missed it were to wait a month. Old Dzherya and Maria tried to persuade their son to marry that fall and to send matchmakers to the rich Varka.

"I don't want to marry her," Mikola declared, "because I have found myself another girl."

"And who is she?" his mother wanted to know.

"Nimidora, the Kavuns' servant."

"I don't know anybody with that name. She isn't from Verbivka then?" his father said.

"She's from the hamlet, Father. She's an orphan and has been working for the Kavuns for quite a long time."

"How can we take into our home somebody we haven't even heard about?" Mikola's mother wailed plaintively. "What if she's some tramp? Plenty of them are now hanging around the sugar mills."

Mikola flushed with anger.

"It's possible you haven't heard anything of her, Mother, but I happen to know her very well. For me, there isn't a better girl in the whole village."

"Lord be merciful!" shouted his mother, and her heart sank as it dawned upon her that the rich Varka would not be her daughter-in-law. "You just can't go about marrying like that, son. How can you leap before looking?"

"You may now look for yourself, Mother, and you're going to like what you see. Nimidora's a good, hard-working girl. She's spent her whole life working, and servant girls don't usually sit around with their hands in their laps. She's got an uncle living in the hamlet of Skripchintsi."

His father listened in silence and then spoke up: "If you want to propose to her, let us first ask some trusty people about her and think it over. Then if she's healthy and not lazy, you may go ahead and marry her as far as I am concerned."

Everything went according to Mikola's wishes, and before the feast of the Intercession he formally proposed to Nimidora. On the first day, the match-makers exchanged loafs, and a day later Nimidora already handed them the traditional towels of acceptance.

On the eve of the feast, old Dzherya and his son went to Skripchintsi to ask the local landlord to let Nimidora leave him. Skripchintsi had its own landlord who was not too rich. He only had that little hamlet and was very reluctant to let his girls marry off to other villages. Petro Dzherya implored him to no avail. The landlord would only allow Nimidora to move to Verbivka if a girl from the village married one of his own serfs. Mikola came out of the landlord's house more dead than alive. He walked home without a word and wandered with his head drooping for the rest of the day.

As fall arrived, weddings began to be celebrated in the village. In one day, ten couples were married in the Verbivka church. Nimidora stood inside the church, and tears rolled down her face onto her beads.

However, to Mikola and Nimidora's delight, a boy from Skripchintsi proposed to a girl from Verbivka, and the hamlet landlord agreed to let Nimidora go. The Dzheryas' household bustled with activity. Mikola's mother got busy preparing for the wedding, and Nimidora looked born anew.

Petro Dzherya put on a new coat, stuck a bottle of vodka in his bosom, took a loaf under his arm and

went with one of the matchmakers to the priest to arrange the wedding.

The Verbivka priest was still young but had already doubled the fees he charged for his services.

Petro kissed the priest's hand, placed the bread and vodka on the table and asked how much he would have to pay for the wedding.

"For five rubles I'll marry your son," the priest said.

"Father! Have mercy! I'm a poor man. Where on earth could I get five rubles? Let it be three."

"It can't be, because these are hard times for me too. All the prices have gone up," the priest explained.

"Have pity, Father! As God is my witness, I can't pay so much. At least let's meet halfway: let it be four."

"Then it's no use talking. Take your vodka and go home."

Dzherya took his vodka and bread and went out. He stood in the passage for a while whispering to the matchmaker and then went back in.

"So what will you say now, Petro?" the priest spoke from another room.

"Have pity and mercy! I need money for the wedding party and for the taxes. By God, it's too much for me! Let it please be four rubles. That would be the Lord's way."

The priest thought about it and agreed.

"Give me that vodka," he said, "and the money, too."

Dzherya lifted the skirt of his coat, pushed his hand into his pocket, got out a white handkerchief with red edges, untied it and put some coins on the table. Then he poured a glass of vodka and offered it to the priest. The priest drank it, then poured two more glasses for Dzherya and the

matchmaker. They drank them after lengthy toasts, said good bye and went home.

Nimidora thanked Petro Kavun and went to the hamlet to her uncle's, because it was decided to hold the wedding party at his place.

Old Dzherya made his own preparations. He bought ten pails of vodka, eight of which were bought for cash from a Jewish tavern keeper and two were gotten for credit. Mikola asked his father to send some vodka to Nimidora's uncle; he knew only too well that Nimidora had no money and that her uncle would not spend a penny for the wedding.

After the wedding on Sunday, Nimidora was walking home from the church, decorated with flowers and ribbons, merry and happy. Bridesmaids were hovering around her, singing wedding rhymes. Straight from the church she went with her bridesmaids to the priest, next to the landowner, and then to the Dzheryas. When Maria saw her tall, slender figure and flushed face, she even forgot for a time about the rich Varka. After the wedding dinner at Nimidora's uncle's place, a pine branch decorated with oat stalks, snowball berries and periwinkle was put on the table that had been covered with a cloth for the occasion. A huge loaf set with baked pigeons, decorated with tinsel and surrounded with pine cones lay on the table. Nimidora sat at the head of the table with downcast eyes, and the bridesmaids and best men seated all round the table sang wedding songs. The house was crammed with people. Children stood on benches, on the plank beds and even on the stove. People were singing and Nimidora was weeping. She remembered her late mother: "If my mother had been alive, my loaf would have been finer, my towels wouldn't have been so plain, and my clothes wouldn't have been so

cheap. My mother would've prepared me for my wedding better than my uncle's wife has."

Toward the evening, the bridegroom arrived with his best man, matchmakers and attendants. Nimidora felt better, but her thoughts still flew back to her mother's grave. Then the bridesmaids began unbraiding Nimidora's hair and sang songs about an orphan girl speaking to her dead mother and asking her to rise and look at her child. But her mother replied that the earth pressed against her chest and she could not rise from her grave. Instead she would sail over the village in a white cloud and fall down in a thin rain after looking at her beloved daughter from the sky. Nimidora said good bye to her uncle and his wife, then remembered her mother, her life as an orphan, her youth spent working in strange households and burst out crying until she couldn't see anything for the tears.

At dusk they drove the bride to Verbivka. As they rode over the dam, the village boys lighted bunches of straw they had set along the dam. In other parts of the village, people were also welcoming marriage trains with burning straw. The entire village was smoking and celebrating, and people in nearby villages thought that Verbivka was on fire.

The villagers were also given Monday to celebrate. They made Nimidora put on Mikola's hat decorated with a long ribbon and led the young couple to the priest to have the headgear of a married woman placed on her head. The newlyweds were followed by musicians, and men and women walked after them in a merry crowd. The priest's yard was entirely filled with people, since all the newlyweds of the village assembled there for the ceremony. Musicians played and women danced in every corner of the yard until the couples came out. Then the bride's

guests sang, the musicians played, and the crowd moved toward the gate, raising a din that drowned both the music and the singers' voices. Only the sounds of tambourines rang out above all that noise, and women's high-pitched voices could be heard above the commotion. Outside the people scattered up and down the Rastavitsya, and before long one could differentiate between the various bands and songs. But music and singing could be heard for a long time afterward under the willows and among houses.

In the Dzheryas' house, musicians played all day long, and guests drank and ate from morning till night. They drank all the vodka there was and could have drunk more. They also consumed a whole barrel of pickles, another of sauerkraut and all the bread. Old Dzherya turned out his pockets and even carried his sheepskin coat to pawn at the tavern.

In the evening the steward rode along the streets ordering everybody to report at the master's stackyard next morning. His shouts told the people that the celebrations were over. Everybody went home. The house was empty of guests.

At night the Dzheryas' house was barely lit by a flickering lamp. Maria and Nimidora got busy washing the dishes and cleaning up. Suddenly, everybody was sober. The women tried to figure out how much money had been spent on the wedding. The family had to repay the tavern keeper, pay taxes and buy cabbages to shred another barrel of sauerkraut for the winter. Not a single kopeck was left.

"What are we going to do, old girl? Where will we get the money?" old Dzherya asked.

"Let's thresh and sell half the grain. Thank God, the harvest has been really good this year."

"And what will we eat if we run out of bread?" Petro asked.



"We'll just earn more money." Mikola said. "Don't we have hands to work with?"

"When would we work?" his father asked. "What with all this work for the master, we won't have any time."

"The devil take all this work to hell!" Mikola said with disgust.

The mother again remembered the rich Varka and Nimidora's not-too-heavy dowry chest and glanced sideways at her daughter-in-law. This house was new to her, but she was working quickly, if somewhat stiffly. Wearing the high headgear of a married woman with a large floral-pattern kerchief wrapped around it, she now seemed even taller and more beautiful. Her large face seemed to have become even wider, and her prominent black eyebrows appeared to be painted on her wide forehead. It seemed to her that her usually quiet and gentle mother-in-law had suddenly grown sharp claws and was ready to unsheathe them from soft, cat-like paws.

The father fell to thinking, sighing heavily. Mikola, too, was thoughtful, and Maria looked worried. Only Nimidora was happy; she seemed to have found her mother, father and home — she would never again have to languish working for strangers.

"Let's go to bed, daughter-in-law, because we'll have to get up at dawn and hurry to the master's fields," the mother said as she stood in front of the icons, praying and crossing herself.

## II

The next morning, as soon as the sun had risen, the whole family had already eaten breakfast and reported for work. The father and son went to thresh grain, and the mother and daughter-in-law were to scutch hemp.

The threshing area was located behind the master's garden on the edge of the village, as was usual in Ukrainian villages. It jutted out far into the fields and was surrounded by a ditch and tall lush poplars. The whole site, nearly half a verst long, was piled with stacks. The long stacks of wheat were placed along it, ten smaller stacks of rye stood across it, and ricks of spring wheat and long stacks of straw huddled in the corners, like sheep among cattle.

The day was bright, sunny and warm. Indian summer had begun. It was dry, and the sky was as blue as in summer. The sun was already traveling low in the sky, but its slanting rays still carried enough warmth. A gentle breeze was barely breathing, and a haze shimmered over the fields. Half of the leaves on the willows had yellowed, but the poplars still stood clad in green. If it had not been for the yellow leaves in the gardens, one would have thought it was still summer. The low green shoots of winter crops in the surrounding fields were another sign of fall. The air was full of flying gossamer, and the whole blue sky seemed crisscrossed with its downy silky threads. They were glistening in the sun, as though a light summer cloud had broken in the sky and was wafting downward in thin strands and separate threads. The gossamer flew in filaments and tangles, curved in big arches or stood upright in straight stalks like rushes. It entangled willows, poplars, stacks and fences, streamed from treetops in the orchards and waved from church domes and crosses. More and more of it flew all the time, and no one knew where it came from.

Men stood in rows on top of the stacks throwing down sheaves of wheat. Down on the floor, a foreman was counting off sheaves for every thresher. The

threshers stood in long rows, half buried in yellow straw, their flails flashing in the sun. Dust rose over the threshing floor like smoke, as if it were on fire.

Mikola was working side by side with his father.

"So, musician, you have to play a flail after your own wedding," the other men were teasing him.

Mikola looked at those huge stacks, thought for a while and then asked his father:

"Why should one man need so much grain? Lord! Will he eat it all alone?"

"You'd better keep your mouth shut, son. Don't you see the foreman? He might hear what you're saying and report you to the master. The whole village knows he's a squealer."

"If only we could have one-tenth of one such stack!" Mikola spoke again. "How happy we would be!"

"Hush, son! God help you if the master should hear you."

Mikola said no more, but he did not stop thinking. When he had been a bachelor, no such thoughts entered his head, but now he had a wife and he wanted her to be happy. He also wanted to be happy himself, working for himself and not for somebody so incredibly rich.

Right behind the threshing floor, near the landlord's orchard, the women were beating and swinging hemp. Among them Mikola spotted Nimidora, recognizing her tall figure and her new headscarf. He would have liked to go to her and say a few gentle words, or at least to have a look at her, but the overseer was hanging around. In the distance, he also saw landlord Bzhozovsky in person. He had ridden out of the estate, a whip in hand, and wore boots with high, shining tops and a black cap.

"When do you think we'll finish threshing these stacks?" Mikola asked his father again.

"When we're dead," Petro replied sadly, "because after we finish these, God will send us more stacks that might be even higher."

Mikola again became thoughtful and flogged a sheaf so hard that the leather strap snapped and the stick broke away.

"Oh, have you hit your old man on the head with that flail?" the other threshers laughed.

Old Dzherya and his son barely managed to finish their share before dark. In the evening, Nimidora and Maria brought home the master's yarn weighed out in sacks. Each winter, every woman and girl, even small girls, was given a quantity of yarn to spin. If this was not sufficient for the established quota, the women had to add their own yarn.

Through the long winter evenings and in the mornings, chips and brushwood burned in the Dzheryas' stove. Maria and Nimidora would sit by the stove, spinning the landlord's yarn. Mikola would be crushing hemp with his feet by the bed. Dust was rising like smoke from the hemp and tows, drifting up into the chimney. Young Nimidora was spinning and singing. She was completely happy: she was no longer a servant and was living in her own home. So her mind naturally turned to singing.

Mikola left his hemp, sat down on the bench and began to think. He asked himself why his Nimidora had to spin yarn all winter for somebody else's shirts and not his...

Then the winter was over. Summer arrived and with it came the harvest. The heat set in. Rye, wheat and oats ripened and started to wither, all at the same time. All the people were out in the fields, gathering in the landlord's rye as fast as they could,

while their own crops stood ungathered. The master's land was lined with stacks, but not a sheaf could be seen in his serfs' plots.

Mikola and his father served three days of corvée and on the fourth went to reap their own rye, even though the steward had told them to come back for the so-called communal days when the whole commune had to work for the herdsman, the church warden or do some road maintenance duty invented by the landlord. The landlord demanded that those days be served during the harvest when there was already plenty to do. Now, too, the peasants' rye was already falling, but the steward kept ordering them to the master's fields to harvest his wheat and rye.

But instead of going to the master's fields, Mikola went to his plot. On the way he met some villagers and persuaded them to start reaping their own rye. But before they had time to begin, the steward was galloping toward them from the master's fields.

"Why aren't you on the job?" he shouted angrily.

Everyone kept silent. Then Mikola spoke up:

"Because we've already done our work for the master."

"Have you forgotten about the communal days?" shouted the steward and cursed Mikola.

"We'll work them off in the fall. Just look! Our rye is falling already. In a day or two it'll be no good!" Mikola said.

All the reapers stood silent. Sickles and bundles of rye stalks froze in their hands, and they kept shifting their glances from the steward to Mikola.

The steward brandished his whip at Mikola. Mikola jumped off into the rye raising his sickle. The steward sharply turned around his horse and galloped back to the estate.



"Lord be merciful!" old Dzherya spoke. "What have we done? Now there'll be trouble!"

Some men were finishing binding their sheaves, others were heading toward the master's fields, when landlord Bzhovzovskiy himself rode up, whipping his fine, fast horse. The steward, running behind, was barely keeping pace with him, mercilessly trampling the rye.

The men stood frozen, their hats off. Bzhovzovskiy yelled crazily at them and, rushing to Mikola, began lashing him with his riding whip. The peasants picked up their lunch bags and trailed to the master's fields. In the evening, the landlord ordered them to be brought to the estate where they were all flogged. Mikola, too, was punished, and even old Dzherya was flogged before his eyes.

Leaving the estate, Mikola turned back to the manor house and shook his fist fiercely; his father walked on, his head drooping low. Neither of them spoke until they reached their house. Back home, they told Maria and Nimidora about everything. The two women listened to them and wept.

A full moon majestically rolled from behind a hill, flooding Verbyvka with a bright light. The willows were all clearly visible, just as in broad daylight. The Dzheryas ate supper and sat silently outside the house.

"Let's go and reap that rye, Nimidora," Mikola said. "Father and Mother, you go to bed now. If our grain is lost, we'll have nothing to eat in winter."

Nimidora got up to fetch the sickles, and they went to their plot. The fields were golden in the moonlight. Mikola's whole body ached and hurt. His soul, too, gave him pain, but he had to strain his back again. Nimidora fell on the rye, sickle in hand, and reaped it as fast as fire consumes dry straw.

The moon rose higher in the sky, and they went home, after binding threescore sheaves.

After that incident, the landlord remembered Mikola and called him a rioter. The steward, too, often shouted at him, accusing him of stirring up trouble in the village. Mikola himself had changed very much. Back in his bachelor days he had been a cheerful lad who had looked everybody boldly in the face. He used to enjoy talking to people and had loved cracking jokes. Now he carried his head low, seldom laughed, and his rare jokes were so caustic that they burned like fire. He also hated his master.

The master's grain was already harvested. His fields were thickly dotted with shocks, like stars in a cloudless sky, while the serfs' rye was still standing, already beginning to fall.

Gathering in his rye, Petro Dzherya stored half of it in a small stack and threshed the rest for bread. But then the tavern keeper turned up to collect his debt, and Dzherya had to carry his grain to the market instead and sell it in order to repay the Jew and redeem his sheepskin coat. And then there were also the master's ducks to feed. That spring, every household had gotten twenty eggs from the estate, and in the fall every married woman was to bring back twenty live ducks. The estate gave a bushel of grain for every ten eggs, but the ducks would have died over the summer if the serfs had not added their own feed. When fall came, Nimidora tied together ten pairs of ducks by their legs and brought them to the estate on a yoke.

That fall she gave birth to a girl. The midwife took her to the priest to be baptized.

"What has he named her?" Nimidora asked. "Has he given her some strange name like my own?"



"No," the woman told her. "She's been christened Lyubov."

On the third day after birth, Nimidora was already out of bed, puttering around outside. Old Dzherya and Mikola were out in the field, working for the master. The steward rode past their yard, looked over the fence and spotted Nimidora. Jumping off his horse, he rushed at her.

"Why aren't you doing the master's work with the rest, you bitch?" he yelled and whipped her across the back.

Nimidora cried out in pain and burst into tears.

"Don't you know that I've had a baby?" she wailed through her tears. "It was born just two days ago."

The steward realized his mistake but added sternly all the same:

"Be sure to come to the meadow tomorrow to weed the seed beets!"

Landlords usually allowed their women only three days after childbirth to recover. On the fourth they had to report back to work to be given some easier jobs.

When Mikola came home that evening, Nimidora showed him the bruise on her back. His heart burned with anger, and his soul stirred with the mad desire to avenge Nimidora, his parents and himself.

Then the time arrived to pay the poll tax. Father and son racked their brains, trying to think of some way to get the money, and in the end decided to sell the hog they had been feeding for Christmas. This they did and were left without fat and meat, and when the fast ended, they had to go on eating lean borshch and dry porridge.

One evening during the Great Fast, old Dzherya came from the master's threshing floor and had to be

put to bed. Nothing hurt him, but all his strength was suddenly gone. His thin neck got even thinner, his wornout face grew even more haggard, his eyes sank still deeper in their sockets, and his hands shook so much that he couldn't hold anything. It was as if all that heavy work had drained all his blood. He just lay on the stove and stared wide-eyed at the ceiling. After he had lain there for a week, without moaning or anything, his face took on an earth-like ashen color.

Mikola went to the priest and asked him to administer the last rites. The priest came, shrove Petro and, seeing how frail he was, ordered him to eat meat on fast days.

"You tell me not to observe the fast, Father, as if I didn't have a soul," old Dzherya said in a low, hoarse voice.

"Then at least eat porridge with milk, Petro," the young priest told him. "God will forgive a sick man as I forgive you."

"I won't do it, Father, because I'm afraid of sinning. I'm an old man and I may die tomorrow, for all I know. And where would we get the milk anyway? We're so short of everything that we've been eating just bread and onions, and even that probably won't last till the new harvest. So if I'm sick, I can't really help it."

"Whatever you choose to do is up to you, of course. But I do advise and give you permission to break fast, because you're in a really bad way."

Petro only waved his hand hopelessly.

He died on Maundy Thursday after ordering his son not to provoke the steward and not to talk back to the landlord, advising him just to do his work and keep his mouth shut.

"You won't achieve anything, son, except making

it worse for yourself. If anything, you'll only make the master send you to the army," Petro said just before breathing his last. Thus he was killed by his unlucky fate after hard work had deprived him of all his vitality. All his strength had been spent for the benefit of his masters, to line other people's pockets, to buy expensive velvet dresses and gold earrings for Lady Bzhozovska and fancy food and fine beverages for his master.

Old Dzherya was buried on Good Friday. The family ate the Easter cake with tears in their eyes. Mikola looked very grim, partly because he would have to go on paying the tax for his dead father, as if he were alive, until the new census.

Spring came luxuriant and warm. The willows along the river were again covered with leaves, and green grass carpeted the meadows. The Dzheryas' orchard bloomed with white flowers. Everything was blossoming, only Mikola was sad and cheerless.

On a quiet spring evening, Nimidora was watering seedlings in their kitchen garden, and Mikola was carrying water from the Rastavitsya. Nimidora was like a rose in full bloom. Against the background of green vegetable patches, grassy meadows and bright-green willow foliage, her eyebrows showed black like marigolds. She was in a happy mood and was humming a tune. Mikola stood over the pails, his head hanging low. A cuckoo was calling somewhere beyond the meadows.

"Why are you warbling away like a young girl?" Mikola asked wearily. "It's a merry song that you're singing, and it makes me even more dismal."

"I just remembered how I was once secretly embroidering a blouse back when I was still a servant girl. I also listened to a cuckoo — and cursed it. But now I really want it to predict a long life for

me. As I look around at this fine kitchen garden that I've planted with my own hands and remember that I'm now a married woman with a home of my own, I feel like singing a merry song."

"Try a sad one instead and you'll probably make me feel better," Mikola said grimly. "My heart is so heavy and I feel such sadness that I don't know what to do with myself."

"Why such sadness?"

"Because living in this world is so hard for us. Now Father is dead, but I must continue paying the tax for him, just as if he were living. I wonder what is so wrong about us, serfs, that there must be a tax on every serf soul."

"If God sends us a good crop, things will be better."

"Let's wait till we see that crop first. But even if it's a good one, we can't be sure that the master will let us gather and thresh it in time."

Nimidora cut short her merry song. She picked up the pails and they walked home in silence.

Mikola went inside and sat down at the table. He propped his head with one hand and fell to thinking, while his mother and Nimidora were busy preparing supper. Nimidora told her mother-in-law about the conversation they had had in the garden.

"There's no need to worry, son," Maria said. "With a good harvest we'll pay those taxes somehow. You'd better walk to Kiev to pray to God while there's nothing to do in the field. Maybe then the Lord will send us some luck and a rich harvest."

Mikola didn't stir and remained silent. His long black mustache drooped low, clinging to his cheeks; his dark eyebrows were closely knitted together. Just as silently, he stood up and went through the orchard to the meadow. Like a dying campfire, the

sun was sinking behind the willows. Mikola felt uneasy, restless and sick at heart. He stood there wondering why the Lord had been so unfair, giving some people titles, riches and lands and leaving the others to all the hard work and poverty. Then he walked back to the house, his arms folded on his chest.

"So will you go to Kiev, son?" asked his mother who had been walking in the yard. "If you're going to make the pilgrimage, I'll dry you some bread for the road."

"No, I won't go, Mother. I don't feel like praying, and I certainly don't want to trouble God for nothing. If he's up there, he's the rich people's God, not the peasants' because he's given everything to the gentry and nothing to us," Mikola spoke bitterly.

"Shame on you! Lord be merciful! Do you realize what you're saying?" Maria wailed and crossed herself. "What are you blabbering about? If the Lord sends no luck our way, that's because we shoot off our mouths with such blasphemies instead of praying to Him!"

Mikola went into the house, took down the Psalter from the shelf and began to read. The book seemed to him darker than night, and he failed to find in it any advice or a single answer to his questions. He closed it and, without a word, put it back on the shelf.

After that Mikola was often seen thoughtful and brooding. His mother pestered him with her questions, wanting to know what was wrong with him. She even wanted to go to the wise woman for advice.

"Don't do that, Mother! No wise women could ever help me," he told her firmly. Only Nimidora could sometimes cheer him up with her songs, her kind words and her lovely face.

Harvest time arrived, and the crop was not very good. The landlord again ordered the peasants to work off the communal days and road duty at harvest and not in the fall. Mikola tried to persuade the people to disobey him and to gather their own grain while they could. The steward told the landlord that Mikola Dzherya was again inciting the serfs to riot, and Bzhozovsky threatened to have Mikola drafted. Word of it reached Maria.

"Please, son, keep away from the steward and don't provoke the master!" she begged Mikola. "Don't you know we are serfs? The master can do with us as he likes, and he'll make us obey his will."

"How can I keep away from the steward when he's treating us like dirt? I'd be only too glad to keep my mouth shut, but the master will starve us to death. He's so fat his own skin has become too tight for him."

"And what will become of us if he does send you to the army?" Maria asked.

"He'll never do that!" Mikola shouted.

Mikola was no longer a raw youth, but a grown man with a long mustache, a sturdy body, broad shoulders and strong hands.

His mother fell silent, and Nimidora wept. Instead of pitying them, Mikola became angry. He went into the orchard, leaned against the fence and stood there for a long time until his head and his chest cooled down.

Having served all their regular days and worked off the communal duty, the serfs still failed to gather all of the master's grain. He had a very good crop that year and his wheat stood thick as a brush. Bzhozovsky called his peasants and announced that he would let them reap for a share, although a very

small one. Mikola could not hold himself back. He came forward and told the master that they would prefer to work for the count who offered better terms. Petro Kavun and several other men spoke up to support Mikola.

Bzhozovsky exploded. His full, florid face turned even redder, and his grayish eyes became blood-shot. He hated Mikola, because he saw that the serf's proud, bold brown eyes expressed bitter hatred for him. He recognized signs of that hatred even in his serf's long black mustache, his lips firmly pressed together and his hard, acid voice. He stomped his feet, shouting:

"How dare you say such things to my face? Inciting my men to rebellion — that's what you're doing! I'll call the police chief and we'll have this village full of soldiers in no time at all. I'll have soldiers flog you and send all the rioters to the army. I'll have you exiled to Siberia!"

The master ordered Mikola and Kavun out of his presence but yielded to the commune's demands for a higher share, fearing they would go to work in the count's fields.

The steward locked up Dzherya, Kavun and four other men in the village cell to let them cool down. By now the master had made up his mind to have Dzherya and Kavun conscripted.

They spent a night in the cell, and on the following day they were released, because men were needed to reap the rest of the master's wheat. As they walked home, the men talked it over and, knowing their master well, decided to run away to some remote sugar mill to wait there until the conscription campaign was over.

Shortly afterward, a memorable incident occurred in the village. The steward's wife had long been

suspected of being light-fingered, and wherever she went, the village wives made sure they did not leave anything lying around within her reach. Kavun's wife had once had a length of linen stolen from the meadow where it was bleaching. Later, she recognized her linen in the steward's son's shirt but preferred not to kick up a row, thinking this would have been beneath her dignity.

But then Kavun killed a hog. The steward's wife dropped in on Kavun's wife, snatched two pieces of fat and tucked them away under her coat. Glancing at the table, the alert Kavun woman immediately discovered the loss. She darted after the thief, shook out her fat and kicked up a din that was heard in all the nearby houses. People came running when they heard her shouts. Mikola cried that the thief must be led through the village with music. He sliced the pieces of fat into quarters, strung and hung them around her neck. Women grabbed the steward's wife by the arms and dragged her along the street. Mikola walked in front, playing the violin, and Kavun's wife rattled a roller against a notched dolly. The steward's wife was burning with shame, trying to hide her eyes. Some children were running behind, and people ran out from their yards to look at the comedy.

When he learned what Mikola and Kavun had done to his wife, the steward was outraged, and in that mood went to the landlord to tell him that the threshers were stealing his rye. They had made themselves huge pockets, he said, and every evening stuffed them full with their master's grain before going home. He informed on all those who had led his wife through the village, but most of all on Dzherya and Kavun.

All this became known in the village, and people



agreed that the steward was a liar and a shameless sinner. Mikola and his friends lay in wait for him in the meadow behind the willows. They caught him as he was going home from the estate and treated him to a good caning.

"Here's one for the master, and here's another one for the mistress, and this is for all that work we do for them," Mikola called out as he struck the man again and again. "The master lets his oxen eat as much hay as they want and even gives them mash to drink. And we're the master's property, just like his oxen, and we work for him like his oxen, but all he has for us is the birch rod. The master's property is also our property, because our work has gone into it, and all the land belongs to God and no one else."

"Here's some more to help you remember that betraying peasants to masters is a great sin, because we didn't steal from the master and just took what should by rights belong to us," other men were saying as they chased the steward down the street hitting him on the back with their canes.

The steward must have realized this was indeed a sin, because he even confessed it to the priest as such; but all the same he went to tell the master who had beaten him. The landlord made a final decision to deliver Mikola, Kavun and their comrades to the conscription center as soon as possible.

The village filled with rumors about conscription parties. In the nearby hamlet of Skripchintsi, conscripts were being caught and put in the stocks. Mikola, Kavun and their comrades decided to run away that very night and find their way to the sugar mill at Stebliv, near Kaniv.

It was a gloomy autumn night. With the whole sky overcast, it was pitch-dark outdoors. Eating supper with the two women, Mikola sat at the table,

thinking. His mother climbed onto the stove and soon fell asleep. Nimidora lighted a fire in the hearth and sat down to spin. The reddish light flickered on the whitewashed walls and Nimidora's young face. The tow on the comb looked almost transparent, and the comb teeth were black against the fire. Mikola was sitting at the head of the table, his eyes, sadly gleaming in the dark, fixed on Nimidora. His heart was so heavy that not even Nimidora's lovely face could make him feel better. He sat there in his coat.

"Why don't you undress, Mikola?" his wife asked him.

"Stop spinning that yarn, Nimidora. Better come and sit with me, because there's something I must tell you," Mikola said in a very low voice so as not to wake up his mother.

Nimidora put the comb onto the holder and sat down beside him.

"I'm going to tell you, my darling, what weighs so heavily on my heart: I have to leave you, my young wife, this very night. I'm running away from the village with Kavun and four other men."

It was as if Nimidora had suddenly been stabbed in the heart. Her blood ran cold, and she froze, her face pale and her whole body numb.

"There's nothing to be afraid of, Nimidora. And you don't have to be so sad about it either. The master wants to have us conscripted and if our heads are shaven, we'd be lost for good. Instead we'll run to the sugar mills and wait there till the danger is over. Then we'll come back. Maybe all this trouble will somehow sort itself out and go away."

"Please don't abandon me, my darling! I'll die without you!" Nimidora cried out frenziedly.

"Hush! Don't scream and don't wail! You'll wake

up Mother and together you'll kick up such a din that I'll be as good as lost."

Nimidora rose from the bench and fell back on it as if she had passed out.

"I'm not leaving you forever. I'll just earn some money and come back again."

"If you want to leave me, you'd better stop eating bread and drinking water!" Nimidora moaned, no longer weeping.

"Don't curse me and don't cry! Or do you think it's easy for me to go away? Oh, my darling, my happiness!" Mikola groaned, as he put his arms around her and burst into tears like a child. "I have to leave the village, because I can't live here. I'll go to the forests, to the desert or up into rocky mountains, but I won't work for the master and won't go to the army either. I'll drown myself, jump from a cliff or let wild beasts tear me to pieces rather than stay here. I'm a lost man here anyway."

"Then what am I to do in this wide world alone with a little child?" Nimidora asked, beginning to weep. She wailed on and on, as if mourning someone dead, even beating against the bench.

"Stop crying, Nimidora! My heart is burning without your tears. Poverty has dried and withered me like a cold wind shrivels a lone stalk in the steppe. My heart feels as if it was pierced through with a knife. Find my shirts, get me something to eat for the road, and I'll be gone. If I stay alive I'll be back, but I'll come at night and knock on the window."

"Then I've nothing left to hope for! Almighty God! Why do you punish us so terribly? When am I to expect you then?"

"I'll be at your door when grass grows on your floor," Mikola quoted from a song. "Don't wring your hands, don't cry your eyes out and take care of



Mother and the child. Nothing will happen to me and I'll be back."

Rushing to the cradle, Nimidora not so much leaned over her daughter as threw herself upon her.

"Oh, my dear, dear child!" Nimidora wailed hoarsely, choking with tears. "You don't know yet that you'll soon be an orphan."

"We've had enough of that, Nimidora! The others are waiting for me. It's going to be a long way, so hurry up with my shirts and something to eat."

"Don't go! Stay at least one more night at home."

"I can't do that. We've planned it for tonight, and they are waiting. Tomorrow I might be chained, and that would be the end of me."

"May all our tears fall on those who are separating us! I almost wish I had died when a child or had spent all my life as a hired servant," Nimidora said and started looking for the shirts in the chest and putting them in a bag. Mikola put on his sheepskin coat and his hat, placed the violin into the bag, bowed to his sleeping mother, kissed the child and went out of the house, death-pale and grim as the autumn night. Nimidora followed him outside.

"Goodbye, my dear threshold, worn out by my feet. Goodbye, Nimidora! Remember me, my darling, with good words and few tears, and I'll never forget you as long as I live."

The night was dark but quiet. Thick clouds covered the whole sky in a carpet as black and unbroken as a plowed field. Nimidora saw Mikola outside the gate and could barely drag herself back to the house.

Mikola went to the old willows in the common where Kavun and four more men were waiting for him.

Once inside, Nimidora sank onto the bench, leaned

over the table, buried her face in her hands and sat there for a long, long time, weeping and grieving. Hot tears poured through her hands onto the table as water flows onto grass from a spring. All the wood in the stove had already been consumed by fire, and only one billet was still smouldering in the ashes, twinkling bluishly. Then the room plunged into darkness, and she was still weeping. Finally she cried out all her tears, and sleeplessness drifted away from her somewhere into the fields.

Suddenly, the room was as light as day. The walls, the stove, the plank bed, the cradle and the icons looked as if they had been smeared with blood. The reddish light flickered in splashes and tiny waves all over the walls, shook and spread from one wall to another, then onto the perch where the clothes hung. Nimidora jumped to her feet and looked at the windows. On one side, three windows looked as if they had been curtained with a red veil from outside. Nimidora thought she was going mad. But she darted to the cradle, which hung suspended from a beam, and pulled it so hard that all the ropes snapped. Yelling crazily, she rushed outside. Frightened Maria ran out after her.

Outdoors, it was as bright as broad daylight. The willows and fruit trees in the orchard, every single branch and even the smallest yellow leaf were all clearly visible. The whole yard, the orchard and the house were flooded by a reddish, blood-like light.

Nimidora thought that her house was on fire, that it was all in flames, that the orchard, the willows and the barn were burning. It seemed to her that the whole sky was enveloped in flames and that the ground under her feet had caught fire as well.

"Help all who trust in God!" Nimidora screamed.

"Save the child, save Mikola! Save Mikola, Mother, or he'll perish, body and soul."

"By God, you don't make sense, daughter. It's not us who are on fire. Surely there's a fire, but it's somewhere in the village, a long way from us," Mikola's mother spoke, fixing her kerchief.

Dogs barked and roosters crowed throughout the village. Voices and noise were heard from afar, as if underground. In all the nearby houses everybody was sleeping. Not a living soul could be seen around.

"Save Mikola, Mother!" Nimidora shouted again, pressing the cradle to her chest.

"Where is he?" Maria asked.

"He's gone away — left us!" Nimidora shouted back.

"When?"

"He's just said goodbye to me. He told me not to wake you and went to some place a long way from here."

"Oh God! Why didn't you wake me up?"

"All I could do was weep. I couldn't think of anything else. I just forgot about you."

The old mother began wailing loudly and was joined by Nimidora, who was returning inside with the cradle.

"What shall we do now, left without a man?" Maria could barely speak through her tears. Nimidora only wailed; she couldn't weep for all her tears were gone.

Meanwhile Mikola and his friends were moving away from the village, walking along field boundaries and avoiding the roads. They were walking in silence, holding their breath and not looking back. They had gone up the hill and reached a forest quite far from the village, when all of a sudden a faint reddish light illuminated the trees before their eyes. Back in the village,

a bell rang the alarm, its peal echoing plaintively all across the fields and along the forest. They all turned round abruptly.

They had no difficulty making out the master's stackyard at the far end of the village. A long stack of straw was burning at the very edge of the field. The stack was enveloped in flames. The fire looked like a shaggy red flower, narrow below and broad above, with curling petals. It burned evenly like a candle. The night was dark and windless, and curls of smoke rose straight upward, all the way to the clouds. Next to the strawstack, a stack of fresh-reaped rye, just as long but lower, had already caught fire, and then another fiery flower rose into the air amidst the rows of rye stacks, shooting up a flaming tongue several times and continuing to burn with an even, slightly curly fire. Then the fire spread to all the rye stacks lined up side by side all the way to the fields. Some ten stacks were burning at the same time, like as many church lamps, producing thick smoke, now pitch-black, now white like the autumn fog. Up in the sky the smoke merged into one huge column and rose higher up to the clouds. The whole dark sky glowed and trembled with reflections of the conflagration, casting blood-colored light from some huge, winking eye down onto the village, the pond, the river, the willows and the entire broad valley. Below, darkness surrounded the fire in an earth-black hoop, like a flaming-red dress tied with a black belt. The light cast by the burning stacks was so bright that the poplars growing along the trench which surrounded the stackyard could be seen from afar as by day.

Half of the leaves on those poplars were still green, the rest were yellow.

Lit up by the fire, the green leaves seemed to be



soaked in thick, coagulated blood; the yellow leaves looked pinkish, as if sprinkled with cherry juice. The poplar trunks, looking as though they were forged of iron, loomed black against the fire. The village spread below, clearly visible with all its white cottages, barns, the church, the orchards and willows. The large pond seemed to be filled up with blood. The Rastavitsya twisted among the meadows like a fiery serpent sending off sparks to all sides; and the pond reflected the black poplar trunks and the black, leafless willow branches, as if someone had dumped iron pillars and pieces of thick, black wire into the transparent blood-like water.

The tocsin was ringing dismally. The landlord galloped out of the estate followed by his household Cossacks. The steward rushed on horseback around the village, waking up people and ordering them to run and fight the fire. Dogs barked and howled, the village filled with people, and everybody was running to the stackyard. Men with axes, women and girls with pails and empty-handed children crowded along the flaming stacks, standing open-mouthed and motionless. An elderly woman had brought a poker for some reason and was standing with it like a Don Cossack with a spear. The master shouted, the steward screamed, the manager clamored, galloping back and forth and ordering the villagers around. The serfs also shouted but stood where they were. Several dozen men had dragged apart a small stack and were throwing sheaves across the ditch into the field. Two barrels of water stood nearby. People were throwing water onto the fire as if they were playing some game.

Meanwhile, the fire was spreading further toward the middle of the stackyard where the big barn stood. A row of last year's stacks loomed black against



the fire. Then those old stacks, too, caught fire, and a second row of flaming-red flowers shot up instantly into the air. The fire was rolling on and on like a wave, moving along the row of stacks. Presently, the big, long barn burned as well. A column of black smoke burst out under its steep roof, rising, it seemed, above the clouds. After the smoke, flames broke out, suddenly enveloping the barn from all sides at once. Sparks flew in sheaves and fountains. Bundles of roofing straw flew up into the air and burned, falling apart and pouring sparks down onto the field. A whirlwind suddenly formed amidst the flames, as if the barn had opened its mouth, yawned and begun breathing as deeply as it could. Caught in the whirlwind, the flames went round and round, and whole sheaves flew up from them, as if tossed with a pitchfork.

Scared sparrows and pigeons flew out of the straw and up into the black smoke, as if someone were throwing up lumps of earth; then they caught fire and, fluttering their flaming wings, fell back into the flames like a hail of fire.

The entire stackyard, down to the last stack, was burning now. All along the ditch, the poplars shriveled and shortly afterward also caught fire. The smoke became thinner and whiter. Where the stacks had stood only a short time before, now lay only heaps of smouldering straw. The poplar trunks were like red-hot iron posts driven into the ground. Up in the sky, the flicker became fainter and steadier. As the red dome overhead shrank, the black sash rose higher and higher from the ground until red and black converged high in the sky.

Six men looked down at the fire from the edge of the forest, clicking their tongues and telling each other that this must have been deliberate arson...

"Serves him right!" they were saying animatedly. "I wonder what kind of profit he'll get from the grain this year?"

"This grain will have burned, but next year he'll have just as many stacks lined up there," Dzherya said.

"I'd like to know who set all those stacks on fire," Kavun said. "Take a good look and try to see if there's a human soul hovering in flames down there. If there was one, we'd surely recognize whose soul it was, and then we'd know the arsonist."

"It would be a very stupid soul indeed that would hang around there. It would be much smarter of it to hole up at home and keep the hell out of sight," Mikola noted, searching with his eyes for his house. Then he found the cluster of willows over his roof and saw the house, its walls gleaming whitely in the glow of the fire. He stood there, staring at those trees under which he had grown up and lived until he had had to leave that house, his mother, his wife, his child and a big part of his heart.

"Damn the fire! Let's stop gawking at it and go straight through the forest while the master's lighting up the way for us," Mikola said, putting his hand over his heart and glancing at the willows for the last time.

The six men plunged into the forest, where reddish reflections flickered on thick oak trunks and old limes. Most of the trees were black, and only the white birches shone faintly, as if covered with linen and sprinkled with pink juice. Then the men descended into a dark valley, and it was as though they had suddenly vanished underground.

Back in Mikola's house, his old mother and Nimidora kept their sorrowful vigil late into the

night. The lamp near the chimney flickered like an old beggar blinking his blind eyes. Sprawled on the bench, Nimidora wept no more and only moaned as if having a nightmare. Her usually pale face had turned red, and her head was ablaze. It seemed to her that she was burning in the master's stackyard and that by her side Mikola and his father were threshing burning sheaves. Only instead of grain, sparks were falling from the sheaves, hailing onto her chest, face and eyes. The two men were made of red-hot iron, so hot it was almost transparent, and they breathed fire as they beat the fiery sheaves with red-hot iron flails.

"Mother! Just look what's become of Mikola and Father! They've got bodies of iron — and it's red and hot!.. And their eyes! They've got live coals in their sockets! My God! Why are they pounding that fire? Can the masters eat those wheat sparks that are falling from those sheaves?"

"What are you saying there, daughter? Stop that nonsense! Cross yourself and pray to the Lord!" Maria cried out, shaking Nimidora by the shoulders and trying to arouse her from her delirium. But the young woman, burning with fever, would not come to her senses. Then Maria got out a phial with Jordanian holy water and moistened Nimidora's chest, eyes and cheeks.

"Mother," Nimidora whispered, half-rising from the bench. "Can you hear somebody knocking at the window? He's come back, my dear dove!"

Rushing to her feet, she darted to the window. Outside, the night was as dark as ever, and the windows seemed to be curtained with black cloth.

"Look, Mother, how light it is outside! I can see the whole yard and the orchard. Mikola has arrived on a white horse! Just look, Mother! He's splendid

and dazzling like the sun, and he's wearing gold clothes with a red sash."

Nimidora seized Maria by the arm and pulled her to the window.

"My dear daughter! What are you saying, what's the matter with you?" Maria muttered, crossing Nimidora, crossing the windows, crossing herself. She was sure that the devil was already hovering over her daughter-in-law.

"Oh Mother! Almighty God!.. Mikola turned into fire, now he's rising higher and higher... Oh, dear, he's flown up to the sky and he'll never come back again! Now I'm finished forever!" Nimidora screamed madly and collapsed onto the bench. Beside herself with fear, Maria did not know what she should do. She kept praying and crossing herself until dawn, when Nimidora finally sank into an uneasy, troubled sleep.

### III

Mikola and his comrades wanted to reach the sugar mills at Stebliv, near Kaniv. To avoid coming across someone from Verbivka, maybe even their master in person, they stayed away from the main road, following country paths from one village to another along the Ros River.

Just outside Stebliv was a very picturesque place where the Ros broke free from its narrow channel between rocky banks. There the Ros flowed around a large rocky island called Zamok and then again was joined by its branch, Samovilka. Right below the island the steep, rocky banks withdrew from the river to some distance. Further on, the rocks hid underground, the hills parted in two semicircles,

and the river wound its way across even terrain among green meadows and pastures. Not far from the island, a huge solid rock lay overhanging the river. It looked like a stone beast bristling with smaller pieces of rock shaped like knives, stumps and saws with big teeth. At one end of that disorderly heap towered a tall, column-like rock, measuring some fifty feet in height. It was thicker on top and gave the appearance of a head of stone supported by a stone neck. It could have been an ancient idol, except that it lacked a nose and eyes, or perhaps the horn of the giant stone animal.

On the island, a large, two-story mill nestled under a tall rock, its roof almost reaching the top of the cliff. Near the watermill, a suspended bridge with rails connected the island with one of the banks. Chained to rocks on both sides, it swung high above the river, and beneath it white foaming waves churned and splashed against the rocks. Looking up the river from the bridge, one could see twisting rocky banks, and farther up a church stood amidst trees on the very top of a cliff named Savior. Framed by the steep banks, the church looked as if it were behind a stone gate.

At the foot of a rocky hill below Zamok island, stood a big, white sugar mill with a tall black chimney that was actually higher than the hill itself. Surrounded by green willows, orderly rows of white-walled, white-gabled German brick cottages stretched along the valley below the mill. German men strolled up and down the streets, German women in red dresses drew water from the wells, and German boys in tight pants played nearby. The mill manager and the German foremen lived there.

Mikola and his comrades went into the office where the manager and a number of clerks were sitting at

their desks. All the corners of the spacious rooms had cage-like cubicles of thick wire for the clerks. Behind one of the desks sat the manager, a tall, dignified, blond German with a long mustache and gray eyes. He did not tell the Verbivka men to show their passports and did not even ask where they came from. All he did was write down their names. Mikola called himself Ivan Hritsenko, and Kavun gave his name as Panasenکو. The manager hired them at three rubles a month with board and told them to report to the mill.

At the mill, a German mechanic assigned them to work stations at the machine. All around them cauldrons with molasses boiled, wheels spun and rattled, and huge transmission belts, which ran through the ceiling to the second story, raced noisily. The poor peasants turned their heads to all sides, gaping at those terrible gigantic machines, afraid of moving or doing anything wrong. It seemed to them that they had stepped right into hell.

Night came, and the Verbivka peasants thought that at any moment devils with dreadful huge teeth might spring from behind the machines and drag them under the wheels. Again and again, the German mechanic explained to them how they were supposed to move around the machinery, but they found it very difficult to get used to the new surroundings and the new work.

At night, shortly before dawn, the bell clanged, and other workers came on to relieve them. They went to the bunkhouse to sleep.

Two long, black bunkhouses, their walls weather-beaten and peeling, stood among the green willows and immaculate white German cottages. They looked more like sheds for sheep than living quarters for people. In a corner at the end of each bunkhouse



stood a big stove with a built-in cauldron to cook for the workers.

One Sunday, a year after the six men had run away from Verbivka, the church bell in a nearby village was ringing for the morning service, echoing loudly among the rocks along the Ros. In the bunkhouse, workers were sitting and standing at a long table. Mikola Dzherya was among them. His face, lean and drawn, had changed almost beyond recognition. His bright brown eyes seemed to have faded, his face looked much older and had lost its color, his forehead was sallow, like wax, and his neck had shriveled. Only his strong, sinewy hands served as a reminder of the man he used to be. He was wearing a soiled shirt, a patched coat and wornout boots with bits of straw sticking out of the holes. The workmen's hair was tousled, making them look like hopeless drunkards.

The men sitting with Mikola at the table were a horrible sight with their unclean shirts, dirty faces, stubbly cheeks and unkempt hair. Some were playing cards so soiled and smudged by dirty hands that the once-gaudy kings and queens were barely visible on them. Here and there bottles of vodka stood on the table. Some men were drinking and pouring drinks for the women workers. Mikola was playing the violin. A young woman, sitting in a dark corner, raised a fuss, scolding Mikola for playing music before the church service.

A common plank bed, covered with straw and hay dust, ran along one wall throughout the length of the barracks. Men and women were sleeping on it side by side, covering themselves with their torn coats. A neatly dressed young woman in a white blouse was sweeping the floor and shaking some of the dirt off the bed. At the table, some men broke into

a drunken song, and Mikola accompanied them on the violin.

"Oh Lord, you don't care if it's a religious holiday and a Sunday!" the God-fearing woman cried from her corner. "Can't you hear the bell?"

"They ring that bell for hours on end, 'cause they don't have to plow the land," Mikola replied with a saying and sawed away so roughly that the strings nearly snapped.

Kavun burst into the bunkhouse and shouted to Mikola:

"We've got to clear out, brother! I've just seen Bzhozovsky in town near the tavern."

"Really?" Mikola cried out, banging the violin against the table.

"By God, I saw him! May I be struck by a thunderbolt if I lie!"

The Verbivka men let the cards drop from their hands and gaped at Kavun, open-mouthed.

"He must've figured out that we were here at the mill and raced down here to grab us," Mikola said. "But I'll be damned if I'm going back to Verbivka."

"He must be a damn fool if he thinks we'll let him catch us alive," spoke another runaway.

"Where exactly did you see him?" Dzherya turned to Kavun.

"He was sitting inside that inn by the window, smoking a pipe. When I saw his red mop of hair and ugly face, I recognized him at once. So I beat it right away and jumped some fences to get behind these Jews' houses."

"Which window was it?" Mikola demanded.

"The one in the side wall, right next to the front corner."

Mikola thought it over for a while, then rose to his feet and motioned for Kavun and the rest to

follow him outside. "Here's what I want to tell you, fellows," he whispered to them. "Let's teach the son of a bitch a good lesson to make him less eager to run after honest men."

"What do you mean?" they asked him.

"He must be staying over at that inn. We could take out the window at night, get inside and work him over with fists and rods the way he used to handle us back at the estate."

"By God, that's not a bad idea! Let's give him a good thrashing that he won't forget any time soon." the other men shouted.

Returning to the bunkhouse, the runaways took their bags and quietly slipped out, one at a time, to hide in a willow thicket among the rocks. Then they went to sleep, their bags under their heads.

Master Bzhovzovsky had indeed learned where his fugitive serfs could be found from some people who had seen them at fairs. Mikola had shown the way, and after him many others had found their way to the mills on the Ros. Traveling to Stebliv, Bzhovzovsky went straight to the mill owner and kicked up a row, accusing him of harboring runaway serfs without proper papers. Next day he intended to catch his men with the assistance of the local police and to send them back to his village.

As dusk fell, Mikola and his comrades were still catching up on their sleep. They knew they had a long night of walking in store. Mikola woke them up late at night, and they crawled out of their hiding place and made for the town. Stars were shining brightly in the sky, but otherwise it was a dark night. It was also rather cold, the way spring nights often are. When they reached the town, lights could still be seen in the windows of one of the Jewish houses. The men waited in the shadow of another house until

the lights went out and stole to the inn across fences and backyards. Everybody appeared to be asleep inside the building, and everything was quiet and still. Kavun showed them the window where Bzhozovsky had sat during the day with a pipe. It faced the yard, not the street. They went round the inn, tiptoed to the window and held their breath, listening. All they could hear was their master's puffing and loud snoring.

"Come on!" Mikola whispered, probing the window with his knife. As more men joined him at the window, the flimsy frames and hinges soon gave way under their strong hands, yielding like a cobweb to their pressure. Mikola took out the frame and leaned it against the wall. Then he climbed inside, followed by the rest of them.

Like a wild beast attacking its prey, Mikola fell upon Bzhozovsky, seizing him by the leg. Brutally awakened, the landowner lost his voice with fear and could not even shout for help. He instantly thought of Mikola and the other runaways. Holding Bzhozovsky by the leg with one hand, Mikola pounded him on the chest with the other. The room was dark like a cellar. Twisting like a snake, Bzhozovsky wriggled out of Mikola's hands and burst out of the room like a frightened rooster. Not knowing where the door was, the men stumbled helplessly around the room. The landowner ran through the passage where the steward was sleeping but did not dare enter the yard, fearing that the door might be guarded by other men from outside. Instead he groped for the inner door and, using it as a ladder, clambered onto the attic. Luckily for him, there was no ceiling in the passage. As soon as he climbed up, he tried to run, but there was nowhere to go; he banged his head against a rafter and pricked his face with a

bundle of thatch. His face was bathed in cold sweat. Then he found a dark corner under the roof and ducked into it.

Meanwhile, Mikola's men had scattered all over the dark room and passage, probing every corner with their hands and groping under the bed, but they failed to find their master. Mikola was fuming with rage.

"Get out the matches!" he commanded. "Let's have some light and we'll beat the hell out of whoever God will let us lay our hands on."

Kavun took some matches from his pocket and struck one against a wall. The match flared up, but all they saw in the room was the empty bed. In the passage, however, they discovered the Verbivka steward, lying on his back fast asleep. Casting aside their last precautions, the men lighted a candle and fell upon the steward hammering him with their fists. Kavun threw a coat over his head and sat on top, so that all they could hear was their victim's scared wheezing.

Up in the attic, Bzhozovsky heard these horrible groans. One of the peasants saw the open door, noticed which way Bzhozovsky had escaped and started climbing up the door. The landowner rushed to his feet, tore through a hole in the thatch between two battens, squeezed through it onto the roof and jumped to the ground. Landing on an ox wagon that stood by the wall, he grazed his calf terribly against its side but jumped down and darted across the yard. Jumping over the fence into the kitchen garden, he squatted under the fence, afraid of running any further. It seemed to him that the whole yard was swarming with tramps, that they were lying in wait for him by all the windows, under the stable and along the fences. At any moment Dzherya could jump onto his back and start pounding him again.

"We've got to get away from here, brothers," Mikola said. "Let's clear out. The bastard has slipped away. He's going to make it hot for us."

One of the men took a gold watch from the table and wanted to pocket it.

"Don't touch it!" Mikola shouted crazily. "That watch is made of our sweat and blood." He tore the watch from the man's hands and hurled it against the floor. The watch banged against the floor, flying to bits. Mikola jumped out through the window, and the others went out after him, blowing out the candle. Bzhovzovsky saw the light go out and, seeing the men jump out the window, panicked and ran straight across the plots, trying to keep his head low. His feet sank in the soft earth, flinging clumps of dirt to all sides and rustling the young corn. He reached a cluster of tall weeds and threw himself to the ground.

Then the peasants were gone and there was again silence. Only the steward was left groaning and moaning in the house.

The landowner lay in these weeds for a long time, straining his ears, until he fell into a kind of stupor. He came to only when he felt his entire body shake with cold and his teeth chatter.

Then a rooster crowed somewhere at the edge of the town... The rooster chased away the devils that had been plaguing Bzhovzovsky that night. Screwing up his courage, he struggled to his feet and looked around, discovering that he had run quite a long way from the inn. Big clumps of earth made walking painful, and the cold earth burned his bare feet like snow. He reached the inn, woke up the Jewish proprietor and ordered his coachman to prepare his carriage immediately. The steward had been so badly beaten that he was barely able to move.

When Bzhovzovsky drove out of Stebliv before daybreak, the tramps were far from town. Walking on and on in almost total darkness, they kept cursing themselves for their failure to fully repay their master. They were headed not north, where plenty of sugar mills could be found, but in the opposite direction, following a vague instinct to the liberty of the steppe. Some mysterious force drew them south, to those same paths and prairies where the Ukrainian people had sought freedom, even though that freedom was constantly threatened there by the jaws of another steppe beast, the Tatars. But even that beast was surely less pernicious than the Ukrainian peasants' own beast of serfdom which constantly tortured and humiliated them.

Meanwhile, Bzhovzovsky was hurrying back to Verbivka. Four fine horses were pulling the light carriage along with ease. The steward could barely keep pace with it in his small two-wheeled cart. As Bzhovzovsky recalled Dzheria and the other tramps, the blood rushed to his head. He could still feel their fists on his body, and his chest was burning where they had struck him. When he remembered escaping through the attic, jumping from the roof and lying low in the weeds, his entire nobleman's sense of honor seethed inside him, rising from the very bottom of his consciousness and boiling and fuming in his heart. He realized that the coachman certainly knew about his humiliation, as did the steward, and that before long the incident would be known to all his gentry neighbors, as well as throughout Verbivka. He vindictively jammed his fist into the coachman's back each time the wheels hit a bumpy stretch or the carriage tilted. In turn, the coachman took it out on the horses, whipping them mercilessly on their sides, and the horses passed it back to the landowner's carriage,

hitting it with their rear hoofs and threatening to bolt any moment.

Dawn had broken and the sun had risen, but the tramps continued on their way without pausing for rest. They had already passed many villages, sugar and fulling mills, but had not allowed themselves to stop even once, fearing chase. Finally, at noon, they turned off into a forest, ate some bread, drank some fresh water from a spring and resumed their journey. Toward evening, they came in view of a fairly large town with two white brick churches situated in a valley. Beyond and outside the town there were several sugar mills with tall black chimneys. A wind was blowing from that direction, and for miles around the fields were saturated with the sickening stench of burned bones and rotten molasses.

The sun set behind a hill. A herd was being driven along the road as the tired men approached the town. They were now well into the Cherkasy district.

"Let's get hired here at these mills," Dzherya proposed. "We've already come a long way from Verbivka. The master will never find us here."

"We'll have to stay where we find jobs," Kavun said. "There are lots of mills around — we've passed more than ten on the way. This place will do as well as any other. But we've got to spend the night somewhere."

"Let's ask around, maybe somebody will let us stay overnight," Dzherya suggested.

The men sat down at a ditch on the outskirts of town, ate a piece of bread and an onion apiece and walked into the town.

"Shall we go to the rich or the poor folks?" one of them asked.

"Let's try the rich first," Mikola decided.

Choosing a fairly big house, the tramps went into the



yard where there were several tired oxen and a pen full of bleating sheep. A woman was milking a cow, and an elderly man was busy in the pen.

"Good evening and a very fine Monday to you," they greeted the man, lifting their hats just a little. "Would you be so kind as to let us sleep the night at your place?"

"What kind of men are you and where do you come from?" the man asked.

"We've come a long way to try to earn some money and we'd like to get jobs at those mills," they told him.

The man eyed them thoughtfully. Standing before him were some men wearing soot-black shirts, old threadbare coats, battered straw hats that were full of holes. Their cheeks and chins were covered with thick stubble, and their eyes were red with tiredness.

"Are you tramps or something?" the man asked somewhat haughtily.

They did not reply at once. Then Mikola spoke:

"Well, yes. It's bad luck that has made us hit the road..."

"Our house is on a big road, and that road brings all sorts of people our way — both good and bad. Look for some other place to sleep, men," said the farmer and went back to work.

The peasants silently filed out of the yard, and Mikola could not refrain from saying:

"We're as honest farmers as you are, only bad luck made us leave our homes."

The tramps tried another house, then one more, but nobody would take them in for the night. Not far from a church, they went to a poor young woman and asked if she would let them sleep in the barn.

"I'd let you, but my husband isn't at home. I just

don't know... I'd be only too glad to, but..." she stumbled.

The men told her all about their bad luck, told her how they had run away from their master and how they had been getting along since then. Finally, they moved her to pity, and she let them into the barn and even made them some gruel for supper. Lying on the straw side by side, the men slept like logs. The kind woman, however, returned to the house and started thinking and imagining things, frightening herself so much that she hid all the clothes that were hanging on a porch into a chest, propped the door with an oven fork and a big poker and stayed awake late into the night, worrying about the tramps.

In the morning, shortly after daybreak, the woman woke up and rushed to check the room and everything in it. She looked at the chest and peered inside, making sure that nothing had been touched. Then she crossed herself and went outside. The men were fast asleep in the barn. She lighted a fire in the stove and began cooking breakfast for them. Then they rose, washed their faces, said their prayers before sunrise, thanked the woman and went to the mills.

#### IV

Located near a large pond, the sugar mills were enclosed with a wall and surrounded by a deep ditch. The road wound to a massive stone gate and just outside it was a watchman's hut painted in black and white stripes, like a sentry box. As the tramps entered the gate, a whole small town unfolded before their eyes. An urban-type paved road, complete with sidewalks, was flanked by pretty little orchards and dainty brick houses with broad windows. Germans and clerks lived there. The refinery manager resided in a fairly

big house on a side street. There was even a school, which was not, however, to spread the benefits of knowledge among the local populace but simply to train boys for clerical jobs at the mill offices. At one end of the street stood a tall, two-story building; this was the theater, a whim of the rich, designed to provide entertainment for managers and their sons and daughters, as well as the mill clerks. The first story of the building was taken up by stores selling all kinds of goods. Further on there were long warehouses, and in the middle of a big square stood the mill itself with four stories at one end and five at the other. Nearer to the pond were the refinery and a number of bone kilns with high, sooty chimneys. Beyond the mill, a large woodyard was stacked with piles of logs; from there a railroad track ran to the mill. In the middle of the woodyard stood a steam engine that was used to saw logs into firewood, which was then loaded onto cars and brought straight to the mill engines.

Workmen in soiled shirts and with dirty faces scurried all over the place. Roaring sounds, rumbles and whistles came from all sides. Inside the shops, engines whirled and rumbled, making the walls groan and tremble. Black clouds of evil-smelling smoke constantly poured out from the chimney.

As they approached the mill, the men stopped to ask whom they should see to get hired. Workers pointed to the house of the leaseholder who ran all these plants.

The leaseholder was a Jew named Abram Moiseyovich Brodovsky. The plants belonged to a very rich nobleman who lived abroad and visited his holdings only rarely. The Jew's way of running things was much in evidence, and signs of it could be observed everywhere. Some fences lay on the ground, the square was covered with pools of stale water, the houses were



peeling, panes were missing in windows and whole herds of goats wandered around orchards skinning fruit trees.

While the Verbivka peasants stood talking with the workmen, the leaseholder appeared in person. He was a fat, heavily built Jew with a ruddy beard, gray eyes and wearing a black velvet vest. A heavy gold chain with a seal and some trinkets dangled across his belly, and massive gold rings with shiny precious stones glittered on his stubby fingers. His collar, shirt and black necktie were so soiled that they glistened in the sun. A long black coat and a cherry-colored cap pushed to the back of his head gave him a very characteristic appearance. Despite his expensive clothing and all that gold, he had an unmistakable smell which the tramps recognized at once, the way dogs recognize the smell of a wolf's skin.

"Do you want something?" he asked them.

All the workers took off their hats at his appearance. The Verbivka men did not even touch theirs and did not bow. They stared at him rather haughtily, as if it was they who owned the mill and Brodovsky were just a hired hand.

"All we want is to get jobs here," Mikola said somewhat arrogantly.

"If that's what you want, you may go to work then," Brodovsky said.

"Do you mean you do the hiring here?" Mikola grinned disdainfully.

The workers smiled, but Brodovsky took offense.

"If you want to work for me, you should at least try to speak to me properly. What shall I do with these peasants? I'm the boss here, don't you know?"

"Well, I didn't. Should I have?" Mikola snapped roughly, the way peasants often talk among themselves.

"Stop shouting!" Brodovsky protested angrily. "I don't remember tending swine with you. If you want to work here, treat me with respect, because I run this place."

Mikola almost started calling him names and held his tongue with great difficulty. All the same, each time he addressed the leaseholder, he deliberately failed to call him sir, seeing in him just another Jew, no matter how rich.

When Brodovsky first leased the mill, he went to a lot of trouble to get the hands to call him sir. All those who failed to comply had plenty of difficulties trying to collect their wages. Unlike the local people, vagabonds, such as Mikola and his comrades, resisted stubbornly, saying "thou" to him, his children and even to his wife, although she looked almost like a lady.

The Verbivka peasants accepted Brodovsky's terms of three rubles a month plus room and board and went to the bunkhouse.

"Isn't it funny having to work for that damned Jew?" Mikola said. "We worked for the masters and now, for a change, we'll try working for Jews. All right, let's try some Jewish bread to see what it tastes like."

The incredibly long bunkhouse was even worse than the one at the Stebliv mill. It was as filthy as a pigsty, and the place was filled with the thick stench of cheap tobacco, rotten straw, unwashed clothes, sour borshch and tramps' footcloths.

As the plant bells rang, workers filed out in long rows. Some men turned toward the town, and the rest went to the bunkhouse to eat dinner.

As the vagabonds sat down at the table, cooks ladled out borshch from big cauldrons into bowls. The borshch was so bad that the Verbivka men, hungry

as they were after the road, had considerable difficulty cramming it down their throats. All it contained were beet tops and kvass, and a few cockroaches served as meat. After the borshch they were given some porridge. It was made of rotten millet and vile-smelling old pork fat. The bread was earth-black.

"That's some porridge!" Mikola said. "I got through some hard times back in Verbivka, but not even then did I eat anything like it. Does Mister Jew eat such porridge himself?"

"Stick around, man, and you'll taste even better stuff," a tramp told him.

Then the bells clanged again and all the tramps went back to work. Only the Verbivka men stayed in the bunkhouse, thinking. Each of them recalled his house, his wife and children. Mikola, too, was brooding.

"Will we ever be lucky enough to return home?" Kavun asked.

"We might — if our master croaks," Mikola said.

"When might that be? He's as strong as an ox," Kavun spoke again, leaning his fair-haired head over the table.

"This place stinks so I can't stand it," Mikola said, going outside. The rest followed suit.

The bunkhouse stood right by the pond, which was quite large and spread out into the fields between two low hills. From the far side of the pond, an old, dense forest rose in a high, straight wall almost from the water level up the slopes, crossed a road and hid from view in a valley beyond the hill. Half of the forest was already gone, consumed by the mill, and the other half, sliced off in a straight line, stood in all its luxuriant beauty, looking as if it had been planted purposefully to form a tall wall. Thick hornbeams, elms, maple trees and oaks stood like densely planted pickets covered with a green roof. Broad, round-shaped tree

tops covered the forest like umbrellas. Further on, another pond glistened between green banks of a ravine, and the water bristled with thick, dark-green rushes, their thin, flexible stalks looking like cobwebs from a distance. Their reflections in the water were still thinner and more delicate, and gave the impression of green down floating just under the surface.

The men wanted to have a swim, but they looked at the water and saw that it was muddy and stale. Dead fish were floating near the banks; molasses wastes had been dumped into the pond, turning it into stinking sludge and rotten water.

The Verbivka men began working at the mill. The work was easier than farming but more boring. Out in the fields, in the fresh air, it had been more pleasant than being imprisoned by the walls and standing alongside those engines on platforms sticky and slippery from spilled molasses.

When a month had passed, the men went to the leaseholder to collect their pay. Brodovsky, who came from a poor family, was in the habit of counting out every single ruble himself, although now he was very rich.

In the yard of Brodovsky's house Mikola met a woman. She was dressed like a noblewoman, but her face, untidy clothes, unkempt hair and the soiled hem of her skirt plainly showed that she was not a true lady.

"Where's your husband?" Mikola asked her casually.

"Why don't you say 'Madam' to me, pig? Just try to get your pay now. When will you churls learn how to speak to your masters?"

"You surely don't mean to tell me that I've been working all month long for nothing," Mikola said. But Brodovska went to her husband to complain



about the way she had been treated by the tramps.

The leaseholder chewed them out and as he paid them, he made sure to deduct money for those days when the men were sick and had not been on the job.

"Well, we certainly aren't going to get rich with such a boss," the men said to each other as they left Brodovsky's yard.

Brodovsky had set up a tavern right near the mill. Before that he had subleased all the taverns in town from the local license holder. In that way the workers buying drinks from Brodovsky gave back to him the money they earned at the mill.

That Sunday, the Verbivka men went to the tavern immediately after leaving Brodovsky and drowned their frustration in vodka, leaving there nearly all their money. Mikola downed one drink after another, and each time his glass was refilled it was short by a finger. That way the Jew who ran the tavern for Brodovsky pocketed hundreds of rubles of extra money. Musicians were playing outside the tavern, and women vagabonds were dancing with the men. By that time Mikola had forgotten Verbivka, Nimidora and his hateful master; he had drowned all his troubles in vodka and was living in some other, carousing and carefree world. It was as if he had again turned bachelor.

"Play for me, musicians, because I'm going to dance!" he shouted, raising his hat high above his head.

The men began to play, and Mikola went round in a wild hopak \*. It was a terrible sight; it seemed that the Devil himself had burst free from hell and broken into a dance. Mikola's dark eyes were burning like smouldering coals, his hair was tousled; his usually pale face was dark and furious. This was no longer

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\* hopak — Ukrainian folk dance — Ed.

the young Mikola with a slender body and a merry boyish face; this was a tramp ready to drink and revel all day long.

"Play faster, or I'll smack your mugs!" Mikola yelled crazily and pulled a workwoman toward him, whirling her so violently that her coat nearly ripped apart at the seams and she struggled hard to break free from his arms.

The musicians played, and the men drank and danced late into the night until they shook out all their money from their pockets.

Then it was winter. The vagabonds had their jobs until spring. The leaseholder fed the workers such terrible food that an epidemic broke out in the bunk-house during the Great Fast. A woman fell ill and died suddenly; then a man became sick and was dead before the day was over. When Brodovsky first leased the enterprise, he had to pay the owner a big sum in advance, much of which he had borrowed from Shmul Kaplun, a wealthy merchant from Lebedin. Kaplun lent the money on the condition that his son-in-law be granted the franchise to feed the mill workers at three rubles a head until Brodovsky repaid the loan. To provide the food, the son-in-law had bought large quantities of carp for a song. The fish was old, stale and rotten. It caused diseases among the workers from which they began to die in such numbers that rumors about it spread far and wide.

The leaseholder regarded himself such a big lord that he thought he could afford to ignore the local priest and ordered the workers to bury bodies without him. The priest immediately informed the bishop who started an enquiry. Now Brodovsky realized he had made a big mistake and to kill the proceedings he had to line the pockets of the right people with many hundreds of rubles. In addition, he was forced to pay

off some arrears owed to the priest by the mill parish, which made him so annoyed that he tugged at his beard and whiskers.

Meanwhile, the plague spread throughout the bunkhouses. More and more people fell ill and died every day. The men were in turmoil, some saying that the masters had deliberately poisoned the well, others insisting that Brodovsky had been feeding dog's meat to his workers. The bunkhouses were in an uproar. Mikola ran the show, stirring up the workers and openly shouting that the Jews had sent a plague upon them. Some of the men got together, went to the leaseholder's house and smashed the windows. Brodovsky with his wife and children fled to the town and remained there until the tramps cooled down. He also sent for the district police. The police chief raided the mill with soldiers, the priest and a doctor. The doctor peered into the wells, tried the water, walked all over the mill and the bunkhouses, went along the pond for some reason, poked his nose into kitchens and bakeries and spoke reassuringly to the workers. However, he could not summon enough courage to sample the mill-cooked borshch with rotten fish and some rats thrown in for better taste. He ordered that the bunkhouses be cleaned up and whitewashed but all the same more and more workers were leaving the mill. The Verbivka men were only waiting until the weather improved. They decided to go farther south, to the Kherson steppes. It was then that Kavun suddenly fell ill. For a long time he did not want to admit it, barely dragging his feet along yet still reporting to work every day. He feared the infirmary like hell, because very few returned from it to the bunkhouses. But he passed out one evening and was taken there all the same.

Lying on a plank bed, Kavun was covering himself

with an old coat and groaning. Dusk glimmered sadly in the window, and his wax-yellow face was barely visible. No one in Verbivka would have recognized Kavun. He was once a hefty, broad-shouldered man with a longish ruddy face. Now his cheeks were sunken, his ruddy complexion was gone, and his dark eyes, which had suddenly become very tired, were staring fixedly at a wall, as if the story of his bitter life was written there. Mikola was sitting pensively beside him, drooping his head. Quite a few people from Verbivka were standing by the bed. After Mikola and his companions left, many more of their fellow villagers had reached those mills. Several dozen of them had already run away from Master Bzhozovsky.

Moaning, Kavun did not take his eyes off the white wall where a broad, dark shadow hovered in a corner. There were some dark spots on the whitewashed wall, and in some places patches of red brick could be seen where the plaster had peeled off. An hour passed, and Kavun was still staring with wild eyes at that wall. In his delirium, pleasant and horrible scenes were passing before his eyes. There was Verbivka with its green willows and flooded by hot sunshine; there was his green meadow over the Rastavitsya. Then he saw the white walls of his house — and a smile flitted across his thin parched lips. Presently, all those willows burst into flames before his eyes, and clouds covered the sky, blotting out the sun... The willows turned into burning stacks in the master's stackyard, and the black sky erupted into horrible flames: the entire stackyard and the whole village were burning before his eyes. His house was burning, too; and it seemed to him that his wife and children had remained inside and were about to be consumed by that terrible fire.

“Save my wife, my children! Help all who trust in

God!" Kavun cried out. "Mikola! Nimidora! Save my children!"

Mikola felt a stab in his heart when he heard Nimidora's name, and a hot tear rolled down his cheek.

But Kavun still saw his yard ablaze, his barn catching fire, the ground smouldering under his feet and the water boiling and burning in the pond. He felt heat and pain; his throat was sore with smoke, and the feeling of pity for his wife and for his children welled up in his chest squeezing his throat... suffocating him... strangling him to death...

As he again focused his eyes on the wall, he watched rocks emerging from the flames and saw the rocky banks on the Ros, crimson like red-hot iron. Then a tall, column-shaped rock loomed up before him all of a sudden. The rock was also red-hot and standing atop it was his master Bzhovzovsky. His clothes were ablaze, as was his hair, and torrents of blood streamed from him down the fiery rock.

"Aha! What will you say now? So you, too, were caught and sent down to hell. How does it feel to be in that fire?" Kavun groaned, and even as he looked, the rock with Bzhovzovsky vanished, and where it had been only a while ago there appeared spinning wheels, a steam engine that was flapping its steel wings, cauldrons full of boiling molasses, and black devils with horns, tails, goatees and fiery tongues rushing back and forth among those wheels. The devils were joined by Bzhovzovsky, who had again sprung out of nowhere, then the steward, then the Jewish tavern keeper, then Brodovsky. All that merry company danced, jumped, ran, screamed and rattled. The devils threw engines together, the machines shook their heads, wagged their tails and hurled loaves of sugar to all sides; those loaves kept striking Kavun's

head, as if somebody were pounding its top with the butt of an ax.

"What are you beating me for? Why this torture?" Kavun again cried out deliriously and it was then that he seemed to awaken, for reason again gleamed in his eyes. Kavun calmed down, moving his eyes to Mikola and the other villagers.

"Do you recognize me, Petro?" Dzherya spoke to Kavun.

"I do," the man said with great difficulty.

"Shall we send for the priest to shrive you?" another asked.

"You don't have to. Leave me in peace. My death is near anyway," Kavun whispered. "I won't get up again. Brothers and comrades! If one of you returns home, tell my wife not to grieve or cry and let her raise the children to give them a proper start in life."

"And teach them to work for the master..." Mikola added grimly.

"I had a home and a family, and I never thought that I'd have to die in a strange land, in some infirmary," Kavun whispered weakly. "Merciful Lord! Why do you punish me so? Let all my misfortune and all my tears fall upon the soul of him who forced me to wander about the world as a tramp."

Kavun cried but he had no tears left; all his tears had dried up, for all the life that had been in him had evaporated to the last drop.

"At least bury me in a decent way. Don't let Brodovsky dump me on the garbage heap the way he did the other men. After all, I worked for him, and he took away my frail body, just as the master drained all my blood. Forgive me, brothers and comrades! Maybe I was guilty of something... Maybe I was guilty toward the commune in Verbvivka... Ask them to forgive the poor tramp. If you return to Verbvivka, give my love

to my wife and tell her not to wait for me and not to expect me — not even as a guest.”

The infirmary was gloomy. Outside, dusk had fallen. Petro Kavun died in a strange land, among strange people. The Verbivka men sat and stood around him as if petrified. Every one was thinking his own thoughts and about his own fate.

“What’s going to happen to the rest of us?” every one thought to himself. “What will happen to me?” Mikola asked himself. “Will Nimidora learn about my death away from home?”

He felt his hair standing. Never before had he wanted so much to return to his home and to his Nimidora. He was burning with the desire to see her, to exchange a few words with her — but the master was alive and well. Recently arrived runaways from Verbivka had told him that in the village everything was as before and that the master kept asking around and looking for Dzherya at all sugar mills to take his anger out on him.

After Kavun’s death the leaseholder kept his wages for a whole month. On payday the Verbivka men reminded Brodovsky about the money. Mikola asked him to give the money to him, because he intended to donate it to the church to have some prayers said for the dead man.

“No way!” Brodovsky said. “Do you really expect me to hand over someone else’s money to a tramp? I know what kind of church you’re going to take it to: you’ll blow it in the tavern — that’s where you leave all your own.”

“I said I wouldn’t blow it but donate it,” Mikola protested firmly.

“I would rather donate it myself,” the leaseholder said.

"Would God accept money for the late man's soul from your hands?"

"Stop bothering me with all this nonsense! I'll take you to the police."

"Would you also send me to the army?" Mikola asked threateningly.

Brodovsky fidgeted and reddened.

"Get off my back! I won't pay you your own money either. And I'll write your master to tell him that you're working at my mill."

At these words Mikola's eyes glittered wildly. It was with great difficulty that he checked himself and did not strike Brodovsky, only taking a step toward him.

"Get out!" Brodovsky shouted. "How dare you get smart with me? Or do you think I don't know where you ran away from?"

"And why shouldn't anyone get smart with you? Doesn't everybody know that you cheat us and feed us on dog's meat, rats and rotten food? And we know how you get beets from peasants. You only weigh the gentry's beets, and those the peasants bring you, you measure by the eye and then pay for them as little as you want. We know you and your kind!"

Mikola snarled, barely holding his tongue from hurling profanities into the other man's face.

Brodovsky, however, let him get away with his strong words; the last thing he wanted was to drive the vagabonds out of the mill. Labor had become a big problem at that time. Local people were not eager to take jobs at the mill, and only grinding poverty forced them to enter into Brodovsky's employ.

As the weather grew warmer, the Verbiivka men prepared to leave Brodovsky and held counsel to decide where they should go next. The bunkhouses



were astir with heated debates, with some wanting to try other plants and others favoring searching for jobs in the steppes or in Bessarabia.

"I'm already sick of dragging myself from one sugar mill to another," Mikola announced. "Better let's go to the steppes, brothers. Quite a few of our Verbivka folks went down to work in the steppes or in Odessa. Some brought back lots of money."

"Let it be the steppes then," the rest clamored approvingly.

They wanted to get out into the steppes and the fields. All of them were used to working in the fields in summer in the open air; all of them loved farming. Several more vagabonds joined the Verbivka company, and as soon as the weather became right, they bought some food for the road, slung their bags over their shoulders and set out toward the broad Kherson steppes.

"Time for us to move on, Abram Moiseyovich! You stay here with your treasures," Mikola said as they were leaving the mill at daybreak.

The men mounted a hill, looked down at the mill and immediately felt better. After the stench of the bunkhouses, after the sickening smell of rotten molasses and incinerated bones, after the acrid smoke and fume of the engines, God's world seemed to welcome them with its green grass, blue sky and pure field air. They walked on and on, passing big villages and small hamlets, more sugar mills, many forests and ravines. In the villages people would sometimes let them sleep in their houses, but more often they spent nights at taverns — both inside and outside. As they left the Chihirin district, forests became scarcer, and there were only small wooded gullies in the valleys. Then hills and valleys gradually evened out into a plain with fewer and fewer villages. And finally

the steppes unfolded before them, spreading to all sides as far as they could see. They walked a day, then another, and there was not a single village or hamlet anywhere in sight. Young grass shone brightly in the spring sun, and yellow-headed dandelions and blue early steppe anemones clustered in the grass. Birds circled and twittered in the broad expanse of the sky. The men felt brushed by the wide wing of golden freedom — freedom from all kinds of troubles and bad luck, freedom from fear of the masters, serfdom and conscription.

“Lord, how big these steppes are!” Mikola said. “We could hide in any of those ravines or gullies from all our enemies.”

“Surely Bzhozovsky will never catch us here to drive us back to work for him,” another added.

They turned into a ravine to have a rest. A small stream flowed on the bottom, disappearing far away amidst gently sloping hills. As far as the eye could see, dense reeds and rushes grew along the stream, and wider pools, bright and clear like mirrors, glistened here and there amidst the rushes. Dusk was falling. In the west the glowing sky had set ablaze scattered small clouds that were drifting across it like a flock of swans. The steppes and the rushes were bathed in pink light.

The men sat down by the stream and had some supper — dry rye bread soaked in water. They were dead tired, and none of them spoke. That majestic silence and the green steppe bathed in a pink glow only added sadness to their gloomy mood.

Then the sun set and the dusk thickened. Mikola gathered some old dry rushes and lighted a fire. The men spread out their coats and dozed off. A wild duck quacked on a nearby pool, then flew off, rustling the rushes and ruffling the water with its wings. It

flew over the fire like a lump of black earth. Then its cry died away and the whole steppe sank again into silence, as if falling asleep.

Suddenly, the vagabonds heard a slight rustle in the rushes not far from the fire, as if somebody was walking toward them. There was a sound of footsteps on the grass, and a man walked into the ring of reddish light. They made out first his head, then a face with a black mustache. A man in an old black coat and a torn hat came toward the fire with a bag slung over his shoulder.

"Good evening, folks!" he spoke to them. "Will you have me for the night?"

"Good evening," they replied in low, half-hearted voices as they turned their heads toward him. "Sit down by the fire and warm yourself if you like. We, too, are going to sleep right here in the open."

The man found some room near the fire and sat down, placing his bag by his side. The fire momentarily lighted up his face, and his black shifty eyes sparkled as they darted from one man to another, as if trying to peer into all their faces. A turned-up, potato-shaped nose, a low forehead, black eyebrows, bright sloe-like eyes and a small chin — everything in him suggested a quick, smart, even predatory fellow. His head, covered with a torn black hat, resembled a bird of prey with a short beak and saucer eyes. The men kept silent, puffing at their pipes and casting sidelong glances at the outsider.

"Where are you coming from?" the stranger asked, getting a pipe from a pouch and stuffing it with tobacco.

"We've come a long way," Mikola said.

"And where are you going?" the man asked again, lighting the pipe and dragging at it so hard that the tobacco crackled and glowed with fire.

"We wish we knew, man," one of the vagabonds replied. "We just want to find some good-paying jobs."

"You must've run away from your master," the stranger said.

"We may have; who cares?.." Mikola drawled without taking his pipe from his teeth.

"Me too, I've fled from my master and I've been wandering about these steppes for more than a year. I know all sorts of places around here. If you let me join you, I'll show you around and may be quite useful to you."

The vagabonds stared at the man in silence. His fast speech, shifty eyes, deft hands and agile gestures somehow did not fit the image of a lifelong serf peasant.

"But where are you headed? To the Don, the Crimea or maybe to Bessarabia?" the man questioned them again in his peculiar prattling manner.

"To tell you the truth, man, we ourselves don't know yet where we will find work," one of them answered.

"I know these parts inside out. I've been to the Crimea, worked with fishing parties on the Dnieper and the Dniester, served the local gentry and now I'm going all the way to Bessarabia."

"Why Bessarabia of all places?" the vagabonds wanted to know.

"Because these steppes are already crawling with police who don't let a tramp pass without demanding his passport, and in Bessarabia nobody seems to care for papers. If you want, we can go there together."

They exchanged glances, then looked again at the crafty stranger, somehow unable to trust him.

"You've chosen a bad place," he spoke again. "It's a little damp here but further along it's drier by the stream. I know these places well."

The men were smoking in silence, glancing furtively at their sacks.

"Help yourselves!" the man said, taking out a hunk of bread, some onions and salt from his sack.

"No, thank you. Have a nice supper," they told him.

The men lay down around the fire, placing their sacks under their heads and began to doze off. But some of them tied their sacks with strings to their hands and did not sleep until the stranger fell down on the grass, like a log, and began snoring away.

In the morning, the men got up, reached for their sacks and found that nothing was missing. They washed their faces in the stream, said their prayers and woke up the stranger. He jumped to his feet as if he had been stung by a wasp, rubbed his eyes, yawned and went to wash his face without even crossing himself.

"My name is Andriy Korchaka," he told them. "If you want some good advice, you should go with me to Bessarabia. Lots of gentry are wandering about these steppes right now; we might come across our masters for all I know."

"What do you think, brothers?" Mikola asked his comrades. "Wouldn't we better follow his advice? Aren't we all sick of our masters?"

"It can be Bessarabia, as long as we get away from them as far as possible," another man spoke.

And they let Andriy Korchaka lead them on. They walked all day long and in the evening reached a tavern. The tavern was built of gray sandy stone and stood unplastered. It was kept by a Jewish family who offered vodka and some food to go with it at exorbitant prices. An old woman from the Podolian Province worked at the tavern as a hired servant. Flat fields spread from the tavern to all sides. The men had a drink each, ate some bread and onions

and slept outside. They asked the Jews if they could find jobs in some nearby village for a week or two. They had too little money left, and it was still a long way to Bessarabia. The tavern keeper directed them to the village of Kolontayivka where vagabonds were hired for the whole summer.

Kolontayivka, lying in a shallow ravine, was a typical steppe village. Small, clay-plastered houses stood along the ravine or nestled at the foot of hills; near the houses were sheds made of tall rushes, also covered with rushes. Cattle was kept in unfenced pens surrounded with ditches, and instead of fences, walls of manure or rush pickets ran along the ditches. There were no barns or granaries in sight. Wheat and rye were stored in small stacks and threshed with flails on a floor or rolled over with a log dragged by horses or oxen. No trees could be seen in the entire village, not even a single willow. This was a village of straw and rushes, of time-blackened thatched roofs and of yellow rush fences and high banks piled up along ditches. Apart from some clusters of acacias and apricots growing around the white stone manor house, Kolontayivka was gray and grim. On a hill beyond the village stood three low windmills with six sails.

"The villages here look pretty bad," one man noted. "I wouldn't like to live in one myself."

"This Kolontayivka is a far cry from our Verbivka," Mikola agreed.

Walking into the village, they saw that these people had quite a lot of cattle and sheep and thought that perhaps farmers in the steppes were much better off than they had first seemed to be. At a tavern they learned all they needed about the local landowner and went on to the manor house. The landlord wanted to hire them for the whole summer, until the Feast of the Intercession, but the vagabonds agreed to work

only for a short time to earn some money for the road. They were so sick of masters of all sorts that they were resolved not to work for them too long if they could help it.

As soon as they had made a little money, they moved on toward the Dniester. Andriy Korchaka had roamed those lands from one end to the other, like a steppe wolf. Among other things, he had worked with fishing parties in the Dniester estuary and along the Black Sea coast.

They passed many places on their way across the Kherson steppes. There were steppe villages, treeless and parched by the scorching sun; there were other villages, lying along small rivers, that could boast some willows, orchards and even vineyards. They also passed through large, affluent German colonies which had long, straight streets and two-storied cottages engulfed in the green of orchards and vines.

## V

One day the vagabonds spotted ahead of them a broad blue ribbon hovering just above the flat steppe. This was the high Bessarabian side of the Dniester firth. As they continued walking, the ribbon became broader, as if rising from underground. Before long, they could make out wooded mountains cut by deep valleys and ravines, and then the town of Ackerman came into view with all its white churches and green orchards. They reached the bank and halted on the edge of the steep slope. The broad estuary sparkled below. The sun was high in the sky, and although it was still early spring, the weather was hot as in summer with only a slight cool breeze blowing from the river. The view of the opposite bank was very picturesque. Numerous gullies made the mountains appear to be cracked and split from the top to the water edge. The slopes were green with fresh spring grass. The town

spread up and along the mountainside, as if deliberately exhibiting and flaunting its cottages, gardens and vineyards. Below stood an ancient Genoese citadel with high, long, dark walls that had battlements and indentations on top. Tall towers rose above the walls overgrown with climbing plants, and the citadel seemed to rise directly from the river. The water reflected identical walls and towers that looked like they were sinking into the deep blue abyss. White and gilded church domes and pointed tops of belfries could be seen here and there on the slopes. The whole high green bank, churches, orchards and all, was mirrored in the river, and the deep-blue, hot southern sky spread majestically over the mountaintops. Emerging from thick reeds and rushes, the Dniester expanded into a broad firth. The rushes stretched on either side of the river and along the estuary in green downy ribbons. Small lakes glistened among the rushes, and wooded hills rose above the lakes.

Quiet and unruffled like molten glass, the Dniester carried its sparkling waters along the estuary, which reached up to eight versts in width. After the flat, deserted, boring steppes, the opposite bank looked like a blossoming paradise.

"There's no need to hurry, fellows," wily Korchaka cautioned them. "Although it'll be a somewhat freer country across the river, we shouldn't rush across by day, because they, too, have some police. We'll have to wait till dark. Let's get some sleep, because there'll be much to do tonight. Also, get some money ready if you want to get registered at some village over there."

The men found a deep gully, ate some lunch and lay down to sleep. In the evening, as dusk began to fall, Korchaka woke them up, and they went down to look for a boat to take them across.



Back then, serfdom as it existed in Ukraine was not practised in Bessarabia. To be sure, peasants did have to work the land, but the gentry could neither buy nor sell them. Bessarabian landowners willingly accepted Ukrainian runaways, because they had plenty of land and rather few peasants. Serfs from Podillya, the Kaniv and Kherson districts and even from lands east of the Dnieper such as the Poltava area, found their way here and settled around Ackerman, near Benderi and even among Moldavians elsewhere in the province. All new villages in the Ackerman area were organized into a number of so-called settlements. Every settlement was provided with a police officer and a headman with a clerk, instead of the *volost*\* chief, as was usual in Ukraine. The local population were all classified as urban residents, since there were no serf-holding gentry in the area.

Korchaka found a boatman who agreed to ferry them across and to find out from the nearest police officer if he would be willing to register them properly at his settlement and for how much. Then the company got into a boat and rowed across the firth, pulling in at the settlement of Krivda.

The vagabonds stayed near the boat, and the boatman ran up the bank to Krivda to speak to the settlement officer. He soon returned to tell them that the registration was going to cost them fifteen rubles apiece. Then he led them to the officer who there and then registered them as urban dwellers of Krivda without so much as asking them who they were or where they came from. Some of the men did not have enough money and they promised to bring the rest as soon as they earned the necessary amount.

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\* A small rural administrative unit

The church, civil and police registers of that excellent settlement were full of names of immortal people. They never died for the simple reason that as soon as a person was dead, his or her identity was immediately used to register some fresh runaway from Ukraine. Judging by those registers, one Petro Perebendya had lived for more than a hundred years; Hnat Shvidkiy with his wife Orishka had each turned one hundred and twenty, while Ivan Posmityukh had managed to stay alive for a hundred and fifty years and also had five sons and three brothers, all in excellent health. The officer registered Mikola as Ivan Posmityukh, the father, while the rest of the men were recorded as his brothers or sons. Andriy Korchaka, alias Olexa Posmityukh, became Mikola's son, although he was actually several years older than his new father. Having christened all the newborns, the officer collected his fees and issued them passports.

"This Bessarabian priest certainly charges a lot for his services," Mikola complained when they had left the police station.

"This one isn't too expensive," the boatman said. "I've seen worse."

"So what are your names again, my dear children?" Mikola joked. "We should try to remember or we might get into trouble."

All the members of the newly-baptized Posmityukh family tried hard to memorize their new identities.

"Now you're supposed to go to the real priest and have your names recorded in the church books as well," said the boatman. "Let him have a look at his new parishioners."

"I wonder if this priest charges as much for baptism as the other fellow," Mikola mused. "If he does, we might as well run back to Verbivka and work for Bzhozovsky."

"Freedom is an expensive thing, you know," the boatman answered him. "But then it's always worth the price."

As it turned out, the priest was only too delighted to receive them into the fold. He duly wrote them down as Posmityukhs and did not charge a penny. His parish was swelling with Ukrainian runaways.

"May I congratulate you on your fresh start, gentlemen, and wish you the best of health," the boatman grinned. "Now, Father, invite me to the tavern and buy me some drinks to celebrate the baptism."

They went to the tavern, consumed two quarts of vodka, and in the morning the boatman led them to the firth, where a band of fishermen was camping in the rushes.

Down by the water, black fishing nets hung from stakes driven into the grassy ground between two walls of young rushes. Endless bands of mesh were swinging in the light breeze like bundles of tarred ropes. Strings of big floats made of light dry wood were stretched between poles. From a distance, it all looked like the flimsiest of wattle fences or a widely spaced picket fence adorned with dolls of some sort on top. Amidst all that maze of mesh stood a cooking shed. It was round-shaped and had low rush walls and a door, but no roof. Inside the shed, two smoke-blackened stakes, forking on top, were driven into the ground, and a thick pole lay across them. On the pole hung several pots, and a fire was going under them, letting out clouds of thick smoke. Partially hidden by that smoke, the two stakes with their crosspiece loomed like a gallows. Beside the fire there were a couple of tables for the cook to prepare fish on. Fish was boiling in the pots, and the whole place was filled with the damp smell of scales.

A larger rush shack stood not far from the kitchen,

containing buckets and barrels of all sizes with millet, peas, corn and beans. There were some other provisions and also clothes. All the fishermen, including the boss, slept there, too.

The cook was puttering around his pots, and the fishermen were busy mending the nets. Outside the shack stood Ivan Kovbanenko, the fishermen's boss. He was not particularly tall, but had very broad shoulders, a large head, a long black mustache and a deeply tanned face with black sparkling eyes. He was wearing rather simple clothes: store-bought, wide, dark-blue trousers, a white shirt and an astrakhan hat. Only his fine Odessa-made scarlet sash set him apart from the rest. Yet there was also something authoritative in his bold, haughty face and dark intelligent eyes. He was puffing at a pipe, letting smoke out of a corner of the mouth.

"We're looking for some work and would like to join you," Mikola told Kovbanenko after greeting him.

The man only nodded slightly, without taking the pipe from between his teeth. He surveyed the group, glanced sideways at the smallish, thievish-eyed Korchaka and spoke:

"We can take you if you like. You'll be getting half of all the fish you catch, and I'll take the other half. I'll give you my gear, we'll go halves on the food, and everybody buys his own vodka. Will you agree to that? He cast another glance at the young, robust men.

"I don't see why not," Korchaka replied hastily. "It wasn't us who made these rules, and it's not up to us to change them either."

Kovbanenko did not seem to care who or what they were, or where they came from. Only a few of his fishermen had passports, and some had only seen other people's, having never had their own.

"Make yourselves comfortable, fellows, right here in the open," Kovbanenko said. "Eat some lunch and then we'll get to work."

The men put their sacks in the shack, filled their pipes and sat on the grass, smoking.

"If you don't want to go hungry, get down to scaling some more fish, because what I've got in the pots won't be enough for all," the cook said.

Kovbanenko took a mat off a bucket which was full of sea and freshwater fish and gave the men knives. The vagabonds began scraping scales off the fish, but they did it so clumsily that Kovbanenko and the cook smiled silently. The skilful fishermen also grinned, looking at the awkward bumpkins.

The cook threw the fish into the simmering water and fed some more rushes into the fire. The fire crackled and flamed up, and the large pot soon began to boil. After a while, the cook pulled out the fish with a ladle that was as big as a plate and put it in a tub-sized vessel hollowed out of a log. He used some of the broth to prepare a thick sauce, poured it over the fish and decanted it through the handle, which was hollow, like a spout. Then everybody sat down on small stools around a knee-high table. The cook placed the fish before them, poured the broth into a large bowl and sliced the bread. The famished vagabonds attacked the fresh pike and sturgeon. They had never eaten so well since they ran away from Verbivka. Now they were storing up fresh energy with that delicious meal.

"Now that we've had a bite to eat, let's set sail, fellows," said Kovbanenko, getting the boat ready.

All the men proceeded to take off the big net and load it onto the boat.

In the firth they caught mostly freshwater fish that came down from the Dniester, although sometimes

they found big sturgeons in their nets as well. The chieftain took the catch to Ackerman to sell it fresh in the market. Salting fish in barrels was unknown in the firth.

They spent about a week more on the firth and then began preparing to go home. It was time to go out to sea. The fishermen loaded their nets, barrels, provisions and clothes onto the big boat and sailed to Ackerman. Once there, they went to the police where Kovbanenko took out a license for the whole summer, also signing a pledge not to appropriate any objects that the sea may cast ashore but to take them immediately to customs.

Then they sailed on down the firth, found a pier and pulled in near a large village. Leaving one of the men to guard the boat, Kovbanenko led the rest through the village to his home. This was still the Ackerman district.

The village was large and long. A broad street stretched throughout its length almost as far as Ackerman. It was lined with acacias, just as Verbivka's streets were lined with willows. This was a Ukrainian village, inhabited, like Ackerman itself, by people who hailed from all the provinces of Ukraine. Green as a grove, the village was drowned in apricot and cherry orchards. Behind the houses, vineyards stretched all along the village. A broad strip of fields, running just outside the village, was covered with feather-like shoots of corn and wide leaves of young tobacco. Further on, lay the wide expanse of table-flat steppes planted with vines, sown with wheat or corn, or overgrown with green grass. It was spring, and the grass was tall and ready for the scythe. This was a flourishing, prosperous paradise of a country.

Kovbanenko lived in a hamlet outside the village. His fairly large house was built of sandy stone and had

wide windows of four panes each. He had fashioned it after the cottages he had seen in Schaba, a Swiss colony located in the steppes nearby. The house was surrounded by a large vineyard where long rows of cherries and apricots grew among the vines. Giant nut trees stood around the house. In that sunny climate, young shoots on the trees had already pushed a good couple of yards upward. The entire yard was as green and fragrant as a flowerbed. The acacias were in blossom, adorned with clusters that resembled big silver candlesticks. The pungent smell of the blossoming acacias spread a special kind of sweetness throughout the yard.

Kovbanenko's wife ran out of the house. She was a Ukrainian woman, no longer young, but tall and graceful. She was wearing a dark-blue vest and had a black kerchief tied low on her forehead, Poltava-style. Thus it turned out that Ivan Kovbanenko lived near Ackerman with a wife who hailed from Poltava Province, east of the Dnieper.

A young girl also came out of the house. This was Mokrina, Kovbanenko's daughter. She was slender as a poplar and had the small feet and hands so typical of the Poltava womenfolk. Mokrina had a longish, fine-featured face with thin, silky eyebrows, sloe-black, bright eyes, full, little cherries for lips and cheeks that were high-colored up to her temples. Her young face seemed to be glowing with health; her cheeks and eyes radiated heat, as though she had just come from a flaming fire. The vigor of the prairies emanated from her face; and her supple body, graceful neck and thin arms were as pliable as a lone stalk in the wind. Her black, thick braids shone in the setting sun, and red beads on a dark-blue vest enhanced her fiery image.

She stood there in the evening sun, under a nut tree

and surveyed the fishermen. As her eyes fell on Mikola, her face immediately blushed, like a poppy. She spun around and flew back into the house.

Kovbanenko's wife brought out supper for the fishermen. The sun had just set, when the men lay down to sleep under the trees. In the morning, they were to go to sea for the whole summer.

At daybreak their breakfast was ready. They ate it outdoors, loaded some more big nets and pots onto a wagon, tied a dog to it and put a rooster on it. Then they went into the living room for the departure ritual.

The room was light and spacious. A lamp was flickering before the icons, and wax-and-paper doves and Easter eggs dangled on threads fixed with wax to the ceiling. A loaf of bread with some salt on top of it lay on a table covered with a white cloth. From another room, Kovbanenko brought out a large bottle of vodka with some sort of yellow root infused in it and placed it on the table. The fishermen pressed closer. There were about twenty men, crowded in the room like carol singers on a Christmas night. Kovbanenko poured a glass of vodka, crossed himself and intoned:

"Grant us, o Lord, full nets of all fishes. May all the fish from the whole Black Sea swim straight to us, into our nets and our traps. Send us, o Lord, health and happiness! May we return alive to our homes and not be drowned at sea!"

"Grant us that!" the fishermen said.

Kovbanenko poured some vodka for his wife and then filled a glass for each of the men, in turn. He then took an icon off the wall, set it on the table, crossed himself and kissed the icon and the bread. The rest followed suit, one by one. Kovbanenko silently sat down at the head of the table, and the



other men took seats on benches and even on the floor, since the benches could not accommodate them all. Everybody froze in hushed silence. The only sound came from the flies rustling in last year's dry cornflowers behind the icons. Presently Kovbanenko rose to his feet, and the fishermen stood up as one man. He took the icon and the bread and salt and went outside, followed by his men. The icon and the bread were put on the wagon. The long German wagon with tired wheels rolled out of the yard. Kovbanenko's wife and the fishermen followed it on foot. The ceremony was over.

Reaching the firth, they dragged the boat back into the water, loaded it with fishing gear, pots and plates, and went aboard, sitting down in two rows. Kovbanenko stood at the big tiller and swung it toward the shore. The rudder turned, like a large sea fish, stirring up the water and causing the boat to move slightly away from the shore. The fishermen struck the water with the flat of the oars, and the big boat flew across the firth, like a bird, leaving behind a long wake of large and small waves.

"Bring us more food in a week," Kovbanenko called to his wife. "Our shacks will stand at the old place, on the spit."

The woman stood there for a long time, staring at the boat, where her husband's white shirt was visible from a long distance. It was as though he had turned into a statue chiseled of white stone. Then she turned the horses up the shore and was suddenly gone, as if she had decided to hide somewhere in the steppe.

The fishermen rowed to the Tsargrad Outfall, passed several narrow channels which broke across the spit from a large lake and pulled in at the customs post in the very mouth of the firth. There the boss

showed his license to the duty officers, and they were allowed to go out to the sea. The boat turned round the point of the sandy spit and sailed into the Black Sea. For several more versts they rowed along a low shore and then pulled in to a sandy spit. There they unloaded their nets, pots and the rest. The spit was very low and stretched into the sea like a white ribbon, dividing a big seawater lake from the firth and the sea. The lake had once been a bay; but waves had washed up a narrow natural dam to form a large lake about twenty versts long that was divided from the sea and the firth. The steep far shore of the lake, which had once been the shore of the sea, loomed in the mist like a green wall. A strip of rushes and reeds ran below along it as far as the eye could see.

It was an imposing view. The oblong lake cut some twenty versts into the steppe, its surface gleaming between the steep shores through the light shroud of mist. In some places, mostly along the white spit, forests of tall rushes seemed to be sinking in green water. On the other side of the spit, the blue waters of the Black Sea spread out, rising higher and higher until they merged with the mist, the sky and the golden sunshine. Beyond the spit, the sea loomed like a grim, remote, black mountain that threatened to come down with all its might and flood the white sand, the lake, the green rushes and the whole boundless steppe. But now the sea, the lake with its high blue shores and the wide steppe were immersed in a hot haze and shrouded with a light, grayish mist, in which all colors and shades were indistinguishable. Above it all hovered the bright-blue, splendid dome of the sky. White terns and gulls circled overhead, and clusters of big, swan-like, red-beaked pelicans covered large stretches of both the water and the shores.

In many places, narrow channels were dug across the narrow spit. Through them, small mullets entered the lake from the sea during the whole summer to feed in the lake's marshy meadows. Through the same channels they also returned to the sea in the fall. The ditches were lined with green rushes and blood-red, juicy saltwort. Kovbanenko chose a place near one of the channels, where the sand was overgrown with green, leafy reed grass and red saltwort and ordered the men to set up camp. The fishermen gathered some dry rushes and built a very long shack and a separate shed for the kitchen and cook. Planting two poles in the sand, they fastened a bar across them and hung the pots. Then they drove in two stakes with a crossbar to hang coils of ropes on, and some of the men pitched for themselves tiny sheds in which a man could only sit or lie. Finally, they dug out a stove to melt tar for the nets and rigged up an oven for bread. Such a camp with any number of large and small shacks, a bakery, rope rack and kitchen shed was usually referred to as "the shacks." It was not uncommon for one boss to have two or three such camps and to appoint men to run them.

Kovbanenko drove in several rows of stakes for the main sweep net and the smaller drag nets. Shacks and sheds covered the spit like houses of a small village. The dog was let loose and the rooster was tied in a separate small shed. The men scurried up and down the deserted spit, a fire flamed up under the pots, and blue smoke poured from the tarring stove and the bakery. The dead shore was coming to life.

In the evening Kovbanenko ordered the men to prepare the sweep net. The fishermen filed up to him, one after another, and he loaded lengths of the net onto their shoulders and backs. One man followed another, and soon ten of them plodded to the sea in a single

file, carrying the long net. Standing in the boat, Kovbanenko took it off them and placed it on the bottom.

The sun had set and dusk began to fall. The sea had turned black, and only the spit shone whitely in the dark like a long strip of white cloth. Terns alighted on the water in droves, and mallards swooped to grab fish, proving that there was plenty of it near the shore.

Then it was night. It was quiet as inside a house, only the sea lapped against the shore, barely rustling the sand. Kovbanenko took his position at the tiller; the main thick rope to which the net was secured along its upper edge lay, coiled like a snake, at his feet. An iron grapple was tied to one end of the main rope. Kovbanenko's mate and most of the men stayed ashore, but several fishermen and the net helper joined him in the boat.

Kovbanenko shoved off the boat and turned the tiller. On shore, the mate held one end of the rope tied to the net. The men on the boat began casting the net, rowing in a wide semicircle. The heavy net rapidly sank, leaving on the surface a track of bubbles and a long line of big wooden buoys that resembled a string of beads.

The heavy boat moved along slowly and sleepily, the oars creaking in the rowlocks. The fishermen were smoking their pipes in silence. On shore, more pipes glowed in the dark, and out at sea, Kovbanenko's pipe, the biggest of them all, shone brightly like a star.

Having completed the semicircle, Kovbanenko pulled in back to shore. The net helper picked up the remainder of the coiled rope and hurled it ashore with all his might. The rope uncoiled with a hissing sound, like a black snake. The grapple caught in the sand and held. The rope struck the water with a loud splash and sank.

Meanwhile, a full moon had risen, as if emerging

from black waves. Under it, a small track shone redly far out at sea, at least a hundred versts away, so it seemed. Slowly and stealthily, the moon rolled up the sky, as if clambering out of the water with some difficulty. Presently, the sea was lighted up, and the reddish path of sparkling water was longer and brighter under the moon.

Kovbanenko moored the boat and jumped out onto the sand, wetting his feet. He yanked at the rope and called loudly: "Everybody heave on!"

Every fisherman was wearing a sort of harness consisting of a broad, flat backpiece that was held in place by means of leather straps fastened with wooden pins in front. Thongs with wooden weights were tied to the straps at the waist. A fisherman would throw his thongs on the rope, and they would twist round it and hold like leeches, with the weights preventing them from uncoiling.

Now half of the fishermen coiled their thongs around the rope at one end of the semicircle, while the rest did the same on the other side. They began dragging out the net, stepping backward a few paces at a time, their backs straining against the wooden backpieces. As the net approached the shore, those who were at the very ends of the rope unwound their thongs, now stiffened by water, and waded in to twist them again around the soaked and swollen rope.

The moon rose higher, pouring its beams down onto the sea. The sea was black like a plowed field, and only a wide patch of it shone under the moon. The sea itself presented a hellishly grim picture, but the white spit shone brightly in the moonlight and seemed to bathe the sea in a white glow.

As the two loose ends of the main rope were hauled in, the men pulled yard after yard of black, tarred mesh out of the water. It was as if two long

fences of black mesh were crawling ashore. Black crayfish swung on the mesh like giant spiders. Here and there mackerels, caught in the meshes by the gills, glistened in the dark, as if somebody had thrust silver knives into the net. When the two sides of the net had been pulled a considerable distance up the shore, the wide sack appeared in the water like some sea beast showing its head and body above the surface. The sack pushed before it whole heaps of sea weeds entangled like bundles of black ribbons. A surface wind had blown during the day, bringing plenty of weeds to the shore; a higher wind would have carried them out to sea.

"Grab the landing nets! Get the fish out of the sack!" Kovbanenko shouted rushing into the water and pressing the bottom of the mesh with his feet to prevent fish from escaping under the net.

The men dropped the ropes and rushed to the sack with landing nets. The sack seemed to be alive, stirring, throbbing and heaving like a human chest and disappearing under the waves every now and then. They scooped the fish out of it and threw them far onto the sand. Drove of small mackerels were tossing and leaping like a fountain of pearls, like a spring of crystal-pure water sparkling in the moonlight. Round-shaped flounders looked like large silver plates jumping up on the sand. A big sturgeon landed on the shore, arching its back in a horseshoe, scraping and scattering sand with its tail. Together with the sand, little mackerels were flying to all sides. And then red-finned searobins and other fishes, big and small, rained onto the beach. Jelly-like medusas gleamed whitely amidst the fish. The entire spit seemed to be stirring in the moonshine, as though the sand had suddenly come to life and was jumping and gushing out in fountains.

Then the whole sack was hauled ashore. A dolphin was floundering in it. It was so big that the fishermen could not get it out alive and had to club it on the head several times. Finally they stunned it and threw it on the shore where it lay like a black log. A ray cut a landing net with its sharp tail and scratched one of the men's leg.

"There's a fine catch, isn't that right?" one of the men exclaimed. "You surely owe us a treat now, boss!"

Traditionally, the first catch always went to the leader of a fishing band. It was also called the "home catch," since it was usually hauled in not far from the camp.

The cook filled the tub with fish and went to his shed to prepare supper. The rest of the fish was shoveled into big barrels and buckets, and all the fishermen walked to the shacks to eat supper and drink the vodka offered by Kovbanenko.

The fire burned high under the pots, the flames even licking the crossbar. Dry rushes were crackling and sparkling, and clouds of smoke were rising high into the air. Fish was boiling in the pots, and the fishermen were sitting around the fire on small stools, drying their wet shirts which were steaming in the heat. Kovbanenko was pouring out vodka, filling a single glass that was passing from hand to hand. The cook was stirring the fire with a long poker. As soon as supper was ready, the cook placed wooden trays of fish before the men and poured the broth into a common bowl.

They ate supper by the fire. The men looked so white against the backdrop of the night that it seemed they were almost transparent, as if cast of opaque glass.

They were in a merry mood, cracking jokes and inventing nicknames for one another. A fisherman with

a large, onion-like nose was christened Onion, another was named Quail, yet another Tailup. Other nicknames were more vulgar. Only Mikola was sitting grimly, hanging his black-haired head. He found this life better than either at the sugar mills or in Bzhozovsky's Verbivka. Kovbanenko was no master but one of the lads, and there was certainly plenty of food. But thoughts of Nimidora would not leave him. How was she getting along, alone with a little child and an old woman on her hands? Was she alive and in good health? He wondered if he would ever go back to her or see her again in this life at all.

A bright morning star rolled onto the lower edge of the sky, as if climbing there straight from the sea. Soon afterward, a reddish glow colored the sky in the east. The sea was calm and as smooth as glass. The fishermen went to sleep in the shacks. Some stretched themselves out on the sand right by the fire and snored away loudly.

Several days later, Kovbanenko's wife and daughter brought them a wagonful of provisions. They were not far from his hamlet, if one skirted the lake and then followed on straight along the spit.

Mokrina took loaves of bread from the wagon and placed them on a burlap spread on the ground. Her black braids glistened in the sun like a pair of snakes, and her red beads seemed to add color to her cheeks. As she reached for the loaves, her slender figure bent like a poplar in the wind.

"Load the fish onto the wagon and take it to town to sell," Kovbanenko told his wife. "And you, Mokrina, stay home and mind the house."

"Don't you think I know the way to town?" Mokrina asked merrily and boldly. "Let Mother do something useful at home, I would rather drive out there. I'd also like to buy some material for a new vest."



"All right, I don't mind," her father said. He knew only too well that she would have her way in the end and preferred not to argue.

Mokrina finished unloading the bread and darted a look at the fishermen. As her eyes fell on Mikola, her whole face blushed up to her eyebrows. After days spent in the pure sea air, Mikola looked fit and handsome. Now his black brows and mustache made the girl's heart beat faster. In all her life, Mokrina had not seen such an attractive, vigorous face with such bright brown eyes.

But when Mikola glanced at her young face, he instantly recalled Nimidora. It was as if he had suddenly seen her near him on that shore, seen her face down to the smallest detail, even her large red kerchief on her head and string of red beads with a big silver coin round her neck. He had begun to forget her amidst the rattling machinery at the mills, but here, by that boundless sea, in the clean air of the free steppes, memories of past happiness again stirred in his heart, bringing tears to his eyes.

The lovely girl could not know, of course, what pain she was causing him, Mikola thought as he again cast a glance at her.

When all the fish had been loaded, Mokrina jumped onto the wagon as agilely as a steppe goat and drove off along the lake. Mikola looked after her for a long time, following with his eyes her blue vest and her braids, black in the setting sun.

The sun fell into the steppes, somewhere behind the rushes, and went out. A red moon rose from the estuary and unrolled a broad sparkling path across the water. The dusk thickened. The steppes, firth, sea and lake blurred in a quiet, magic twilight under a thin shroud of bluish mist. The boundless space and unlimited view brought uneasy thoughts to Mikola's

mind. The fire was blazing under the cooking pots, and clouds of smoke were white in the moonlight. Seen through the smoke, the stakes and crossbar looked black. The men were laughing and joking, but Mikola was in no mood for merrymaking. He had often wondered if he should try to make his way to Verbivka to take his wife, daughter and mother with him to the steppes. But as he remembered Bzhozovsky and recalled how many versts of those steppes he had covered on foot, and how many villages, towns, forests and ravines he had passed on the way, he felt less and less sure he should attempt it.

The fishermen had nicknamed him Sad Man.

A scorching, sweltering summer arrived. The catches became smaller and smaller. Kovbanenko's daughter visited the camp more and more often and had begun to flirt with Mikola more or less openly. This was noticed by everybody, not excluding her father.

## VI

Early in the fall, the boss divided the profits by keeping one half for himself and giving the other half over to the men. The season had been very good. The fishermen had earned quite a lot of money and decided to go on a spree. First they all walked together to Ackerman where they bought new coats and some had jackets made of blue cloth. They also bought fine red sashes and new astrakhan hats. Then they hired musicians, marched with them in a hilarious procession through the whole town and finally landed at a tavern. Clad in their new outfits, girdled with the new sashes, they proudly marched down the street in the hot sunshine, their hats pushed to the

backs of their heads. The wide sashes burned redly in the sun, their fringed loose ends dangling below their knees.

At the tavern, they sat together on benches, talking merrily, and treated one another to drinks while the musicians played away. After eating they began to swill down beer. Fishermen from nearby villages drank less, but the vagabonds and rogues were in a really expansive mood, spending money like water. Mikola sat in silence, drinking beer from a bottle.

"Hey, Sad Man, stop brooding! Better come and dance with us!" Tailup called to him, tugging at his sleeve.

"Do you think that I don't know how to carouse?" Mikola asked him grimly. "If you do, you're damn wrong, because I might even teach you a thing or two."

"I bet you couldn't! There isn't a man who knows more about reveling than Tailup. Just try to prove me wrong," the man argued tipsily.

"What if I do prove you wrong?" Mikola insisted.

"I'll buy you a bottle of the finest wine then. Don't think I'm a miser. I spit on money, it's like water to me?" he shouted heatedly.

"Come on, stick up your tail!" yelled Onion, who was very drunk already. "Let's see how you can caper."

Tailup showed them, breaking into a dance so wild that it seemed like invisible gadflies were continually stinging his back, heels and soles. He was tossing up his feet and driving his heels into the ground so hard that lumps of earth flew into the musicians' faces. His boot struck a table, sending bottles crashing to the ground. The skirt of his short blue jacket was spinning and twirling like the sails of a windmill, and his sash flashed in the sun as if it had caught fire.

Mikola could no longer sit still and began to dance

across from Tailup. He was followed by Onion, Quail, Stamper and Itchingrear. Half of their bunch were up and dancing, and it seemed as though some windmills had come to life and broken into a dance, their sails going round and round. Arms were waving, feet were kicking, the skirts of blue jackets were whirling, and long red sashes were blazing amidst it all. Tailup tied his sash across his black hat, Onion hung a big silk kerchief on his sash and Mikola snatched off his hat and waved it above his head as he danced.

"Hey there! Get us some really good wine!" Tailup shouted to the tavern keeper, falling on a bench. "I can't keep going anymore. Mikola wins!"

The Jew brought a bottle of expensive wine. The vagabond got some coins out of his purse and tossed them on the table.

"Pour the stuff! Tailup's having a good time! A tramp buys booze, 'cause he's got money to lose. Drink, dance and don't think about money!"

If the Jew disapproved, he did not show it. He just pocketed the money and poured a glass of wine.

"Do you think we've never tasted good wines?" Korchaka shouted to him. "Come on, get us something better still, the stuff the richest lords guzzle."

The Jew fetched some worse wine and charged a higher price.

Then evening came, but the drunk fishermen went on dancing, singing and drinking for quite a long time. Some had passed out and were now lying by the tavern in the dust. Korchaka blew all his money and began to drink on credit; several other men followed suit. Things quieted down only toward midnight. The whole lot of them were sprawled out on the square, snoring loudly. Only two men, their arms wrapped round each other, stumbled across the square, muttering: "Aw hell, damn it, better let's find some straw.

To the right, so we'll go through the barn door. To the right, I say, and don't you push me. See? There's a strawrick over there!" But instead of the non-existent strawrick, they tumbled into some tall weeds and went out like a light, their faces in the nettle.

Next morning, the fishermen cured their hangovers with the hair of the dog. Some of the local villagers went home, but the vagabonds went on carousing, going back to work only on the third day, having left much of their earnings at the tavern.

Korchaka, however, stayed in town with two of the Verbivka runaways. He soon turned into a lazy drunkard and had to pawn his new jacket and boots at the tavern. Then he ran across some old pals, and together they robbed a Jewish woman. They stole some silver spoons, which somebody had pawned with her, several Sabbath lamps and about ten rubles in cash. When they tried to sell the loot to some Jew at the market, the police turned up out of the blue and seized them, spoons, lamps and all. The men were taken to the station. Mokrina and her mother happened to be at the market, selling fish, and saw the scene with their own eyes. They also heard that that very night the police chief was going to raid the fishermen's camp with village wardens and take away all the vagabonds. Leaving her mother at the market, Mokrina ran all the way to the shacks to warn her father and Mikola.

"Drop out of sight," Kovbanenko said. "I don't care if you hide in the steppes, in the rushes or out at sea, but hide you must or you'll be in trouble. Lie low for some time until this thing blows over."

The men scattered in the rushes, just as chickens scatter in weeds fleeing from a hawk.

"Take a boat and row out to sea," Mokrina whispered to Mikola. "Drop the grapnel and wait till I give you a sign from the shore, because the rushes aren't

safe enough. Tonight I'll get a fire going on the beach. Come back only when you see me tossing burning sticks up into the air..."

Mikola darted to a small boat and took it out several versts to sea. From there he saw men rushing about the shore like scared ants when the police appeared. He dropped on the bottom of the boat.

It was a hot day with sunshine pouring generously from a high sky, and Mikola soon realized that he had not a crumb of bread and not a drop of water. He soon felt hungry and then also thirsty. His mouth and throat were parched. The water that was all around him only teased him and made his chest and throat burn even more painfully with thirst. He anxiously awaited the evening, glancing at the sun every now and then. But the sun seemed frozen in the sky, apparently not moving at all. In front of him, the coast arched in a semicircle, and behind him a large ship moved across the blue waters, all her white sails set and swollen by a breeze. Proud and splendid like a white swan, she slowly glided along, her sails shining in the sun, as though they were made of swan down interwoven with silver threads.

Presently, a dark spot appeared on the horizon where the sea merged with the sky. It grew larger all the time, as it approached like a swelling haycock. Mikola felt the placid water stir under the boat, as if somebody were rocking the seabottom. The haycock turned into a big stack, and the cloud continued moving toward the shore, its narrow rim glittering like a silver ring. Against the background of the cloud, now as dark as freshly plowed black soil, the ship's sails seemed even whiter, shining still brighter. The air suddenly stirred and moaned like a pine forest in the wind, and the black cloud swelled and rushed toward Mikola so fast that he could follow it with his eyes. The sea

below it was also black, and the cloud swallowed the ship in the twinkling of an eye. A big wave with a white, foaming crest came from the sea and danced around the boat.

This was the first time Mikola had been at sea. Tough as he was, he was somewhat worried. But he had daily lived with far greater misfortunes than this momentary fear. Mikola sat there in the boat, grimly watching the huge beast of a cloud rush toward him.

Heavy drops of rain drummed against the water, and a gust of wind suddenly tossed up the boat like a splinter of wood. The rain became heavier all the time until the sky erupted in a downpour. The sea groaned and whined. The shore hid behind a wall of rain and fog, and the sun was blotted out by clouds. The land, sea and sky melted into one, and the wind whistled, hissed and roared like a beast of prey over the dark sea.

The boat was filling with water. High white crests smashed against the boards, leaped into the air and flew over the boat. Mikola started bailing out with his hands.

All this time, Mokrina was staring at the terrible sea from a shack. Her blood ran cold with fear. She wept like a child, her eyes fixed on the spot where she knew the boat was anchored until the sky suddenly became clear and the wind died, as if it was running from the sea to the steppes to play freely in the boundless expanse.

It suddenly became still. Soon the sea along the coast sparkled again, its green waters covered with white crests that looked very much like swaths on a freshly mown meadow. The sun, only partially obscured by a cloud, shone as brightly as before; the sky over the sea was blue again, and a colorful

rainbow shot across it. One of its broad ends rested upon the sea, while the other stretched far beyond the lake, across the water meadows, into the wide, flat steppes. The red, orange and yellow bands of the rainbow were so intense that they seemed to be burning with subdued fire; and through its wide screen, spread out across the sea like a peacock's tail, one could see distinctly the green waves and the white crests tinged with the various colors of the rainbow. The wet-sailed ship, too, was caught by the rainbow and seemed to be shrouded with an expensive sheer fabric.

Mokrina spotted the black speck amidst the white-crested waves and was as delighted as a child. Now she waited for dark. She had decided to bring Mikola some bread and water without telling her father.

Meanwhile, the police chief and wardens returned to the shacks. They had wandered in vain all over the rushes and sedges, found no vagabonds and only gotten wet to the skin. The police chief left for town, leaving a few wardens on watch for the whole night and promising to return the following day.

When it began to grow dusky, the girl took a crock of water, some bread and boiled fish and left the camp, making it appear as if she were going to the village. Instead, she walked far along the sea until she was hidden from view by a bend in the steep shore. Finding a small boat, she settled down to wait until the moon rose. She was afraid of missing Mikola's boat in the dark and of rowing too far out to sea. As soon as a reddish moon appeared in the sky, Mokrina grabbed an oar and was off.

Mikola sat in his boat feeling stiff, his clothes wet against his skin. When he saw that a boat was approaching him, his first thought was that a warden was coming after him. He had already lifted a heavy oar to hit him on the head if it came to a fight, when



he realized that the rower was a girl. The reddish moonlight shone upon her face, blue vest and white sleeves.

"It's me," Mokrina said in a low voice as her boat touched Mikola's with a soft knock.

He was hardly able to believe his eyes, but her face was clearly visible, and even in the moonlight he could see her blush.

"The wardens have stayed at the shacks and will be there the whole night," she said. "I knew you had nothing to eat, so I've brought you some bread, fish and water." She put the crock and food in his boat.

"Thank you, Mokrina," Mikola said. "You're really a kind-hearted girl. Does your father know that you're here?"

"He doesn't and he won't — unless you tell him..."

"Why should I do that?.." he asked brusquely.

"If you don't tell him, I won't either, no matter what he does to me. Nothing will ever stop me from coming to you or from feeding you when you're hungry."

Mikola guessed that there had to be a personal reason behind her visit and did not know what he should say.

"Weren't you afraid of rowing all the way here alone at night?" he asked.

"I wasn't, because I was sure I would find you. And I fear nothing when I'm with you. Why are you so sad?"

"There's no reason why I should be happy."

"You must've left your parents somewhere a long way from here. Is it that you're missing them now? Or are you just homesick?"

"My father is dead," Mikola said softly.

Mokrina thought she should not ask him any more questions. Instead, she said:

"Let me show you the way through a ditch to the lake. You'll be safer there. Take up the grapnel and let's go."

"Are you sure you aren't going to deliver me up to the wardens?" he asked cautiously.

Suddenly, Mokrina's entire body flushed. She spoke heatedly:

"I certainly don't love you to betray you to the police."

Mikola wished he hadn't spoken. He felt sorry for the poor girl, her pretty face and her blush. He almost told her that he was married, but as he glanced at her young, ardent face and her supple figure, the words stuck in his throat. Mokrina was sitting alongside him, and their boats rubbed against each other. He almost felt the glow of her face, and the beauty of that girl of the steppes bewitched him like the beauty of a mermaid.

Mokrina pulled off toward the shore, her boat gliding across the water like a duck. Mikola rowed after her.

She steered the boat into a channel, and before long they reached the lake. Then thick sedges rustled against the boats as they moved through them along a narrow, ditch-like passage. The passage grew narrow, then wider again, turning into little lakes. It flowed between walls of rushes like a small river. Then it again narrowed, wound and twisted, until they reached such a bottleneck that they were barely able to force their way through a forest of rushes. Finally, Mokrina stopped.

"Stay here, Mikola, and wait for me," she said. "Even Father couldn't find you here, let alone that half-witted police chief. I'll keep bringing you food and fresh water until it's safe to come out."

Mokrina turned back her boat.

"Goodbye, Mikola," she said. He held out his hand to her, and she reached toward him, twining her warm arms, bare up to her elbows, round his neck and pressing her cherry-ripe, burning lips to his mouth. "Goodbye, Mikola," she repeated. "I love you and I always will, even if my love destroys me. Good night!" Mikola only came to his senses when her boat was rustling in the rushes somewhere far away.

"Oh, Lord, why is this happening to me?" he asked himself. "Dear Nimidora, my poor dove! Am I to forget you forever?"

The big millstone of the moon rolled up high into the sky, and its light fell over the tall rushes onto the boat. Mikola sat there motionless, his head hung low. He could have been as inanimate as the rushes leaning over the boat. The chunk of bread he had not touched and the uncorked crock lay before him on the bottom.

That whole day seemed to have been one long dream in which a beautiful, green-eyed mermaid had emerged from the depths of the sea to bewitch him with her beauty. She had burned his soul with her caresses, ardent eyes and hot kisses and then swum away.

He sat there for a long time, his head hung low, thinking of Nimidora. Shortly before dawn, he broke some rushes, made a heap of them in the boat, ate some bread and fish, drank some water and lay down to sleep. He dreamed of the sea covered with foaming waves, a bright rainbow above it and Nimidora stepping down the rainbow to him. She was wearing a pair of red boots, a string of beads over a green vest and a wreath of flowers on her head with ribbons streaming from her braids. Down at the end of the rainbow, where it sank into the sea, Mokrina with sedge-like green braids lurked in the water, as if

waiting to drag Nimidora down into the roaring waves.

Kovbanenko was dozing when Mokrina reached the shacks toward midnight.

"Where have you been all this time?" he asked.

"Well, I puttered around the shacks and then went to fetch some water from the well. I must've gone astray on my way back. I still can't understand how I missed that road. The devil must have led me away from it."

"The devil certainly did a good job of it, driving you around till midnight," he grumbled. "Just make sure you never stay out that late again."

Early next morning, Mokrina went home, and in the evening she came back to the camp, took some fish, bread and water and rowed to the rushes where Mikola was hiding.

"Are the wardens still hanging around?" he asked.

"They stuck near the shacks all night long. Also that crazy police chief came round in the morning. Stay put, Mikola, until they're gone."

Once again, Mokrina was speaking gently to him, and he answered in a grim voice. He felt sorry for the girl, and her passion made him uneasy. All the same, he did not find it in his heart to tell her or even hint that he had a wife and a daughter.

Mokrina again came back late to the shacks, and her father again scolded her.

"You must have a reason for staying out so late," he said gruffly. "Do it once more, and I'll whip a good stick against your back. Do you hear me?"

"Of course I do, there's nothing wrong with my ears," she snapped back angrily.

"I'd like to know where you've been traipsing," he said sharply.

"I haven't been traipsing anywhere. I've only taken

some food and water to the men hiding in the rushes. Or would you like them to starve to death?"

"To all the men or just one of them?" her father asked accusingly.

"To tell you the truth, I went to Mikola only," Mokrina snapped back defiantly.

"Don't you know that he isn't a bachelor, that he's got a wife?" he asked.

"I don't care if he's married," she forced herself to say, as if she were totally unconcerned. But her father's words were like a stab in the heart. Her head swimming, she went outside and burst into tears. Disillusionment, pain and love welled up in her chest all at once, flooding her entire soul with tears, like a river in springtime.

Soon afterward, the wardens went away without catching any vagabonds or finding out anything about them. Mokrina could hardly wait, and as soon as the evening came, she ran to a boat. Without telling anyone, as was now her custom, she rowed to Mikola.

He was surprised to see her tear-stained eyes.

"Why have you been crying?" he asked. "Has something happened?"

Without saying anything, she started sobbing, her young face reflecting her humiliation and pain. She just wept on and on, her cheeks as red as her beads. Mikola was being so kind and his eyes looked at her with such a gentle expression that she could not believe he did not love her.

"Mikola! Has Father told me the truth about your being married?"

He understood everything at once and felt sorry for her.

"If that's true," Mokrina said, boldly lifting her head, "forget your wife. Do it for me, because if you don't forget about her, I'll kill myself. I'll hang

or drown myself, I'll just destroy myself, I don't know what I'll do with myself, only I'll never stop loving you as long as I live. And I won't live without you — I'll just wither away."

While she talked, she flashed her brown eyes wildly, almost fiercely, but as soon as she had finished, she leaned against the board like a supple rush and sobbed loudly like a little child. Mikola saw her small hands with thin fingers clawing the board and the red beads round her thin neck.

"Don't cry, Mokrina! What are we to do? This must be the Lord's will."

He sat in silence, and she sobbed softly without raising her head. All of her girl's sense of shame had come back to her. She was now ashamed of looking Mikola in the eyes.

The rushes became still like a room. A moor hen had appeared from the rushes and was swimming almost beside their boats. A wild duck circled over the water meadow, flapping its wings, and then settled into the rushes not far from them. But it became frightened and, fluttering its wings and quacking loudly, it flew up again, rustling the rushes.

Mokrina raised her head with difficulty and sat for a while covering her eyes with her sleeve. Then she said, as if nothing had happened:

"Take the oar and follow me. You may now go back to the shacks. The wardens are gone."

She settled down in the boat, took the oar, pushed away the fallen rushes and forced the boat through them. Mikola followed her. While they rowed amidst the rushes and then across the lake, Mokrina did not turn round to Mikola and never looked back at him or spoke to him. Her strong soul had suppressed all her tears, but it was powerless against her ill-fated love.

Once more, Mokrina came home late, and Kovbanenko again bawled her out:

"Just where in the hell have you been wandering?" he hollered at her. "Why do you keep going to that tramp?"

"I go to him because I love him," she retorted. "Scold me or beat me, but I'll keep on going to him and I'll love him."

"Damn your stupid father and your ignorant mother, too," Kovbanenko shouted, unwittingly cursing himself and his wife. "You'd better get some towels ready for the matchmakers that'll come in the fall."

"They'll come and they'll go," Mokrina snapped and went to the kitchen garden.

The vagabonds who had been scared away by the police now returned to the camp and resumed fishing. A warm, quiet autumn began. The men cleared the ditches, dredged out some of the sand and started fishing for gray mullet. Fattened in the water meadows along the lake shores, the mullets had just begun to return to the sea. They caught them right in the ditches, damming them with rush wattles.

The Verbivka runaways found this work in the open air on the seashore much easier than the sugar mills. They had become healthier and merrier. Some married men comfortably forgot their wives and married again. They made some money, built houses and began new families. The whole area around Ackerman filled with Ukrainian villages, orchards and vineyards.

Two Verbivka peasants built dugouts not far from Kovbanenko's hamlet, married and started new families. Then a Bessarabian Jew came out of nowhere and raised a windmill nearby. Thus, another Ukrainian village began to grow by the lake. Men from Verbivka

jokingly called it Little Verbivka, although there was not a single willow twig in it\*.

Mikola, too, had saved some money and was going to build a dugout. He was thoroughly sick of tramping and desperately wanted to settle down. However, he still clung to the lingering hope of returning some day to his village, his wife and daughter. It was that hope that discouraged him from making his home in a strange country and drove him back to tramping.

One evening in the fall, shortly before the Feast of Intercession, Mikola was sitting by the firth, resting after work. The other fishermen had already gone to sleep. To divert himself he took the violin and played songs which Nimidora had liked to sing. His thoughts drifted far away, back to Verbivka, his orchard, his yard — and Nimidora. Suddenly, something rustled behind him. He turned round and saw Mokrina. Her dark eyes and red beads shone in the twilight. She was standing there, listening to his violin, her hand against her cheek.

“Keep on playing,” she spoke softly. “I’ve been listening here for quite a while.”

“Mokrina! Why don’t you go home? Your father will be angry with you, and with me, too. He’ll be saying that I’m turning your head and making you lose your reason.”

“He may get angry as much as he likes, as far as I’m concerned. I just don’t care. What am I to do if you do turn my head — even though you don’t want to?”

“Come to your senses, Mokrina! Don’t you understand that you are driving me out of my mind? What am I to do if that’s my fate?”

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\* Verbivka — from Ukrainian *verba* meaning willow



Involuntarily, Mikola was admiring her thin eyebrows of black silk and her whole lovely flushed face. He again felt the heat of her lips which had clung to him back in the rushes, and that fire bewitched him.

"Mikola, my darling," Mokrina said. "You haunt my thoughts at dawn, and when the sun shines high in the sky, and in the dead of night. And when I sleep at night, I often dream of you, and then my soul thrills with delight like a swallow in the sun. But then I wake up and don't see you — and my heart sinks again. There's no way I can help it. Whether it's day or night, all I ever feel is sadness and anguish."

"Don't tease me, girl, with your twittering. Don't make things still worse for me, because I'm unhappy enough as it is."

"Forget her, Mikola! You'll never return there, you'll have to forget her anyway. But if you let me love you, I'll follow you even overseas. I'm ready to run away with you any time you like."

"That wouldn't be the right thing to do. What right do I have to do harm to your father and mother?"

"What do I need my father and mother for if I love you? I'm powerless against your brown eyes. When I look into them I even stop crying. Why then did you set my soul on fire with those eyes of yours?" Mokrina turned to face him, wringing her hands. "I'll have to ask the sea to receive my sinful body!"

The girl darted to the sea like a goat. Mikola felt compassion for her. He rushed after her, seizing her by the arm.

"What do you think you're going to do, you silly creature?"

"I'd like to think, but I can't think anymore; I wish I could cry, but I've got no tears left..."

"Mokrina, dear!" Mikola said, taking both her hands. "Wait, don't ruin your soul and your beauty. I'm not going anywhere, I'll keep on working here. Who can tell what the future will bring, what may yet happen to you?"

His words seemed to have breathed new life into her. She dropped her head onto his shoulder and wept with tears as small as summer dew.

It was late when Mokrina reached her hamlet, having forgotten about shame, her father and mother, and about everything else. A spring rose had blossomed in her heart, filling all her soul with its fragrance. She became quieter. Nobody heard her sing or joke or say so much as a word in a cheerful voice... She was waiting for something, she was hopeful...

Mikola stood at the seashore long after she was gone. Waves quietly lapped against the sand, rustling like a forest in a light wind. He fell under the spell of those sounds and soon it seemed to him that he was hearing the rustling of willows over the Rastavitsya, over the house in which Nimidora must have been sleeping at that very moment. And he could not stop thinking about Mokrina's flushed face, hot tears and young, ardent love. He was pensive and sad. His soul wavered like a sturdy boat on a rough sea, but that did not last long: his firm character overcame this weakness, subdued his heart and, in the end, won.

Kovbanenko had taken a liking to Mikola and made him his mate. Mikola now looked after the nets, together with two rope helpers, and took charge of the party in Kovbanenko's absence. In good years he made a lot of money, but much of it was squandered in taverns, especially when all the fishermen went on a spree in town together.

Mokrina kept coming to Mikola in the evenings to gaze at his brown eyes and black brows. She was still waiting and hoping for something.

## VII

The morning after Mikola had left his wife and run away from the village, Nimidora had to go to work. She wept as she walked to the master's field and she wept as she returned home. When evening came, she felt that Mikola had been away at least a year. She lay down to sleep on a bench by the window but kept listening in case Mikola returned and knocked at the window. Shortly after Maria had dozed off on the stove, Nimidora started awake, shouting: "Wake up, Mother! Mikola's come back!"

Her mother-in-law hastily climbed down from the stove, sure that something terrible had again happened in the village.

"Where's Mikola? What are you saying, Nimidora?" the frightened woman asked.

"Didn't you hear, Mother? He tapped at the window and I went to open the door for him. He came in, hugged me, kissed me and went out again. He must be hiding somewhere in the yard."

The old woman raked a live coal from the stove, put a splinter against it and blew on it until the splinter caught fire. Then she lit the lamp with the splinter. Nimidora was standing in the middle of the room, her eyes wild, her face burning red.

"You must have dreamed of him or seen a vision, you've surely gotten it wrong. And then, why should he come back? The master would send him off to the army right away."

"Look, Mother, Mikola's outside. Let's go to the yard, he must be hiding there," Nimidora said. "I flew after him in the steppes as a cuckoo, and when he sat down to rest, I turned into a well. He drank some water, and then he cried for me, and his tears fell on my face. Then I came home with him. I tell you he's in the yard."

The scared woman went into the yard, followed by Nimidora. The night was quiet. Not even the rustle of willows could be heard anywhere.

"Nimidora, dear, go back to sleep and stop thinking about Mikola," said Maria, although her hands and feet were shaking with fear.

Another day passed, but Nimidora did not stop crying. In the evening, it again seemed to her that Mikola entered the gate, crossed the yard and went into the orchard. She rushed outside. Maria ran after her and brought her into the house.

"But I did see Mikola, Mother. He spoke to me in secret in the orchard and then walked across the meadow into the willows, making signs for me to follow him."

The old woman became really frightened. Now she feared that Nimidora had conjured up Mikola's spirit with her grieving, and that the Devil was visiting her.

Before long, the word spread through the village that Nimidora was being visited by the Devil. One woman insisted that she had actually seen a fire-breathing dragon fly into the chimney of the Dzheryas' house. The village wives wagged their tongues, sighed heavily and advised Maria to take Nimidora to a certain monk who was famous for his ability to exorcise devils with his prayers.

The widow took a ruble and a roll of linen from the family chest, borrowed a wagon and a mare from

a neighbor and drove Nimidora to the monastery. The young woman sat on the wagon with a face that was as pale as death and seemed hardly aware of where she was going or why.

On a Saturday evening they reached the monastery and went to look for the monk, Father Zenon. They did not find him at home, however, and in the end the man was discovered in a willow scrub amidst the rocks on the Ros. He was all wet from the waist down and had apparently nearly drowned himself.

The holy man was retrieved from the water and delivered to the monastery. On that day he was clearly unable to exercise any more devils. He even missed the evening service at the monastery church.

Father Zenon had a good sleep that night and came to his senses, so on Sunday morning people started bringing lunatics to him. One crazy man kept crossing himself and shouting all the time: "Merciful Lord! Take me to heaven with you!" A young wife, fresh-looking and ruddy-faced, had lost her reason through too much grieving. She kept telling everybody in exactly the same words how her dear Petro had been conscripted and had had half of his head shaven. Another young woman had been taken off a belfry where she was ringing all the bells. When she was led into the cell, she hurled profanities at the monk and screamed wildly.

Father Zenon, short and stout like a field mushroom and with thick overhanging brows, read an exorcismal prayer over Nimidora, blinking after every word. Nimidora listened attentively; now she, too, believed that she had a devil in her.

After giving the money and the linen to the monk, Maria and Nimidora went to attend a church service where they prayed and confessed. Nimidora looked more composed as she came out of the church. The good

choir, fine icons and prayers had somewhat distracted her and calmed her down. She came home in a quieter frame of mind, as though she had really had a devil driven out of her at the monastery.

Nimidora remained without a husband, like a widow. In winter, she spun the master's yarn and in summer went to work in his fields. The family plot was leased to a neighbor for half the crop. A year passed, then another, but there was no word from Mikola or about him. She would ask people about him at fairs and sugar mills, but nobody appeared to have heard anything. The willows and cherry trees Mikola had planted by the Rastavitsya had grown tall, still there was no sign of him. Nimidora seemed to have recovered, but she was still morose. As she sat at the flax comb, she would sing a song about a husband who went astray on his way back home and then started chasing another woman, neglecting his lawful wife.

Mikola's mother lived another ten years and died in the eleventh year of her son's absence. Nimidora mourned her as she would her own mother. While Maria had been alive, she had been a kind of symbol of Mikola's continued presence in the house; now Nimidora's only consolation was her daughter Lyubov.

The girl was growing up like a cherry tree in an orchard. In appearance she resembled her mother very much; she had the same dark eyes, the same fine brows on a wide forehead, and the same long braids. Nimidora doted on her and did not let her do any heavy work. When Lyubov was only ten years old, Nimidora already began preparing her trousseau, spinning linen for towels and making kerchiefs.

"Go sit in the orchard and embroider that towel," Nimidora would tell her. "I guess I've had enough

bad luck for the two of us. I'd like to see you happier than I've been."

The little girl would warble like a nightingale in a grove as she embroidered hop leaves and stars on a big towel. Watching her, Nimidora felt that she was reliving her own childhood.

Nimidora had become so thin and pale that those who had known her several years earlier would have had difficulty recognizing her. Her full cheeks had withered and sunk, the luster had faded from her eyes, and only her figure remained as slender as ever; despite all the heavy work she did. She had dried up and shriveled like a blade of grass in a cold wind. Her unhappy face had aged her before her time. Although she was a woman in her prime, she looked as though she were nearing the end of her life.

Lyubov grew up into a really beautiful girl, one of Verbivka's finest. Nimidora nursed her like a rose in a flowerbed. Matchmakers started coming to her as soon as she had turned sixteen. Olexa Chabanenko, a good boy, proposed to her, and they were engaged. A humble wedding was held, at which the bride was without her father, like an orphan. Olexa moved in to live with his wife and mother-in-law.

After Lyubov's wedding there did not seem to be anything left for Nimidora to do, and nothing interested her anymore. She began thinking more and more about her death and even prepared a blouse and a kerchief to be buried in. She also saved money for her burial and to pay the priest and the bell ringer. Every Sunday and holiday she attended both the morning service and the vespers. Each year she made a pilgrimage to the Kiev Lavra Monastery and prayed there and in other Kiev monasteries that Mikola was alive and in good health and that he return home at least before her death.

After more than twenty years had passed since Mikola left the village, Nimidora began to forget his face, his eyes and his voice. His image had dimmed, and she saw it as if through a mist. She was now aged and ailing and wanted to see him again before she died.

"I can't bear thinking that I might die without seeing him," she would say to her daughter.

She thought about him as she sat at the comb by the stove or stood in a dark church at the vespers, imploring God that as a last favor He let her say farewell to him before she died.

Once in spring Nimidora walked to Kiev to pray. Unable to get Mikola off her mind, she looked for him among pilgrims at the Lavra Monastery and questioned people from many remote parts of the country. She again saw him in her dreams.

One night she dreamed that Mikola was reaping wheat with her in their plot. It was a starry night. One full moon was shining high in the sky, and another one, red-hot and as big as a barrel, was rising from behind a forest. Mikola had gone somewhat ahead, and she was working hard to catch up with him. Then she raised her head and suddenly realized that it was already day. One sun was blazing overhead, and another one was just rising amidst purple clouds. She saw herself as a young girl, all in ribbons and flowers, clad like a bride, her waist girdled with an embroidered towel. Mikola had cut his way deep into the forest of wheat and was reaping on and on, without pause, without lifting his head, his gold sickle flashing in the sun. He was very young and had black wavy hair, and wore a red sash over a white shirt. She wanted desperately to see his face, but he wouldn't look back. Stalks of wheat were falling on his shoulders, and golden grain poured from the ears onto



his black curls and white shirt before dropping to the ground. All of a sudden, sparks flew from those ears falling on his white shirt. And then Mikola turned round and looked back at her, and she saw his young face, black brows and bright eyes and she was glad.

Nimidora awakened with her soul in turmoil, prayed, crossed herself and soon dozed off again.

Now she dreamed that she was in the cathedral of the Lavra Monastery in Kiev. It was a Holy Thursday, and the church was crowded. All the people were holding lighted candles, and the whole church, from top to bottom, was ablaze with candlelight. From above, from the very dome, came such wonderful singing that she felt as if she were in heaven. She turned round and suddenly saw Mikola standing right behind her, his hair white, his mustache gray and only his brows still black. His face was deeply lined and worn out by misery. He took her hand, and they walked together toward a wall, carrying candles. The wall parted before them, and Mikola led her down into the catacombs, with the rest of the church-goers streaming after them in a river of candlelight. Then Nimidora looked back and saw that all the others had suddenly disappeared. The two of them went deeper and deeper through the narrow passage. Holy saints with long gray beards, black brows and shiny eyes lay in coffins on both sides. Nimidora was afraid, but Mikola walked on, deeper and deeper, leading her by the hand. In one of the coffins she saw Father Zenon, who had read the exorcismal prayer over her. He lay there, blinking his thick, gray, short brows. Then they left all the coffins behind them and went past other saints who stood buried up to their waists. Their candles had gone out, but they walked on and on, deeper and deeper. Suddenly she saw a red light

shining ahead, and it seemed to her that she and Mikola were already in the other world.

The passage widened and they found themselves in a huge, awesome-looking cave. Big red-hot stones hung from the cave roof and under one of them there was a pool of molten tar that seethed and churned like water boiling in a pot. In the middle of that pool Master Bzhozovsky stood waist-deep in tar, all black and sooty. His hair was black with tar, and his skin was all cracked. Horned and tailed devils clung to the stones above like bats, pouring hot tar onto the landowner. Nimidora turned to Mikola and saw his old, wrinkled face illuminated with the red hellish glow. She felt panicky and began to suffocate because of the heat and smoke — and she awoke.

She got up and knelt before the icons to pray for Mikola.

"I'll die this year," she told her daughter and son-in-law in the morning. "I dreamed of my husband this night, and it was too horrible for words."

"If you dream of him, Mother, that's because you think about him all the time," Lyubka said.

"No, daughter, it's because my death stands right behind my back. I feel so bad that I can hardly breathe. It's my death pressing on my chest. I only wish your father would return in time to find me still alive."

A week later Nimidora again dreamed of Mikola. This time they were wandering over a wide steppe. The whole sky was covered by black clouds, and it was terribly humid. Huge streaks of lightning flashed across the entire sky, and thunder roared incessantly. A red streak of lightning would flash, and in its glow Mikola's face would seem crimson like heated steel. A green flash of lightning would split the sky, and his face would look greenish like the face of a

drowned man. Then suddenly, the sky would be illuminated with a light as bright as sunshine, and she would see his face young, ruddy-cheeked and black-browed. Nimidora was frightened. Fiery dragons were flying everywhere, and red cracks ran across the sky from top to bottom and from one end to another. All around them stretched the boundless steppe with not a house or tree in sight. All of a sudden, she saw a river churning amidst the rocks before them. The sky parted right in the middle, and a sun appeared in the crack. Beyond the river, on a high hill, there was a lush orchard where a tree with golden fruit grew amidst green apple trees. Up in that tree, gold-feathered, gold-crowned firebirds with peacock's tails sang and churned amidst the rocks. Unsteady planks had been laid from one rock to another. Mikola stepped onto one of those, leading her by the hand behind him. She looked down at the noisy stream, and her head swam. A terrible peal of thunder rang out overhead, and the sun plummeted into the river. The sky was again full of lightning. Nimidora woke up, shivering as if in a fever.

"Oh, daughter, I've had another of those dreams about your father. It was dreadful!.." Nimidora told Lyubov. After that night, she looked still sadder and brooded even more.

Meanwhile, there was talk about freedom.

Like a wave, the rumor had started somewhere and had spread wider and wider until it reached Verbivka. It was discussed by noisy crowds at fairs and from there people brought the news to their villages. Nimidora cheered up. She hoped that Mikola would hurry to Verbivka when he learned that the serfs were about to be freed.

"Lord! How I wish I could live at least another

year! I'm sure Mikola will come back home as soon as he hears about freedom and ask my forgiveness for all he's done to me," Nimidora kept saying.

The village orchards blossomed and died, but Mikola did not come. Then the green rye yellowed, and still there was no sign of him. Nimidora was again ailing and spent more and more time lying on the stove. When the Feast of St. Peter arrived, she was hardly able to walk to church to pray. She was all faded and withered, her face had darkened and shriveled, and only her dark eyes still shone among yellowish wrinkles.

Once Nimidora was sitting by an open window staring out into the orchard at the green cherries and pear trees. Nightingales were warbling in the orchard, and a cuckoo was calling from the willows in a far meadow. Suddenly, a swallow flitted into the window, almost brushing her face. It flew around the room, perched on an icon, twittered for a while, flew out and hid in the cherry trees.

"That was my death coming after me. That swallow didn't fly in here for nothing," Nimidora told her daughter.

A week later, Nimidora lay down never to rise again. She felt a lump in her chest and breathed with difficulty. She strained her ears to hear Mikola's footsteps, sent Lyubov outside to see if he was coming and was alarmed whenever dogs barked in the yard.

"Go open the gate, daughter. Your father's come to ask forgiveness of his sins. Someone's knocking at the gate." She spoke as if asleep, lifting her eyelids with effort.

Lyubov went outside and came back in the house. Nimidora was barely able to breathe.

"Hasn't your father come? I thought I heard his

voice by the window outside," Nimidora muttered sleepily.

"God bless you, Mother," Lyubov spoke. "Those were nightingales twittering in the orchard."

"If he came," she said, "it might be easier for me."

Nimidora died without seeing Mikola. She died unhappy, just as she had been born unhappy. Neighbors tied a kerchief round her head and laid her out on a bench. There she lay, her face as yellow as wax. Neighbors came and went, and Lyubov wailed over her dead mother. She cried so sincerely that she made all the women in the room cry with her.

"My dear, dear Mother! Why did you leave me so early? Didn't I love you, didn't I take good care of you? Didn't I get up before dawn to look after you? Do I deserve for you to leave me forever?

"My dear Mother, my sweet swallow! Too much unhappiness and too many tears made you want to take leave of this world and fly far, far away, like a silver-feathered cuckoo. When can I expect you to visit us again, my dear, dear Mother? Will you fly to see us when the snows are deep, or when the meadows are green, or when the orchards are white with blossoms?

"My dear Mother, my angel swan! From where will you come, on which side shall I watch to see you coming? Will it be from the east, or from the west, or from the blue sea, or from the wide steppe? Will you be coming to me as a churning river, a stormy wind, or a white cloud? Or will you fly to me as a cuckoo to call me from our cherry orchard?

"My dear Mother, my gold seed of love! Where shall I lay you, my dear? Shall I lay you up in the blue sky, or in the green meadow, or in the cherry orchard? Will you rise as a star or will you bloom as a beautiful rose?"

All the women were crying and telling one another that no one in the entire village could wail as nicely as young Lyubov.

Nimidora was buried at the cemetery next to Mikola's parents. Lyubov planted a willow beside her grave, and her husband made a small cross. All the people in the village mourned for Nimidora and prayed to God that He rest her soul and make it easier for her at least in the other world, because in this world her life had been heavier than the damp earth now pressing down upon her coffin.

## VIII

Mikola still worked in Kovbanenko's outfit. Mokrina had loved him for a long time, giving pumpkins to all the matchmakers sent to her. Her father had shouted at her, and her mother had wept and tried to persuade her to change her mind, but it had all been to no avail. Mokrina had married only several years later, when her heart had cooled and Mikola had left Kovbanenko.

Once Mikola quarreled with Kovbanenko and nearly came to blows with him. In spring, the whole bunch of them were getting ready to go out to sea. They left the village carrying their gear on a wagon. According to a time-honored custom, the first spring catch, the so-called "fine catch," went to the boss. That was a really fine catch, too: the net was full of mackerels, sturgeons and searobins. The men had hauled the sack ashore with great difficulty.

Kovbanenko offered his men some vodka to celebrate, but far less than expected. This left the fishermen open-mouthed with surprise, and they began to make fun of their boss's stinginess.

The "fine catch" was very good indeed, but the summer turned out to be quite bad for fishing. In the fall, when the money was divided, the men saw that they had earned little more than twenty rubles apiece. To make things worse, Kovbanenko cheated them a little by failing to give their lawful share. The men went to town to celebrate and found they did not have enough money to get properly drunk that night, let alone cure their hangovers with more of the same the day after.

The following evening they returned to Kovbanenko's house very hungry. For supper, the boss's wife brought out some stale bread and fried fish left over from the day before, the kind she would have normally fed to the ducks as something no longer fit for people.

"Don't you have any better fish to give us for supper, Mister Boss?" Mikola demanded angrily. "With such a fine catch as we've landed you we surely deserve to eat something better than this bread that's a good couple of years old. You must have gobbled this fish while it was fresh and hot, and now we're supposed to eat it when it's cold and tasteless."

"Where could I get any fresh fish right now?" Kovbanenko protested. "Stop making a fuss and speaking nonsense. Have you all gone crazy or what?"

"Didn't we get you that first catch that was worth more than we got for a whole summer of hard work?" Mikola insisted.

"Oh, really?" Kovbanenko sneered. "As you sow so shall you reap."

This was more than Mikola could stand. Rushing to his feet, he shouted:

"Give us a good supper, boss, or I'll lick your hide with this stick. Fancy such a fine giver that gives

plenty of work to do and gets stingy and sparing when it comes to giving us something to eat! We might find better and more generous bosses."

"You, Mikola, are only stirring up trouble and working up the men. I got no place for such trouble-makers as you. Get lost with your demands and go ask around for some other job."

Mikola grabbed a stick and rushed toward the man. Kovbanenko caught the end of the stick and pulled it. It now looked very much like a fight with each man tugging and pushing the other.

"Let go!" Mikola yelled, fuming with rage.

"You try and make me!" Kovbanenko shouted back. "What right do you have to fight with me. You're no boss or overseer. I do what I please around here."

"Don't think you're God Almighty just because you're a boss. I've beaten up bigger men than you are!" Mikola shouted with rage, tugging at the stick with such force that it slipped free skinning Kovbanenko's palms.

Kovbanenko took to his feet. In the yard, a pair of oxen driven by a farmhand were dragging a log roller over unbound sheaves spread on the ground. Kovbanenko leaped over the roller and the sheaves and darted behind the oxen. Mikola's foot caught on the roller, and he landed in a pile of wheat, head first, which saved his boss from a good thrashing. Kovbanenko ran around the house, with Mikola hard at his heels. Then he slipped into the passage and bolted the door from inside.

"You better not come out or I'll kill you," Mikola called hammering his fist on the door and rattling the latch.

Kovbanenko knew Mikola's temper only too well and stayed inside until Mikola went to sleep.



At dawn Mikola took his things and went to join another fishing party.

Kovbanenko regretted having lost Mikola. He had served him very well, even helping him at the farm, and had been a conscientious worker and an excellent mate. In the spring he went to Mikola and said he was sorry. They patched it up and had a drink on it. Mikola went back to Kovbanenko's shacks.

Mikola worked in Kovbanenko's fishing outfit for quite a long time, earning a considerable sum of money. He built himself a dugout and tried to farm, but found this was a hard and sad business without a family and went back to fishing.

Meanwhile more and more people were running away from Bzhozovsky's Verbivka. Many of them wandered from one sugar mill to another, some found jobs in Odessa. Mikola often met them there and recruited some of them into Kovbanenko's party. He questioned them about Nimidora, his mother, their family plot and finally about Bzhozovsky. He realized he could not return as long as the old landowner lived.

Bzhozovsky, who had thus lost many of his serfs, had started going round sugar mills to drive the runaways home. He had caught quite a few of them and sent them back to Verbivka. However, he had failed to find Dzherya.

He still remembered Mikola's fists, and his chest burned where a serf's hand had struck it.

Meanwhile, a new police chief had been appointed to Ackerman who was something of a friend to Bzhozovsky and hailed from Kiev Province. Moving from place to place, he ended up in Bessarabia, where he soon found out that there were many Verbivka runaways working in fishing parties. He made a surprise raid on Kovbanenko's shacks and seized many men from Verbivka, including Mikola. They were all

taken to jail and put into irons. The chief immediately sent word to Bzhozovsky, who hurried to Ackerman from Odessa where he had traveled on some business. The landowner's blood was boiling with injured pride. He was ready to lose half of his village if that helped him to take revenge on Mikola.

Arriving in Ackerman, Bzhozovsky submitted a petition to the court. However, the judge refused to deliver the arrested men to him without trial.

The fishermen waited in jail for a long time before they were brought to court. Bzhozovsky, too, waited for the trial. A week passed, then another, then two more. Bzhozovsky's expenses over that time reached a considerable sum. He was very angry, for it seemed to him that he, too, had been jailed like his serfs. At last he was summoned to court. Ten men from Verbivka were led into the courtroom by two soldiers carrying rifles. The men hung their heads as soon as they saw their master. Only Mikola stared defiantly at the landowner with his piercing dark eyes. Bzhozovsky, now totally gray, glared at Mikola with his saucer eyes and seemed to be wishing he could eat him alive with his stare alone.

The ten men who had been brought before the court did not resemble the ragged, starving, miserable tramps that could usually be found at Ukrainian sugar mills. Ten healthy-looking men wearing good clothes faced the court. Among them, Mikola stood out for his height, his upright figure and his proud, bold stare. Serfdom and hard luck had failed to bend his back. His brows and mustache were still black, while his head seemed powdered with snow. His temples and the top of his head were still dark and shiny and only seemed to have been powdered with dust, while the rest of his hair looked like a broad white wreath, as is common for men with thick, stiff black

hair. There he stood, a tall, imposing man, sturdily built and with strong arms. The sinews on his arms looked like strands of taut wire. Dark, proud eyes shone from under thick low brows. He looked bold and defiant standing there open to everyone's gaze as though he were deliberately exposing all of himself. Not a single wrinkle of his face was hidden from view; only his eyes lay deep in their sockets under his brows, peering out with an expression that was both intelligent and clever, proud and bold. They cast sidelong glances, a sign that they did not trust anyone. The other men stood dejected under their master's stare. It was as though they had seen their death raising a steel scythe above their heads.

"What is your name?" the judge asked Mikola.

"I'm Ivan Posmityukh," Dzherya said reluctantly in a hollow voice that seemed to be coming from a grave.

"His name is Mikola Dzherya!" Bzhovovsky shouted impatiently, his gray, bulging eyes glittering excitedly.

"What is your faith?" the judge asked in Russian.

"Bessarabian," said Mikola, thinking he was being asked about his province of residence.

"That's not what I'm asking you about. What church do you go to?" the judge said.

"Sometimes I go to the one in Krivda, sometimes here in Ackerman, as the case may be."

"I don't mean that. Of what faith are you?" the judge asked in an angrier tone.

"Why, I'm a Christian ... like everybody else," Mikola said.

This made the judge even angrier and he shouted at Mikola:

"Where do you come from? Where did your father live and what was his name?"

"I come from these parts. My grandfather lived here, and his father, too. I was born in Krivda, and my father's name was Posmityukh, and that's what people called my grandfather, too."

"Actually he comes from Verbivka in Kiev Province," the landowner explained, somewhat bewildered by Mikola's answers.

"I've never been to Verbivka in all my life and don't even know where it is and who it belongs to," Mikola said in a low voice.

"You ran away from Verbivka more than twenty years ago," Bzhozovsky said.

"If somebody ran away from that place, it surely couldn't have been me," Mikola said haughtily. "I'm no tramp and no rogue."

Thoroughly annoyed, the judge stopped questioning Mikola and turned to the other men.

"And what is your name?" he asked one of the men.

"I'm Hritsko Posmityukh."

"Are you related to Ivan Posmityukh?"

"I'm his son," the man said almost in a whisper, hiding his eyes. He was visibly ashamed of lying but he had no choice under the circumstances.

"Will you tell us your name?" the judge turned to a third man.

"I'm Karpo Posmityukh," he said timidly.

"Are you a relative of these two Posmityukhs?" the judge demanded.

"I'm Ivan's brother," the man mumbled groggily, hanging his head. At Krivda he was really registered as Mikola's brother.

The judge put the same question to two more men who explained they were Mikola Dzherya's sons.

"You do seem to have plenty of sons, and they aren't too young either!" the judge laughed. The court clerks burst out laughing after him.

Wide-eyed, Bzhozovsky watched the comedy, not quite certain whether everybody was crazy or just joking.

All the other men gave the names under which they had been registered in various villages around Ackerman, and none mentioned the name under which he had been known in Verbivka. Now Bzhozovsky was totally confused.

The judge looked through the passports, finding there the very names the men had given him. He ordered the prisoners back to the cell and sent for the headman and the clerk who had issued the passports. He knew only too well how such things were done in the Ackerman district and could not help grinning.

The soldiers took the men back to the jail. They were all ready to face exile to Siberia rather than return to Bzhozovsky's Verbivka. They realized that the landowner had not come without a good reason and that he would not go home until he got what he had come for. Bzhozovsky, however, now had to wait until the end of the trial and almost wished he had stayed home. He only hoped he would eventually be rewarded by being able to have Mikola flogged several hundred times and to send him off to the army.

But while the Verbivka runaways remained in custody, something extraordinary happened which was totally unexpected. Serfs were freed and serfdom was abolished forever. The news had not yet reached the out-of-the-way Ackerman district, nor had it penetrated the jail where the prisoners languished in boredom. But Bzhozovsky already knew — and could not believe it.



The jail door clanged open again, and once more soldiers led the men to the courthouse. This time, the headman and the clerk from Krivda were present, as well as Bzhovzovsky.

Meanwhile, the decree on the emancipation of serfs had reached Ackerman and had been read in the churches on Sunday. The judge realized that the case had taken an unexpected turn.

The Verbivka men stood there as if under a gallows. The judge took out the decree and read it aloud to them. Because of the language in which it was written, the men did not understand a thing.

"Have you understood what I've read?" the judge asked.

"No, sir," they answered.

The judge tried to explain to them that they were no longer serfs but free men and if they wanted to get some land they had to hurry not to Krivda but to the village where they had run away from.

They stood there more dead than alive, but none of them believed the judge at all and all of them feared this was some kind of a clever trap.

"Now you may safely tell me if you are really Posmityukhs," the judge smiled. "For you are now free men and may go home any time you like."

The men were sure the judge was trying some trick to make them tell him who they really were.

"Oh no, sir," Mikola said. "We're all Posmityukhs like our fathers and grandfathers!"

"What if I issue you with passports and allow you to travel home and never to work for your master again?"

"As you please, sir. We're really Posmityukhs from Krivda," Mikola told him. "That's where we all come from."

The judge just waved his hand, while Bzhovzovsky

stood in utter confusion, just like the prisoners had stood at the first hearing.

They did not believe it until the soldiers stepped away and they were allowed to go free.

Then they felt as if they were born anew.

"Now we're really not Posmityukhs anymore," Mikola spoke. "We'll have to get baptized all over again to get our old names back, only I don't know who could do it for us."

"We could probably do it in Verbivka, as the judge said," another said.

Master Bzhozovsky faced an unpleasant journey back to Verbivka, and the peasants, too, prepared to go home. They sold all they had, waited until it became warm and when spring came, they said goodbye to Kovbanenko and started on the long way home. Only those who had married here for a second time stayed behind.

It was then that in Krivda and other villages around Ackerman a great many people suddenly died according to the registration books. One fine day, the hitherto immortal Ivan Posmityukh expired together with his sons, brothers and nephews. Looking through the church registers, the members of the Kishinev Consistory were frightened by the unprecedented jump in mortality in Ackerman and elsewhere in Bessarabia. There were even rumors that the Benderi Plague was raging again.

Now the wide steppe spread before the peasants again as they walked once more along familiar roads. Actually, they almost did not have to walk; it seemed their feet carried them homeward as if by themselves. Their souls were astir with thoughts about their mothers, wives and children. It was as if they had not really lived in that strange land at all; they had



merely wandered from job to job, from one place to another.

"Will we find our people alive?" the question escaped from Mikola's lips and was met by silence. Everyone felt joy, but under that joy, a heavy stone pressed upon each soul.

They went through many Ukrainian villages and towns and spent many weeks walking before they reached Verbivka. Orchards blossomed and died, the green fleece of rye sprouted in the fields and grew to a considerable height. The men kept walking until one evening Verbivka unfolded before them down in the valley. They stopped on a hill and stared down at their native village for a long time. Verbivka was green with willows, orchards and vegetable plots. Each of them searched with his eyes for his house and yard, their eyes filling with tears. Verbivka had changed a lot, spreading further along the Rastavitsya. A whole new neighborhood had grown in the valley on the edge of the village.

They went down the hill and entered the village. The people they met seemed to be total strangers, and they could not remember having seen any of them before.

"Is the Dzheryas' house still standing?" Mikola asked a young fellow.

"There isn't such a house anymore. There s a house that used to be called that, as far as I know. But it is now the Chabanenkos' house, because old Nimidora Dzherya married her daughter to young Chabanenko."

"Is Nimidora still alive?" Mikola asked. His voice shook and with it his entire soul trembled.

"She died last year," the youth said. "She didn't suffer long."

Mikola suddenly saw Verbivka go round and round before his eyes. First it was all green, then it yellowed and melted away as if in a fog. Tears blocked his vision, as though clouds had covered the sky, erupting in a downpour that flooded the entire village.

Mikola went along the familiar dam. The willows on both sides of it had become so thick that two men holding hands could have hardly embraced them. He turned into a side street and saw his house.

What would he find there, he wondered, as he approached the gate?

He stood at the gate leaning against it, his gray head bent low. He looked around the yard. The shed was gone, and its willow stakes had grown into tall, thick trees. The house had sagged, slightly tilting toward the gable side. The windows were warped, and the door had become lower, sinking a little into the ground. The old tree in the orchard had withered, and in its place, young, vigorous apple and cherry trees had grown up.

Mikola crossed the yard, opened the passage door with a creak, and entered the house. A young woman was puttering about at the stove, and a young man was standing by the table. The woman could have been Nimidora's sister; she looked very much like her and had the same black brows and the same dark eyes. However she was thinner, as if she had been undernourished in childhood. To Mikola she resembled Nimidora as she had looked when he courted her before their marriage.

"Good evening!" Mikola said, looking at them with his tear-stained eyes.

"Good evening," Lyubov replied. Her eyes were wide with surprise.

Those wide-open eyes, her face and voice reminded

him of Nimidora. It was as if through those eyes Nimidora's soul were looking at him. It seemed that Nimidora herself was speaking to him with that voice from the other world. Unable to check himself, Mikola kissed Lyubov and cried, his hard, strong soul melting like wax and dissolving in tears.

"You don't recognize your father, because you've never seen him," Mikola spoke with effort. "And where's your mother?"

Now Lyubov understood who had walked into her house. She was stunned and saddened and just stood silently by the stove, unable to find the proper words. But her heart did not stir with the sympathy that a daughter should feel for her father. A total stranger was standing before her. She even found it odd that he called her his daughter. She had long thought that her father had died and lay buried somewhere. She was so confused and her feelings were in such a turmoil that she could not decide whether she should feel sadness or joy.

"Did Mother die long ago, Lyubov?"

"On St. Peter's Feast last year." She could hardly speak. "Mother waited for you and sent me out to look out for you."

"She died without seeing me, though. That's the kind of fate we have," Mikola said. "I see you're married already, Lyubov; you were in a cradle when I went away."

"We got married not long ago," she said pointing to her husband.

"The house has gotten lower still; it must have sunk. The icons are the same," Mikola said. "Your mother used to pray before them. Are you free already?"

"We no longer work for the master, Lord be praised," Lyubov's husband spoke. "We still work

our old field, but they say somebody will come to allot new holdings to be redeemed or something like that."

"If it hadn't been for serfdom, your mother might've been alive now, and I wouldn't have had to wander about the world for more than twenty years. How long ago did my old mother die?"

"Grandmother died quite long ago," Lyubov said. "That was when I was still a little girl."

"How did you fare without me?" Mikola asked.

"Well, we definitely didn't fare too well," his daughter said. "Mother and I just carried along, working hard and living in poverty all the time. Maybe Mother wouldn't have died if she hadn't had to work so hard. Why don't you sit down?" Lyubov almost called him father, but the word stuck to the tip of her tongue.

Silently, Mikola went outside, crossed the yard and the orchard, and walked along the river toward the meadows and their kitchen garden. The little cherry orchard he had once planted had grown tall and thick, looking like a big green nest that was so dense that not a ray of sunshine could penetrate inside. The willows along the wattle fence had become dry and filled with holes. Mikola searched with his eyes for the old branchy pear tree under which he had lain when he first saw Nimidora taking water from the Rastavitsya. There was not a sign of the tree in sight, and he could barely find its old rotten stump, feeling for it with his feet in the nettle. The stump had not produced a single new shoot. Mikola remembered that wonderful evening and the magic dream he had had sleeping under the tree, the crystal leaves and the Firebird which had sung in Nimidora's voice.

Lyubov led her father to the cemetery and showed him Nimidora's grave. The cemetery was surrounded

by a deep ditch, and the earth bank along the ditch was overgrown with thorn bushes. Tall willows grew along the bank on one side. The sun had just set behind the hill, and its pink rays were fading away on the very tops of the trees. Lyubov pointed to Nimidora's grave under the willows. The grave had already overgrown with grass. Mikola took off his hat, crossed himself and hung his head, holding his hat in front of him with both hands. Lyubov wept. Two big tears rolled out from Mikola's eyes and fell on the grass.

It was as quiet as in a closed room, and in that stillness they could almost hear Death hovering over the cemetery. Mikola stood there for a long time, thinking, and then waved his hand and said:

"Everything is dead, and there's not a trace left behind. My life has uselessly burned away, and there are only some ashes waiting to be buried in the holy earth."

But he was wrong. Not everything in him had yet turned into ashes, and he did not realize that there were still coals smouldering underneath, the kind that remain after mighty oak logs have burned out. His gray-headed frame contained a vigorous, truthful soul.

Straight from the cemetery Mikola went to the priest and ordered a requiem mass to be held for Nimidora. Lyubov walked home, and her husband looked questioningly at her as she entered the room.

"Was that your father?" he asked her.

"I guess so, because he's been crying for Mother something terrible," she said.

"Where has he been all this time?" he asked. "He must have been tramping somewhere, eh?"

"God knows where he's been wandering since he left us. Because of that Mother suffered terribly and did



plenty of crying, too. I guess no one else in the village had it so tough as she did."

"Well, he must've had a good reason to do what he did. After all, Kavun also ran away, and lots of other folks left Verbivka as well," her husband said.

Mikola stayed to live with his daughter. At first the young couple felt a bit strange in his presence. Lyubov was quite scared on the first night; she feared this was some rogue who might still cause them plenty of trouble. She could barely force herself to call him father. He would remain a stranger to her as long as he lived.

Mikola went about the village, looked up his old friends of his childhood, and heaped all kinds of questions upon them. Then he led them to the tavern and, to drown his grief, stood them such a treat that in the end he passed out, like the rest, and slept under a bench all night long.

"I've certainly celebrated the end of my tramping in style," Mikola muttered, struggling to his feet in the morning. "It wasn't that I drank such an awful lot; it was my grief and my grinding poverty. My fate hasn't done me one good turn in all my life."

For a whole week Mikola drank away the bitterness of his tramping life, coming home drunk every night. His daughter and son-in-law exchanged glances but did not dare protest. Lyubov's husband remembered that he lived in his father-in-law's house and worked his land.

"Don't get angry," Mikola would tell them. "I'll wash away my sorrow and then I'll swear never to touch the stuff again as long as I live."

Before long, he did stop drinking, bought a mare and a wagon with his own money and began to farm. Like a big river after a spring flood, his life gradually resumed a steady flow; but time and again it

would suddenly overflow its banks, spilling over into his old tramping ways, until it finally calmed down for good in his old age.

Mikola's son-in-law never dared to speak to him about his occasional drinking bouts. He even tried to play up to him, never forgetting he lived under his father-in-law's roof. Besides, he understood that it was Mikola's hard life that made him take to the bottle now and then.

Meanwhile a new administration system had been introduced in the village. Verbivka had become the seat of the newly-instituted volost, and a wealthy farmer was elected volost administrator with a salary of two hundred rubles a year. The new administrator immediately made out which side the bread was buttered on and, in league with the clerk, began to milk the commune treasury, favoring his rich relatives and shifting the main burden of the communal dues onto the shoulders of the poor peasants.

Once the administrator sent a warden to Mikola, ordering him to give his horse to the police chief.

Mikola knew that the horses of the administrator and his well-to-do relatives were all at home, in their stables.

"Let the administrator give the chief his own horses or send you to his folks," Dzherya told the warden angrily.

The administrator sent the warden to Mikola a second time. Mikola let them have his mare but immediately went to the tavern where quite a lot of villagers were gathered, and denounced the administrator who, he said, made the poor work off most of the communal dues and had already built himself a new house with a big living room, like a lordly manor house.

"The administrator is stealing our money, and we're



keeping our mouths shut. He makes us believe we're supposed to give him horses and oxen every time he says so, and he'll soon work them to death. Don't we have other men in the village? Why, we could pay the shepherd a hundred rubles a year, and he'd make just as good an administrator and be grateful, too. Let's throw the bastard out! Let's show him that the commune is a great thing."

"Let's kick him out, oh yes! You're right, Mikola! Can't we really find a good man in the village for the job? Why don't we elect someone poor? We've had a rich fellow for administrator, now let's try a poor one for a change."

The decrepit tavern keeper, the very one with whom Mikola's father had pawned his clothes when Mikola had married, poured him a half quart of vodka, slightly cheating him.

"Why don't you pour it right, you son of a bitch!" Mikola shouted at the Jew. "Or d'you think I don't know how much you make on short measure alone?"

"So how much do you think I make?" the old man whined. "May God shorten my life by as much as I've shortened your drink."

"If that were true," Mikola laughed, "you would've croaked long ago. You make a hundred rubles a year by cheating."

"On no! That's impossible! Not a hundred rubles. If I did that, I would've become a rich merchant by now."

"Give me another half quart!" Mikola shouted.

The tavern keeper poured another drink, making it short by at least a finger. He saw that Mikola was already tipsy. Serving drunks, he not only gave them short measure, but also diluted their drinks with-water.

"Fill it up! Don't play any tricks on me!" Mikola roared.

"What? Haven't I filled it properly?" the Jew mumbled and added a couple of drops, for appearances' sake.

Mikola seized the mug and hurled it at the tavern keeper. The vodka flowed from his face and beard. The man snorted like a cat that had sniffed pepper.

"You just wait!" Mikola shouted. "You won't be running this tavern for long. Maybe you think we don't know how many buckets of vodka you gave free to the administrator, the clerk and their relatives. We'll throw you out like the administrator. I'll take the job myself but I won't let you anywhere near this public tavern."

"No one's preventing you from taking it. You may run it yourself, as far as I'm concerned, and bring your daughter to help you, too," the tavern keeper argued.

The villagers gathered at the volost office, buzzing like a beehive. They voted out the rich administrator and elected the shepherd. Jewish tavern keepers had their licenses withdrawn, and two men from Verbivka were appointed to run the public taverns.

Meanwhile the authorities had begun to allocate new holdings to former serfs. The landlord took the best lands in the valley, along the river, and half the villagers were given plots on hilltops over deep gullies. One such hill went to Dzherya and his son-in-law. It was so steep that heavy rains washed the soil down, and oxen could barely drag the plow up its slopes. Besides, the landlord received the forest together with some orchards that had belonged to the peasants as long as anybody could remember. Those orchards ran along a gully in the middle of the thick forest.

One of them was Mikola's, and his father's bee garden also stood there.

"Gentlemen of the commune!" Mikola spoke to the villagers. "The landlord is treating us unfairly, and we must stop it. What are we going to pay such an awful lot of money for? For those bare hills? The landlord may do what he likes, but I don't want that plot, and this summer I'm not even going to sow it. Whoever sows his land, shall be a traitor to the commune."

"Let's leave that land unsowed then!" the men shouted. "And if somebody starts plowing, we'll give him a good thrashing. We must file a complaint about the master and about our orchards too."

"Of course we must! There's no more serfdom; now we're all free farmers and we can state our case," Mikola encouraged them.

That summer the commune did leave the hillside plots along the gully unplowed and unsowed.

Bzhozovsky had meanwhile gone to town and complained that Dzherya was inciting the commune to rioting. The arbitrator appointed to settle conflicts between landowners and their former serfs took his side, and Mikola, together with several other ring-leaders, was tied up, brought to town and put in jail.

"That's some freedom!" Dzherya said. "That's some sweet homecoming! I wonder what I returned to this damn land for. May it be cursed by God and men!"

Half the village did not work any land that summer. The landlord refused to take back these plots, and they lay untouched all through the summer.

Meanwhile, in other villages peasants were refusing to take the infertile land they were given. A commission of enquiry was sent down from the capital, looked into the grievances of the Verbivka peasants and ordered

that better land be allocated to them. Now they got back even those hamlets and forest orchards which Polish landlords had taken away from them years before the reform. Mikola was released from jail. Bzhovzovsky hated him more than ever, thinking hard of some way to drive him out of the village, while Mikola stayed clear of the estate and swore never to work for Bzhovzovsky on his fields. From that time on, he would flee to a forest hamlet every time he heard a shaftbow bell announcing the arrival of the police chief or some officer.

To the end of his life Dzherya fought against landlords and Jews who had done him so much harm, ruining his whole life.

In his old age he liked to spend long winter evenings telling his daughter and grandchildren about places and things he had seen and people he had met. Listening to him, his grandchildren would fall asleep beside him in his arms.

These were different times, and people had changed, too. Dzherya remembered how he had reaped rye with Nimidora on a moonlit night and how the peasants' wheat and rye had stood ungathered, bending down and falling, while serfs were reaping the master's fields, working their sickles as fast as they could. Now it was the other way around: the peasants' plots were covered with shocks, while the landlords' grain crop was still ungathered. Then landowners began hiring peasants as "contract laborers" for the entire harvesting season. They did the hiring in winter, the hardest time of year for peasants and when they were most likely to be tempted with the pay, no matter how low. And they imposed stiff fines for every day missed in summer. When the Polish gentry introduced the notorious sharecropping system, it was almost as if serfdom had returned.

Dzherya tried to persuade the villagers not to agree to the new system. He himself went to live in his hamlet for the whole summer. In addition to his own bee garden, he tended other bee houses that stood in nearly every nearby orchard.

It was a lovely, quiet summer evening. The sun was sinking in the west. Old Dzherya was sitting near a fire with his little grandchildren. The little bee garden stood in an orchard over the gully, facing the high, steep wall of the other bank which had been overgrown with thick woods and dense hazel bushes down toward the bottom.

On either side of Dzherya's bee garden, old orchards stretched along the gully, and giant rock-like oaks with thick, dark leaves grew between them. The gully, lined with orchards, wound along the high, hilly opposite bank and disappeared far away, in an old linden forest. In the orchards one could still see holes and ditches overgrown with blackthorn and hazel bushes; these were traces of a dead village, maybe older than Verbivka itself, probably ruined by the fire and sword of a Tatar or Polish raid.

Dzherya's small garden was fenced off with a low wattle fence on three sides and a tall rush wall from the north. A stack stood nestled by the rush fence, and well-cleared paths wound among the bee houses. In the middle of the bee garden stood a sturdy low cross with two planks nailed on top to the ends of the crosspiece. An icon of St. Zosima and St. Savatyi was fixed to the center of the cross. Under the cross stood a tub with water for the bees strewn with straw.

Apple and pear trees grew around the bee garden, their thick branches drooping low over the bee houses. There was a small melon plot behind the rush fence. Long, winding stems of pumpkins had climbed up

the fence, getting onto the shack. A big pumpkin nestled on the shack roof, as if it had climbed there to warm its white belly in the sun. A fire was smouldering in a corner near the wicket gate, and thin smoke was winding upward, disappearing in the thick branches of an old pear tree. Dzherya was sitting on a stump by the fire holding his little grandson with a smudged face. His two little granddaughters were sitting beside him, and the elder boy was standing before him, holding a whip, his eyes fixed on his grandfather. Dzherya's head was almost snow-white. His thick gray brows hung low, partially covering his shiny eyes which were still as black as sloes. His long gray mustache was drooping low, and his head was as white as a cherry blossom. He still looked proud and defiant.

Lyubov had brought her father his supper and was now standing under the overhanging branches of the pear tree, leaning her head to one side, her cheek on her palm. The old man gave his grandchildren some cucumbers and was telling them about remote lands, the Black Sea and the Dniester estuary. The children were drinking in his stories like some wonderful fairytale and kept asking their grandfather about the sea and terrible sea beasts. The little boy fell asleep in his arms.

In the bee houses, bees were buzzing in a loud, even hum that sounded as if it came from underground. Here and there, some bees were lazily crawling around the entrances. Two or three flew sleepily over the cross, but then suddenly dropped into the entrances and were gone. The place smelled of honey, young grass and field flowers. A melon stem had crept into the middle of the garden, become intertwined with pedicels, bindweeds and the broad leaves of cucumbers, and ran to a bee house in a long, green

line. The green grass among the bee houses was dotted with the bright eyes of bluebells; along the fence the grass was sprinkled with the blood drops of champions. There was also a yellow bush of genista. The slanting rays of the sun under the apple trees and the heavy oaks seemed to have set fire to the green foliage and the bee houses, bathing the old man in reddish light.

Then the sun set, and a sweet somnolence spread over the thick orchards and the forest. And the old man continued telling his stories, and the children were listening, and the bees hummed like the strings of a kobza playing in accompaniment to the magic ballad of old bee keeper Mikola Dzherya.

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**МИКОЛА ДЖЕРЯ**

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