

MAXIM GORKY

Collected Works in
Ten Volumes

Volume VI

Tales of Italy.
Childhood

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Tales of Italy

**“There are no tales finer
than those created by life itself.”**

Hans Andersen

The Strike

The tram-car employees in Naples were on strike: a string of empty cars stretched the entire length of the Riviera di Chiaia and a crowd of conductors and drivers, jolly, voluble Neapolitans, as volatile as quicksilver, had gathered on Piazza della Vittoria. Above their heads over the park fence sparkled a fountain jet like the slender blade of a sword, around them pressed a large, hostile crowd of people who had to travel on business to all parts of the huge city and all these shop assistants, artisans, tradesmen and seamstresses loudly reproached the strikers. Harsh words and biting jibes were exchanged and there was much gesticulating, for the Neapolitans speak as expressively and eloquently with their hands as with their indefatigable tongues.

A light breeze wafted from the sea, the dark green fronds of the tall palms in the city park swayed gently, their trunks looking strangely like the clumsy legs of some monster elephants. Urchins, the half-naked children of the Neapolitan streets, hopped about sparrow-like, filling the air with their twitter and laughter.

The city, which resembled an old engraving, was bathed in the generous rays of the blazing sun and seemed to reverberate like an organ; the blue waves in the gulf plashed against the stone embankment adding a muffled beat, like the throbbing of a tambourine, to the hubbub and cries of the city.

The strikers huddled gloomily together, barely replying to the irritable outcries of the crowd; some of them climbed on to the railing of the park peering anxiously down the street over the heads of the people, like a pack of wolves surrounded by the hounds. It was clear that these people in their uniformed attire were closely linked

by an unshakable resolve to stand their ground, and this irritated the crowd still more. But the crowd had its philosophers. Smoking calmly, they admonished the more impassioned opponents of the strike thus:

"Ah, signor! What is a man to do if he can't afford macaroni for his children?"

Sprucely attired agents of the municipal police stood by in groups of two and three to see that the crowd did not obstruct the movement of the carriages. They kept strictly neutral, regarding with like equanimity the censurers and censured and good-humouredly chaffing both sides when shouts and gestures became too heated. A detachment of carabinieri carrying their short, light rifles were lined up against the buildings on a narrow side-street, ready to intervene in the event of serious clashes. They made a rather sinister group in their three-cornered hats, abbreviated capes and the scarlet stripes like two streaks of blood running down their trousers.

Suddenly the wrangling, jeers, reproaches and persuasions subsided. Some new spirit swept the crowd, a pacifying spirit it seemed; the strikers moved closer together with set faces as a shout went up from the crowd: "The soldiers!"

Whistles of mockery and triumph directed at the strikers mingled with shouts of greeting and one stout man in a light grey suit and a panama hat broke into a caper, tapping with his feet against the stone causeway.

The conductors and drivers made their way slowly through the crowd to the cars, some climbed aboard. They looked grimmer than before as they forced their way through the crowd snapping retorts to the exclamations from all sides. The hubbub subsided.

Up from the Santa Lucia embankment with a light, dancing step came the little grey soldiers, their feet beating a rhythmic tattoo and their left hands swinging with a mechanical motion. They looked like tin soldiers and as fragile as toys. They were led by a tall handsome officer with knit brows and a contemptuous twist to his

lips; beside him hopped a stout man in a top hat chattering volubly and cleaving the air with innumerable gestures.

The crowd fell back from the cars; the soldiers scattered like so many grey beads, taking up positions at the platforms of the cars where the strikers stood.

The man in the top hat and several other respectable-looking citizens around him waved their arms wildly and shouted:

"The last time... *ultima volta!* Do you hear?"

The officer stood with his head inclined twirling his moustache with a bored air; the man ran up to him waving his top hat and shouting something in a hoarse voice. The officer glanced at him out of the corner of his eye, then drew himself up, threw out his chest and rapped out commands in a loud voice.

Whereupon the soldiers began jumping on to the platforms of the cars, two on each platform, while the drivers and conductors jumped down one after the other.

This struck the crowd as funny—it roared, whistled and laughed, but all at once the noise subsided and with grim, tense faces and eyes wide with horror the people fell back from the cars in heavy silence, and pressed towards the front car.

There, within two feet of its wheels, stretched across the rails, lay one of the drivers. His grey head was bared and his face, the face of a soldier with the moustaches bristling angrily, stared up at the sky. As the crowd gaped, a lad, small and agile as a monkey, threw himself down beside the driver, and one by one others followed suit.

A low hum rose from the crowd and voices were heard calling fearfully on the Madonna, some cursed grimly, the women screamed and groaned and the urchins jumped up and down in excitement, like rubber balls.

The man in the top hat yelled something in a hysterical voice, the officer looked at him and shrugged his shoulders—his soldiers had been sent to take over the

cars from the tram men but he had no orders to fight the strikers.

Then the top hat, surrounded by some obliging citizens, rushed over to the carabinieri—and now they came forward and bent over the men lying on the rails with the intention of removing them.

There was a brief scuffle; then suddenly the whole grey dusty crowd of onlookers swayed, bellowed, howled and rushed over to the rails—the man in the panama snatched off his hat, threw it into the air and was the first to lie down beside the end striker, slapping him on the shoulder and shouting words of encouragement at him.

One by one people began to drop down on to the rails, as if their feet had given way beneath them—jolly, noisy folk who had not been there at all two minutes before. They threw themselves on the ground, laughing and pulling faces at one another and shouting to the officer who was talking to the top-hatted individual, shaking his gloves under his nose with a slight smile, and tossing his handsome head.

More and more people poured on to the rails, women dropped their baskets and bundles, small boys, shaking with laughter, curled up like shivering puppies, and decently dressed people, too, rolled about in the dust.

The five soldiers standing on the platform of the front car looked down at the heap of bodies under the wheels and roared with laughter, clinging to the bars for support, throwing back their heads and bending forward, convulsed with amusement. They did not look at all like tin soldiers now.

...Half an hour later the tram-cars, scraping and clanging were speeding through the streets of Naples, and on the platforms stood the beaming victors and down the cars walked the victors, asking politely:

“Biglietti?!”

And the passengers handed them red and yellow notes with much winking, smiling and good-natured grumbling.

On the little square in front of the railway station in Genoa a dense crowd had gathered, working-men for the most part but with a good sprinkling of well-fed, respectably dressed people as well. In front of the crowd stood members of the city council; above their heads waved the heavy and cunningly embroidered silk banner of the city, with the varicoloured banners of the worker's organizations beside it. The golden tassels, fringes, and cords glittered, the tips of the flagpoles shone, the silk rustled and a low hum like a choir singing sotto voce rose from the festive throng.

Above, on its tall pedestal, stood the statue of Columbus, the dreamer who had suffered so much for his beliefs and who won because he believed. Today, too, he looked down at the people and his marble lips seemed to be saying:

"Only those who believe can win."

The musicians had laid their instruments around the pedestal at his feet and the brass glittered like gold in the sun.

The receding semi-circle of the station building spread its heavy marble wings as though wishing to embrace the waiting throng. From the port came the laboured breathing of the steamships, the muffled churning of a propeller in the water, the clanging of chains, whistling and shouting. But the square was still and hot under the broiling sun. On the balconies and at the windows of houses women stood with flowers in their hands and beside them were children looking like flowers in their holiday garb.

As the locomotive rolled whistling into the station the crowd stirred and several crushed hats flew into the air

like so many dark birds; the musicians picked up their trumpets, and a few grave, elderly men spruced themselves, hastily stepped forward and turned to face the crowd, speaking excitedly and gesturing to the right and left.

Slowly the crowd parted, clearing a wide passage to the street. "Whom have they come to meet?"

"The children from Parma!"

There was a strike on in Parma. The employers would not yield, and the workers were in such dire straits that they had decided to send their children to their comrades in Genoa to save them from starvation.

From behind the columns of the station building there appeared a neat procession of little people, half-naked and looking like some queer, shaggy little animals in their ragged garments. They walked hand in hand, five abreast, small, dusty and tired. Their faces were grave but their eyes shone brightly, and when the musicians struck up the Garibaldi hymn a smile of pleasure rippled over those gaunt, hunger-pinched little faces.

The crowd welcomed the men and women of the future with a deafening shout, banners dipped before them, the brass trumpets blared out, stunning and dazzling the children; somewhat taken aback by this reception, they shrank back for a moment and then suddenly drew themselves up so that they looked taller, coalesced into a mass and from hundreds of throats there rose a single shout:

"Viva Italia!"

"Long live young Parma!" thundered the crowd, rushing toward them.

"Evviva Garibaldi!" shouted the children, as in a grey wedge they cut into the crowd and were engulfed by it.

In the hotel windows and from the roofs of houses handkerchiefs fluttered like white birds, and a shower of flowers and gay, lively shouts poured down on the heads of the crowd below.

Everything took on a festive appearance, everything

sprang to life, even the grey marble seemed to blossom out in daubs of bright colour.

The banners waved in the breeze, caps and flowers flew into the air, the tiny heads of the children rose above the heads of the throng, small grimy paws stretched out in greeting sought to catch the flowers and the air resounded with the mighty, unceasing shout:

"Viva il Socialismo!"

"Evviva Italia!"

Nearly all the children were snatched up, some sat perched on the shoulders of the grown-ups, others were pressed against the broad chests of stern bewhiskered men; the music was barely audible above the hubbub of shouting and laughter.

Women darted in and out of the crowd picking up the remaining newcomers and shouting to one another:

"You'll take two, Annita?"

"Yes. And you?"

"Don't forget one for lame Margaret...."

A feeling of joyous excitement reigned, there were beaming faces and moist kind eyes on all sides, and already some of the strikers' children were munching bread.

"No one thought of this in our time!" remarked an old man with a beak-like nose and a black cigar between his teeth.

"And how simple it is...."

"Yes. Simple and sensible."

The old man removed the cigar from his mouth, glanced at its tip and sighed as he shook off the ash. Then noticing two little Parma children—brothers obviously—nearby, he assumed a fierce expression, and while the boys looked on gravely, pushed his hat down over his eyes, spread out his arms and, as the brothers backed away together frowning, suddenly squatted down and crowed like a rooster. The boys roared with laughter, stamping their bare soles on the cobbles; the man rose,

straightened his hat, and walked off unsteadily feeling that he had done his duty.

A humpbacked, grey-haired woman, with the face of a witch and wiry grey hairs sprouting on a bony chin, stood at the foot of the statue of Columbus and wept, wiping her reddened eyes with the end of her faded shawl. Dark and ugly, she looked strangely forlorn among the excited throng....

A black-haired young Genoese woman came tripping along, leading by the hand a young man of about seven wearing clogs and a grey hat so large that it reached down almost to his shoulders. He tossed his little head to shake the hat back from his eyes but it kept slipping forward on to his face until the woman swept it off and waved it in the air, laughing and singing; the child, his face wreathed in smiles, threw back his head to look, then jumped up to catch the hat as both disappeared from view.

A tall man with powerful bare arms, wearing a leather apron carried a little girl of six on his shoulder, a grey mousey little thing.

"See what I mean?" he remarked to the woman who walked beside him leading a small boy with flaming red hair. "If this sort of thing takes root... it won't be easy to get the better of us, eh?"

And with a deep laugh of triumph he threw his little burden up into the blue air, crying: "Evviva Parma-a!"

The people gradually dispersed carrying the children or leading them by the hand until the square was empty of all save the crumpled flowers, candy wrappers, a group of jolly facchini and over them the noble figure of the man who discovered the New World.

And the happy shouts of the people going forward to a new life echoed through the streets like the flourish of great trumpets.

It is a sultry noon. The midday gun has just gone off¹ in the distance with a queer muffled sound like the bursting of some giant rotten egg, and in the air, stirred by the explosion, the city odours—the smell of olive oil, garlic, wine and sun-warmed dust—seem more pungent still.

The clamour of the torrid southern day, damped for a moment against the hot stones of the pavement by the dull reverberations of the cannon, rises again over the streets and flows on to the sea in a broad, turbid stream.

The city is as colourful as the richly embroidered robe of a priest. Its passionate cries, groans and exclamations ring out like a paean to life. Every city is a temple raised by the labours of man, all labour is a prayer to the Future.

The sun is at its zenith and a blinding heat pours down from the blue sky as if every sun ray falling upon earth and sea were a fiery sword thrust into stone and water. The water is like shining silk thickly sewn with silver, its warm green waves lap the shore sleepily and it murmurs its gentle hymn to the source of life and happiness—the sun.

Crowds of dusty, sweating men are hurrying to their midday meal, conversing in gay loud voices. Many of them run down to the beach, shed their grimy clothing and plunge into the sea, their bronze bodies absurdly small as they drop into the water, like dark specks of dust in a great bowl of wine.

The silky splash of the water, the joyous cries of the refreshed bathers, the loud laughter and squeals of the children—all this along with the rainbow-hued spray kicked up by many feet rises up to the sun like some gay sacrifice.

On the pavement in the shade of a tall building four navvies, as grey, dry and sturdy as the stones on which they sit, are preparing to dine. With his keen eye narrowed, a grey-haired old man, covered with dust as white as ashes, is cutting a long loaf, taking care that no slice should be smaller than another. He wears a red knitted cap with a tassel which falls into his eyes, and now and again he tosses his large apostolic head, and the nostrils of his long, parrot-like nose quiver.

A strapping lad with bronze skin and coal-black hair, is sprawled on his back on the hot stones beside him. Crumbs of bread fall on his face and he blinks lazily, humming a tune as if in his sleep. The other two sit leaning against the white walls of the house and dozing.

A boy carrying a fiasca of wine in one hand and a small bundle in the other comes toward them. He throws back his head and shouts something in a voice as shrill as a bird's, unaware that heavy drops of thick ruby-red wine are oozing through the straw encasing the bottle.

But the old man sees it, and laying the bread and the knife on the young man's chest, he waves his hand to the boy and shouts:

"Hey, are you blind? Look, you're spilling the wine!"

The boy lifts up the fiasca, gasps and runs over quickly to the navvies, who bestir themselves all at once, shouting excitedly and fingering the fiasca, while the boy dashes off into a yard and re-appears at once with a large yellow jug.

He stands the jug on the ground and the old man carefully pours the living red stream into it. Four pairs of eyes lovingly watch the wine sparkling in the sun, and their dry lips quiver.

A woman in a pale blue dress and a gold lace scarf on her black hair comes along, her high heeled boots tapping on the pavement. She leads by the hand a curly-headed little girl who trips along waving two scarlet carnations in her hand and singing: "O, ma, O ma, O mia ma..."

Pausing behind the old navvy, the little girl stops singing, raises herself on her toes and looks gravely over

his shoulder at the wine pouring into the yellow jug, with a gurgling sound like the continuation of her song.

She pulls her hand away from the woman's, quickly tears off the petals of her flowers and raising her little hand as dark as a sparrow's wing, she throws them into the wine jug.

The four men start and raise their dusty heads in anger. The little girl claps her hands and laughs and stamps her little feet. The embarrassed mother tries to catch her hand, scolding her in a high-pitched voice. The boy, doubles up with laughter, and the petals of the flowers float on the dark wine in the jug like tiny pink boats.

The old man takes a glass, skims off the flowers along with the wine, rises and, putting the glass to his lips, says in a grave soothing voice:

"That's all right, signora: a child's gift is god's gift.... Your health, fair signora, and yours too, child! May you be as beautiful as your mother and twice as happy."

He dips the ends of his grey moustache into the glass, screws up his eyes and slowly sips the wine, smacking his lips loudly and twitching his crooked nose.

The mother smiles, bows and moves on, leading the little girl by the hand, and the child shuffles her little feet over the pavement, swaying from side to side and singing:

"O, maa... O mia, ma..."

The navvies turn their heads lazily, with their eyes now on their wine, now on the little girl, and smile and say something to each other in their rapid southern dialect.

And in the jug the scarlet petals of the flowers still float on the surface of the crimson wine.

The sea sings, the city hums, the sun shines brightly, weaving its tales of magic.

The Tunnel

The calm blue lake is set in a frame of tall mountains crested by eternal snows. The dark tracery of gardens undulates in luxurious folds down to the water's edge. White houses that seem built of sugar gaze into the water and the stillness is like the gentle slumber of a child.

It is morning. The scent of flowers is wafted sweetly from the hills. The sun has just risen, and the dew-drops still glisten on the leaves of the trees and the blades of grass. The road is a grey ribbon flung into the silent mountain gorge. It is paved with stones, yet it seems as if it must be soft as velvet to the touch.

Beside a heap of rubble sits a worker, as black as a beetle; his face expresses courage and kindness and he wears a medal on his chest.

Resting his bronzed hands on his knees, he looks up into the face of the passer-by who stands under a chestnut tree.

"This medal, signor," he says, "is for my work on the Simplon tunnel."

And looking down, he smiles gently at the shining piece of metal on his chest.

"Yes, all work is hard until it gets into your bones and you learn to love it, and then it stirs you and ceases to be hard. But, of course, it wasn't easy!"

He shook his head slightly, smiling at the sun; then, livening up suddenly, he waved his hand and his black eyes glistened.

"Sometimes it was a bit frightening. Even the earth must feel something, don't you think? When we burrowed in deep, cutting a great gash into the mountainside, the earth inside there met us in anger. Its breath was hot, and

our hearts sank, our heads grew heavy and our bones ached. Many have experienced the same thing! Then it hurled stones at us and doused us with hot water. That was awful! Sometimes when the light struck it, the water would turn red, and my father would say that we had wounded the earth and that it would drown and scorch us all with its blood! That was sheer imagination, of course, but when you hear such talk deep down inside the earth, in the suffocating darkness with the water dripping mournfully and the iron grating against the stone, everything seems possible. It was all so fantastic there, signor. We men seemed so puny compared with that mountain reaching up to the clouds, the mountain into whose bowels we were drilling ... one has to see it to understand what I mean, to see the yawning gap we little men had made in the mountainside, to see us entering through that gap at dawn and the sun looking sadly after us as we burrowed into the earth's bowels; to see the machines, the gloomy face of the mountain, to hear the heavy rumble deep within and the echo of the explosions sounding like the laughter of a mad-man."

He examined his hands, straightened the metal tab on his blue overall and sighed faintly.

"Men know how to work!" he continued with pride. "Ah, signor, man, small as he is, can be an invincible force when he wants to work. And, believe me, man puny as he is can do anything he sets out to do. My father didn't believe that at first.

"'To cut through a mountain from one country to another,' he used to say, 'is defying God who divided land by walls of mountains. You'll see, the Madonna will forsake us!' He was mistaken, the Madonna never forsakes men who love her. Later on Father came to think almost as I did, because he felt bigger and stronger than the mountain, but there was a time when he would sit at table on feast days with a bottle of wine in front of him and lecture me and the others.

“‘Children of God,’ that was one of his favourite expressions, for he was a good, God-fearing man, ‘children of God,’ he would say, ‘you can’t fight the earth that way, she will take revenge for her wounds and will remain unvanquished! You will see: we shall bore our way right to the heart of the mountain and when we touch it, we shall be hurled into the flames, because the heart of the earth is fire, everyone knows that! To till the earth is one thing, to help Nature with her labour is man’s duty, but to disfigure her face or her form—that we must not do. See, the farther we bore into the mountain, the hotter becomes the air and the harder it is to breathe....’”

The man laughed softly, twirling his moustaches with his fingers.

“He wasn’t the only one who thought thus, and indeed it was true: the farther we advanced, the hotter it grew, and more and more of us took ill and fainted. Hot water gushed in ever more powerful streams, chunks of earth tore loose, and two of our men from Lugano went insane. At night in the barracks many would rave in delirium, groan and leap from their beds in a fit of horror....

“‘Was I not right?’ Father said. There was terror in his eyes and his cough grew worse and worse.... ‘Was I not right?’ he said. ‘You can’t defeat the earth!’

“And finally he took to his bed never to rise again. He was a sturdy old man, my father, and he battled with death for more than three weeks, stubbornly, uncomplainingly, like a man who knows his worth.

“‘My work is done, Paolo,’ he said to me one night. ‘Take care of yourself and go home, and may the Madonna be with you!’ Then he was silent for a long time, and lay there breathing heavily with his eyes closed.”

The man rose to his feet, glanced up at the mountains and stretched himself so that his sinews cracked.

“Then he took me by the hand and drew me close to him and said—God’s truth, signor!—‘Do you know, Paolo, my son, I think that it will be done just the same: We and those who are boring from the other side will

meet within the mountain, we shall meet, you believe that, don't you, Paolo?' Yes, I believed it. 'That is well, my son! A man must be confident of success and have faith in God who, through the Madonna's prayers, helps good works. I beseech you, son, if it should happen, if the men meet inside the mountain, come to my grave and say: Father, it is done! Then I shall know!'

"It was good, signor, and I promised him. He died five days later. Two days before his death he asked me and the others to bury him on the spot where he had worked inside the tunnel, he begged us to do it, but I think he must have been raving.

"We and those others who were moving toward us from the other side met in the mountain thirteen weeks after my father's death. Oh, that was a mad day, signor, that day when down there in the dark underground, we heard the first sounds of that other work, the sounds made by those coming to meet us in the bowels of the earth, signor, beneath the tremendous weight of earth that could have crushed us little men, all of us with one blow!

"For many days we heard these sounds, hollow sounds that grew louder and more distinct from day to day, and the wild joy of victors possessed us, we worked like fiends, like fleshless spirits, and felt no weariness, needed no urging. Ah, it was good, like dancing on a sunny day, it was, I swear to you! And we all became as kind and gentle as children. Ah, if you but knew how powerful, how passionate is the desire to meet other men in the darkness underground where you have been burrowing like a mole for many long months!"

His face flushed with excitement at the recollection. He came closer and gazing deeply with his profoundly human eyes into those of his listener, he continued in a soft, happy voice:

"And when finally the last intervening layer of earth crumbled and the bright yellow flame of the torch lit up the opening and we saw a black face streaming with tears

of joy and more torches and faces behind it, shouts of victory thundered, shouts of joy—oh, that was the happiest day of my life, and when I recall it I feel that my life has not been in vain! That was work, my work, holy work, signor, I tell you! And when we emerged into the sunlight many of us fell to the ground and pressed our lips to it, weeping; it was as wonderful as a fairy tale! Yes, we kissed the vanquished mountain, kissed the earth; and that day I felt closer to the earth than I had ever been, signor, I loved it as one loves a woman!

“Of course, I went to my father’s grave. I know that the dead cannot hear anything, but I went just the same, for one must respect the wishes of those who laboured for us and who suffered no less than we did, is that not so?

“Yes, yes, I went to his grave, knocked at the earth with my foot and said as he had bade me:

“‘Father, it is done!’ I said. ‘We men have conquered. It is done, Father!’”

The young musician spoke softly, his dark eyes gazing into the distance. "This is what I would like to express in music," he said.

"A boy is walking along a road leading to a big city. It lies before him, a sombre mass of sprawling stone, clinging to the earth, groaning and muttering. From the distance it seems to have been destroyed by fire, for the lurid flame of the sunset still rises above it and the crosses of its churches, its spires and weather-vanes have an incandescent glow.

"The edges of the black clouds, too, seem on fire, angular sections of huge buildings are outlined starkly against the red patches of sky, and here and there window-panes glitter like gaping wounds. The wrecked and anguished city, scene of a ceaseless struggle for happiness, seems to be bleeding to death and a hot yellowish suffocating smoke rises from it.

"The boy walks in the twilight along the grey strip of road, which thrusts itself straight as a sword into the side of the city, unerringly directed by some mighty invisible hand. The trees on either side of the road stand like unlighted torches, their large black limbs motionless over the silent expectant earth.

"The sky is covered with clouds, no stars are visible and there are no shadows. The late evening is melancholy and still, only the slow, light steps of the boy are faintly audible in the weary silence of the slumbering fields.

"Night advances noiselessly in the boy's wake, hiding with the dark mantle of oblivion the far distances from which he came.

"The gathering dusk enfolds in its warm embrace the solitary white and red houses that cling submissively to the

earth, the gardens, the trees, the chimneys scattered desolately over the hills. The world turns black and disappears, crushed by the darkness of the night, as if hiding in fear from the small figure with the staff in its hand, or playing hide-and-seek with it.

"He walks on in silence, at the same unhurried pace, a small, lone figure, his eyes fixed steadily on the city ahead, as if he were the bearer of something momentous and long-awaited by those in the city, where blue, yellow and red lights are already twinkling an anxious welcome to him.

"The sun has set. The crosses, weather-vanes and steeples have melted and disappeared. The city now seems shrunk and diminished, more densely packed against the silent earth.

"An opal cloud has appeared over it, a phosphorescent, yellowish mist hangs over the grey network of huddled buildings. The city no longer seems to have been destroyed by fire and drenched with blood; there is now something both mysterious and incomplete about the uneven line of its roofs and walls, as though he who started to build this great city for men to live in had grown weary and retired to rest, or perhaps, disappointed in what he had begun, had abandoned it and gone away, or lost faith and died.

"But the city lives; it is possessed with an agonizing desire to see itself towering in proud beauty to the sun. It groans in a delirium of many-faceted desire for happiness, it is astir with a passionate will to live, and in the dark silence of the fields around it flow gentle streams of muffled sound, while the black bowl of the sky fills up more and more with a dim and dismal light.

"The boy stops, throws back his head and, peering into the distance with his serene courageous gaze, goes on at a quicker pace.

"And the night, following on his heels, murmurs in the tender voice of a mother:

"'Tis time, child. Go! They are waiting for you!"

“...But of course it is impossible to write such music,” the young musician said at length with a pensive smile.

Then clasping his hands together he exclaimed in tenderness and distress:

“Holy Mother of God! What will he find there?”

Midday

The sun melts in the blue midday sky, pouring its hot rainbow-hued rays on to sea and earth. The drowsy sea exhales an opalescent mist, the blue water gleams like steel, and a strong scent of brine is wafted ashore.

The waves ring as they splash lazily against the grey boulders, spill over their backs and on to the whispering pebbles; they are small waves, as transparent as glass and untouched by foam.

A purple haze enwraps the mountain, the grey olive leaves are like old silver in the sunlight, the dark velvety green of the gardens terracing the hills is lit up by the golden glow of lemons and oranges, the scarlet pomegranate blossoms smile their vivid smile and there are flowers, flowers everywhere.

The sun truly loves this earth.

Two fishermen are on the rocky shore. One is an old man in a straw hat, with a stout face and a grey stubble on his cheeks and chin, eyes half hidden in fat, a red nose and hands bronzed by the sun. Holding his slender fishing-rod far out over the water, he sits on a rock, his hairy legs dangling, and the green waves leap up and lick his feet, and heavy bright drops of water fall off his dark toes into the sea.

Behind the old man, leaning his elbow on a boulder, stands a dark-eyed, swarthy-skinned young man, tall and slender, with a red knitted cap on his head, a white jersey stretched over his powerful chest, and blue trousers tucked up to the knees. He twirls his moustache and stares thoughtfully out to the sea to where the black strips of

fishing boats are bobbing gently on the water, and in the far distance a motionless white sail, like a fluffy cloud melting in the heat, is faintly visible.

"Is she rich, the signora?" the old man asks in a hoarse voice, pulling in his line.

"I believe so," the young man replies softly. "She wore a brooch with a big blue stone, earrings and a great many rings and a watch. An American, I think."

"And is she beautiful?"

"Oh yes! Very slender, it is true, but eyes like flowers and a tiny slightly open mouth...."

"That is the mouth of an honest woman and one who loves but once in her life."

"That is what I think."

The old man swung up his rod, looked at the empty hook through narrowed eyes, grunted and remarked with a chuckle:

"Fish are no more foolish than we."

"Who goes fishing at midday?" said the young man, dropping on to his haunches.

"I do," said the old man and he baited his hook. Throwing the line far out into the sea, he asked:

"You rowed till morning, you say?"

"Yes, the sun was already rising when we came ashore," replied the young one with a deep sigh.

"Twenty lire?"

"Yes."

"She could have given more."

"She could have given much...."

"What did you two talk about?"

The young man's head drooped sadly.

"She knows no more than ten words of Italian, and so we were silent...."

"True love," said the old man, turning to him and showing his white teeth in a broad smile, "strikes the heart like lightning and is as silent as lightning, too, surely you know that?"

Picking up a big stone, the young man was about to throw it out into the sea, but changed his mind and threw it over his shoulder instead.

"Sometimes," he said, "you wonder why people need so many different languages."

"They say that one day it will not be so," remarked the old man after a pause.

A white steamer, like the shadow of a cloud, slid noiselessly in the milky haze at the far edge of the sea's blue expanse.

"Bound for Sicily," said the old man, nodding in its direction.

He produced a long, rough, black cigar from somewhere, broke it in two and handed the young man a half over his shoulder.

"What were you thinking of when you sat with her in that boat?"

"A man always thinks of happiness..."

"That is why he is always a fool," observed the old man.

They lighted up. The blue spirals of smoke curled over the stones in the still air which was saturated with the satisfying smell of the fecund earth and the gentle water.

"I sang to her and she smiled to me..."

"And what then?"

"Well, you know I am not much of a singer."

"No."

"So I rested the oars and gazed at her."

"You did?"

"I gazed at her and thought to myself—here am I, young and strong, and you are bored. Love me and let me live a good life."

"Is she bored?"

"Who will travel to a strange land if he is not poor and if he is happy?"

"Bravo!"

"I vow to you by the Virgin Mary," I thought to

myself, "that I shall be good to you and everyone will be happy around us...."

"Ecco!" exclaimed the old man, and he threw back his big head and laughed heartily.

"I shall be true to you always...."

"Hm...."

"Or, I thought, we shall live together for a while and I shall love you as much as you wish, and then you will give me money to buy a boat and tackle and a plot of land and I shall return to my own country and remember you with gratitude all my life."

"That is not foolish...."

"Then toward morning, I thought that perhaps I did not want anything. I did not want money, I only wanted her, at least for that one night."

"That is simpler."

"For only one night!"

"Ecco!" said the old man.

"It seems to me, Uncle Pietro, that a little happiness is always more honest...."

The old man said nothing. He pursed his thick lips and stared out at the green water, while the young man began to sing on a soft sad note:

"O sole mio...."

"Yes, yes," the old man said suddenly, shaking his head. "A little happiness is more honest, but much happiness is better still. Poor men are handsomer, the rich are more powerful. And thus it is in all things!"

The waves continued their ceaseless murmur. Blue wisps of smoke floated over the heads of the men like haloes. The young man rose to his feet, humming a tune with the cigar in a corner of his mouth. He stood with his shoulder leaning against a grey boulder, his arms folded over his chest, gazing out to sea with a dreamy look in his eyes.

And the old man sat motionless, his head lowered. He seemed to be dozing.

The purple shadows in the mountains thickened and grew softer.

“O sole mio!” sang the young man.

*The sun was born
More beautiful,
More beautiful than thou.
Oh, sun,
Shine on my breast!*

The green waves kept up their gay frolic.

The Wedding

At a small station between Rome and Genoa the conductor opened the door of our compartment and with the aid of a grimy oiler almost carried in a little old man blind in one eye.

"Very old!" they chorussed, smiling good-naturedly.

But the old man turned out to be quite spry. Thanking his assistants with a wave of his wrinkled hand, he raised his battered hat from his hoary head with gay politeness and, glancing at the benches with his keen eye, inquired:

"Perinit ine?"

The passengers moved up and he sat down with a sigh of relief, resting his hands on his bony knees, his lips parted in a good-natured toothless smile.

"Travelling far, Grandpa?" my companion asked him.

"Oh no, only three stations from here!" was the old one's ready reply. "I'm going to my grandson's wedding...."

A few minutes later to the accompaniment of the rhythmic beat of the wheels he was telling us his story, swaying from side to side like a broken branch on a stormy day.

"I'm a Ligurian," he said. "We, Ligurians, are a sturdy lot. Take me, I've got thirteen sons and four daughters and I don't know how many grandchildren. This is the second to get married. Pretty good, eh?"

And proudly surveying us all with his single eye, faded yet merry still, he chuckled.

"See how many people I've given my king and country!"

"How did I lose my eye? Ah, that happened a long time ago. I was just a bit of a lad then, but I was already helping my father. He was turning the soil in the

vineyard—the soil down our way is hard and stony and needs a deal of attention—when a stone flew up from under his pickaxe and hit me right in the eye. I don't remember feeling any pain, but that day while I was eating my dinner my eye fell out. That was awful, signori! They stuck it back and put a warm bread poultice on but it was no use, the eye was gone!"

The old man vigorously rubbed his sallow flabby cheek and again smiled his jolly, good-humoured smile.

"In those days there weren't as many doctors as there are now and people lived foolishly. Oh, yes! But perhaps they were kinder, eh?"

Now his one-eyed, leathery face, deeply lined and overgrown with greenish-grey hair like mould, assumed a look of sly triumph.

"When a man has lived as long as I have, he can say what he thinks of people, don't you think so?"

He raised a dark, crooked finger gravely as though reproving someone.

"Let me tell you something about people, signori...."

"I was thirteen when my father died, and was smaller even than I am now. But I was a spry lad and tireless when it came to work. That was all I inherited from my father, for our plot of land and the house were sold to cover our debts. And so I lived with my one eye and my two hands, working wherever there was work to be found.... It was hard, but youth is not afraid of hardships, is it?"

"When I was nineteen I met the girl whom I was fated to love. She was as poor as I was, but she was a strapping lass and stronger than me. She lived with her old invalid mother and like myself did whatever work came her way. She wasn't especially handsome but she was kind and had a good head on her shoulders. And a fine voice, too. Ah, how she could sing! Just like a professional. And a good voice is worth a great deal. I used to sing quite well myself.

"'Let's get married,' I said to her one day.

“‘That would be foolish, one-eyed one!’ she replied sadly. ‘Neither you nor I have anything. How should we live?’

“That was God’s truth: neither of us owned anything. But what does a young couple in love need? You know yourselves how little love requires. I insisted and won my point.

“‘Well, perhaps you’re right,’ said my Ida at last. ‘If the Holy Mother helps us now, when we live apart how much easier will it be for her to help us when we live together!’

“And so we went to the priest.

“‘This is madness!’ he said. ‘Are there not enough beggars in Liguria as it is? Unhappy people, you are the devil’s playthings, resist his temptations or you will pay dearly for your weakness!’

“The young folk in the community laughed at us, the old folk censured us. But youth is stubborn and wise in its own way! The wedding day arrived, we were no richer on that day than before and we did not even know where we would lay us down to sleep on our wedding night.

“‘Let us go to the fields!’ said Ida. ‘Why not? The mother of God is kind to people wherever they may be.’

“And so we decided—let the earth be our bed and the sky our counterpane.

“And now begins another story, signori. I beg your attention, for this is the best story in all my long life!

“Early in the morning the day before our wedding, old Giovanni for whom I had done a good deal of work said to me, in a casual way, since he was speaking of a mere trifle:

“‘You ought to clean out the old sheep pen, Ugo. Put in some clean straw. It’s dry and the sheep haven’t been there for more than a year, but you’d best clean it out if you and Ida want to live in it.’

“And there was our house!

"As I was busy cleaning out the sheep pen, singing at my work, I looked up to see Costanzio, the carpenter, standing in the doorway.

"So this is where you and Ida are going to live? But where is your bed? I have an extra one at my place. Come over and get it when you've finished cleaning."

"As I was going to him, Maria, the shrewish shop-keeper, shouted:

"Getting married, the fools, with not a sheet or a pillow to call their own! You are crazy, one-eyed one, but send your bride to me...."

"And lame Ettore Viano, forever tortured by rheumatism and fever, cried out to her from his doorstep:

"Ask him how much wine he has put by for the guests? Ah, how can people be so thoughtless!"

A bright tear glistened in one of the deep folds on the old man's cheek, he threw back his head and laughed soundlessly, his bony Adam's apple working and his loose skin trembling.

"Oh, signori, signori," he said, choking with laughter and waving his hands in childish glee. "On the morning of our wedding day we had everything we needed for our home—a statue of the Madonna, dishes, linen, furniture, everything, I swear to you! Ida laughed and wept. I too, and everyone else laughed—for it is bad to weep on a wedding day, and all our own folks laughed at us!

"Signori! It is damned fine to have the right to call people your own. And even better to feel them your own kith and kin, people for whom your life is not a joke and your happiness a gamble!

"And what a wedding it was! What a day! The whole community attended the ceremony, and everyone came to our sheep pen which had all at once become a rich mansion.... We had everything! Wine and fruit, meat and bread, and everyone ate and everyone was gay.... That, signori, is because there is no greater happiness than to do good to people, believe me, there is nothing finer and more beautiful than that!

"And the priest came too. He made a fine speech. 'Here,' he said, 'are two people who have worked for all of you, and you have done what you could to make this day the best in their lives. And that is as it should be, for they have worked for you, and work is more important than copper and silver money, work is always more important than the remuneration you receive for it! Money goes, but work remains....

"These people are gay and modest, their life has been hard yet they did not complain, their lives will be harder still and still they will not grumble, you will help them in their hour of need. They have good hands and stout hearts.'

"And he said many flattering things to me, to Ida and to the whole community!"

The old man surveyed us all with an eye that was young again:

"There, signori, I have told you something about people. It was good, was it not?"

It is spring, the sun shines brightly, everyone is gay and even the windows of the old stone houses seem to be smiling.

A crowd of people dressed in their holiday clothes pours in a colourful stream through the streets of the little town. The whole town is here—workingmen, soldiers, burghers, priests, officials, fishermen—all slightly intoxicated by the spring, talking loudly, laughing and singing and all, like a single body, bursting with the joy of being alive.

The coloured parasols and hats of the women, the red and blue balloons carried by the children, all resemble fantastic flowers, and everywhere, glowing and scintillating like the precious gems on the sumptuous robes of a fairy-tale king, are the laughing children, the happy monarchs of the earth.

The pale green foliage of the trees is still folded into tight little buds which are greedily drinking in the warm rays of the sun. Music sounds invitingly in the distance.

One feels as if men's misfortunes are a thing of the past, as if yesterday had seen the end of the hard life they had so long endured, and today everyone had awakened feeling as light-hearted as children, conscious of a new-found confidence and faith in their indomitable will which must carry all before it, and were now marching confidently together toward the future.

And it was strange and sad to observe in this lively throng the sorrowful face of a tall, sturdily built man walking past with a young woman on his arm. He could have been hardly more than thirty, yet his hair was grey. He held his hat in his hand, exposing his round silvery head. His lean, healthy face wore a calm, yet sorrowful

expression, and his large dark eyes half hidden by the eyelashes were the eyes of one who has suffered pain that cannot be forgotten.

"Observe that couple," my friend said to me. "Especially the man. He is the victim of a tragedy that is becoming more and more common among the workers of Northern Italy."

And he proceeded to tell me this story.

That man is a Socialist, he said, the editor of a local workers' newspaper. He is a worker himself, a house painter by trade, one of those natures for whom knowledge is faith and faith increases the desire for knowledge. A passionate and intelligent anti-clerical. See the dark looks those black-robed priests cast in his direction!

Some five years ago he met a young girl in one of the study-circles he conducted as a propagandist. The women here have been taught to cherish a blind and unshakable belief in God, the priests have worked for centuries to imbue them with this capacity and they have achieved their purpose. Someone has said quite correctly that the Catholic Church has been built up on the breasts of women. The cult of the Madonna is not only beautiful in the pagan sense, it is a very clever cult. The Madonna is simpler than Christ, She is nearer to the heart, She is torn by no inner conflicts, She carries no threat of Gehenna, She is all love, compassion and forgiveness. It is easy for Her to take possession of a woman's heart for life.

But here was a young woman who was able to speak up and ask questions, and in her questions this man felt besides naïve wonder at his ideas, an undisguised distrust of him, mingled often with fear and even revulsion. The Italian propagandist is obliged to speak much about religion, and often to speak in harsh terms of the Pope and the clergy. And each time he spoke of this he read in the girl's eyes scorn and hatred for himself, and if she asked him a question her words had a hostile ring, and there was poison in her voice. She was clearly conversant

with Catholic literature directed against socialism and in this study-circle her words obviously carried as much weight as his own.

Here in Italy the attitude to women is much cruder than in Russia, and until quite recently Italian women themselves were largely to blame for this. Taking no interest in anything besides the Church, they are at best indifferent to the cultural activity of their menfolk and do not understand its significance.

Our friend's masculine pride was hurt, his fame as a skilled propagandist suffered in his clashes with this young girl. He sometimes lost his temper, and several times cleverly ridiculed her argument, but she repaid him in kind, arousing his reluctant respect and compelling him to take particular care in preparing for his lecture to the class she attended.

Yet at the same time he noticed that whenever he spoke of the ugliness of contemporary life, of how it oppressed man, how it crippled his body and soul, and whenever he painted pictures of life in the future when man would be free morally and physically, a remarkable change would come over his antagonist. She listened to him with the wrath of a strong and intelligent woman who knew how heavy life's chains could be, and with the trustful eagerness of a child listening to some wondrous fairy-tale that is in harmony with its own enchanted soul.

This aroused in him the hope of ultimately winning over an opponent who might prove to be a fine comrade.

For nearly a year the contest lasted without evoking in either of them any desire to become more closely acquainted and to carry on their debate eye to eye. But at last he approached her.

"Signorina is my constant antagonist," he said. "Does she not think that in the interests of the cause it would be well for us to get to know each other better?"

She willingly agreed and almost at once they crossed swords: she hotly defending the Church as a place where the tortured soul of man could find peace, where all were

equal before the good Madonna, all objects alike of compassion whatever their garb; he objecting that it was not rest man needed, but struggle, that social equality was impossible without equality of material benefits, and that behind the Madonna lurked men to whose advantage it was to keep people unhappy and ignorant.

Thenceforward these debates filled their entire lives. Each encounter was a continuation of one and the same passionate argument, and with each succeeding day the utter irreconcilability of their beliefs became more and more apparent.

For him life meant a striving for knowledge, a struggle to subordinate the mysterious forces of nature to the human will. All men, he argued, must be equally armed for that struggle which must culminate in freedom and the triumph of reason—the mightiest of all forces and the only force in the world that operates consciously. For her, life was an agonizing sacrifice to the unknown, a subordination of the mind to a will, a law and a goal known to the priest alone.

“Then why do you come to my lectures?” he demanded in amazement. “What do you expect of socialism?”

“Ah, I know that it is sinful of me, that I am going against my better judgement,” she admitted sorrowfully. “But it is so good to listen to you and to dream of the possibility of happiness for all men on earth!”

She was not especially beautiful—a slender girl, with an intelligent face and large eyes whose expression could be mild and wrathful, tender and stern. She worked at a silk mill, and lived with her aged mother, a crippled father and a younger sister who attended a trade school. Sometimes she was gay, not noisily merry, but charmingly gay. She adored museums and old churches, she took delight in paintings and in beautiful objects, and gazing at them she would say:

“How strange it is to think that these beautiful things were once locked up in the homes of private persons and

that one person only had the right to enjoy them! Beauty must be accessible to all, only then does it truly live!"

She often spoke so strangely that it seemed to him that her words sprang from some secret agony of soul, for they reminded him of the groans of a wounded man. He felt that this girl loved life and people with the deep love of a mother, a love full of anxiety and compassion. He waited patiently for the moment when his faith would touch off the spark in her heart that would turn her gentle love to passion. It seemed to him that she listened more and more eagerly to his talks, and that in her heart she already agreed with him. And with greater fervour than ever he spoke to her of the need for incessant struggle for the liberation of mankind from the old fetters whose rust was eating into the soul of men and poisoning them.

One day as he escorted her to her home he told her that he loved her and wished to marry her. He was shocked by the effect his declaration had upon her. She recoiled as if he had struck her. Her eyes opened wide and she leaned, pale-faced, against the wall for support, her hands hidden behind her back.

"I guessed it," she said, gazing at him with something like horror. "I felt it, because I, too, have loved you for a long time. But, Oh my God, what shall we do?"

"We shall be happy, you and I together, we shall work side by side!" he exclaimed.

"No," said the girl, and her head drooped. "No! There can be no talk of love between us two."

"Why?"

"Will you marry me in Church?" she asked in a low voice.

"No!"

"Then, farewell!"

And she walked swiftly away from him.

He caught up with her and began to plead with her. She listened to him in silence, then she said:

"I, my mother and my father are all religious and we

shall die religious. Marriage by magistrate is not for me. Children who are born of such a marriage are bound to be unfortunate, I know it. Church marriage alone sanctifies love, it alone can give happiness and peace."

He saw that she would not easily give in, but neither could he yield on that point. They parted. As she took leave of him, the girl said:

"Let us not torment each other. Do not try to see me any more. Ah, if only you would go away from here. I cannot, I am too poor...."

"I can give you no promises," he replied.

Thus began the struggle between these two strong people. They met, of course, and even more frequently than before. They met because they wanted to meet, each hoping that the other would be unable to withstand the torture of unrequited passion that burned ever more intensely. Their meetings were full of anguish and despair. Each time he felt crushed and helpless, while she went away weeping to confession, and he knew it and it seemed to him that the black wall of men with tonsured heads grew higher and more formidable from day to day, threatening to part them for ever.

Once, on some holiday, as they were walking together in a meadow in the country, he said to her:

"Sometimes it seems to me that I could kill you." It was not a threat, he was merely thinking aloud.

She did not reply.

"Did you hear what I said?"

"Yes," she replied, glancing up tenderly at him. And he realized that she would die before she gave in to him. Before that "yes" he had sometimes embraced her and kissed her. She had struggled a little, but her resistance had grown weaker and he had begun to hope that one day she would yield to him and that her womanly instinct would help him to conquer her. But now he knew that this would be not victory but enslavement, and thenceforth he ceased trying to awaken the woman in her.

Thus he explored with her the dark confines of her narrow conception of life. He sought to flood that darkness with the light of knowledge, but she listened to him like a blind creature with a dreamy smile on her lips and disbelief in her heart.

"Sometimes I realize that everything you tell me is indeed possible," she said once. "But then I think that is because I love you. I understand, but I do not believe, I cannot believe! And when you leave me everything that is yours goes with you."

This lasted for nearly two years, and one day the girl fell ill. He gave up his work, abandoned his political activity, got into debt and, avoiding his comrades, spent his time outside her apartment or at her bedside watching her consumed with fever, seeing her wasting away with each passing day as the flames of sickness leapt higher and higher.

"Tell me about the future," she begged him.

But he spoke to her of the present, fiercely enumerating all that which is destroying us, which he would always fight against and which must be cast out of the lives of men like so many filthy, worn-out rags.

She listened, and when the pain became unendurable she stopped him, touching his hand and gazing imploringly into his eyes.

"Am I dying?" she asked him once, many days after the doctor had told him that she had galloping consumption and that her condition was hopeless.

He turned away.

"I know that I will die soon," she said. "Give me your hand."

And when he stretched his hand out to her she pressed her hot lips to it.

"Forgive me," she said. "I have wronged you, I ought not to have tormented you. I see now that my faith was nothing but fear of that which I could not understand in spite of my own desire and your efforts. It was fear, but that fear is in my blood. I was born with it. I have my own

mind—or perhaps yours—but my heart does not belong to me. You are right, I knew it, but my heart could not agree with you.”

A few days later she was dead, and as he watched her death agony his hair turned grey. Grey at twenty-seven.

Not long ago he married that girl's only friend, also a pupil of his. They are on their way now to the cemetery. They go there every Sunday to put flowers on her grave.

He does not believe in his victory. He is convinced that when she told him that he was right, she was lying in order to console him. His wife thinks the same, both of them cherish her memory, and her tragic story inspires them to avenge the death of a splendid human being, lends boundless energy and a peculiar beauty to their joint efforts....

...The gay, colourful throng of people flows like a bright river under the sun, the sound of merriment accompanies its course, children shout and laugh as they go. True, not everyone is light-hearted and gay, doubtless many hearts are heavy with sorrow, many minds tortured by doubt, but we are all marching forward to liberty, to liberty!

And the closer we march together, the faster our progress!

Let us raise our voices in praise of woman, the Mother, inexhaustible fount of all-conquering life! This is the tale of the flint-hearted Timur-leng, the lame panther, of Sakhib-i-Kirani, the lucky conqueror, of Tamerlane, as he was called by the infidels, of the man who sought to destroy the whole world.

For fifty years he trampled the earth, his iron heel crushing cities and states as the foot of an elephant crushes an ant-hill. Red rivers of blood flowed in his wake in all directions. He built tall towers out of the bones of vanquished peoples. He destroyed life, pitting his power against the power of Death, for he was avenging the death of his son Jigangir. A ghastly man, he wished to rob Death of all his spoils so that he might expire from hunger and despair!

From the day when his son Jigangir died and the people of Samarkand met the conqueror of the evil Juts dressed in black and pale-blue, their heads sprinkled with dust and ashes, from that day until the hour in Otrar thirty years later when Death overpowered him at last, Timur did not smile. He lived thus with lips compressed, his head unbowed and his heart locked against compassion—for thirty years!

Let us sing the praises of woman, the Mother, the sole force before which Death humbly bows his head! Let here be told the truth about Mother, how Death's servant and slave, the stony-hearted Tamerlane, the bloody scourge of the earth, bowed before her.

It came about thus: in the lovely valley of Canigula wreathed in clouds of roses and jasmine, the valley Samarkand poets named "Vale of Flowers", whence the blue minarets of the great city, the blue cupolas of the mosques are visible, Timur-bek was feasting.

Fifteen thousand circular tents were spread out fan-wise in the valley like fifteen thousand tulips, and over each tent hundreds of silken pennants fluttered in the breeze.

And in the centre stood the tent of Gurugan Timur, like a queen among her train. It was four-cornered, each side one hundred paces in length, three spears in height, the centre was supported by twelve golden columns each as thick as a man; atop rested a pale-blue cupola while the sides were of black, yellow and blue stripes of silk; five hundred scarlet cords kept it fixed firmly to the ground so that it might not rise into the sky, four silver eagles stood at its corners, and under the cupola on a dais in the centre of the tent sat the fifth eagle, the king of kings himself, the invincible Timur-Gurugan.

He was garbed in a flowing silken robe of a celestial hue studded with pearls, five thousand large pearls, no less. On his fearsome grey head sat a white peaked cap with a ruby on the tip that swayed to and fro like a bloodshot eye surveying the world.

The face of the Lame One was like a broad-bladed knife, rusty from the blood into which it had been immersed thousands of times; his eyes were narrow slits that missed nothing, and their glitter was the cold glitter of the zaramut, favourite gem of the Arabs which the infidels call emerald and which cures the falling sickness. And from his ears suspended earrings of Ceylon rubies, the colour of a lovely maiden's lips.

On the floor of the tent on carpets of superb beauty stood three hundred golden jugs of wine and everything meet for a kingly feast; behind Timur sat the musicians, beside him no one, and at his feet, his kinsmen, kings and princes and chieftains and, closest to him of all, drunken Kermani, the poet, who, when the destroyer of the world once asked him: "Kermani! How much wouldst thou give for me, were I to be sold?" had replied: "Twenty-five askers."

"But my belt alone is worth as much!" Timur had exclaimed in amazement.

"It is of thy belt that I was thinking," replied Kirmani, "only of thy belt, for thou thyself art not worth a farthing!"

So spake Kermani, the poet, to the king of kings, the man of horror and evil, and may the glory of the poet, friend of truth, be ever exalted above the glory of Tamerlane!

Let us sing the praises of poets who know but one God, the fearless, beautiful word of truth. That is their God for ever!

And so in the hour when the revelry and feasting, the proud reminiscences of battles and victories, were at their height, in the midst of the loud music and the popular games played in front of the king's tent, where innumerable motley jesters bounded up and down, where athletes wrestled and tight-rope walkers went through such contortions that one would think there was not a bone in their bodies, and warriors crossed swords exhibiting peerless skill in the art of killing, and performances were given with elephants painted red and green which made some appear frightful and others ridiculous—at that hour of rejoicing among Timur's men, who were intoxicated with fear of him, with pride in his glory, with weariness of victories, with wine and koumiss—at that wild hour the cry of a woman, the proud cry of a she-eagle reached the ears of Sultan Bayezid's conqueror, suddenly cutting through the hubbub, like a streak of lightning through a thunder-cloud. It was a sound familiar to him and in harmony with his wounded soul, the soul wounded by Death and hence cruel toward living men.

He ordered his men to see who it was that had cried out in joyless voice, and he was told that a woman, a mad creature in dust and rags, had come speaking in the language of the Arabs and demanding, yes demanding, to see him, the ruler of three cardinal points of the earth.

"Bring her in!" said the king.

And so before him stood a woman. She was barefoot and her tattered clothing had faded in the sun, her black tresses were loosened so that they covered her bare breast, her face was the colour of bronze and her eyes imperious, and her dark hand outstretched toward the Lame One did not tremble.

"Is it thou has vanquished Sultan Bayezid?" she demanded.

"Yes, I have defeated him and many besides, and am not yet weary of conquests. And what saith thou of thyself, woman?"

"Hear me!" said she. "Whatever thou has done, thou art but a man. I am a Mother! Thou servest death, I serve life. Thou has sinned against me and so I have come to demand that thou atone for thy guilt. I have been told that thy device is 'in justice lies strength', I do not believe it, but to me thou must be just, for I am a Mother!"

The king had wisdom enough to feel the power behind these bold words.

"Sit down and speak. I would listen to thee!"

She seated herself upon the carpet amid the intimate circle of kings and began her tale:

"I am from the region of Salerno, far away in Italy, thou knowest not those parts! My father was a fisherman, my husband too, he was as handsome as only happy men are and it was I who gave him happiness! I had a son too, the loveliest child in the world...."

"Like my Jigangir," the old warrior murmured.

"There is none as handsome and as clever a lad as my son! He was six years old when the Saracen pirates landed on our coast. They slew my father and my husband and many others, and they carried off my boy and for four years now I have been searching the earth for him. Now thou hast him. This I know, for Bayezid's men captured the pirates, and thou hast conquered Bayezid and taken all his possessions. Thou must know where my son is and give him back to me!"

Everyone laughed, and the kings, who always consider themselves to be wise, said:

"She is mad!" said the kings and the friends of Timur, the princes and chieftains, and they laughed.

Only Kermani gazed at the woman gravely and Tamerlane looked at her in great wonder.

"She is mad as a Mother is mad," the drunken poet Kermani said softly; and the king, the enemy of peace, said:

"Woman! How hast thou come hither from that unknown land across the seas, the rivers and mountains, through woods and forests? How is it that beasts and men—often more savage than the most savage of beasts—have not molested thee, how couldst thou have wandered alone without a weapon, which is the only friend of the defenceless and which will not betray him so long as he has strength to wield it? I must know this in order that I might believe thee and that my wonder might not prevent me from understanding what thou sayest!"

Let us sing the praises of woman, the Mother, whose love knows no obstacles, whose breast has nurtured the whole world! All that is beautiful in man, is derived from the sun's rays and from his Mother's milk. This it is that imbues us with love of life!

"I encountered but one sea in my wanderings," she replied. "There were many islands and fishing boats on it, and when one seeks a loved one the winds are always fair. And for one who has been born and brought up on the seashore it is no hardship to swim rivers. Mountains? I did not notice them."

And the drunken Kermani said gaily:

"A mountain becomes a valley for one who loves!"

"There were forests, yes. I encountered wild boars, bears, lynxes and fearful bulls with their heads bent low and twice panthers looked at me with eyes like thine own. But every animal has a heart, and I spoke with them as I speak with thee, they believed me when I said I was a Mother, and they went their way sighing, for they pitied

me! Knowest thou not that the beasts, too, love their children and know how to fight for their lives and freedom as well as men?"

"Well said, woman," said Timur. "And often, this I know, they love more strongly and fight more stubbornly than men!"

"Men," she continued, like a child, for every Mother is a child a hundredfold at heart, "men are always children to their mothers, for every man has a Mother, every man is some mother's son, even thou, old man, wast born of woman, thou canst deny God, but this thou canst never deny!"

"Well said, woman!" exclaimed Kermani, the fearless poet. "Well said! From a herd of bullocks there will be no calves, without the sun flowers will not bloom, without love there is no happiness, without woman there is no love, without Mothers there are neither poets nor heroes!"

And the woman said:

"Give me back my child, for I am his Mother and I love him."

Let us bow to Woman; she gave birth to Moses, to Mohammed and to Jesus, the great prophet who was put to death by evil men but who, as Sharifu'd-Din² hath said, shall rise again and bring judgement upon the living and the dead, and this shall come to pass in Damascus, in Damascus!

Let us bow to Her who tirelessly gives birth to the great! Aristotle is Her son, and Firdusi, and Saadi, as sweet as honey, and Omar Khayyam, like unto wine mixed with poison, Iskander and the blind Homer—these are all Her children, all of them imbibed Her milk and She led each one of them into the world by the hand when they were no bigger than tulips. All the pride of the world comes from Mothers!

And the hoary destroyer of cities, the lame tiger Timur-Gurugan sat sunk in thought. After a long silence he said to those gathered about him:

"Men tangri Kuli Timur! I, God's servant Timur, do say what must be said! Thus I have lived, for many years the earth has groaned beneath my feet, and for thirty years I have been destroying it in order to avenge the death of my son Jigangir, for extinguishing the sun of life in my heart! Men have fought against me for kingdoms and cities, but never has anyone fought me for man, and never has man had any value in my eyes, and I did not know who he was and why he stood in my path! It is I, Timur, who said to Bayezid when I defeated him: 'Oh, Bayezid, it must be that before God countries and men are nothing, for behold, he suffers them to be possessed by such as we: thou, one-eyed and I, lame!' So spake I to him when he was brought to me in chains and could barely stand under their weight, so spake I, gazing upon him in misfortune, and life at that moment was to me as bitter as wormwood, the weed of ruins!

"I, God's servant Timur, say what must be said! Here before me sits a woman, one of myriads, and she has awakened in my soul feelings such as I have never known. She speaks to me as to an equal, and she does not beg, she demands. And I see now, I understand why this woman is so strong—she loves, and love has taught her that her child is the spark of life which can kindle a flame for many centuries. Were not all the prophets children too, and were not all the heroes weak? O, Jigangir, light of mine eyes, perhaps thou wert destined to kindle the earth, to sow it with happiness, I, thy father, have drenched it with blood and it has grown fat!"

Once again the scourge of the nations lapsed into silence, then at last he spoke:

"I, God's servant Timur, say what must be said! Three hundred horsemen shall set out at once to all corners of my land and they shall find this woman's son and she shall wait here, and I shall wait with her; he who returns with the child in his saddle, good fortune shall be his. It is I, Timur, who speaks. Have I spoken well, woman?"

She tossed her black hair back from her face, smiled to him and replied:

"Thou hast, king!"

Then rose this terrible old man and in silence bowed to her, and the merry poet Kermani spake up with great rejoicing:

*What is more beautiful than the song of flowers and stars?
The answer all men know: 'tis the song of love!
What is more beauteous than the sunlight at noon in May?
The lover replies: She whom I love!
Ah, beautiful are the stars in the midnight sky,
And beautiful the sun on a summer's noontide,
But the eyes of my beloved are lovelier than all the flowers,
And her smile is more gentle than the sun's rays.
But the song most beautiful of all is yet to be sung,
The song of the beginning of all things on earth,
The song of the world's heart, of the magic heart,
Of her whom on earth we call Mother!*

And Timur said to his poet:

"Good, Kermani! God was not mistaken when he chose thy lips to extol his wisdom!"

"God is himself a great poet!" spake the drunken Kermani.

And the woman smiled and all the kings smiled and the princes, and the chieftains smiled, they were all children as they gazed upon her—upon the Mother!

All this is true; every word spoken here is the truth, our mothers know it to be so, ask them and they will tell you:

"Yes, all this is the eternal truth, we are stronger than death, we who are for ever bringing into the world sages, poets and heroes, we who imbue man with all that makes him glorious!"

The Monster

It is a hot day and all is hushed. The world is silent and at peace. The blue orb of the sky looks down tenderly upon the earth; the sun is its fiery pupil.

The sea is a sheet of smooth blue metal. The vari-coloured fishing boats stand motionless as if welded into the semi-circle of the bay, as dazzlingly bright as the sky. A sea-gull flies by, lazily flapping its wings, and on the surface of the water another bird appears, whiter and more beautiful than the one in the air.

In the shimmering distance a purple islet floats gently on the water, or melts perhaps under the burning rays of the sun—a lone rock rising out of the sea, a bright gem in the diadem that is the Gulf of Naples.

The rocky coast descends in jagged ledges down to the sea; it is covered with a luxurious tangle of dark vines, orange-trees, lemons and figs, of pale-silver olive leaves. Flowers, gold, red and white, smile gently through the dense foliage dropping steeply down to the sea, and the yellow and orange fruits remind one of stars on a warm moonlight night when the sky is dark and the air damp.

Sky, sea and soul are hushed, and in this stillness one yearns to hear the silent hymn life offers up to the Sun God.

A tall woman in black is walking down a path that winds down between the gardens, stepping lightly from stone to stone. Her dress has faded in the sun to a splotchy brown, and even from the distance one can see the patches on the worn fabric. Her head is bare and her hair gleams silver, falling in tiny curls over her tall forehead, temples and her dark-skinned cheeks, the sort of hair that it is impossible to comb smooth.

Her face is sharp-featured and stern. It is a face which

once seen can never be forgotten. There is something timeless in that stern face, and if you happen to meet the straight glance of her dark eyes you cannot help thinking of the burning deserts of the East, of Deborah and Judith.

She walks with head bent, crocheting as she goes. The steel of her crochet hook glitters, the ball of wool is hidden somewhere in her clothing, and it seems that the crimson thread seeps out of the woman's heart. The path is steep and wayward, now and again one hears the rattling of the stones as they drop down, but this grey-haired woman moves as confidently as if her feet had eyes to see the way.

Here is the tale they tell of this woman. She is a widow, her husband, a fisherman, went off on a fishing trip soon after they were married and never returned. She was left with a child under her heart.

When the child was born she hid it from people. She did not take it out into the street and the sunshine to show it off as all mothers do. She kept it in a dark corner of her hut swaddled in rags, and for a long time all that the neighbours saw of the infant was a large head and a pair of huge motionless eyes in a yellow face. It was observed, too, that this healthy, agile woman who had once fought poverty tirelessly and cheerfully imbuing others with energy and vigour, had now grown silent and downcast, looking at the world through a veil of sorrow, with a strange questioning look in her eyes.

It was not long before everyone learned her misfortune: her child was deformed, and that was why she kept him hidden, this was the reason for her misery.

When they discovered this, the neighbours told her that they understood how shameful it was for a woman to give birth to a freak, that none but the Madonna knew whether this cruel fate was a just punishment, but however that might be, the child was not to blame and she was wrong to deprive it of sunlight.

She listened to them and showed them her son. They saw a monster with arms and legs as short as the fins of a

fish, an enormous swollen head wobbling on a thin scraggy neck, a wrinkled old man's face, glazed eyes and a huge mouth spread into a deathly grin.

The women wept at the sight, the men looked at it with repugnance and turned away in silence. The mother of the monster sat on the ground, now hiding her face, now raising her head and staring at her neighbours with a wordless question none could understand.

The neighbours made a coffin-like box, filled it with the combings of wool and rags, placed the deformed creature in this soft warm nest and stood it in a shady part of the courtyard in the secret hope that the sun which worked wonders every day would perform another miracle.

But time went by and the enormous head, the long body with the four helpless limbs did not change. Only his smile began to acquire a definite expression of insatiable greed, and the mouth became filled with two rows of sharp crooked teeth. The foreshortened paws learned to seize pieces of bread and direct them almost unerringly into the large, hot mouth.

He was mute, but whenever the odours of food reached him, he would utter whining noises, open his maw and shake his heavy head, and the murky whites of his eyes would turn bloodshot.

He ate vastly, his capacity for food increased as time went on, and his whining was constant. His mother toiled ceaselessly, but her earnings were meagre and sometimes she earned nothing at all. She did not complain. Reluctantly, and always silently, she accepted the help offered by neighbours, but when she was not at home the neighbours, irritated by the whining, would run into the yard and stuff bread, vegetables, fruits—everything that could be eaten—into the insatiable mouth.

"Soon he will devour you altogether," they told her. "Why do you not give him away to some asylum, or hospital?"

"I gave birth to him," she would reply heavily. "I must feed him."

She was a handsome woman and more than one man sought her love, but all of them in vain, and to one for whom she cared more than the others, she said:

"I cannot be your wife, I am afraid to give birth to another monster. I do not want to disgrace you. Leave me."

The man tried to persuade her. He reminded her that the Madonna is merciful to all mothers and looked upon them as Her own sisters, but the mother of the monster replied:

"I do not know what I have done, but see how cruelly I have been punished."

He pleaded with her, he wept and grew frantic, but she said: "No, I cannot go against my faith. Go!"

And he went away to some distant land and never returned.

And so for many years she provided food for that bottomless maw, those incessantly working jaws. He devoured the fruits of her labours, her blood and her life. His head grew steadily larger and more monstrous, like a huge ball that might at any moment detach itself from the weak, skinny neck and sail away over the houses, knocking against the corners and swaying lazily from side to side.

The stranger who chanced to look into the yard would stop, horrified by what he saw and unable to grasp its meaning. Beside the ivy-grown wall on a heap of stones as on some sacrificial altar stood the queer-shaped box with that monstrous head protruding from it; the yellow, wrinkled broad-featured face standing out against the green ivy would draw the gaze of the beholder and none who had seen it could soon forget those vacant staring eyes bulging out of their sockets, the broad flat nose, the abnormally developed cheek and jaw-bones, the quivering flaccid lips, revealing two rows of cruel teeth, the huge sensitive animal ears that seemed to live a life of their own—the entire hideous mask topped by a shock of black

hair which curled in tiny ringlets like the hair of a Negro.

Clutching some bit of food in a hand as small and short as a lizard's claw he would tear at it with his teeth, jerking his head back and forth like a pecking bird and emitting loud grunting noises. Having eaten, he would look up at the people around him and bare his teeth, and then his eyes would focus on the bridge of his nose, merging in a murky thick splotch on a face contorted as if in a death agony. When hungry, he would stretch out his neck, open his red maw, and twisting his long, snake-like tongue, whine for food.

Onlookers would cross themselves and pray at the sight and turn away reminded suddenly of all the evil they had ever known, all the misfortune they had ever suffered.

Many times the dour old blacksmith remarked: "When I see that all-devouring mouth, I think that it is something like that has devoured my strength, and it seems to me that we all live and die for parasites."

That mute head evoked in everyone sorrowful thoughts and feelings from which the soul recoiled in horror.

The mother of the monster listened in silence to what was said about him. Her hair turned swiftly grey, her face grew lined, and she had long since forgotten how to laugh. People knew that at night she stood motionless by the door, staring up at the sky as if waiting for someone.

"What is it she waits for?" they asked one another.

"Put him on the square by the old church," her neighbours advised. "Foreigners pass there, they would not refuse to throw him a few coppers every day."

But the mother shuddered at the thought.

"It would be terrible to let men of other lands see him," she said. "What would they think of us?"

"There is poverty everywhere," they told her. "Everyone knows that!"

She shook her head.

But foreigners, driven by boredom, strolled about all

over the place, peering into all the courtyards and, of course, one day they wandered into hers as well. She was home and she saw the grimaces of distaste and repugnance on the well-fed faces of these idle people. She heard them talk of her son, their mouths twisted into a leer, their eyes narrowed. Most painful to her were some words she overheard spoken in tones of scorn, hostility and undisguised malice.

She memorized the foreign sounds, repeated them over and over to herself, for her heart—the heart of an Italian woman and a mother—sensed the insult they carried, and she went to a commissioner of her acquaintance and asked him what they meant.

"It depends on who said them," he replied, frowning. "They mean: 'Italy is dying out faster than the other Romanic races.' Where did you hear that lie?"

She went away without replying.

The next day her son overate himself and died in convulsions.

She sat in the courtyard beside the box, with her hand on the lifeless head of her son, waiting calmly and looking questioningly into the eyes of all who came to her to look at the corpse.

No one spoke, no one asked her any questions, although perhaps many would have wished to congratulate her at her release from slavery, to say some word of comfort, for after all she had lost her son. But no one said anything. Sometimes people understand that there are things that are better left unsaid.

For a long time afterwards she continued to look at her neighbours with that unspoken question in her eyes, but in time she became as simple-hearted as they.

The Mother of a Traitor



One can talk endlessly about Mothers.

For several weeks enemy hosts had surrounded the city in a tight ring of steel; by night fires were lit and the flames peered through the inky blackness at the walls of the city like a myriad of red eyes—they blazed malevolently, and their menacing glare evoked gloomy thoughts within the beleaguered city.

From the walls they saw the enemy noose draw tighter; saw the dark shadows hovering about the fires, and heard the neighing of well-fed horses, the clanging of weapons, the loud laughter and singing of men confident of victory—and what can be more jarring to the ear than the songs and laughter of the enemy?

The enemy had thrown corpses into all the streams that fed water to the city, he had burned down the vineyards around the walls, trampled the fields, cut down the orchards—the city was now exposed on all sides, and nearly every day the cannon and muskets of the enemy showered it with lead and iron.

Detachments of war-weary, half-starved soldiers trooped sullenly through the narrow streets of the city; from the windows of houses issued the groans of the wounded, the cries of the delirious, the prayers of women and the wailing of children. People spoke in whispers, breaking off in the middle of a sentence, tensely alert: was that not the enemy assaulting the walls?

Worst of all were the nights; in the nocturnal stillness the groans and cries were more distinctly audible; black shadows crept stealthily from the gorges of the distant mountains toward the half-demolished walls, hiding the enemy camp from view, and over the black ridges of the mountains rose the moon like a lost shield dented by sword blows.

And the people in the city, despairing of succour, worn out by toil and hunger, their hope of salvation waning from day to day, the people in the city stared in horror at that moon, at the sharp-toothed ridges of the mountains, the black maws of the gorges and the noisy camp of the enemy. Everything spoke to them of death, and not a star was there in the sky to give them consolation.

They were afraid to light the lamps in the houses, and a heavy darkness enveloped the streets, and in this darkness, like a fish stirring in the depths of a river, a woman draped from head to foot in a black cloak moved soundlessly.

When they saw her, people whispered to one another: "Is it she?"

"It is she!"

And they withdrew into the niches under archways, or hurried past her with lowered heads. The patrol chiefs warned her sternly:

"Out in the street again, Monna Marianna? Take care, you may be killed and nobody will bother to search for the culprit...."

She drew herself up and stood waiting, but the patrols passed by, either not daring or else scorning to raise their hand against her; the armed men avoided her like a corpse, and, left alone in the darkness, she continued her solitary wanderings from street to street, soundless and black like the incarnation of the city's misfortune, while all about her, as though pursuing her, melancholy sounds issued from the night: the groans, cries, prayers and the sullen murmur of soldiers who had lost all hope of victory.

A citizen and a mother, she thought of her son and her country: for at the head of the men who were destroying her city was her son, her gay, handsome, heartless son. Not so long ago she had looked upon him with pride, regarding him as her precious gift to her country, a beneficent force she had brought forth to aid

the people of the city where she herself had been born, where her son had been born and reared. Her heart was bound by hundreds of invisible threads to these ancient stones of which her forefathers had built their homes and raised the walls of the city; to the soil wherein lay buried the bones of her kinsfolk, to the legends, the songs and the hopes of the people.

And now this heart had lost a loved one and it wept. She weighed in her heart as on scales her love for her son and her love for her native city, and she could not tell which weighed the more.

And so she wandered thus by night through the streets, and many, failing to recognize her, drew back in fear, mistaking her black figure for the incarnation of Death that was so near to all of them, and when they did recognize her, they turned silently away from the mother of a traitor.

But one day in a remote corner by the city walls she saw another woman, kneeling beside a corpse, so still that she seemed part of the earth. The woman was praying, her grief-stricken face upturned to the stars. And on the wall overhead the sentries spoke in low tones, their weapons grating against the stone.

The traitor's mother asked:

"Your husband?"

"No."

"Your brother?"

"My son. My husband was killed thirteen days ago, my son today."

And rising from her knees, the mother of the slain man said humbly:

"The Madonna sees all and knows all, and I am grateful to her!"

"For what?" asked the first, and the other replied:

"Now that he has died honourably fighting for his country I can say that I feared for him: he was light-hearted, too fond of revelry and I feared that he might betray his city, as did the son of Marianna, the

enemy of God and Man, the leader of our foes, may he be accursed and the womb that bore him!"

Marianna covered her face and went on her way. The next morning she appeared before the city's defenders and said:

"My son has come to be your enemy. Either kill me or open the gates that I may go to him...."

They replied:

"You are a human being, and your country must be precious to you; your son is as much an enemy to you as to each one of us."

"I am his mother. I love him and feel that I am to blame for what he has become!"

Then they took counsel with one another and decided:

"It would not be honourable to kill you for the sins of your son. We know that you could not have led him to commit this terrible sin, and we can understand your distress. But the city does not need you even as a hostage; your son cares nought for you, we believe that he has forgotten you, fiend that he is, and there is your punishment if you think you have deserved it! We believe that is more terrible than death itself!"

"Yes," she said. "It is indeed more terrible."

And so they opened the gates and suffered her to leave the city and watched long from the battlements as she departed from her native soil, now drenched with the blood her son had spilt. She walked slowly, for her feet were reluctant to tear themselves away from this soil, and she bowed to the corpses of the city's defenders, kicking aside a broken weapon in disgust, for all weapons are abhorrent to mothers, save those that protect life.

She walked as though she carried a precious phial of water beneath her cloak and feared to spill a drop; and as her figure grew smaller and smaller to those who watched from the city wall, it seemed to them that with her went their dejection and hopelessness.

They saw her pause halfway and throwing back the hood of her cloak turn back and gaze long at the city.

And over in the enemy's camp they saw her alone in the field and figures dark as her own approached her cautiously. They approached and inquired who she was and where she was going.

"Your leader is my son," she said, and not one of the soldiers doubted it. They fell in beside her singing his praises, saying how clever and brave he was, and she listened to them with head proudly raised, showing no surprise, for her son could not be otherwise.

And now, at last, she stood before him whom she had known nine months before his birth, him whom she had never felt apart from her own heart. In silk and velvet he stood before her, his weapons studded with precious stones. All was as it should be, thus had she seen him so many times in her dreams—rich, famous and admired.

"Mother!" he said, kissing her hands. "Thou hast come to me, thou art with me, and tomorrow I shall capture that accursed city!"

"The city where thou were born," she reminded him.

Intoxicated with his prowess, crazed with the thirst for more glory, he answered her with the arrogant heat of youth:

"I was born into the world and for the world, and I mean to make the world quake with wonder of me! I have spared this city for thy sake, it has been like a thorn in my flesh and has retarded my swift rise to fame. But now tomorrow I shall smash that nest of obstinate fools!"

"Where every stone knows and remembers thee as a child," she said.

"Stones are dumb, unless man makes them speak. Let the mountains speak of me, that is what I wish!"

"And what of men?" she asked.

"Ah yes, I have not forgotten them, mother. I need them, too, for only in men's memory are heroes immortal!"

She said:

"A hero is he who creates life in defiance of death, who conquers death...."

"No!" he objected. "The destroyer is as glorious as the builder of a city. See, we do not know who it was that built Rome—Aeneas or Romulus—yet we know well the name of Alaric and the other heroes who destroyed the city...."

"Which outlived all names," the mother reminded him.

Thus they conversed until the sun sank to rest; less and less frequently did she interrupt his wild speech, lower and lower sank her proud head.

A Mother creates, she protects, and to speak to her of destruction means to speak against her; but he did not know it, he did not know that he was negating her reason for existence.

A Mother is always opposed to death; the hand that brings death into the homes of men, is hateful and abhorrent to Mothers. But the son did not perceive this, for he was blinded by the cold glitter of glory that deadens the heart.

Nor did he know that a Mother can be as clever and ruthless as she is fearless, when the life she creates and cherishes is threatened.

She sat with bowed head, and through the opening in the leader's richly appointed tent she saw the city where first she had felt the sweet tremor of conception and the anguished convulsions of the birth of this child who now thirsted for destruction.

The crimson rays of the sun dyed the walls and towers of the city blood-red, cast a baleful glare on the window-panes so that the whole city seemed to be a mass of wounds with the crimson sap of life flowing from each gash. Presently the city turned black as a corpse and the stars shone above it like funeral candles.

She saw the dark houses where people feared to light candles so as not to attract the attention of the enemy, saw the streets steeped in gloom and rank with the stench of corpses, heard the muffled whispers of people awaiting death—she saw it all, all that was near and dear to her stood before her dumbly awaiting her decision, and she felt herself the mother of all those people in her city.

Clouds descended from the black peaks into the valley and swooped down like winged steeds upon the doomed city.

"We may attack tonight," said her son, "if the night is dark enough! It is hard to kill when the sun shines in your eyes and the glitter of the weapons blinds you, many a blow goes awry," he remarked, examining his sword.

The mother said to him:

"Come, my son, lay the head on my breast and rest, remember how gay and kind thou wert as a child, and how everyone loved thee...."

He obeyed her, laid his head in her lap and closed his eyes, saying:

"I love only glory and I love thee for having made me as I am."

"And women?" she asked bending over him.

"They are many, one tires of them as of everything that is too sweet."

"And dost thou not desire children?" she asked finally.

"What for? That they might be killed? Someone like me will kill them; that will give me pain and I shall be too old and feeble to avenge them."

"Thou art handsome, but as barren as a streak of lightning," she said with a sigh.

"Yes, like lightning..." he replied, smiling.

And he dozed there on his mother's breast like a child.

Then, covering him with her black cloak, she plunged a knife into his heart, and with a shudder he died, for who knew better than she where her son's heart beat. And, throwing his corpse at the feet of the astonished sentries, she said addressing the city:

"As a Citizen, I have done for my country all I could: as a Mother I remain with my son! It is too late for me to bear another, my life is of no use to anyone."

And with a firm hand she plunged the knife, still warm with his blood—her blood—into her own breast, and again she struck true, for an aching heart is not hard to find.

The cicadas are droning.

It is as if thousands of metal strings were stretched taut among the thick foliage of the olive-trees, the wind stirs the brittle leaves, they touch the strings and this light, ceaseless contact fills the air with intoxicating sound. It is not exactly music, yet it seems as if invisible hands were tuning hundreds of invisible harps, and one waits in tense expectancy for the tuning to cease, and for a grand string orchestra to strike up a triumphant hymn to the sun, sky and sea.

The wind blows, swaying the trees so that their waving crowns seem to be moving from the mountains down to the sea. The surf beats dully and rhythmically against the rocky shore; the sea is a mass of living, white flecks of foam looking like great flocks of birds that have settled on its blue expanse. They all float in one direction, then disappear into the depths only to rise again with a faintly audible sound. And as though luring them away in their wake, two boats, their triple sails raised high, bob up and down on the horizon, like two grey birds themselves. The whole scene is as unreal as a distant, half-forgotten dream.

"There'll be a stiff gale by sundown!" says an old fisherman, sitting in the shadow of the rocks on the small pebbled beach.

The tide has washed bunches of brown, yellow and green seaweed on to the beach and it lies withering on the hot pebbles under the blazing sun, filling the salty air with the tangy scent of iodine. Curly wavelets chase one another up the beach.

The old fisherman resembles a bird with his small wizened face, his hooked nose and his round and doubtless very sharp eyes hidden amid the dark folds of

the skin. His gnarled, withered fingers lie motionless on his knees.

"About half a hundred years ago, signor," says the old man, in a voice that harmonizes with the murmur of the waves and the hum of the cicadas, "I remember just such a bright and glorious day, when everything seemed to laugh and sing. My father then was about forty, I was sixteen and in love, as is only natural for a lad of sixteen under a blessed sun like ours.

"Come, Guido," said my father, 'let us go out for some pezzoni.' Pezzoni, signor, is a very delicate tasty fish with pink fins, it is also known as coral fish because you find it deep down among the coral reefs. You catch it standing at anchor with a heavily weighted hook. A handsome fish.

"And so we set off anticipating nothing but a successful catch. My father was a strong man and an experienced fisherman, but shortly before this trip he had been ill, his chest ached and his fingers were twisted with rheumatism, the fisherman's disease.

"This is a very treacherous and evil wind that is blowing now so caressingly upon us from the shore, as if pushing us gently toward the sea. Out there it comes upon you unawares and suddenly hurls itself at you, as if you had done it an injury. It sends your barque flying, sometimes keel upwards with you in the water. It happens so quickly that before you have time to curse or to utter God's name you are sent swirling helplessly into the distance. A robber is more honest than that wind. But, then, men are always more honest than the elements.

"Well, it was just such a wind that struck us four kilometres from the shore, quite close by, as you see. It took us by surprise like a coward and a scoundrel.

"Guido!" cried my father, seizing hold of the oars with his twisted hands. 'Hold on, Guido! Quick, the anchor!'

"But while I was fumbling for the anchor, the wind tore the oars out of my father's hand knocking him a blow on the chest that sent him reeling unconscious to the

bottom of the boat. I had no time to help him, for every second threatened to capsize us. Everything happened very quickly: by the time I took up the oars we were being swept along, with the spray surrounding us on all sides, as the wind picked the crests off the waves and sprinkled us like the priest does, only with a great deal more energy and not in order to wash away our sins.

"‘This is serious, my son!’ said father, coming to his senses. He looked out toward the shore. ‘This is going to be a long blow,’ he said.

"‘When you are young you do not easily believe in danger; I tried desperately to row and did everything else that a sailor must do at critical moments, when the wind, the breath of wicked devils, is obligingly digging a thousand graves for you, and singing your requiem free of charge.

"‘Sit still, Guido,’ said my father, smiling and shaking the water from his head. ‘What’s the use of digging at the sea with matchsticks? Save your strength or else the folks at home will await you in vain.’

"‘The green waves tossed our little craft as children toss a ball, they climbed over the sides, rose above our heads, roaring and shaking us madly; we dropped down into yawning pits, then climbed to the top of tall white peaks, and the shore sped swiftly farther and farther away and seemed to be dancing along with our barque.

"‘You may return but I shall not!’ my father said to me. ‘Listen and I shall tell you what you must know about fishing and work....’

"‘And he began to tell me all he knew about the habits of one or another fish, where, when and how best to catch them.

"‘Had we not better pray, Father!’ I suggested, when I saw how bad our plight was; we were like a couple of rabbits among a pack of white hounds that were baring their fangs at us from all sides.

"‘God sees all!’ said he. ‘He knows that men whom He created to dwell on land are now perishing at sea and that

one of them, having lost hope of salvation, must bequeath to his son all the knowledge he possesses. Work is necessary for the earth and for men. God understands that....'

"And when he had imparted to me all he knew about his craft, he told me what a man must know in order to live in peace with his fellow men.

"Is this the time to teach me?" I said. 'On land you did not do it!'

"On land death was never so close.'

"The wind howled like a wild beast, and the waves roared so loud that father had to shout for me to hear him.

"Always behave towards men as if you were neither worse nor better than they, and that will be right! The nobleman and the fisherman, the priest and the soldier are part of the same body and you are as necessary a part of that body as all the others. Never approach a man thinking that there is more bad than good in him, believe that there is more good in him and you will always find it to be so. Men behave as one expects them to.'

"He did not say this all at once, of course. His words came to me through the spray and foam as we tossed from wave to wave, now plunging deep down, now climbing high up. Much of what he said was carried away by the wind before it reached me, much I did not understand, for, signor, how can one learn with death staring one in the face? I was afraid, I had never before seen the sea in such a fury or felt so helpless on it. And I cannot say whether it was then or later on, when I remembered those hours, that I experienced a sensation I shall never forget as long as I live.

"I can see my father, as if it were yesterday, sitting at the bottom of the boat, his poor arms outstretched as he clung to the sides with his crooked, twisted fingers; his hat had been washed away and the waves struck against his head and his shoulders now from the right, now from the left, in front and behind, and each time he would toss his

head, snort and shout to me. Drenched to the skin, he seemed to have shrunk in size and his eyes were large with fear, or perhaps with pain. With pain, I suppose.

"‘Hark!’ he would cry. ‘Do you hear me?’

"Sometimes I would answer:

"‘I hear you!’

"‘Remember, all good comes from man.’

"‘I shall remember!’ I would reply.

"Never had he spoken thus to me on land. He had always been gay and kind but I had felt that he regarded me with amusement and distrust and that I was still a child to him. Sometimes this offended me, for youth is easily wounded.

"His shouts allayed my fear, perhaps that is why I remember everything so vividly."

The old fisherman fell silent, his eyes fixed on the foamy sea. Then he smiled and went on with a wink:

"I have observed people for many years, signor, and I know that remembering is the same as understanding, and the more you understand the more good you see, that's the truth, believe me!

"There, I can remember his dear face, all wet and the big staring eyes looking at me gravely and lovingly and in such a way that I knew then I was not destined to die that day. I was afraid, but I knew I would not perish.

"Finally, of course, we capsized. There we were both in the seething water, with the foam blinding us, the waves hurling our bodies about, clashing them against the keel of the boat. We had lashed to the thwarts everything that could be tied, in our hands we held the ropes, we would not be cast away from our barque so long as we had the strength to hold on, but it was hard to keep our heads above water. Several times he and I were thrown against the keel and washed off again. The worst of it is that your head swims, you are deafened and blinded, your ears fill with water, and you swallow great quantities of it.

"This lasted for a long time, about seven hours, until

the wind suddenly turned, blowing strongly shoreward, and we were carried swiftly toward the land.

"Hold on!" I cried joyfully.

"Father shouted something back but I heard only one word:

"...rocks!"

"He was thinking of the rocks on the shore, but they were still far off and I did not heed him. But he knew better than I, we were borne along, numb and helpless, amid the mountains of water, clinging like snails to our boat which knocked us about unmercifully. This went on for a long while but at last the dark crags of the coast came into view. After that everything happened very swiftly. Swaying, they moved toward us, bending over the water, ready to crash down upon us. The white waves hurled our bodies forward once, twice, our boat crunched like a nut under the heel of a boot, I was torn loose, saw the black ribs of the rocks as sharp as knives looming before me, saw my father's head high above mine, then lifted above those devil's claws. He was picked up an hour or two later with his back broken and his skull smashed. The wound in his head was so big that part of the brain had been washed out of it, and I can remember the grey chunks of matter in the wound with red veins running through it like marble or foam mixed with blood. His body was terribly mutilated, but his face was clear and calm and his eyes tightly closed.

"I? Yes, I was also badly battered up, I was unconscious when they pulled me ashore. We had been carried away to the mainland beyond Amalfi, a long way from home, but, of course, the folk there are also fishermen and such things do not surprise them but make them kind and gentle. Men who lead a dangerous life are always kind!

"I'm afraid I haven't been able to describe the feeling that last talk with my father gave me, the feeling I have been carrying in my heart for fifty-one years now. You need special words for that, not words but music perhaps.

But we fishermen are as simple as the fish, we cannot talk as well as we would like! We feel and know so much more than we can express.

"The important thing is that he, my father, in his hour of death, knowing that he could not escape it, was not afraid, he did not forget about me, his son, and he found the strength and the time to pass on to me everything he thought I should know. I have lived for sixty-seven years and I can say that all that he told me then is the truth!"

The old man took off his knitted cap that had once been red and was now brown, pulled out his pipe and bending his naked, bronzed skull, said emphatically:

"Yes, it is all true, dear signor! Men are as you wish to see them; look at them in kindness and you will do good both to them and to yourself. They will become better, and you too. It is simple, isn't it?"

The wind rose steadily, the waves mounted higher, grew sharper and whiter; flocks of birds scurried farther and farther into the distance, and the two boats with the three rows of sails had already disappeared behind the blue rim of the horizon.

The steep shores of the island were white with foam the dark-blue water was agitated, and the cicadas kept up their tireless, passionate din.

The sirocco was blowing that day, a moist wind from Africa, an evil wind! It irritates the nerves and puts men in an ill humour. That is why the two cabbies, Giuseppe Cirotta and Luigi Meta, quarrelled. The quarrel broke out suddenly, no one knew who started it, but people saw Luigi hurl himself at Giuseppe and try to seize him by the throat, and Giuseppe draw in his head to hide his thick red neck and put up a pair of black heavy fists.

They were pulled apart at once.

"What is the matter?" people asked.

Luigi, his face black with rage, shouted: "Let that ox repeat what he said of my wife!"

Giuseppe tried to get away, he hid his little eyes in the folds of a contemptuous grimace and shaking his round black head refused to repeat the insult. Whereupon Luigi said in a loud voice:

"He says that he has known the sweetness of my wife's embraces!"

"Oho!" murmured the onlookers. "That is no joke, that is a serious matter. Calm yourself, Luigi! You are a stranger here, but your wife is one of us, we know her from childhood, and if you have been wronged, the shadow of her offence falls on all of us. Let us be just!"

Then they turned on Giuseppe.

"Did you say that?"

"Yes, I did," he confessed.

"Is it true?"

"Has anyone ever known me to lie?"

Giuseppe was a decent man, a good husband and father. This was an ugly business. The people were silent and dismayed. Luigi went home and said to his wife Concetta:

"I am leaving you. I want to have nothing more to do with you unless you can prove that this scoundrel's accusation is false."

She wept, of course, but tears do not prove anything. Luigi thrust her away from him, and left her with an infant in arms, and no money or bread.

Then the women intervened, first of all Caterina, the vegetable vendor, a clever fox of a wench, with a body like an old sack stuffed with flesh and bones and badly crumpled in spots.

"Signori," said Caterina, "you have heard it said that this affair touches the honour of all of us. This is not a matter of a little fun on a moonlight night. The fate of two mothers is at stake. Right? I shall take Concetta to my house and she shall live with me until we discover the truth."

And so it was. After a while Caterina and that old hag Lucia, whose voice can be heard three miles away, got to work on poor Giuseppe. They called him in and commenced to poke their fingers into his soul as if it were some old rag.

"Now then, man, tell us, how many times did you possess Concetta?"

The fat Giuseppe puffed out his cheeks, pondered a while and said:

"Once."

"You could say that without stopping to think," remarked Lucia, as if to herself.

"Did it happen in the evening, at night or in the morning?" Caterina persisted, for all the world like a magistrate.

Giuseppe chose the evening without hesitation.

"Was it still light?"

"Yes," the simpleton replied.

"So! Then you could see her body?"

"Certainly!"

"Very well then, describe it to us."

Now he saw whither the questions were leading and he opened his mouth like a sparrow that has choked on a grain of barley, started to mutter and grew so angry that his huge ears turned purple.

"What do you want me to say?" he growled. "Do you think I examined her like a doctor?"

"Aha, so you eat the fruits without admiring them?" said Lucia. "But perhaps you noticed one particular thing about Concetta?" she urged him with an evil wink.

"It all happened so quickly," said Giuseppe, "that I swear I didn't notice anything."

"Then that proves you never possessed her!" cried Caterina. She is a kind-hearted old woman but she can be very stern when she pleases. In a word, they led him into such a maze of contradictions that the fellow finally hung his foolish head and confessed: "There wasn't anything at all. I made it up out of spite."

The old women were not surprised.

"We knew it," they declared and sending him away, they left the affair to the judgement of the menfolk.

The next day our workingmen's association met. Giuseppe stood before them charged with libelling a woman, and old Giacomo Fasca, the blacksmith, made a fine speech:

"Citizens, comrades, good men! If we expect to be treated with justice ourselves, we must be just toward one another. Let all men know that we appreciate the value of what we demand and that justice is not an empty word for us as it is for our masters. Here is a man who has libelled a woman, insulted a comrade, broken up one family and brought misery to another, making his own wife suffer from jealousy and shame. We must be severe with him. What shall we do with him?"

Sixty-seven tongues pronounced in unison:

"Expel him from our community!"

But fifteen held that this was too harsh a measure, and a dispute arose. They shouted themselves hoarse—after all the fate of a human being was being decided, and not

of one human being, for after all he was married, he had three children—what crime had his wife and children committed? He had a house, a vineyard, a pair of horses, four donkeys for foreigners—all this he had earned by his own labour, and he had laboured much. Poor Giuseppe sat alone in the corner, as black as the devil, hunched up on his chair, his head bent, kneading his hat in his hands. He had already torn off the ribbon and was now working on the brim, and his fingers danced like the fingers of a fiddler. And when they asked him if he had anything to say, he got to his feet with difficulty and said:

"I ask for clemency! None of us is sinless. It would not be fair to drive me away from the land where I have lived for more than thirty years, the land on which my forefathers toiled!"

The women were also opposed to banishment, and finally Fasca suggested this course:

"I believe, friends, that he will be well punished if we compel him to support Luigi's wife and child. Let him pay her half of what Luigi earned!"

There was a good deal more argument, but finally they chose this way out and Giuseppe Cirotta felt that he had got off easily. Indeed everyone was satisfied, we had settled the affair among ourselves, without recourse to court or dagger. We do not like, signor, when our affairs are described in the language of the newspapers where the words you can understand are as rare as teeth in the mouth of an old man. Nor do we like when judges, who are strangers to us and understand very little of life, speak of us as though we were savages and they the Lord's angels who have never tasted wine and fish and never touched a woman. We are simple people and we look at life simply.

So it was decided: Giuseppe Cirotta was to provide for Luigi's wife and their child. But the matter did not end there. When Luigi learned that Cirotta had lied and that his signora was innocent, and when he was told of our sentence, he wrote and invited her to join him.

"Come to me and we will be happy together again," he wrote. "Do not take a single centesimo from that man, and if you have already taken something, throw it back in his face! I have not wronged you, how could I know that that man could lie in such a thing as love?"

To Cirotta he wrote another letter:

"I have three brothers and all four of us have vowed to cut your throat like a ram's if ever you leave the island and turn up in Sorrento, Castellanare, Torre or anywhere else. As soon as we find out that you have left we shall kill you, remember! This is as true as that the men of your community are good honest men. My signora does not need your help, even my pig would refuse your bread. Live, but do not dare to leave the island until I say you may."

They say Giuseppe took that letter to our magistrate to find out whether Luigi could not be sent to prison for threatening his life. And the judge is believed to have said:

"Yes, we can send him to prison but then his brothers would be sure to kill you. They would come here and murder you. I advise you to wait. That will be better. Anger is not like love, it does not last very long...."

The judge might very well have said that. He is a good, kind man and he writes quite good verse too, but I do not believe Cirotta went to him with that letter. No, Cirotta is a decent fellow at heart and he would never be guilty of another piece of tactlessness. After all, he would be laughed to scorn if ever his comrades found out.

We are simple working folk, signor, we have our own way of life, our own ideas and opinions. We have the right to live as we please, as we think best.

Socialists? O, my friend, every working man is born a Socialist, I believe, and though we do not read books we have a good nose for the truth—for truth always smells of working man's sweat!

Beside the door of the white cantina hidden among the thick shrubbery of an old vineyard two men, Vincenzo, the house-painter, and Giovanni, the turner, are sitting over a jug of wine. Their table stands in the shade of a canopy of grape vines intertwined with convolvulus and tiny Chinese roses. The painter is a small, dark, bony man. His black eyes are lit up by the gentle smile of the dreamer, and that smile gives his face a naïve, childlike expression in spite of the dark blue of his close-shaven upperlip and cheeks. He has a small, sweet, girlish mouth and long hands. His restless fingers are playing with a golden blossom. He presses it to his full lips and closes his eyes.

"It is possible," he says softly. "I do not know." He shakes his long, narrow head and his reddish curls fall on to his high forehead.

"Yes, yes! The farther north you go, the tougher the people!" insists Giovanni. He is a young man with a large head, broad shoulders and a shock of black curly hair. His face is copper-coloured, his sunburned nose has a scaly white layer of peeling skin, his eyes are the large, gentle eyes of an ox. The thumb of his left hand is missing. His speech is as slow as the movements of his hands, which are stained deep with machine oil and iron dust. Squeezing his wine glass in his dark fingers with the broken nails, he continues in his deep bass:

"Milan, Turin—these are splendid workshops where new men are being moulded, where a new mentality is arising! Wait, before very long the world will grow honest and wise!"

"Yes," said the little painter, and lifting his glass to catch the sunbeam, he began to sing:

*Oh, how warm is the earth in the morn of our days,
But alas, we grow old and the gentle warmth fades.*

"The farther north you go, I say, the better the work. The French are not as lazy as we are, then come the Germans, and finally, the Russians. There is a people for you!"

"Yes!"

"Downtrodden and oppressed, at the risk of losing their freedom and their lives, they have done great things. It is thanks to them that the whole East has sprung to life! ³"

"A land of heroes!" said the painter, bending his head. "I wish I lived there...."

"You!" exclaimed the turner, slapping his knee with the side of his hand. "You would be a lump of ice in a week!"

Both laughed heartily.

Flowers of blue and gold bloomed around them, sunbeams quivered in the air, the Almandine wine sparkled in the glass jug, and from the distance came the whispering sound of the sea.

"Now listen, my good Vincenzo," said the turner with a broad smile, "and I shall tell you how I became a Socialist. You must put it in verse. Do you know the story?"

"No," said the painter, pouring the wine into the glass and smiling at the red stream. "You have never told me. That skin of yours sits so well on your bones, that I thought you were born in it!"

"I was born as naked and foolish as you and all other men. In my youth I dreamed of marrying a rich woman. When I was in the army I worked hard to become an officer. I was twenty-three before I began to feel that all is not well in this world and that it was a shame to go on being a fool."

The painter leaned his elbows on the table, raised his head and gazed up at the hill and the great pines waving their branches at the very top.

"My unit was sent to Bologna. The peasants there were making trouble, some were demanding lower rents, others wanted higher pay. I thought both sides were in the wrong. To reduce land rents and raise wages was absurd, in my opinion. Why, the landlords would be ruined! To a town dweller like myself it all seemed stupid and senseless. Moreover I was very angry, what with the heat, the constant moving from place to place, and the sentry duty at night—because those fellows were smashing the landlords' machines, burning grain and wrecking everything that did not belong to them."

He drank his wine in tiny sips, and, warming to his subject, he went on:

"They went about the fields in dense droves like sheep, but sullen and silent. They meant business. We dispersed them, showing our bayonets, sometimes pushing them with our rifle butts. But they did not take fright, they scattered slowly and gathered again. It got to be as boring as High Mass, and it dragged on from day to day like the fever. Luoto, our corporal, a nice chap from Abruzzi and a peasant himself, felt very badly about the whole thing. He grew thin and haggard and looked very miserable.

"'It's bad, my children!'" he would say. 'It looks as if we shall have to use our rifles, damn it!'

"His croaking upset us even more, and to make matters worse, there were those pigheaded peasants poking their heads around every corner, every hill and every tree, glaring at us with hatred in their eyes. Naturally they didn't feel any too friendly toward us."

"Drink!" said little Vincenzo, pushing a full glass toward his friend.

"Thanks, and here's to staunch men!" cried the turner. He tossed off his drink, wiped his moustache with his hand and continued:

"One day I was standing on a knoll near an olive grove guarding the trees—because the peasants wrecked them whenever they had a chance. Two peasants, an old man and a youth, were digging a ditch at the bottom of the hill. It was very hot, the sun burnt like fire—one of those days when a man wishes he were a fish. I watched the two at work, feeling bored and angry. At midday they stopped working and got out some bread and cheese and a jug of wine. The devil take you, I thought to myself. Suddenly the old man, who had not once glanced in my direction until then, said something to the lad. The lad shook his head and the old man shouted:

"'Go, I tell you!' in a stern voice.

"The young man came over to me with the jug, and said none too graciously: 'My father thinks you are thirsty and offers you some wine!'

"It was awkward, but pleasant. I declined the offer, nodded to the old man and thanked him, but he said, looking up at the sky:

"'Drink, signor, drink! We are offering it to the man and not the soldier. We do not expect our wine to make the soldier kinder.'

"'You needn't bite, damn you!' I said to myself, and took a swallow of wine and thanked them, and they began to eat down there. Before long Hugo—he was from Salerno—came to relieve me, and I told him that those two peasants were all right. That evening as I was standing by the door of the shed where the machines were kept, some tiles fell off the roof, one hit my head, but not hard, and another one struck my left shoulder so violently that my arm went numb."

The turner began to laugh, opening his mouth wide and screwing up his eyes.

"In those days and in that place," he said, through his laughter, "tiles, stones and sticks lived a life of their own, and the violence of inanimate objects earned us some nice bumps on our heads. A soldier would be going somewhere or standing still and suddenly a stick would spring

up from the ground and strike him, or a stone would drop down from the skies. It made us furious, of course."

A sad look came into the eyes of the little house-painter, his face grew pale and he said softly:

"It is always painful to hear of such things...."

"It can't be helped. People learn very slowly. But to get on with my story. I called for help and I was carried into a house. One of our fellows was lying there. His face had been cut open with a stone and when I asked him how it had happened he said, with a wry smile:

"'An old woman, my comrade, an old grey-haired witch struck me and then invited me to kill her!'

"'Was she arrested?'" I asked him.

"'No. I said I had fallen and hurt myself. The commander did not believe me, of course. I could tell by the way he looked at me. But how could I admit that an old woman had injured me? The devil take it! Theirs is a hard life, and I can understand why they hate us.'"

"'So that's it,' I thought. Presently a doctor arrived and two ladies with him. One was a very beautiful lady with fair hair, a Venetian I believe, the other I don't remember. They examined my shoulder—it was a trifle of course—applied a compress and went away."

The turner frowned, fell silent and rubbed his hands. His friend refilled the glasses, holding the wine jug high as he poured so that the vivid red stream of wine quivered in the air.

"My comrade and I were sitting by the window," the turner went on gloomily. "We sat in the shade out of the sun and we heard the sweet voice of that fair lady as she and her friend strolled in the garden with the doctor. They spoke French, which I understand quite well.

"'Did you notice his eyes?' I heard her say. 'He is a peasant too, of course, and perhaps when he discards his uniform he will also be a Socialist like all the others. To think that men with eyes like that want to conquer the

whole world, to change everything, to drive us all out and destroy us. And all in the name of some blind, stupid justice!

"'Foolish lads,' said the doctor, 'half children, half animals.'

"'Animals—yes! But what is there childlike about them?'

"'Oh, those dreams of universal equality....'

"'Think of it,' she cried, 'I, the equal of that fellow with the ox eyes, and that other with the face of a bird, all of us, you and I and she, equals of them, these people of common blood! Men who can be hired to kill others of their own kind, animals like themselves....'

"She spoke a great deal, and with much heat and I listened and thought to myself: 'Ah, signora!' I had seen her before, and you know how passionately a soldier can dream of a woman. Naturally I had imagined her to be kind and warm-hearted, and clever too, for in those days I believed that all people of the upper classes must be remarkably clever.

"I asked my comrade whether he understood what they were saying. But he knew no French. And when I told him what the blond lady had said, he grew very angry. He sprang up and began pacing the room, his eyes flashing, or rather his eye, for the other was bandaged up.

"'So that is how it is!' he fumed. 'She uses me but does not consider me a human being! For her sake I suffer the humiliation of soldiery, and she dares to trample on my self-esteem. She denies me the right to human dignity. For the sake of protecting her property I risk losing my soul....'

"He was not a stupid fellow and he felt deeply insulted. I too. The next day we talked openly about that lady, without mincing words. Luoto only muttered under his breath and advised us to take care.

"'Do not forget, my children, that you are soldiers and there is such a thing as discipline!'

"We had not forgotten. But from that day on many of us, indeed nearly all of us, to say the truth, became deaf and blind, and those peasants were not slow to take advantage of our sudden infirmities. They won their fight. They began to be very friendly toward us. That blond lady might have learned much from them. For instance, they would have taught her how honest men should be treated. When at last we were withdrawn from that place where we had come with the intention of spilling blood, many of us received gifts of flowers. As we marched down the village street they pelted us with flowers, my friend, and not stones and tiles! I believe we had earned those flowers. We could forget the unfriendly welcome we had received with such a splendid send-off!"

He laughed, and then said: "There, Vincenzo, make a poem of that..."

The painter, with a thoughtful smile, replied:

"Yes, it is fit material for a poem! I believe I can do it. When a man passes the age of twenty-five love poems no longer come easily."

He threw aside the flower, now withered, plucked another and glancing over his shoulder, went on in a low voice:

"When a man has traversed the path from his mother's breast to the breast of his beloved, he must strive on for another kind of happiness."

His companion, shaking the wine in his glass, said nothing. The sea murmured softly down below and the scent of the flowers floated in the warm air.

"It is the sun that makes us too lazy, too soft," muttered the turner.

"I cannot write good love verse any more, I am very displeased with myself," said Vincenzo, knitting his delicate brows.

"Have you thought of something?"

The painter did not reply at once.

"Yes," he said at last. "It came to me yesterday, on the roof of the Como Hotel."

And he began to recite in a low, lilting voice:

*The shore is deserted, the late autumn sun
Bids a tender farewell to the ancient grey rocks,
The hungry waves hurl themselves on the dark boulders*

*Washing the bright sun into the cold blue sea.
And the copper-hued leaves, torn loose by the autumn winds,*

*Gleam in the foam of the tide, like the bright corpses of birds,
The sad pale sky looks down on the angry sea.
Only the sun laughs as slowly it sinks to rest.*

There was a long pause; the painter bowed his head looking down at the ground. The burly turner smiled.

“One can write well of many things, but best of all about man, the song of good men!”

A golden shower of sunlight streams through the dark-green curtain of vines on to the hotel terrace—threads of gold strung in the air. Shadows of weird design lie on the grey flagged floor and the white tablecloths, and it seems that if you looked at them long enough you might learn to read them as one would read a poem. Clusters of grapes glow in the sunshine like pearls or that strange, lustreless stone, the olivine, and in the carafe of water on the table there are blue diamonds.

A tiny lace handkerchief lies on the floor between the tables. A lady dropped it, of course, and doubtless she was divinely beautiful. How could it be otherwise, how could one think otherwise on this serene day full of languorous heat, a day when everything commonplace and dull vanishes before the sun's glory as if hiding in shame.

All is still; the only sounds are the twittering of the birds in the garden, the humming of the bees over the flowers and the faint sigh of a song coming from the vineyards somewhere in the hills. There are two singers—a man and a woman, and each verse is separated from the next by a minute of silence, which lends a peculiar prayer-like quality to the song.

And now a lady appears, slowly ascending the broad marble staircase leading from the garden. An old lady, very tall, with a dark, stern face, knitted brows and thin lips obstinately compressed as if she had just said: "No!" Over her bony shoulders she wears a long, wide cape-like mantle of gold-tinted silk edged with lace, a black lace scarf covers her small grey head, in one hand she carries a red parasol with a long handle, and in the other, a black velvet handbag sewn with silver thread. She marches

through the gossamer web of sunbeams with the firm tread of a soldier, and her parasol taps loudly on the flagstones of the terrace. In profile her face is even more austere: the nose is hooked, the chin with a large grey wart on it is sharp, the bulging forehead overhangs dark sockets in which the eyes are hidden among a fine network of wrinkles, set so deeply that the old woman seems to be blind.

After her, waddling from side to side like a duck, appears a squat figure of a hunchback with a soft grey hat on his large drooping head. His hands are hidden in the pockets of his waistcoat, and this makes him look even wider and more angular than he is. He wears a white suit and white boots with soft soles. His mouth is half-open revealing yellow, uneven teeth, sparse bristly moustache sticks out unpleasantly on his upper lip, he breathes quickly and painfully, his nose quivers but his moustache does not move. His short legs twist horribly as he walks, and his huge eyes stare dully down at the ground. His small body is bedecked with a host of large objects: he wears a large gold cameo ring on the fourth finger of his left hand, a large golden medallion with two rubies is suspended from the end of the black ribbon that serves as a watch chain, and in his blue tie is an oversized opal, the unlucky stone.

Still another figure emerges on the terrace, also an old woman, small and round with a red kindly face and lively eyes, a jolly, garrulous body no doubt.

They cross the terrace to the door of the hotel like figures from a painting by Hogarth: unsightly, sad, comical and so alien to everything under this radiant sun that the world seems to turn dim and pale at the sight of them.

They are Dutch, a brother and sister, children of a diamond merchant and banker, and theirs is a curious history, if one is to believe the mocking tale that is told of them.

As a child, the hunchback had been quiet, shy and

thoughtful, caring nothing for toys or games. No one paid much attention to this except his sister; his father and mother believed that such behaviour was natural for an unfortunate creature, but the little girl, who was four years his senior, was disturbed by her brother's strange ways.

She spent nearly all her time with him, trying to amuse him, to make him laugh. She gave him toys to play with and he piled them up one atop the other, pyramid fashion. Rarely did she see him force a smile; usually he regarded her with the same dull, blank expression in his large eyes with which he stared at everything about him. That look irritated her.

"Don't you dare to look at me like that, you'll grow up to be an imbecile!" she would cry, stamping her feet. She would pinch him and slap him and he would whimper and throw up his long thin arms to protect his head, but he never ran away from her and never complained to anyone.

Later on, when she thought that he would be able to understand what was perfectly clear to her, she tried to reason with him:

"If you are deformed you must be clever otherwise we shall all be ashamed of you—papa, mama and everybody! Even the servants will be ashamed to serve in a rich house that has a little freak in it. In a rich house everything must be either beautiful or clever, understand?"

"Yes," he replied gravely, tilting his large head to one side and turning his dark, lifeless stare on her.

The father and mother were delighted by the little girl's attitude to her brother, they praised her kind heart in his presence, and gradually she became the acknowledged companion of the little hunchback. She taught him to use his toys, helped him with his lessons and read him stories about princes and fairies.

But he continued to pile up his toys into tall heaps as though he strove to reach up to something, and took little interest in his lessons. Only the wondrous deeds of

fairy-tale characters brought a faint smile to his lips, and one day he asked his sister:

"Are princes ever hunchbacked?"

"No."

"And knights?"

"Of course not!"

The boy sighed wearily, and his sister, laying her hand on his coarse hair, said:

"But wise magicians are always hunchbacks."

"Then I shall be a magician," he said meekly, and added after a thoughtful pause:

"Fairies are always beautiful, aren't they?"

"Always."

"Like you?"

"Perhaps! But even more beautiful I think," she said honestly.

When he was eight years old his sister noticed that whenever they walked or drove past building sites the boy's face would light up with wonder and he would watch the men working with rapt attention, and then turn to her with a questioning look in his dull eyes.

"Does that interest you?" she asked him.

"Yes," he replied.

"Why?"

"I do not know."

But one day he explained: "Such little men and such little bricks, and what great houses they make. Is that how the whole city was made?"

"Of course."

"Our house too?"

"Certainly."

Glancing at him, she said firmly: "You are going to be a famous architect when you grow up!"

They bought him a great quantity of wooden blocks, and from that time a fierce passion for building flared up in him. For days on end he would sit on the floor of his room silently building tall towers, and when they tumbled down with a crash he built them up again. This came to

be such a necessity for him that even at mealtime he would try to build something out of knives, forks and napkin rings. His eyes grew deeper and more concentrated, his hands came to life and were constantly in motion, and his fingers explored every object within his reach.

Now, during his walks through the city, he would have liked to stand for hours watching houses being built, seeing them rise slowly from the ground toward the sky. With quivering nostrils he greedily inhaled the brick dust and the smell of the boiling lime, his eyes grew sleepy and a film of dreamy thoughtfulness came over them, and when he was told that it was not nice to stand and stare he seemed not to hear.

"Come!" his sister urged, pulling him by the hand.

He would bend his head and move on, turning back again and again.

"You are going to be an architect, aren't you?" his sister asked him again and again.

"Yes."

One day, as they were sitting in the drawing-room after dinner waiting for coffee, the father observed that it was time the boy stopped playing with toys and began to study in real earnest, but his sister spoke up in the tone of one whose opinion needs be reckoned with:

"I trust, Papa, that you are not thinking of sending him to some school?"

The father, a large, clean-shaven man with a vast amount of sparkling jewelry distributed about his person, lit a cigar.

"And why not, pray?"

"You know very well why."

Since they were speaking of him, the hunchback slipped out of the room, and as he went he heard his sister say:

"But everyone will make fun of him!"

"Ah yes, of course!" said the mother in a voice as raw as the autumn wind.

"People like him must be hidden away!" the sister said passionately.

"Ah yes, there is nothing to be proud of," said the mother. "What a clever little head it is to be sure!"

"I daresay you are right," the father agreed.

"But, how clever she is!"

The hunchback turned in the doorway and said:

"I am not stupid either, you know...."

"That remains to be seen," said the father, and the mother observed: "No one thinks you are...."

"You shall study at home," declared the sister, making him sit down beside her. "You shall learn everything an architect needs to know. Will you like that?"

"Yes. You will see."

"What shall I see?"

"What I like."

She was only slightly taller than he, about half a head, but to him she seemed to tower high above everyone else, including his mother and father. She was fifteen at that time. He resembled a crab, while she—slim, tall and strong—seemed to him like a lovely fairy who held the entire house and himself under her spell.

And now the hunchback began to be visited regularly by cold, polite people who tried to teach him something, explaining patiently and asking him questions, but he admitted unabashed that he understood nothing of what his teachers said, and stared coldly through them thinking his own thoughts. He spoke little, but sometimes he asked strange questions:

"What happens to people who do not want to do anything?"

His teacher, a man with perfect manners, dressed in a black coat buttoned up to the throat and resembling at once a priest and a soldier, replied:

"The worst things imaginable happen to such people! For instance, many of them become Socialists."

"Thank you," said the hunchback; he treated his

teacher with the dry courtesy of an adult. "And what is a Socialist?"

"At best he is a dreamer and an idler, in general, a mental cripple with no conception of God, property or country."

His teachers always replied briefly and their answers embedded themselves in his memory like cobble-stones in the pavement.

"Can an old woman be a mental cripple as well?"

"Of course...."

"And a young girl too?"

"Yes. It is something one is born with...."

His teachers said of him: "He has very little ability for mathematics, but shows great interest in questions of morality."

"You talk too much," his sister told him when she learned of his conversations with his teachers.

"They talk more than I do."

"You don't pray to God enough."

"He won't cure my hump...."

"Oh, so that is what you are thinking of now?" she exclaimed in amazement. "I forgive you this time," she declared, "but you must banish such thoughts from your mind for ever, you hear?"

"Yes."

By this time she was wearing long dresses, and he had turned thirteen.

From that day the hunchback began to give his sister much trouble. She rarely entered his work room without some board, plank or tool falling on her shoulder, her head or her fingers. The hunchback always shouted a warning to her: "Look out!" But he was always a moment late and she was often hurt.

Once, limping with pain, she rushed over to him pale with anger and shouted: "You are doing this on purpose, monster!" and she struck him on the face.

His legs were weak and he fell, and sitting there on the floor he said softly without tears or resentment: "How can

you think that? You love me, do you not? You do love me?"

She ran away, groaning with pain. Later she came back to apologize.

"You see," she explained, "this never happened before...."

"I didn't have all this before," he replied calmly with a sweeping gesture which included the entire room with boards stacked in the corners, wood piled high on the carpenter's bench and a lathe by the wall, all in great confusion.

"Why have you dragged all this rubbish in here?" she asked him, glancing around her with disgust and suspicion.

"You will see!"

He had already begun to build. He had made a rabbit hutch and a kennel for the dog, and was now working on a new kind of rat-trap. His sister eagerly followed the progress of his work and at mealtimes she boasted proudly of his success to their mother and father. The father nodded with approval.

"Everything begins with the little things, that is how it is always!" he said.

And the mother, embracing her daughter, said to her son: "Do you realize how much you owe her?"

"Yes," replied the hunchback.

When the rat-trap was finished he called his sister and showed her the clumsy contraption.

"This is no toy, you know," he said. "It can be patented! See how simple it is and how powerful. Put your finger here."

The girl did, something snapped. She screamed and the hunchback jumped up and down beside her muttering: "Oh, oh, it's the wrong one, the wrong one...."

The mother came running, and then the servants. They took the trap apart and released the girl's squashed blue finger and carried her away in a dead faint.

That evening his sister summoned him and asked: "You did that on purpose. You hate me. Why?"

Shaking his hump, he replied in a low, calm voice:

"You touched it with the wrong hand, that's all."

"That's a lie!"

"But ... but why should I try to disfigure your hand? And, it wasn't even the hand you struck me with...."

"Take care, cripple, you cannot outwit me!"

"I know that," he agreed.

His angular face was as calm as usual; his eyes were thoughtful, it was impossible to believe that he was angry or that he could be lying.

After that she did not go to his rooms quite so often. Her friends came to see her, vivacious young girls in bright-coloured gowns, who flitted lightly through the large, rather chill and austere rooms, and the pictures, statues, flowers and gilt ornaments all seemed to grow warmer in their presence. Sometimes his sister brought them to his room—they primly gave him their fingers with the pink nails, touching his hand cautiously as if they feared to break it. They talked to him very gently and they stared with interest not unmingled with curiosity at the sight of the hunchback among his tools, drawings, chunks of wood and shavings. He knew that these girls called him "the inventor", his sister had seen to that, and that they all expected him to do something in the future that would bring fame to his father's name. His sister always spoke of this with such assurance.

"He is ugly, of course, but he is very clever," she often said.

She was nineteen now, and already had a suitor when her father and mother lost their lives during a trip on a pleasure yacht which was rammed and sunk by the drunken helmsman of an American freighter. She, too, was to have gone on that yacht but she had remained home with a toothache.

When the news of her parents' death reached her she

forgot her toothache and rushed up and down the room, weeping and wringing her hands:

"No, no, it cannot be, it cannot be!"

The hunchback, standing by the door with the curtain wrapped about him, regarded her with a fixed stare and, shaking his hump, he said:

"Father was so round and so empty I cannot understand how he could possibly drown...."

"Keep quiet, you do not love anyone!" cried his sister.

"I simply do not know how to say sweet words," he said.

The father's body was never found, but the mother had died before she reached the water and her body was recovered. She lay in her coffin just as she had been in life—as dry and brittle as the dead branch of an old tree.

"You and I are all alone now," the sister said sorrowfully to her brother after the mother's funeral, regarding him with her cold grey eyes. "It will be hard for us. We do not know anything and we may lose much. What a pity I cannot get married at once!"

"Oh!" exclaimed the hunchback.

"What do you mean by that?"

He thought for a moment, then said: "We are alone."

"You say that as if it pleased you!"

"Nothing pleases me."

"That, too, is a great pity. You are so unlike a living person!"

In the evenings her fiancé would come to see her—a lively little man, with fair hair, round sunburned face and a bushy moustache. He laughed incessantly all evening long and no doubt could laugh all day as well. They were already betrothed and a house was being built for them in one of the best streets in the city. The hunchback had never been at that building site and did not like to hear it spoken of. His sister's fiancé would slap him on the shoulder with his small pudgy ringed hand and, with a smile that showed a mouth full of small teeth, would say

"You ought to come and have a look at it, eh? What do you think?"

For a long time the hunchback refused on diverse pretexts, but finally he gave in and went with his sister and her fiancé to the site. The two men climbed the scaffolding, but when they reached the top they fell. The fiancé fell straight into a vat of lime, but the brother's clothes caught on a protruding board and he was suspended in mid-air until the bricklayers took him down. He only dislocated his leg and arm, and bruised his face, but the fiancé had a broken spine and his side was torn open.

The sister had convulsions. She lay on the ground tearing at the earth with her nails, raising a cloud of white dust. She wept for a long time, more than a month, and after that she grew thin and gaunt like her mother and her voice acquired the same cold, raw sound.

"You are my misfortune!" she would say.

The hunchback would stare down at the ground in silence. His sister took to wearing black, her brows were always knit, and on meeting her brother she clenched her teeth so violently that her cheek-bones stood out sharply. He did his best to avoid her and busied himself, alone and silent, with his drawings. They lived thus until he came of age and from that day on there was open war between them. Their entire lives were dedicated to this struggle which bound them together by the firm bonds of mutual insults and humiliations.

On the day he came of age he said to her in a tone of authority:

"There are no wise magicians or good fairies, there are only people. Some are bad, others are stupid, and all that is said about kindness is a fairy tale! But I want that fairy tale to come true. Do you remember what you said: in a rich house everyone must be either beautiful or clever? In a rich city, too, everything must be beautiful. I am buying a piece of land outside of town and I shall build a house there for myself and for other cripples like

me. I shall take them away from this town where it is too painful for them to live and where they offend the sensibilities of people like you...."

"No," she said. "You will not do this! It is an insane idea!"

"It is your own idea."

They argued, coldly and rationally, as people do who hate each other and have no need to hide their hatred.

"It is decided," he said.

"Not by me," she answered.

He lifted his hump and went out, and soon afterward his sister learned that he had bought the land, and that the foundation was already being dug and carts were hauling up brick, stone, iron and wood.

"You still consider yourself a small boy?" she demanded. "Do you think this is a game?"

He did not reply.

Once a week his sister—gaunt, straight-backed and proud—went out of town in a small carriage drawn by a white horse which she drove herself, and driving slowly past the building site, coldly watched the meaty, red bricks being entwined with the tendons of the iron beams, and the yellow wood laid like nerve threads in the heavy mass. From the distance she saw her brother crawling crablike over the scaffolding, with his cane in his hand, a crumpled hat on his head, looking as dusty and grey as a spider. Later on, at home, she stared at his animated face and his dark eyes which had become softer and clearer than before.

"I tell you," he said, "this is a splendid-idea of mine. It is good for us and for you too! It is a fine thing to build, and it seems to me that I shall soon be able to consider myself a happy man."

"Happy?" she echoed, measuring his deformed body with an enigmatical glance.

"Yes! Do you know, men who work are entirely different from us, they inspire one with strange thoughts. How fine it must be to be a bricklayer and to walk

through the streets of the town in which he has built dozens of houses! There are a good many Socialists among the workers, they are sober-minded people and I must say they have a strong sense of dignity. Sometimes it seems to me that we know very little about our own people...."

"This is queer talk," she remarked.

The hunchback grew livelier and more talkative from day to day.

"As a matter of fact everything is proceeding as you wished it," he told her. "I shall be the wise magician who will rid our city of cripples. You could become the good fairy if you wished. Why do you not answer?"

"We shall speak of this later," she said, playing with her gold watch chain.

One day he addressed her in a language quite new to her:

"Perhaps I have wronged you even more than you me...."

She was astonished.

"I—wronged you!"

"Wait! I swear I am not so much to blame as you think! I am not very steady on my feet, perhaps I did push him that time, but I did not intend to, believe me! I am far more to blame for trying to disfigure the hand you struck me with...."

"Let us drop the subject," she said.

"We ought to be kinder to each other," the hunchback muttered. "I believe that kindness is not a dream, it is possible...."

The huge building outside of town grew with astonishing speed, it spread over the rich earth and rose to the sky that was always grey, always threatening rain.

One day a group of officials came to the site, they examined the building, talked quietly among themselves and ordered the work to stop.

"This is your doing!" cried the hunchback. He threw himself on his sister in his rage and seized her by the

throat with his long, powerful hands. But people appeared from somewhere and tore him away from her.

"You see, gentlemen," she said to them, "he is truly abnormal and needs a guardian! This began shortly after the death of our father whom he passionately loved. You may ask the servants, they all know of his illness. They have kept quiet about it, for they are good people who prize the honour of the house where many of them have lived from childhood. I, too, have concealed our misfortune, after all one cannot be proud of the fact that one's brother is insane...."

When he heard this his face turned blue and his eyes started out of their sockets. He lost the power of speech, and silently he clawed the people who were holding him, as she went on:

"Take this ruinous venture, the building of this house which I intend to turn over to the city for a mental hospital to be named after my father...."

At this he uttered a scream and fainted. They carried him away.

His sister finished the building as speedily as he had begun it, and when the house was ready her brother was sent there as the first patient. He spent seven years there, quite enough time to become an imbecile. He developed melancholia. In the meantime his sister grew old, she lost all hope of ever being a mother and when at last she saw that her enemy was dead and would never revive she took him under her care.

And so they wander about the globe, moving from place to place like sightless birds, staring with dull joyless eyes at everything and seeing nothing anywhere but themselves.

The blue water seemed as thick as oil and the ship's propeller turned softly and almost noiselessly in it. The deck did not tremble underfoot, there was only the straining and quivering of the mast pointing up to the cloudless sky, and the soft humming of the rigging, taut as violin strings. But one was too accustomed to that tremor to notice it and the ship seemed to stand motionless, white and graceful as a swan on the slippery water. To be conscious of motion one had to look over the rail to where the green wave fell away from the white ship's sides, crumpled up and disappeared in broad soft folds, flashing a mercurial gleam and murmuring sleepily as it went.

It was early morning. The sea was not quite awake yet, the rosy hues of sunrise had not faded from the sky, but the wooded island of Gorgone was already passed, a grim lonely rock with a round grey tower on its summit and a huddle of small white houses on the shore of a sleepy bay. A few small boats had slipped swiftly by a short while back—sardine fishers from the island—leaving behind just a memory of the measured splash of long oars and the slender figures of the fishermen who rowed standing in their boats, their bodies swaying as if bowing to the sun.

A wide strip of greenish foam trailed behind the ship and sea-gulls wheeled lazily over it. Now and again a water snake skimmed noiselessly over the surface of the water and dived suddenly swift as an arrow.

The purple mountains of the Ligurian coast rose dimly out of the sea in the distance; another two or three hours and the ship would enter the crowded harbour of Genoa, the city of marble.

Higher and higher rose the sun promising a scorching day.

Two stewards came running on deck: one was a young Neapolitan, slim and nimble, with an elusive expression on his mobile face; the other, a man of middle age, with a grey moustache and black eyebrows and a silvery bristle on his round skull, an aquiline nose and grave intelligent eyes. Laughing and cracking jokes, they quickly laid the table for coffee and hurried off. Presently one by one the passengers emerged from their cabins: a fat melancholy man with a small head and a flabby face, pink cheeks and puffy red lips that drooped wearily; a man wearing grey sideburns, tall and well-groomed, with pale eyes and a small button nose on a flat sallow face. Behind him, stumbling on the brass-bound threshold, came a round ginger-haired man with a slight paunch and a military moustache, wearing an alpine costume and a hat with a green feather. All three went over to the ship's rail, and the fat one, screwing up his eyes, said with a pensive air:

"Quiet, isn't it?"

The man with the sideburns thrust his hands into his pockets and set his feet apart so that he resembled an open scissors. The ginger-haired man took out a gold watch, as big as the pendulum of a grandfather's clock, glanced at it, then at the sky and along the deck and began to whistle, swinging the watch and tapping his foot.

Presently two ladies appeared—one young and plump with a china-doll face and mild, milky-blue eyes and dark eyebrows that seemed to be painted on, one slightly higher than the other; the other an older woman, with a sharp nose and faded hair fashionably arranged, a large black birth-mark on her left cheek, two gold chains hanging from her neck, a lorgnette and a bunch of trinkets at the waist of her grey gown.

Coffee was served. Without a word, the young woman seated herself at the table and commenced to pour out the black liquid with a curiously rounded movement of her arms which were bare to the elbow. The men came over to the table and sat down. The fat one took a cup and said, with a sigh:

"It is going to be a hot day...."

"You are spilling your coffee on your lap," remarked the older woman.

Bending his head so that his jowls drooped and his chin pressed against his chest, he stood his cup on the table, brushed the drops of coffee from his grey trousers with his handkerchief and wiped his perspiring face.

"Yes," said the ginger-haired man, speaking suddenly in a loud voice and drawing up his short legs. "Yes, yes! If even the Leftists have begun to complain of hooliganism, that means...."

"Oh do stop chattering, Ivan!" the older woman interrupted him. "Is Lisa coming up?"

"She is not feeling well," replied the young woman in a deep voice.

"But the sea is perfectly calm...."

"Ach, when women are in such a delicate condition...."

The fat man smiled and closed his eyes languidly.

The man with the sideburns, who had been intently watching a school of dolphins gambolling on the smooth surface of the water, said:

"Dolphins are like pigs."

To which the ginger-haired man replied:

"In general there is much piggishness here."

The colourless lady raised her cup to her nose, smelt the coffee and made a grimace of distaste.

"Disgusting!"

"Yes, and as for the milk..." the fat man added, blinking in horror.

The lady with the china-doll face drawled: "Everything is filthy, filthy! And they all look so disgustingly like Jews...."

The ginger-haired man was pouring out a long string of words into the ear of the man with the sideburns, as if he were rattling off a well-learned lesson. The other listened with a sensuous curiosity, shaking his head slightly from side to side, his mouth a slit in his dry, flat face. Now and again he tried to interrupt, and began in a

curious, fuzzy voice: "Now, in my own gubernia...."

But he went no further, and again bent his head attentively to the moustache of the ginger-haired man.

The fat man heaved a deep sigh and said:

"How you do buzz, Ivan...."

"Well, where is my coffee?"

He moved his chair noisily to the table, while his companion remarked significantly:

"Ivan has ideas."

"You haven't had enough sleep," said the older woman, glancing at Sideburns through her lorgnette. He ran his hand over his face and looked at his palm.

"I feel as if my face were powdered. Have you experienced the same sensation?"

"Yes, Uncle!" cried the young lady. "It is the Italian sun! It dries the skin dreadfully!"

"Have you noticed, Lydia, what awful sugar they have," the older woman asked.

Just then a large man with thick grey curly hair, a large nose, merry eyes and a cigar between his teeth came on deck. The stewards standing by the rail bowed respectfully to him.

"Good day, my lads, good day!" he said in a loud, hoarse voice, nodding benevolently to them.

The Russians fell silent, glancing at him out of the corner of their eyes, and the whiskered Ivan informed the others in an undertone: "A retired soldier, one can tell at once...."

Conscious of their stares, the grey-haired man took the cigar from his mouth and bowed politely to the Russians. The older woman tossed her head, raised her lorgnette and fixed him with a challenging stare. The man with the moustache looked embarrassed for some reason, turned quickly away, pulled his watch from his pocket and began swinging it in the air again. Only the fat man replied to the bow, pressing his chin to his chest. This confused the Italian, who thrust his cigar back into the corner of his mouth and in a low voice asked the elderly steward:

"Russians?"

"Yes, sir! A Russian governor and his family...."

"What kind faces they always have...."

"Yes, a very good people...."

"The best of the Slavs certainly...."

"A trifle inconsiderate, I would say...."

"Inconsiderate? Really?"

"Yes, so it seems to me, inconsiderate of others."

The fat Russian reddened.

"They are talking about us," he said with a sheepish grin.

"What are they saying?" inquired the older woman, making a mien of distaste.

"They say we are the best of the Slavs," replied the fat man, giggling.

"They are sycophantic!" declared the woman, and the ginger-haired Ivan put away his watch and twirling his moustaches with both hands said disdainfully: "They are all amazingly ignorant about us...."

"There," said the fat one, "you are being praised and you declare it is out of ignorance...."

"Nonsense! I did not mean that, I meant in general ... I know very well that we are the best."

The man with the sideburns, who had been closely watching the play of the dolphins all this time, sighed and shaking his head remarked: "What stupid fish!"

The grey-haired Italian was joined by two others, an old man wearing a black coat and glasses, and a long-haired, pale-faced youth with a high forehead and thick eyebrows. All three stood at the rail a few yards away from the Russians.

"When I see Russians I always remember Messina," the grey-haired man said in a low voice.

"Remember the welcome we gave the Russian sailors who came to Naples?" said the young man.

"Yes! They will not forget that day in those forests of theirs!"

"Have you seen the medal that was struck in their honour?"

"Yes. I did not care for the workmanship!"

"They are talking about Messina," the fat man informed his companions.

"And they are laughing!" exclaimed the young woman. "Amazing!"

The gulls caught up with the ship. One of them hovered over the side, flapping its crooked wings violently. The young woman threw biscuits to it. The birds caught the morsels in their beaks, disappeared over the side of the boat and wheeled up again with loud cries into the blue emptiness over the sea. Coffee was brought to the Italians and they, too, began to feed the birds, throwing biscuits up into the air. The older woman frowned:

"A ping us!" she said in scorn.

The fat man listened to the lively conversation of the Italians and again reported: "He is not a soldier, but a merchant. He is talking about trading with us in grain. He says they could buy kerosene, timber and coal from us, too."

"I could see at once that he was not a soldier," the older woman declared.

The ginger-haired man resumed his whispered discourse with Sideburns, who listened with his mouth drooping sceptically, while the young Italian, glancing now and again toward the Russians, was saying:

"What a pity we know so little of that land of huge people with light-blue eyes."

The sun was already high up and the heat was intense. The sea shone with dazzling brightness and in the distance the contours of mountains or clouds rose out of the sea.

"Annette," said Sideburns, his mouth stretched to his ears in a broad smile, "just listen to this absurd Jean, he has thought of a remarkably clever way of getting rid of those rebels in the villages!"

Rocking back and forth in his chair, he began to speak

slowly in a flat voice as if translating from a foreign language:

"He says that at village fairs and on holidays the local land authorities should prepare a large quantity of stakes and stones at the expense of the Treasury and then stand the muzhiks, also at the Treasury's expense, with ten, twenty or fifty pails of vodka, depending on the number of people. That will do the trick!"

"I do not understand," said the older woman. "Is it a joke?"

"No, quite seriously," the ginger-haired man hastened to assure her. "Just think of it, *ma tante*..."

The young woman opened her eyes wide and shrugged her shoulders.

"What nonsense! To let them swill vodka at the expense of the Treasury, when as it is..."

"No, wait, Lydia!" cried the ginger-haired man, springing up on his chair. The man with the sideburns laughed noiselessly, his mouth wide open and swaying from side to side.

"Think of it—the hooligans who don't drink themselves senseless will kill one another with the stakes and the stones. You see?"

"Why one another?" inquired the fat man.

"But you are joking?" the older woman insisted.

The ginger-haired man, spreading out his short arms, went on excitedly: "Whenever the authorities suppress them, the Leftists start shouting about brutalities and atrocities, so we must find a way of getting them to suppress themselves. Right?"

The ship rolled suddenly. The plump woman caught at the table in fright, the dishes rattled, and the older woman clutched at the fat man's shoulder. "What was that?" she cried sternly.

"We are turning round..."

The coastline grew more and more distinct: hills and misty mountains covered with gardens; blue rocks amid the vineyards, white houses peeping out of dense green

shrubby, window-panes gleaming in the sunlight. Bright patches of colour already stood out—at the very water's edge a small house nestled among the rocks facing the sea, its façade covered with a thick mass of bright purple flowers and with scarlet geraniums pouring in rich profusion from the stone terrace above. The gay colours made the shore look warm and inviting, and the soft contours of the mountains seemed to beckon one into the cool shade of the gardens.

"How crowded everything is here," remarked the fat man with a sigh. The older woman glanced at him coldly, then raising her lorgnette she studied the shore, pursing her thin lips and tossing her head.

There were now many dark-complexioned men in light suits on the deck, conversing in loud tones. The Russian ladies looked at them with haughty disdain like queens at their subjects.

"How they do gesticulate," remarked the young woman. The fat man explained:

"That is a peculiarity of the language, it is so poor that it must be accompanied by gestures...."

"Good heavens!" said the older woman with a deep sigh, then after a brief pause, asked:

"Are there many museums in Genoa as well?"

"Only three, I believe," replied the fat man.

"And that cemetery?" asked the young woman.

"Yes, the campo santo. And the churches of course."

"And I suppose the cabs are as wretched as in Naples?"

The ginger-haired man and Sideburns got up and walked over to the railing carrying on an earnest conversation, both talking at once.

"What is that Italian saying?" the lady asked, patting her elegant coiffure. She had sharp elbows and large yellow ears that resembled faded leaves. The fat man obediently listened to the lively talk of the curly-haired Italian.

"They have what must be a very ancient law, signori,

forbidding Jews to visit Moscow—that is evidently a survival of despotism, Ivan the Terrible, you know! Even in England there are many archaic laws which remain in force to this day. But perhaps this particular Jew was deceiving me, at any rate he for some reason had no right to visit Moscow—the ancient city of the tsars, a holy city....”

“And here in Rome—which is far older and holier than Moscow—the mayor is a Jew,” said the youth, with a laugh.

“And how cleverly he outwits the tailor Pope! *” interjected an old man in spectacles clapping his hands.

“What is that old man shouting about?” the lady asked lowering her lorgnette.

“Some nonsense. They are speaking in the Neapolitan dialect.”

“...He came to Moscow, and since one must have a roof over one’s head this Jew went to a prostitute, signori. He had nowhere else to go, he said.”

“A cock-and-bull story!” declared the old man firmly, waving the story-teller away.

“To say the truth I think so myself.”

“Well, what happened then?” the youth asked.

“She turned him over to the police, but first she took money from him, as from an ordinary customer....”

“How vile!” said the old man. “That man had a filthy imagination, that’s all. I knew some Russians at the University, they were very fine fellows....”

The fat Russian, dabbing his perspiring face with his handkerchief, said to the ladies in a lazy drawl:

“He is telling a Jewish anecdote.”

“With such animation!” laughed the young woman, and the other remarked: “You know, these people with their gestures and their noise are somehow terribly boring.”

* A play of words—the Pope’s name was Sarto meaning “tailor”.— *Tr.*

On shore the town was growing before their eyes: houses came into view from behind hills, the gaps between them growing less and less until they formed a solid wall of buildings that seemed in the sunlight to be carved out of ivory.

"It looks like Yalta," said the young woman rising to her feet. "I shall go down to Lisa."

She sailed across the deck, her large body draped in light-blue cloth swaying slightly as she walked, and when she passed the group of Italians, the grey-haired man stopped speaking to remark in an undertone:

"What beautiful eyes!"

"Yes," said the old man in the spectacles, shaking his head. "Basilida must have looked like that!"

"But Basilida was a Byzantine, was she not?"

"I see her as a Slav."

"They are speaking of Lydia," said the stout man.

"What are they saying?" asked the woman. "Something insulting, no doubt?"

"No, about her eyes. They admire them..."

The woman made a face.

The steamer, its brasswork glittering, edged in swiftly and gently to the shore. Behind the dark walls of the pier rose a forest of masts. Here and there bright shreds of flags hung motionless. The black smoke melted in the air and the smell of oil and coal dust, harbour noises and the muffled roar of a big city reached the boat.

The stout man suddenly laughed aloud.

"What is the joke?" the lady asked, narrowing her faded grey eyes.

"The Germans will smash them, by God! You will see!"

"But why should that make you so happy?"

"Oh, I don't know...."

The man with the sideburns, looking down at his feet, asked the ginger-haired man in a loud, meticulous voice: "Would that be a pleasant surprise for you or not?"

The other twirled his moustaches fiercely but made no reply.

The steamer slowed down. The murky green water which reflected nothing of the marble buildings, the tall towers, or the grillwork balconies, slapped shudderingly against the ship's sides as if in complaint. The black maw of the port packed tight with vessels of all kinds opened wide to receive them.

A man in a light suit, lean and clean-shaven like an American, sat down at an iron table near the door of the restaurant and called out in a lazy drawl:

“Ga-aarçon....”

Acacia blossoms hung in thick white profusion all around, and the golden sunbeams filled earth and sky with the gentle gladness of springtide. Little shaggy-eared donkeys tripped down the street with a pattering of hoofs, heavy draught horses jogged along, the people, too, walked at a leisurely pace, and it was clear that every living creature wished to linger as long as possible in the sunshine and breathe the air heavy with the sweet scent of flowers.

Children, the heralds of spring, flashed by, the sun tinting their clothes with bright hues; gaily dressed women, who belong to a sunny day as the stars belong to the night, sailed along, swaying slightly as they walked.

The man in the light suit had a curiously scrubbed look about him: as if he had been extremely dirty and had just been washed clean, but so vigorously that all vividness had been rubbed off him for ever. He looked around him with his faded eyes as if he were counting the sun spots on the walls of the houses and on everything that moved along the dark street and over the broad flagstones of the boulevard. His flaccid lips were pursed and he was softly whistling a queer, sad tune, and drumming his long white fingers on the edge of the table. His nails gleamed palely and in his other hand he held a tan glove with which he beat time on his knee. He had the face of a man of intelligence and resolution, it seemed a pity that all warmth had been so roughly wiped off that face.

As the waiter, with a deferential bow, placed before him a cup of coffee, a small bottle of green liqueur and some biscuits, a man sat down at the next table. He was a powerfully built man with agate eyes; his cheeks, neck and hands were smoke-begrimed and his burly frame had such steel-like quality of strength that he seemed part of some huge machine.

When the eyes of the clean man rested wearily on him, he raised himself slightly, touched his cap with his fingers and said through his thick moustache:

"Good day, Mr. Engineer."

"Ah, you again, Trama!"

"Yes, it's me, Mr. Engineer...."

"Well, we may expect something, eh?"

"How is your work getting on?"

"You can't make conversation with questions alone, my friend," said the engineer with a faint smile on his thin lips.

His companion pushed his hat on to one ear and laughed heartily.

"Right you are!" he said through his laughter, "but I swear I'd give a lot to know...."

A rough-haired, piebald donkey drawing a coal cart stopped in his tracks, stretched out his neck and emitted a mournful cry, but evidently the sound of his own voice did not please him that day, for he broke off in confusion on a high note, shook his shaggy ears and, lowering his head, trotted on with a clatter of hoofs.

"I'm waiting for that machine of yours as impatiently as I would wait for a new book to draw new wisdom from."

"I do not quite understand the analogy," murmured the engineer sipping his coffee.

"Don't you agree that a machine frees man's physical energy as much as a good book frees his spirit?"

"Ah!" said the engineer, raising his head, "perhaps you're right. And now, I suppose, you will start your

propaganda?" he added, placing the empty cup back on the table.

"I have started already...."

"Strikes and disturbances again, eh?"

The other shrugged his shoulders, smiling gently.

"If only all that were unnecessary...."

An old woman in black, as austere as a nun, silently proffered a bunch of violets to the engineer. He took two and handing one to his companion, said reflectively:

"You have such a good head, Trama, it is a pity you are an idealist...."

"Thank you for the flowers and the compliment. A pity, you say?"

"Yes! You are essentially a poet, and you could learn to become a good engineer if you tried."

Trama chuckled, his white teeth gleaming.

"Ah, there you're right!" he said. "An engineer is a poet. Working with you I have learned that...."

"You are very kind...."

"I have thought, why should Monsieur the Engineer not become a Socialist? A Socialist must be a poet too...."

They both laughed in complete understanding, these two men so strikingly different in appearance, the one dry, nervous, with the rubbed-out features and faded eyes, and the other looking as if he had been hammered out in a forge shop only yesterday and had not yet been polished.

"No, Trama, I would prefer to have my own workshop and some three dozen good lads like yourself working for me. Then we would be able to do something...."

He tapped the table lightly with his fingers and sighed as he put the violets in his buttonhole.

"Devil take it," cried Trama growing excited, "to think that such trifles can prevent a man from living and working...."

"Oh so you call human history a trifle, master mechanic?" queried the engineer with a faint smile. The

worker snatched off his hat, gesturing with it as he went on heatedly:

"Ah, what is the history of my ancestors?"

"Your ancestors?" repeated the engineer, accentuating the first word with a more caustic smile.

"Yes, mine! Insolence you think? Perhaps. But why are Giordano Bruno, Vico and Mazzini not my ancestors? Am I not living in their world, am I not enjoying the fruit of their great minds?"

"Oh, in that sense!"

"Everything the departed have given to the world is mine!"

"Of course," said the engineer, knitting his brows gravely.

"And everything that has been done before me, before us, is the ore which we must turn into steel, is it not?"

"Why, of course, that is obvious!"

"After all, you educated men, just as we workers, are reaping the fruit of the minds of the past."

"I do not deny that," said the engineer, looking down to discover a small, ragged boy like a much-battered ball, standing beside him holding a bunch of crocuses in his filthy little paws and urging insistently:

"Buy my flowers, signor...."

"I have some...."

"You can never have too many flowers...."

"Right you are, lad," said Trama. "Bravo, give me two...."

And when the boy had given him the flowers he raised his hat and offered a bunch to the engineer.

"Thank you."

"It's a glorious day, isn't it?"

"Yes, even at fifty I can appreciate its beauty...."

The engineer glanced thoughtfully about him with narrowed eyes and heaved a sigh.

"I daresay you feel the warmth of the spring sun coursing in your veins so keenly, not only because you are young, but because I believe the whole world

looks different to you than it does to me. Is that not so?"

"I do not know," replied the other laughing. "But life is good!"

"Because of what it promises?" the engineer asked sceptically. The question appeared to sting his companion, for, replacing his cap on his head, he answered impulsively:

"Life is good because of all that I love in it! Damn it all, my friend, words to me are not merely sounds and letters; when I read a book, look at a picture or behold something beautiful I feel as if I had created it all with my own hands!"

They both laughed at that, the one frankly and heartily as though proud of his ability to laugh well, throwing his head back and thrusting out his broad chest, the other, almost soundlessly, chokingly, exposing his teeth with their gold crowns that looked as if he had recently been chewing gold and had forgotten to clean it off his teeth.

"You're a good lad, Trama, it is always a pleasure to see you," said the engineer and added with a wink: "If only you weren't such a trouble-maker...."

"Oh, I'm always making trouble...."

And screwing up his fathomless black eyes in an expression of mock gravity, he inquired:

"I trust our behaviour was quite correct that time?"

The engineer shrugged his shoulders and rose.

"Oh yes, quite. That affair cost the firm some thirty-seven thousand lire, you know...."

"It might have been wiser to have added that to the men's wages...."

"H'm! You're wrong. Wiser, you say? Every beast has his own brand of wisdom."

He held out a dry yellow hand and when the worker shook it, said:

"I still think you ought to study and study hard...."

"I learn something every minute...."

"You would make an engineer with a rich imagination."

"Oh, my imagination comes in quite handy as it is!"

"Well, so long, my stubborn friend!"

The engineer walked off under the acacias, through the tracery of sunbeams, taking long strides with his lanky legs and pulling his glove onto the thin long fingers of his right hand. The little dark waiter moved away from the door of the restaurant where he had been listening to the conversation and said to the worker who was rummaging in his purse for some coppers:

"Getting old, our engineer...."

"Oh, he can still hold his own!" exclaimed the worker confidently. "There's plenty of fire under that skull of his...."

"Where will you be speaking next time?"

"In the same place, the labour exchange. Have you heard me?"

"Three times, comrade...."

Shaking hands warmly they parted with a smile; the one walking off in the opposite direction from that the engineer had taken, the other humming pensively as he commenced to clear the tables.

A group of schoolchildren in white aprons, boys and girls, marched by in the middle of the road, scattering noise and laughter all around them; the pair in the lead blew lustily into paper trumpets, and the acacias softly showered them with snowy petals.

Always, and especially in springtime, the sight of children prompts one to call after them loudly and gaily:

"Hey, there, young folk! May the future be yours!"

If man can no longer find a crust of bread on the earth that has been enriched by the bones of his ancestors; if, driven by need, he is forced to leave his native soil and go to South America, thirty days' journey from home—if things come to such a pass, what can one expect a man to do?

It does not matter who he is—he is like a child torn from its mother's breast. The wine of a foreign land tastes bitter to him; instead of gladdening his heart it fills him with longing, makes him listless and flabby as a sponge, and his heart, torn out of the homeland's breast, absorbs all manner of evil and wickedness as a sponge absorbs water.

In Calabria our young men usually marry before leaving home to cross the ocean, believing, perhaps, that their love for a woman might deepen their love for their country—for a woman holds the same attraction for a man as his country, and nothing can protect a man better in a strange land than true love that calls him back to his native soil, to his loved one's breast.

But these marriages, overshadowed by poverty and separation, are nearly always the prologues to grim dramas of fate, vengeance and bloodshed, as was the case not long ago in Senerchia, a community situated in the Apennine Mountains.

It is a simple and terrible story which might have been taken from the Bible, and to begin at the beginning we must go back five years. Five years ago a handsome young woman named Emilia Bracco lived in the little village of Saracena high up in the mountains. Her husband had gone to America and she lived with his parents. She was a strong, healthy girl and an able worker, endowed with a

fine voice and a merry nature, fond of a joke and apt to flaunt her beauty a little, exciting the passions of the village lads and the woodsmen from the hills. For all her banter, she guarded her honour, and though her gay laughter stirred many fond hopes, no man could ever boast of having won her.

Now, no one in the world suffers the pangs of envy so much as the Devil and an old woman. Emilia lived with her mother-in-law and the Devil is always to be found where there is evil work to be done.

"You are too gay without your husband, my dear," the old woman would say. "I think I shall write to him about it. Take care, I am watching every step you take. Remember, your honour is our honour...."

At first Emilia calmly assured her mother-in-law that she loved her husband, and had no cause to reproach herself. But the old woman continued to insult her with her ugly suspicions, and egged on by the devil, began to spread the rumour that her daughter-in-law had lost all shame.

When she heard this, Emilia was frightened and she implored the old witch not to ruin her by her malicious gossip, swearing that she had never been faithless to her husband, that even in her dreams she had never been tempted to deceive him. But the old woman would not believe her.

"I know how much such vows are worth," she scoffed. "Was I not young myself once? No, I have already written to him to come back at once and avenge his honour!"

"You have written to him?" Emilia gasped in horror.

"I have."

"Very well...."

Our men are as jealous as Arabs, and Emilia knew what awaited her on her husband's return.

The next day, when the mother-in-law went to the forest to gather dry brushwood, Emilia followed her with an axe hidden beneath her skirts. Later on, she went to

the carabinieri and told them that she had killed her mother-in-law.

"It is better to be a murderess than to be looked upon as a harlot when one is innocent," she said.

Her trial was a triumph for her. Nearly the entire population of Senerchia went to testify on her behalf and many pleaded with the judge with tears in their eyes, saying: "She is innocent, her life has been ruined unjustly."

Only His Eminence, the Archbishop Cozzi, dared to raise his voice against the unfortunate woman. He refused to believe in her innocence. He spoke of the need to uphold the ancient traditions, and he warned the people that they were making the same mistake as had the Greeks when they acquitted Phryne, allowing her beauty to blind them to her unseemly conduct. He said everything he had to say and perhaps it was thanks to him that Emilia was sentenced to four years' imprisonment.

Like Emilia's husband, his fellow-villager Donato Guarnaccia had also gone across the ocean, leaving his young wife behind at home to the melancholy task of Penelope—to weave dreams of life without living.

Three years ago Donato received a letter from his mother informing him that his wife Theresa had given herself to his father—her husband—and was living with him. The old woman and the Devil again, you see!

Guarnaccia bought a ticket for the first steamer bound for Naples and turned up unexpectedly at his home as if he had dropped from the skies.

His wife and his father feigned astonishment, and he, being a hard-headed, suspicious lad, kept his counsel at first, wishing to verify the truth of the report, for he had heard Emilia Bracco's story. He treated his wife tenderly and for a time both seemed to enjoy a second honeymoon, a passionate feast of youth.

His mother tried to pour poison into his ear, but he

stopped her: "Enough!" he said. "I shall judge for myself. Let me be."

He knew that one who has been wronged cannot be believed, be it one's own mother.

Nearly half the summer passed thus in peace and tranquillity, and they might have lived thus to the end of their days, if the father had not taken advantage of the son's brief absences from home to renew his attentions to his daughter-in-law. But now she resisted the advances of the old lecher and this angered him—he could not endure to be so suddenly deprived of the enjoyment of her young body. And he resolved to take revenge on her.

"You shall perish," he threatened her.

"So shall you," she retorted.

We are a people of few words.

The next day he said to his son: "Do you know that your wife has been unfaithful to you?"

The son grew pale, and looking his father straight in the eye, he asked: "What proof have you?"

"Those who have enjoyed her caresses have told me that she has a large birth-mark in the lower part of her belly—is that so?"

"Very well," said Donato. "Since you, my father, tell me that she is guilty she shall die!"

The shameless father nodded his head.

"Of course! Loose women must be killed."

"And men, too," said Donato and went away.

He went to his wife and laid his heavy hands on her shoulders.

"Listen to me. I know you have been unfaithful to me. For the sake of the love we bore each other before and after your betrayal, tell me who is the man?"

"Your accursed father alone could have told you! He alone..." she cried.

"It is he, then?" demanded the peasant, the blood rushing to his eyes.

"He took me by force, with threats. But hear the whole truth...."

She paused, struggling for breath.

"Speak!" cried her husband shaking her.

"Yes, yes," she whispered in despair. "We lay together, he and I, as man and wife, some thirty, forty times...."

Donato rushed into the house, seized his gun and ran out to the field whither his father had gone and there he said all that men say to each other at such moments, and with two shots he finished him. Then he spat on the body and smashed the skull with his rifle butt. They say that he made mockery of the body for a long time, that he jumped on its back and danced a dance of vengeance upon it.

Then he went to his wife and loading his shotgun, said: "Stand back four paces and say your prayers...."

She began to weep and beg him to spare her life.

"No," he said. "I must do as justice demands, as you would have done had I wronged you...."

And he shot her dead as he would have shot a bird, and gave himself up to the authorities. And as he passed down the village street, the people made way for him and many of them said: "You have behaved as a man of honour, Donato...."

At the trial he defended himself with grim energy, with all the crude eloquence of a primitive soul.

"I take a woman in order that the fruit of our love shall be a child in whom both of us, she and I should live! When a man loves, neither father nor mother exists for him, only love exists. May love be eternal and those who defile it, man or woman, be they cursed with sterility, with fearful pestilence and agonizing death...."

The counsel for the defence demanded that the jury return a verdict of murder in a fit of rage, but the jury acquitted Donato amid stormy applause from the public. And Donato returned to Senerchia like a conquering hero. He was hailed as a man who had adhered stringently to the old national traditions of bloody vengeance for besmirched honour.

Shortly after Donato's acquittal, Emilia Bracco was

released from jail. It was winter, the season when Nature mourns. The feast of the Birth of Christ was approaching, a time when men desire above all things to be among their own kin, around their own warm hearth. But Emilia and Donato were alone, for theirs was not the fame that evoked the respect of their fellowmen—a murderer remains a murderer after all. He may shock people, he may be vindicated, but how can he be loved? Both of them had blood on their hands and broken hearts; both had suffered the painful drama of trial, and it was no surprise to anyone in Senerchia that these two people, branded by Fate, should be drawn together and seek to brighten each other's broken lives, for they were both young and they both yearned for tenderness.

"What shall we do here amid all these painful memories of the past?" Donato said to Emilia after their first kisses.

"If my husband returns he will kill me, for now I have truly been faithless to him in thought," said Emilia.

They decided to go overseas as soon as they had saved enough money for the passage, and perhaps they would have succeeded in finding a little happiness and a peaceful haven for themselves. But they lived among people who reasoned in this wise:

"We can forgive a murder of passion. We applauded crime committed to defend honour. But are these two not trampling the very traditions in whose name so much blood was spilt?"

These harsh and sinister judgements, echoes of the grim and hoary past, sounded ever louder until finally they reached the ears of Emilia's mother, Serafina Amato, a strong, proud woman, who in spite of her fifty years still possessed the beauty of one born in the mountains.

At first she did not believe the insulting rumours.

"Slander," she said. "Have you forgotten how my daughter suffered to protect her honour?"

"No, it is she who has forgotten," people replied.

Whereupon Serafina, who lived in another village, came to her daughter and said:

"People are beginning to talk about you, I do not want to hear these things said of you. What you did in the past was the action of a pure and honourable woman in spite of the bloodshed, and so it must remain as a lesson to all men!"

Her daughter began to weep.

"The world exists for man, but what is man if he cannot exist for himself?"

"Ask the priest if you are stupid enough not to know the answer yourself," her mother replied.

Then she went to Donato and issued him a stern warning.

"Leave my daughter alone, or you shall live to rue it!"

"Listen," the young man implored her. "I love your daughter with all my heart. She is as unfortunate as I am. Permit me to take her away with me to another land and all will be well!"

But he only poured oil on the flames.

"You want to run away?" cried Serafina in fury and despair. "No, that shall never be!"

They parted snarling like beasts and staring at each other with hatred in their eyes.

From that day Serafina began to stalk the lovers as a clever dog stalks game. But this did not prevent them from meeting secretly at night—for love, too, is as cunning and clever as a beast.

But once Serafina overheard her daughter and Guarnacchia discussing a plan of escape—and in that evil moment she resolved on a monstrous deed.

On Sunday the people gathered in the church to hear the Mass. In front stood the women in gaudy holiday skirts and shawls, and behind them knelt the men. Our lovers, too, came to pray to the Madonna to help them.

Serafina Amato entered the church later than the others. She, too, was dressed in her holiday clothes, and in the folds of the wide embroidered apron which

she wore over her skirt, she had hidden an axe.

Slowly, with a prayer on her lips, she crept over to the image of Archangel Michael, the patron saint of Senerchia, knelt down before him, with her hand touched his and then her lips and, creeping stealthily up to her daughter's seducer who stood on his knees with the others, struck him twice on the head cutting a Roman figure V, the sign of the vendetta on his skull.

A wave of horror seized the congregation. They rushed shouting and screaming to the exit. Many fell senseless on the tiled floor, many wept like children. But Serafina stood with the axe poised over poor Donato and her senseless daughter like some village Nemesis.

She stood thus for many minutes and when the people recovered from the shock and seized her, she commenced to pray loudly, raising her eyes burning with savage joy to the heavens:

"Saint Michael, I give thanks to you! It is you who gave me the strength to avenge my daughter's honour!"

When she learned that Guarnachia was still alive and had been carried to the apothecary, where his frightful wounds were being dressed, she was seized with a fit of trembling, and rolling her mad, horror-filled eyes, she said:

"No, no, I believe in God. That man will die. I struck him two fatal wounds, my hands felt it, and—God is just—that man must die!"

The woman will soon stand trial and of course she will be severely punished, but what can any punishment teach a person who believes that he has the right to inflict violence on others? Does iron become softer for being hammered?

The judgement of men says to the accused: you are guilty. The accursed admits, he is guilty, or denies it, and all remains as before.

And in the final end, dear signori, it must be said that a man must grow and have increase where the Lord have placed him, where he is loved by the soil and by a woman.

From early childhood Old Giovanni Tuba lost his heart to the sea, that blue expanse now gentle and serene like the glance of a young girl, now stormy like the passionate heart of a woman; that wilderness that absorbs the sunshine the fish have no need of, and which brings forth nothing from contact with the golden sunbeams other than beauty and dazzling brilliance; the treacherous sea with its eternal song that fills one with an irresistible desire to sail away into its distances. Many a man has it lured away from the dumb, stony earth which demands so much moisture from the skies, so much toil, and gives so little joy in return!

Even as a boy working in a vineyard that clung to the mountain side in terraces held up by grey stone walls, amid the spreading fig-trees and olives with their leaves of beaten metal, the dark green orange-trees and the tangled branches of pomegranates, under the bright sun on the hot earth amid the scent of flowers, even then Tuba gazed hungrily at the blue sea with the eyes of one under whose feet the earth pitched and rolled. He gazed, drinking in the salty air until he was drunk with it, becoming absent-minded, indolent and disobedient as is always the case with those who fall under the sea's spell, who fall head over heels in love with the sea....

And on holidays, early in the morning, when the sun had barely risen from beyond the mountains and the sky over Sorrento was still pink as though woven from apricot blossoms, young Tuba, as shaggy as a sheep dog, would go scampering down the hillside, his fishing rod over his shoulder, leaping from rock to rock, a veritable boneless bundle of springy muscles, and run down to the sea, his broad freckled face lit up by a happy smile as the sharp

tang of the sea, stronger than the sweet fragrance of the awakening flowers, floated toward him on the fresh morning air, and he heard the low murmur of the waves as they rippled over stones down below, drawing him toward them like maidens...

There he is perched on the edge of a pinkish-grey rock, his bronze legs dangling, his huge black eyes like two plumes probing the transparent greenish water whose liquid glass reveals to him a wondrous world far more entrancing than all the fairy-tales he has ever heard: red-gold seaweed at the sea's bottom waving among stones covered with carpets; gaily-hued "violi", the flowers of the sea, floating out of a forest of seaweed, "perche", with the bleary eyes of drunkards, striped noses and blue spots on their bellies; golden "sarpe", the impudent striped "canie", black "guarracini", darting swiftly about like merry devils, "sparaglioni" and "occhiate" shining like silver saucers and a host of other lovely fish—all of them cunning creatures who peck at the bait with their tiny teeth before snatching it with their round little mouths.

In this bright, placid water bewhiskered shrimps float like birds in the air; hermit crabs crawl over the stones at the bottom dragging their ornamented shell-homes along; starfish, red as blood, propel themselves gently forward; purple medusas rock silently, and now and again the evil head of the sharp-toothed muraena is thrust out from beneath a stone, its red speckled snaky body writhing this way and that—just like the witch in the fairy-tale, but much more frightening and ugly; and suddenly a grey octopus spreads itself out in the water like a dirty rag, and dashes hurriedly off after some prey; and now a lobster comes along its whiskers as long as bamboo fishing rods twitching as it goes; these and a host of other wondrous creatures dwell in this transparent water under a sky as clear but far emptier than the sea.

And the sea breathes, its blue bosom rising and falling. Green white-tipped waves break against the rock on which Tuba sits chasing one another merrily in an effort to lick

his feet—sometimes they succeed, making him start and smile, and then they laugh gaily and run away from the rock as if in fear, only to come rippling up to it again. A sunbeam penetrates deep into the water, making a funnel of bright light thrust into the bosom of the water. His soul slumbers blissfully, undisturbed by thoughts or desires, content to feast in silence on what it sees; bright waves ripple over his whole being, and his soul is as boundlessly free as the sea itself.

That was how he spent his holidays, and after a time the sea began to call to him on weekdays as well, for when once it has taken possession of a man's heart he becomes a part of it, just as the heart is only part of the man. And so he left his plot of land to his brother and went off with a company of other men, in love with the sea like himself, to the shores of Sicily to fish for coral. Fine work, but dangerous too, for a man can drown ten times a day. But what wonderful things he sees when the net rises heavily out of the blue water—a semi-circular net rimmed with iron teeth seething like thoughts in the brain with all forms of life and colour, and in the middle, the pink branches of the precious corals, the sea's gift to man!

And so this man over whom the sea had cast its spell was lost for ever to the land. Even women he loved as if in a dream, briefly and silently, for he could speak to them only of that which he knew—of fish and corals, of the play of the waves, the caprices of the wind and of big ships which sail unknown seas. He was timid on land, he walked the earth cautiously, suspiciously, and he was silent with people like a fish, gazing at them searchingly with the keen eye of one accustomed to plumbing the treacherous deeps and *not trusting them*. But on sea he was quietly happy, attentive to his comrades and as agile as a dolphin.

But however good the life a man chooses for himself, it never lasts more than a few score years. When the old salt reached the age of eighty his hands, twisted by rheumatism, refused to work—enough!—his knotted legs barely supported his bowed body, and, now an old

weather-beaten man, Tuba sorrowfully landed on the island, climbed the hill to his brother's cabin, to join his brother's children and grandchildren, folk too poor to be kind now that Tuba could no longer bring them quantities of delicious fish as of old.

The old man was miserable among these people, they watched too carefully the bits of bread he thrust with his crooked old hand into his toothless mouth. He soon saw that he was one too many among them. His soul grew dark, his heart contracted with pain, the wrinkles on his sun-dried skin deepened and a new ache racked his old bones. All day long from morning till night he would sit on the stones by the door of the cabin, his old eyes staring out at the bright sea where his life had melted away, the blue sea sparkling in the sunshine as beautiful as a dream.

It was far away from him, and the journey down to the sea shore was not easy for an old man. But he made up his mind, and one quiet night he set out down the hillside, crawling over the sharp stones like a crushed lizard, and when he reached the waves—they met him with their familiar murmuring splash against the earth's dead stones, a sound far more gentle than the voices of men—the old man, as people afterwards guessed, fell upon his knees, looked up at the sky, prayed a little for all men who were strangers to him, then cast aside the rags that covered his old bones, laid that old skin—his own yet not his own—on the rocks, and walked into the water. Tossing his hoary head, he lay down on his back, his face upturned to the sky, and swam off into the distance, to where the dark blue of the sky touches the waves with the edge of its purple mantle, and the stars are so close that it seems one can reach them by stretching out one's hand.

On soft summer nights the sea is as calm as the soul of a child wearied by the day's play; it sleeps, sighing faintly and doubtless dreaming bright dreams; if you swim by night through the thick warm water blue sparks flash beneath your hands, a blue flame spreads about you, and your soul melts softly in a gentle radiance as caressing as a tale told by a mother.

The sun rises amid a hallowed silence, and a bluish mist, heavy with the sweet scent of the golden furze, floats skyward from the rocky island.

Standing in the midst of the dark mass of sleepy water under the pale cupola of the sky, the island is like an altar to the Sun God.

The stars have just faded, but white Venus still shines alone in the chill vastness of the dim sky above a delicate ridge of fluffy clouds. The clouds are tinged faintly with pink and glow softly in the light of the first beam, and their reflection on the tranquil bosom of the sea is like mother-o'-pearl that has risen to the surface from the blue deeps.

The blades of grass and the petals of the flowers laden with silvery dew reach out toward the sun. The shining drops of dew hanging at the tips of the stalks swell up and fall to the ground which has perspired in its sleep. One waits to hear the soft tinkling sound of their fall, and grieves when he fails to hear it.

The birds are up and flitting about among the olive leaves singing their morning song, and from below come the heavy sighs of the sea awakened by the sun.

Nevertheless it is quiet, for the people are still asleep. In the freshness of early morning the scent of the flowers and grasses is stronger than sound.

From the doorway of a little white house so overgrown with vines that it looks like a boat lashed by green waves, old Ettore Cecco comes out to meet the sun. A lonely little old man, with the long arms of a monkey, the bare skull of a sage, and a face so furrowed by time that his eyes are almost completely hidden in the wrinkled skin.

Raising his black hairy hand slowly to his forehead he looks up at the pink sky and surveys the scene around him: the rich gamut of emerald and gold, the rose, yellow and red of the blooms against the greyish-purple of the rocks. His dark face quivers in a gentle smile, and he nods his round, heavy head in approval.

He stands as though supporting some heavy weight, his back slightly bent, his legs wide apart, and around him the young day glows and sparkles, brighter shines the green of the vines, louder sounds the twittering of the gold finches; the quails flutter among the blackberry and spurge thickets, and somewhere a blackbird, as jaunty and carefree as a Neapolitan, whistles a merry note.

Old Cecco raises his long weary arms above his head and stretches himself as if about to fly down into the sea which is as calm as wine in a chalice.

Having stretched his old bones, he lowers himself on to a boulder beside the door, takes a postcard out of his jacket pocket, holds it away from him and gazes long at it with narrowed eyes, his lips moving soundlessly. His large face with its silver bristle lights up in a new smile, a smile in which love, sorrow and pride are strangely mingled.

Before him on the slip of pasteboard is a drawing in blue ink of two strapping lads, seated side by side and smiling gaily, two young men with curly hair and large heads like Old Cecco's. On top of the card in large clear type are the printed words:

"Arturo and Enrico Cecco, two noble champions of the interests of their class. They organized 25,000 textile workers who earned 6 dollars a week, and for this they were thrown into prison.

"Long live the fighters for social justice!"

Old Cecco cannot read, moreover the caption is printed in a foreign language, but he knows what it says, every word is familiar to him, every word is like a trumpet blast.

The blue postcard has brought the old man much trouble and anxiety. He received it two months ago and

his paternal instinct told him at once that something was amiss: the portraits of poor men are printed only when they break the law.

Cecco hid the slip of paper in his pocket, but it was like a heavy weight against his heart and it grew heavier from day to day. More than once he was about to show it to the priest, but long experience had taught him that people are right when they say: "A priest may speak the truth to God about Man, but never the truth to Man!"

The first person he asked to explain the mysterious significance of the postcard was a red-haired artist, a long, lanky foreigner, who often came to Cecco's house. He would set up his easel at a convenient angle and then lie down to sleep beside it, with his head in the square shadow cast by the unfinished painting.

"Signor," Cecco asked him, "what have these men done?"

The artist glanced at the smiling faces of the old man's sons and said: "Something jolly most likely."

"But what is written here about them?"

"It is in English. Besides the English, no one understands their language except God, and my wife too, if she is telling the truth in this case. In most cases she doesn't...."

The artist chattered like a magpie; he was evidently incapable of taking anything seriously and the old man went away in disgust. The following day he went to the stout signora, the artist's wife. He found her in the garden. Dressed in a flowing gown of some white transparent material, she lay in a hammock melting in the heat, her blue eyes staring angrily up at the blue sky.

"These men have been sent to prison," she said in broken Italian.

His legs trembled as if the island had received a heavy blow. Nevertheless he found the strength to ask:

"Have they stolen something perhaps, or murdered someone?"

"Oh no. It is simply that they are Socialists."

"What are Socialists?"

"That's politics, old man," said the signora in an expiring voice and closed her eyes.

Cecco knew that foreigners are very stupid, more stupid even than Calabrians, but he wished to know the truth about his children, and so he stood for a long while beside the signora, waiting for her to open her large languid eyes. And when at last she did, he asked, pointing with his finger at the postcard:

"Is it honest?"

"I do not know," she replied resentfully. "It is politics, I told you. Don't you understand?"

No, he did not understand. Politics was something the ministers and rich men in Rome used to make the poor pay more taxes. But his sons were workers, they lived in America and were fine fellows. What had they to do with politics?

All night long he sat with the portrait of his sons in his hands—they looked very dark in the moonlight and the old man's thoughts grew darker still. In the morning he resolved to ask the priest. The man in the black cassock said curtly:

"Socialists are men who deny the will of God. That should be enough for you."

And as the old man turned to go, he added more sternly still: "You should be ashamed of yourself taking up with such things at your age!"

"It is well that I did not show him the portrait," thought Cecco.

A few more days went by. The old man went to the barber, an empty-headed dandy, as sturdy as a young donkey. It was said of him that for money he made love to elderly American women who came to the island avowedly to enjoy the beautiful scenery but in reality to seek adventures with poor lads.

"Good God!" exclaimed this wicked man when he read the caption and his cheeks flushed with pleasure. "Arturo and Enrico, my comrades! Oh, I congratulate you, Father

Ettore, with all my heart, you and myself! Now I have two more famous countrymen. Is that not something to be proud of?"

"Don't let your foolish tongue run away with you," the old man warned him.

But the barber, waving his hands cried: "Splendid!"

"What is printed here about them?" the old man insisted.

"I cannot read what it says but I am sure that it is the truth. Poor men must be great heroes if the truth is spoken of them!"

"Hold your tongue, for goodness' sake," said Cecco and stalked off, his wooden shoes clattering violently over the stones.

He went to the Russian signor of whom it was said that he was a kind and honest man. He came in, sat down by the cot on which the signor lay slowly dying, and asked:

"What is written here of these two men?"

The Russian, narrowing his eyes which were faded and sad with illness, read the caption on the postcard in a weak voice and a warm smile lit up his face.

"Signor," the old man said to him, "you see I am very old and I shall soon be going to my Maker. When the Madonna asks me what I have done with my children I shall have to tell her the whole truth. These are my children, but I do not understand what they have done and why they are in prison?"

"You may tell the Madonna," the Russian advised him earnestly, "that your children understood well her own son's chief commandment: they loved their neighbours truly...."

The old man believed the Russian, for lies cannot be uttered in simple language, lies demand fine words and flowery phrases. and he shook the sick man's small, uncalled hand.

"Then it is not a disgrace for them to be in prison?"

"No," said the Russian. "You know that the rich are sent to prison only when they do so much evil that it can

no longer be hidden. The poor are sent to prison as soon as they yearn for a little good. You are a lucky father, let me tell you!"

And he spoke to Cecco for a long time, telling him in his thin, weak voice of what honest men were doing in this world to overcome poverty and stupidity, and all the evil and abomination that springs from stupidity and poverty....

The sun burns in the heavens like a flaming flower, it pours the golden dust of its beams on to the grey rocks, and from every chink in the stone life reaches out eagerly to the sun—the green grass and the flowers as blue as the sky. Golden sparks of sunlight flare up and die in the swollen drops of crystal dew.

As he watches every living thing about him drinking in the life-giving sunlight, as he listens to the singing of the birds busily building their nests, the old man thinks of his children, those boys of his on the other side of the ocean sitting behind bars in a big city, and he thinks how bad it is for their health to be in jail, poor lads....

But then he reflects that they are in prison because they have grown up to be honest young men, as their father had been all his life—and he is content and his bronze face relaxes in a proud smile.

"The earth is rich, men are poor, the sun is kind, man is cruel. All my life I have thought of these things and though I did not speak to them of all this they understood their father's thoughts. Six dollars a week, that is forty lire. Oho! But they thought it too little, and twenty-five thousand others like them thought the same—it is too little for a man who wishes to live well...."

He is certain that the ideas he cherished in his heart have blossomed out in his children and he is very proud of the fact, but knowing how rarely men believe in the fairy-tales they themselves weave from day to day, he keeps his thoughts to himself.

Yet sometimes his great old heart overflows with thoughts of his children's future, and then he straightens

his weary back, inhales deeply and mustering his failing strength shouts hoarsely out to sea, over to where his children are:

“Val-o-o!” *

And the sun laughs as it rises higher and higher over the deep waters of the sea, and the men from the vineyards above echo the old man’s call:

“-o-o!”

* Here: Courage! — *Tr.*

The Nativity

It is soon midnight.

Low clouds flit across the indigo sky above the little Capri square, revealing glimpses of bright star patterns. Blue Sirius flares up and dies, and the deep sonorous voice of the organ pours forth from the open doors of the church. And all this—the racing clouds, the tremulous stars, the movement of the shadows on the walls of the buildings and the stones of the square—is like soft music.

To its solemn rhythm the whole square trembles like a theatrical set, seeming now narrow and dark, now spacious and filled with light.

Orion spreads its magnificence over Monte Soliaro. A white cloud sits on the mountain top like a bright crown, and the steep sides of the mountain, lined with crevices, resemble some dark, ancient countenance furrowed by lofty thoughts of the world and mankind.

Up there at a height of six hundred metres, hidden now by a cloud, stands a small abandoned monastery and a small cemetery with graves like rows of flower beds beneath which lie the remains of all the monks who once dwelt there. Sometimes the grey walls of the cloister peep out through the clouds as if listening to what goes on down below.

Noisy throngs of children run about the square throwing fire-crackers. Tongues of fire leap into the air, scattering myriads of red sparks over the stones. Now and again some bold hand throws a lighted fire-cracker high into the air, where it hisses and whirls like a frightened bat. Small dark figures dart about in all directions with shouts and laughter, there is a loud explosion and for a second the figures of the children crouched in corners are

illuminated by the flash, their shining eyes gleaming in the darkness.

The explosions are almost unintermittent, they drown out the laughter, the cries of fear and the clatter of wooden clogs over the resonant lava. The shadows tremble and leap, the clouds glow with the lurid reflection, and the old walls of the houses seem to smile—they remember the old folk as children and have witnessed time without number this gay and rather dangerous game the children play on Christmas Eve.

But as soon as silence returns, if only for a second, one hears again the solemn peal of the organ, and from below the sea answers with the muffled roar of its waves breaking on the coastal rocks and the soft whisper of the pebbles.

The bay is a goblet filled with dark, frothy wine, and around its rim sparkle the city lights—the bay's bright necklace of precious gems.

The sky over Naples has an opalescent glow, it shimmers like the aurora borealis, dozens of rockets and flares tear into it, blossom out into bouquets of coloured light, hover motionless for an instant in a quivering cloud of light and then die out with a low rumble.

The entire semi-circle of the bay is alive with this beautiful play of fire. The white lighthouse gleams coldly out at sea and the red eye of Capo di Misena glistens. But the lights on the Procida and at the foot of Ischia are like rows of large diamonds sown on to the black velvet of the night.

Herds of white-caps move across the bay. Their melodious splash muffles the roar of the distant explosions. The organ still peals and the children laugh. But suddenly the clock on the tower chimes first four and then twelve times.

The Mass is over. The crowd pours in a colourful stream through the church doors and down the broad steps to where the red fire-crackers leap and writhe. The women utter little shrieks of fear, the small boys laugh

with delight. This is their holiday and no one will dare forbid them to play with the scarlet fire tonight.

What fun indeed to frighten some staid grown-up dressed in his holiday clothes; to make this despot leap about on the square, twisting and turning to avoid the fire-cracker which chases him with a loud hiss, spattering his boots with sparks! And this happens but once a year....

On this anniversary of the birth of the Infant, who loved them, the children feel themselves kings and masters of life and they make the most of these few minutes of merriment to repay the adults for a whole year of tiresome domination. How they enjoy the awkward capers of the grown-ups as they try to escape the fire, begging good-naturedly for quarter: "Basta! Hey, you young scoundrels—basta!"

Now come the *zamponiari*, shepherds from Abruzzi, mountain folk in short blue capes and broad-brimmed hats, their shapely legs encased in white woollen stockings criss-crossed with black straps. Two of them carry bagpipes under their capes, four others have wooden horns which produce a thin high-pitched sound.

These people come down to the island every year and live here for a whole month, praising the Lord and the Holy Mother with their lovely weird music.

It is touching to see them at dawn, standing with their hats at their feet before the statue of the Madonna, gazing in adoration at the gentle face of the Mother and playing for her that inexpressibly moving melody which someone once so aptly described as the "physical awareness of God".

Now the shepherds are hurrying to take the Infant in the manger from the house of old Paolino the carpenter, to the Church of St. Theresa.

The children run after them. The narrow street swallows up their dark figures, and in a few minutes the square is empty, but for a small crowd at the church steps waiting for the procession to appear, and the warm shadows of the clouds which slide noiselessly over the

walls of buildings and the heads of the people as if caressing them.

The sea sighs. Far away on the isthmus a pinetree, like a huge vase on a delicate stem, looms in the darkness. Sirius is now dazzlingly bright. The cloud that hovered over Monte Soliaro has disappeared and the lovely monastery perched on the edge of the cliff and the solitary tree rising sentinel-like above it are clearly visible.

The singing of the shepherds issues in radiant waves of sound from the street archway. Hatless, hook-nosed, resembling giant birds in their dark capes, they come surrounded by a throng of children carrying lanterns on long poles, and the lanterns sway in the air, lighting up the small rotund figure and silvery head of old Paolino, the flower-filled manger he carries in his arms and the pink body of the smiling Infant Christ nestling within, his tiny hands uplifted in blessing.

The old man gazes at this terracotta image with such adoration as if it were indeed alive and would bring "peace on earth and good will to all men" at sunrise.

Grey, bared heads, grave faces, eyes alight with tenderness incline toward the manger from all sides. Fireworks flare up, banishing the darkness from the square as if the dawn had suddenly broken. The children sing and shout and laugh, the grown-ups smile gently, and one feels that they too would like to leap and shout for joy if only they did not fear to appear undignified before the children.

The yellow lights of candles flutter like golden moths over the crowd, and above them in the dark-blue sky glow the stars. From another street comes another procession, little girls carrying the statue of the Madonna; and now there is more music, lights, joyous shouts and children's laughter. One is caught up wholly by the spirit of the feast.

They carry the Infant Christ into the old chapel. Services have long since ceased to be held there and it stands empty all the year round. But today its ancient

walls are adorned with flowers and palm leaves, golden lemons and tangerines, and the whole interior is taken up by a large skilfully executed model depicting the birth of Christ.

The mountains, caves, Bethlehem and fantastic castles on the mountain tops are made of large pieces of cork. A road winds snakily down the mountain sides; sheep and goats graze on meadows. There are sparkling waterfalls made of bits of glass. A group of shepherds stand looking up at the sky where a golden star blazes; angels hover in the heavens pointing with one hand toward the star of Bethlehem and with the other to the cave where the Holy Mother, and Joseph, and the Infant, with his hands upraised to the skies are seen. A colourful caravan of Wise Men and kings in rich attire approaches the cave, and above them are suspended on silver threads angels with palm leaves and roses in their arms. There are long-bearded Magi on camels dressed in bright silken robes, fair-haired kings on horseback in rich brocade and luxurious wigs, curly-haired Numidians, Arabs and Jews and hundreds of other colourful fantastically garbed terracotta figures.

And around the manger Arabs in white burnouses have already opened their shops and are selling weapons, silks and sweetmeats made of wax; here, too, men of some unknown nationality are selling wine. Women with water-jugs on their shoulders are on their way to the well, a peasant leads an ass loaded with brushwood, a crowd of people are kneeling around the Infant. And children, children everywhere.

All this mass of detail is fashioned with such skill and artistry that the whole picture seems to be alive with sound and movement.

The children stand before the picture scrutinizing it closely, their sharp little eyes noticing every new detail added since the previous year. They hasten to share their discoveries with one another, arguing and laughing and shouting. And the proud artists nearby listen not without

pleasure to the praise of these young connoisseurs.

True, they are grown men, fathers of families, far too serious to be interested in playthings and they pretend that all this does not concern them. But children are often much wiser than grown-ups and always more sincere, they know that even old men like to be praised, and so they are lavish with their praise, and the artists stroke their whiskers and beards to hide their smiles of satisfaction.

Here and there the children gather in groups and confer earnestly among themselves. They are forming "bands," and on New Year's Eve they will roam over the island with Christmas Tree and Star, singing to the rattle-banging din of some ancient instruments the jolly pagan ditties that local poets compose for the occasion every year.

*A Happy New Year,
Signor and Signora!
Hear the glad tidings
Your little friends bring you!*

*Open your ears and hearts,
Open your purses,
For today we rejoice,
Today is Lord's day!*

*Our Saviour was born,
Naked and poor,
The oxen warmed him
With their kind, soft breath.*

*He perished to save us
From all our sorrows,
And he gave his whole life
For us, the poor.*

*Praise, then, the Lord,
Rejoice in his name,
Make this His day
A feast of joy.*

And while one band of children sings and dances to this pagan hymn, another drowns out the singing with a song merrier still:

*Remember the shepherds,
The kings and the wizards
Who knelt, one and all,
Before His manger!*

Boom! boom! go the drums, while some reedy fife cannot keep pace with the children's singing and whistles along on a plaintive note:

*And the wicked King Herod
In fear of the Infant
Had all little boys
In the kingdom slain!*

*But that is long past,
Herod is dead, and we are alive;
None but capons and hens
Are slain on this day.*

The grown-ups, too, are unable to resist the gay rhythm of the song, and now Carlo Bambola, the fat cabbie, waddles up to the children and drowning out their voices begins to sing at the top of his voice, his face red with the effort:

*Banish all cares,
Forget all sorrows.
No illness shall visit,
No evil befall us!*

*See how the stars
Light up the heavens,
May our lives too
Be warm and bright!*

The dark eyes of the women glow dreamily as they watch the children. The merrymaking increases, faces beam. Girls dressed in their holiday best smile coyly at the

lads. The stars fade. And from somewhere up above—from the roofs or from a window—comes a ringing tenor voice:

*Be ye healthy and gay,
And all else will be well!*

The old chapel rings ever louder with the laughter of children, the finest music there is on earth. The sky over the island grows pale. Dawn is approaching. The stars recede farther and farther into the blue depths of the sky.

Amid the dark green gardens of the island golden oranges begin to glow, yellow lemons peep out of the gloom like the eyes of giant owls. The young yellowish-green shoots light up the crowns of the orange-trees. The olive leaves gleam silvery and the tracery of naked vines quivers.

The vivid carnations and the red sprigs of sage smile to the dawn. The heavy fragrance of narcissi floats on the fresh morning air, mingling with the salty breath of the sea.

The lapping of the waves grows louder, they are transparent now and their foam is as white as snow.

San Giacomo quarter is justly proud of its fountain. The immortal Giovanni Boccaccio loved to linger in lively discourse beside it, and it was painted more than once on the large canvases of the great Salvator Rosa,⁴ the friend of Tommaso Aniello, or Mazaniello⁵ as he was called by the poor folk for whose freedom he fought and died. Mazaniello, too, was born in our quarter.

Indeed, many famous people were born and brought up there; in the olden days famous people were born more often than they are now and they were more conspicuous. Nowadays, when everyone walks about in jackets and goes in for politics, it is hard for a man to rise above his fellows, and besides, the soul cannot grow properly when it is swaddled in newsprint.

Until last summer Nuncia, too, was the pride of our quarter. Nuncia was a vegetable vendor, the gayest person in the world and the belle of our corner where the sun always shines a little longer than in other parts of the town. The fountain of course is still the same as it always was, it is growing yellower with age and will long continue to delight foreigners with its droll beauty, for the marble children never grow old and never tire of their play.

But sweet Nuncia died last summer. She died on the street in the middle of a dance, and since it is not often that people die like that it is a story worth telling.

She was too gay and warm-hearted a woman to live peacefully with any husband. Her husband did not realize this for a long time and he shouted and swore, waving his hands about and threatening people with his knife, and one day he thrust the knife into somebody's side. But the police do not like such jokes and so Stefano, after serving his time in jail, went off to the Argentine: a change of air is very good for hot-tempered people.

And so at twenty-three Nuncia was left a widow with a five-year-old daughter, a pair of donkeys, a vegetable garden and a little cart, and since a light-hearted person does not need much that was quite enough for her. She knew how to work, and there were always many who were eager to help her, and when she was short of money to pay for their labour she paid with laughter, with songs and with all those other riches that are more valuable than money.

Not all the women approved of her way of life, nor all the men either, of course, but being honest at heart she not only left the married men alone but often managed to reconcile them with their wives.

"A man who falls out of love with a woman has never really loved..." she would say.

Arturo Lano, the fisherman who had studied in a seminary as a youth and had been training for the priesthood but had since strayed from the path of righteousness and floundered in the sea, the taverns and such like pleasant spots—Lano, a master of the art of inventing immodest ditties, said to her once:

"You seem to think that love is as complicated a science as theology?"

"I know nothing of science," she replied, "but I know all your songs." And she sang to Arturo, who was as fat as a barrel:

*It sooner happens so as no.
It's quite a common thing,
The Virgin Mary too, begot
Her son in early Spring.*

He roared with laughter of course, his clever little eyes disappearing among the folds of his fat red cheeks.

Thus she lived, joyous herself and a joy to many, pleasing to all, for in time even her woman friends forgave her, realizing that a person cannot help his character, and remembering that even the saints were not

always able to conquer their own nature. Besides, man is not God, and to God alone must we be faithful.

For some ten years Nuncia shone bright as a star, acknowledged by all to be the loveliest woman and the best dancer in the quarter, and had she been a virgin she would undoubtedly have been chosen queen of the market, as indeed she was in the eyes of one and all.

She was even pointed out to foreigners, and many of them would have given much to talk to her in private, but this always made her laugh heartily.

"In what language would that much washed-out signor talk to me?"

"In the language of gold coins, little fool," respectable folk assured her. But she replied:

"I have nothing to sell to strangers besides onions, garlic and tomatoes...."

At times people who sincerely wished her well sought earnestly to persuade her.

"Only a month or so, Nuncia, and you would be a rich woman! Think it over well, and remember you have a daughter."

"No," she said firmly. "I love my body too well to insult it. I know that it is enough to do something unwillingly once to lose your self-respect for ever."

"But you don't refuse others?"

"No, not my own kind, and when I wish it."

"What do you mean your own kind?"

"People among whom I have grown up and who understand me," was her ready answer.

Nevertheless she did have one affair with a foreigner, an Englishman, a strange man and silent, though he spoke our language. He was young yet his hair was grey and there was a scar across his face, the face of a cutthroat with the eyes of a saint. Some said he wrote books, others maintained that he was a gambler. She even went away with him to Sicily and came back looking very thin and worn. But he could not have been wealthy, for Nuncia brought back neither money nor gifts. And she again

began to live among us, as merry and eager for happiness as ever.

But one day, on some holiday, as the people were coming out of church someone remarked with surprise:

"Look! Nina is beginning to look exactly like her mother!"

It was the truth, as clear as a day in May: Nuncia's little daughter had blossomed out, as bright a star as her mother. She was only fourteen, but very tall, with luxuriant hair and proud eyes and she looked much older than her years and quite ripe for womanhood.

Nuncia herself was amazed to look at her.

"Holy Madonna! Do you want to be more beautiful than me, Nina?"

The girl smiled. "No," she replied. "Only to be as beautiful as you, that is enough for me."

For the first time a shadow appeared on the face of the light-hearted woman, and that evening she said to her friends: "Such is life! Before you have drunk but half of your glass another hand reaches out for it...."

Of course no hint of rivalry was noticeable between mother and daughter at first. The daughter behaved with modesty and caution, she looked out at the world through her long lashes and rarely opened her mouth in the presence of men. And the mother's eyes burned more avidly, and her voice rang more seductively than ever.

Men grew flushed in her presence like sails at dawn when the first ray of the sun touches them, and true enough for many a one Nuncia was the first ray of love's day, and many watched with silent gratitude as she walked down the street beside her little cart, as straight and slender as a mast, her voice echoing over the roofs of the houses. She was lovely to look at on the market-place, too, as she stood before the vivid-hued heap of vegetables for all the world like a painting by some great master with the white church wall as the background—her place was by the church of San Giacomo, to the left of the steps, and she died within three paces of them. Lovely she was as she

stood there like a bright flame scattering her jokes, her laughter and songs—she knew thousands of them—like gay sparks over the heads of the crowd.

She knew how to dress in such a way that her clothes set off her beauty as a crystal goblet sets off good wine: the more transparent the glass the better it shows the soul of the wine, for colour always adds to the flavour and aroma, playing to the last note that glorious song without words which we drink in order to give our spirit a little of the sun's blood. Wine! Dear God, the world with all its noise and bustle would not be worth a donkey's hoof had man not the sweet opportunity to refresh his poor soul with a good glass of red wine which, like the holy Communion, purifies us of our sins and teaches us to love and forgive this world in which there is so much ugliness. Just look at the sun through your glass and the wine will tell you such tales as you ne'er dreamed of....

There stands Nuncia in the sunshine, inspiring those about her with happy thoughts and a longing to win her favour—no man can endure to remain in the background when there is a lovely woman nearby and so he tries to outdo himself. A great deal of good was done by Nuncia, many were the forces she awakened to life. Good always inspires a desire for better.

And so, more and more often now the daughter appears beside the mother, as modest as a nun, or as a dagger in a sheath. The men look and compare, and perhaps some of them begin to understand how a woman feels sometimes and how cruel life can be to her.

Time moves on, quickening its hasty steps, and in relation to time people are like the motes of dust in a sunbeam. Nuncia's thick eyebrows are more frequently knit, and at times, biting her lip, she looks at her daughter as one gambler looks at another, trying to guess what cards the other holds.

A year passed, then another, and the daughter drew ever nearer to her mother and ever farther from her. Now it was quite clear to everyone that the young men did

not know in which direction to cast their tender looks—at the one or the other.* And Nuncia's woman friends, than whom none can wound more unerringly, began to twit her:

"Nuncia, is your daughter going to outshine you?"

But Nuncia laughed and replied: "Big stars are visible even when the moon is out."

As a mother she was proud of her daughter's beauty, as a woman she could not but envy Nina's youth, for Nina stood between her and the sun, and the mother was loth to live in the shadow.

Lano invented a new song, its first verse went thus:

*Were I a man I'd make my girl
Give birth to such a beauty,
As I myself gave birth to once,
I did my woman's duty!*

Nuncia did not want to sing that song. It was rumoured that Nina had told her mother more than once: "We could live better if you were more prudent."

And the day came when the daughter said to her mother:

"Mother, you put me too much in the shade. I am not a child any more and I, too, want to live. You have had a gay time, is it not my turn to live now?"

"What is the matter?" the mother asked but she lowered her eyes guiltily, for she knew what it was.

About that time Enrico Borbone returned from Australia. He was a woodcutter in that wonderful land where big money was to be had for the wishing. He came home to warm himself for a while in the sun of his homeland and intended to return to the land where life was freer than at home. He was thirty-six, a jolly, bearded giant with a merry nature, and he told fascinating stories of his adventures and of life in the bush. Everyone thought he was telling fairy-tales, but the mother and daughter believed it all.

"I can see that Enrico likes me," said Nina. "But you flirt with him and that makes him thoughtless and spoils my chances."

"I understand," said Nuncia. "Very well, you shall have no cause to complain to the Madonna about your mother."

And she gave up this man whom everyone knew was dearer to her than many others.

But it is a well-known fact that easy victories have a way of turning the heads of the victors, especially if the victors are still very young.

Nina began to speak to her mother in a manner Nuncia had not deserved. And one day, on San Giacomo's Day it was, our holiday, when everyone was making merry and Nuncia had just danced the tarantella magnificently, her daughter remarked aloud for all to hear:

"Are you not dancing too much? At your age it might be bad for your heart...."

All who heard those insolent words spoken in a gentle voice fell silent for a moment and Nuncia cried out in anger, her hands on her slender hips:

"My heart? You are worried about my heart? Very well, child, thank you! But we shall see whose heart is stronger."

And considering for a moment, she proposed:

"I shall race you from here to the fountain three times there and back without stopping...."

Many thought the whole thing absurd, some indeed considered it scandalous, but the majority out of respect for Nuncia, supported her proposal with mock gravity, insisting that Nina accept her mother's challenge.

They chose judges and set a time limit—observing all the rules of the race. There were many men and women who sincerely wished the mother to win, gave her their blessing and exhorted the Madonna to help her and give her strength.

And now mother and daughter stood side by side, not looking at each other; the gong went, and they set off, racing along the street to the square like two large white birds, the mother wearing a red kerchief on her head, the daughter, a pale-blue one.

From the first minutes of the race it was quite clear

that the mother was both stronger and lighter on her feet than her daughter. Nuncia ran as easily and gracefully as if the earth itself carried her like a mother her child. People at the windows threw flowers on to the pavements at her feet and applauded and shouted encouragement to her. After the second lap she was more than four minutes ahead of her daughter, and Nina, crushed and upset by her defeat, dropped down panting and tearful on the church steps, unable to run a third time.

Nuncia, as fresh as a cat, bent over her, laughing with the others.

"Child," she said, stroking the girl's dishevelled hair with her strong hand. "You must know that the strongest heart in play, work and love is the heart of a woman tried by life, and that comes long after the age of thirty. So don't fret, child."

And without pausing to rest after the race, Nuncia asked for the music of the tarantella again:

"Who will dance with me?"

Enrico came forward, took off his hat, made a sweeping bow to this wonderful woman, bending his head reverently before her.

Then the tambourine began the throbbing, jangling beat of the fiery dance, as intoxicating as old, dark, mellow wine. Off went Nuncia, spinning and whirling, writhing like a serpent: well did she understand this dance of passion, and it was a sheer delight to see the lithe movements of her superb indomitable body.

She danced for a long time, and she danced with many. Her partners wearied but she could not have enough, and it was past midnight when she cried out:

"Come, once more Enrico, for the last time!" And slowly began to dance with him. Her eyes widened, shining with tender promise. Then suddenly she uttered a brief cry, threw up her arms and fell to the ground as if struck down.

The doctor said she died of heart failure.

Perhaps....

The island sleeps wrapped in silence. The sea too is deathly still; it is as if some mighty hand has hurled this black, queer-shaped rock from the skies into the bosom of the sea, crushing the life out of it.

Looking at the island from the sea, from where the golden arch of the Milky Way meets the dark waters, it resembles a blunt-browed beast crouched at the edge of the shore, its back arched, silently drinking the water still as oil.

These black nights of dead calm are quite common in December; nights so strangely still that one is loath to raise one's voice above a whisper lest the noise disturb something secretly brewing in the stony silence under the blue velvet of the night sky.

And it is in hushed voices that the two men seated among the chaos of rocks on the shore are conversing. One is a customs soldier in a dark uniform jacket with yellow piping and a short rifle slung at his back—he is there to prevent the peasants and fishermen from collecting the salt deposited by time in the fissures of the rocks. The other is an old fisherman, swarthy, clean-shaven like a Spaniard, with silvery sideburns and a nose as large and hooked as a parrot's.

The rocks seem wrought in silver that has been tarnished a little by the salt water.

The soldier is young and, being young, he speaks of what is nearest to his youthful heart. The old man replies lazily, at times sternly:

"Who makes love in December?" he says. "By this time of the year the children are being born...."

"Rubbish! When people are young they do not wait...."
"Well, they ought to."

"Did you?"

"I, my friend, was not a soldier. I worked and I experienced everything it is man's lot to experience in my time."

"I don't understand."

"You will, one day."

Sirius casts its blue reflection on the water not far from the shore. If you gaze at this pale light long enough you will see a cork buoy on the water as round as a human head and perfectly motionless.

"Why are you not sleeping?"

The old man throws open his old faded cape, and replies, with a cough:

"We have cast our nets here. See the buoy?"

"Yes, I see it now."

"Three days ago one of the nets was torn up."

"Dolphins?"

"In winter? No. A shark perhaps. Who knows?"

A small stone, loosened by the foot of some invisible animal, rolled down the hillside through the dry grasses and plopped noisily into the sea. The silent night pounced eagerly on the brief noise and echoed it back lovingly from its depth as if wishing to cherish the memory of it for ever.

The soldier began softly to sing a mocking ditty:

*Why do old men sleep ill?
Can you guess, Umberto?
Because in their youth
They drank too much wine....*

"Not me," growled the old man.

*What else makes the old sleep ill?
Does clever Berghito know?
Because when they were young
They did not love enough.*

"A good song, eh, Uncle Pasquale?"

"You will know the answer yourself when you've passed sixty. Why ask me?"

For a long time the two sat silent, in harmony with a world hushed by the night. Presently the old man took his pipe out of his mouth, knocked it against a stone and listening to the tapping, said:

"You young lads laugh well, but I doubt whether you know how to love as they did in the old days...."

"Bah! The old story. Love is always the same. I think."

"You think! But you do not know. Up there behind the hill lives the Senzamane family. Ask them to tell you the story of Grandfather Carlo. It will be good for your wife."

"Why should I ask strangers to tell me their story when you can tell it to me yourself?"

Somewhere an invisible night bird flew by and a curious sound, as if the dry rocks were being rubbed with a woollen cloth, stirred the air.

The darkness grew thicker, moister and warmer, the sky receded, and the stars shone brighter and brighter in the silvery haze of the Milky Way.

"In the olden days women were more highly prized...."

"Indeed? I didn't know that!"

"The menfolk often went to war...."

"Yes, and there were a great many widows...."

"Always there were pirates and soldiers, and every five years or so new rulers appeared in Naples. The women had to be kept under lock and key."

"It would be well to do the same nowadays too...."

"They used to steal them like chickens...."

"Though they're more like foxes if you ask me...."

The old man fell silent and lit his pipe. A cloud of white fragrant smoke hung in the motionless air. The match flared, lighting up the dark, crooked nose and the close-clipped moustache under it.

"Well, and what then?" the soldier asked drowsily.

"Keep quiet if you want to listen."

Sirius shone with such intensity that one might have thought the proud star wished to outshine all the other

heavenly bodies. The sea was spattered with gold dust and this faintly visible reflection of the sky enlivened a little the dark silent wilderness, lending it a shimmering glow. It was as if a thousand phosphorescent eyes shone out of the sea's depths.

"I am listening," said the soldier, impatient at the hurt silence of the fisherman, and the old man began to weave one of those tales that will always be listened to with interest.

"About a hundred years ago, on the top of that mountain up there where the pine-trees grow, there lived a hunchbacked old Greek named Echellani, a smuggler with a reputation for black magic. This Echellani has a son named Aristides who was a hunter, for in those days wild goats still roamed the island. The richest family here in those days were the Galiardis. Nowadays they use their grandfather's name, Senzamane. Half of the vineyards belonged to them; they owned eight wine cellars with more than a thousand barrels. In those days our white wine was valued highly even in France where, I am told, they don't know the value of anything but wine. Those French are all gamblers and drunkards, they even gambled away their king's head to the devil."

The soldier laughed softly and as if echoing his laughter there was a splash somewhere nearby. The two pricked up their ears and peered out toward the sea where faint ripples were receding from the shore.

"That's the fish nibbling at the hooks."

"Go on...."

"Yes.... The Galiardis. There were three brothers. My story is about the middle one, Carlone as he was called because of his big mouth and his thunderous voice. He had taken a fancy to the blacksmith's daughter Giulia, a very clever girl. Strong men are never clever, you know. For some reason or other their marriage had been postponed, and they waited impatiently for their wedding day. In the meantime the Greek's son, who also had his eye on Giulia, did not waste time. For a long time he had

tried to win her love, but she had repulsed his advances, and so he resolved to dishonour her in the hope that Carlone Galiardi would spurn her and then he would easily win her for himself. In those days people were stricter than they are now....”

“Well, nowadays too...”

“Loose living is the amusement of the idle rich, we here are all poor men,” the old man said sternly, and returning to the past, he went on:

“One day, as the girl was gathering the cut branches of the vines, the Greek’s son came by and pretending to have missed his footing on the hill path behind the wall of her vineyard, stumbled and fell heavily right at her feet. She, being a good Christian, knelt down beside him to find out whether he was hurt. He groaned.

“‘Giulia,’ he implored weakly. ‘Do not call for help, I beg you. I am afraid. If your jealous betrothed should find me here beside you he will kill me. Let me rest here a while and then I shall go....’

“Laying his head on her knees, he pretended to swoon. The frightened girl called for help, but when the people ran up, he suddenly sprang to his feet, as healthy as you please, acting as if he were greatly embarrassed and commenced loudly to protest his love for her and his honourable intentions, declaring that he would hide the girl’s shame by marrying her—in a word he made it appear as if, wearied by her caresses, he had fallen asleep in her lap. The gullible folk believed him in spite of the girl’s angry protests. They forgot that she herself had called for help. They did not know that it is in the nature of the Greek to be cunning, that the Devil himself christened the Greeks in order to confuse things for the Christians. The girl swore that the Greek lied, but he declared that she was simply ashamed to admit the truth, that she feared the heavy hand of Carlone. He convinced them, but the girl went raving mad. She snatched up stones and hurled herself at people, so they tied her up and the whole village set out for town. By this time

Carlone had heard her cries, he rushed to meet her, but when they told him what had happened, he fell on his knees before the crowd, then sprang up and struck his betrothed a blow on the face with his left hand and with the right he began to strangle the Greek. The people barely managed to tear him away."

"He was a fool," growled the soldier.

"The brains of an honest man are in his heart! I told you that all this happened in the winter just a few days before the feast of the birth of the infant Jesus. On that date people make gifts to one another of their excess wine, fruit, fish and fowl; everyone gives, and of course the poorest get the most. I do not remember how Carlone learned the truth, but he found out what had really happened and on the first day of the feast Giulia's mother and father, who had not left the house even to go to church, received only one present—a small basket of pine branches and among them—the left hand of Carlone Galiardi—the hand that had struck Giulia. They rushed in horror to his place and he met them kneeling on the threshold of his house, a blood-stained rag was bound around the arm stump, and he was weeping like a child.

"‘What have you done?’ they asked him.

"And he replied: ‘I have done what had to be done: the man who insulted my love cannot live, and I killed him. The hand that struck my innocent beloved, wronged me, and so I cut it off.... All I ask now, Giulia, is that you and yours forgive me....’

"Of course they forgave him, but there is still the law which exists also to protect scoundrels. Galiardi was sent to jail for two years for that Greek; and it cost his brothers very dearly to get him out of prison....

"Later he married Giulia and they lived happily together to a ripe old age, bringing a new name with them to the island—Senzamane, the Handless."

The old man fell silent, sucking hard at his pipe.

"I don't like that story," said the soldier. "That

Carlone of yours was a savage. And in general it was stupid."

"In a hundred years from now your life, too, will seem stupid," said the old man solemnly, and blowing out a cloud of white smoke, he added: "That is, if anyone will remember that you lived on this earth at all...."

Again a loud splash sounded in the stillness, violent and hasty this time. The old man threw off his cape, got up quickly and disappeared as if swallowed up by the water black and still but for the light ripples near the shore tinged with blue like silvery fish scales.

Night in velvet garments comes softly into the town from the meadows, and the town meets her with a myriad of golden lights. Two women and a youth are walking through the fields as if they, too, were meeting the night, and in their wake comes the muffled hum of the city retiring to rest after the day's toil.

Three pairs of feet shuffle softly over the dark slabs of the ancient road, paved by the polyglot gangs of Roman slaves and in the warm stillness a woman's voice rings out clear and tender:

"Do not be harsh in your dealing with people...."

"Have you ever known me to be harsh, Mother?" the youth asks thoughtfully.

"You argue with too much passion."

"I love the truth passionately."

On the youth's left hand walks a girl, her wooden shoes clicking against the stones. She walks as if she were blind, her face upraised to the sky where the evening star shines full and bright and beneath it is the reddish glow of the sunset and two poplars etched against the red like unlighted torches.

"Socialists are often sent to prison," says the mother with a sigh.

"It won't be always so," the son replies calmly. "It is no use...."

"Yes, but in the meantime...."

"There is no force that can destroy the young heart of the world, and never will be...."

"Those are fit words for a song, my child...."

"Millions are singing that song, Mother, and the whole world is harkening to it more and more.... You yourself never used to listen to me or Paolo so patiently and kindly as you do now."

"Yes! Yes... but the strike has driven you from your native town...."

"It is too small for the two of us. Let Paolo remain! But we won the strike...."

"Yes," the girl responded warmly. "You and Paolo...."

She broke off and began to laugh softly, then they all walked on for a minute or two in silence. The ruins of some building emerged from the darkness ahead of them. Over it a sweet-scented eucalyptus spread its slender branches, and when the three came up to it, a faint tremor rustled the branches.

"Here is Paolo," said the girl.

A tall dark figure detached itself from the ruins and came out into the middle of the road.

"Did your heart sense his presence?" asked the youth, laughing.

"Is it you?" came the man's voice like an echo.

"Yes. Here they are. You need not come any further with me. It is only a five hours' walk to Rome, and I chose to go on foot so as to collect my thoughts on the way...."

They stopped. The tall man took off his hat.

"Don't worry about your mother and sister," he said in a hoarse voice. "All will be well!"

"I know. Good-bye, Mother!"

She sobbed and moaned softly. Then three kisses sounded and a manly voice said: "Go home and rest, you have had a trying time. Go, and all be well! Paolo is as much a son to you as I. Well, little sister...."

Again the kisses and the dry rustle of feet on the stones—in the watchful stillness of the night all sounds were reflected back as in a mirror.

The dark shapes enveloped in gloom merged together and could not separate for some time. Then in silence they tore themselves apart: the three moved slowly back toward the city lights, and one strode swiftly ahead to the west, where the sunset glow had faded and a myriad of stars lit up the sky.

"Farewell!" the sorrowful cry rang softly in the night. And from afar a cheerful voice responded: "Farewell! Do not be sad, we shall soon meet again...."

The girl's wooden shoes beat hollowly on the pavement, and the young man spoke comforting words in a husky voice:

"He will be all right, Donna Filomena, you may be as sure of that as of the grace of Our Lady. He has a good head and a stout heart. He knows how to love and to make others love him.... And love for one's fellow men gives a man wings to soar above everything...."

The city scatters more and more of her pale lights into the darkness. The tall man's words, too, glow like sparks.

"A man who carries in his heart the word that unites men the world over will always find people who will welcome him—always!"

Just outside the city walls crouched a low white tavern staring invitingly at the passers-by with the square eye of its lighted doorway. Around three small tables at the entrance dark figures were noisily making merry to the accompaniment of a throbbing guitar and the metallic twang of a mandolin.

The music ceased as the three came up to the door, the voices dropped lower, and several of the figures rose.

"Good evening, comrades!" cried the tall man in greeting.

And a dozen voices responded fervently:

"Good evening, Paolo, comrade! Will you join us? A glass of wine?"

"No... thanks!"

The mother said with a sigh: "Our people love you too."

"Our people, Donna Filomena?"

"Ah, do not laugh at me. I am not a stranger to my own kind. They all love you: you and him...."

The tall man took the girl's arm. "All and one more," he said. "Am I right?"

"Yes," said the girl softly. "Of course."

Then the mother laughed. "Ah, my children. When I look at you and listen to you I cannot help believing that yours will surely be a better life than ours...."

And all three disappeared down the city street, which was as narrow and shabby as the sleeve of an old, threadbare garment.

It had been raining heavily since early morning but by midday the clouds had spent themselves, their dark fabric grew threadbare, and the wind tore it into a host of filmy shreds and blew it out to the sea, where it was woven again into a dense bluish-grey mass that cast a thick shadow on the rain-calmed water.

In the east the dark sky was rent by flashes of lightning while a magnificent sun threw its blinding light over the island.

Seen from far out at sea the island must have looked like a rich temple on a feast day; everything so radiantly clean, decked with bright flowers, and the big raindrops glistening everywhere, like topazes on the yellowish young leaves of the vines, amethysts on the clusters of wistaria, rubies on the scarlet geraniums and like emeralds strewn in rich profusion over the grass, the green underbrush and the leaves of the trees.

The world was hushed with the stillness that comes after rain; the only sound was the gentle babble of the brook hidden amid the rocks and under the roots of the euphorbia, dewberry and fragrant, twining clematis. Down below, the sea murmured softly.

The golden shafts of the furze pointed skywards and swayed gently, weighted with moisture, which they shook noiselessly from their fantastic blossoms.

Against the lush green background, the light-purple wistaria vied with the blood-red geraniums and roses, the rusty yellow brocade of the clematis blossoms mingled with the dark velvet of the irises and gillyflowers, and it was all so vivid and glowing that the flowers seemed to be singing like violins, flutes and passionate 'cellos.

The moist air was fragrant and as heady as old wine.

Under a grey rock, jagged and torn by blasting, the stains of oxidized iron showing in the cracks, amid grey and yellow boulders exuding the sourish smell of dynamite, four quarrymen, husky fellows in damp rags and leather sandals, sat partaking of their midday meal.

They ate slowly and heartily out of a large bowl filled with the tough meat of the octopus fried in olive oil with potatoes and tomatoes, and washed it down with red wine quaffed in turn from a bottle.

Two of the men were clean-shaven and resembled each other sufficiently to be brothers, twins even; the third was a small, bow-legged, one-eyed chap with quick nervous gestures that made him look like an old scraggy bird; the fourth was a broad-shouldered, bearded, hook-nosed man of middle age with an abundant sprinkling of grey in his hair.

Breaking off large chunks of bread, the latter smoothed out his wine-stained whiskers and thrust a piece of bread into the dark cavern of his mouth.

"That's nonsense," he was saying, his hairy jaws working methodically. "It's a lie. I haven't done anything wrong...."

His brown eyes under their thick brows had an unhappy mocking expression. His voice was heavy and gruff, his speech slow and reluctant. Everything about him—his hat, his hairy, coarse-featured face, his large hands and his dark-blue suit spattered with white rock powder—indicated that he was the one who drilled the holes in the mountainside for blasting.

His three workmates listened attentively to what he was saying; they did not interrupt him but looked up at him from time to time as if to say: "Go on...."

And he went on, his grey eyebrows moving up and down as he spoke:

"That man, Andrea Grasso, they called him, came to our village like a thief in the night; he was dressed in rags, his hat was the colour of his boots and as tattered. He was greedy, shameless and cruel. And seven years later our

elders were doffing their hats to him while he barely gave them a nod. And everyone for forty miles around was in debt to him."

"Yes, there are such people," remarked the bow-legged one, sighing and shaking his head.

The narrator glanced at him.

"So you've met that kind too?" he inquired mockingly.

The old man made an eloquent gesture, the two clean-shaven men grinned in unison, the hook-nosed blaster took a draught of wine and went on, watching the flight of a falcon in the blue sky:

"I was thirteen when he hired me along with some others to haul stones for his house. He treated us worse than animals, and when my pal Lukino told him so he said: 'My ass is mine while you are a stranger to me, why should I be kind to you?' Those words were like a knife-thrust to me, and from that time on I began to watch him more closely. He was mean and brutal to everybody, even the old men and women, it made no difference to him. I could see that. And when decent folk told him he was behaving badly he laughed in their faces: 'When I was poor,' he said, 'no one treated me any better.' He took up with priests, carabinieri and policemen, the rest of the people saw him only when they were in grave trouble and then he could do what he liked with them."

"Yes, there are people like that," repeated the bow-legged one softly and all three glanced at him in sympathy: one of the clean-shaven workers silently handed him the wine bottle, the old man took it, held it up to the light and before putting it to his lips, said:

"I drink to the sacred heart of the Madonna!"

"He often used to say that the poor have always worked for the rich and the fools for the wise, and that is how it must be always."

The story-teller laughed and stretched out his hand for the bottle. It was empty. He threw it carelessly on to the stones alongside the hammers, picks and a coil of fuse.

"I was a youngster then and I resented those words

deeply. So did my workmates, for they killed our hopes, our desire for a better life. Late one night I and Lukino, my friend, met him as he was crossing the field on horseback. We stopped him and said politely but firmly: "We ask you to be kinder to people."

The clean-shaven fellows burst out laughing and the one-eyed one too chuckled softly, while the narrator heaved a deep sigh:

"Yes, of course, it was stupid! But youth is honest. Youth believes in the power of the word. You might say that youth is life's conscience...."

"Well, and what did he say?" asked the old man.

"He yelled: 'Let go of my horse, you scoundrels!' And he pulled out a pistol and pointed it at us. We said: 'You have no need to fear us, Grasso. And don't be angry. We are merely giving you a piece of advice!'"

"Now that was good!" said one of the clean-shaven men, and the other nodded in agreement; the bow-legged one pursed his lips and stared at a stone, stroking it with his crooked fingers.

The meal was over. One of the men amused himself by knocking the crystalline raindrops off the blades of grass with a thin stick, another looked on, picking his teeth with a dry grass stalk. The air grew drier and hotter. The brief shadows of noon were melting rapidly. The sea murmured a gentle accompaniment to the solemn tale:

"That encounter had unpleasant consequences for Lukino. His father and uncle were in debt to Grasso. Poor Lukino grew thin and haggard, he ground his teeth and his eyes lost the brightness that had once attracted the girls. 'Ah,' he said to me once, 'that was a foolish thing we did that day. Words are worth nothing when addressed to a wolf!' 'Lukino is ready for murder,' I thought to myself. I was sorry for the lad and his good family. But I was poor myself and all alone in the world, for my mother had died shortly before."

The hook-nosed worker brushed his moustache and beard with his lime-stained fingers, and as he did so a

heavy silver ring gleamed on the forefinger of his left hand.

"I might have done a service to my fellowmen if I had been able to carry the thing to the end, but I am softhearted. One day, meeting Grasso on the street, I walked alongside him and speaking as humbly as I could, said: 'You are a mean, greedy fellow, it is hard for folks to live with you, you are liable to push someone's hand and that hand may reach for a knife. My advice to you is to go away from here.' 'You're a fool, young man!' he said, but I kept insisting. 'Listen,' he said with a laugh, 'how much will you take to leave me in peace? Will a lira be enough?' That was an insult but I controlled my anger. 'Go away from here, I tell you!' I insisted. We were walking shoulder to shoulder, I on his right. When I wasn't looking he drew out his knife and stuck me with it. You can't do much with your left hand, so it went into my chest only one inch deep. Naturally I flung him to the ground and kicked him the way you would kick a hog.

"Now perhaps you will take my advice!" I said as he writhed on the ground."

The two clean-shaven fellows threw an incredulous glance at the speaker and dropped their eyes. The bow-legged one bent over to tie the leather thongs of his sandals.

"The next morning when I was still in bed the carabinieri came and took me to the sheriff who was a pal of Grasso's. 'You are an honest man, Ciro,' he said, 'so you will not deny that you tried to murder Grasso last night.' I said that was not exactly the truth, but they have their own way of looking at things. So they kept me in jail for two months before I was brought to trial and then they sentenced me to a year and eight months. 'Very well,' I told the judges, 'but that isn't the end of it!'"

He drew a fresh bottle from its cache among the stones and thrusting it under his moustaches took a long draught of the wine; his hairy Adam's apple moved

thirstily up and down and his beard bristled. Three pairs of eyes watched him in grave silence.

"It's boring to talk about it," he said handing the bottle to his workmates and smoothing his moist beard.

"When I returned to the village I saw there was no room for me there; everyone was afraid of me. Lukino told me that things had got even worse that year. He was sick to death of it all, the poor lad. 'Very well,' I said to myself and went to see that man Grasso. He was terribly scared when he saw me. 'Well, I'm back,' I said. 'Now it's your turn to go away!' He snatched up his rifle and fired but it was loaded with bird shot and he aimed at my legs. I didn't even fall. 'Even if you had killed me I would come and haunt you from the grave,' I told him. 'I have sworn to the Madonna that I shall get you out of here. You are stubborn, but so am I.' We got into a scuffle and before I knew it I had accidentally broken his arm. I hadn't intended to do him violence and he had attacked me first. A crowd gathered and I was taken away. This time I got three years and nine months and when my term ended, the warden, who knew the whole story and liked me, tried hard to persuade me not to go back home. He offered me a job with his son-in-law who had a big plot of land and a vineyard in Apulia. But I, naturally, could not give up what I had undertaken. So I went home, this time firmly resolved not to indulge in any useless chatter, for I had learned by then that nine words out of ten are superfluous. I had only one thing to say to him: 'Get out!' I arrived in the village on a Sunday and went straight to Mass. Grasso was there. As soon as he saw me he jumped up and yelled all over the church: 'That man has come here to kill me, citizens, the devil has sent him for my soul!' I was surrounded before I had time to touch him, before I had time to tell him what I wanted. But it didn't matter for he fell on to the stone floor in a fit and his right side and his tongue were paralyzed. He died seven weeks later.... That's all. And folks invented a sort of legend about me. Very terrible, but a lot of nonsense."

He chuckled, looked up at the sun and said:
"Time to get started...."

In silence the other three rose slowly to their feet; the hook-nosed worker stared at the rusty, oily cracks in the rock and said: "Let's get to work...."

The sun was at its zenith and all the shadows had shrivelled up and vanished.

The clouds on the horizon sank into the sea whose waters had grown calmer and bluer than before.

Pepe is ten, he is as frail, slender and quick as a lizard, his motley rags hang from his narrow shoulders, and the skin, blackened by sun and dirt, peeps through innumerable rents.

He looks like a dried-up blade of grass, which the sea breeze blows hither and thither. From sunrise to sunset Pepe leaps from stone to stone on the island and hourly one can hear his tireless little voice pouring forth:

*Italy the Beautiful,
Italy my own!*

Everything interests him: the flowers that grow in riotous profusion over the good earth, the lizards that dart among the purple boulders, the birds amid the chiselled perfection of the olive-tree leaves and the malachite tracery of the vines, the fish in the dark gardens at the sea bottom and the foreigners on the narrow, crooked streets of the town: the fat German with the sword-scarred face, the Englishman who always reminds one of an actor in the role of a misanthrope, the American who endeavours in vain to look like an Englishman, and the inimitable Frenchman as noisy as a rattle.

"What a face!" Pepe remarks to his playmates, with his keen eyes at the German, who is so puffed out with importance that his very hair seems to stand on end. "Why, he's got a face as big as my belly!"

Pepe doesn't like Germans, he shares the ideas and sentiments of the streets, the squares and the dark little saloons where the townsfolk drink wine, play cards, read the papers and discuss politics.

"The Balkan Slavs," they say, "are much closer to us poor southerners than our good allies who presented us

with the sands of Africa in reward for our friendship.⁶"

The simple folk of the south are saying this more and more often, and Pepe hears everything and forgets nothing.

Here is a dull Englishman, striding along on his scissor-like legs. Pepe in front of him is humming something like a funeral dirge or just a mournful ditty:

*My friend has died,
My wife is sad....
And I do not know
What ails her.*

Pepe's playmates trail along behind convulsed with laughter, scurrying like mice to hide in the bushes or behind walls whenever the foreigner glances at them calmly with his faded eyes.

One could tell a host of entertaining stories about Pepe.

One day some signora sent him to her friend with a basket of apples from her garden.

"I will give you a soldo!" she said. "You can well use it."

Pepe readily picked up the basket, balanced it on his head and set off. Not until evening did he return for the soldo.

"You were in no great hurry," the woman remarked

"Ah, dear signora, but I am so tired!" Pepe replied with a sigh. "You see there were more than ten of them!"

"Why, of course, there were more than ten! It was a full basket!"

"Not apples, signora, boys."

"But what about the apples?"

"First the boys, signora: Michele, Giovanni...."

The woman grew angry. She seized Pepe by the shoulder and shook him:

"Answer me, did you deliver the apples?" she cried

"I carried them all the way to the square, signora!"

Listen how well I behaved. At first I paid no attention to their jibes. Let them compare me to a donkey, I told myself, I will endure it all out of respect for the signora, for you, signora. But when they began to poke fun at my mother, I decided I had had enough. I put the basket down and you ought to have seen, good signora, how neatly I pelted those little devils with those apples. You would have enjoyed it!"

"They stole my fruit!" cried the woman.

Pepe heaved a mournful sigh.

"Oh, no," he said, "the apples that missed were smashed against the wall, but the rest we ate after I had beaten my enemies and made peace with them...."

The woman loosed a flood of abuse on Pepe's small shaven head. He listened attentively and humbly, clicking his tongue now and again in admiration at some particularly choice expression. "Oho, that's a beauty! What language!"

And when at last her anger had spent itself and she left him, he shouted after her:

"You wouldn't have felt that way if you saw how beautifully I swatted the filthy heads of those good-for-nothings with those wonderful apples of yours. If only you could have seen it, why you'd have given me two soldi instead of one!"

The silly woman did not understand the modest pride of the victor, she merely shook her fist at him.

Pepe's sister who was much older, but not smarter than he, went to work as housemaid in a villa owned by a rich American. Her appearance altered at once; she became neat and tidy, her cheeks became rosy, and she began to bloom and ripen like a pear in August.

"Do you really eat every day?" her brother once asked her.

"Twice and three times a day if I wish," she replied proudly.

"See you don't wear out your teeth," Pepe advised.

"Is your master very wealthy?" he inquired after a pause.

"Oh, yes, I believe he is richer than the king!"

"You can't fool me! How many pairs of trousers has he got?"

"Hard to say."

"Ten?"

"More, perhaps...."

"Then bring me a pair, not too long in the leg but the warmest you can find," said Pepe.

"What for?"

"Well, just look at mine!"

There was indeed not much to see, for little enough remained of Pepe's trousers.

"Yes," his sister agreed, "you really need some clothes! But won't he think we have stolen them?"

"Don't imagine that folks are sillier than we are!" Pepe reassured her. "When you take a little from someone who has a lot, that isn't stealing, it's just sharing."

"You're talking nonsense," his sister objected, but Pepe soon overcame her scruples and when she came into the kitchen with a good pair of light-grey trousers, which were, of course, far too large for Pepe, he knew at once how to overcome that difficulty.

"Give me a knife!" he said.

Together they quickly converted the American's trousers into a very convenient costume for the boy; the result of their efforts was a somewhat loose, baggy but not uncomfortable sack attached to the shoulders by bits of string that could be tied around the neck, with the trouser pockets serving as sleeves.

They might have turned out an even better and more convenient garment had the wife of the owner of the trousers not interrupted their labours. She came into the kitchen and began to give vent to a string of very ugly words in many languages, pronounced equally badly, as is customary with Americans.

Pepe could do nothing to check the flow of eloquence;

he frowned, pressed his hand to his heart, clutched despairingly at his head and sighed loudly, but she did not calm down until her husband appeared on the scene.

"What's up?" he asked.

Whereupon Pepe spoke up:

"Signor, I am greatly astonished by the commotion your signora has raised, in fact I am somewhat offended for your sake. As far as I can see she thinks that we have spoiled the trousers, but I assure you that they are just right for me! She seems to think that I have taken your last pair of trousers and that you cannot buy yourself another pair...."

The American, who had listened imperturbably to the speech, now remarked:

"And I think, young man, that I ought to call the police."

"Really," Pepe queried in amazement, "what for?"

"To take you to jail...."

Pepe was extremely hurt. In fact, he was ready to cry, but he swallowed his tears and said with great dignity:

"If, signor, it gives you pleasure to send people to jail, that is your affair! But I would not do that if I had many pairs of trousers and you had none! I would give you two, perhaps even three pairs; although it is impossible to wear three pairs of trousers at once! Especially in hot weather...."

The American burst out laughing, for even rich men can sometimes see a joke. Then he treated Pepe to some chocolate and gave him a franc piece. Pepe bit at the coin and thanked the donor:

"Thank you, signor! The coin is genuine, I presume?"

But Pepe is at his best when he stands alone somewhere among the rocks, pensively examining their cracks as if reading the dark history of rock life. At such moments his vivid eyes are dilated and filmy with wonder, his slender hands are laced behind his back and his head, slightly bent, sways a little from side to side like a flower

in the breeze. And under his breath he softly hums a tune, for he is for ever singing.

It is good also to watch him looking at flowers, at the wistaria blossoms that pour in purple profusion over the walls. He stands as taut as a violin string as if he were listening to the soft tremor of the silken petals stirred by the breath of the sea breeze.

As he looks he sings: "Fiorino.... Fiorino...."

And from afar, like the sound of some huge tam-bourine, comes the muffled sigh of the sea. Butterflies chase one another over the flowers. Pepe raises his head and follows their flight, blinking in the sunlight, his lips parted in a smile tinged a little with envy and sadness, yet the generous smile of a superior being on earth.

"Cho!" he cries, clapping his hands to frighten an emerald lizard.

And when the sea is as placid as a mirror and the rocks are bare of the white lacy spume of the tide, Pepe, seated on a stone, gazes with his bright eyes into the transparent water where among the reddish seaweed the fish glide smoothly, the shrimps dart back and forth and the crab crawls along sideways. And in the stillness the clear voice of the boy pours gently forth over the azure waters:

"Sea, oh, Sea...."

Adults often shake their heads disapprovingly at Pepe, saying: "That one will be an anarchist!"

But kinder folk, possessed of greater discernment, are of a different opinion:

"Pepe will be our poet...."

And Pasqualino, the cabinet-maker, an old man with a head that seems cast in silver and a face like those etched on ancient Roman coins—wise and respected Pasqualino has his own opinion:

"Our children will be far better than we, and their lives will be better too!"

Many folk believe him.

Through the gloom of a moonless Saturday before Easter a woman shrouded in black slowly made her way through the narrow slits of alleys in the town's outskirts. The hood over her head hid her face from view, and the ample folds of the loose cape made her look inordinately tall; she walked in silence, the very personification of the uttermost depths of sorrow.

Behind her, at the same slow pace, came the musicians—a group so compact as to seem like a single body—and above them floated the awesome brass mouths of their instruments, some extended forward horribly, others raised up to the black sky in supplication, and all blaring, groaning: the clarinets sang their doleful song nasally like so many monks at the end of a long, sleepless vigil, and the bassoon recalled an ill wind moaning in the eaves; the cornet-à-piston added its raucous wail and was echoed by the despondent French horns; the saxhorn intoned its sorrowful chant, and the big drum beat out the measure of the sombre march, while the dry rat-a-tat of the little drum merged with the shuffling of hundreds of feet over the paving stones.

The brass gleamed with a yellow, lifeless lustre, the men caught in its toils looked like some strange monsters from another world, and the wood winds jutted out snout-like from the knot of musicians forming the head of the enormous black snake that slithered painfully through the narrow streets of grey-walled houses.

Every now and then this strange procession, marking Christ's passions, poured into one of the tiny irregular squares that look so much like holes worn by time in the stone garb of the city, and then squeezed once more into the narrow slit of a street as if in a vain effort to force its

walls apart. Hour after hour the sinister serpent, each of whose segments was a living human body, crawled through the city under the silent dome of the heavens, following the mysterious figure of the woman.

Silent, black-garbed, encased in an impenetrable armour of sorrow, she continued her quest in the gloom of night, carrying the imagination of the spectator deep into the darkness of ancient beliefs, reminding one of Isis whose brother and husband fell victim to the evil Seth, until her strange figure seemed to emanate an aura of blackness that immersed everything around in the murk of long ago revived this night in order to impress on man his bond with the past.

The funereal strains echoed against the windows, sending tremors through the glass, yet the sound of the music and the low murmur of voices was muted by the shuffling of thousands of feet against the paving stones. The stones were hard underfoot, yet the earth seemed shaky and the world small, a heavy smell of humanity hung over it, and one's eyes kept turning to the sky where the stars glowed dimly through a pall of mist.

But now a red reflection of light gleamed on the black rectangles of windows on a high wall in the distance—gleamed, disappeared, flashed again, and a suppressed murmur passed through the throng as a spring breeze through forest thickets:

“They’re coming.... They’re coming....”

Somewhere ahead new sounds had been born and were now gaining in volume—sounds less sombre, and the light there was growing brighter too. The woman seemed to have quickened her steps and the crowd surged forward at a livelier pace to keep up with her, even the musicians missed a beat and for a moment the melody faltered, its pattern broken; a hasty flute piped a false high note, evoking a ripple of soft laughter.

The next moment, with the unexpectedness of a fairy-tale, a small square opened up ahead with two figures lit up by torches and Bengal lights in the middle.

One was the familiar fair-haired figure of Christ in flowing white robes, and the other, his favourite disciple, John, in a blue tunic. Around them milled dark shapes with flaming torches in their hands, their swarthy southern features illuminated by a smile of sublime joy—joy they themselves had conjured into being and exulted in.

Christ, too, was in gay spirits. With one hand he held the instrument of his death decked in flowers, and with the other he gesticulated as he spoke. John, young, beardless, handsome as Adonis, threw back his head with the flowing curls and laughed.

The crowd spilled on to the square like liquid oil and formed a circle around the two, while the woman, black as cloudy night, seemed to rise and float up to Christ. On reaching him she stopped and threw back her hood, and her black shroud settled cloud-like to her feet.

In the gay, exultant light of the flickering torches the falling hood revealed the radiant, golden head of the Madonna, and from under her cloak and from the hands of the figures closest to the Mother of God scores of white doves rose with flashing wings to the dark sky. Indeed, for a moment it seemed that the woman garbed in white gleaming with silver and garlanded with flowers, the white, almost transparent Christ and the blue John—all three figures of a mien so strange and unearthly—floated to heaven in the living flutter of the dove's wings as if surrounded by cherubims. "Gloria, Madonna, gloria!" the cry from a thousand throats rose from the dark mass of the throng, and the world underwent a magic transformation: lights blazed in all the windows, uplifted arms raised torches over the heads of the crowd, golden sparks showered down everywhere, green, red and purple lights burst forth, the pigeons wheeled overhead and all faces were turned up as the crowd shouted in rapture:

"Gloria, Madonna, gloria!"

The walls of the houses trembled in the play of light, and children and women, both young and old, appeared

in all the windows. Their bright-coloured holiday garb blossomed out like enormous flowers, while the silver-robed Madonna, standing between John and Christ, seemed to be aflame and melting away—one now saw she had large pink-and-white features, huge eyes, a crown of golden hair falling in two luxuriant cascades of fine curls to her shoulders. Christ was laughing gaily as befits the resurrected and the blue-eyed Madonna smiled and shook her head as John seized a torch and waved it, scattering sparks around him—he was still a mere boy, sharp-eyed, lithe and agile like a bird, and evidently enjoyed a prank.

All three laughed infectiously as only those can laugh who dwell under the southern sun, on the shores of the merry sea, and looking at them, the people around laughed too—these people who know how to make merry, who have the gift of creating beauty out of everything, and who themselves are the most beautiful spectacle of all.

The children were there of course. They fluttered about at the feet of the three figures just as the white birds fluttered in the air above them, shouting in their resounding, gay, excited voices:

“Gloria, Madonna, gloria!”

The old women were praying. They looked at the trinity as lovely as a dream, and although they knew very well that Christ was a carpenter from the via Pisacane, John, a watch-maker, and the Madonna, none other than the gold-embroiderer Anita Bragaglia, they prayed, whispering with their withered lips warm words of gratitude to the Madonna for everything, and most of all for existing....

The sound of solemn singing carried from the distance and the words of the old familiar song came to mind:

“Of death we celebrate the death....”

Day was breaking. The gaily ringing church bells vied with one another to proclaim that Christ, the God of Spring, had risen from the dead. In the square the musicians closed ranks and music blared forth, and in step with it many moved on toward the churches where the

organs were also singing deep-throated praises to the resurrected God of Spring and a multitude of birds, brought along by people to be released at this solemn moment, were flitting under the domes.

It is a grand tradition, this custom of making birds, the purest of all living creatures, party to man's finest fête; a wondrous melody fills the heart at the sight of these hundreds of tiny winged beings in their multicoloured plumage flying about the church, twittering, trilling, perching on the cornices and statues, flitting every now and then down to the altar.

The square grew deserted. The three radiant figures had started some melodious song and walked down the street arm in arm, followed by the musicians, and those by the throng. The children scampered after them looking in the light of the multi-coloured festive illumination like so many coral beads broken off their string. As for the pigeons, they had perched on the roof tops and eaves and were cooing.

And again the words of the good old song came to mind:

"Christ is arisen...."

And we all shall rise from the dead, invoking death upon death.

Childhood

On the floor beneath the window of a small, dusky room lay my father, remarkably long and all dressed in white; the toes of his bare feet were strangely widespread, and the fingers of his gentle hands, now quietly crossed on his breast, were likewise distorted. The dark discs of copper coins closed his laughing eyes, his kind face had become livid, and I was terrified by the glint of his set teeth.

My mother, in a red skirt but little else, was kneeling beside him, combing back his soft hair with the black comb I had used as a saw to cut through the rind of watermelons. She kept muttering something in a deep, hoarse voice; her grey eyes were swollen and seemed melting into large tears.

My hand was being held by my grandmother—a roundish woman with a large head, enormous eyes, and a funny, fleshy nose. She was all soft and dark and fascinating. She, too, was weeping, but in a peculiar way that formed a pleasant accompaniment to my mother. She trembled all over and kept pushing me towards my father, but I hung back, hiding behind her skirts. I was afraid and uncomfortable.

I had never before seen grownups cry and did not understand the words my grandmother kept saying to me:

“Go take your leave of your daddy. You’ll never see him again. He’s died, my darling, before his time, before his hour....”

I had just recovered from a serious illness, during which my father—I remembered that very well—had come and played with me merrily. But suddenly he disappeared and his place was taken by this strange woman who was my grandmother.

"Did you have to walk far to get here?" I asked her.

"I didn't walk, I rode. You don't walk on the water, you fig," she answered. "I came down from the Lower,* higher up."

This sounded very funny and mixed up: higher up in our house lived some bearded, painted Persians, while below, in the cellar lived an old yellow-skinned Kalmyk who sold sheepskins. You could come downstairs without walking by sliding down the banister, or if you fell, you could tumble down head over heels—I knew this well enough. But where did the water come in? She was all wrong and crazily mixed up.

"Why am I a fig?"

"Because you're so big," was her laughing retort.

She had a kind, bright, lilting manner of speech. From the very first day she and I became great friends, and now I wanted both of us to get out of this room as fast as we could.

My mother upset me. Her tears and wailing filled me with unwonted alarms. I had never seen her like this before; ordinarily she was a stern woman, who wasted no words. She was clean and smooth and large as a mare; she had a firm body and exceedingly strong hands. But now she was unpleasantly swollen and dishevelled. Her clothes were torn, and her hair, usually piled into such a neat, bright cap on top of her head, straggled over her bare shoulders and into her eyes, with one braid swinging into my father's sleeping face. I had been standing in the room for some time, but not once had she so much as glanced at me, absorbed as she was in combing my father's hair and sobbing.

A policeman glanced into the room, along with some dark-haired muzhiks.

"Hurry and lay him out," cried the policeman irritably.

* "The Lower" is the translation of "Nizhni"—short form of "Nizhni-Novgorod".—Tr.

The window was hung with a dark shawl which blew out like a sail. Once when my father had taken me for a ride in a sailboat there had come an unexpected crash of thunder. My father had laughed, pressed me between his knees, and cried:

"That's all right, don't be afraid, son!"

Suddenly my mother sprang up heavily, then fell on her back, her hair streaming over the floor, her sightless face livid, her teeth clenched like those of my father.

"Lock the door—take Alexei out," she gasped in an awful voice.

My grandmother pushed me aside as she rushed toward the door.

"Don't be afraid, good people!" she cried. "Don't touch her! Go away, for the love of Christ; it's not the cholera! It's the birth pains beginning! Take pity, good people!"

I hid behind a trunk in a dark corner, from where I could watch my mother writhing on the floor, moaning and grinding her teeth, while my grandmother crawled about, murmuring tenderly and happily:

"In the name of the Father and the Son! Try to bear it, Varya! Holy Mother of God, merciful patron...."

I was terrified. They kept fussing on the floor near my father, groaning and crying and bumping into him, but he lay there motionless, seeming to laugh at them. This kept up for a long time. Several times my mother struggled to her feet, only to fall back again; my grandmother bounced in and out of the room like a great black ball; suddenly a baby cried in the darkness.

"Thank God," breathed my grandmother. "A boy!"

She lighted a candle.

I must have fallen asleep in the corner, for I remember nothing else.

My next vivid recollection is of a deserted spot in a cemetery on a rainy day; I was standing on a slippery mound of earth gazing down the hole into which they had lowered my father's coffin. The bottom of the hole was

filled with water and frogs—two of them had jumped on to the yellow lid of the coffin.

The only people at the grave were the dripping policeman, two grumpy men with spades, my grandmother and I. All of us were bathed in a fine spray of rain.

"Dig it in," said the policeman, moving away.

My grandmother wept, covering her face with the ends of her shawl. The men bent over and threw the first spadefuls of dirt into the hole. The water splashed and the frogs began to leap against the walls of the grave, but the clumps of earth beat them back.

"Get away, Alyosha," said my grandmother, taking me by the shoulder. I slipped out of her grasp, because I did not want to go away.

"Oh Lord," she sighed, in a tone which left some doubt as to whether she was complaining about me or the Lord. For a long time she stood there silent, with lowered head; even when the grave was entirely filled in she kept on standing there.

The men packed the earth with the backs of their spades; a wind rose and drove the rain away. Grandmother took me by the hand and led me to a distant church standing among a forest of dark crosses.

"Why don't you cry?" she asked me when we were outside the cemetery. "You ought to cry."

"I don't feel like it," I said.

"Well, if you don't feel like it, you needn't," she answered quietly.

It was most surprising that she should have told me to cry. I rarely cried, and then only when my feelings were hurt—never from bodily pain. My father had always laughed at my tears, but my mother had shouted:

"Don't you dare cry!"

After that we rode in a droshky down a wide, muddy street between dark red houses.

"Won't the frogs get out?" I asked.

"No they won't, God bless them," she answered.

Neither my mother nor father had ever spoken the name of God so frequently and with such familiarity.

A few days later my mother and grandmother and I were travelling in the small cabin of a boat. My infant brother Maxim had died and was lying on the table in the corner wrapped in white, tied with a red ribbon.

I sat on top of our trunks and bundles, looking out of the round bulging window that reminded me of the eye of a horse. Murky foaming water kept running past the pane. Now and then it would leap up and lick it, at which times I would instinctively jump down to the floor.

"Don't be afraid," said my grandmother, lifting me up in her soft arms and putting me back on the bundles.

A moist grey fog hung over the water; every once in a while a dark strip of land would emerge from the fog, only to dissolve again. Everything about us was shaking. Only my mother stood firm and motionless, leaning against the wall with her hands behind her head, her eyes tightly closed. Her face was dark and grim and sightless. She never spoke a word, and seemed somehow new and different. Even the dress she was wearing was unfamiliar to me.

Every once in a while my grandmother would say to her softly:

"If you'd only have a bite to eat, Varya ... just a wee bite...."

But my mother remained silent and motionless.

Grandmother spoke to me in a whisper; she spoke a bit louder to my mother, but timidly and cautiously, and very rarely. It seemed to me that she was afraid of my mother. I could understand this, and it drew me all the closer to my grandmother.

"Saratov," said my mother in an unexpectedly loud, harsh voice. "Where's the sailor?"

Even her words were strange and unfamiliar—"Saratov", "the sailor"....

Into the cabin came a broad-shouldered, grey-haired man dressed in blue and carrying a little box. Grandmother took it from him and began to place the body of my brother in it. When she had finished she carried it to the door on outstretched arms, but she was so fat she could not get through without turning sideways, so she stood there nonplussed, looking very funny.

"Oh, Mother!" cried my own mother impatiently, taking the coffin out of her hands. Then they both disappeared and I remained in the cabin with the man in blue.

"So your brother's gone and left us," he said, bending over me.

"Who are you?"

"A sailor."

"And who's Saratov?"

"A city. Look out the window. There it is."

The land was moving past the window, dark and lumpy and wreathed in mist, reminding me of a large hunk of bread just cut from the loaf.

"Where did grandmother go?"

"To bury her grandson."

"Will they put him in the ground?"

"Of course they will."

I told the sailor how they had dug in live frogs when they buried my father. He lifted me in his arms, hugged me tight and kissed me.

"Ah, sonny, it's not much you understand yet!" he said. "It's not the frogs are to be pitied—the devil with them—it's your mother. Just look what grief's done to her!"

There was suddenly a great shrieking and blowing up above, but I knew it was the steam-boat's siren and was not afraid. The sailor put me down hurriedly and rushed out, saying as he went:

"Have to be off!"

I also wanted to be off. I went out of the cabin. There was nobody in the dark narrow passage. Not far from the

door I could see the glitter of brass on the stairs. I looked up and caught sight of people with bags and bundles in their hands. It was clear that everyone was leaving the boat, which meant that I, too, must leave.

But when I reached the gangplank in the midst of all the peasants, people began shouting at me:

"Who are you? Who do you belong to?"

"I don't know."

For a long time I was jostled and pushed and prodded. At last the grey-haired sailor appeared and said:

"He's from Astrakhan—came out of his cabin...."

He picked me up and ran back to the cabin, where he put me up on the bundles and shook his finger at me. "I'll give it to you!" he threatened as he went out.

Gradually the bustle overhead quieted down, the steamer stopped trembling, the splashing of the water ceased. A wet wall blocked the window of the cabin; it became dark and stuffy, and the bundles seemed to swell up and crowd me out. What if they left me all alone on this empty steamer for good?

I went to the door. It was shut tight and I was unable to turn the brass knob. I took a bottle of milk and swung it at the knob with all my force. The bottle smashed and the milk flowed over my feet and into my boots.

Crushed by my failure, I lay down on the bundles and quietly cried myself to sleep.

When I woke up, the steamer was trembling again, the water splashing, and the window of the cabin was shining like the sun. My grandmother was sitting beside me combing her hair and frowning as she muttered something to herself. She had an amazing quantity of blue-black hair which fell thickly over her shoulders, breast and knees, sweeping down to the floor. With one hand she lifted it off the floor and held tight, while with the other she forced a coarse wooden comb through the heavy strands. Her mouth was screwed up, her dark eyes flashed with anger, and her face looked little and amusing in that mass of hair.

She seemed in a bad mood today, but when I asked her why she had such long hair, her voice was as soft and friendly as it had been the day before.

"Most likely a visitation from the Lord—'Here, spend your days combing this accursed mane!' In my youth I vaunted it; in my age I curse it. But get back to sleep, child. It's early yet—the sun's scarce up."

"I don't want to sleep any more."

"Well don't, if you don't want to," she agreed, braiding her hair and glancing at the couch where my mother lay on her back straight as an arrow. "How did you break that bottle yesterday? Speak soft."

She had a peculiar way of singing her words that made it easy for me to remember them—words as gentle, vivid and luscious as flowers. When she smiled, the irises of her dark eyes expanded and shone with an inexpressible light; her smile revealed strong white teeth, and in spite of the numerous wrinkles on her swarthy cheeks, her whole face seemed young and bright. It was spoiled only by her fleshy, red-tipped nose with its flaring nostrils. She took snuff from a black box ornamented with silver. Everything about her was dark, but through her eyes one glimpsed the warm, cheerful, unquenchable light which illumined her from within. She was stout, and so bent as to be almost hunchbacked, but she moved about with the ease and agility of a large cat. And she was just as soft as that affectionate animal.

It seemed that until her arrival I had been sleeping, hidden away in the darkness. But she came and woke me up and led me out into the light. She spun all my surroundings into a single, unbroken thread, then wove it into multicoloured lace; she immediately became my friend for life, the one who was nearest and dearest to me, and the one I most understood. Her selfless love for others enriched me and gave me the strength to cope with my hard life.

Steamboats moved slowly forty years ago. It took us a

long time to reach Nizhni-Novgorod, and I well remember those first days, drenched with beauty.

The weather was fine, and from morning to night I was up on deck with my grandmother, floating there beneath the bright sky, between the banks of the Volga embroidered with the golden silk of autumn. The rust-coloured boat with a barge in tow moved lazily against the current, nosing its way with a gentle slapping of paddles through the grey-blue water. The barge was grey and looked like a wood-louse. The sun stole imperceptibly above the Volga; every hour brought something new—everything about us kept changing. The green hills were folds in the rich raiment of the earth. Towns and villages seemed made of gingerbread as they passed in the distance; golden autumn leaves floated on the water.

"Just see how wonderful it is!" my grandmother kept exclaiming as she moved from one side of the deck to the other, her face radiant, her eyes dilated with joy.

Often she would stand looking at the shore quite oblivious of my presence, her hands crossed on her breast, her lips curved in a smile, her eyes filled with tears. Then I would tug at her dark, flowered skirt.

"Eh?" she would say, pulling herself together. "Like as if I was asleep and having a dream."

"What are you crying about?"

"That's from happiness, my lad, from feebleness, my darling," she would say with a smile. "I'm an old woman now, with more than threescore summers behind me."

Then she would take a pinch of snuff and begin to tell me fantastic stories about saints and animals and kind robbers and goblins.

She told her tales in a low, mysterious voice, her face close to mine, gazing into my eyes with dilated pupils as though she were pouring into my heart a stream of strength to support me. She sang rather than spoke, and the longer she went on, the more rhythmic became her

speech. It was an inexpressible joy to listen to her, and when she had finished a tale I would cry:

"Tell me another!"

"And then it was like this: under the stove sat the hearth-goblin, a splinter of noodle in his paw. Rocking he sat, and moaning: 'Oh, little mice, it hurts! Oh, I shall die, little mice!'"

She grabbed up her own foot and sat rocking back and forth with her face all screwed up as though she were the sufferer.

Sailors gathered round—good-natured, bearded men—and they laughed as they listened, and praised her and also asked for more.

"Go on, Granny, tell us another!"

And then they would say:

"Come along and have supper with us."

At supper they would treat her to vodka and me to watermelon and cantaloupe; that was all done on the sly, for there was a man on board who forbade the eating of fruit.¹ If he caught anyone with fruit he would grab it away and toss it into the river. He was dressed like a policeman, with brass buttons down his uniform, and was always drunk. People hid from him.

My mother rarely came up on deck and in general avoided us. She remained as silent as ever. To this day I remember her tall, handsome figure, her grim, dark face crowned by fair braids—all her strength and hardness, seen as though through a fog or a bright cloud. And across the years comes the unfriendly gleam of her grey eyes, as large as my grandmother's.

One day she said sternly:

"You make a laughing-stock of yourself, Ma."

"Let folks laugh if they like," replied my grandmother good-naturedly. "It'll do them good."

I remember my grandmother's childlike joy on catching sight of Nizhni. "Look, look how fine it is!" she cried as she grabbed me by the hand and pushed me toward the rail. "There's Nizhni for you! What a beauty! Look at

the domes of the churches—as if they were flying!” She turned to my mother almost in tears. “Take a look, Varya! You’d forgotten it, hadn’t you? Drink in the joy of it!”

Mother smiled gloomily.

The steamer came to a halt opposite the lovely city. It stopped in the middle of the river, which was crowded with ships and bristling with hundreds of masts. A large boat filled with people approached our steamer and hooked on to the ladder which had been let down and up which the people climbed to the deck. At the head of them rushed a lean little old man in a long black coat. He had small green eyes, a beak of a nose, and a beard as red as gold.

“Father!” called my mother in a loud voice, throwing herself into his arms. He seized her head in his little red hands and began stroking her cheeks and squealing excitedly:

“Eh, eh, you silly! Ha! So here you are! Ah-h, tck, tck, tck!”

Grandmother hugged and kissed everybody all at once, whirling about like a propeller.

“Here, quick,” she said, pushing me toward the people. “This is Uncle Mikhail; this is Yakov; here’s Aunt Natalya; and these boys are cousins—both named Sasha; and cousin Katerina; all our tribe—just look how many!”

“How are you, Mother?” my grandfather asked her.

They kissed each other three times.

Then my grandfather snatched me out of the crowd and said, with his hand on my head:

“And who might you be?”

“I’m from Astrakhan, from the cabin.”

“What’s that he’s saying?” asked grandfather, turning to my mother. But then he pushed me away without waiting for an answer. “Got his father’s cheekbones,” he observed. “Get down into the boat.”

We rode to shore and climbed up the cobbled road between two high embankments covered with yellow, trampled grass.

My grandfather walked up ahead with my mother. He came only to her shoulder and took quick little steps, while she, looking down from her height, seemed to float through the air. Behind them walked my uncles without speaking: Mikhail, with black, straight hair and a body as thin as my grandfather's; Yakov, with fair, curly hair. Then came some fat women in bright-coloured dresses, and about six children, all of them older than me and very quiet. I walked with my grandmother and little Aunt Natalya. She was pale and blue-eyed and had an enormous belly. Every once in a while she would stop to catch her breath and murmur:

"Oh, I can't go another step."

"Why did they bring you along?" muttered my grandmother angrily. "A stupid tribe!"

I did not like either the children or the grown-ups and felt like a stranger among them. Even my grandmother seemed to have faded and become distant.

I especially disliked my grandfather, immediately sensing an enemy. He roused in me a wary curiosity, and I paid him particular attention.

We reached the end of the climb. Built against the right embankment at the very top stood a low, one-storied house from which the street took its beginning. It was painted a dirty pink and had bulging windows with the roof pulled down low over them. It seemed large when I viewed it from outside, but inside the rooms were small and dark and drowded. Everywhere there were angry people bustling about as they had on the steamer just before docking, and flocks of children like thievish sparrows; an acrid, unfamiliar odour pervaded the whole house.

I found myself out in the yard, which was no pleasanter. It was all hung with huge wet cloths and cluttered with vats holding thick, coloured water in which other cloths were soaking. From a low, ramshackle shed in one corner came the glow of a wood fire in a stove;

something was boiling and bubbling and an invisible person was pronouncing strange words in a loud voice: "Santalín—magenta—oil of vitriol...."

2 This was the beginning of a swift, eventful, and inexpressibly strange life. I remember it like a sombre tale told by a good genius who was yet painfully realistic. Now, as I recall the past, I sometimes have difficulty in believing that it was really like that; I am inclined to refute and deny many of the facts, so dark and brutal was the life of this "stupid tribe".

But the truth is beyond all commiseration, and it is not about myself I am writing, but about the stifling and horrifying surroundings in which the ordinary Russian lived—and still lives.

My grandfather's house was filled with hot vapours of hostility—the hostility of each towards all. The older people were completely poisoned by it, and even the children were contaminated. Later I learned from my grandmother's stories that my mother had arrived just at a time when her brothers were demanding that their father divide his property among them. The unexpected return of my mother made this demand more urgent. They were afraid she would ask for the dowry which my grandfather had withheld because she had "gone her own way" and married against his will.² My uncles claimed that this dowry should be divided between them. For some time they had been carrying on a bitter argument as to which of them should start a dye-works in the city, and which in the settlement of Kunavino, on the other side of the Oka River.

Soon after our arrival a quarrel broke out in the kitchen while we were having dinner. My uncles suddenly jumped up and leaned across the table, yelling and shouting in my grandfather's face, snarling and shaking themselves like dogs. My grandfather struck the table with his spoon, turned red in the face, and shrieked hoarsely:

"I'll turn you out to beg in the streets!"

With a painful grimace, my grandmother said:

"Give them everything, Father. Give it to them and have some peace."

"Tut! You're too easy with them!" he cried with flashing eyes. It seemed strange that anyone as small as he could shout so deafeningly.

My mother rose and walked slowly to the window, where she stood with her back to all of us.

Suddenly Uncle Mikhail gave his brother a smashing blow in the face. The latter let out a howl, grabbed his brother, and the two of them went rolling across the floor, panting and grunting and swearing.

The children began to cry; my pregnant Aunt Natalya let out a despairing wail; mother seized her in both arms and led her away; Evgenia, the jolly, pock-marked nanny, chased the children out of the kitchen; chairs crashed; apprentice Tsiganok straddled Uncle Mikhail's back, while Grigori Ivanovich, a bald, bearded master-workman in dark glasses, calmly tied his hands with a towel.

My uncle scraped his thin black beard on the floor and let out horrible wheezing sounds.

"Brothers! Blood brothers! Phoooh, what people!" cried my grandfather as he ran round the table.

At the very beginning of the argument I had been frightened up on to the stove, from where I watched my grandmother wash the blood from Uncle Yakov's battered face. He wept and stamped his feet, while she said despairingly:

"Come to your senses, you accursed ones! What a wild tribe!"

My grandfather shouted at her as he pulled off his torn shirt:

"So these are the brutes you brought into the world, you old witch!"

When Uncle Yakov went out, she cowered into a corner.

"Holy Mother of God," she wailed, "bring my children to their senses!"

My grandfather stood with his eyes glued to the table where everything was spilled and overturned.

"Keep your eye on those sons of yours, Mother," he said quietly, "or they'll do away with Varvara...."

"God knows what you're saying! Here, give me your shirt so I can mend it." She took his face in her hands and kissed him on the forehead while he, so much smaller, buried his head on her shoulder.

"Looks I'd better divide up, Mother."

"Yes, Father."

They spoke together for a long time. At first their conversation was amiable but soon grandfather began pawing the floor like a cock before a fight and shaking his finger at my grandmother.

"I know you all right; you think more of them than you do of me," he complained in a loud whisper. "But that Mikhail of yours is a hypocrite, and that Yakov an infidel! They'll squander all I own—they'll swill it all down!"

With a clumsy movement of my shoulder, I knocked down a flatiron which went clattering off the stove and landed in the slop bucket. My grandfather sprang up, yanked me down and stared into my face as though he were seeing me for the first time.

"Who put you up there on the stove? Your mother?"

"I climbed up myself."

"You're lying."

"No, I'm not. I was scared."

He pushed me and gave me a whack over the forehead.

"The image of your father! Get out!"

I was only too glad to get out of that kitchen.

I could see very well that my grandfather kept following me with his sharp green eyes, and I was afraid of him. I remember that I was always trying to hide from those searing eyes. He seemed spiteful; he addressed

everyone in a tone that was offensive and sarcastic, taking delight in teasing and provoking people.

"Phooh, what people!" he was fond of saying, and the sound of that long-drawn-out "oo" always made me feel chilled and forlorn.

During the tea hour in the evening, when my grandfather and uncles and the workmen left the shop and came wearily into the kitchen, their hands stained with dye and raw with acid, their hair tied back with tape, all of them looking like the dark icons hanging in the corner of the kitchen—during that dangerous hour my grandfather sat opposite me and made his other grandchildren envious by speaking to me more often than to them. He was all neat, pointed, sharp-edged. His embroidered satin vest was old and worn, his cotton shirt wrinkled, his pants patched at the knees, but all the same his clothes seemed cleaner and looked nicer than his sons' jackets, starched cuffs, and silk neckerchiefs.

A few days after our arrival he set me to learning my prayers. All the other children were older and were being taught to read and write by the clerk of the Church of the Ascension, whose golden domes could be seen from the windows of our house.

I was taught by my quiet, timorous Aunt Natalya, who had the face of a child and such transparent eyes that it seemed possible to look straight through them to the back of her head.

I loved to sit and stare at her without blinking. This made her uneasy, and she would narrow her eyes, twist her head, and ask in a voice that was almost a whisper:

"Do say this, please: 'Our father which art...'. "

"What does it mean, 'which art'?"

"Don't ask," she would reply, glancing furtively about. "It only makes it worse if you ask. Simply repeat after me, 'Our father...'. Well?"

I could not understand why asking would only make it worse. The words "which art" took on a secret meaning,

and I purposely distorted them: "Which heart," "which aren't..."

But my white-faced aunt, who seemed to be slowly melting away, would patiently correct me.

"No, just say it simply, like this—'which art...'. "

But neither she herself nor the words she spoke were simple. This annoyed me and made it difficult to remember the prayer.

One day my grandfather asked me:

"Well, Alexei, what have you been doing today? Playing. See that lump on your forehead. Don't have to be very smart to get a lump on your forehead, but what about learning 'Our Father'?"

"He has a bad memory," whispered my aunt.

My grandfather laughed and raised his red eyebrows.

"If that's the case, have to give him a thrashing. Your father ever thrash you?" he asked, turning to me.

I did not understand what he was talking about, so I remained silent.

"Maxim never beat the child and forbade me to," answered my mother.

"How's that?"

"He said that beatings never taught anybody anything."

"He was a fool, that Maxim, may his soul rest in peace!" answered my grandfather testily.

His words offended me, and he noticed this.

"What you pouting about? Better watch your step! Sasha's going to get a nice little ripping up on Saturday on account of that thimble," he said, smoothing back his red and silver hair.

"How will you do it?" I asked.

Everybody laughed, and my grandfather replied:

"Just wait and you'll find out."

I hid in the corner and began to figure it out: to rip meant to take apart the clothes brought to be dyed, but to thrash and to beat apparently meant the same thing. People beat horses and dogs and cats, and in Astrakhan

the soldiers beat the Persians—I had seen that with my own eyes. But I had never seen anyone beat little children. To be sure, my uncles sometimes gave their children a fillip on the forehead or the back of the head, but the victims seemed not to mind, simply rubbing the sore spot a bit and then forgetting it. Sometimes I would ask them if it hurt.

"No, not a bit," they would answer bravely.

I knew about the famous incident with the thimble. Between tea-time and supper, my uncles and the master-workman would sew together pieces of dyed cloth into one length and attach the cardboard tags. As a joke on the half-blind Grigori, Uncle Mikhail told his nine-year-old nephew to heat the workman's thimble over the candle. Sasha held the thimble over the flame with a pair of tongs until it was red hot, then he placed it near Grigori and hid behind the stove. At just that moment my grandfather came in, sat down to work, and picked up the hot thimble.

I remember running into the kitchen to see what all the noise was about and finding my grandfather jumping comically about, holding his ear with his burnt fingers and shouting:

"Who did this, you heathens?"

Uncle Mikhail was bending over the table pushing the thimble about with his finger and blowing on it; Grigori was sewing imperturbably, the shadows licking across his huge bald pate; Uncle Yakov came running in and slipped behind the stove to hide his laughter; my grandmother began to grate a raw potato for a poultice.

"It's Yakov's Sasha did it," said Uncle Mikhail all of a sudden.

"That's a lie," cried Yakov, jumping out from behind the stove.

From somewhere in the corner his son began to bawl.

"Don't believe him, Dad!" he called. "He told me to do it!"

My uncles began to quarrel. Immediately my

grandfather calmed down, placed the poultice on his finger, and went out without a word, taking me with him.

Everyone said that Uncle Mikhail was to blame. It was only natural that during tea I should ask if he was to be ripped and thrashed.

"He ought to be," muttered my grandfather, glancing askance at me.

Uncle Mikhail pounded the table with his hand and shouted at my mother:

"If you don't take that puppy of yours in hand, Varvara, I'll screw his head off!"

"You just try laying a finger on him!" answered my mother.

Everyone was silent.

She had the knack of throwing people back with a few short words that were utterly squelching.

I could see that everyone was afraid of my mother; even my grandfather addressed her in a different tone—quieter than the one he used with others. This pleased me.

"My mother's the strongest of all!" I would boast to my cousins.

They never denied it.

But what happened on the next Saturday shook my opinion of my mother.

By Saturday I, too, had managed to get into trouble.

I was fascinated by the way the grownups changed the colour of cloth. They would take something yellow, dip it in black water, and the material would come out dark blue—"indigo". Or they would rinse something grey in reddish water and it would come out dark red—"mulberry". All very simple, but incomprehensible.

I nursed a secret longing to try my hand at dyeing, and I confided this to Yakov's Sasha, a polite, serious boy who was always trailing the grownups, offering them his services. Everyone but my grandfather praised him for being smart and obliging.

"Phooh, the little toady!" the old man would say, glancing contemptuously at the boy.

Yakov's Sasha was dark and skinny, with bulging eyes, like a crab's. He spoke in a hushed, hurried voice, half swallowing his words and glancing furtively about as though he were planning to run off and hide. Usually his brown eyes were immobile, but when he was excited the very eyeballs seemed to tremble.

I did not like him. I liked Mikhail's Sasha much better even though he was inconspicuous and not very bright. He was quiet and had his mother's sad eyes and winning smile. His teeth were very ugly—they protruded from his mouth and grew in a double row in his upper jaw. This kept him busy: he had his fingers constantly in his mouth trying to loosen and yank out the teeth in the back row; he meekly permitted anyone who wished to feel them. But I could find nothing else of interest about him. He was always alone in the overcrowded house, sitting off by himself in some dark corner or spending his evenings at the window. It was pleasant to be with him—to sit close beside him at the window and say nothing for a whole hour, watching the daws wheel and plane about the Church of the Ascension, whose golden domes stood out in fine relief against the red glow of the sunset. The birds would soar and plunge, then suddenly spread a black net across the fading sky and disappear, leaving a vast emptiness behind them. When you watch something like this you don't want to talk, so full is your heart of pleasurable ennui.

Uncle Yakov's Sasha, on the other hand, could talk at length and impressively about anything, like a grownup. When he found out that I was anxious to learn the dyeing trade, he advised me to take the Sunday tablecloth out of the sideboard and dye it dark blue.

"White things are the easiest of all to dye, take my word for it," he said very seriously.

I dragged out the heavy tablecloth and ran into the yard with it, but scarcely had I dipped one end of it into

the vat containing "indigo" when Tsiganok threw himself upon me, grabbed the tablecloth out of my hands, wrung it in his enormous paws, and shouted to my cousin who was watching from the shed:

"Run for your grandmother!"

He turned to me and shook his tousled head ominously.

"You'll get it for this all right," he said.

My grandmother hurried out. She gasped when she saw the mischief, and even wept a few tears as she scolded me in her funny way:

"Oh, you Permyak, you, with your cabbage ears! You ought to get picked up and flopped down somewheres on the other side!"

Then she began to plead with Tsiganok:

"Don't you tell his grandfather, Vanya! I'll hide it away and maybe it'll pass over somehow...."

"You needn't worry about me, but you better see that Sasha don't go squealing," replied Vanya anxiously, wiping his wet hands on his stained apron.

"I'll give him a kopek to close his mouth," said my grandmother as she led me into the house.

On Saturday, just before vespers, somebody took me into the kitchen. It was dark and quiet there. I remember that the doors into the entranceway and the other rooms were tightly closed, that the autumn evening lurked grey and misty beyond the windows where the rain was murmuring. On a bench in front of the black mouth of the stove sat Tsiganok, unwontedly sullen; my grandfather was standing at a tub in the corner pulling long birch wands out of the water, measuring them, stacking them together, and flicking them through the air with a great swish. My grandmother was standing somewhere in the shadow, loudly sniffing tobacco and muttering:

"Enjoys it, the brute...."

Yakov's Sasha was sitting on a chair in the middle of the kitchen digging his fists into his eyes and wailing like an old beggarman:

"Forgive me, for the love of Christ...."

Uncle Mikhail's Sasha and his sister stood behind the table, stiff as posts.

"I'll forgive you after you've had your deserts," answered my grandfather, running a long, wet wand through his fist. "Well, take down your pants."

He spoke calmly, and neither the sound of his voice, nor the movements of the boy on the squeaking chair, nor the shuffling of my grandmother's feet, violated the unforgettable silence of that shadowy kitchen beneath the low, smoke-grimed ceiling.

Sasha got up, unfastened his pants, dropped them to his knees, and stumbled toward the bench. It was awful to watch him—my own knees started trembling.

But it was even worse when he meekly lay face down on the bench and Vanya tied him under the armpits and around the neck with a long towel, then bent over and held him by the ankles.

"Alexei!" called my grandfather. "Come closer! Well, who am I talking to? This is what is meant by a thrashing—have a good look! One!..."

With a short swing of his arm he brought the wand down on Sasha's bare body. The boy yelped.

"Don't pretend," said my grandfather. "That didn't hurt! But this one will!"

He gave him a lash that instantly raised a nasty red welt. My cousin gave a long howl.

"Don't like it?" asked my grandfather, rhythmically moving his arm up and down. "Not to your taste? Here's your thimble for you!"

Whenever he raised his arm something inside my breast was lifted along with it, and whenever he dropped his arm this something dropped too.

Sasha wailed in a high, thin voice that was horrid to hear.

"I won't do it again. Didn't I tell you about the tablecloth? It was me who told...."

"Telling tales won't clear you. The tattletale gets the

first lashing. This one's for the tablecloth!"

My grandmother threw herself at me and snatched me up.

"You'll not be touching Alexei! I'll not let you, you brute!"

She began to kick at the door.

"Varvara! Varvara!" she shouted.

My grandfather rushed over, knocked her off her feet, grabbed me and hauled me to the bench. I struggled in his arms, pulled his red beard, and bit his finger. He roared, clutched me tighter and finally threw me down on the bench so that I struck my face. I remember his wild cry:

"Tie him down! I'll kill him!"

And I remember my mother's white face and her enormous eyes. She kept running back and forth in front of the bench.

"Don't, Father! Let him go!" she gasped.

My grandfather beat me until I lost consciousness. For several days after that I was ill and lay face down on a wide, hot bed in a little room with one window in it and a little red light which was kept constantly burning in the icon corner.

The days of my illness were important days of my life. During that time I seemed to grow older and develop a new quality—that of being deeply concerned about all people. It was as though the skin had been torn off my heart, making it unbearably sensitive to every injury, my own or another's.

First of all, I was shocked by the quarrel which took place between my mother and grandmother. In this tiny room my big, dark grandmother swooped down upon my mother, forcing her into the icon corner and hissing:

"Why didn't you snatch him away, eh?"

"I was frightened."

"A big creature like you! For shame, Varvara! Old as I am, I had no fear! For very shame!"

"Leave me alone, Mama! I'm sick of it all!"

"You don't love him! You don't pity the poor little orphan!"

"I'm an orphan myself—for all my life!" said my mother in a loud, pained voice.

Then they both cried, sitting on the trunk in the corner.

"If it wasn't for Alexei I'd go away—somewhere far away!" said my mother. "I can't go on living in this hell. I can't, Mama! I haven't the strength!"

"Ah, child of my flesh, my own heart!" whispered my grandmother.

Now I knew: my mother was not strong after all; she, like all the others, was afraid of my grandfather. And I was responsible for keeping her here in this house where she could not bear to live. This thought was depressing. Actually my mother disappeared soon after that. She went visiting somewhere.

One day my grandfather came to see me, all of a sudden, as though he had dropped down from the ceiling. He sat on the edge of the bed and felt my head with fingers as cold as ice.

"How do you do, young man.... Come, answer me. Don't hold a grudge. Well?"

I felt like kicking him, but it hurt to move. His hair seemed redder than ever; he kept nodding his head uneasily while his bright eyes roved over the walls. Out of his pocket he took a gingerbread goat, two candy trumpets, an apple, and some raisins, and placed them on the pillow next to my nose.

"See, I've brought you some presents."

He bent down and kissed me on the forehead; then he began talking: quietly stroking my hair with his rough little hand stained a bright yellow, especially around his crooked, bird-like nails.

"Gave you a little more than your share this time, sonny. I was so mad—you bit me and scratched me and—well, I just lost my temper. But it's not bad you got

an overdose this time—we'll count it to your credit next time. You just remember one thing—when your own folks do the beating, it's no offence—just a good lesson! But don't let others touch you—only your own folks—they don't count. Think I didn't take my share in my day? In your worst dreams you couldn't imagine the way they beat me, Alyosha! They beat me so hard it must have made the Lord God weep to watch them. And what came of it? Just look at me now—me, the orphan, son of a beggarwoman—head of a works, ordering people about.”

He pressed toward me with his lean, well-built body, and began to tell me about his childhood, skilfully piling his hard words one on top of the other.

His green eyes flashed and his hair bristled with gold as he trumpeted into my face:

“You came here on a steam-boat. The steam brought you here, but when I was young it was my own strength I pitted against the Volga, pulling the barges. The barge in the water—me on the bank, barefoot, over the sharp stones and the boulders, keeping it up from sunrise to nightfall, the sun streaming down till it made your head feel like an iron pot with something boiling inside, and you all bent over like a hairpin—your bones creaking—going on and on, not seeing where, the sweat streaming into your eyes, your heart moaning, your lips groaning—ah yes, Alyosha, you have nothing to complain about! On and on you go until you fall out of the harness, your face buried in the earth and you glad of it, for at least it means the strength has passed clean out of you, to the last drop. And there you lie 'til it's time to pass on or pass out, and little difference it makes which. That's how we lived in the eyes of God, in the eyes of our blessed Lord Jesus Christ.... Three times I measured the length of Mother Volga in such wise: from Simbirsk to Rybinsk, from Saratov to here, and from Astrakhan to Makaryev, to the fair—trails covering many thousands of versts! But in the fourth year I was promoted to foreman—the boss could see I was more than the ordinary run!”

As he spoke, he seemed to grow before my eyes like a cloud, changing from a lean little old man into a hero of fabulous strength—one who singlehanded hauled a huge grey barge against the current of the great river.

Sometimes he would jump off the bed and, his arms swinging, show me how the boatmen walked in their harness and how they bailed out the water; he would sing snatches of unfamiliar songs in a bass voice, then once more spring youthfully back onto the bed, an astonishing creature who went on talking in a voice which grew ever deeper and more convincing.

"But in spite of it all, Alexei, when we'd come to a halt on a summer's evening, in Zhiguli, and build a campfire at the foot of a green hill—oh, those were the times, Alexei! While the porridge was boiling, one of us would start up a soulful song for his heart's ease, and the rest would join in—oh, but it'd make your very flesh creep to hear us, and the Volga herself seemed to gather speed, like a horse, rearing and charging to the very heavens! Then all our troubles were swept away like dust before the wind; in our singing we'd forget even the porridge until it went sizzling over into the fire, and then it was a beating over the head the cook would get—'have your song, but don't forget your job!'"

Several times people came to the door and called him, but I would plead:

"Don't go yet!"

He would laugh and wave his hand.

"Let them wait," he would call out.

He went on telling me tales until evening, and when he bid me an affectionate farewell and left, I knew that grandfather was neither spiteful nor terrifying. It was painful to remember that it was he who had beaten me so cruelly, yet I could not forget it.

My grandfather's visit opened the door to everyone else, and from morning to night someone was sitting at my bedside, trying in every way to amuse me. I remember that these attempts were not always successful. My

grandmother came more often than anyone else; she even slept with me. But the one who left the deepest impression on my mind was Tsiganok. He came in the evening—a stocky, broad-shouldered fellow with a huge head covered with dark, curly hair. He was dressed in his Sunday clothes, consisting of a honey-coloured silk shirt, wide plush trousers, and squeaky boots that wrinkled about his ankles like an accordion. His hair shone, his slanting eyes flashed merrily from under heavy brows, his white teeth gleamed from under the black line of his young moustache, and his shirt glowed softly, reflecting the red light of the icon lamp.

“Take a look,” he said, pulling up the sleeve of his shirt to reveal a network of red welts on his bare arm. “See how swollen it is? But it was even worse; they’ve almost healed.

“I could see your grandad was crazy with fury, like to beat you to death, so I put my arm under the whip in the hope it would break. Then your grandad would have to get a new one, giving your granny or your mother a chance to snatch you away. But it didn’t break—too well soaked. But still I spared you some of the lashes—you can see for yourself how many. I’m a slick one, I am!”

He gave a soft, silky laugh.

“I felt so sorry for you I couldn’t breathe,” he added, glancing once more at his swollen arm. “It was the way he was swinging away....”

He snorted like a horse and tossed his head and began talking about ordinary things with a childlike simplicity that immediately won my heart.

I told him that I loved him very much, and he answered with this same unforgettable simplicity:

“I love you too. That’s why I took this pain on myself—for love of you. Think I’d have done it for anyone else? What the hell do I care!”

Then, with many furtive glances at the door, he began to instruct me.

"Next time they give you a thrashing," he said, "see you don't tighten up, hear? It hurts twice as bad when you tighten up. Let your body go free, so's to be soft, like jelly. And don't hold your breath. Breathe for all you're worth and yell at the top of your lungs. You just remember this."

"Why, will they beat me again?" I asked.

"What do you think?" answered Tsiganok calmly. "Of course they will. You'll get it lots of times yet."

"What for?"

"Your grandfather will find what for!"

And once more he began to advise me, with the greatest concern:

"If he begins striking straight, just swishing down and that's all, you can lie there soft, without moving. But if he brings it down and then draws it across your body to pull the skin off, then roll toward him, in the direction of the wand, hear? That makes it easier."

He winked a dark, slanting eye at me and said:

"When it comes to beatings, I know more than a police officer. You could make a pair of pants out of all the skin that's been licked off me."

As I looked into his merry face, I recalled the tales my grandmother had told me about Ivan-the-Prince, and Ivan-the-Fool.

3 When I got well, it became clear to me that Tsiganok occupied a privileged position in our household. My grandfather did not shout at him as often and as roughly as he did at his sons, and when he spoke of him in his absence he would shake his head appreciatively.

"He's a handy one, that Ivan is, devil take him! Mark my words, it's no mean a fellow growing up among us."

My uncles were also friendly with Tsiganok and never played tricks on him, as they did on the master-workman Grigori. Almost every evening they thought up some bad joke to play on the latter—they would heat the handles of

his scissors, or put a tack on his chair, or place materials of different colours in the pile he was stitching, so that in his blindness he would sew them together into one length and be upbraided for it by my grandfather.

One day, when Grigori was having an after-dinner nap on a bunk in the kitchen, they painted his face with red dye, and for a long time he went about looking comical and terrifying: his long red nose hung down like a tongue between the two dark discs of his spectacles, which gleamed dully against the background of his grey beard.

My uncles were inexhaustible in thinking up such tricks, but Grigori accepted them without a word, only muttering to himself and taking the precaution of spitting copiously on his fingers before picking up the scissors, the iron, the tongs, or his thimble. This became a habit with him, so that even at the dinner table he would wet his fingers before touching a knife or a fork, to the vast amusement of the children. When he was hurt, a wave of wrinkles would pass over his large face, strangely mounting to his forehead, lifting his brows, and disappearing somewhere on his bald pate.

I do not know what my grandfather thought of his sons' sport, but my grandmother would shake her fist at them and shout:

"You shameless devils, you fiends, you!"

Behind Tsiganok's back, my uncles would speak maliciously and sarcastically of him, criticizing his work and calling him a thief and a sluggard.

I asked my grandmother why this was.

"It's because each of them wants to get Ivan when they have their own works," she answered. "So each belittles him before the others, the sly ones! But both are afraid Ivan will want to stay here with your grandfather 'stead of going with them. And your grandfather may very well go and open up a third works with Ivan. That'd be bad for the uncles, see?"

She laughed quietly.

"Enough to set God Himself a-laughing, the way they go on! And your grandfather sees their cunning, and teases them on purpose: 'I'll buy Ivan an exemption,' says he, 'so's they won't take him for a soldier. Can't spare him.' Don't that make them mad, just! They don't want that—and they grudge the money. An exemption costs a lot."

Once more I was living with my grandmother, as I had on the steamer, and every evening before I went to sleep she would tell me fairy tales, or stories from her own life, which were as good as fairy tales. But when she spoke about the practical affairs of the family—about dividing up my grandfather's property, or about my grandfather's intention of buying a new house for himself—she spoke ironically and with detachment, as though she were a neighbour and not the second eldest in the household.

From her I learned that Tsiganok was a foundling. On a rainy night in the early spring they had found him on the bench beside the gate of our house.

"There he laid wrapped up in an apron," she said thoughtfully and mysteriously. "So frozen he couldn't make a peep."

"Why do people give babies away?"

"When a mother has no milk and nothing to feed her baby, she finds out where a little one has just been born and died, and takes her own and leaves it there."

There was a moment's pause while she combed her hair.

"It's all on account of poverty, Alyosha," she went on, sighing and looking up at the ceiling. "Some people are so poor there's no words for it. And it's counted a disgrace if an unmarried girl has a baby. Your grandfather was for taking Ivan to the police, but I talked him out of it: let's keep him, says I, God has sent him in place of our dead ones. Eighteen souls I brought into this world. A whole streetful if they had lived—eighteen houses. You see they married me off before I was fourteen years old and my first baby came before I was fifteen. But God took a fancy

to my babies—He took them to be His angels one after another. It made me sad, but glad, too.”

As she sat there on the edge of the bed in her nightgown, all covered with black hair, a huge shaggy figure, she resembled the bear a bearded muzhik from the forests of Sergach had recently brought into our yard.

“Took the best ones, He did, and left me the worst,” she chuckled, crossing her snow-white breast and shaking all over. “I was happy to get Ivan—it’s such a love I have for little ones like you! So I took him in and had him christened, and here he’s lived and grown into a fine lad. First I called him the Beetle—account of his buzzing—he used to go crawling about, buzzing like a beetle. Love him, Alexei, he’s a simple soul.”

I did love Ivan, and was dump with admiration for him.

On Saturdays, when grandfather left for vespers after having thrashed the children who had sinned during the week, a life began in the kitchen that was great fun: Tsiganok would catch some black-beetles from behind the stove, make a harness of thread, a paper sleigh, and drive the four black steeds up and down the table, which had been scraped a shining yellow.

“They’re off to fetch the archbishop!” he would cry excitedly as he steered them with a tiny splinter.

He would stick a piece of paper to the back of another beetle and send it scurrying after the sleigh, saying:

“They forgot their bag, so here’s a monk running after them with it.”

Then he would tie the legs of still another beetle, so that it stumbled along pitching forward with its head.

“The deacon going to church straight from the pub,” Vanya announced, clapping his hands in glee.

He would also demonstrate his trained mice for us, making them stand and walk on their hind legs, with their long tails trailing behind them and their beady eyes blinking comically. He was very gentle with his mice,

carrying them inside his shirt, feeding them sugar from his own mouth, kissing them, and saying convincingly:

"The mouse is a very wise neighbour and very affectionate. The house goblin is fond of mice and helps those who feed them."

Tsiganok could do tricks with cards and money. He would shout louder than any of the children, and indeed could scarcely be distinguished from them. One day in a card game with the children, he was left the "pig" several times running. He was very much offended, scowled and dropped out of the game. Later he complained to me sniffingly:

"It was all put up, I know! They winked at each other and passed cards under the table. Call that playing? I can cheat as well as them!"

He was nineteen years old and bigger than the four of us put together.

I have an especially vivid memory of him on holiday evenings when my grandfather and Uncle Mikhail went visiting. Uncle Yakov, curly-headed and dishevelled, would bring his guitar into the kitchen, and grandmother would arrange a treat, with lots of food, and vodka in a green decanter with red flowers skilfully blown into the glass. Tsiganok whirled like a top in his Sunday clothes. Grigori would come sidling quietly in, his spectacles flashing darkly. Evgenia would be there, our pock-marked, red-faced nanny,³ fat as a jug, with cunning little eyes and a deep bass voice. Sometimes the hairy clerk from the Church of the Ascension would come, and some other dark, slippery-looking people who resembled pikes or eels.

Everybody ate a lot and drank a lot and heaved deep sighs. The children were given a glass of sweet liqueur, and gradually a strange, wild hilarity developed.

Uncle Yakov lovingly tuned his guitar, and when this was done, invariably said one and the same thing:

"Well, now I'll begin."

Shaking back his curls, he would bend over the

instrument and stretch his neck like a goose. His round, carefree face became dreamy and an oily film dimmed his lively eyes as he softly plucked at the strings, playing a tune that drew you irresistibly to your feet.

His music demanded utter silence: it rushed like a rivulet from somewhere far away, seeping through walls and floors and evoking a strange, sad restlessness. It made you feel sorry for yourself and everyone else. The grownups seemed to become children, and everyone sat motionless, in pensive silence.

Mikhail's Sasha listened with particular concentration. He would lean toward his uncle with his whole body, his eyes glued to the guitar, his mouth open, with saliva drooling from the corners. Sometimes he would become so absorbed that he slipped off his chair, and on such occasions he remained where he fell, on all fours, his eyes retaining the same fixed stare.

Everyone sat breathless under the spell of the music; only the samovar went on humming quietly, without disturbing us as we listened to the plaint of the guitar. The two small windows gazed out into the darkness of the autumn night; occasionally someone would knock softly on the panes. On the table quivered two yellow flames of candlelight, sharp as lances.

Uncle Yakov fell deeper and deeper into a trance; he appeared to be fast asleep, with his teeth clenched, but his hands kept on living a life apart; the curved fingers of his right hand fluttered like a bird at the opening of the soundboard, while the fingers of his left rushed up and down the finger board.

When he had had a drink or two, he would begin to wail an endless song, hissing unpleasantly through his teeth:

*If Yakov was a little pup
His howls would wake the neighbours up—
O-o-o-o Dear Lord!
O-o-o-o I'm bored!
A nun comes walking down the street,*

*A crow goes cawing at her feet,
O-o-o-o I'm bored!
A cricket chirps behind the stove,
A frog is croaking in the grove,
O-o-o-o I'm bored!
A beggar hung up his pants to dry,
Another stole them, passing by—
O-o-o-o I'm bored!
So bored, oh Lord!*

I could not bear this song, and when my uncle sang about the beggars, I wept in inconsolable grief.

Tsiganok listened to the music as attentively as anyone else, running his fingers through his mop of curly hair, staring into the corner and breathing noisily. Sometimes he would exclaim plaintively:

"If only I had a voice! Wouldn't I sing though!"

"Enough of tearing your heart out, Yakov," my grandmother would say with a sigh. "Give us a dance, Ivan."

They did not always comply with her request at once, but sometimes the musician would press his palm against the strings for a second, then clench his fist, and with a wide gesture, as though tossing something soundless and invisible on the floor, would give a spirited cry:

"Enough of this dreariness! Get to your feet, Ivan!"

Ivan would get up, preen himself, straighten his yellow shirt, and mince into the centre of the floor as if walking on glass.

"Make it faster, Yakov Vasilyevich," he would say with a bashful smile and a blush on his swarthy cheeks.

The guitar broke into a wild rhythm, heels began to beat time, dishes rattled on shelves and table, while Tsiganok whirled in the centre of the room, swooping like a bird, waving his wing-like arms, moving his feet so swiftly that the eye could not follow them. With a whoop he sat on his haunches and whirled like a golden top, lighting everything with the shine of silk, which glowed and flamed in its shimmer and flow.

Tsiganok danced inexhaustibly, with utter self-oblivion, and it seemed that if the door were opened, he would dance out into the street, through the city, and away into the unknown....

"Cut across!" shouted Uncle Yakov, beating time with his foot.

He gave a piercing whistle and shouted a couplet in his irritating voice:

*If it wasn't for spoiling my shoes on the way,
I'd run from my wife this very day!*

The people at the table caught the spirit. Sometimes they would shout or squeal as though seared by hot iron; the bearded master-workman kept tapping out the time on his bald head and muttering under his breath. Once he leaned toward me, his soft beard sweeping my shoulder, and whispered in my ear as though I were a grownup:

"If only your father was here, Alexei Maximovich! He'd light a different flame! A jolly fellow he was, and warm-hearted. Remember him?"

"No."

"Ha! Your grandmother and him used to.... Here, wait a minute!"

Grigori rose to his feet—tall, emaciated, like the image of a saint—bowed to my grandmother, and said in an unusually deep voice:

"Akulina Ivanovna, be so good as to do a dance for us. Remember how you used to with Maxim Savvateyevich? Now do us the favour!"

"Goodness sakes, what are you saying, Grigori Ivanovich? Oh, my!" laughed my grandmother, shrinking away. "Me dance? Just to make people laugh, is that it?..."

But everyone began to urge her, and suddenly she got up like a young girl, adjusted her skirt, straightened her spine, threw back her heavy head, and glided off, crying:

"Let them laugh as wants to! Come on there, Yakov! Give us the tune!"

My uncle threw himself back and stretched his legs, half closing his eyes and playing a slower tune. Tsiganok stopped for a moment, then jumped up and began leaping about my grandmother as she glided silently over the floor as though floating in air, gracefully moving her arms, her brows raised and her dark eyes gazing into the distance. I thought she looked funny, and let out a snort, but Grigori shook his finger at me and all the grownups glared at me in displeasure.

"Get away, Ivan!" called out Grigori with a laugh, and Tsiganok obediently moved off to one side and sat down, while nanny Evgenia stuck out her Adam's apple and began to sing in a fine deep voice:

*'Til Saturday the whole week through,
The maiden worked at making lace,
Weak and thin her fingers grew,
Ah, how pale and wan her face!*

My grandmother seemed more to be telling a story than dancing. Now she would move slowly, thoughtfully, swaying from side to side and peering about from under her hand, hesitating in her movements as she carefully felt her way. Then she would stop as though suddenly frightened, her face frowning and quivering. Suddenly her features would light up with a kind, friendly smile, and she swerved to one side as though making way for someone to pass, waving others aside. Then she would stand listening with lowered head, her smile broadening, lighting her face. All at once she sprang to life, whirling about taller and straighter than she had ever been before, and so wildly attractive in this moment of resurrected youth that it was impossible to take one's eyes off her.

And all the while nanny Evgenia kept trumpeting away:

*She danced from early mass on Sunday
To the breaking of the dawn.
All too soon the day was Monday—
And the holiday was gone.*

When the dance was over, my grandmother took her place at the samovar. Everyone praised her, but she modestly protested:

"Enough, enough! You've never seen a real dancer," she said, as she arranged her disordered hair. "There was a girl, now, where I lived in Balakhna—I've forgot her name and whose she was—never would she dance but some would cry with the joy of watching her! A heart's holiday it was just to look at her; you couldn't want for anything more! How I envied her, sinner that I was!"

"Singers and dancers are the salt of the earth," observed nanny Evgenia serenely, and began to sing something about King David.

"You ought to dance in the inns," said Uncle Yakov to Tsiganok, as he threw his arm over his shoulder. "You'd give people a treat all right!"

"I want to sing," complained Tsiganok. "If God would give me a voice, I'd sing without stopping for ten years, and then it wouldn't matter what happened to me—not even if I became a monk."

Everyone drank vodka, especially Grigori.

"Watch out, Grigori, or you'll go completely blind," warned my grandmother as she poured him glass after glass.

"What of it?" he answered. "I don't need eyes any more. I've seen enough."

He did not get drunk, but became more and more voluble, talking to me all the time about my father.

"He had a big heart, he did, my good friend Maxim Savvateyevich."

Grandmother sighed and agreed with him:

"Ah yes, child of God that he was...."

I found all this vastly interesting and was held in a state of tense excitement. The atmosphere gave rise to a kind of quiet, unoppressive sadness, and the sadness and the joy lived together in the hearts of the people, inseparable, the one supplanting the other with an elusive, inexplicable swiftness.

Once Uncle Yakov, who was not particularly drunk, began to rip his shirt, tear at his curly hair and colourless moustache, at his nose and protruding lip.

"Why, oh why?" he wailed, the tears flowing. "Why is it?"

He struck himself on the cheek, on the brow, on the breast, sobbing the while.

"I'm wicked and worthless, a lost soul!"

"Aha! 'That's it!'" roared Grigori.

"Enough, Yakov! The good Lord knows what to teach us," said my grandmother, also a bit tipsy, as she caught at her son's hands.

She became even better after having something to drink. Her smiling dark eyes poured a warm light over everyone, and she would say in a singsong voice as she fanned her flushed face with her handkerchief:

"Oh Lord, oh Lord, how good it all is! Just look how good it all is!"

That was her heart's cry, her life's slogan.

I was amazed by the tears and cries of my carefree uncle. I asked my grandmother why he wept and struck himself.

"You have to know everything," she grumbled reluctantly, not at all in her usual manner. "Wait a while—it's too soon for you to be sticking your nose into such things."

That only whetted my curiosity. I went into the works and began questioning Ivan, but he also avoided answering me, only laughing quietly, glancing at the master-workman out of the corner of his eye and pushing me out of the dye-house.

"Enough! Get out of here, before I let you down into one of those vats and dye you a bright green," he shouted.

The master-workman was standing before a low, broad stove with three vats built into it. He was stirring the contents of one of them with a long black stick with which he would then lift up the cloth and watch the coloured water drain off. The bright fire was reflected in his

leather apron, as varicoloured as the brocaded vestments of a priest. The dye water bubbled in the vats and a cloud of acrid smoke streamed through the door and across the wintry yard.

The master-workman glanced at me from under his glasses with red and filmy eyes; then he turned to Ivan.

"Can't you see I need some wood?" he said gruffly.

When Tsiganok ran out into the yard, Grigori sat down on a sack of sandalwood chips and beckoned me to him.

"Come here," he said.

He sat me on his knee, swept my cheek with his warm, soft beard, and told me things I shall never forget.

"Your uncle beat his wife to death, and his conscience gives him no peace, understand? It's right you should know everything—keep your eyes open or you'll have a hard time of it."

It was easy to talk to Grigori, as to my grandmother, but it was frightening. It seemed as though he could see through everything when he glanced out from under his dark glasses.

"And how did he beat her to death?" he went on unhurriedly. "Here's how—he'd get in bed with her, cover her with the quilt, head and all, and thump and pound her night after night until she died. What for? I don't suppose he knows himself."

Ivan came in with a load of wood and squatted in front of the fire to warm his hands, but Grigori went on impressively without paying any attention to him.

"Maybe he beat her because she was better than him and he envied her. The Kashirins can't stand anything good, sonny. They envy it, but they can't take it to themselves, so they wipe it out. You ask your granny how they went after your father. She'll tell you everything—she can't stand lies—can't understand them. She's a kind of saint, your granny, even if she does take a drop now and then and likes her snuff. Kind of a holy woman. You keep in with her, sonny...."

He pushed me away and I went out into the yard stunned and horrified. Ivan overtook me in the passage.

"Don't be afraid of him, he's a good sort," he whispered in my ear, his hand on my head. "Look him straight in the eye—he likes people who do that."

Everything was strangely upsetting. I knew no other life, but I had a vague recollection that my mother and father had not lived like that; they had spoken other words, known other amusements, and had always sat and walked beside each other, close together. In the evenings they had sat at the window singing songs, laughing loud and long, so that the neighbours would gather to listen. I remember that the upraised faces of these neighbours had always reminded me of dirty dinner plates. Here, on the contrary, people rarely laughed, and when they did you could not be sure what they were laughing at. They were always shouting at each other, threatening each other, and whispering in corners. The children were silent and inconspicuous, beaten to earth like dust in the rain. I felt like a stranger in this house, and the life about me pricked me with a thousand needles, rousing my suspicions and forcing me to watch everything with strained attention.

My friendship with Ivan grew. From sunrise until late at night my grandmother was busy about the house, so I spent most of the day trotting at the heels of Tsiganok. He continued to protect me with his arm whenever my grandfather flogged me, and would show me his swollen fingers the next day with the complaint:

"No point in it. Don't help *you* any, and look what *I* get! That's the last time—hereafter you take what's coming to you!"

But the next time he would take the unearned punishment all over again.

"You said you wouldn't do it any more."

"Saying and doing are two different things—don't know myself how it happened."

Soon I learned something about Tsiganok that increased my interest and devotion.

Every Friday Tsiganok would hitch the sorrel gelding Sharap (a mischievous beast with a sweet tooth—my grandmother's favourite) to the broad sledge, dress himself in an enormous fur hat and a short sheepskin tightly girdled with a green sash, and go to market to buy the week's supply of food. Sometimes he would be gone for a long time. Then everyone would become nervous, and keep going to the window, breathing on the frosted glass to get a glimpse into the street.

"Coming?"

"Not yet."

My grandmother would worry the most.

"Ah me!" she would say to her sons and husband. "You'll be the death of a good man and a good horse. It's a conscience you want, you shameless creatures! Never satisfied with what you've got! A stupid tribe, a greedy lot! The Lord'll punish you yet!"

My grandfather would frown and mutter:

"Oh, all right. This is the last time...."

Sometimes Tsiganok would not return until noon; then my grandfather and uncles would rush into the yard to meet him, while behind them would come my grandmother, furiously sniffing her snuff and waddling like a bear—for some reason she was always clumsy at such times. The children would come running out, and then would begin the joy of unloading the sledge, packed with suckling pigs, fish, cuts of meat of every variety.

"Bought everything we ordered?" asked my grandfather, eyeing the sledge with his sharp little eyes.

"Everything, just as ordered," answered Ivan merrily, jumping about the yard and rubbing his mittened hands to warm up.

"Stop rubbing your mittens like that—they cost money," shouted my grandfather sternly. "Bring back any change?"

"No."

My grandfather slowly walked about the sledge, muttering as he went:

"Looks as if you've brought back an awful lot of stuff again. Sure you haven't bought some of it without money? See that don't happen in my house, hear?"

And he would hurry away with his face all screwed up.

Then my uncles would gayly make for the sledge and guess the weight of the fowls. fish, giblets, legs of veal, and chunks of meat.

"You made a fine choice, all right!" they would say, whistling and shouting in approbation.

Uncle Mikhail went into particular ecstasies. He would hop around the sledge as though he were on springs, sniffing with the nose of a woodpecker, smacking his lips and blissfully screwing up his restless eyes. He was as lean as my grandfather, and looked like him, except that he was taller, and dark as a gypsy. He would thrust his frozen hands up his sleeves and ask:

"How much money did the old man give you?"

"Five rubles."

"And here's at least fifteen rubles' worth. How much did you spend?"

"Four rubles ten."

"In other words, ninety kopeks in your pocket, eh? Hear that, Yakov? That's one way to make money."

Uncle Yakov laughed softly as he stood there in the cold in his shirt sleeves, blinking at the frosty blue sky.

"How about standing us a half pint each, Ivan?" he would drawl.

My grandmother unharnessed the horse.

"What is it, my love? What is it, my kitten?" she would murmur to the gelding as she worked. "Want to play a bit? Go ahead. Go right ahead—the Lord don't object to a little playfulness."

The huge Sharap would toss his mane and bite playfully at her shoulder with his white teeth, snatching off her silk kerchief, glancing into her face with sparkling eyes, neighing softly as he shook the hoarfrost off his lashes.

"Is it some bread you want?" she would ask as she

thrust a great hunk, well salted, between his teeth, holding her apron under his mouth and watching him chew.

"He's beauty, that gelding, Granny," Tsiganok would say, as playful as a young colt himself. "He's so clever!"

"Get away! Stop wagging your tail around here!" cried my grandmother with a stamp of her foot. "You know I have no use for you on such days!"

She explained to me that when Tsiganok went to market, he did less buying than he did stealing.

"Grandad gives him a fiver; he spends three—and steals ten rubles' worth," she said sullenly. "He loves to steal, the rascal! Tried it once—it worked—everybody here at home laughed and praised him, so he made a habit of it. Your grandad had to put up with such poverty when he was young, it has made him tight in his old age. He thinks more of money than of his own children. Only too glad to get something for nothing. As for Mikhail and Yakov—"

She dismissed them with a wave of her hand and became silent for a moment.

"It's a tangled bit of lacemaking, Alyosha," she continued, glancing into her snuffbox, "done by a blind old hag as got the pattern all twisted. Little wonder you and me can't make head or tail out of it. But once they catch Ivan for stealing, they'll beat him to death."

Again she was silent for a brief space, and when she went on, her voice was very soft.

"Ah me! Lots of rules we've got, but no truth...."

The next day I begged Tsiganok not to steal any more.

"They'll beat you to death."

"They won't catch me—I'll get away: I'm a clever one, and my horse is fast," he said with a laugh which was soon eclipsed by a frown. "Oh I know it's all wrong to steal, and dangerous. I do it just for the fun of it. And I don't save up any money; those uncles of yours get it all out of me in the course of a week. But I don't care—let them have it. I get enough to eat."

Suddenly he picked me up and shook me gently.

"You're thin and light, but you got good bones. You'll grow up into a strong fellow. Listen, learn to play the guitar—ask your Uncle Yakov to teach you—I mean it. Only you're too young yet, that's the trouble! A little chap, but got a temper! I don't think you like that grandad of yours, do you?"

"I don't know."

"I don't like any of these Kashirins except Granny. Only the devil could like them!"

"And me?"

"You're not a Kashirin. You're a Peshkov. That's different blood, a different tribe."

Suddenly he squeezed me tightly and almost groaned out:

"God, if only I could sing! Wouldn't I wring hearts though! Well, get along, brother. Got to start working."

He let me down on the floor, put a handful of nails into his mouth, and began tacking some wet black material to a large square board.

Soon after that he was killed.

It happened like this: leaning against the fence of our yard, near the gate, lay a huge oaken cross ending in a thick knotty butt. It had lain there for a long time. I remember noticing it when I first came to live in the house. At that time it was new and yellow; now it had become darkened by autumn rains and gave off the pungent odour of seasoned oak. It was in the way in our small, littered yard.

Uncle Yakov had bought it to put on his wife's grave, swearing to carry it to the cemetery on his own shoulders on the first anniversary of her death.

The anniversary fell on a Saturday, at the beginning of winter. It was cold and windy and snow came flying off the roofs. My grandmother and grandfather and the other three grandchildren rode ahead to the cemetery for the ceremony. Everyone else went out into the yard. I was left at home as a punishment for some mischief I had committed.

My uncles, Mikhail and Yakov, dressed in identical black coats, lifted the head of the cross and placed its arms on their shoulders. With difficulty Grigori and a strange man lifted the heavy butt and placed it on Tsiganok's broad shoulders; he swayed and placed his feet wide apart to brace himself.

"Can you manage?" asked Grigori.

"Don't know. Pretty heavy."

"Open the gate, you blind devil," roared Uncle Mikhail.

"Shame on you, Ivan," said Uncle Yakov. "We're both lighter than you."

But Grigori turned to Vanya as he opened the gate and admonished sternly:

"Take care not to strain yourself! Well, God be with you!"

"You mangy old fool!" Uncle Mikhail shouted at him from the street.

Everybody in the yard laughed and started talking in loud voices, as though pleased that the cross had been taken away.

Grigori took me by the hand and led me into the works.

"Maybe your grandfather won't thrash you today," he said. "Seems to be in a good humour."

He sat me on top of a pile of wool ready to be dyed, gently wrapped it round me, and began to speak to me thoughtfully as he sniffed the steam coming from the vats:

"I've known your grandfather for thirty-seven years, sonny," he said. "I saw the beginning of this business, and now I'm seeing the end of it. We used to be good friends—went into business together, thought it up together. He's clever, your grandfather. See, he's made himself boss here—I wasn't able to. But the Lord's cleverer than any of us, one smile of His, and the wisest is left standing there blinking his eyes like a fool. You don't know the how and the why of things yet, but it's right you should know everything. The life of an orphan's not easy.

Your father, Maxim Savvateyevich, was a trump if there ever was one—he understood everything. That's why your grandfather didn't like him and wouldn't have a thing to do with him...."

It was pleasant to sit and listen to his kind words and watch the red and gold fire playing in the stove, the milky cloud of steam rising from the vats and settling to freeze on the planks of the slanting roof. Through a ragged crack I glimpsed a blue ribbon of sky. The wind had died down, the sun was shining, and the yard seemed to have been sprinkled with ground glass. From the street came the crunching of sleigh runners; blue smoke curled from the chimneys of the houses and light shadows flitted over the snow as though they, too, were telling their story.

The tall, bony Grigori, with his long beard and large ears, looked like a kind wizard as he stood there hatless, stirring the boiling dyes and giving me instructions:

"Always look people straight in the eye; even a dog that's after you will stop in his tracks if you do that...."

His heavy glasses pressed on the bridge of his nose, causing the end to turn blue, like my grandmother's.

"What's that?" he said, stopping suddenly. He listened for a second, closed the draft in the stove with his foot, and bounded across the yard. I followed at his heels.

Tsiganok lay on his back in the middle of the kitchen floor; from the window streamed two broad shafts of light, one of which fell on his head and breast, the other on his feet. His forehead shone with a strange light; his brows were raised; his slanting eyes stared at the sooty ceiling; his dark lips twitched and emitted a pink froth; thin streams of blood oozed out of the corners of his mouth, down his neck and on to the floor, while blood ran freely from underneath him. Ivan's legs lay limp, and from the way his wide pants clung to the floor, it was clear that they were soaked. The floor had been scrubbed with sand until it shone bright in the sun. Rivulets of blood ran toward the doorway, lighted vividly where they crossed the shafts of sunlight.

Tsiganok lay motionless except for the fingers of his outstretched arms, which kept scratching at the floor, causing his dye-stained nails to glisten in the sunlight.

Nanny Evgenia crouched beside Ivan to place a candle in his hand, but he could not grasp it; the candle fell, and its flame was extinguished in blood. The nurse picked it up, wiped it off, and once more tried to place it in his restless fingers. The kitchen seethed with suppressed excitement which blew me like a wind off the doorsill, but I clung tight to the jamb.

"He stumbled," said Uncle Yakov in a colourless voice, jerking his head. He himself had become faded and wrinkled, and he kept blinking his eyes.

"He fell, and it crushed him—fell right on his back. It'd have smashed us too if we hadn't let go in time."

"Then it was you that smashed him," said Grigori hoarsely.

"Well, what do you think we...."

"You!"

The blood kept flowing; near the door it had already formed a pool which darkened and seemed to be rising. Tsiganok lay there making noises as though in his sleep, while the pink froth bubbled at his mouth and his body melted away, growing flatter and flatter, levelling down to the floor as though merging with it.

"Mikhail took a horse and raced to the church to fetch Dad," whispered Uncle Yakov. "I dumped him in a droshky and hurried back here with him. A good thing I didn't carry the pedestal myself, or look where I'd be now."

Once more the nurse fixed the candle in Tsiganok's hand, dripping wax and tears into his palm.

"Stick the candle to the floor at his head, clumsy!" cried Grigori roughly.

"Of course."

"Take off his hat!"

The nurse pulled off his hat and Ivan's head struck the floor with a dull thud. Now his head was turned, so

that the blood flowed more freely from his mouth, but only from one corner. This went on for a frightfully long time. At first I had expected Tsiganok to have a rest, then sit up, spit disgustedly, and say in his usual manner:

"Phooh! This heat!"

That was what he always said on awaking from his after-dinner nap on Sundays. But instead of sitting up, he just lay there and melted away. The sun had withdrawn; the beams were shorter now and had withdrawn to the window sills. His face and hands were livid, his fingers no longer moved, and the froth had stopped bubbling from his mouth. Three candles had been placed about his head, their golden flames lighting the blue-black mass of his hair, the pinched tip of his nose, his bloodstained lips, and throwing wavering patches of light over his swarthy cheeks.

Nanny knelt weeping beside him.

"Ah, you poor little pigeon! Such a joy you were!" she whispered.

It was cold and terrifying. I climbed under the table and hid there. Then my grandfather came lumbering into the kitchen in his racoon coat, followed by my grandmother in her greatcoat with little tails about the collar. With them came Uncle Mikhail, the children, and many strangers.

My grandfather threw his coat on the floor and shouted:

"The bastards! To do in a chap like this! Why, in five years he'd have been worth his weight in gold!"

The clothes on the floor cut off my view of Ivan, and in crawling to a better position I got in my grandfather's way; he kicked me aside as he shouted, shaking his little red fist at my uncles:

"Wolves, that's what you are!"

Then he sank down on a bench, grasping it tightly with his fingers as he whimpered and muttered in a squeaky voice:

"Oh I know—you couldn't stomach him. Ah, Vanya, foolish boy! What can we do now? What can we do, I say? The horse is old, the harness sold.... Well, Mother, looks like the Lord's had in it for us these last few years, eh? What do you say, Mother?"

My grandmother had thrown herself down on the floor beside Ivan and was feeling his face, his head, his breast, breathing into his eyes, picking up his hands and rubbing them, knocking over all the candles. At last she rose heavily to her feet, a vast black figure, her black dress shining, her black eyes rolling fearfully, as she said in a low voice:

"Get out of here, you accursed ones!"

Everyone except my grandfather disappeared.

Tsiganok was buried quietly and unobtrusively.

4 I lay on a wide bed with a heavy quilt folded round and round me, listening to my grandmother praying. She was on her knees, pressing her breast with one hand while with the other she occasionally crossed herself unhurriedly.

I could hear the crackling of the frost beyond the window. Greenish moonlight glanced through the lacy pattern of the frozen pane, lighting up the kind face with its prominent nose and kindling a phosphorescent flame in the dark eyes. The silken headdress covering my grandmother's hair shone like metal, while her dark dress streamed from her shoulders in shifting folds that lay in a heap at her feet.

When she had finished praying, she undressed silently, placing her clothes neatly on the trunk in the corner. Then she came to bed, and I pretended to be sound asleep.

"Stop making believe, you little rascal. You're not asleep," she said softly. "You're not now, are you, pigeon-widgeon? Here, let's have a bit of that quilt."

Knowing what was to follow, I could not restrain a smile.

"Aha!" she shouted. "So it's sport you want to make of your old grandmother, is it?"

She took hold of the edge of the quilt and yanked it with such force and skill that I bounced into the air, whirling round and landing back in the feather bed while she roared with laughter.

"Take that, you son of a radish! 'Guess that'll hold you!"

Sometimes she would pray for such a long time that I would really fall asleep and not hear her come to bed.

Days of trouble, quarrels and fighting always ended in these long prayers; it was most interesting to listen to my grandmother giving the Lord a detailed account of what had happened. There she knelt, a mountainous form, beginning her prayers in a quick, unintelligible whisper which grew into a deep grumble:

"You know yourself, Lord, it's only natural everyone should want to better himself. Mikhail, now, being the oldest, is the one as should stay here in town—it's not fair to send him over the river to a new place as nobody's tried before and there's no telling how it'll turn out. But father has a preference for Yakov. Is it right for a father to love his children unequal? He's stubborn one, the old man is. You might make him see reason, Lord."

She would gaze at the dark icons with her large, shining eyes as she went on giving advice to that God of hers:

"Send him a good dream, Lord, showing him how to divide with his sons."

She would cross herself and bow until her broad brow struck against the carpet, then, straightening up, go on with her suggestions:

"And why not send Varvara a bit of joy? What's she done to get in your bad graces, Lord? Why is she worse than the others? Who ever heard of such a young, strong woman living in such misery? And then Grigori, Lord—his eyes are getting worse every day. Once he's blind, what's left for him but to go begging his bread, and would

that be right?—him as has poured out all his strength in grandad's business.... But the old man'll give him no help.... Ah, Lord, dear Lord...."

For a long time she would remain silent, with drooping head and hanging arms as though she had fallen asleep.

"What else?" she would say at last, wrinkling her brows. "Be merciful to all the faithful: and forgive me, accursed fool that I am; you know it's a foolish mind leads me to sin and not a wicked heart."

Then she would give a deep sigh and say with loving satisfaction and tenderness:

"But there's nothing you don't know, dear Lord; nothing you don't understand, blessed Father."

I was very fond of my grandmother's God, he seemed so near and dear to her. Often I would say:

"Tell me about God."

She had a special manner for speaking about Him; she would always sit down and close her eyes and speak in a soft voice, strangely drawing out her words; I can still remember how she would draw herself up, take a seat, throw a kerchief over her head, and begin to weave her fancies until I fell asleep:

"There the Lord sits on a hill, among the meadows of paradise, sits on a sapphire throne under the silver lindens, lindens that bloom all the year round, for there is no winter in paradise, and no autumn, so that the flowers bloom from year's end to year's end, bringing joy to the saints of heaven. And all around the Lord fly a multitude of angels—thick as snow, or a swarm of bees—or like a flock of white doves flying from heaven to earth and back again, telling the Lord about us creatures here below. And each of us has his own angel—yours and mine and grandad's—for the Lord is the same to all His creatures. Here, now, comes your angel and says to the Lord: 'Alexei went and stuck his tongue out at his grandfather.' So the Lord gives His orders: 'Let the old man give him a bit of a thrashing,' says he. And so it is with everybody and everything, each rewarded according to his deserts—grief

to some, joy to others. And it's all so fine that the angels flutter their wings in joy and keep singing, 'Praised be the Lord, the Lord on high!' While He just looks on with a smile, as much as to say, 'Well, go ahead, my pretties, once it pleases you!'"

And my grandmother herself would smile and nod her head.

"Have you seen all that?"

"I haven't seen it, but I know," she answered musingly.

Whenever she spoke about God and paradise and the angels, she became small and meek, her face grew young, and her moist eyes radiated a particularly warm light. I wound her heavy satiny braids round my neck and sat motionless, charmed by these tales of which I could never have enough.

"It's not given to mortals to look on the face of God—they would go blind. Only the saints can behold Him with wide-open eyes. But angels I've seen. They show themselves when you are clean of heart. Once I stood in the church at early mass, and there at the altar I could see two of them—like fog they were—see right through them, and bright as bright, with wings to the floor, all lacy and gauzy. They were moving round the altar helping old Father Ilya: when he'd raise his feeble old arms to pray there they'd be, holding up his elbows. So old and blind he was that he kept bumping into everything, and soon after that he died. I was so happy to see them I nearly fainted with joy; my heart ached nigh to bursting and the tears came steaming from my eyes—ah, how good it was! How good everything is with God up in heaven, Alyosha, my pigeon-widgeon! And how good it is down here on earth!"

"Even here in our house?"

"Yes, everywhere, praised be the Holy Virgin," said my grandmother, crossing herself.

This was puzzling: certainly it was hard to agree that

everything was good in our house, where things seemed to be getting worse and worse.

I remember once passing the open door of Uncle Mikhail's room and catching a glimpse of Aunt Natalya all in white, rushing about the room with her hands pressed to her breast, crying in a dreadful, low voice:

"O God, take me away from here, let me go!"

I understood her prayer, and I understood Grigori when he kept muttering:

"Soon as I'm blind I'll go off begging, and that'll be better than this!"

I hoped he would hurry and go blind so that I could become his guide and go off with him, to wander through the world begging our bread. I once spoke of this to him. He laughed into his beard and said:

"All right, we'll go together. And I'll cry through the streets: 'This is the grandson of Vasili Kashirin, owner of the dyeworks!' That'll be funny, won't it?"

I had often seen Aunt Natalya with swollen lips and black-and-blue marks on her yellow face.

"Does uncle beat her?" I asked grandmother.

"On the sly, curse him!" she answered with a sigh. "Your grandfather doesn't allow it, so he does it at night. He's a mean one and she's got no backbone."

Then she would go on, warming to her story:

"But they don't beat nowadays the way they used to. Oh, sometimes they'll slam you in the teeth or on the ear or pull your braid for a minute or two, but they used to torture you for hours! Once your grandfather beat me on the first day of Easter week from early mass to sun-down—beat me—take a rest—then start all over again. With the horse reins or anything else at hand."

"What for?"

"Can't remember now. Once he beat me till I was half dead and then gave me nothing to eat for five days. I hardly managed to pull through that time. Or again...."

I was struck dumb by such facts: my grandmother was

twice the size of my grandfather, and I could not imagine his getting the better of her.

"Is he so much stronger than you?"

"Not stronger, but older. And then he's my husband. God's put him in charge of me, and ordered me to bear it."

I used to love to watch her dust the icons and clean their mountings. Our icons were very rich, set with pearls and precious stones and inlaid with silver. She handled them with deft fingers.

"What a sweet face!" she would murmur as she crossed herself and kissed them.

"All covered with dust and soot! Blessed Mother of God, omnipotent, shedding joy unspeakable! Just look how fine the drawing is, Alyosha, my pigeon-widgeon, such tiny figures, but each one separate. This one's called 'Twelve Holidays', with the Feodorovsky Virgin in the middle⁴—such a dear kind lady! And this one—'Weep not, oh Mother, beside my coffin'⁵...."

Sometimes it seemed to me that she played with the icons as seriously and credulously as my cowed cousin Katerina played with her dolls.

She had often seen devils, both singly and in drove.

"One night in Lent I was walking past the Rudolfs' house—everything bright with moonlight—and suddenly I saw something dark straddling the roof near the chimney. Big and shaggy it was, with its horned head bent over the chimney, a-sniffing and a-snorting, lashing its tail over the roof and shuffling its big feet. I made the sign of the cross and said, 'Christ shall rise again and His enemies be scattered!' Straight away he gave a little squeak and slid down into the yard—scattered he was! Likely the Rudolfs were cooking meat on a fast day and he sniffed it, gloating...."

I laughed at the thought of the devil somersaulting down into the yard, and she laughed with me.

"Don't they like mischief though, just like little children! One night, getting on to midnight, I was doing

the wash in the bath-house. All of a sudden the door of the stove swung open and out they came—little ones, and littler ones—red ones, green ones, black ones—like roaches. I rushed to the door, but I couldn't reach it. There I was, locked up with those devils, millions of them, filling the whole bath-house—under my feet, up my legs, pinching, biting, stinging 'til I couldn't so much as make the sign of the cross to shoo them away. Soft and warm and furry they were, like little kittens, all up on their hind legs, a-turning and a-tumbling, baring their little mice teeth, flashing their little green eyes, tossing their heads with the little knobs where the horns were coming through, twisting their little pigs' tails.... Lordy, what a time I had! Lost my senses, I did, and when I came to, the candle was almost burnt up, the wash water cold, and the wash scattered all over the floor. 'Phoo!' thinks I, 'the plague on you, devils that you be!'"

I closed my eyes and could see the door of the grey stove open, letting out a stream of tumbling furry imps who crowded the bath-house, blowing at the candle and sticking out their vixenish pink tongues. This, too, was amusing, but terrifying as well. My grandmother shook h^{er} head and was silent for a minute, until again she was seized by a flare of imagination:

"And I've seen folks with the curse on them, too; that was also during the night, in the winter, with a blizzard raging. I was crossing the Dyukov gully, where remember I told you Yakov and Mikhail tried to drown your father through a hole in the ice of the pond. That's where I was going; I had just come down the path to the bottom of the gully when all of a sudden such a whistling, such a screeching I heard! I looked up, and there's a troika of black horses galloping down on me with the coachman, a round little devil in a pointed red cap, standing up on the seat with his arms stretched out, driving them with chains instead of reins. And when the horses couldn't get through the gully they made straight for the pond in a cloud of snow. And those in the sleigh were also devils,

whistling and shouting and waving their caps. Seven troikas went flying past me like fire-engines, and the horses of all of them black as crows, and all those horses were really people accursed on their fathers and mothers! Such people are good sport for the devil. The devils ride them and drive them through the night for their merrymaking. Reckon it was a devil's wedding I saw that night...."

Grandmother spoke with such simplicity and conviction that it was impossible not to believe her.

But best of all were the verses she recited about how the Holy Virgin walked the thorny path through this world, exhorting the "Robber-Princess" Yengalycheva not to rob and flail Russians; verses about Alexei, the man of God, and about Ivan-the-Warrior; tales about Vassilisa-the-Wise, about the Goat-Priest and the godly Godson; fearful legends about Marfa Possadnitsa, about Baba Ustya, the Robber Chieftainess, about Maria, the Egyptian sinner, and about the grief of the Robber's Mother. Her stock of tales, legends and verses was inexhaustible.

She was not afraid of people, including my grandfather, or devils, or any other dark power, but she was deathly afraid of cockroaches and sensed their presence at a great distance. Sometimes she would wake me up in the middle of the night, whispering:

"Alyosha darling, there's a cockroach crawling. Kill it, for the love of Christ!"

Only half awake, I would light the candle and crawl about on my hands and knees in search of the enemy; but my efforts were not always successful.

"There isn't any," I would say, but she would gasp from where she lay motionless, her head under the quilt.

"Oh, yes there is! Keep hunting, I beg you! It's there, I know it is!"

And she was always right. Usually I would find the cockroach somewhere far away from the bed.

"Have you killed it? Ah, praise the Lord! And thank,

you, my love," she would say, throwing the quilt off her head with a happy smile.

But if I failed to find it, she would be unable to sleep, and I would feel her body trembling at the slightest rustle in the silence of the night and hear her whispering with bated breath:

"There it is at the door ... now it's under the trunk...."

"Why are you so afraid of cockroaches?"

"What are they good for?" she would answer sensibly enough. "Only go crawling about, crawling about, the black devils! God gave the least of His creatures some purpose in life—the woodlouse shows there's dampness in the house; the bedbug shows the walls are dirty; if you catch a louse on you, it means you'll be sick—that's all clear enough! But as for cockroaches—who can tell what they're for; what right have they to be alive?"

Once when she was on her knees carrying on an animated conversation with God, grandfather flung open the door and cried hoarsely:

"Well, Mother, a visitation from the Lord, all right! The workshop's on fire!"

"No!" cried my grandmother, struggling to her feet. Both of them rushed noisily into the darkness of the large parlour.

"Evgenia, take down the icons! Natalya, dress the children!" ordered my grandmother in a firm, loud voice.

"Ah-h-h!" wailed my grandfather.

I ran into the kitchen; the window overlooking the yard was bright as gold, and golden patches slithered and slid over the floor; my Uncle Yakov pulled his boots on his bare feet and then jumped about on the spot as though they burned his soles, crying:

"Aha! It's Mikhail set us on fire; set us on fire and ran away!"

"Sh-s-s, you cur!" said my grandmother, giving him such a push towards the door that he nearly fell.

Through the frost on the windowpane I could see the burning roof of the works and the flames whirling through the open door. Red blossoms of fire bloomed smokeless in the quiet night; only high up in the air did a smoke cloud hover, without blotting out the silver trail of the Milky Way. The snow glowed red with the flames and the walls of the outhouses swayed and trembled as though straining toward the corner of the yard where the fire was burning merrily, lighting up the broad cracks in the workshop and thrusting its bright twisted tongues through them. Red and gold ribbons of flame quickly slid over the dry boards of the roof where the slender clay chimney thrust up noticeably, pouring a thin stream of smoke into the air. A soft crackling and silken rustling beat at the windowpane; the fire grew, and its splendour transformed the workshop into beauty like that of the iconostasis in the church, luring the watcher with irresistible power.

I threw a heavy sheepskin over my head, pulled on somebody's boots, and staggered into the entranceway, then out to the porch, where I stood stunned—blinded by the brilliance of the fire; deafened by its roar and the shouts of my grandfather, my uncle, and Grigori; frightened by the behaviour of my grandmother. She threw an empty sack over her head, wrapped herself in a horse blanket, and ran into the blazing workshop, shouting:

"The vitriol, you fools! The vitriol will blow up!"

"Stop her, Grigori!" wailed my grandfather. "Oh, she's done for!"

But grandmother was back already, all smoking and shaking her head, bending under the weight of a demijohn of vitriol.

"Lead the horse out, Father!" she cried hoarsely, between coughs. "Pull this thing off me—can't you see I'm a-fire?"

Grigori snatched the smouldering horse blanket off her shoulders, then grabbed up a spade and bent double to smash the huge hunks of snow at the door of the

workshop. My uncle kept jumping about him with an axe in his hands, my grandfather followed at the heels of my grandmother, throwing snow at her. She buried the demijohn in a snowdrift and ran to open the gates of the yard.

"Save the barn, neighbours!" she cried, bowing to the people who came running up. "It'll spread to the barn and the hayloft—all our buildings will burn to the ground, and yours will be next. Chop off the roof and throw the hay into the garden! Grigori, throw the snow up high—what good's it on the ground? Stop running about, Yakov, give the people spades and axes! Good people, work together, and God will be our help!"

She was as fascinating as the fire. Lighted by the flames which seemed to strike out at her, she darted like a black shadow about the yard, being everywhere at once, noticing everything and giving everybody orders.

Sharap ran into the yard and reared up on his hind legs, with grandfather hanging on to the bridle; the horse's rolling eyes flashed red in the firelight; he snorted and balked, and was so unmanageable that grandfather let go of the bridle and jumped aside.

"Hold him, Mother!" he cried.

She threw herself under the very feet of the rearing horse and stood motionless with outstretched arms. The horse neighed plaintively and lowered himself casting furtive glances at the fire.

"Don't be afraid," said grandmother in a deep voice as she patted the animal's neck and took the bridle in her hand. "Would I leave you at such a fearful moment? You silly little mouse!"

The little mouse, three times her size, followed her meekly to the gate, snorting as it looked into her flushed face.

Nanny Evgenia led out the children, all bundled up and mumbling into their wrappings.

"Vassili Vassilyevich, I can't find Alexei!" she cried.

"Get along, get along," answered grandfather, while I hid under the porch steps so that Yevgenia would not lead me away too.

The roof of the workshop caved in, leaving a pattern of smoking, glowing rafters against the sky; from inside the structure came explosions of red, green and blue flames which licked out into the yard, reaching toward the crowd of people who were trying to extinguish this enormous bonfire by throwing snow at it. The vats boiled furiously, giving off thick clouds of smoke and steam which filled the yard with strange odours and brought tears to the eyes; I climbed out from under the steps and found myself at grandmother's feet.

"Go away!" she cried. "You'll get crushed! Go away!"

Into the yard dashed a horseman in a plumed metal helmet. His sorrel steed was foaming at the mouth and he lifted his whip as he shouted threateningly:

"Make way!"

Little bells jingled merrily and everything was gay and festive. My grandmother pushed me up on the porch.

"Didn't you hear me? Go away, I tell you!"—

It was impossible not to obey her at this moment. I went into the kitchen and again took my stand at the window, but the dark crowd of people cut off my view of the fire. The only thing I could see was the flash of metal helmets among the dark winter hats and caps.

The fire was quickly extinguished by beating it down and pouring water on it. The policemen drove away the people, and at last grandmother came into the kitchen.

"Who's here? You? Not asleep? Afraid? Don't be afraid. It's all over now."

She sat down next to me and began rocking back and forth without a word. It was pleasant to regain the quiet night and the darkness, but at the same time I regretted the loss of the fire.

Grandfather appeared in the doorway.

"Mother?"

"Ah?"

"Get burned?"

"Nothing much."

He scratched a sulphur match, and the blue flame illuminated his ferret face, black with soot. He lighted the candle on the table and sank down heavily next to my grandmother.

"You might have a wash," she said. She was also covered with soot and smelled of smoke.

"Sometimes the Lord is gracious to you," sighed grandfather. "Sends you great good sense."

He patted her on the shoulder and added with a grin:

"Just for brief minutes, for little spells, but still He sends it."

Grandmother laughed and was about to say something, but grandfather frowned.

"Have to get rid of that Grigori. It's all his carelessness. That man's done for, outlived his time. Yakov's sitting out there on the porch crying, the fool. You'd better go out to him."

She got up and went out, holding up one hand and blowing on the fingers.

"See it all, from the very beginning?" asked my grandfather without looking at me. "What did you think of that grandmother of yours, eh? And don't forget she's an old woman. Beaten and broken. There's something for you! As for the rest of them—phoo!"

He bent down and said nothing for some time. Then he got up and broke off the burnt end of the candle wick as he asked:

"Were you afraid?"

"No."

"That's right. Nothing to be afraid of."

He took off his shirt irritably and went to the washstand in the corner.

"Stupid to have a fire!" he said in a loud voice, stamping his foot. "Anyone who has a fire should be whipped in the public square as a fool or a thief! That's what they ought to do with such people and then there

wouldn't be any more fires!... Get back to bed! What are you sitting here for?"

I went out, but there was no more sleeping for me that night; I had just crawled back into bed when I was galvanized into life by an inhuman wail. Once more I ran into the kitchen; I found grandfather standing in the middle of the room, shirtless, holding a candle in his hand; the candle trembled; he kept shifting his feet but did not budge from the spot.

"Mother, Yakov, what's that?" he gasped.

I jumped up on the stove-bunk and crouched in the corner. Once more everything became topsy-turvy inside the house, as during the fire. The wails beat in rhythmic waves against the walls and ceiling, ever louder and more insistent. My grandfather and uncle began running about like madmen; my grandmother shouted them out of the kitchen. Grigori made a great noise with the logs he was stuffing into the stove. He filled some kettles with water and walked about nodding his head like the camels I had seen in Astrakhan.

"Get the fire going!" commanded grandmother.

Grigori climbed up on the stove for some kindling, touched my foot, and shouted in fright:

"Who's there? Phoooh, what a scare you gave me! You're always where you don't belong!"

"What's happening?"

"Your Aunt Natalya's in labour," he answered calmly, jumping down.

I remembered that my mother had not wailed like that when my brother was born.

When Grigori had lit the stove, he climbed up beside me and took a clay pipe out of his pocket.

"Started smoking to cure my eyes," he said, showing me the pipe. "Your grandmother says to take snuff, but I reckon it's better to smoke."

He sat with his feet swinging over the edge of the stove-bunk, staring at the meagre light of the candle; his ear and cheek were smudged with soot, his shirt was torn,

so that I could see his ribs sticking out like hoops. One glass of his dark spectacles was cracked and a large piece had fallen out, revealing a moist red eye that looked like a sore.

As he listened to the moans of the woman he stuffed his pipe with leaf tobacco and muttered to himself as though he were drunk:

"Seems your grandmother got some burns after all. How's she going to do the delivering? Hear how your aunt's going on? They forgot all about her; her pains began just when the fire broke out—out of fright.... Just look how hard it is to bring a living creature into the world, and still nobody holds a woman of any account. But a woman should be respected—a mother, that is—and don't you forget it!"

I dozed off, but was awakened by a slamming of doors, the drunken cries of Uncle Mikhail, and a general rumpus. I heard strange words being said:

"Go and ask them to open the Holy Gates in the Church!"⁶

"Give her lamp oil with rum and soot in it: half a glass of oil, half of glass of rum and a tablespoon of soot."

"Let me see her," Uncle Mikhail kept asking.

He was sitting on the floor spitting between his widespread legs and striking the floor with his hands. The heat became unbearable on top of the stove, so I climbed down. But when I was passing my uncle he grabbed me by the leg and yanked it so that I fell, striking my head on the floor.

"Fool!" I cried.

He jumped to his feet, snatched me up and swung me into the air with a roar.

"I'll smash you against the stove!"

When I came to I was lying on my grandfather's knees in the parlour. He was sitting in the icon corner, rocking me back and forth, his eyes fastened on the ceiling as he muttered:

"And there'll be no forgiving us, not any of us...."

The icon lamp burned brightly above his head and a candle was lighted on the table in the centre of the room, while a hazy winter morning glanced through the window.

"Where does it hurt?" asked my grandfather, bending over me.

Everything hurt. My head was damp, my body like lead, but I did not wish to talk about it—everything about me was so strange: unfamiliar people were occupying most of the chairs in the room—a priest in a purple robe, a grey-haired old man in glasses and a military uniform, and many others; they were all sitting motionless, like wooden figures, frozen in expectation as they listened to a splashing of water somewhere close at hand. Uncle Yakov was standing erect in the doorway with his hands behind his back.

"Here, take him to bed, Yakov," said my grandfather.

My uncle beckoned to me and we went on tiptoe to grandmother's room. When I had crawled up on the bed he whispered:

"Your Aunt Natalya is dead."

This did not surprise me—for some time she had not been seen about the house—had not entered the kitchen or come to the table for her meals.

"Where's grandmother?"

"In there," he answered with a wave of his hand. He went out as he had come in—tiptoeing in his bare feet.

I lay in bed looking about me. Blind, grey faces were glued to the windowpane; grandmother's dress was hanging in the corner over the trunk—I knew this, but now it seemed to me that the dress was a living creature lurking in the shadows. I hid my head in the pillow, keeping one eye on the door; I wanted to jump up and run away; it was hot in the room, and the house was filled with a stifling odour reminding me of how Tsiganok had died and his blood had flowed over the kitchen floor. My head, or perhaps my heart, seemed to swell up; everything I had witnessed in that house dragged through me

like a sledge caravan along a wintry road, pressing me down, blotting me out....

Slowly the door of the room was opened and grandmother edged through. Pushing the door closed with her shoulder, she remained leaning against it, her arms outstretched toward the blue flame of the icon lamp.

"My poor hands ... how they hurt....," she whispered in a plaintive, childlike voice.

5 The division of property was made that spring; Yakov remained in town, and Mikhail went across the river. My grandfather bought himself a fine new house on Polevaya Street, with a tavern on the ground floor, which was built of stone, a cosy little room in the attic, and a garden overlooking a ravine bristling with bare willow shoots.

"Plenty of rods!" said my grandfather with a merry wink at me as we walked together down soft, thawing paths to look over the garden. "Soon I'll begin teaching you your letters, and then they'll come in handy."

The whole house was crowded with tenants; my grandfather left only one large room on the upper floor for himself and the reception of guests, while my grandmother and I lived in the attic. The window of the attic room gave on to the street, and by leaning out I could watch the drunkards come out of the tavern in the evening and on holidays. They would go stumbling down the street, roaring and falling in the gutter. Sometimes they would be thrown out of the tavern like sacks of flour, but they would crawl back and pound on the door, which slammed with a jarring of glass and a shriek of the rusty pulley. Then a fight would begin. It was great fun to watch all this from up above. Every morning my grandfather went to his sons' workshops to help them get started, returning in the evening, tired, depressed, and irritable.

Grandmother sewed and cooked and dug the garden, bustling about all day long like a huge top driven by

invisible springs. She would take her snuff, sneeze appetizingly, and observe as she wiped her perspiring face:

"Praised be the saints and the angels to the end of time! At last we've come to a quiet life, Alyosha, my pigeon-widgeon! Everything's so nice for us now, thanks to the Holy Virgin."

But I did not find our life very quiet. From morning to night the tenants kept running about the yard and through the house; neighbours kept popping in, always hurrying somewhere, always being late for something, always getting ready for something.

"Akulina Ivanovna!" they would call to my grandmother.

And Akulina Ivanovna would smile upon all of them in her friendly way and listen attentively to all of them as she pushed the snuff up her nose with her thumb and wiped it neatly with a large red-checked handkerchief.

"To get rid of lice?" she would say, "you must wash often at the bath-house, my dear, and best to take a steaming with oil of peppermint. But if the lice is under the skin, then take a tablespoon of goose fat—the very purest—a teaspoonful of sublimate, and three drops of mercury; mix it all together seven times with a china pestle and then rub it on. Never use a bone or a wooden spoon or the mercury will be lost; and never touch it with copper or silver—that's very harmful."

Sometimes, after careful consideration, she would say:

"You'd best go to Brother Asaf at Pechory Monastery, my good woman. Your question is too much for me to answer."

She acted as midwife, arbitrated in family quarrels, treated sick children, recited "The Virgin's Dream" so that the women could learn it "for good luck", and gave advice in household matters:

"The cucumbers themselves know when it's time to salt them; soon as they stop smelling of earth, that's when to begin salting them down. To set good kvass, its temper

must be stirred: kvass can't abide anything sweet, so throw in some raisins, or some sugar—a teaspoonful to a pailful. There's different tastes in *varenets*: there's the Danube way to make it, and the Spanish, and then there's the Caucasian....”

All day I trotted at her heels, in the yard or the garden, or at the neighbours', where she would sit for hours drinking tea and recounting tales; it was as if I had grown to be part of her, and during that period of my life I can remember nothing but that kind, indefatigable old woman.

Sometimes my mother would put in an appearance for brief stretches. She was still proud and stern and looked upon everything with eyes as cold and grey as winter sunlight. She never stayed long, and went away without leaving any remembrance of herself.

One day I said to my grandmother:

“Are you a witch?”

“There now, whatever made you think such a thing!” she laughed. But presently she became very serious and added, “Witchcraft takes lots of learning, and here am I without even knowing my letters! Look what a learned man your grandfather is, but the Blessed Virgin didn't see fit to make me wise.”

Then she confided another bit of her life to me:

“I, too, grew up an orphan. My mother was without husband, and a cripple in the bargain. She was frightened by her master when she was a young house-serf and threw herself out of the window at night, hurting her side and her shoulder so that her arm withered after that, her right one, the main one, and she an expert lacemaker. After that her master had no use for her and let her go—to make her way as best she could—but how could she make her way with only one arm? So she became a beggarwoman. But at that time the people of Balakhna lived better and were kinder—they were famous carpenters and lacemakers—so we went a-begging, my mother and me, through the town in autumn and winter; but when the

Archangel Gabriel raised his sword and drove off the frost, and the spring came over the earth, then off we'd go, far as feet would carry us, to Murom we went, to Yurievets, and up along the Volga and the quiet Oka. How nice it is to walk the earth in spring and summer—with the ground so soft and the grass like velvet! And there in the fields the Virgin has sprinkled flowers for your joy, and there lie the great spaces for your heart's delight. And then my mother would half close her blue eyes and her song would go winging away to the heaven—her voice was not strong but it was sweet and clear—and everything around would go still and breathless with listening. How good it was to go a-begging then! But when my tenth year came my mother was ashamed to take me with her begging, thought it a disgrace, so she settled down in Balakhna; there she would go alone from door to door, and on Sundays would stand on the porch of the church, while I sat home learning to make lace. I couldn't learn fast enough, so anxious was I to help my poor mother; and when the pattern wouldn't turn out, there I'd sit with the tears rolling down my cheeks. In a bit over two years, mind, I learned the lacemaking, and my fame spread throughout the town. Whenever some special work was wanted, they'd come to us—'Well, Akulya, start your bobbin working!' Didn't that make me happy though! To be sure it wasn't me to take the credit, but my mother for teaching me. If she couldn't work herself with her one hand, she knew how to teach, and a good teacher is worth ten workers. I was so proud! 'You can stop your begging now, Mother,' says I. 'I can feed you now with the work of my hands.' But 'Hush,' says my mother. 'That money must go for your dowry.' Soon after that your grandfather came along—a very fine young man: only twenty-two and a foreman of the boatmen already. It was his mother as sought me out. She saw how poor I was—the daughter of a beggarwoman, which made it sure I would make a dutiful wife. Hm-m.... And she herself a bun-seller, and

an evil-tempered woman ... but why speak ill of the dead? The Lord sees all that without our help; the Lord's sad, the devil's glad."

She laughed her gentle laugh; her nose quivered comically and her eyes caressed me with musing tenderness, conveying much more than words.

I remember one quiet evening when grandmother and I were having tea in grandfather's room; he himself was not well, and sat on the bed without a shirt on, his shoulders covered by a long towel with which he kept wiping the sweat off his brow and chest. His breathing was hoarse and rapid, his green eyes were filmy, his face red and puffy. His sharp little ears were particularly red, and when he reached out for a glass of tea his hand shook pitifully. He was very meek and not at all like himself.

"Why don't you let me have sugar?" he complained to grandmother in the tone of a spoiled child.

"Because honey's better for you," she answered gently but firmly.

He swallowed down the hot tea with much grunting and blubbering.

"Watch out I don't die," he said.

"Don't worry, I'm watching."

"That's it. If I should die now it would be like I never lived at all—all for nothing."

"Lie down and stop talking."

For a minute he lay quiet with his eyes closed, smacking his blue lips. Suddenly he started up as if stung.

"Have to marry off Yakov and Mikhail as soon as possible. Maybe wives and some more children will tame them a bit, eh?"

He began naming over the eligible young women in the town while grandmother sat drinking glass after glass without making any comment. Grandfather had forbidden me to go out because of some misdemeanour, so I sat at

the window watching the fading sunset and its bright reflection in the windows of the houses.

Down in the garden flocks of beetles were buzzing about the birches. A cooper was hammering away in the next yard, while not far away someone was turning the wheel of a grind-stone. From the ravine beyond the garden came the shouts of children playing among the thick bushes. I had a desperate longing to be out there with them, and my heart was heavy with the sadness of twilight.

Suddenly grandfather took out a brand-new book, slapped it against his palm, and called to me in a cheerful voice:

"Hey, you young whippersnapper, you cabbage ear, come over here! Sit down, Tatar face! See that sign? That's 'A' for apple. Say it—'A' for apple. 'B' for butter. 'C' for cellar. What's this?"

"'B' for butter."

"Right. And this?"

"'C' for cellar."

"Wrong! 'A' for apple. Look close: 'D' for dinner, 'E' for evening, 'F' for father—what's this?"

"'E' for evening."

"Right. And this?"

"'D' for dinner."

"Good. And this?"

"'A' for apple."

Grandmother interrupted.

"Be better for you to lie quiet, Father."

"Be quiet! This is just what I need to keep my mind off my worries. Go on, Alexei!"

He threw a hot, moist arm about my neck and pointed to the letters, while with the other hand he held the book under my very nose. He gave off a smell of vinegar, sweat, and baked onion which nearly suffocated me. He became strangely excited and shouted into my ear:

"'K' for kitchen, 'L' for lady!"

The words were familiar, but the Slavonic letters in no

way resembled them. The 'L' looked more like a stick than a lady; the "F" looked like humpbacked Grigori rather than father; the bulging "B" reminded me of my grandmother and me together, while there was something about all the letters that resembled my grandfather. He kept drilling me on the alphabet, taking the letters in order and out of order; he infected me with his excitement, so that I, too, broke into a sweat and began to shout at the top of my voice. This struck him as funny and his laugh brought on a fit of coughing.

"Just look how he's took to it, Mother," he gasped, clutching his breast and the book. "Phooh, you Astrakhan plague, you! What you yelling about?"

"It's you that's yelling...."

It delighted me to watch him and grandmother, who sat with her elbows on the table, her fists at her cheeks, laughing quietly as she watched us.

"Enough of shouting your heads off!" she said.

Grandfather turned to me in friendly explanation:

"I'm shouting because I'm sick, but what are you shouting for?"

Then he shook his perspiring head and said to grandmother:

"The late Natalya was wrong when she claimed he had a bad memory. He's got a memory like a horse! Go on, snubnose!"

At last he jokingly pushed me off the bed.

"That's enough. Hang on to the book. Tomorrow you'll tell me the whole alphabet without a mistake, and for that I'll give you five kopeks."

When I reached for the book, he drew me toward him and said sadly:

"What did your mother have to go and abandon you for, sonny?"

"Now, Father, no sense in talking like that," put in grandmother.

"I wouldn't talk like that if the hurt of it didn't make me.... Ah, what a girl to go wrong!"

He pushed me away with a brusque movement.

"Go out and play. But not in the street—only in the yard or the garden, hear?"

The garden was just the place where I wanted to be: I knew that as soon as I appeared on the hill, the boys down in the ravine would start throwing stones at me, and I wanted nothing more than to pay them back in their own coin.

"There's the pug!" they cried on catching sight of me. "Here goes!" And they hurriedly collected ammunition.

I had no idea what a "pug" was, so the name carried no insult; but it was a joy to find myself pitted against so many and to see how a well-aimed stone would put an enemy to flight or make him dive into the bushes. Such fights held no malice and left no feeling of injury.

I learned my letters quickly, and perhaps it was this that made my grandfather look thoughtfully at me and stop whipping me so often; though in my opinion I *deserved more lickings than ever before. As I became* older and bolder, I began to violate my grandfather's rules and orders, but he only scolded or shook his fist at me.

It seemed to me that he had often beaten me without cause, and one day I told him so.

He gave me a light tap under the chin and blinked at me.

"What-a-at?" he drawled, adding with a chuckle: "You little heretic, you! Who are you to decide how many lickings you deserve? I'm the only one can know that! Be off with you!"

But he caught me by the shoulder as I turned and once more looked me in the eye.

"You being sly, or just a simpleton?"

"I don't know."

"Don't know, don't you? Well, then I'll tell you: you be sly—that's better than being a simpleton. A calf's a simpleton. Now go out and play."

Soon I was spelling out the Psalter letter by letter. Usually we studied after tea in the evening, and each time I had to read an entire psalm.

"'B' for butter, 'L' for lady, 'E' for evening, 'S' for sugar, 'S' for sugar—bless; 'E' for evening, 'D' for dinner—ed: blessed. Blessed is he..." I spelled, running my index finger along the line. The boredom of it gave rise to all kinds of questions.

"Who is blessed? Uncle Yakov?"

"I'll give you a whack over the head and then you'll know who is blessed!" answered grandfather with an angry snort. But I sensed that his anger was not genuine; it was only assumed by force of habit, and for form's sake.

And I was not mistaken; a minute later grandfather grumbled, without a thought for me:

"Hm-m, when it comes to singing and playing, he's a regular King David, but when you look at his doings, he's no better than an Absalom. A songster, a trickster, a jester—phoooh! 'Dancing merry o'er the green!' Well, and how far does that dancing get you? Not very far!"

I stopped reading to listen to him, glancing up into his frowning, worried face; his narrowed eyes were gazing off into the distance, and they were filled with a warm sadness thawing his usual severity. His golden eyebrows quivered and his stained fingernails glistened as he tapped nervously on the table.

"Grandfather!"

"Eh?"

"Tell me a story."

"You go on with your reading, lazybones," he grumbled, rubbing his eyes as though he had just waked up. "You'd rather hear fairy tales than read the Psalter."

I suspected that he, too, would rather hear fairy tales than read the Psalter, though he knew the latter almost by heart, having taken a vow to read part of it out loud every evening before going to bed, chanting like the deacon reading the service in church.

But I pressed him for the story, and finally the old man gave in.

"Oh, all right. You'll be having the Psalter with you all your life, but I'll soon be going to meet my Maker at the judgement seat."

Leaning against the wool-embroidered back of the old armchair, he fixed his eyes on the ceiling and lost himself in recollections of old times. Once a robber band had come to Balakhna to loot the shop of the merchant Zayev. Grandfather's father had run to the belfry to give the alarm, but the robbers overtook him, slashed him with their swords, and threw his remains down from the belfry.

"I was only a little chap at the time; I didn't see what happened and I don't remember it; I only remember from the time the French came, in 1812—I was twelve then. They drove about thirty French prisoners into Balakhna—all of them little and skinny, dressed in whatever they could lay hands on—worse than beggars—shivering in their skins, some of them with their arms and legs frost-bitten and too weak to stand. The muzhiks wanted to kill them off, but the convoy wouldn't let them. Then the troops from the garrison came and drove the muzhiks to their huts. Later we got used to the Frenchmen, they turned out to be a shrewd, quick-witted lot, and rather jolly; sometimes they would sing their songs, too. The quality used to drive down from Nizhni in troikas to look at them. Some of those who came would curse the French and shake their fists at them, even strike them; others would talk kind to them in their own tongue and give them money and warm clothes. I remember one old man—a gentleman he was—who covered his face with his hands and started crying: 'Just see what that fiend Napoleon has done to the French!' he says. Think of that—a Russian, and a gentleman at that, with such a kind heart—taking pity on foreigners that way...."

For a moment he was silent, closing his eyes and stroking down his hair. Then he continued cautiously, rummaging through his memories of the past:

"It would be winter, with a blizzard raging and the cold pressing down hard on the huts, and the Frenchmen would come running to our window and calling to my mother—she used to make buns to peddle—they'd knock at the window, jumping about and shouting for buns. Mother wouldn't let them into the house; she'd hand them their buns through the window. They'd grab them, all hot and steaming, straight from the oven, and put them inside their shirts, tight against their frozen bodies, against their hearts; how they stood it I can't imagine! Lots of them died of the cold—people from a warm country, not used to such frosts. Two of them lived in our bath-house, down in the garden—an officer and his orderly named Miron; the officer was tall and thin, nothing but skin and bones, and he went about in a woman's cloak that came to his knees. He was a gentle soul, but a real drunkard. My mother brewed beer on the sly and sold it; he'd buy himself beer and drink himself drunk and start singing. He learned to babble a bit in our tongue. 'Your land's not white,' he would say. 'It's black and harsh.' He spoke very broken, but you could understand what he meant, and it's the truth—nothing gentle about our northern parts. If you go down the Volga the land gets warmer and softer, and down past the Caspian Sea there's no snow at all. You can be sure of this, for you'll not find anything about snow or about winter in the Gospels, or the Acts, or the Psalter, and it was down in that country Christ lived. As soon as we finish the Psalter, you and me will start reading the Gospels."

Again he became silent and seemed to doze off; when his mind was fixed on something, he would stare out of the window with his eyes narrowed, his whole figure little and sharp.

"Go on," I urged quietly.

"Ah well!" he said with a start. "What was it I was talking about? The French? Well, they're also humans, no worse than us sinners. They'd go shouting after my mother, 'Madame, madame!' which means 'my lady' in

their tongue, but that 'lady' would go toting home a sack of flour weighing five poods if an ounce. Strong as an ox she was; she thought nothing of flinging me around by the hair right up until I was twenty years old. And I was no weakling myself at that time. That orderly Miron was a great lover of horses: he'd go from yard to yard making signs, asking to be allowed to groom the horses. At first people were scared: an enemy, he might ruin the horses. But after a while the muzhiks used to ask him themselves: 'Hi there, Miron!' and he'd laugh and duck his head like a bull and come running. His hair was red as a carrot, and he had a big nose and thick lips. He was a fine groom and knew how to cure the horses of various ailments; later he became a vet in Nizhni, but he went off his head and the firemen beat him to death. As for the officer, he began to waste away when spring came, and on the day of Saint Nicholas he died quiet-like: sat dreaming at the window of the bath-house and passed away, just sitting there with his head out the window. I felt sorry for him; even shed a few tears; a gentle soul he was; used to take me by the ears and whisper something soft in his own tongue. I couldn't understand his words, but they sounded nice. There's not too much human kindness in this world. Once he began teaching me to talk his language, but my mother forbade it. She even took me to the priest and he ordered me a beating and put in a complaint about the officer. People were strict in those days, sonny! You don't have to suffer what we did—others have suffered it for you, and don't you forget it! Take me, for example—what I've suffered!"

It grew dark. Grandfather strangely expanded in the dark and his eyes shone like those of a cat. He recounted his story quietly, cautiously, musingly, but when he spoke of himself he became animated and boastful. I did not like to hear him speak of himself and I did not like his constant admonitions:

"Remember that!" "Don't you forget it!"

There were many things he told me which I would

have been glad to have forgotten, but they stuck in my mind like painful splinters, even without his admonitions. He never told me fairy tales—only accounts of true happenings. I had observed that questions annoyed him, and so I made a point of putting them:

"Who's better—Russians or Frenchmen?"

"Who can tell? I never saw Frenchmen in their own country," he answered with irritation, adding:

"Even a rat's all right in its own hole."

"Are Russians all right?"

"Some are, some aren't. They were better when they were serfs—like wrought iron, forced into shape. Now the chain's off their feet, but they've nothing to eat. To be sure the gentlefolk are a hard-hearted lot, but they've got more sense than the muzhik. Can't say that about all of them, but once a gentleman's good, he's very good. Some are the veriest fools—like sacks—hold whatever you stuff them with. Too many empty shells among us—at first glance looks like a human being, but on looking a little closer you see the worms have eaten out all the kernel—nothing left but a shell. What we need is some learning; need to sharpen our wits, but there's nothing to sharpen them on."

"Are Russians strong?"

"Some are, but it's not strength that counts, it's skill; the strongest man is weaker than a horse."

"Why did the French fight us?"

"Well, now—wars—they're the business of the tsar. It's not for simple folk like us to understand why."

But I shall never forget grandfather's answer when I asked him who Bonaparte was:

"He was a brave fellow who wanted to conquer the whole earth, so's everybody could live equal—no lords and officials, but just like that—all the same.⁷ The names would still be different, but the rights equal for everybody. And the same faith for everybody. No sense in that, of course; it's only crabs are all alike. Take fish, now—even they're all different: the salmon's no friend of

the catfish, and the sturgeon's not making up to the herring. We've had our own Bonapartes—Stepan Razin, for example, and Emelyan Pugachov—but I'll tell you about them another time."

Sometimes he would stare at me wide-eyed for a long time, as though he had never seen me before, and this was very unpleasant.

But he never spoke to me about my father or mother.

Sometimes grandmother would enter during these conversations. She would quietly take a seat in the corner and say nothing until suddenly she would ask a question in her caressing voice:

"Remember, Father, how fine it was that time you and me made a pilgrimage to Murom to pray to the Virgin? What year was that?"

"Don't remember exactly, but it was before the cholera—the year they combed the forest for the Olonchans."⁸

"True. I remember how scared we were of them...."

"Hm-m."

I asked who the Olonchans were and why they hid in the forest. Grandfather answered reluctantly:

"The Olonchans were simply muzhiks—serfs who ran away from work at the factories."

"How did they catch them?"

"How do you suppose? Like when the boys play—some of them run, others catch them. Once they're caught, they get the knout. Used to get their nostrils slit too, and brands put on their foreheads to show they were punished."

"What for?"

"Who knows? That's a dark business, and it's hard to say who was at fault, the ones who did the running or the ones who did the catching."

"Remember, Father," put in grandmother once more, "how it was after the great fire?"

"Which great fire?" asked grandfather with a stern insistence on accuracy.

Lost in their reminiscences, they became oblivious of my presence. Their voices went on quietly, and with such measured rhythm that at times they seemed to be singing a song, a gruesome song about fires and pestilences and the thrashings dealt to human beings, about accidental deaths and clever swindles, about religious fanatics and irascible gentlemen from the upper classes.

"How much we've seen! How much we've lived through!" muttered grandfather.

"And has it been a bad life?" asked grandmother. "Just think what a lovely spring it was when Varvara was born!"

"That was in '48, the year of the march on Hungary⁹; the day after we had Varvara baptized her godfather Tikhon was called up."

"And he never came back," sighed grandmother.

"Never came back. From that day on God's mercy slipped past us like water past a raft. Ah, Varvara...."

"Enough, Father."

"Why enough?" he answered angrily. "Turned out bad, our children, however you look at them. Our strength all poured away into nothing. You and me thought we were laying things by in a sound basket, but the Lord saw fit to put a sieve in our hands."

He cried out as if he had been burnt, trotting about the room, moaning, denouncing his children, shaking his bony little fist at grandmother.

"And it's all your spoiling that sent them to the dogs, you witch!"

The extremity of his bitterness drove him into the icon corner, where he beat himself on his thin, hollow-sounding breast and wailed tearfully:

"Why, oh Lord? Am I so much worse than anybody else?"

His wet eyes glistened with pain and indignation, and his whole body trembled.

Grandmother remained sitting in the darkness, silently crossing herself. Finally she went over to him.

"Why torture yourself like this?" she said persuasively. "The Lord knows what He's about. Not many children are better than ours. It's the same everywhere, Father—quarrels and fighting. All mothers and fathers wash away their sins with their own tears. You're not the only one."

Sometimes her words would calm him, and he would wearily slip into bed, while grandmother and I stole away to our attic.

But once when she went over to him with her gentle words, he whirled about and struck her a blow in the face with his fist. Grandmother swayed and pressed her hand to her lips. When she had sufficiently recovered, she said in a calm, quiet voice: "You fool!" and spat the blood at his feet. He raised his arms over his head and shrieked twice:

"Get out before I kill you!"

"Fool!" repeated grandmother, going toward the door. He threw himself after her, but she unhurriedly stepped over the sill and slammed the door in his face.

"The old hussy," hissed grandfather, as red as fire, clutching the jamb and scratching it with his nails.

I sat on the stove-bunk more dead than alive, scarcely believing my own eyes. This was the first time he had ever struck grandmother in my presence, and I was crushed by the repulsiveness of it. His act revealed a new quality in him, something which nothing could justify and which bore down on me with an awful weight. He kept standing there, hanging on to the door jamb, shrinking and going grey before my eyes, as though dusted with ashes. Suddenly he went to the centre of the room, fell on his knees and slumped forward, supporting himself on his arm. Then he straightened up, beat himself on the breast with both hands, and cried:

"Oh God, oh God..."

I slid off the warm tiles of the bunk as though they were ice and ran out. Upstairs grandmother was walking up and down, rinsing her mouth.

"Does it hurt?"

She went to the corner and spit the water into the waste bucket.

"It's all right," she answered calmly. "My teeth are whole—just a cut on the lip."

"Why did he do it?"

"Lost his temper," she answered glancing out the window. "It's hard for him, poor old man, so much misfortune.... Go to bed and forget it."

I asked her about something else, but with unwonted sharpness she replied:

"Didn't you hear me? Go to bed! Such a disobedient lad...."

She sat down by the window and sucked at her lip, frequently spitting into her handkerchief. I kept looking at her as I undressed. A sprinkling of stars could be seen in the square of night sky above her head. Everything was quiet outside, everything dark inside.

When I was in bed she came over to me and quietly stroked my hair.

"Sleep in peace," she said. "I'm going down to him... Don't feel sorry for me, pigeon-widgeon, a lot of it is my own fault. Go to sleep."

She kissed me and went out, leaving me with a choking sadness. I jumped out of the soft, hot bed and went to the window, where I stood staring down into the empty street, numbed by unbearable pain.

6 Once more life became a nightmare. One evening after tea, when grandfather and I were reading the Psalter and grandmother was washing up, Uncle Yakov rushed into the room. He was as dishevelled as ever, looking like a worn-out broom. He threw his cap into the corner and without a word of greeting began to gabble with wild gestures:

"Mikhail's on a rampage, Dad! He had dinner at our place, got drunk and went raging mad: broke the dishes, tore up a woollen dress belonging to a customer, broke the window, and cursed me and Grigori. He's coming here

and swears he'll get you: 'I'll pull all the hairs out of his beard!' he yelled. 'I'll kill him!' he cried. You'd better look out...."

Grandfather leaned on the table and slowly pulled himself to his feet, his face all drawn toward his nose, making it look for all the world like a hatchet.

"Hear that, Mother?" he squeaked. "What d'ye think of that, eh? Coming to kill his own father! There's a son for you! Well, the time's come! The time's come, my lads!"

He squared his shoulders and began pacing the floor. Then he went to the door and fastened it with a heavy hook.

"Both of you want to get your hands on Varvara's dowry, don't you?" he said, turning to Yakov. "Well, here's how you'll get it!" and he snapped his fingers under my uncle's nose.

"Why jump on me, Dad?" said the latter, springing back and speaking in an offended tone.

"You? I know you too!"

Grandmother said nothing as she hurriedly put the cups in the cupboard.

"I came to protect you!"

"Ha!" laughed grandfather scornfully. "That's a good one! Thanks, son! Here, mother, give this foxy customer something to work with—a poker or a flatiron! And you, Yakov Vassilyevich, soon as your brother breaks the door open you'll give it to him—on my head!"

My uncle thrust his hands in his pockets and walked off to one side.

"Well, if you don't believe me—"

"Believe you?" shouted grandfather with a stamp of his foot. "I'd believe a cat, or a rat, or a dog, but not you! It's you that gave him the liquor and egged him on—I know! Well, now beat him up! Take your choice—him or me!"

Grandmother turned to me and whispered:

"Run upstairs and watch for Uncle Mikhail through

the window. Soon's you see him, come and tell us! Be off, hurry!"

So up I went and planted myself at the window, a bit frightened by the thought of what my raging uncle would do when he got here, but swelling with pride at the responsible task entrusted to me. The street was wide and covered with a thick layer of dust through which the curves of the cobbles protruded. It extended far to the left, crossing a ravine and coming out on Ostrozhnaya Square, where the grey building of the old jail with its four towers stood firmly implanted in the clay soil. There was a certain melancholy beauty and impressiveness about this building. To the right, three houses from ours, the street ran into Sennaya Square, bounded on the opposite side by yellow guard-house and the vigilant fire-tower, at the top of which the watchman walked round and round like a dog on a chain. The square was cut up by gullies and ditches, one of which was filled with green slime, while to the right lay Dukov Pond. It was there, according to grandmother, my uncles had once pushed my father through a hole in the ice. Almost opposite the window was a by-street lined with little, motley houses; it ended in the fat, squat church of the Three Saints. When I looked straight out of the window, the roofs seemed to be boats upturned on the green waves of the orchards.

The dusty, faded houses of our street, scoured by the winds of long winters, washed by endless autumn rains, stood huddled together like beggars on a church porch, glancing about furtively with their bulging windows as though, like me, they were waiting for something. The few people in sight walked unhurriedly, like meditative cockroaches climbing the stove. A stifling heat rose to my window, bringing with it the detested odour of pies stuffed with spring onions and carrots. To this day these smells make me feel dismal.

The scene was oppressive—oppressive in a peculiar way which was almost unbearable. It was as if my breast was filled with liquid lead, that pressed against my ribs

and chest, making me swell out, making me blow up like a balloon that could not be contained in this tiny room with its coffin-lid ceiling.

Suddenly I caught sight of Uncle Mikhail glancing out from behind the grey house on the corner of the by-street. He had pulled his cap down so that it made his ears stick out. He was wearing a short brown coat and knee boots covered with dust; one hand was in the pocket of his checked pants, the other holding on to his beard. I could not see his face, but he was standing as though he meant to leap across the street and dig his black, hairy claws into grandfather's house. I should have run downstairs and told them he had come, but I could not tear myself away from the window. I saw him steal cautiously across the street, as though he were afraid to dirty his grey boots, and heard the jarring of glass and the squeaking of hinges as he opened the door of the tavern.

I ran downstairs and knocked at the door of grandfather's room.

"Who's there?" he cried gruffly, without opening. "You? Well? Went into the tavern, you say? Very well, go back where you came from!"

"I'm afraid...."

"Can't be helped!"

I went. It was getting dark; the dust of the street became thicker and darker; only yellow lights appeared in the windows; from the house across the street came the sound of a stringed instrument playing something fine and mournful. Someone was singing in the tavern; whenever the door was opened I could hear a tired, broken voice which I knew to belong to the one-eyed beggar Nikitushka, a bearded old man whose left eye was shut tight and whose right one resembled a red-hot coal. The slamming of the door would chop off his song like the blow of an axe.

Grandmother envied the beggar; whenever she heard him sing she would sigh and say:

"How lucky he is to know so many wonderful songs!"

Sometimes she would call him into our yard. He would sit on the porch leaning on his cane, singing and reciting verses, grandmother sitting beside him, interrupting him with an occasional question.

"You mean to say the Holy Virgin has been in Ryazan?"

"She's been everywhere—in all the gubernias," he would answer convincingly.

A sleepy exhaustion crept imperceptibly along the street, pressing down on my heart and closing my eyes. If only grandmother would come! Or even grandfather! What sort of person had my father been, that my uncles and grandfather should have disliked him so, while grandmother and Grigory and nanny Evgenia should speak so well of him? And where was my mother?

Of late I kept thinking more and more often of my mother, envisioning her as the heroine of all grandmother's tales and legends. The fact that mother did not want to live with her family only raised her in my estimation. I imagined that she was living with a band of highwaymen at an inn, and that they robbed the rich and divided the spoil among the poor. Or perhaps she was living in a cave in the forest, again with a band of kind-hearted robbers for whom she cooked and guarded stolen gold. Still another version was that she was wandering over the earth counting its treasures like the "Robber-Princess" Yengalycheva, accompanied by the Holy Virgin, who kept saying to her as she said to the "Robber-Princess":

*It is not for thee, thou greedy one,
To strip the earth of its silver and gold;
It is not for thee, thou grasping one,
To hide thy shame 'neath the treasures of earth!*

And mother answered her in the words of the "Robber-Princess":

*Forgive me, O Virgin Immaculate,
And pity my soul for its sinfulness,
Not for myself do I plunder so,
But for the sake of my son, my beloved one...*

Then the Holy Virgin, who was as kind-hearted as grandmother, forgave her, and said:

*Ah, thou vixen, thou Varyushka,
Ah, thou Tatar incorrigible!
Go, if thou must, thy chosen path:
Choose the way; rue the day.
But touch not the folk of this Russian land,
On a forest trail, a Mordovian flail,
Or a Kalmyk slay on the steppelands grey...*

I lost myself in recollections of these legends as in a dream, from which I was roughly awakened by a bustling and shuffling and roaring coming from the hall and the yard down below. Leaning out of the window I saw grandfather and Uncle Yakov and Melyan, the funny tavern hand, pushing Uncle Mikhail through the gate out into the street; he fought his way back, but they kicked him and beat him on the arms, the back, the shoulders, and at last he went flying into the dust of the street. The gate was slammed, locked and bolted, his battered cap tossed over the fence, and everything became quiet.

My rumpled, tattered uncle lay still for a while, then sat up, picked up a cobblestone and hurled it at the gate, producing a dull thud like a blow on the bottom of a barrel. Dark-faced people came crawling out of the tavern and began bellowing and waving their arms; heads appeared in the windows of the houses; the street became lively with yells and laughter. This, too, was like a fairy tale—fascinating, but unpleasant and frightening.

Suddenly everything was over, everyone had gone, all was quiet.

...On the trunk by the door sat grandmother, all hunched over, motionless, scarcely breathing; I was

standing in front of her stroking her soft, warm, wet cheeks, but apparently she was unaware of it, and only sat there muttering miserably:

"Dear Lord, wasn't there enough good sense to go around when it came to me and my children? God have mercy on us...."

It seems to me that my grandfather lived not more than a year in this house on Polevaya Street—from spring to spring. But in so short a time the house became notorious; almost every Sunday the urchins would come running to our gates, joyfully announcing to the entire block:

"Another fight at the Kashirins'!"

Usually Uncle Mikhail would come in the evening and remain the whole night, keeping the house in a state of siege, its inhabitants in a state of alarm. Sometimes he would bring two or three assistants along—desperate young bucks from the Kunavino settlement. They would climb up the ravine into the garden and there give full rein to the dictates of their drunken imagination. They pulled up all the raspberry and current bushes, and one night they ruined the bath-house, breaking everything in it that was breakable—the shelves, the benches, the boilers. They took the stove apart, pulled up some of the floorboards, ripped off the door and the jamb.

Grandfather stood at the window silent and lowering, listening to them destroy his property; grandmother ran out into the yard, where she became lost in the darkness. But her voice came back pleadingly:

"Mikhail! Think what you're doing, Mikhail!"

In reply came a string of foul and idiotic Russian oaths, the meaning of which must have been beyond the comprehension and feeling of the beasts vomiting them forth.

There could be no thought of following grandmother at such a moment, but it was frightening without her. I went down into grandfather's room.

"Get out of here, anathema!" he shouted at me hoarsely.

I ran back to the attic and stared out into the darkness of the garden, trying not to lose sight of grandmother, crying and calling to her, afraid that they might kill her. She did not come, but on hearing my voice, my drunken uncle shouted filthy oaths at my mother.

On one such evening grandfather was ill. He lay in bed and kept crying plaintively as he rolled his head back and forth on the pillow:

"Is this all I lived for, sinned for, saved for? If it wasn't so shameful, I'd call the police and haul them up before the governor tomorrow. What a disgrace! Who ever heard of parents setting the police on their own children? So there's nothing you can do but lie here, old man!"

Suddenly he threw his legs over the edge of the bed and went staggering to the window.

"Here, where you going?" cried grandmother, catching him by the arm.

"Give me a light!" he ordered, his breath coming in great gasps.

When grandmother had lighted the candle, he held it in front of him like a gun and shouted mockingly through the window:

"Phooh, Mishka, thief in the night, mad as a dog with the mange!"

Immediately the upper pane of the window was shattered and half a brick fell on the table next to grandmother.

"Missed!" yelled grandfather, and began either to laugh or to cry.

Grandmother picked him up in her arms as though he were me and laid him on the bed, muttering in a frightened voice:

"What are you doing, for the love of Christ! If anything should happen, it'd be Siberia for him; do you

think he realizes it means Siberia when he's in such a state?"

Grandfather lay with his legs jerking, sobbing hoarsely: "Let him kill me...."

A roaring and stamping came from outside. I took the brick off the table and ran to the window, but grandmother managed to snatch me up and thrust me in the corner, hissing:

"You crazy little brat!"

Another time my uncle mounted the back porch and began swinging a huge club at the entrance door. Grandfather stood in the hall waiting for him, supported by two lodgers with clubs in their hands and the large wife of the tavern keeper wielding a rolling pin. Behind them pressed grandmother.

"Let me go out to him," she pleaded. "Let me have a word with him."

Grandfather held his club upraised and stood with one foot forward like the man with the spear in the painting "The Bear Hunt". When grandmother rushed over to him, he silently pushed her away with his foot and his elbow. All four of them stood in menacing poses of expectation. A lamp hanging above them lighted their faces with its fitful flame. I stood watching from the attic stairs, anxious to take grandmother away.

My uncle kept furiously beating the door. The lower hinge was already broken and scraped unpleasantly, leaving the door hanging by only the upper hinge, which also threatened to give way. Grandfather spoke to his supporters in the same hoarse voice:

"Beat him over the hands and the legs—not on the head, mind."

Next to the door was a window, just big enough to stick a head through; my uncle had already broken the glass of this window, leaving it to gape darkly, fringed with splintered glass, like an empty eye socket.

Grandmother ran to it, thrust her arm through, and waved to Mikhail as she cried:

"Misha, for Christ's sake, go away! They'll cripple you for life! Go away!"

He struck her over the arm with his club; I saw something heavy flash across the window and fall on her arm, then grandmother sank to the floor, just managing to cry once more, "Run, Misha..." before she fell back limp and silent.

"Ah, Mother!" wailed grandfather in a dreadful voice.

The door opened and my uncle jumped through, but he was immediately thrown out onto the porch like a spadeful of dirt.

The wife of the tavern keeper took grandmother to grandfather's room; he soon followed.

"Is the bone broken?" he asked unhappily, going over to her.

"Looks like it's broken," she replied without opening her eyes. "But what have you done to him?"

"Come to your senses, woman!" cried grandfather angrily. "What do you think I am, a beast? We tied him up and he's lying out in the shed. I poured a bucket of water over him. There's a fiend for you! Who does he take after?"

Grandmother groaned.

"I've sent for the bonesetter; try to bear it a while," said grandfather, sitting down next to her on the bed. "They'll be the death of us yet, Mother; bring us to our graves before our time."

"Give them everything."

"And what about Varvara?"

They spoke for a long time, grandmother in a quiet, plaintive voice, grandfather noisily and angrily.

Then a little, hunchbacked old woman came in. She had a mouth stretching from ear to ear, her lower jaw trembled, her mouth hung open like a fish's, and her upper lip was bisected by a sharp nose. Her eyes could not be seen, she could scarcely move her legs and kept shuffling across the floor with her crutch, jingling the little bundle she carried.

This, I thought, was Death come to my grandmother. I ran over to the old woman and shouted at the top of my lungs:

"Get out of here!"

Grandfather grabbed me up and hauled me unceremoniously to the attic.

7 At a very early date I realized that my grandfather had one God, my grandmother another.

On waking in the morning, grandmother would usually sit for a long time on the bed combing her amazing hair, jerking her head, clenching her teeth as she pulled out whole locks of the long black silk, and cursing under her breath so as not to wake me up:

"A pox on you, a plague on you!"

When she had managed to untangle it more or less, she would braid it and wash herself hurriedly, with angry spluttering. Without washing the irritation off her large face, all wrinkled with sleep, she would kneel in front of the icons. Then would begin her true morning ablutions which left her completely refreshed.

Straightening her spine and throwing back her head, she would glance affectionately into the round face of the Virgin of Kazan and cross herself fervently as she whispered:

"Blessed Virgin, bless the coming day...."

Then she would bow to the very floor, raise herself slowly and again whisper with growing fervour:

"Fount of all joy, beauty inexpressible, like an apple tree in bloom...."

Almost every morning she found new words of praise and adoration, and this made me listen to each of her prayers with strained attention.

"Dear heart, so pure, so divine! Light of my soul, guardian of my hearth, sun of heaven, so bright, so golden, precious Mother of God, save us from the

onslaughts of evil, save me from giving offense and from being needlessly offended...."

A smile hovered in the depths of her dark eyes, and she seemed to have grown younger as she crossed herself with a slow movement of her heavy hand.

"Dear Jesus, son of God, be merciful to me, a sinner, for thine own mother's sake...."

Her prayers were always a laudatory offering, a paean of praise coming from a simple and sincere heart.

In the morning she did not linger long over her prayers: it was necessary to put up the samovar, since grandfather no longer kept a servant, and if she made him wait for his morning tea, she was rewarded by angry and endless reproaches.

Sometimes, if grandfather had awakened earlier than grandmother, he would climb up to the attic and find her at her prayers. He would stand listening silently, with a contemptuous smile at the corners of his thin, dark lips, remarking later at the breakfast table:

"How many times have I taught you how to pray, you thickhead, but on you go, in your stubborn way, muttering along like a heretic! How God ever puts up with it is more than I can understand!"

"He understands," answered grandmother confidently. "No matter what you say to Him, He's sure to understand."

"Chuvash, that's what you are! Phooh!"

Her God was with her all day long. She even told the animals about Him. I could see that it was easy for all creatures—people, dogs, birds, bees, and even growing things—to accept that God. He was equally kind and equally near to everything on earth.

One day the mischievous tomcat belonging to the tavern keeper's wife—a lovely, grey, golden-headed beast, a favourite in the yard even though it was a toady and a sly glutton—caught a starling. Grandmother took the tortured bird away from the cat and said angrily:

"No fear of God in your heart, that's what's the matter with you, you wicked creature!"

The janitor and the tavern keeper's wife laughed at grandmother for these words, but she shouted at them angrily:

"You think the animals have no knowledge of God? The least of them knows Him as well as you do, you hardhearted creatures!"

While harnessing Sharap, who had grown fat and lazy, she would murmur:

"Why so unhappy, servant of God? Getting old, are you?"

The horse would sigh and shake its head.

Yet she did not utter the name of God as often as did grandfather. I could understand grandmother's God and was not afraid of Him, yet I dared not tell a lie in His presence. It would have been shameful. Because of this shame, I never lied to my grandmother. It was quite impossible to hide anything from so kind a God, and so far as I can remember, I never had any inclination to do so.

One day the tavern keeper's wife quarrelled with grandfather and included my innocent grandmother in her vituperations, even throwing a carrot at her.

"It's a fool you are, my fine lady," retorted grandmother calmly. But I was deeply offended and decided to take revenge.

For some time I considered what would be the best way to punish this fat, red-headed woman with the double chin and no eyes to speak of.

In the internecine wars waged by our neighbours, I had observed that vengeance was wreaked by chopping off the tails of cats, poisoning dogs, killing chickens, or by stealing into the enemy's cellar at night and pouring kerosene into barrels of sauerkraut or pickles, or pulling the stoppers out of kegs of kvass. But none of these means satisfied me. It was necessary to think up something more bold and terrible.

And so I decided on the following measure: when the tavern keeper's wife climbed down into the cellar I closed the hatch after her, locked it, did a dance of vengeance on top, and threw the key up on the roof. Then I rushed into the kitchen where grandmother was cooking. At first she could not understand my ecstasy, but when she discovered its cause, she slapped me on the parts provided for that purpose, dragged me out into the yard, and sent me up on the roof for the key. Crushed by her reaction, I silently recovered the key, then ran into a corner of the yard, from where I watched my grandmother free the prisoner and come walking toward me in the company of the hated one, both of them laughing amiably.

"I'll give it to you yet!" threatened the tavern keeper's wife, shaking her fat fist at me, but her eyeless face was smiling good-naturedly. Grandmother took me by the scruff of the neck and led me into the kitchen.

"What did you do that for?" she asked.

"Didn't she throw a carrot at you?"

"Aha! So it was on my account you did it, eh? I'll show you, you little whippersnapper! I'll shove you under the stove with the mice, and then you'll get some sense in you! A fine champion, you! Come, people, take a look at this little bubble before it bursts! If I tell your grandfather, won't he take the skin off your behind for you, just! Get up into the attic now and learn your lessons!"

She did not speak to me for the rest of the day, but in the evening before saying her prayers she sat down on the side of my bed and said these unforgettable words:

"Listen, pigeon-widgeon, just remember this: never meddle in the affairs of grownups. Grownups are a spoiled lot—tried by toils and temptations. But you're not—not yet. So you just go on living according to your child lights until the Lord sees fit to touch your heart and show you your task, leading you out on to the path you must tread. Is that clear? As for who's to blame for what—that's none of your business. God will judge and punish. That's for Him, not for us."

She was silent for a minute, during which she took some snuff, then she narrowed her right eye and added:

"Sometimes the Lord Himself must find it hard to tell who's to blame."

"Why, doesn't He know everything?" I asked in surprise.

"If He did," she replied sadly, "there's lots of things people wouldn't do. He sits up there in heaven, watching us sinners down below, and sometimes he breaks into such tears, such sobbing! 'Ah, my people, my people, my own dear people!' he weeps. 'How my heart bleeds for you!'" She herself was weeping, and she went to the icon corner to pray without drying her tears.

From that time on her God became even dearer and more comprehensible to me.

In my admonitions grandfather also taught me that God was all-knowing, all-seeing, and ever present, a help to man in all his trouble. But grandfather did not pray as grandmother did.

Before going to the icon corner in the morning, he would carefully wash and dress and comb his red hair and beard; only after adjusting his blouse in the mirror and tying the black cravat he wore inside his vest would he creep stealthily toward the icons. He would always come to a halt at one and the same knot in the floor-board that resembled the eye of a horse, his arms stiff at his sides like a soldier's. After a moment's silence, standing with bowed head, thin and straight, he would say impressively:

"In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost!"

It always seemed to me that the room became particularly quiet after these words—even the flies buzzed more circumspectly.

Now his head was thrown back, his eyebrows bristling, his golden beard horizontal. He said his prayers in a firm voice, as though reciting a lesson, pronouncing the words emphatically and demandingly:

"No man knoweth when the Judgment Day will come, to expose the deeds of men...."

Beating himself lightly on the chest, he would press his request:

"Against Thee the one God, have I sinned.... Hide Thy face from my sins...."

Every word was stressed as he recited the Creed, and he beat time by jerking his right leg. He stood there neat and clean and commanding, his whole body straining toward the icons, seeming to grow taller and thinner and harder.

"Thou, who didst give birth to the Great Healer, heal my soul of evil passions. Hark to the groaning of my heart and have mercy, O Mother of God!"

Then he would chant thinly, with tears in his green eyes:

"Let my faith be counted unto me for works, O my God, and lay not a burden beyond my strength to bear...."

He crossed himself again and again, quickly and convulsively, nodding his head like a butting goat and speaking in a wheezing, whimpering voice. When in later life I had occasion to visit a synagogue, I realized that grandfather prayed like a Jew.

The samovar had long since been steaming on the table, the room was filled with the scent of hot rye cakes stuffed with cottage cheese, and my stomach was roaring with hunger. Grandmother stood leaning against the door jamb, sighing and frowning, her eyes on the floor; the sun glanced jocosely through the window, the dew shone like pearls on the trees, the morning air bore the fresh scent of dill, currants, and ripening apples, but grandfather went on rocking and wailing at his prayers:

"Quench the fire of my passion, for I am base and accursed!"

I knew all his matins and all his vespers by heart, and would follow him with intense concentration to see whether he made a mistake or left out anything.

Such occasions were rare, but they always roused in me a malicious sence of triumph.

When grandfather had finished his prayers, he turned to me and grandmother:

"Good morning," he said.

We bowed, and at long last took our places at the table.

"You left out 'sufficient'," I said, turning to grandfather.

"Are you sure?" he asked anxiously.

"Yes. You should have said, 'And may my faith be sufficient unto my need'."

"Humph!" he exclaimed, blinking guiltily.

Some day he would repay me with interest for that remark, but for the present I took my fill of pleasure in his embarrassment.

One day grandmother said jokingly:

"Must be boring for God to listen to your prayers, Father—always saying one and the same thing."

"Wha-a-t?" he drawled menacingly. "What's that you're babbling?"

"It's never a word from your own soul you offer your Maker, that's what I'm saying."

Trembling and flushing, he jumped up on a chair and threw a saucer at grandmother.

"Get out of here, you old witch!" he screeched like a saw on glass.

Whenever he spoke about the strong arm of God, he emphasized its ruthlessness: once, for example, when people sinned they were drowned in a flood; another time their cities were burned and destroyed; people were punished by famine and plague. For him, God was a raised sword, a lash held over the heads of the wicked.

"Any as violates the laws of God are sure to come to some bad end!" he warned me, tapping the table with his bony fingers.

It was difficult for me to believe in the cruelty of God.

I suspected that grandfather had invented it to make me afraid of himself, rather than of God.

"Is it to make me obey you that you tell me this?" I asked candidly.

"Of course," he replied with equal candour, "A fine thing it would be if you didn't obey!"

"What about grandmother?"

"Don't you listen to that old fool," he said sternly. "She's been that way all her life—crazy and unlearned. I'll tell her she's not to talk to you about such important things. Now answer me this: how many ranks are there among the angels?"

I answered and then asked:

"What does it mean, 'A person of high rank'?"

"You want to know everything, don't you?" he snorted, dropping his eyes and chewing his lips. On second thought he explained reluctantly:

"That's got nothing to do with God, that's human business—people of high rank—government officials and the like. An official is one who lives off the law—chews it up and swallows it down."

"What's the law?"

"The law? That's, so to speak, what people take on as their custom," answered the old man, his sharp, clever eyes twinkling with relish. "People live together and come to an agreement among themselves: that, for example, is the best way to do something or other, so they take it on as a custom, make it a rule, or a law, as they call it. Like when the boys get together to play a game and decide among themselves how they'll play. What they decide on is the law."

"And the officials?"

"They're like the bad boys who come and break the law."

"Why?"

"That's not a thing for you to understand," he said with a frown. "The Lord stands over all the affairs of men. They want one thing; He wants another. Nothing

sure about human affairs. Just one little breath from the Lord, and everything gets scattered to the wind like so much dust."

There were many reasons why I was interested in officials, so I kept pressing my point:

"There's that song Uncle Yakov sings:

"The holy angels—servants of God,

"The state officials—slaves of Satan!"

Grandfather closed his eyes, lifted his beard on his palm and put it in his mouth. From the trembling of his cheeks, I could tell he was laughing inside.

"Have to put you and Yakov in a sack and throw you in the river," he said. "He has no business singing such songs and you have no business listening to them. That's a song made up by dissenters and heretics—a bad sort of joke." He looked past me while he thought it over, then said with a sigh, "Phooh! What people!"

While in his conception God stood high and menacing above the affairs of men, he, like grandmother, believed that the Lord had a hand in all his affairs—God and an endless number of saints. The only saints my grandmother seemed to recognize were Nicholas, Yuri, Frol and Lavr, who were kind and good, spending their time wandering from village to village, from town to town, helping people and sharing all their human frailties. Almost all of grandfather's saints, on the other hand, were martyrs who had torn down idols and pitted themselves against the Caesars, for which they had been tortured, burned at the stake and skinned alive.

Sometimes grandfather would say wistfully:

"If only the Lord would help me sell this house for a profit of even five hundred rubles, I'd pay the priest to hold a service for Nicholas-the-Martyr!"

Grandmother would laugh and say to me:

"The old fool! Like as if Nicholas had nothing better to do than sell houses for him!"

For many years I kept grandfather's church calendar with various remarks written in his hand. Opposite the days of Ioachim and Anna he had inscribed in red ink:

"Saved by their mercy from great misfortune."

I remember what that misfortune was. In his efforts to help his worthless sons he had secretly begun to lend out money, accepting various articles of value as security. Someone reported this, and one night the police came to search our house. There was great excitement, but everything ended happily. Grandfather prayed until sunrise, and in the morning he wrote those words on the calendar in my presence.

Before supper he had me read the Psalter, the prayer book, or the heavy volume of Efrem Sirin.¹⁰ After supper he once more began to pray, and in the evening silence his monotonous words of repentance went on and on:

"It is Thine to give, and Thine to take away, most merciful immortal King.... Lead us not into temptation.... Protect us from the wicked.... Let my tears absolve me of sin...."

Grandmother, on the contrary, would often say:

"Oh, how tired I am! Looks like I'll be going to bed without saying my prayers tonight!"

Grandfather took me to church: on Saturdays to vespers, on Sundays to late mass. Even at church I could tell which God people prayed to: the priest and the deacon prayed to grandfather's God, but the choir always sang to grandmother's.

To be sure, I have given a crude picture of the childish distinction I drew between the two Gods, a distinction which I remember having caused me much spiritual conflict. I feared and disliked grandfather's God, who loved no one and kept a stern eye on everybody. He was primarily interested in discovering something wicked and vicious in man. It was clear that he did not trust people, was ever waiting for them to repent, and took pleasure in meting out punishment.

In those days my mind dwelled primarily on God, the

only beauty I found in life. All other impressions repulsed and saddened me with their filth and cruelty. God—my grandmother's God, friend to all living things—was the brightest and best of all that surrounded me. I could not understand why grandfather was blind to God's goodness.

I was not allowed to play in the street because this excited me too much. I became almost drunk from the effect of it and was often the instigator of fights or disorders. I made no friends; the neighbours' children were hostile toward me. I hated to be called a Kashirin, and knowing this, they insisted on shouting the name to each other:

"Here comes the grandson of Kashirin, the miser!"

"Knock him down!"

And a fight would begin.

I was exceptionally strong for my age and a good fighter. Even my enemies admitted this and never attacked me singlehanded. So I always took a good beating at their hands and returned home with a bloody nose, cut lips, and torn clothes.

Grandmother would meet me with fright and commiseration.

"What! Been fighting again, you little brat? I'll show you all right! Just you wait!"

She would wash my face and put a coin, or some herbs, or a lotion on my bruises, saying the while:

"Why are you always fighting? Such a quiet lad at home, but a very demon once you get out in the street! For shame! I'll tell your grandfather not to let you out!"

Grandfather always noticed the bumps and bruises, but he never got really angry about them, simply muttered:

"Wearing your medals again! Well, my brave warrior, don't let me catch you running out into the street again, hear?"

I had no desire to go out into the street when everything was quiet there, but when I heard the merry voices of the children I would forget grandfather's warning and run out of the yard. I did not mind the

bruises, but I could never get used to the brutality of the boys' fun, a brutality with which I had become only too familiar and which nearly drove me mad. I could not bear to see them set cocks and dogs fighting each other, torture cats, chase the goats belonging to Jews, tease drunken beggars and the pious Igosha, Death-in-the-Pocket.

The latter was a tall, lean, grimy person with a bristling beard on his bony, rusty-looking face. His stooped figure in a long sheepskin coat swayed strangely as he moved down the street, his eyes fixed on the ground. His dark face with its sad little eyes inspired me with awe and respect. It seemed to me that this person must be engaged in some solemn task, that he was looking for something and must not be interrupted.

But the boys ran after him and threw stones at his hunched back. For some time he would pay no attention to them, as if he did not feel the stones, but all of a sudden he would stop, throw back his head and look round, pulling down his shaggy cap with a convulsive movement as if just aroused from sleep.

"Igosha, Death-in-the Pocket! Igosha, where are you going? Look in your pocket! See death there?" cried the boys.

He would clutch at his pocket, then, bending swiftly, pick up a stick or a stone or a lump of earth and wave his long arm clumsily, cursing under his breath. He always used the same three swear-words—the boys' vocabulary was incomparably richer. Sometimes he would run limping after them; his long coat would get in his way and he would fall on his knees, supporting himself with black arms that looked like two dry sticks. Then the boys would pelt him with stones, while the bolder ones would run up to him, throw a little dust on his head and dodge away.

An even more painful sight the street had to offer was that of our former master-workman Grigori Ivanovich. He had gone completely blind and spent his days wandering through the town begging. Tall and silent and comely, he was led by a grey little old woman who would

stop at every window and say in a squeaky little voice:

"Help a poor blind man, for the love of Christ...."

Grigori Ivanovich would say nothing. His black glasses looked straight into the wall of the house or the window or the face of anyone he met; his dye-saturated hand would quietly stroke his broad beard, but his lips were always tightly closed. I often saw him, but never did I hear a sound come from those tight lips, and this silence oppressed me more than anything else. I never went up to him—I could not make myself do so—but whenever I saw him I would run home and say to grandmother:

"Grigori is coming!"

"Ah!" she would exclaim with pained agitation. "Here, run and give him this!"

I rudely refused. Then she herself would go out the gate and stand talking to him for a long time. He would give a smile and shake his beard, but say scarcely a word.

Sometimes grandmother would bring him into the kitchen and give him tea. Once he asked where I was. Grandmother called me, but I ran away and hid in the wood pile. I could not meet him. I felt horribly ashamed in his presence, and I knew that grandmother felt the same. Only once did she and I speak about Grigori. When she had seen him out the gate, she came walking slowly back through the yard weeping, her head bent low. I went over to her and took her hand.

"Why do you always run away from him?" she asked quietly. "He is so fond of you, and he's a good man...."

"Why doesn't grandfather feed him?" I asked.

"Grandfather?"

She stopped and drew me to her and whispered almost prophetically:

"Remember my words: the Lord will send us a bitter punishment for this! A bitter punishment!"

She was not mistaken. Some ten years later, when grandmother had already gone to her rest, my crazed grandfather himself walked the streets of the city begging miserably at the windows for something to eat.

"Good folks, give me something to eat—just a little.... Phoooh, such people!"

That bitter, heart-rending "Phoooh, such people!" was the only thing left of his former self.

In addition to Igosha and Grigori Ivanovich, there was the profligate old woman Voroníkha, the very sight of whom was enough to drive me off the street. She put in an appearance every Sunday—huge, dishevelled, drunken. She had a peculiar walk, as though she did not move her feet or touch the ground, but sailed like a storm cloud, shrilling her lewd songs. The people on the street fled before her, hiding in shops, around corners, behind fences. She swept the street clean. Her face was blue and bloated like a balloon; her bulging grey eyes rolled frighteningly. Sometimes she would wail:

"Where are my children, my children?"

I asked grandmother what that meant.

"It's not for you to know," she said at first, but then she explained in a few words: it seems the woman's husband had once been an official named Voronov. In order to be promoted to higher rank, he had sold his wife to his chief, who took her away for two years. When she returned, her children—a boy and a girl—were dead, her husband had gambled away public funds and was in jail. In her grief she began to drink and lead a profligate life. Now the police took her off the streets every Sunday.

There was no doubt about it—it was better at home than in the street. It was particularly pleasant during the hours after dinner when grandfather went to visit Uncle Yakov and grandmother would sit at the window telling me stories and talking about my father.

She had clipped the broken wing of the starling rescued from the cat and cleverly attached a little stick to the stump of the bird's leg. Now that it was well, grandmother tried to teach it to talk. For a whole hour she would stand before the cage on the window-sill repeating the words she wanted to teach the bird.

"Come now, say: birdy wants porridge!"

The bird would cock its sly round eye at her, knock its wooden leg against the floor of the cage, stretch its neck and whistle like an oriole, imitate a jay and a cuckoo, attempt to meow like a cat, or bark like a dog, but it could not produce human speech.

"Enough of your nonsense!" grandmother would say seriously. "Try it now: birdy wants porridge!"

Whenever the bird screeched something faintly resembling grandmother's words, she would laugh with joy and feed it a bit of oat porridge from her finger.

"Oh, I know you all right, you trickster!" she would tease. "You can say anything if you want to!"

And she actually taught it to speak: after some time it asked for porridge quite clearly, and on seeing grandmother would cry something which sounded extremely like "Hello!"

At first its cage hung in grandfather's room, but soon he outlawed it to our attic because the bird began to imitate him; grandfather enunciated his prayers very distinctly, and the starling would poke its yellow beak through the bars of the cage and say:

"True, true, oo, oo, tru-u-ue, oo, true!"

This offended grandfather. One day he interrupted his prayers, stamped his foot and cried angrily:

"Take that devil out of here before I kill it!"

There was much that was interesting and much that was amusing in our house, but sometimes I was overwhelmed by a vast longing. It was as though a great burden were weighing me down, and I lived at the bottom of a dark pit, bereft of sight and hearing and feeling—blind and only half alive.

 Quite unexpectedly grandfather sold our house to the tavern-keeper and bought another one, on Kanatnaya Street. This street was clean and quiet, unpaved and overgrown with grass. It led directly out into the fields and was lined with little, brightly-painted houses.

The new house was more pleasant and cheerful than the old one. The façade was painted a dark, warm red, against the background of which the blue shutters of the three downstairs windows and the lattice-work shutter of the attic window stood out vividly. The left side of the roof was hidden by the rich greenery of an elm and a lime-tree. There were many enticing corners in the yard and garden, which seemed to have been especially designed for playing hide-and-seek. The garden was delightful—not very big, but charmingly overgrown with shrubbery. In one corner stood the bath-house, small and neat as a toy. In another corner was a wide, shallow pit overgrown with weeds, from which protruded the charred remains of a former bath-house. On the left the garden was bounded by stables belonging to Colonel Ovsyanikov; on the right by outhouses belonging to the Betlengs. The extreme end joined the property of the dairywoman Petrovna, a fat, red-faced, noisy creature who resembled a large bell. Her little house, dark and rickety, had settled comfortably into the earth and become overgrown with moss. Its two windows glanced out over fields, cut up by deep gullies and banked by the blue haze of the distant forest. All day long soldiers drilled on these fields, their bayonets flashing like white lightning in the slanting rays of the autumn sun.

Our house was filled with people I had never seen before: the front apartment was occupied by a military man, a Tatar by birth, and his round little wife who laughed and shouted and played a gaily decorated guitar from morning to night. The song she sang most often in her high, ringing voice, was the following:

*To love when you despise?
Oh no! If you are wise,
You'll seek another girl.
I hope you get your prize,
And that she'll be a pearl!
A ve-e-e-ery w-o-o-n-drous pearl!*

Her husband, who was as round as a ball, would sit at the window with his blue cheeks blown up as he puffed on his pipe, rolling his merry little brown eyes and coughing with a strange bark:

"Ar-r-uff! Ar-r-ruff-uff-uff!"

Two draymen and a tall, glum Tatar orderly named Valei lived in the warm quarters built over the storehouse and stable. One of the draymen was a little, grey man whom they called Uncle Pyotr; the other was his deaf and dumb nephew Styopa. Styopa was sleek and strong, with a face like a brass tray. All these people were new to me and presented rich possibilities.

But the person I found most interesting was our boarder, "That's Fine", who occupied a room next to the kitchen in the back of the house. It was a long room with two windows in it, one looking out on to the garden, the other on to the yard.

The boarder was tall and bent, with a black, parted beard accentuating the pallor of his face. He had kind eyes and wore glasses. In general he was quiet and unobtrusive, and when he was told that tea or dinner was ready, he would always answer:

"That's fine!"

Grandmother began to call him "That's Fine" behind his back, and even to his face.

"Go tell That's Fine to come and have tea, Alexei," she would say, or: "Have some more, That's Fine, you're not eating enough."

His room was piled high with wooden boxes and secular books, a kind I had never seen before. Everywhere stood bottles filled with coloured fluids, bits of copper and iron and bars of lead. He was always dressed in a brown leather jacket and grey checked pants, all spotted with paint and smelling unpleasantly. From morning to night he would stand there, all ruffled up and clumsy, smelting lead, soldering copper, weighing something on his tiny scales, grunting, burning his fingers, blowing on them, stumbling over to diagrams hanging on the wall, wiping

his glasses and examining the diagrams so closely that he almost touched them with his chalklike nose. Sometimes he would stand stockstill in the centre of the room or beside the window and remain thus for a long time with his eyes closed, his head lifted, silent and motionless.

I climbed up onto the roof of the shed across the yard and observed him through the open window. I could see the blue flame of the spirit-lamp burning on the table and his dark figure bending over it; I could see him write something in a worn notebook, his glasses shining coldly, like bits of blue ice. The necromancy of this man kept me up on the roof for hours, possessed by agonizing curiosity.

Sometimes he would stand framed in the window, his hands behind his back, staring directly at the roof; but he never seemed to see me, and this offended me. Suddenly he would jump back to his table and bend double as he rummaged nervously through papers and objects there.

I might have been afraid of him had he been rich and well dressed. But he was poor: the dirty, wrinkled collar of his shirt stuck out of his leather jacket, his pants were patched and stained, the shoes he wore on his bare feet were much the worse for wear. There was nothing dangerous or frightening about poor people—this I had learned from the pity grandmother showed them and the contempt in which grandfather held them.

Nobody in our house liked That's Fine. Everyone spoke of him with ridicule. The jolly wife of the military man called him Chalk Nose, Uncle Pyotr called him an apothecary and witch-doctor, grandfather called him a heathen.

"What does he do?" I asked grandmother, but she answered abruptly:

"None of your business. Keep your mouth shut."

One day I gathered all my courage and went to his window.

"What are you doing?" I asked, scarce able to hide my excitement.

He started and gave me a long look over his glasses.

Then he held out his burned and scarred hand and said:
"Here, climb in."

The fact that he invited me to enter through the window rather than through the door raised him considerably in my estimation. He sat down on one of the boxes, placed me in front of him, moved me away, then close to him again, and finally asked:

"Where did you come from?"

The question was strange enough, inasmuch as I sat beside him at the kitchen table four times every day.

"I'm the grandson here," I answered.

"Ah, yes," he said and relapsed into silence as he studied one of his fingers.

I decided it was necessary to elucidate.

"But I'm not a Kashirin—I'm a Peshkóv."

"Péshkov?" he repeated with the wrong stress. "That's fine."

He pushed me aside, got up and went back to the table.

"Well, sit down and don't make any noise."

I sat there for a long time watching him make filings from a piece of copper which he held in pincers. When he had enough, he gathered the golden filings into a little heap which he placed in a thick mug; then he took some powder as white as salt out of a can, added it to the filings, and poured some dark liquid over it. The mixture in the mug began to hiss and smoke and give off an acrid odour that made me cough violently.

"Smell bad?" asked the wizard boastfully.

"Yes!"

"Aha! That's good, brother, that's very good!"

I failed to see any cause for satisfaction.

"If it's bad, it can't be good!" I said severely.

"You don't say," he cried, blinking his eyes. "Well, now, that's not always true, brother! Do you like to play knucklebones?"

"Dibs?"

"Yes, dibs."

"Oh, yes!"

"How would you like me to smelt a filler for you? Make a good beater."

"I'd like it."

"Let's have the knucklebone then."

Again he came over to me, holding the smoking mug in his hand.

"If I fill it up for you, promise you won't come back any more?" he said, glancing at me out of one eye.

This hurt me deeply.

"I'll never come back as it is!" I retorted and went into the garden.

There I found grandfather putting manure about the roots of the apple trees; it was autumn, and the leaves had long since begun to fall.

"Here, clip the raspberry bushes," said grandfather, handing me the shears.

"What is That's Fine making?" I asked.

"Just a mess," he answered angrily. "Spoiling the room: he's burnt the floor and stained the wallpaper, even tore a piece off. Have to give him notice."

"Do," I assented as I tackled the raspberry bushes.

But I was in too much of a hurry.

On rainy evenings, if grandfather was out, grandmother would hold parties in the kitchen. She would invite all the lodgers, including the draymen, the orderly, and even the gay young wife of the Tatar officer; often the lively Petrovna would come, and always That's Fine would be found in the corner by the stove, where he would sit silent and motionless. The deaf-mute Styopa would play cards with Valei, who would cuff him on his broad nose and say:

"Ash, shaitan!"

Uncle Pyotr would bring a huge loaf of white bread and a big earthenware jar of raspberry jam, slice the bread, spread it thickly with jam, and hold the pieces on his outstretched palms as he offered them to the guests.

"Be so kind as to help yourselves," he would say with a

low bow. Whenever any one took a piece, he would examine his dusky palm and lick off any drops of jam which might be there.

Petrovna brought cherry brandy and the gay young wife donated nuts and candy. A jolly feast, grandmother's favourite form of entertainment, would begin.

Grandmother held such a party shortly after That's Fine offered me that bribe to stay away from his room. A dreary autumn rain was falling, the wind was whining, the trees sighing and scratching at the walls of the house. It was warm and cosy in the kitchen; the people drew close together and were somehow particularly quiet and well-disposed. Grandmother was more lavish with her tales than usual.

She sat on the edge of the stove-bunk with her feet resting on the step, and leaned down toward the people, her face illuminated by a little tin lamp. She always chose a seat up on the stove-bunk when she was inspired.

"I have to talk down from high up; it's easier that way," she explained.

I sat at her feet on a lower step, just above the head of That's Fine. Grandmother told the charming story of Ivan-the-Warrior and Miron-the-Hermit. Rhythmically flowed the rich, measured language:

*Once on a time lived the evil Gordion,
Black was his soul, stony his heart.
Hating of truth, stinting of ruth,
Living a mole in an evil hole.
Of all whom he hated, this Gordion,
Miron-the-Hermit he most abhorred,
Miron, who peace and love adored,
Of blessed truth a champion.*

*Now summoned this Gordion, Captain-of-War,
His warrior bold dubbed Ivánushka.
Get thee hence to old Mirón.
Slaughter the ancient, the haughty one,
Strike off his head, he not afeared,
Lift it aloft by its hoary beard,*

And bring it me, a feast for my hounds.

Forth went Ivan, obedient,

Forth to the task, bitterly ruing:

"Not of mine own, of another's will

Do I this deed, decreed of God."

Under his skirts he hid his sword,

Came to the hermit, courteous bowing.

"Greetings, O ancient, how farest thou?

Many the blessings shed by the Lord?"

Smiled the knowing one, Mirón the ancient,

Spake in his wisdom to Ivan-the-Bold:

Why thou deceivest I know not, in sooth,

For Jesus our Saviour is wise to all things,

Goodness and evil both dwell in His hand,

And surely He knoweth thine evil intent.

Shame filled the heart of Ivánushka:

Yet feared he the wrath of Gordion.

Snatched he his sword from its leathern sheath,

Boldly he burnished the baneful blade.

"Fain would I spare thee the sight of this,

Keep thee in blissful unknowingness,

But now thou hast seen—on thy knees, old man!

Pray the last time to the Fountain Head,

Pray for all men, and for me and thyself.

Then shall I sever thy hoary head!"

Down on his knees sank the ancient one,

There on his knees 'neath a sapling oak.

Over him bended the branches green,

Soft spake the ancient, smiling the while:

"Consider, Ivan: long shalt thou wait me,

Endless the prayer for the souls of all men,

Better have done with my life undelaying,

Make thou an ending and hasten away."

Here Ivan frowned at him wrathfully,

Here he did answer him boastfully:

"Nay! As decreed, thus shall it be!

Pray while I wait for you, even an age!"

Prayed then the hermit till coming of nightfall,

Prayed he from nightfall 'til breaking of dawn,

Prayed from the dawn to descending of darkness,

*Prayed from the summer straight through to the
spring.*

*Year followed year, and still the good hermit
Kneeled 'neath the oak, now grown to the sky,
'Round him a forest up-sprang from the acorns,
Still his petition ascended on high.*

*Thus to this day, there in the forest,
Pleadeth untiring the hermit Mirón,
Asking God's help for all of the people,
Beseeching the Virgin to smile upon men.*

*Near him reclineth Ivan-the-Warrior,
Sword and its sheathing rotted to dust,
Chain mail and armour eaten by rust,
All of his garments gone to decay.
Consumed by the heat—yet unconsumed;
Devoured by pests—yet undevoured.
Shunned by the wolves, shunned by the bears,
Spared by blizzards, spared by the frost,
Powerless he to move from that place,
To lift a hand, or even to speak.
And this, I ween, be a punishment,
That he hearkened so to such evilness,
That he bent his will to another's will.
Still the prayers of the ancient one
Flow up to God for us sinners all,
Flow like a stream to the ocean-sea.*

At the very beginning of the tale I noticed that for some reason That's Fine was greatly agitated: he kept making strange convulsive movements with his hands, taking off and putting on his glasses, waving them in rhythm to the verse, nodding his head, pressing his fingers against his eyes, and continually passing his hands over his forehead and cheeks, as though perspiring heavily. If anyone moved or coughed or scraped his feet across the floor, he would whisper impatiently:

"Sh!"

When grandmother had finished, he jumped up noisily, waved his arms, and began to walk about in circles, muttering:

"That's wonderful! It must be written down by all means! How very true it is!"

Now I could plainly see that he was crying: his eyes were filled with tears that flowed over and streamed down his cheeks. This was strange and very touching. He ran about the kitchen in funny little hops, trying to put on his glasses but unable to hook them behind his ears. Uncle Pyotr let out a laugh, but everyone else was silent with embarrassment.

"Well, write it down then," said grandmother hurriedly. "No sin in that. I know lots of others like it."

"Oh, no! Just this one. It is so very—Russian," cried the boarder excitedly. Suddenly he came to a halt in the middle of the kitchen and began to speak in a loud voice, waving his right hand and holding his glasses in his trembling left one. He spoke heatedly and at length, emphasizing his words by raising his voice and stamping his foot.

"It's wrong to live by another's conscience!" he repeated over and over again.

All of a sudden his voice broke off, and with a glance at the faces about him he stole away, quietly and guiltily, with hanging head. People sniggered and glanced at each other uneasily. Grandmother moved back into the shadows of the bunk and gave a deep sigh.

"What's wrong with him? Mad about something?" asked Petrovna, passing her hand over her thick red lips.

"No," replied Uncle Pyotr. "That's just his way."

Grandmother climbed down off the stove and began to heat the samovar.

"Gentle folk are all like that—capricious!" added Uncle Pyotr calmly.

"That's what comes of being a bachelor," put in Valei.

Everyone laughed, and Uncle Pyotr said:

"See him cry? Hard to come down to herring when you're used to sturgeon!"

I felt bored; a sad dreariness pricked at my heart. That's Fine had greatly surprised me, and I pitied him. I

could not get the memory of his brimming eyes out of my mind.

He spent the night away from home, returning after dinner the next day chastened, untidy, and clearly embarrassed.

"I made a scene yesterday," he said to grandmother with the guilty manner of a little boy. "Are you angry?"

"Why should I be?"

"For having me speak like that."

"You didn't hurt anybody."

I felt that grandmother was afraid of him. She did not look at him and spoke too softly to be natural.

He went over to her and said with utter simplicity:

"You see I am terribly lonely. I have no one in the world. And when a person's forever silent like that, there comes a moment when all that's going on in his soul has to break loose. He's ready to talk to a stone or a tree."

"Why don't you get married?" asked grandmother, moving away from him.

"Ah!" he cried, with a wave of his hand, and went out frowning.

Grandmother watched him leave, then took a pinch of snuff and turned to me:

"Don't you go hanging round him," she said sullenly. "No telling what he's like."

But again I felt drawn to him.

I had noticed the change which came over his face as he said, "I am terribly lonely." There was something comprehensible to me in those words; they touched my heart, and I went to seek him.

I glanced through the window of his room—it was empty and cluttered with strange and useless things—as strange and useless as their owner. I went into the garden and found him in the pit, sitting all hunched over on a charred beam, his elbows on his knees and his hands locked at the back of his neck. One end of the beam was buried in earth, the other stuck out above the nettles and wormwood and burdock. It was obviously uncomfortable

for him to sit there, and this fact made me feel all the more drawn to him.

For some time he sat staring past me with the unseeing eyes of an owl, but suddenly he asked with a touch of annoyance:

"Have you come for me?"

"No."

"Then why have you come?"

"For no special reason."

He took off his glasses and wiped them with a handkerchief stained black and red.

"Well, climb down."

When I had taken my place next to him, he gave me a tight hug.

"Sit here. We'll just sit and say nothing, shall we? Like this.... Are you a stubborn fellow?"

"Yes."

"That's fine."

We sat there without speaking for a long time. It was a mild, quiet evening, one of those melancholy evenings of Indian summer when the colours fade and wither before your very eyes; when the earth has exhausted the lush smells of summer and exudes only the chill odour of dampness; when the air is strangely transparent, and the claws plunge in the rosy sky, giving rise to oppressive thoughts. Everything is hushed and mute, so that the slightest sound—the rustle of a bird's wing, the falling of a leaf—is so resounding as to cause one to start up and glance about, only to relapse once more into the engulfing silence.

Such moments give rise to thoughts which are particularly pure, but fragile and transparent as a spider's web, defying capture in words. They flash and fade like falling stars, searing the soul with sadness, or fondling it, disturbing it, causing it to seethe and crystallize into permanent contours. At such moments character is moulded.

Pressed against the warm body of my companion, I

glanced with him through the black filigree of apple boughs, followed the flight of the busy linnets against the flushed sky, saw the goldfinches stripping the flower-heads of dry burdocks of their spicy seeds, saw ragged grey clouds with lurid borders spread across the fields, while beneath them the crows headed for their nests in the churchyard. All of it was good, and comprehensible to an unwothed degree.

Sometimes my companion would utter a deep sigh and remark:

"Fine, isn't it, brother? Humph! But isn't it damp? Aren't you cold?"

When the sky had darkened and everything expanded, swollen with grey twilight, he said;

"Well, that's enough. Come on."

He stopped when we reached the garden gate.

"That grandmother of yours is a wonderful woman," he said. "Ah, what a world!"

Then he closed his eyes and smiled, and repeated very softly and distinctly:

*And this, I ween, be a punishment,
That he hearkened so to such evilness,
That he bent his will to another's will....*

"Remember that, brother!" he admonished, pushing me ahead. "Can you write?"

"No."

"Learn. And once you learn, put down what your grandmother recites—it's very important."

We became friends after that. From that day on I used to visit That's Fine whenever I wished. I would sit on a box of rags and watch him unmolested while he melted lead or heated copper; or while he made iron red-hot and beat it into sheets on a little anvil with a light hammer with a fancy handle, and worked with a rasp, sandpaper, and various files, one of which was as fine as a hair. He would weigh everything on a delicate copper scale. He would mix various liquids in thick white porcelain vessels,

filling the room with acrid smoke. He would frown as he looked into a thick book, muttering and biting his red lips, or sighing gently:

Ah, rose of Sharon....

"What are you making?"

"A certain thing, brother..."

"What thing?"

"I wouldn't know how to explain so that you would understand...."

"Grandfather says you're probably making counterfeit money."

"Grandfather? Hm. That's all nonsense. Money, my boy, is not worth bothering about."

"But can you buy bread without it?"

"No, you can't buy bread without it."

"See? Or meat...."

"Or meat either."

He laughed in a quiet way I found delightful, and tickled me behind the ear as if I were a kitten.

"Can't get the better of you, brother," he said. "You push me into a corner every time. So let's not talk any more."

Sometimes he would stop working and sit down beside me at the window, where we would watch the apple trees shedding their leaves or the rain on the roof and in the yard, all overgrown with weeds. That's Fine was sparing of words, but what he said always seemed to be to the point. Most often he would draw my attention to something he wanted me to notice by nudging me and indicating the object with a wink and a glance.

I could see nothing remarkable about our yard, but from those nudges and his occasional words everything I saw assumed new significance and became engraved on my memory. A cat went running across the yard and stopped to watch its reflection in a puddle, raising its paw as though to strike the image.

"Cats are proud and mistrustful," said That's Fine softly.

The red-gold rooster Mamai flew up on the fence, fluttered its wings, nearly lost its balance, and began to cluck angrily as it stretched its neck.

"He's important, is the General, but he hasn't got much sense."

The clumsy Valei tramped heavily through the mud like an old horse, raising his broad, puffy face to squint at the sky; a ray of pale autumn sun struck him on the chest and made a brass button on his jacket sparkle. The Tatar stopped and touched it with his crooked fingers.

"As if he'd just had a medal pinned on his chest."

Soon I found that my attachment to That's Fine had grown very deep. He became essential to me in my hours of bitterness no less than in my hours of joy. Though he himself was silent by nature, he never stopped me from saying whatever was on my mind. Grandfather, on the contrary, was always interrupting me:

"Stop chattering, you windbag!"

Grandmother was so full of her own thoughts that she could not absorb other people's.

But That's Fine always listened to me attentively, and often he would say with a smile:

"That's not true, my boy. You just made it up!"

His brief remarks were always apt and timely. It was as though he could see what was going on in my heart and mind, could see what was false and superfluous before the words passed my lips, and seeing it, slew it with three sharp words, kindly spoken:

"That's not true."

Sometimes I would intentionally test his magic powers by making up stories and relating them as fact. But after listening a minute he would inevitably shake his head and say:

"That's not true, my boy."

"How do you know?"

"Oh, I just know."

Often grandmother would take me with her when she went to fetch water from the pump on Sennaya Square. One day we saw five townsmen beating a peasant. They had him down on the ground and were going at him like a pack of dogs. Grandmother took the pails off her yoke, flourished it like a club and rushed at the men, shouting to me:

"Go away!"

But I was afraid and ran after her. I began throwing stones at the enemy, while she bravely poked them with the yoke, and thumped them on head and shoulders. Other people joined in the fray, and the men were driven off. Grandmother washed the peasant's face, which was badly hurt. To this day I shudder at the recollection of how he pressed his dirty fingers to a torn nostril, coughing and howling while the blood spurted from between his fingers into grandmother's face and on her breast. She also howled and trembled from head to foot.

When I got home I ran to the boarder and began to tell him all about it. He stopped working and stood in front of me holding a long file upraised like a sword. He looked at me sternly and steadily from under his glasses, then suddenly interrupted, saying with unusual emphasis:

"Splendid! That's exactly how it was! Very good!"

I was so shaken by what I had seen that I went on talking without realizing what he had said, but he put his arm round me and began pacing the floor.

"That's enough, that's enough," he admonished. "You've said all you had to say. Enough!"

I stopped talking. At first I was hurt, but on considering the matter I realized to my amazement that he had stopped me just in time, that I had, in fact, told everything.

"Don't let your mind brood over such things," he said. "Try to forget them."

Sometimes he would quite unexpectedly say things that I have remembered all my life. Once I told him about my enemy Klushnikov, one of the warriors from Novaya

Street. He was a fat boy with a big head, and he could no more get the better of me than I could of him. That's Fine listened to my tale of woe, then said:

"Nonsense! Strength like that is no strength at all! Real strength lies in quickness of movement; the quicker you are, the stronger—understand?"

On the following Sunday I tried using my fists quicker, and had an easy time licking Klushnikov. That made me prize the boarder's words even more.

"You have to know how to take hold of things—understand? And that's very difficult—to know how to take hold of things."

I did not understand the meaning of what he said, but I remembered these and similar words. I remembered them because there was something exasperatingly mysterious in their simplicity: what could be difficult about taking hold of a stone, or a piece of bread, a cup, or a hammer?

The people in our house came to dislike That's Fine more and more. Even the friendly cat belonging to the officer's gay young wife would not climb into his lap as it would into other people's laps, nor would it answer his gentle call. I struck it for this and shook it by the ears, almost weeping as I tried to convince the cat not to be afraid of this man.

"My clothes smell of acid; that's why it won't come to me," he explained. But I knew that everybody else, including grandmother, had a different explanation. They were hostile to him, and I found this wrong and painful.

"Why are you always hanging round him?" grandmother asked testily. "Watch out, or he'll be teaching you tricks!"

Grandfather, the red-headed ferret, whipped me cruelly every time he heard that I had visited the boarder. Naturally I did not tell That's Fine that I had been forbidden to visit him, but I frankly told him what people thought of him.

"Grandmother's afraid of you; she says you go in for black magic, and grandfather too. He says you're against

God and it's dangerous for people to have anything to do with you."

He jerked his head as though chasing a fly; his pallid face flushed with a smile that made my heart contract and my head reel.

"I can see all that, brother," he said quietly. "Too bad, isn't it, eh?"

"Yes."

"Too bad, brother."

Finally they drove him away.

One morning after breakfast I found him sitting on the floor packing his things in a box and humming: "*Ah, rose of Sharon.*"

"Well, good-bye, brother, I'm leaving."

"Why?"

He studied me intently for a moment before answering.

"Don't you know? This room is needed for your mother."

"Who said so?"

"Your grandfather."

"He's lying."

That's Fine drew me toward him, and when I was sitting on the floor beside him, he said quietly:

"Don't be angry! I thought you knew and just didn't say anything, brother, and I didn't like it."

For some reason I was hurt and annoyed.

"Listen," he said with a smile and almost in a whisper.

"Remember my telling you not to visit me?"

I nodded.

"Hurt your feelings then, didn't I?"

"Yes."

"I didn't mean to, but I knew they would scold you if you made friends with me. And they have, haven't they?"

He spoke as though he were my own age, and his words made me very happy. It even seemed to me I had known for a long time what he had just told me.

"I knew that long ago," I said.

"Good. Well now, so that's how it is, my boy. Hm."
My heart ached unbearably.

"Why doesn't anybody like you?"

He hugged me tightly and blinked hard as he replied:

"Because I'm not like them—understand? That's the whole thing, I'm not like them!"

I plucked at his sleeve, not knowing what to say.

"Don't be angry," he said, and then whispered in my ear, "and don't cry either."

But the tears were stealing down his own cheeks from under his dark glasses.

We sat there for a long time in silence, as was our wont, occasionally exchanging brief words.

That evening, after taking a fond farewell of everyone and embracing me warmly, he went away. I slipped through the gate and saw him jouncing on top of the cart as the wheels struck the frozen ruts in the road. As soon as he had left, grandmother set to work cleaning the dirty room while I made a point of getting in her way.

"Get out!" she cried as she stumbled over me.

"Why did you put him out?"

"It's none of your business!"

"You're all fools, all of you!" I said.

She began slapping me with a wet rag and crying:

"You're out of your senses, you wicked boy!"

"They're all fools but you," I corrected, but this did not appease her.

"Well, thank God he's gone!" said grandfather at the supper table. "Every time I saw him it was like a knife in my heart. Had to get rid of him."

In my rage I broke a spoon for which I was duly punished.

Thus ended my friendship with the first of that innumerable company of people—outcasts in their native land, who are its finest sons.

2 I might liken myself as a child to a beehive to which simple, ordinary folk brought the honey of their knowledge and views on life, each of them making a rich contribution to the development of my character. Often the honey was dirty and bitter, but it was knowledge, and so honey for all that.

After the departure of That's Fine, I became friendly with Uncle Pyotr. He resembled grandfather in that he was thin and neat and clean, but he was smaller in stature and in every other way. He reminded me of a young boy dressed up like an old man just for the fun of it. His face was a basketwork of fine leather thongs, forming a cage from behind which his merry eyes with their yellowish whites darted about like two little goldfinches. His grey hair was curly, and his beard all ringlets; he smoked a pipe whose smoke was the colour of his hair and curled about him as did his quaint speech. He spoke in a buzzing voice that seemed to be kind and gentle, but I always had the impression that he was ridiculing people.

"At the beginning of things, the countess who owned me—Tatyan by name, Alexeyevna by patronymic—says, 'It's a smith you'll be,' but no sooner did I take to smithing than she says, 'Be the gardener's assistant.' I had no objections, but as the saying goes, 'If you don't belong, everything's wrong.' So then she says, 'Try your hand at fishing, Petrushka!' Again it's the same to me; but just when I set to like fishing, it's goodbye to the fish and I'm sent to town to be a drayman. So it's a drayman I'll be and anything else you like, but before she gets a chance to think of anything else along comes 'manicipation and there I be, left with the horse on my hands, and to this day I have a horse instead of a countess."

The horse was old and skewbald, it looked as if a drunken painter had slung a mottled brush at its white coat; a crazy quilt with bandy legs. Its bony head set with filmy eyes hung sorrowfully from a neck loosely connecting it to the body by stretched sinews and flaccid hide.

Uncle Pyotr was most respectful to his horse; he called it "Tanya" and never beat it.

"Why should you give your beast a Christian name?" grandfather once asked him.

"But it's not, Vasili Vasilyevich—not at all," he replied. "Tanya's no Christian name—the Christian name's Tatyana."

Uncle Pyotr could read and write and had a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. He and grandfather were always arguing as to which of the saints was the most saintly. They were relentless in passing judgement on sinners mentioned in the Bible, condemning Absalom above all others. Sometimes their argument assumed a purely grammatical aspect; grandfather said "wickedism", "lawlessness", "idolism", while Uncle Pyotr claimed they should be pronounced "wickedry", "lawlessry", "idolatry".

"Your way's one thing—mine's another!" bellowed grandfather all red in the face. "A fig for your '-rys!'"

But Uncle Pyotr sat unperturbed, with the smoke curling about his head.

"And what's better about your '-isms?'" he drawled spitefully. "Not a bit better in the sight of God. Maybe when the Lord listens to them prayers of yours He thinks to Himself, 'The prayer is big, but not worth a fig!'"

"Go away, Alexei!" grandfather would shout at me, his green eyes flashing.

Pyotr was very fond of order and cleanliness. Whenever he walked through the yard, he would kick away sticks and bones and chips, muttering reprovingly;

"No good for anything but to get in the way."

He was very loquacious and gave the impression of being kind and jolly. But at times his eyes would become filmy and bloodshot and glassy like those of a corpse. And frequently he would be found sitting in a dark corner as sullen and silent as his nephew.

"What's the matter, Uncle Pyotr!"

"Go away," he would answer with dull severity.

Into one of the houses on our street moved a gentleman with a lump on his forehead and a very strange habit: on Sundays he would sit at the window and fire his shotgun at dogs, cats, chickens and crows, and even at passersby if they did not strike his fancy. One day he poured grapeshot into That's Fine. It did not penetrate his leather jacket, but some of the shot landed in his pocket. I remember watching the boarder examine the pieces he held in his hand. Grandfather urged him to put in a complaint, but he tossed the shot into a corner of the kitchen and said:

"Not worth the trouble."

Another time the sniper put some shot into grandfather's leg; grandfather was enraged, reported the offence and began mobilizing witnesses. But the gentleman suddenly disappeared.

Every time shots were heard in the street, Uncle Pyotr would hastily pull on the faded, large-visored cap he wore on Sundays and rush through the gate. Once out on the sidewalk, he would put his hands under his coat-tails to make them stick up like a rooster's tail, poke out his belly, and stride importantly past the sniper's window. If the first stroll was uneventful, he would repeat it a second and a third time. All the people from our house would crowd at the gate to watch, with the officer and his blond wife peering at the window. People came out in the yard of the Betlengs' house, too. Only the grey house belonging to the Ovsyannikovs remained lifeless.

Sometimes Uncle Pyotr's efforts were futile—the hunter refused to consider such game worthy of his attention. But sometimes the double-barrelled gun went off.

"Bang-bang!"

Without quickening his steps, Uncle Pyotr would come over to us and report with the greatest satisfaction:

"Got me in the coat-tails."

One day the shot struck him in the neck and shoulder.

"Why should you egg on such a wild creature?" asked

grandmother as she removed the lead with a needle. "He'll shoot your eyes out next!"

"No danger, Akulina Ivanovna!" replied Pyotr contemptuously. "He's no shot at all!"

"Why give him the satisfaction?"

"Satisfaction? I just do it to tease the gentleman!"

As he examined the lead in his hand, he repeated: "No shot at all. The countess, now, Tatyana Alexeyevna, once had temporary marriage ties—she changed her husbands like her footmen—once had these ties, I'm saying, with an army man named Mamont Ilyich. Well, he really could shoot! What he could do with a gun, Granny! He'd place Ignashka the fool a long way off—forty paces or so—and tie a bottle to his belt, let it hang down between his legs, and Ignashka would plant his feet wide apart and laugh like the idiot he was. Then Mamont Ilyich would take aim and—bang! right into the bottle. Only once a horsefly must've bit Ignashka—the boy goes and jerks and gets the bullet in his knee—right in the cap. They call the doctor and quick as a wink he has the leg off—just like that! They buried it...."

"And Ignashka?"

"Oh, he was all right. An idiot has no use for arms and legs—lives by his idiocy. Everybody's ready to help an idiot—they're a harmless lot like the saying goes, 'No sense—no offence.'"

This story did not impress grandmother—she knew dozens like it. But it gave me the creeps.

"Could one of the gentlefolk kill a person to death?"

"Why not? He could. Sometimes the gentlefolk even kill each other. Once a lancer came to visit Tatyana Alexeyevna and got into a quarrel with Mamont. They both snatched their pistols, went to the park and there on the path by the lake the lancer got Mamont—bang!—right in the liver. Well, Mamont went to glory, the lancer to the Caucasus, and that was the end of that! There, you see? Killing their own selves. As for the muzhiks and their—phoo! Many as you like! Especially nowadays,

when nobody owns them any more. Used to be more careful—after all, the muzhik was somebody's property!"

"Didn't care much then either," put in grandmother.

"True enough," agreed Uncle Pyotr. "Property, all right, but cheap property."

He was always gentle with me and spoke more kindly to me than to the grownups, without dropping his eyes, but there was something about him I did not like. When he treated us to his favourite jam, he would spread my bread thickest. He would bring me ginger cookies and poppy seeds when he went to town, and he always spoke with me quietly and seriously.

"Well, what're we going to be when we grow up, my man? A soldier, or a clerk?"

"A soldier."

"Good for you. Not hard to be a soldier these days. The priests have it easy too—just go about shouting, 'Praised be the Lord,' and there's an end to it. Even easier to be a priest than a soldier. But the easiest of all is to be a fisherman. He don't need to know anything at all—just get the habit, that's all."

He gave an amusing imitation of how the fish circle round the bait and how a bass, a bream, and a perch struggle when they are hooked.

"You get mad, now, when your grandfather gives you a beating, don't you, though?" he said consolingly. "But there's no reason at all to get mad, my man. They're all for your own good, those beatings, and they're just childish beatings. But take my Tatyana Alexeyevna, for instance. There was a person for you when it came to beatings! She kept a special man for such business—Christopher was his name—such an expert he was that the owners of neighbouring estates used to send to the countess: be so good, Tatyana Alexeyevna, as to lend us your Christopher for a beating or two. So she'd send him over."

He gave an unimpassioned and detailed account of how the countess would sit in a red armchair on the

columned porch of her estate, resplendent in a sheer white dress with a blue scarf about her shoulders, supervising the lashings Christopher administered to her serfs of both sexes.

"That Christopher person, although he came from Ryazan, was something like a Gypsy or a *khokhol**, with moustaches from ear to ear, but his face all bluelike, from shaving his chin. And there was no telling whether he was really half-witted or just made believe he was so's to make life easy. He'd go into the kitchen and fill a jug with water, catch a fly, or a cockroach or a beetle, and drown it by pushing it down with the end of a stick—keep drowning it for a long time. Sometimes he'd catch the vermin under his own collar and drown it."

I was well acquainted with stories like this, having heard many of them from my grandfather and grandmother. But with all their variations, they were the same in that they told of how human beings were tortured and humiliated. I was sick of such stories, and never wanted to hear another.

"Tell me about something else," I said.

The drayman gathered all his wrinkles about his mouth, then shifted them to his eyes, and agreed.

"All right, greedy. Here's something else. Once we had a cook...."

"Who had?"

"Countess Tatyān Alexeyevna."

"Why do you call her Tatyān, like a man, instead of Tatyana? She wasn't a man, was she?"

"No indeed, she was a lady, but still she had a moustache. A little black one. She was a black German by birth—a tribe something like the Negroes. Well, then this cook of ours—this is going to be a funny story, my man...."

The funny story was an account of how the cook had

* *Khokhol*—Russian nickname for Ukrainians—*Tr.*

spoiled a pie and was punished by being made to eat the whole thing at one sitting, which made him sick.

"That's not funny," I said with annoyance.

"So what's funny? Come, let's hear."

"I don't know."

"Then keep your mouth shut."

Once more he started spinning his dull tales.

Sometimes my cousins would come for a visit on Sundays—Uncle Mikhail's sad and lazy Sasha, Uncle Yakov's neat and knowing Sasha. One day, when the three of us were exploring the roofs of the outhouses, we saw a gentleman sitting on a woodpile in the Betlengs' yard, playing with some puppies. He was wearing a long green coat lined with fur, but his little bald and yellow head was uncovered. One of my cousins suggested that we steal one of the puppies, and we immediately thought of a plan: my cousins were to go out in the street and wait at the Betleng gate while I was to frighten the man. When he ran away, my cousins would dash into the yard and grab a puppy.

"How shall I frighten him?"

"Spit on his bald head," suggested one of my cousins.

I found nothing particularly wicked about spitting on a bald head—I had seen and heard about greater crimes being committed, so I did not hesitate to fulfil the task entrusted to me.

But the act created a tremendous fuss. A whole army of men and women from the Betlengs' house invaded our yard, led by a handsome young officer. And since my cousins were innocently playing out in the street at the moment of the crime, I was the only one to receive the beating, which grandfather administered with great gusto to propitiate the house of Betleng.

While I lay bruised and aching on the bunk in the kitchen, Uncle Pyotr came to see me, all dressed up and in a cheerful mood.

"That was a clever thing to think of, young man," he whispered. "Serves him right. the old goat. Spit on the

bunch of them! Better to have thrown a brick at his rotten head!"

I remembered the round, hairless, childlike face of the gentleman in the green coat, and how he had squealed softly and plaintively as a puppy as he wiped his yellow pate with his little hands. This had made me hate my cousins and feel frightfully ashamed of myself at the time, but now I forgot it as I looked into the basketwork face of the drayman, which was quivering in the same frightening and repulsive way grandfather'd had when he gave me the beating.

"Get out!" I cried, pushing Pyotr away with my hands and feet.

He chuckled and winked and got up off the bunk.

From that time on I never had any desire to talk to him. I began to avoid him, and at the same time to keep a suspicious eye on him, as though I were vaguely expecting something.

This incident was shortly followed by another. For some time I had nurtured a secret interest in the quiet house belonging to the Ovsyannikovs. It seemed to me that a mysterious fairy-tale existence went on in that grey house.

The Betleng house was always noisy and cheerful. A number of attractive young ladies lived there, courted by students and officers who were always talking, laughing, singing and playing. The house itself had a gay look, with its sparkling windows through which the green of the plants shone with particular vividness. Grandfather did not like this house.

"Infidels! Heretics!" he called the occupants in general, while he applied a particularly filthy word to the women—a word which Uncle Pyotr once explained to me in a gloating, obscene manner.

But grandfather was impressed by the stern and silent house of the Ovsyannikovs.

It was high and one-storied and ran far back into a clean, open yard carpeted with grass. In the centre of the

yard stood a well, covered by a roof supported by two columns. The house stood back from the street, as though hiding from it. Three narrow arched windows, whose panes were turned to rainbow hues by the sun, decorated the façade. A barn to the right of the entrance gate also had three windows matching those of the house, but they were imitation windows, formed by moulding tacked to the wall, with frames and sashes painted in white. There was something unpleasant about these blind windows, and the barn seemed to suggest that the house wanted to hide away and live its life unobserved. The entire property, including the empty stables and empty barns with their huge gates, breathed a sense of quiet injury, or silent pride.

Sometimes a tall, beardless old man with white moustaches bristling like needles could be seen limping about the yard. Occasionally another old man with side whiskers and a crooked nose led a grey horse out of the stable. Once out in the yard, the narrow-chested, thin-legged horse would nod to everything and everyone like a meek nun. The lame old man would slap it noisily, whistle and sigh deeply, then send the horse back into the dark stable. It seemed to me that the old man wanted to escape from the house, but was held there by an evil spell.

Almost every day from noon to evening, three little boys played in the yard. They were all dressed alike in grey pants and blouses and similar hats, and they themselves were so much alike, with their round faces and grey eyes, that I could distinguish them only by their size.

I watched them through a chink in the fence but to my disappointment they did not notice me. It was pleasant to see in what a happy, friendly manner they played games that were unfamiliar to me. I liked the way they were dressed and the way they took care of each other, especially noticeable in the attitude of the older ones towards the youngest—a sturdy, amusing little fellow. If he fell down, they laughed as people always laugh at anyone who falls down, but there was nothing spiteful in

their laughter; they would immediately help him to get up and if he had dirtied his hands or knees, they wiped them with burdock leaves or their handkerchiefs.

"You clumsy thing!" the middle one would lisp.

They never fought or played tricks on each other, and all three of them were strong and agile and full of energy.

One day I climbed a tree and whistled to them. They stopped at the sound of the whistle, then drew together with their eyes on me and held a consultation. I expected them to start throwing stones, so I got down, filled my shirt and pockets with missiles, and once more climbed the tree. But they were already playing again in a far corner of the yard and had apparently forgotten all about me. That was regrettable, but I did not want to be the first to declare war. Presently, someone called from the window:

"Home, children—quick!"

They turned obediently but unhurriedly, and marched off like geese.

Many times I sat in the tree above the fence, hoping they would invite me to play with them, but they never did. In my imagination I often joined them in their games, even calling out and laughing aloud in my enthusiasm. At such times all three of them would look at me and quietly pass remarks to each other, while I would slip embarrassedly down the tree.

One day they began to play hide-and-seek. The middle brother was "it", and he stood at one corner of the barn with his hands over his eyes, without peeping, while his two brothers hid. The oldest boy quickly climbed into a sledge sheltered by the overhanging roof of the barn, but the little fellow ran round and round the well, not knowing where to hide.

"One!" cried the boy who was "it". "Two...."

The little one climbed up on the edge of the well, grabbed hold of the rope, and jumped into the empty bucket, which immediately disappeared, knocking dully against the sides of the well.

I was frozen with horror as I saw the rope quickly and noiselessly unwinding. But I immediately realized what might be the result and jumped down into the yard, shouting:

"He's fallen into the well!"

The middle brother reached the well at the same time as I did, and grabbed the rope, which lifted him off his feet and burned his hands, but I took hold, and by that time the eldest boy came running and helped me haul up the bucket.

"Careful, please," he said.

We rescued the little one, who was badly frightened. Blood was flowing from the fingers of his right hand, his left cheek was also badly scratched, he was soaked to the waist and deathly pale, but he smiled and said with a shudder:

"Wha-a-at a fa-l-l-l...."

"You craythy thing!" lisped the middle brother, hugging him and wiping the blood from his face, while the eldest frowned and remarked:

"Come on, we can't hide it anyhow, so we may as well go now."

"Will you get a licking?" I asked.

He nodded and held out his hand.

"You came very fast," he said.

I was so overwhelmed by his praise that before I could take his hand he was saying to the middle brother:

"Come on, or he'll catch cold. We'll say he simply fell down, but don't say anything about the well."

"Yes," agreed the little one, still shaking. "We'll just say I fell in a puddle."

And they went away.

Everything had happened so fast that when I glanced up at the branch on which I had been sitting it was still swaying and scattering its yellow leaves.

For about a week after that the brothers did not appear in the yard, and when they did, they were noisier

than ever. As soon as the eldest boy saw me, he cried in a friendly tone:

"Come and play with us!"

We climbed into the sledge under the eaves of the barn and sat there for a long time inspecting one another and talking.

"Did they beat you?" I asked.

"We got it, all right," answered the eldest.

It was hard to believe that these boys also took beatings like mine, and I thought it unfair.

"Why do you catch birds?" asked the little one.

"Because they sing prettily."

"Don't catch them any more. Let them be free to go where they want."

"Very well, I won't."

"Only first catch one and give it to me."

"What kind?"

"A cheerful kind—to put in a cage."

"That'll be a chaffinch."

"The cat'll kill it," said the middle brother. "And father won't let uth keep it."

"No, he won't," agreed the eldest.

"Haven't you got a mother?"

"No," answered the eldest, but the middle brother corrected him:

"We have, only another one—not ourth—ourth died."

"That kind's called a stepmother," I said, and the eldest nodded.

"Yes."

All three of them fell into a brooding silence.

I had learned what a stepmother was from grandmother's tales, and so I could understand their silence. They sat there huddled together, as like as three peas. I recalled the story of the witch stepmother who resorted to foul means to take the place of the real mother, and I tried to console the boys by saying:

"Don't worry, your real mother will come back yet."

"How can she, if she's dead? That never happens," said the eldest with a shrug of his shoulders.

Never happens? Heavens, how many times a sprinkling of living water had brought back to life not only those who were merely dead, but even those who had been chopped into a hundred pieces! And how many times death turned out to be not a real death, sent by God, but the work of witches and wizards!

I began an enthusiastic retelling of grandmother's stories, but the eldest laughed contemptuously and said: "We've heard those—they're just fairy tales!"

His brothers, however, listened in silence, the little one with a frown on his face and his lips compressed, the middle brother with one elbow on his knee, the other arm crooked about the little one's neck.

By now it was well on toward evening; rosy clouds had settled low over the roofs when the old men with white whiskers appeared. He was wearing a long brown coat like a priest and had a shaggy fur cap on his head.

"Who's that?" he asked, pointing his finger at me.

The eldest boy rose and nodded toward grandfather's house.

"He's from over there," he said.

"Who asked him to come?"

Without a word all three of the boys immediately climbed out of the sledge and went home, once more reminding me of obedient geese.

The old man took me firmly by the shoulder and led me through the yard to the gate. I was on the verge of tears from fright, but he strode ahead so quickly that I found myself out in the street before I had time to cry. He stood at the gate shaking his finger at me and saying:

"Don't dare come to my house again!"

"I didn't come to your house, you old devil!" I retorted angrily.

His long arm reached out for me once more, and he led me down the sidewalk, reiterating the same question, like hammer blows over the head:

"Is your grandfather at home?"

Unfortunately for me, he was. He stood before the menacing old man, his head thrown back, his beard sticking out, looking up into eyes as round and dull as kopek pieces.

"His mother's away, I'm busy, nobody to look after him—begging your pardon, Colonel!" he said hastily.

The Colonel gave a grunt that could be heard all over the house, swung round on his heel like a wooden post and marched away. A little later I was tossed out into Uncle Pyotr's cart.

"Got it again, my man?" asked the drayman as he unharnessed the horse. "What was the beating for this time?"

When I had told him the story, he flared up and hissed through his teeth:

"What do you want to make friends with the likes of them for? They're gentlefolk's brats; see what you took on their account? Next time you give it to them!"

He kept on muttering to himself, and at first, embittered by my beating, I sympathized with what he said. But his basketwork face quivered more and more unpleasantly and reminded me that those boys would also be flogged, and that they had done me no harm.

"No reason why I should give it to them," I said, "and what you say is just a pack of lies."

He glanced at me sharply, then suddenly shouted:

"Get out of my cart!"

"Fool!" I cried, jumping down.

"A fool, am I? A liar, am I? I'll show you...." and he began chasing me about the yard, but could not catch me.

Grandmother appeared on the kitchen porch. I ran to her, and he began to complain about me:

"I get no peace with that brat around! I'm five times his age, and he calls me all sorts of filthy names ... says I'm a liar...."

When people lied about me to my face, I was stunned out of mind. Now I stood there at an utter loss for words, but grandmother said firmly:

"Well, Pyotr, that shows you really are a liar. You can't tell me he called you filthy names."

Grandfather would have believed the drayman.

From that day on the relationship between me and the drayman was one of silent, vicious war. He never missed an opportunity to poke me or hit me with the reins as if by chance; he set my birds free and one day he set the cat on them. He was always complaining to grandfather about me, invariably exaggerating the cause. I found it impossible to look upon him as anything but a boy like myself dressed up like an old man. In my turn I would unravel his bast sandals and untwist the cording, so that it would break when he was lacing them. One day I sprinkled pepper in his cap, and he went about sneezing for a whole hour. In general, I did everything in my power to give him tit for tat. On Sundays he would spend the entire day spying on me, and more than once he caught me in illegal communication with the gentlefolk's brats and at once told my grandfather.

I had continued my acquaintanceship with the boys, and derived more and more pleasure from it. Between the wall of grandfather's house and the Ovsyannikovs' fence there was a little corner shaded by an elm and a lime and overgrown with elderberry bushes. Behind these bushes I had cut a little opening in the fence, to which the brothers would come in turns or pairs, to talk quietly with me. One of them always watched to see that the Colonel did not catch us.

They told me about the dull life they lived, and this made me very sad. We talked about my birds, and about many childish interests, but so far as I can remember they never mentioned their father or their stepmother. Most often they simply asked me to tell them stories, and I conscientiously related all the tales I had heard from my grandmother. If I forgot anything, I would ask them to

wait while I ran to her to be prompted. She was only too glad to do this.

I often told them about my grandmother. One day the eldest boy gave a deep sigh and said:

"All grandmothers must be nice. We used to have a nice grandmother too...."

He so often and so sadly repeated the expressions: "used to be", "used to have", "once upon a time", that it seemed he had lived a hundred years instead of only eleven. I remember that he had slender hands with long thin fingers. He himself was slender and fragile with eyes as shy and clear as the icon lamps in church. I was fond of his brothers as well. They won my sympathy and inspired me with the desire to do something nice for them. But I was most fond of the eldest.

So absorbed would I become in our conversation that I often failed to notice the approach of Uncle Pyotr, who would startle us with his long-drawn-out:

"What-a-t! At it again?"

I could see that he was becoming more and more subject to fits of sullenness. I even learned how to determine the mood in which he returned from work: ordinarily he opened the doors unhurriedly, so that the hinges gave a prolonged creak. But if he was in a bad mood, the hinges would let out a sharp, sudden shriek, like a cry of pain.

His nephew, a deaf-mute, left for the country to get married. Pyotr went on living alone in a low-ceilinged room over the stable that had only one tiny window in it and smelled of tar, old leather, tobacco and sweat. I never visited him because of this smell. These days he slept without extinguishing his lamp, a thing which displeased grandfather very much.

"Watch out or you'll be burning the place down, Pyotr."

"No danger of that. I always stand the lamp in a basin of water at night," he answered, turning his eyes away.

He was always glancing about shiftily nowadays, and he no longer attended grandmother's parties or treated us to jam. His face had become dried up, the wrinkles had grown deeper, and he swayed like a sick man when he walked.

One morning when grandfather and I were shovelling the snow which had fallen abundantly during the night, the latch on the gate clicked with particular importance; a policeman entered the yard, closed the gate, stood with his back to it, and beckoned to grandfather with a fat grey finger. When grandfather went over to him, he stuck his big nose into his face and said something to which grandfather hastily replied:

"Here? When? If I could only remember...."

Suddenly he started comically and cried:

"Merciful God! Not really?"

"Sh!" warned the policeman.

Grandfather glanced about and caught sight of me:

"Take the shovels and go home!"

I hid round the corner of the house and watched them enter the drayman's quarters in the stable. The policeman took the glove off his right hand and began slapping his left with it.

"He understands, all right; he's left his horse and gone into hiding."

I ran into the kitchen to tell grandmother all I had seen and heard. She nodded her flour-dusted head as she kneaded the dough.

"Must've stolen something or other," she said calmly when I had finished. "Go out and play. What's it to you?"

When I ran out into the yard again, grandfather was standing at the gate with his hat off and his eyes raised to heaven, crossing himself. His face was angry and bristling and one of his legs was jerking.

"Didn't I tell you to go into the house?" he cried, stamping his foot.

He followed me into the kitchen.

"Come here, Mother!" he said.

They went into the next room and whispered together for some time. One look at grandmother's face when she returned told me that something dreadful had happened.

"What are you scared of?" I asked.

"You just keep your mouth shut," she replied softly.

A strained and awed atmosphere hung over the house the rest of the day; grandmother and grandfather kept exchanging furtive glances and short, incomprehensible words which heightened the feeling of alarm.

"Light all the icon lamps, Mother," ordered grandfather, clearing his throat.

They ate hurriedly, but without appetite, as if expecting someone. Grandfather wearily blew out his cheeks, cleared his throat, and murmured:

"Satan's too strong for a man to pit himself against. Take him, for instance—a godly, pious man to all appearances, but look what he's done!"

Grandmother sighed.

The silvery winter day dragged on, interminably, while the atmosphere at home became more uneasy and oppressive with every hour.

Towards evening another policeman came. He was fat, redheaded and sat drowsing on a bench in the kitchen, nodding and snuffling.

"How did you find out?" grandmother asked.

After a short pause he replied gruffly:

"Don't worry, we find out everything."

I remember sitting at the window heating an old coin in my mouth in order to make an impression of St. George killing the dragon of the frosted windowpane.

Suddenly there was a great bustling in the passage and the door burst open. Petrovna stood on the threshold and shouted:

"Go and take a look at what's lying on your property!"

On catching sight of the policeman she rushed back into the passage, but he caught her by the skirt and also shouted in fright:

"Wait a minute! Who are you? What's out there?"

She fell on her knees and began to sob, swallowing down her words and her tears:

"I went out to milk the cow, and all of a sudden I sees something like a long boot in the Kashirins' yard."

"That's a lie, you hussy!" shouted grandfather in a rage. "You couldn't see anything in our yard—the fence is too high and there's no holes in it! You're lying! There's nothing out there!"

"Ah me!" wailed Petrovna, stretching out one hand to him and holding her head with the other. "It's the truth when he says I'm lying. I was walking along and all of a sudden I sees tracks leading up to your fence and the snow all trampled down in one place, so I climbs up and looks over the fence, and there he is lying there...."

"Who-o-o?"

The cry came frightful and long-drawn and meaningless. Then all of a sudden, as though they had lost their senses, everyone went running and pushing out of the kitchen into the yard. There in the snow-filled pit lay Uncle Pyotr, his back against the charred beam, his head drooping on his breast. Just below his right ear was a great gash resembling a red mouth with bluish fringes sticking up like teeth. I closed my eyes in horror, and through my lashes I saw Uncle Pyotr's saddle-knife lying on his knee, the twisted darkened fingers of his right hand beside it and his left hand buried in snow. The snow had melted under his slight figure, which lay deep in the white fluff, looking more childlike than ever. On his right the snow was stained with a strange red design that looked like a bird, while on his left it remained unspotted and lay smooth and glistening. His head, so meekly bowed rested on his chest, pushing up his curly beard, beneath which, on his bared chest, hung a large brass cross framed by rivulets of dried blood. My head swam from the confusion of voices: Petrovna wailed without cease, the policeman kept shouting to Valei to go somewhere, grandfather

yelled: "Don't spoil the tracks!" Then he frowned and dropped his eyes.

"No sense in shouting, officer," he said in a loud, authoritative voice. "This is the hand of God, the judgment of God, and you with your silly business—fie on you!"

All the people became silent at once, sighing and crossing themselves and staring at the dead man.

Others climbed over the fence from Petrovna's side and came running across the yard, falling and muttering, but making little noise, until grandfather glanced round and cried in despair:

"You're breaking all the raspberry bushes, neighbours! Aren't you ashamed of yourselves?"

Grandmother took me by the hand and led me into the house.

"What did he do?" I asked.

"Didn't you see?" she answered, whimpering.

All that evening and until late in the night strange people moved about the kitchen and the room adjoining it. The police gave orders, and a man who looked like a deacon made notes in a book and kept quacking like a duck:

"What's that? What's that?"

Grandmother served tea to everybody. At the kitchen table sat a round, bewhiskered, pockmarked man who said in squeaky voice:

"Nobody knows his real name. The only thing they know is that he comes from Elatma. But that deaf-mute is no more deaf than you nor me, and he came out with the whole story. And the third chap talked too—seems there was a third one. They been robbing churches ever so long—that was their main business."

"My God!" cried Petrovna, flushed and perspiring.

I lay up on the stove-bunk looking down on them, and they all looked short and fat and ugly....

10 Very early one Saturday morning I went into Petrovna's garden to catch bullfinches. Some time passed, but the proud, red-breasted creatures would not enter my snare. Vaunting their beauty, they would strut importantly over the silver snow crust, or fly into the bushes, where they would sway on the hoar-covered branches like bright flowers among blue sparkles of snow dust. All this was too lovely to allow of my feeling disappointment in the hunt. In general I was not a very impassioned hunter: I always took greater pleasure in the process than in the result. I liked to watch the birds and think about them.

What could be more pleasant than to sit alone at the edge of a snowy field and listen to the chirping of the birds in the crystal silence of a winter's day, while somewhere far away in the distance sounded the bells of a passing troika—that melancholy lark of the Russian winter.

When I was chilled to the bone and felt that my ears were freezing, I gathered up my snares and cages, climbed the fence into grandfather's garden, and went toward the house. The gates were open, and a huge man was leading three horses hitched to a large, closed sleigh out into the street. Clouds of steam rose from the horses, the man whistled gaily, and my heart stood still.

"Who did you bring?" I asked.

He turned, glanced at me from under his hand, jumped up into his seat, and said:

"The priest."

That did not concern me—if the priest had come, he was probably visiting one of the tenants.

"Get going, my chickens!" cried the man as he touched the horses with the reins, causing them to spring ahead and set the air ringing with bells. I watched them go, then closed the gates and went into the house. When I entered the kitchen I heard my mother's deep voice coming from the next room:

"Well, what now? Off with my head—is that it?"

Without waiting to take off my coat I threw down my cages, rushed out into the passage and ran into grandfather. He gripped my shoulders and looked at me with wild eyes, swallowing painfully, as he announced in a hoarse voice: "Your mother's come—go in to her. Wait!"

He shook me so that I could hardly keep my footing, then pushed me toward the door.

"Go in, go in," he said.

I fumbled at the padded door, scarcely able to lift the latch with my frozen, trembling fingers; when at last I opened it, I stood speechless on the threshold.

"Ah, so here he is!" said mother. "Heavens, how big you've grown! Don't you recognize me? The way you dress him! And look, his ears are frozen! Give me some goose grease—hurry, Mother!"

She stood bending over me in the middle of the room, taking off my clothes and turning me round like a ball. Her large body was clothed in a soft, warm red dress as wide as a peasant's *chapan* and with large black buttons descending diagonally from the shoulder to the waist, then down to the very hem. I had never seen such a dress before.

Her face seemed to have grown smaller and paler, her eyes larger and deeper, and her hair more golden. She threw aside the clothes she took off me, drawing down the corners of her red lips disdainfully and saying in an imperious tone:

"Well, why don't you say something? Aren't you glad? Phoooh, what a dirty shirt!"

She rubbed goose grease on my ears. It hurt, but the pain was compensated by the refreshing, delightful scent which emanated from her. I pressed close and looked deep into her eyes, unable to utter a word in my agitation. As a background to what she was saying, I heard grandmother softly complaining:

"He's so self-willed, got quite out of hand, don't even fear his grandfather any more. Ah, Varya, Varya...."

"Stop whining, Mother! Everything will be all right!"

In contrast to my mother, all the surroundings seemed little and old and drab. I myself felt as old as grandfather.

She held me tightly between her knees as she stroked my hair with a warm, heavy hand.

"Need a haircut," she said. "And time for you to be going to school. Do you want to study?"

"I've already studied."

"There's more to be learned. But what a sturdy little fellow you are!" And she laughed a rich, warm laugh as she fondled me.

Grandfather came in, grey and bristling, with blood-shot eyes. She pushed me away with a single gesture and asked in a loud voice:

"Well, what am I to do, Father? Leave?"

He stood at the window scratching at the ice on the pane with his nail and saying nothing. Everybody felt tense and uneasy, and as always in such moments, I felt eyes and ears springing out all over my body and my chest grew so big I wanted to scream.

"Get out of here, Alexei," said grandfather dully.

"Why?" asked mother, drawing me to her again.

"You're not to leave. I forbid it."

She got up and sailed about the room like a red cloud. "Listen, Father," she said, halting behind him.

"Silence!" he shrieked.

"I won't allow you to shout at me!" said mother quietly.

"Varvara!" cried grandmother, getting up off the couch and shaking a warning finger, while grandfather sank weakly into a chair, muttering to himself:

"Wait... who am I? What's this, eh?"

Suddenly he let out a roar like a wounded beast:

"You've disgraced me, that's what you've done, Varvara!"

"Go away," grandmother said to me. Deeply unhappy, I went into the kitchen and climbed up on to the stove, from where I could hear the sounds coming from the other room—now everyone talking excitedly, now

everyone silent, as though suddenly fallen asleep. They were talking about a baby my mother had given birth to and left with someone. But it was impossible to tell whether grandfather was angry because my mother had given birth without his consent, or because she had not brought him the baby.

Finally he came into the kitchen, red and dishevelled and exhausted, followed by grandmother, who was wiping the tears from her cheeks with the skirt of her jacket. He slumped down on a bench, leaning on his hands, twitching, biting his grey lips. Grandmother fell on her knees before him.

"Forgive her, Father, for the love of Christ, forgive her! Even better sleighs have broken down. Don't such things happen among the gentlefolk too, and among the merchants? Just see what a woman she is! Forgive her, Father—none of us are perfect...."

Grandfather leaned back against the wall, watching her with a crooked smile on his face:

"Oh yes, indeed," he whined. "Why not? Who wouldn't you forgive? You'd forgive anybody. Phoooh! Such people!"

Then he leaned forward, grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her.

"But what about the Lord?" he said in a rapid whisper. "He doesn't forgive anything, does He? He's caught us up at the brink of the grave to punish us—our last days, and no peace, no joy, and none to hope for. Beggars we'll die—mark my word—beggars!"

Grandmother took his hands in hers, sat down beside him, and laughed softly.

"What of it? Why are you so scared to be a beggar? Very well, we'll be beggars. You can sit home and I'll go out with the cup. Nobody'll refuse me—we'll not go hungry! Stop worrying yourself with all this business!"

Suddenly he gave a little smile, turned his head like a goat, seized grandmother about the neck and pressed against her, small and crumpled and blubbering:

"You fool! You blessed fool! The only person left to me! You'd be willing to lose everything, simpleton that you are! Just remember how we worked for our children, how I sinned for them! And now at the end, not to have anything, not even a little bit...."

At this point I could stand it no longer; I jumped off the stove with the tears streaming down my cheeks and ran to their side, sobbing with joy because they were talking to each other with unwonted tenderness, and because I felt sorry for them, and because mother had come, and because they were letting me share their grief with them, both of them embracing me, patting me, bathing me in their tears.

"So you're here too, little scoundrel," whispered grandfather into my ear. "Now your mother's come you won't be needing me, your grandfather, the mean old devil, eh? Nor your grandmother, the old softy who only knows how to spoil you. Phoooh, such people!"

He waved us off with his hands and stood up.

"Everybody leaves us—all go away—each for himself.... Well, call her in," he said tetchily. "Hurry up!"

Grandmother left the kitchen and grandfather went over to the icon corner.

"Merciful God—just see—to think of it!" he muttered with bowed head, striking himself resoundingly on the chest. I didn't like this, and in general I didn't approve of the way in which he spoke to God, always so boastful.

Mother entered, filling the room with the cheer of her red dress. She sat on the bench at the table with grandmother and grandfather on either side of her, the full sleeves of her dress falling on their shoulders. She spoke to them softly and seriously, and they listened without a word, never interrupting. Both of them looked so small beside her that it seemed she was the mother and they her children.

Worn out with emotion, I fell fast asleep on the bunk.

That evening the two old people put on their best

clothes and went to vesper service. Grandmother winked roguishly at grandfather, who was resplendent in the suit of a master-workman and a racoon coat, his trousers worn outside his boots for the occasion.

"Just see what a neat little goat your father is," she said, nudging my mother.

Mother laughed gaily.

When she and I were alone in her room, she sat on the couch with her legs drawn up under her and called me over, patting the couch next to her.

"Here, come sit down. Well, how are things? Not very good?"

How were they? I didn't know.

"Does your grandfather beat you?"

"Not much any more."

"Really? Well, tell me anything you like."

I didn't want to talk about grandfather, so I began to tell her that a very nice man had lived in the room we were in, but nobody had liked him and grandfather had finally put him out. Evidently this story didn't interest mother, and she said:

"Tell me something else."

I told her about the three little boys and how the Colonel had chased me out of his yard.

"What a nasty man," she said, hugging me.

Then she became quiet, studying the floor through narrowed eyes and shaking her head.

"Why is grandfather so angry with you?" I asked.

"It's my fault."

"You ought to have brought him the baby...."

She started up, frowned, and bit her lip; then she burst out laughing and hugged me again.

"You little silly! But don't say a word about that again, hear? Not a word—and don't even think about it!"

For some time she spoke words that were quiet and stern and unintelligible. Then she got up and began to pace the floor, tapping her chin with her fingers and moving her heavy brows.

A guttering tallow candle burned on the table and was reflected in the emptiness of a looking-glass. Dirty shadows crept across the floor, an icon lamp glowed in the corner, and the frost-covered window was silver with moonlight. Mother glanced about as if looking for something on the bare walls and ceiling.

"When do you go to bed?"

"A little later."

"Yes, you had a nap this afternoon," she remembered with a sigh.

"Do you want to go away?" I asked.

"Where to?" she replied with some surprise, then she lifted my head and gazed for so long into my eyes that I could not hold back the tears.

"Why are you crying?"

"My neck hurts."

But my heart hurt more. I knew she could not live in this house, she would surely go away....

"You will be like your father," she said, tossing a mat aside with her foot. "Has grandmother told you about him?"

"Yes."

"She was very fond of Maxim—very. And he was fond of her."

"I know."

Mother looked at the candle, frowned, and put it out.

"That's better," she said.

It seemed fresher and cleaner in the room without the candle. The dirty shadows on the floor were replaced by patches of blue moonlight, and the window-pane sparkled with gold.

"Where have you been living?"

She mentioned the names of several towns as though remembering something long forgotten, all the while circling about the room like a hawk.

"Where did you get such a dress?"

"I made it myself. I do everything for myself."

I was glad she was so different from everybody else,

but I was sorry she spoke so little. If I didn't ask her questions, she said nothing at all.

Once more she sat down next to me on the couch, and there we sat without speaking, clinging to each other, until the old folks returned smelling of wax and incense, gravely quiet and gentle.

Supper was solemn and sedate. We spoke little and cautiously, as though afraid of awakening someone from a light sleep.

Soon mother energetically undertook my "secular" education: she bought me books, one of which was called "A Russian Primer". From this book I learned the secular alphabet in a few days. But mother immediately had me learn poetry by heart, and this was the beginning of mutual torture.

Here is the first verse I had to learn:

*A winding road, an endless road,
A road past fields and man's abode,
It was not pick or spade that made you,
Not do o'erspreading lindens shade you...*

When I recited it I always said "binding" instead of "winding", "blade" instead of "spade" and "onspreading" instead of "o'erspreading".

"But just think," protested mother, "how could a road be 'binding', silly? 'Winding'—that's what you must say."

I understood, and yet I kept saying "binding", to my own consternation.

Mother became angry and said I was stubborn and stupid. That was a very bitter accusation and I strained every effort to remember the accursed lines. Mentally I recited them without a mistake, but when I said them outloud I invariably mixed up the words. I came to hate these elusive lines, and began to distort them for spite, inventing a whole series of words in alliteration, which gave me the greater pleasure the less sense they made.

But this amusement cost me dear: one day at the end

of a successful lesson, mother asked me to recite the poem, and in spite of myself I began to mutter:

*A road was sowed and blowed with toad,
And mowed and hoed a heavy load...*

I realized what I was saying only too late: mother rose with her hands on the table and asked, enunciating each word separately:

"Where did you get that?"

"I don't know," I answered, thoroughly shocked.

"Oh yes you do! Tell me!"

"I just made it up."

"What for?"

"For fun."

"Go and stand in the corner."

"What for?"

"Go!" she repeated threateningly.

"Which corner?"

Without answering, she gave me such a look that I completely lost all sense of what I was doing or what she wanted me to do. In the icon corner stood a round table holding a vase filled with sweet-scented dried flowers and grasses. In another corner stood a trunk covered with a rug. A bed occupied the third corner while the fourth was taken up by the door.

"I don't know what you want me to do," I said, making a desperate effort to understand.

She sank into a chair, silently rubbing her brow and cheek.

"Didn't grandfather stand you in the corner?"

"When?"

"At any time," she cried impatiently, striking the table twice.

"No, not that I remember."

"Don't you know that it is a punishment—to be stood in the corner?"

"No, why is it a punishment?"

"Dear me!" she said with a sigh. "Come here."

"Why did you shout at me?" I asked, coming over.

"Why did you change the poem?"

I explained to the best of my ability that when I shut my eyes I remembered the poem as it was written, but when I said it out loud, other words came out.

"Aren't you just making that up?"

I swore I was not, but immediately I began to wonder whether I was or not. Suddenly, taking my time, I recited the poem without a mistake. I was amazed and overwhelmed.

I felt my face flushing, my ears burning. I stood there in front of my mother consumed with shame, and through my tears I could see her face darken with disappointment, her lips tighten, her brows lower.

"What does that mean?" she asked in a strange voice.

"So it seems you really did make it up!"

"I don't know. I didn't mean to."

"You're difficult," she said, lowering her head. "Go away."

She began to give me more poems to learn, but my mind refused to absorb them. The desire to distort these rhythmic lines and to fit different words into them grew more viciously intense. I had no trouble in doing this—the unwelcome words came to my mind in droves, quickly substituting themselves for the right ones. Often whole lines refused to be captured by my visual memory however hard I tried. One plaintive verse—by Prince Vyazemsky, it seems—caused me particular trouble.

*'Til late at night from early morn,¹¹
Old folks and orphans and widows
Beg for a crust 'neath the windows.*

I always left out the third line:

Stretch out their hands and in voices forlorn....

In exasperation mother told grandfather about my freaks of memory.

"He does it on purpose!" he said angrily. "There's

nothing wrong with his memory; knows all the prayers better than me. His memory's like stone—once a thing's cut into it, it's there for good. Try giving him a thrashing!"

Grandmother confirmed his opinion:

"He remembers fairy tales and songs, and songs are the same as poetry."

All this was true, and I felt that I was to blame, but as soon as I undertook the learning of a poem, other words would come crawling out like a lot of cockroaches and line themselves up:

*Night and morning, to our gate,
Cripples, orphans come and wait,
Wait and whine and beg for bread,
Take it to Petrovna's shed,
Sell it for her cows, and then,
Wallow drunken in the glen.*

At night as I lay beside grandmother, I would tell her all I remembered from the books and all that I myself made up. Sometimes she would laugh, but mostly she reproved me:

"Just see what you can do if you want to! But you oughtn't to make fun of beggars. Christ was a beggar, and so were all the saints."

I replied by muttering:

*Beggars I hate,
And grandfather too,
So help me God.
What can I do
To escape my fate
And grandfather's rod?*

"May your tongue wither at the roots, you wicked boy!" exclaimed grandmother. "What if your grandfather hears it?"

"Let him!"

"You ought not to be naughty and make your mother angry. It's hard enough for her as it is, without you making it worse," coaxed grandmother gently.

"Why is it hard for her?"

"Tut! Hold your tongue! It's not for you to understand such things!"

"I know; it's because of grandfather...."

"Tut! Tut!"

I was unhappy almost to the point of despair, but I didn't want to show it. And so I became bold and unruly. Mother's lessons became more frequent and more difficult. I had no trouble with arithmetic, but I could not bear to write and understood nothing about grammar. The thing that oppressed me most was knowing how miserable mother was, living in my grandfather's house. She became gloomier with every day, looking at everyone with alien eyes and sitting for hours at the window gazing out into the garden, seeming to wither away. The first few days after her arrival she was quick and full of life, but now there were dark circles under her eyes and she neglected her appearance, going about all day long in a wrinkled, unbuttoned blouse without combing her hair. It hurt me to see her so unattractive—she always should have been neat and clean and beautiful, the most beautiful person in the world.

During our lessons she stared past me at the wall or through the window, asking her questions in a tired voice and forgetting to listen to the answers. She had become very irritable and often shouted at me. This also hurt my feelings: a mother should be more just than other people, like the mothers in fairy tales.

One day I said to her:

"Are you unhappy with us?"

"Get on with your work," she replied sharply.

I also observed that grandfather was preparing to do something that frightened mother and grandmother. Often he would lock himself up with mother in her room and screech like shepherd Nikanor's horrible wooden whistle.

On one such occasion mother shouted so loud as to be heard throughout the house:

"That will never be, never!"

She slammed the door and grandfather let out a howl.

That was in the evening. Grandmother was sitting in the kitchen making grandfather a shirt and muttering under her breath as she sewed. When the door slammed she listened, and then said:

"Oh Lord, she's gone to the tenants!"

Suddenly grandfather rushed into the kitchen, struck grandmother over the head, and hissed as he nursed his stinging hand:

"When are you going to learn to hold your tongue, you old witch?"

"You're a fool," answered grandmother calmly, adjusting her kerchief. "Think you can make me hold my tongue? You can be sure I'll always tell her when I find out about your scheming."

He threw himself at her and began to pummel her head. Grandmother made no resistance, but kept saying:

"Go ahead and beat me, you fool! Harder, harder!"

From the stove-bunk where I was sitting I began throwing pillows and blankets and boots at him, but in his rage he did not notice it. Grandmother fell on the floor, and there he kicked her head until he himself stumbled and fell, overturning a pail of water. He jumped up, spitting and sputtering. With a wild glance round, he ran out of the kitchen and up to his room in the attic. Grandmother got up with a groan, sat down on the bench, and began straightening out her tangled hair. I jumped down off the bunk.

"Gather up these pillows and things and put them back on the stove," she said angrily. "A fine thing to go throwing the pillows about! Learn to mind your own business! And that old devil going off his head like that, too!"

Suddenly she let out a little cry, frowned, and called me over.

"Look here," she said, lowering her head. "What is it hurts so here?"

I lifted her heavy hair and discovered that a hairpin had been driven into her scalp. I pulled it out and found another. I went weak all over.

"I'd better call mother," I said. "I'm afraid."

"What are you saying—I'll call mother!" she cried with a wave of her hand. "Thank the Lord she didn't see or hear it, and you'll be calling her! Get out of here!"

With the deft fingers of a lacemaker, she herself began feeling through her heavy black mane for the imbedded hairpins. Gathering all my courage, I helped her pull out two more.

"Does it hurt?"

"Not much. Tomorrow I'll heat up the bathhouse and wash all the hurt away. But don't you go telling your mother he beat me, pigeon-widgeon," she coaxed tenderly. "They're angry enough with each other as it is. You won't, now, will you?"

"No."

"Don't forget! Now let's tidy up here. Can you see anything on my face? No? That's good. So everything's neat as daisies."

She began to mop up the floor, and I said from the bottom of my heart:

"You're like one of the saints—thy beat you and torture you, and you don't pay any attention to it."

"What nonsense! A saint! A fine place to go looking for a saint!"

She kept on muttering as she crawled about on all fours, while I sat on the steps to the stove-bunk reckoning how I could pay back grandfather for what he had done.

This was the first time he had shown such violence to grandmother in my presence. There in the twilight I seemed to see his red face with the red hair waving about it. My heart was burning with indignation, and I was unhappy because I could not think of a fitting revenge.

Two days later, on entering his room in the attic, I found him sitting on the floor in front of an open chest going through some papers. On a chair beside him lay his favourite calendar of saints—twelve sheets of heavy grey paper divided into squares for the days of the month, with figures of the saints in the squares. Grandfather prized this calendar highly, allowing me to look at it only on those rare occasions when he was particularly pleased with me, and I always contemplated those attractive little grey figures with a peculiar emotion. I knew the lives of some of them: Kirik and Ulita, Varvara-the-Martyr, Panteleimon, and many others. I was especially moved by the sad life of Alexei, Man-of-God, and the splendid verses about him which grandmother often recited to me with deep feeling. When you looked at these hundreds of saints, it brought the quiet consolation that there had always been martyrs.

But now I decided to cut up this calendar, and when grandfather went over to the window to read a blue paper embossed with eagles, I snatched up several sheets, quickly ran downstairs, took the scissors from grandmother's table, climbed up on the stove-bunk and began cutting off the heads of the saints. When I had decapitated one row, my heart was touched with pity for them, so I began to merely cut along the lines dividing the sheet into squares. Before I had cut up the following row grandfather appeared on the stove-bunk steps.

"Who gave you permission to take the calendar?" he asked.

Suddenly he caught sight of the little squares scattered over the bunk. He seized them, peered at them, discarded them, and picked them up again; his jaw clamped, his beard began to quiver, and he breathed so hard that the papers went flying.

"What have you done!" he shouted at last, pulling me off the stove by the leg. I somersaulted into the air, but grandmother caught me.

"I'll kill you!" shrieked grandfather, pummeling both me and grandmother.

Suddenly mother appeared and I found myself in the corner with her in front of me.

"Stop this nonsense!" she cried as she warded off grandfather's blows. "Come to your senses!"

"I'm done for," wailed grandfather, sinking down on the bench by the window. "You're all against me—all of you!"

"You should be ashamed of yourself for putting on such a show!" came mother's low voice.

Grandfather shouted and kicked the bench, his eyes tight closed and his beard pointing ridiculously toward the ceiling. It seemed to me that he really was ashamed of the show in the presence of my mother, and that was why he closed his eyes.

"I'll paste these pieces together on some calico and the calendar will be better than ever—stronger," said mother as she straightened out the sheets of paper. "See, they're all wrinkled and worn and falling to pieces."

She spoke to him in the same tone she used at our lessons when I did not understand. Suddenly grandfather got up, straightened his shirt and his vest with great importance, cleared his throat, and said:

"See that you paste them together today. I'll bring you the other sheets at once."

He went to the door, but turned at the threshold.

"He deserves a whipping!" he said, shaking a crooked finger at me.

"Yes, he does," agreed mother. "Why did you ever do such a thing?" she asked, bending over me.

"I did it on purpose. If he ever beats grandmother again, I'll cut his beard off!"

Grandmother, who was in the act of taking off her torn blouse, shook her head.

"You ought to hold your tongue, as you promised!" she said, spitting in disgust. "May it swell up so it can't go wagging any more!"

Mother glanced at her, then turned to me.

"When did he beat her?" she asked.

"Shame on you, Varvara, asking him such things! It's none of your business!"

"Ah, Mother, you blessed creature!" cried my own mother, embracing her warmly.

"Hm, a fine sort of a mother for you! Here, let me go...."

They looked at each other in silence for a minute, then moved apart. Grandfather could be heard shuffling about in the passage.

From the very first day of her arrival, mother was friendly with the officer's gay little wife, and went to visit her almost every evening. There she met people from the Betlengs' house—pretty young girls and officers. Grandfather didn't like this, and often as he sat over his supper in the kitchen he would shake his spoon in their direction and grumble:

"Another party on, curse them! There'll be no sleeping the night through!"

Soon he asked the tenants to move, and when they had gone he brought two loads of odd furniture from somewhere, placed it in the empty apartment and locked the door.

"Don't need those tenants any more—I'll be entertaining guests myself from now on."

And on Sunday the guests began to arrive. Among them were grandmother's sister, Matryona Ivanovna, a noisy, big-nosed laundress wearing a striped silk dress and a gold-coloured scarf on her head. With her came her two sons, Vasili, a draughtsman, long-haired and dressed in grey—a jolly, *good-natured* fellow; and Victor, who had a head like a horse and a narrow face sprinkled with freckles. While he was taking off his rubbers out in the passage I heard him piping like a clown:

"Andrei-papá, Andrei-papá...."

This surprised and frightened me.

Uncle Yakov came with his guitar. He also brought

along a quiet, bald-headed, one-eyed watchmaker, dressed in a long black coat that made him look like a monk. He always sat smiling in the corner with his head tipped to one side, and one finger supporting his cloven, clean-shaven chin. He was dark, and his one eye gazed at everyone with particular intensity. He spoke little and constantly repeated the same phrase:

"Please don't trouble yourself—it's all the same...."

When I first saw him I suddenly remembered the time, long ago (we were still living on Novaya Street), when I had heard the drums beating ominously out in the road and seen a high black cart surrounded by soldiers and people move from the jail to the public square. On a bench in the cart sat a man with a round cap on his head and chains on his hands that jingled with the swaying of his body. A black sign hung about his neck with something written on it in large white letters. The man's head hung down as though he were reading it....

"This is my son," said mother, introducing me to the watchmaker, but I edged away in fright, holding my hands behind my back.

"Please don't trouble yourself," he said, stretching his mouth to his right ear in a frightful way. Catching me by the belt, he jerked me toward him and whirled me about with a quick, deft movement.

"He's all right, a sturdy chap," he said in approbation as he let me go.

I took up my position in a leather armchair large enough to sleep in. Grandfather always boasted that this chair had belonged to a Prince Gruzinsky. From the corner I observed with what an effort the grownups tried to be jolly and how strangely and suspiciously the watchmaker changed his facial expressions. His face was mobile and greasy, all melted and running. When he smiled, his thick lips shifted to the right and his little nose moved like a dumpling in a stew. His large, protruding ears also moved, now rising along with the brow above his one eye, now sliding toward his cheekbones, and it seemed

to me that if he so desired, he could fold them over his nose like hands. Sometimes with a sigh he would stick out his dark little tongue, as round as a pestle, drawing a circle with it to moisten his thick, oily lips. I found this more surprising than amusing, and could not take my eyes off him.

The guests drank tea with rum, which smelled like burnt onions. They also drank grandmother's liqueurs, which were golden, or green, or dark as tar. They ate rich baked cream and honey cakes sprinkled with poppy seeds. They swelled and sweated and praised my grandmother. When they had had their fill they sat back in their chairs, flushed and bloated, and lazily asked Uncle Yakov to play for them.

He bent over his guitar and strummed it as he sang in his unpleasant voice:

*Oh, we lived as best we could,
Lots of noise, but little good.
Ca-a-ame the lady from Kazan,
Looking for another man....*

I found this a very sad song, and grandmother said:

"Sing something else, Yakov—a true kind of song. Remember the songs they used to sing, Matryona?"

"There's a new style in songs these days, my dear," said the laundress with an impressive rustle of her dress.

My uncle stared at grandmother through half-closed eyes as though she were far away, and continued plucking out his gloomy tune and singing his ugly words.

Grandfather was carrying on a secret conversation with the watchmaker, demonstrating something with his hands. The latter lifted his brow, glanced in mother's direction, nodded, and a subtle change spread over his liquid face.

Mother was sitting with the Sergeyevs as usual, speaking to Vasili in a grave, quiet voice.

"Hm-m. Have to think about that," he said with a sigh.

Victor gave a well-fed smile, shuffled his feet, and suddenly began to sing in a thin voice: "Andrei-papá, Andrei-papá...."

Everyone stopped talking and glanced at him.

"He got that from the theáyster," explained his mother proudly. "They sing that in the theáyster."

There were two or three such evenings, memorable for their insufferable boredom. Then one Sunday the watchmaker put in an appearance at noon, just after late mass. I was sitting in mother's room helping her unravel some old beaded embroidery when the door was suddenly flung open and grandmother's frightened face appeared just long enough to whisper:

"Varya, he's come!"

Mother did not start or move a muscle. A minute later the door opened again and grandfather said solemnly:

"Dress yourself and come along, Varvara!"

"Where to?" asked mother without looking at him or getting up.

"Come along, and God bless you. Don't start arguing. He's a steady man, a master at his job, and he'll make a good father for Alexei."

Grandfather spoke with unwonted importance and kept stroking his sides with his hands, while his elbows quivered as though his arms wanted to stretch forward and he was struggling to keep them back.

"I tell you it can never be," said mother calmly.

Grandfather strode over to her with his arms ahead of him like a blind man.

"Come along or I'll drag you along—by the hair!" he shouted hoarsely, bristling all over.

"You'll drag me?" said mother rising. Her face was white and her eyes narrowed menacingly. Quickly she began to pull off her skirt and blouse. When she remained in only her petticoat, she said to grandfather:

"All right, drag me along!"

He bared his teeth and shook his fist.

"Put on your clothes, Varvara!"

Mother pushed him away and went to the door.

"Well, are you coming?" she cried.

"I'll disown you!" hissed grandfather.

"I'm not afraid. Well?"

She opened the door, but he seized the hem of her petticoat and fell on his knees.

"You'll come to an awful end, Varvara, you she-devil! Don't disgrace me. Mother! Mother!" he wailed.

Grandmother had already barred mother's way and was shooing her back into the room like a chicken.

"You fool!" she muttered. "Get back, you shameless wench!"

When she had her back in the room, she put the hook on the door and turned to grandfather. With one hand she raised him off the floor, with the other she threatened him:

"O-o-o, you old devil, you senseless creature!"

She sat him down on the couch like a rag doll with his head flopping and his mouth hanging open.

"Get into your clothes!" she shouted at mother.

"I won't go out to him, do you hear?" said mother as she picked up her clothes.

Grandmother pushed me off the couch.

"Go and bring a dipper of water, quick."

She spoke almost in a whisper, but calmly and imperiously. I ran out into the passage, from where I could hear someone walking slowly up and down in the front room.

"I'm going away tomorrow," I heard mother say.

I went into the kitchen and sat down at the window as in a dream.

Grandfather sniffled and groaned, grandmother muttered under her breath, then a door slammed and all was quiet and terrifying. Suddenly remembering what I had been sent for, I dipped up some water and went back into the passage. The watchmaker came out of the front room with drooping head, stroking his fur cap and making hoarse sounds. He was followed by my grandmother with

her hands crossed on her stomach, bowing and saying quietly:

"You yourself can understand—no forcing a person's affections."

He stumbled through the door and out into the yard, while grandmother crossed herself and stood there trembling all over, laughing or crying—I couldn't make out which.

"What's the matter?" I asked, running over to her. She snatched the dipper out of my hands, splashing my feet and crying:

"How far did you go to fetch this water? Lock the door!"

She went back into mother's room, and I into the kitchen, from where I could hear them groaning and sighing and muttering, as though they were pushing a weight beyond their strength from one place to another.

It was a fine day, with slanting rays of winter sun coming through the frosted panes of the two windows. The table was laid for dinner, and shone with pewter dishes, a decanter of golden kvass and another one of grandfather's vodka, green from the wort and cowslip added for flavour. Through the thawed places in the windowpanes I caught a glimpse of the dazzling snow on the roofs and the sparkling silver caps on fence posts and bird-houses. My captured birds played in their sun-flooded cages hanging from the window frames: the tame chaffinches chirped merrily, the bullfinches chattered, while the goldfinch trilled a song. But the music and brightness of this silvery day brought me no joy. The day came unwanted. Everything was unwanted. I would have set the birds free, but just as I was taking down the cages grandmother came bustling into the kitchen, slapping herself on the thighs and crying as she ran to the stove:

"Curses on all of you, devil take you! Ah, what an old fool you are, Akulina!"

She took the pie out of the oven, tapped the burnt crust with her fingers, and spat in vexation.

"Burnt to a cinder! There's warming it up for you! Phoo—Demons, the whole bunch of you! May you blow up and float away! What are you sitting there goggling at, you owl! I'd like to smash the lot of you like cracked jugs!"

She began to cry, turning the pie from side to side, tapping the dry crust, watering it with enormous tears.

Mother and grandfather came into the kitchen, and she flung the ruin on the table, causing the dishes to rattle.

"Just see what's happened, all on account of you, devil take you!"

Mother, now in a calm and merry mood, embraced her and coaxed her to forget it. Grandfather looked tired and wrinkled as he took his place at the table, tied his napkin round his neck, squinted his swollen eyes in the sun, and muttered:

"All right, forget it! We've tasted a pie before. The Lord's a bit of a miser—pays for years in minutes and doesn't believe in interest. Sit down, Varya ... forget it!"

He hardly seemed to be in his right mind. All through the dinner he talked about God and the impious Ahab and the trials and tribulations of being a father. Grandmother angrily interrupted him.

"Go ahead and eat and don't talk so much," she said.

Mother laughed, her clear eyes shining.

"Well, were you frightened a while ago?" she asked as she gave me a nudge.

I had not been very much frightened, but now I felt uneasy and could not understand what had happened.

They ate much and long, as was usual on Sundays. It was difficult to believe that these were the same people who half an hour ago had been shouting at each other on the verge of a fight, sobbing and seething with anger. Nor could I believe that all this had been serious or had cost them any effort. I had become used to their crying and shouting; the scenes flared up so often and died down so

quickly that I no longer took them so much to heart as I had at first.

Long afterwards I came to understand that Russians, as a result of the poverty and dullness of their lives, seek diversion in grief, playing at it like children, and are rarely ashamed of their misery.

In the endless succession of monotonous days, grief is a welcome change and a fire is diversion; a scratch is adornment on a vacuous face.

II After this incident, mother became strong and erect and the head of the household, while grandfather became quiet and unobtrusive, not at all like himself.

He almost never left the house, sitting alone in the attic reading a mysterious book called *Notes Written by My Father*. He kept this book in his strongbox under lock and key, and I had often observed that before taking it out he always washed his hands. The book was small and thick and bound in tan leather. On the bluish title page was the following inscription in faded ink:

"To the honourable Vasili Kashirin with the fondest regards and gratitude."

It was signed by a strange name ending in a flourish representing a bird in flight. Grandfather would carefully open the heavy leather cover, put on his silver-framed spectacles, and gaze for long at this inscription as he twitched his nose to adjust his glasses. More than once I asked him what the book was, but he always answered impressively:

"That is not for you to know. Just wait a bit—when I die I'll leave it to you, and my racoon coat too."

He spoke less often and more gently to mother, and when she spoke he would listen attentively, muttering and making little gestures with his hand and blinking his eyes like Uncle Pyotr.

"Ah, well, do as you like!"

His trunks were full of many extraordinary costumes: brocaded skirts, satin vests, cloth-of-gold, *sarafans*, pearl-embroidered head-dresses, bright kerchiefs and scarfs, heavy Mordovian necklaces and beads of coloured stones. He brought all this into mother's room and spread it on the table and chairs. When mother admired the finery, he said:

"In my day, people dressed richer and finer than nowadays. The clothes were richer, but people lived simpler and more friendly. But I suppose there's no going back! Try them on—dress yourself up...."

One day mother went into the next room and returned wearing a dark blue *sarafan* embroidered in gold, and a pearl head-dress.

"Does it please your grace?" she said, bowing low to him.

Grandfather gasped, beamed all over, and walked round her, waving his arms and muttering indistinctly, as in a dream:

"Ah, Varvara, if only you were rich and there were decent people about!"

Mother had taken up her quarters in two rooms at the front of the house, and she often entertained guests. Most frequent were the Maximov brothers: Pyotr, a tall, handsome officer with a large blond beard and blue eyes—the one in whose presence grandfather had given me a beating that time for spitting on the old gentleman's head; Yevgeni, who was also tall, but pale and long-legged, with a pointed little black beard. He had eyes like sloes and always wore a green uniform with gold buttons and gold insignia on his narrow shoulders. He had the habit of tossing back his long, wavy hair from his high forehead and smiling condescendingly. He was always telling something in a husky voice, beginning his speech with the insinuating phrase:

"You see, the way I look at it...."

Mother would listen to him with half-closed eyes, often interrupting him with a laugh:

"You're still a child, Evgeni Vasilyevich, if you'll forgive my saying so."

"Exactly! A child!" the large officer would corroborate, with a slap on the knee for emphasis.

The Christmas holidays passed in noisy merriment. Almost every evening mother and her friends dressed up in fancy costumes and went visiting. Mother's costume was always the finest.

Every time the gay company went out the gate, the house seemed to sink into the earth; everything became dull and alarmingly quiet. Grandmother moved through the rooms like an old goose, tidying up, while grandfather stood warming his back at the tile stove and muttering to himself:

"Well, all right, let her have her own way.... We'll see what will come of it."

After the Christmas holidays mother took me and Sasha, Uncle Mikhail's son, to school. Sasha's father had married a second time, and his stepmother had taken an immediate dislike to him. She beat him so often that grandmother insisted on grandfather's taking him to live with us. We attended school for about a month. Of all I was taught in that time I can remember only one thing—that when asked what my name was, it was not sufficient to answer:

"Peshkov."

I had to say:

"My name is Peshkov."

Nor could I say to the teacher:

"Don't shout at me, brother. I'm not afraid of you...."

I disliked school from the first day. My cousin, on the other hand, liked it and made many friends. But one day he happened to fall asleep during the lesson and cried out in his sleep:

"No, I wo-on't!"

When he woke up, he asked permission to leave the room, for which the other boys teased him mercilessly.

The next day, on reaching the gully at Sennaya Square on our way to school, he stopped and said:

"You go on without me. I'm not going to school today. I want to go for a walk."

He squatted down, buried his books in the snow, and went away. It was a bright January day, the whole world sparkling with sunlight. I envied my cousin, but gritted my teeth and went on for mother's sake. Naturally the books Sasha had buried in the snow were stolen, so that he had real reason for not going to school on the following day. On the third, grandfather found out about his truancy.

Both of us were put on trial: behind the kitchen table grandfather, grandmother, and mother sat for the cross-examination. I remember the funny answers Sasha gave to grandfather's questions:

"How is it you never reached the schoolhouse?"

"I forgot where it was," he said, looking grandfather straight in the face with his timid eyes.

"You forgot?"

"Yes. I looked and looked for it...."

"You should have followed Alexei; he remembered."

"I lost sight of him."

"Of Alexei?"

"Yes."

"How could you do that?"

Sasha thought a moment, then answered with a sigh:

"There was a blizzard—I couldn't see anything."

Everybody laughed, because the weather had been clear and sunny. Sasha also gave a faint smile, but grandfather bared his teeth and said sarcastically:

"Couldn't you have held on to his hand or his belt?"

"I did, but the wind tore me loose."

He spoke slowly and hopelessly; I felt uncomfortable listening to that clumsy, useless lying and could not understand his stubbornness.

They gave us a whipping and hired an old retired fireman with a twisted arm to escort us to school. He was

to see that Sasha did not wander from the path of knowledge. But all was in vain. When we reached the gully on the following day, my cousin took off one of his felt boots and hurled it to the left, took off the other and hurled it to the right, then made off across the square in his stockinged feet. The old man gasped and set out after the boots. When he had found them, he led me home in fright.

All day long mother and grandmother searched the town for the runaway, finding him that evening in Chirkov's pub near the monastery, entertaining the public by dancing for them. They brought him home and did not even beat him, so overwhelmed were they by the boy's persistent silence. He lay beside me on the stove-bunk kicking his feet in the air and saying quietly:

"My stepmother doesn't love me, my father doesn't love me, my grandfather doesn't love me. Why should I go on living with them? I'll find out from grandmother where the robbers live and run away to them. Then you'll all be sorry! Let's go together, shall we?"

I could not run away with him. At that time I had another aim in life—to become an officer with a great, blond beard—and so I had to study. When I told my cousin my plan he thought for a moment before giving his approval.

"That's good, too. When you're an officer I'll be chief of the robbers and you'll have to catch me. One of us'll kill the other, or else take him prisoner. I wouldn't kill you for anything."

"Neither would I you."

On that we concluded our discussion.

Grandmother came in, crawled up on the stove and began to talk to us.

"Well, little mice? Ah, my little orphans, my little sprouts!"

In her deep sympathy for us, she began to denounce Sasha's stepmother, fat Aunt Nadezhda, daughter of an innkeeper. This led her to denounce all stepmothers and

stepfathers, and this in turn led her to tell us the story of the wise hermit Ión who, while still a lad, brought his stepmother before the judgment seat of God. His father, a fisherman of Beloye Lake,

— Was undone by a vixenish wife.
With ale she enticed him to drunkenness,
With a potion she drugged him to sleepiness,
Then she placed him, asleep, in an oaken skiff,
In a narrow skiff, like a coffin bed.
She herself took the oars wrought of maple wood,
To the depths of the lake did she row with him,
Where the water ran brooding and lowering,
Awaiting the deed of the shameless one.
There she leaned from the skiff and unbalanced it,
Overturned it, with none to know of it.
Like a stone sank her husband in waters deep,
While his wife quickly swam to the forest shore.
There she fell on the earth, wailing bitterly,
Feigning to grieve for the loss of him,
Him she had murdered so cruelly.

Hearkened the people and pitied her,
Wept at her plight, at her widow's lot.
Alas, thou art young to be widowed so,
Bitter and black thy unhappiness,
But the hand of the Lord rules the lives of us,
And 'tis He who doth order the death of us.

It was only her stepson, Iónushka,
Who believed not the tears of his **máčekha**.
Softly he whispered rebuke to her,
Holding his hand on the heart of her:

Oh, thou woman of subtlety,
Bird-of-the-night, full of treachery;
Nor believe I thy tears, shed so lavishly;
The heart in thy breast beats too joyously.
Let us turn to the heavenly judgment seat,
To the Lord and the powers of holiness,
And let one of us take up a whetted knife,
And hurtle it heavenward forcefully:

*If I be to blame—I shall be slain;
If thou be to blame—thou shall be slain.*

*Slowly his **máhekha** turned to him,
Glanced with a hate-flashing countenance.
Now on her feet standing steadily,
Made she retort to him vengefully:*

*Fool that thou art, born ere thy time,
Belched from the womb of the werewolf!
What is this talk, of thy fancy bred?
What are these lies that thy tongue hath spread?*

*Hearkened the folk who had gathered there,
Saw that the matter was evil-charged,
Silent they glanced heavy-heartedly,
Softly conferred on the circumstance.
Then out-stepped an elderly fisherman,
Bowed to all sides, to his kindred-men,
Spoke he these words, each with honour weighed:*

*Bring me, good people, the whetted blade,
Here you shall see me take hold of it,
Into the sky I shall hurtle it,
Him will it kill who has acted ill.*

*Brought they the knife to the ancient one,
Swung he the blade o'er his hoary head,
Bird-like it soared in the welkin bright,
Long did they wait for return of it,
Waited and gazed in the crystal heights,
Took off their caps, huddled together,
Stood there in silence, and silent the night.
Then o'er the lake came the flush of dawn,
Flushed too the **máhekha** gloatingly,
But sudden the knife, like a swallow swift,
Swooped from the sky to the heart of her.
Down on their knees dropped the pious folk,
Praying to God in humility:
— Praised be the Lord for His righteousness!
Then to Ión came the fisherman,*

*Led him away to a hermitage,
Far away on the river called Kérzhenets,
Near the fabulous city of Kítezh....**

On the next day I woke up covered with red spots. This was the beginning of smallpox. I was put up in the back attic, where for a long time I lay blind, my arms and legs tied down with wide strips of bandage, enduring horrible nightmares. As a result of one of them I nearly perished. The only visitor I had was my grandmother, who fed me from a spoon like an infant and told me endless tales and legends. One evening when I was well on the road to recovery, so that my arms and legs were unbound, though I still wore mittens to keep me from scratching my face, grandmother did not come at the usual time, and this alarmed me. I had a horrible vision of her lying face down of the dusty landing of the attic with her arms widespread, her neck slashed almost in two, like Uncle Pyotr's, while out of the dusty shadows a large cat crept towards her, greedily rolling its huge green eyes.

I jumped out of bed, smashed the double window with my feet and shoulder, and threw myself into a snowbank under the window. Mother was entertaining that evening, so nobody heard me break the window, and for some time I lay undiscovered in the snow. No bones were broken; I had only dislocated my shoulder and cut myself severely on the glass, but the shock caused me to lose the use of my legs. For some three months I was unable to walk and lay in my room listening to the growing animation in the house, the frequent slamming of doors and the constant coming and going of people.

Blizzards swept over the roof; the wind raged beyond the attic door, wailing funereally in the chimney and

* In the town of Kolyupanovka, Tambov Gubernia, Borisoglebsk Uyezd, I heard another version, according to which the knife kills the stepson, who slandered his stepmother.— *Author's note.*

rattling the shutters. During the day I listened to the cawing of the crows, while on quiet nights I could hear the dismal howling of wolves in distant fields. To the accompaniment of this music, my soul matured. Then shyly and quietly, but more insistently with every day, the spring came glancing through the window with radiant eyes. Cats began to scream and yowl on the roof, and little spring sounds penetrated the walls: the snapping of icicles, the sliding of snow off the roofs, the ringing of the bells, whose chiming assumed a solidity it had lacked in winter.

Grandmother came to see me. Of late her words had become more often and more strongly scented with vodka. She even began to bring a large white teapot with her which she would hide under my bed, admonishing me with a wink:

"Don't you tell your goblin of a grandfather, pigeon-widgeon!"

"Why do you drink?"

"Shhh! When you grow up you'll find out."

Then she would take a swallow from the spout of the teapot, wipe her mouth on her sleeve, and turn to me with a blissful smile.

"Well, my fine gentleman, what was it I was telling you about yesterday?"

"About my father."

"And where did I leave off?"

When I had told her, her rhythmic speech would flow on for hours.

She herself had begun to tell me about my father one day when she was tired and sober and unhappy.

"I dreamed about your father last night—whistling he was, as he walked through the fields with a hazel wand in his hand and a spotted dog running after him with its tongue a-lolling. For some reason Maxim Savateyevich has been visiting me often in my dreams of late—looks like his soul must be wandering about restless-like...."

For several evenings running she told me about my father, stories as interesting as all her others: Father was the son of a soldier who had been promoted to the rank of officer and then exiled to Siberia for cruelty to his subordinates. Somewhere there in Siberia my father was born. He had a hard life, and when he was still a child began making attempts to run away from home. One day his father took a hound and searched the woods for him as though he were a rabbit. Another time after finding him he began to beat him so mercilessly that the neighbours rescued him and hid him away.

"Do they always beat children?" I asked.

"Always," replied grandmother calmly.

His mother died when he was very young, and when he was nine years old, his father also died. He was adopted by his godfather, a carpenter, who began teaching him his trade and made him a member of the carpenters' guild in the town of Perm. But father ran away. At first he led blind beggars about the markets, but when he was sixteen he came to Nizhni-Novgorod and began to work for a carpenter on the steamboats belonging to Kolchin. By the age of twenty he was already a qualified cabinet-maker and upholsterer. The shop where he worked was next door to grandfather's house on Kovalikha Street.

"A low fence, and nimble legs," laughed grandmother. "So there we were, Varya and me, picking raspberries in the garden, and all of a sudden I looked up and—ffwtt!—there's your father over the fence and me scared out of my wits. He came walking toward us through the apple-trees, a giant of a fellow in a white shirt and velveteen trousers, barefoot and hatless, with a strap holding back his long hair. And what do you think he had come for? To ask for your mother's hand! I'd seen him before a few times walking past the window. And whenever I saw him I thought to myself, 'There's a fine fellow for you!' So when he comes up to me I says, 'How's that you don't know the right road, my man?' Down on

his knees he goes. 'Akulina Ivanovna,' he says. 'Here I am, all of me, at your feet. And there's Varya; help us get married, for the love of Christ.' Now that was something, I tell you! Stunned I was, and speechless. I looked up and there's that vixen of a mother of yours hiding behind an apple-tree, red as a raspberry, and making signs to him, her eyes full of tears. 'Ah, you rascals,' says I. 'What's this you're up to? Have you gone clean out of your senses, Varvara? And as for you, young man, think what you're doing! Is it for you to bend a birch this size?' Your grandfather was a rich man those days—nothing parcelled out to his children yet—owned four houses and money a-plenty, and honoured by his fellows. Not long before that they had presented him with a uniform and hat all fancied up with gold braid for his being nine years head of the guild. Ah, but a proud one he was, those days! So I says what I has to say, trembling with fear the while and my heart like to burst with pity, so downhearted they were. Then your father up and says, 'I know Vasili Vasilyevich will never give me Varya of his own free will, so it's up to me to steal her, and that's why we want your help!' My help, think you! I shooed him away, but he didn't budge. 'You can stone me if you like, but help me you must,' says he. 'I'll not give in!' Here Varvara comes up to him and puts her hand on his shoulder and says, 'We've been husband and wife for a long time—since the month of May. Only we're in need of a wedding.' Goodness gracious! I fell down in a heap, like as if they had struck me."

Grandmother's whole body shook with laughter..Then she took a pinch of snuff, wiped the tears from her eyes, gave a happy little sigh, and went on:

"You're too young yet to know the difference between being man and wife and holding a wedding. But it's a dreadful thing when a girl gives birth to a child out of wedlock. You just remember that when you grow up and never lure a maid into such trouble. That'll be a great sin on your soul, leaving the maid in misery and the babe

without the law. Don't forget it, now! You must show pity for a woman and love her with all your heart, and not just for the pleasure of it. This is a good thing I am telling you."

She rocked herself thoughtfully a while, then went on with her story:

"So what was to be done? I struck Maxim over the head and pulled Varvara by the braids, but he says a sensible thing: 'Beating us won't undo anything,' he says, and she puts in, 'First think of a way out and then beat us if you like.' So I says to him, 'Have you got any money?' 'I did have, some,' he says, 'but I spent it all on a ring for Varya.' 'How much had you, three rubles?' 'No,' says he, 'nearly a hundred.' And in those days things were cheap and money was worth a lot. I looked at your mother and father standing there—such children they were! Such little fools! 'I hid the ring under a floor board so's you wouldn't see it,' says your mother. 'We can sell it.' Just like children, weren't they just? Well, however it was, we decided to hold the wedding within the week, and I myself was to fix it up with the priest. But oh, how I wept, and my heart shivering and shuddering for fear of your grandfather, and Varvara all a-tremble. Well, we fixed everything up.

"Only your father had an enemy—one of the master-workmen—a spiteful man. For long he had been keeping his eye on them and guessed everything. Well, I dressed up my only daughter in the best I had, led her out the gate, and there around the corner stood a troika waiting. She climbed in, Maxim gave a whistle, and off they went. I came back home with the tears flowing, and who should meet me but this fellow, the scoundrel! 'I'm good-hearted,' says he, 'and don't aim to break up their happiness. Only I should ask you to let me have just fifty rubles, Akulina Ivanovna.' I had no money—I never liked it nor saved it—and, fool that I was, I up and says, 'I have no money, and so I can't give you any!' 'Then promise it to me,' says he. 'Promise? And where shall I get the money if I

promise?' 'Is it so hard to steal from a rich husband?' says he. It's me, the ninny, should have kept him there talking for a time, but I spat in his face and went on my way. He ran ahead of me into the yard and—what a row he raised!"

She closed her eyes and a faint smile flitted across her face.

"To this day it's dreadful to recall what happened! Your grandfather lets out a roar like the beastiest beast—a sorry blow it was to him! Used to be he'd look at Varvara and boast how he'd marry her off to a nobleman, to a *barin*. There's your nobleman for you—there's your *barin*! But the Holy Virgin knows better than us how the mating's to be done. Your grandfather rushed about the yard like he was a-fire. He calls Yakov and Mikhail, Klim the coachman, and that freckle-faced master-workman; I see him take up a cudgel and a weight fastened to a strap, while Mikhail takes a gun. Ours were good, spirited horses and our buggy a light one. 'He'll catch them sure,' thinks I to myself. But here Varvara's guardian angel sends me an enlightenment. I take a knife and cut the harness at the shaft, thinking it will snap on the road. And so it did. The shaft swung loose, nearly killing your grandfather and Mikhail and Klim. The mending of it held them up, so when they reached the church Varya and Maxim were standing at the altar married already, thank the Lord!

"Well, so our men threw themselves at Maxim, but he was a strong fellow, Maxim—not many's given the strength he had. He hurls Mikhail off the altar, breaking his arm, and knocks out Klim, and your grandfather and Yakov and that master-workman were afraid to come near him.

"But Maxim keeps his head, spite his fury. 'Put down that cudgel there,' he says to your grandfather. 'I'm a peace-loving fellow and what I've taken, it's by the grace of God and no man's got the right to take it away from me. And that's all I'll be asking of you!' Our men fell back, and grandfather sits in the buggy and shouts,

'Farewell, Varvara! You're no longer a daughter of mine, and I never want to see you again! It's all the same to me whether you're alive or dead!' He came home—gave me a beating, gave me a cussing, but I just granted and said nothing: I knew it'd all blow over, and what had to be, would be. After that he says to me, 'Look here, Akulina, don't you forget that your daughter's gone for good—you no longer have a daughter here nor anywhere else, understand?' And I keeps thinking to myself, 'Go on lying, you redheaded devil! Your temper's fast, but it won't last.'"

I listened with bated breath, I was surprised by certain parts of her story—grandfather had described my mother's wedding quite differently. He had been opposed to the wedding and had not allowed my mother into his house afterwards, but according to his account, the wedding had not been secret and he himself had been present. I didn't dare ask grandmother which version was right because I preferred hers, which was more romantic. She rocked back and forth as she spoke, rocking harder whenever she came to sad, or dreadful parts, and raising one arm as though warding off a blow. Often she would close her eyes, her heavy brows trembling and a warm smile playing in the wrinkles of her cheeks. Sometimes I was touched by the blind way in which she forgave everything, but at other times I wanted her to cry out harsh words of protest.

"Well, for the first two weeks or so I had no idea where they were, Varya and Maxim, but then they sent a little boy to tell me. The next Saturday I set out like I was going to vespers, but instead I went to see them. They were living far away in the wing of a house on Suyetinskaya Street. All kinds of workmen were living in the yard—a dirty place, and noisy, but those two paid no attention, just went on purring and playing together like a pair of happy kittens. I brought them some presents—tea and sugar and cereals and jam and flour and dried mushrooms and some money—don't remember how much—

whatever I could steal from your grandfather—no harm in stealing so long as it's not for yourself! But Maxim would have none of it. 'Is it beggars we are?' he asked, hurt-like. And Varya takes up the tune: 'Now why did you have to bring all that stuff, Mother?' I gave it to them all right! 'It's a God-given mother I am to you, you foolish man!' I says to Maxim, 'and it's a blood-mother I am to you, you little fool! Where's it written you can insult your own mother? Once you insult your mother here below, you make God's mother weep up above!' So then Maxim grabs me up in his arms and carries me round the room—even does a jig with me—strong as a bear he was! And Varya struts round proud as a peacock of that husband of hers, and starts talking grandly about their 'home' like an honest-to-goodness housewife—split your sides to listen! And the *vatrushki* she served with tea! Break the teeth of a wolf. And the cottage cheese! Like so much gravel.

"So that's how it goes on for a long time. You were about to get born, and still grandfather keeps mum—stubborn creature he is, the old goblin! I kept on sneaking off to them and he knew it, but made believe not to. Nobody in our house was allowed to mention Varvara's name, and no one did, nor me either, but all the time I knew a father's heart couldn't hold out for long. And sure enough the time came—one night when a blizzard was raging and the wind tearing at the window like a pack of wolves, the chimneys screaming, and all Hell's devils turned loose. Your grandfather and me were lying there side by side unable to sleep and I up and says to him, 'A dreadful night for the poor,' I says, 'and still worse for them as has trouble on their mind.' Suddenly grandfather says, 'How are they getting on?' 'Right enough,' I says. 'Not bad at all.' 'And who do you think I'm asking about?' he says. 'Our daughter Varvara and our son-in-law Maxim.' 'How did you guess it was about them?' 'Enough of this comedy, Father,' says I. 'Time to stop the game—is anybody the happier for it?' He gives a big sigh. 'Ah, you

devils, you!' he says. Then he asks, 'But what about that gawking fool?'—meaning your father—'is he really such a fool?' 'A fool,' says I, 'is him as does no work and lives at other people's expense. Take a look at your Yakov and Mikhail—aren't they the ones to be called fools? Who does the work and brings in the money in our house? You. And a lot of help you get from them!' Here he starts cursing me, calling me fool, and bitch, and harpy, and goodness knows what all! But I say nothing. 'How could you be taken in by a fellow as nobody knows where he came from or what he's like?' he says. Still I keep mum till he's worn out, then I says, 'You might go and see how they're getting on. They're living together fine,' I says. 'Why should I do them such an honour?' says he. 'Let them come here.' Well, when he says that, I just break down and cry with joy, and he starts unbraiding my hair—loved to play with my hair, he did. 'Well, don't go bawling, old woman,' he mutters. 'Think I've got no heart at all?' He used to be a good soul, your grandfather, before he got the idea he was smarter than anybody else—after that he turned mean and stupid.

"So they came to see us—your mother and father—on Absolution Sunday, both so big and clean and handsome! Maxim stands up there next to your grandfather, and your grandfather comes just up to his shoulder. 'Don't think, Vasili Vasilyevich,' says Maxim, 'that I've come to get a dowry. No indeed. I've only come to pay my respects to my wife's father.' That pleased your grandfather, and he laughed and says, 'Aha! So that's the kind of a rascal you are! Well, enough of this nonsense. Time you came to live with me.' Maxim frowned. 'That's up to Varya,' he says. 'She can do as she likes.—makes no difference to me.' Then they began arguing again—and no stopping them. I kept winking at that father of yours and kicking his foot under the table, but he would have his own way. Fine eyes he had—clear and bright, and dark brows over them. Sometimes he'd pull his brows down over his eyes and his face'd grow hard as stone and then he wouldn't

listen to a soul but me. I loved him ever so much more than my own sons and he knew it, and loved me too. Used to hug me, or take me in his arms and carry me round the room, saying, 'You're the only real mother I've got—like Mother Earth,' he'd say. 'I love you more than I do Varvara!' Your mother was a lively little vixen those days. She'd rush at him and shout, 'How dare you say such a thing, you son of a turnip!' And the three of us'd go chasing each other round the room, having a wonderful time! Happy days they were, pigeon-widgeon! He could dance like nobody else, too, and knew so many fine songs—learned them from blind beggars, and nobody can sing like the blind.

"Well, so they moved into the wing facing the garden; that's where you were born—at high noon. Your father comes home to lunch, and there you are to greet him. He all but went off his head with joy, and as for your mother—he made so much of her as if it was the hardest thing in the world to have a baby! He sets me up on his shoulder and carries me through the yard to report to your grandfather the arrival of another grandson. Even grandfather broke out laughing. 'What a devil you are, Maxim!' he says.

"But your uncles didn't like him—he didn't drink, was sharp with his tongue and clever at thinking up tricks. It's those tricks were his undoing. Once during Lent a high wind sprang up, and suddenly there was such a frightful whistling and howling through the house that everybody was scared out of their wits. Your grandfather goes running round yelling to light all the icon lamps and pray to the Lord. Then, just as sudden, everything became dead quiet, and that was more fearful than ever. Your Uncle Yakov guessed the truth: 'That,' he says, 'will be Maxim's doing!' And sure enough, Maxim himself told us later how he put empty bottles in the attic window so the wind would go howling through. 'You better watch your step, Maxim!', warned your grandfather, 'or you'll be getting sent back to Siberia with those tricks of yours!'

"Came a winter so cold the wolves crept in from the steppes. One day there's a dog missing, the next a horse gets a fright, or a drunken sentry is found chewed to death. A lot of trouble they made, those wolves! Your father would take his gun, put on skis, and be off in the night. He always came back with a wolf or two. He'd skin them and stuff them and put glass in their eyes so you couldn't tell them from live ones. One night your Uncle Mikhail goes out to the privy, and all of a sudden he comes running back with his eyes popping, his hair standing on end, his tongue hanging out; he can't even speak. He gets all twisted up in his pants and falls down, gasping, 'A wolf!' Everybody grabs up the first thing comes to hand and runs to the privy. Sure enough, there's the head of a wolf sticking out of the hole. They shoot it and beat it, but the wolf stays right where it is. So they creep up on it—nothing but an empty hide with a stuffed head and the front legs nailed to the toilet seat! Your grandfather was furious with Maxim that time. Soon Yakov joins your father in playing tricks. Maxim would make a head out of cardboard, paint in the eyes, and nose, and mouth, and stick on some oakum for hair. Then he and Yakov would go down the street and poke this scarecrow in people's windows. Naturally the neighbours got scared and raised a row. Other times they'd dress themselves up in sheets. Once they scared the priest; he ran to the watchman; the watchman was scared too and gave the alarm. They were always pranking like this and no talking them out of it. I told them to stop and so did Varya, but they wouldn't listen. Maxim would just laugh and say what fun it was to see people lose their heads and start running account of some idiotic trifle. Just try to make him see reason.

"Well, so this mischief nearly finished him. Your Uncle Mikhail's like his father—nasty, and always harbouring a grudge, and he set his heart on getting rid of your father. One day, the beginning of winter, they were coming home from a visit—four of them—Maxim, your uncles, and the

deacon (he was unfrocked later for beating a cabman to death). They came down Yamskaya Street and got your father to go with them to Dukov Pond—like as if they wanted to go sliding there. But once they reached the pond, they pushed him through a hole in the ice—seems I told you about that already....”

“What makes my uncles so wicked?”

“It’s not they’re wicked,” replied grandmother calmly as she took a pinch of snuff. “They’re just foolish. Mikhail’s sly and foolish; Yakov’s just a milksop.... Well, so they push him in, and when he comes up and grips the edge of the ice, they stamp on his fingers. Lucky he was sober and they were drunk. Somehow, with God’s help, he managed to stretch out under the ice with his head at the hole and breathe while they threw ice at him, but they couldn’t hit him and soon they went away, thinking he’d drown without their help. But he climbed out and ran straight to the police—the headquarters is right there on the square, you know. The sergeant knew him and all our family, so he asked how it happened.”

Grandmother crossed herself and murmured gratefully:

“May the Lord give peace to his soul, the soul of Maxim Savvateyevich, righteous man, and well deserving! Never a word did he tell the police as to what happened. All my fault, he says—went to the pond drunk and fell through the ice. But the sergeant says: ‘You’re lying; you don’t drink.’ They rub him down with vodka there in the station house, dress him in dry clothes, wrap him in a fur coat and bring him home—the sergeant and two others. Yakov and Mikhail aren’t home yet—doing the pubs to the glory of their parents. Your mother and me can hardly recognise Maxim—all blue, and his fingers smashed, and the blood running down, and something like snow on his temples, only it don’t melt and turns out to be his hair gone white.

“Varvara screams, ‘What have they done to you, Maxim?’ The sergeant goes nosing around, asking ques-

tions, and I feel in my heart things are bad. I leave Varvara with the sergeant while I try to get the truth out of Maxim. 'Go find Mikhail and Yakov,' he whispers. 'Tell them to say we parted company on Yamskaya Street—they went along Pokrovka and I turned down Pryadilny. Or else they'll be in a bad fix with the police.' I go to grandfather: 'Keep the sergeant company,' I says, 'while I wait for our sons at the gate.' And I told him the evil thing as happened. He pulls on his clothes, a-trembling and a-muttering: 'I knew it, I knew something like this would happen!' But that wasn't true—he didn't know anything. Well, I greet my beloved sons with a good box on the ears. Mikhail comes sober from fright, but Yakov's too drunk. 'I don't know a thing!' he garbles. 'It's all Mishka's doing—he's older than me!' We got the sergeant calmed down somehow—he was a good soul! 'Watch out,' he says. 'If anything happens now I'll be sure to know who's to blame!' And off he goes. Then grandfather walks over to Maxim and says, 'Thank you, son. Another one'd have acted different in your place, I know that well enough. And thank you, daughter, for bringing such a good man into our house.' When he wanted, your grandfather could talk fine like that—it was only afterwards he turned foolish and locked up his heart. So there we were alone, the three of us, and Maxim began to cry and his mind sort of wandered: 'Why should they do such a thing to me?' he cried. 'What have I ever done to them? Why should they do it, Mama?' He always called me mania, not mother, like a little child, and there was much in his nature that was childlike. 'Why, Mama?' And all I can do is sit there and cry with him. After all, they're my sons and I can't help pitying them. Your mother pulled all the buttons off her blouse and sat there looking as if she'd been in a fight. 'Let's go away, Maxim,' she cried. 'My brothers are our enemies and I'm afraid of them. Let's go away!' I gave it to her for that. 'Don't throw straw on the fire,' I says. 'Enough smoke in the house without that!' Here your grandfather sends those two idiots in to ask

forgiveness and she slaps Mishka in the face. 'There's your forgiveness for you!' she says. And your father keeps asking, 'How could you do such a thing, brothers? You could have crippled me for life. What kind of a workman would I be without my fingers, eh?' They made it up somehow. Your father was sick for seven weeks or so after that, and he'd keep saying as he lay there, 'Let's go to some other town, Mama—I'm sick of it here!' Soon after that he was sent to Astrakhan. They were expecting the tsar there on a visit, and your father was asked to build the triumphal arch. They sailed off on the first steamboat that left in the spring. Like parting with half my soul, it was. He was sad too, and kept begging me to go with them. But Varvara was glad as glad could be and didn't even try to hide it, the shameless baggage! So that's how they left ... and that's all...."

She took a swallow of vodka, a pinch of snuff, and said musingly, as she gazed out of the window:

"Your father and me, we had no kindred blood, but we were kindred in spirit...."

Sometimes during her tale grandfather would enter, lift his little weasel face, sniff the air, glance suspiciously at grandmother, listen a moment, and then mutter:

"Lies, lies, nothing but lies...."

Once he asked unexpectedly:

"Alexei, she been drinking here?"

"No."

"You're lying—I can see by your eyes."

He left unconvinced. Grandmother winked at his departing figure and quoted the saying:

"'Go away, Kish, you'll scare the fish!'"

One day he stood in the middle of the room with his eyes fixed on the floor and said:

"Mother...."

"Eh?"

"See what's happening?"

"I see."

"What you think of it?"

"Fate, Father. Remember what you used to say about fine gentlemen?"

"Hm-m."

"Well, seems you were right."

"A pauper."

"That's her business."

Grandfather went out. Sensing some disaster, I said to grandmother:

"What were you talking about?"

"Have to know everything, don't you?" she grumbled as she rubbed my legs. "If you know everything when you're little, won't be anything left to find out when you're big." She laughed and shook her head.

"Ah, Grandfather, Grandfather! You're a very tiny speck in the eye of God! Don't you say anything, Alexei, but the fact is your grandfather's lost everything—to the last kopek. Lent a gentleman big money, up in the thousands, and the gentleman goes bankrupt...."

She became lost in thought, sitting silent for a long time, and the smile on her face was replaced by a darkening sadness.

"What are you thinking about?"

"Thinking about what to tell you," she replied, pulling herself together. "Well, how about the story of Evstignei? It was like this:

*Once there lived Evstignei the deacon,
Thinks to himself he's as bright as a beacon,
Brighter than even the priest or the tsar,
And as for the merchant—brighter by far!
Struts like a peacock, foolish fowl,
His eyes popping out like a wise old owl.
Teaches the neighbours from morning to night,
And nothing for him is ever right.
Looks at a steeple—much too low!
Rides in a buggy—much too slow!
Bites an apple—it isn't sweet!
Sits in the sun—too much heat!
Says about everything he sees:*

Grandmother rolled her eyes and puffed out her cheeks and her kind face assumed an amusing look of stupidity, while she drawled:

*"I could have made it, if you please,
Infinitely better, but as you know,
My time cannot be wasted so."*

She paused for a moment, then continued in a low voice:

*Some devils came to him one night:
"You find things here are not all right?
Suppose you visit us in Hell—
The fires burn there surpassing well!"
Scarce had the deacon donned his hat,
When two of the devils on him sat,
While others grabbed him in their paws,
Pinched and tickled him with their claws,
And pushed him in the raging flame:
"Well, Evstignei, are you glad you came?"
As the deacon roasted, he rolled his eyes,
But kept on looking very wise,
And his lip curled scornfully as he spoke:
"The fires of Hell make too much smoke!"*

She finished the tale in a deep drawl, then laughed and turned to me with a change of expression:

"He didn't give in, that Evstignei—a great one for having his own way, like your grandfather! Well, now, time to go to sleep...."

Mother rarely came up to the attic to see me, and when she did, it was only to say a few hasty words and hurry away. She had grown handsomer and dressed better, but I sensed the same secretiveness about her I had noticed in grandmother. I felt that she, as well as grandmother, was hiding something from me, and I tried to guess what it was.

I became less interested in the tales grandmother told me—even the stories about my father could not dispel the vague alarms which grew with every day.

"What makes father's spirit so restless?" I asked grandmother one day.

"How should I know?" she answered, half-closing her eyes. "That's the concern of heaven—God's business, not for us to understand."

During sleepless nights as I lay watching the slow procession of the stars across the dark blue heaven, I invented sad stories of which my father was the hero. He was always alone, with a staff in his hand and a shaggy dog at his heels....

12 One evening I woke up after a brief nap and felt that my legs had also awakened. I let them down over the edge of the bed, and once more they became numb and lifeless. Nevertheless, the confidence was born that my legs were whole and I would be able to walk. I felt so happy that I cried out and placed my feet on the floor. I fell, but crawled to the door and down the stairs, imagining what a shock everyone would get on seeing me.

I cannot remember how I found myself on grandmother's lap in mother's room, but there I was, surrounded by strange people, among whom was a thin, greenish old woman.

"Give him some raspberry jam in hot tea and wrap him in a blanket," said the green woman in a solemn voice that drowned out all other voices.

Everything about her was green—her dress and her hat and her face and the wart under her left eye. Even the hair sprouting from the wart was like grass. She dropped her lower lip and raised her upper one, staring at me with green teeth and shading her eyes with a hand encased in a black mit.

"Who is that?" I asked falteringly.

"That'll be another grandmother for you," answered grandfather in an unpleasant voice.

Mother laughed and pushed Evgeni Maximov toward me, saying:

"And here's your future father."

She added some quick, unintelligible words, while Maximov narrowed his eyes, bent over me and said:

"I'll buy you some paints."

It was very bright in the room. On a table in the corner stood silver candelabras with five candles in each. Between them was grandfather's favourite icon, "Weep not, oh mother!" The pearls ornamenting the frame gleamed and melted in the candle light, which brought flashes of fire from the rubies in the golden haloes. Round pancake faces peered through the dark windows, flattened noses were pressed against the panes; everything about me began to swim, and the green woman leaned over to feel behind my ears with her cold fingers, muttering:

"By all means, by all means...."

"He's fainted," said grandmother, and carried me to the door.

But I had not fainted. I had merely closed my eyes, and as she carried me up the stairs I said:

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"All right, all right, no talking now, hear?"

"Deceiving me like this, all of you...."

When she had placed me on the bed, she buried her head in the pillow and burst into tears. Her body heaved and rocked with her sobs, and she kept saying to me:

"Go ahead and cry, cry it out!"

But I had no desire to cry. It was dark and cold in the attic. The bed shook and squeaked with my trembling, and I could not drive the green woman out of my mind. I pretended to fall asleep and grandmother left me alone.

The next few days passed in dull monotony. After announcing her engagement, mother went away, and an oppressive silence fell upon the house.

One morning grandfather appeared with a chisel in his hand and began to dig the putty from around the storm-window. Then grandmother came with a basin of water and some rags.

"Well, old lady?" asked grandfather quietly.

"Well what?"

"Are you glad?"

She answered him as she had answered me on the stairs:

"All right, all right, no talking now, hear?"

These words had a special significance—they concealed something big and unpleasant, which everybody knew but nobody wished to mention.

Grandfather carefully removed the storm-window and carried it away. Grandmother threw open the window. A starling and some sparrows chirped out in the garden; the intoxicating scent of thawing earth filled the room; the blue tiles of the stove paled with frustration—it made me shiver to look at them. I crawled out of bed.

"Don't walk about barefoot," warned grandmother.

"I'm going into the garden."

"Wait till the dampness is gone."

I did not wish to obey her. It was unpleasant for me to be with the grownups now.

Pale green needles of young grass had already pushed their way through the earth, buds were swelling on the apple trees, lovely green moss carpeted the roof of Petrovna's house, and birds were everywhere. My head swam from the fresh, fragrant, murmurous air. Brown weeds, crushed by the snow, fringed the pit where Uncle Pyotr had cut his throat. I couldn't bear to look at them—neither they nor the charred beams sticking up so desolately had anything in common with the spring; the pit was particularly out of place. I had an angry impulse to pull up the weeds, take away the beams and bricks, clear away everything that cluttered this part of the yard, and make myself a tidy corner where I could spend the summer alone, without any grownups. I immediately undertook this task, and it helped me forget recent events in our house. To be sure, the hurt remained, but with every day it became less acute.

"What are you sulking about?" grandmother and

mother would ask me. The question was upsetting—I was not angry with them; it was just that everything in the house had become unpleasant. Often the green woman would join us for dinner or tea or supper, sitting there like a rotten post in an old fence. Her eyes were sewn to her with invisible threads. They rolled easily about in their bony sockets, seeing everything, scrutinizing everything, rising to the ceiling when she spoke of God, dropping to the floor when she spoke of mundane things. Her eyebrows seemed to be made of bran pasted on in some mysterious way. Her wide, bare teeth noiselessly ground up everything she put into her mouth. She held her fork in a funny, crooked way with her little finger sticking out. Little balls of gristle rolled under the skin in front of her ears. Her ears moved, and the green hairs of her wart stirred as it shifted on her wrinkled, yellow, disgustingly clean skin. She and her son were so terribly clean that I was afraid to go near them. During the first few days of our acquaintance she made several attempts to make me kiss her wizened hand, which smelled of laundry soap and incense. I always ran away.

"That boy needs very careful training, Evgeni!" she kept repeating to her son.

He would only bow his head obediently, frown, and say nothing. Everybody frowned in that green presence.

I hated the old woman—and her son as well—with a concentrated hatred that cost me many a whipping. One day when we were having dinner, she rolled up her eyes and said:

"My dear Alexei, why do you eat in such a hurry, and with such big mouthfuls? You will choke on your food."

I removed the piece from my mouth, stuck my fork into it and held it out to her.

"Here, take it if you want it so badly," I said.

Mother snatched me away from the table and I was ignominiously banished to the attic.

Later grandmother joined me and shook with laughter, holding her hand over her mouth.

"Oh Lord, oh Lord! What a little rascal you are, heaven help you!"

I disliked the way she held her hand over her mouth so I ran away from her and climbed out on the roof, sitting there behind the chimney for a long time. I had an irresistible urge to make mischief and say impudent things to them all. It was very difficult for me to combat this urge, but I was forced to. One day I spread cherry paste on the chairs of my future stepfather and grandmother. They both stuck fast in a most comical way, but after grandfather had given me a beating, mother came up to me in the attic, drew me toward her, held me tightly between her knees, and said:

"Why should you be so naughty? If you only knew how hard you make it for me!"

Her eyes filled with bright tears and she held my head against her cheek. How much easier it would have been if she had struck me! I swore never to injure the Maximovs again if only she would stop crying.

"That's right," she said softly. "You mustn't be naughty. Soon we shall get married and take a trip to Moscow, and when we return you will live with me. Evgeni Vasilyevich is a very kind and clever man; I know you will like him. You will go to high school and then become a student—as he is now—and after that you will be a doctor or anything else you like. A learned person can do whatever he wants. Well, run along and play now."

These "thens" and "after thats" seemed to form a descending staircase leading me far away from her, into darkness and loneliness. The future she pictured promised me no happiness. I wanted to say to her:

"Don't get married. I will work and provide for you."

But I didn't say it. Mother always inspired tender and solicitous feelings in me, but I never had the courage to express them.

My work in the garden progressed from day to day. I pulled up and hacked off the weeds and propped the sliding edges of the pit with bricks. With other bricks I

built a seat wide enough to lie on, and I gathered bits of coloured glass and broken dishes which I set in clay between the bricks. When the sun shone on them they glinted and sparkled like the icons in church.

"Clever of you to think of that," said grandfather one day as he surveyed my work. "Only the weeds'll come up again—you left the roots in. Here, bring me the spade and I'll dig them up for you."

When I had brought it, he spat on his hands and pushed the spade deep into the earth with a grunt.

"Throw away the roots and I'll plant sunflowers and hollyhocks for you. It'll be fine—fine...."

Suddenly he leaned motionless on the spade and said nothing. I glanced at him and saw tears streaming from his eyes, that were small and intelligent, like those of a dog.

"What's the matter?"

He shook himself, wiped his face with his hand, and glanced at me.

"Hm, I'm sweating already. Look what a lot of worms there are!"

Once more he began to dig. Suddenly he said:

"No sense in doing all this. No sense at all. I'll be selling the house soon. Probably in the autumn. Need money for your mother's dowry. Hm. At least *she* should live decent...."

He threw down the spade with a wave of his hand and went behind the bath-house to a corner of the garden where he had some hot-beds. I began to dig, and immediately cut my toe with the spade.

This injury prevented me from attending mother's wedding. I could only go outside the gate and watch her walk down the street with Maximov holding her arm, her head bent, her feet picking a careful way among the young grass springing between the cracks of the brick pavement as though she were walking on nails.

It was a quiet wedding. And there was nothing cheerful about the tea which followed the ceremony.

Mother immediately changed her clothes and went into her bedroom to pack her trunks. My stepfather sat down next to me and said:

"I promised to make you a present of some paints, but there are no good paints here and I can't give you mine. I shall send you some from Moscow."

"What shall I do with them?"

"Don't you like to draw?"

"I don't know how."

"Then I'll send you something else."

Mother came in.

"We'll be back soon," she said. "As soon as your father passes his examination and finishes his studies we'll come back."

It was pleasant to have them speaking to me as though I were a grownup, but it was strange that a man with a beard should still be studying.

"What are you studying?" I asked.

"Surveying."

I was too lazy to ask what that was. The house was filled with an oppressive silence, a woolly rustle. I was anxious for night to come. Grandfather stood with his back to the stove staring out of the window with half-closed eyes. The green woman helped mother pack, sighing and grumbling the while. Grandmother, who had been drunk since noon, was locked in the attic to keep her from disgracing the family.

Mother left early the following morning. She embraced me in parting, easily lifting me off the ground and gazing into my eyes with a look I had never seen before.

"Well, good-bye," she said as she kissed me.

"Tell him to obey me," said grandfather sullenly, gazing into the sky, which was still rosy.

"Obey your grandfather," she admonished, crossing me. I had expected her to tell me something else and was angry with grandfather for interrupting.

They got into the droshky, mother's skirt caught on

something and she fussed irritably for a long time setting it free.

"Help her, can't you see?" grandfather said to me, but I was too deep in the throes of despair to help.

Maximov carefully drew in his long legs encased in tight navy blue trousers, while grandmother handed him some packages which he piled on his knees, holding them with his chin.

"Enough!" he drawled as he nervously wrinkled his pale forehead.

The green woman and her elder son, the officer, got into another droshky. She sat stiff as a wax figure, while he rubbed his beard with the hilt of his sword and yawned.

"So you're off to the war?" ¹² grandfather asked him.

"I am indeed!"

"That's fine. Have to lick those Turks."

They were off. Mother turned round several times and waved her handkerchief. Grandmother leaned weeping against the wall of the house and also waved, while grandfather stood squeezing tears out of his eyes.

"Nothing good—will come—of this," he mumbled.

I sat on a stumb watching the droshky bounce over the ruts—there they went round the corner—something inside of me slammed shut ... tight....

It was still early in the morning. The streets were empty and the shutters of the windows still closed. Never before had I seen such utter emptiness. From somewhere in the distance came the long-drawn wail of a shepherd's pipe.

"Come have breakfast," said grandfather, taking me by the shoulder. "Looks like you're fated to go on living with me—scratching up against me like a match on a brick."

From morning to night he and I silently worked in the garden. He dug the soil, tied up the raspberry bushes, scraped the lichen off the apple trees, and squashed caterpillars, while I kept improving my corner.

Grandfather chopped off the ends of the charred beams, and stuck poles into the ground on which I hung my bird cages. I wove awnings of dried weeds to protect my house from sun and dew. The corner became delightful.

"It's fine for you to be learning how to fix things up for yourself," said grandfather.

I highly prized his observations on life. Sometimes he would lie down on the seat I had covered with turf and speak to me unhurriedly, seeming to pull each word out of his mouth with great deliberation.

"Now you're a piece hacked away from your mother. She'll be having other children, dearer to her than you. Your grandmother, as you see, has taken to drink."

He would fall into a long silence, as though listening to something, then continue dropping his heavy words:

"This is the second time she's taken to drink—the first was when Mikhail was to be called up for army service. She talked me into buying him a recruit certificate, fool that she was. Maybe he'd have been different if he'd served in the army.... Ah me!... And I'll be dying soon. That means you'll be left all alone, understand?—all alone to shift for yourself. Hm. Learn to wait on yourself, and never let others make you wait on them. Behave yourself calm and quiet-like, but stick to your chosen path. Listen to everybody, but do what seems best to yourself...."

Except for rainy days, I spent the entire summer in the garden, even sleeping out there on warm nights—grandmother had given me a piece of felt for a bed. She herself would often spend the night with me, bringing out an armful of straw which she would spread next to my couch, and lie down beside me, telling me stories which were interrupted by sudden exclamations, such as:

"Look—a falling star! That's somebody's soul as felt a longing for mother earth. A good man's been born somewhere."

Or:

"A new star's come up—look! What a jewel! The sky, the sky—garment of God, all gem-bedecked!"

"Catch your deaths, you idiots," grandfather would grumble. "Get the lumbago, or else robbers'll come and cut your throats."

The sun would go down, flooding the sky with rivers of fire, which, in expiring, scattered red-gold ashes over the green velvet of the gardens. Then the world would noticeably darken, swelling and expanding as it absorbed the warm twilight. The sun-sated leaves would droop on the branches and the grass would bend its head to the earth. Everything became richer and softer, emanating a perfume as soft as music. And music would come floating from the army camps in distant fields. The night brought a feeling as strong and refreshing as mother love; and like a mother's caress was the silence, stroking the heart with a warm, furry paw, soothing away all that should be forgotten—all the fine, caustic dust accumulated during the day. It was delightful to lie gazing up at the sky, watching the stars come out, each one opening up new depths to the heavens. These receding depths seemed to lift you lightly off the earth, and you could not tell whether the earth had shrunk to your size, or whether you had marvellously expanded until you were one with all that surrounded you. The silence increased, the darkness thickened, but invisible strings vibrated with little sounds, each of which—the twitter of a bird in sleep, the rustle of a passing hedgehog, the sound of a human voice—had a special quality distinguishing it from daytime sounds and lovingly stressed by the sensitive silence.

The playing of an accordion, a woman's laughter, a sword striking against the bricks of the pavement, the yelping of a dog—all these were last leaves falling from the dying day.

Sometimes there would be a sudden brawling of drunken voices out in the street or in open fields, and the patter of running feet. Such sounds were too ordinary to deserve attention.

Grandmother would lie awake a long time, her arm under her head, recounting something with quiet emo-

tion, apparently indifferent to whether I was listening or not. She never failed to select a legend which added significance and beauty to the night.

I would fall asleep to the sound of her rhythmic speech, waking up with the sun in my face and the singing of birds in my ears. The morning air stirred gently as it warmed in the sun, the leaves of the apple trees shook off the dew, the grass was vividly green and assumed a crystal transparency in the veils of mist that hovered above it. Rays of sun fanned across the sky, transforming it from lavender to blue. The song of a lark came from some invisible height, and all the sounds and colours of the newborn day seeped like dew into my soul, filling me with quiet happiness and the desire to be up and about, and to live in harmony with all creatures.

This was the most calm and contemplative period of my whole life. It was this summer that nurtured in me a sense of my own strength. I came to avoid people. When I heard the voices and cries of the Ovsyannikov children I was no longer filled with a longing to join them, and instead of being glad when they came to see me, I only feared they might spoil something in my garden—the first thing I had made with my own hands.

Grandfather's harangues also ceased to interest me. They became ever more dry, querulous and complaining. He began to have frequent quarrels with grandmother and to put her out of the house, at which times she would go either to Uncle Yakov's or to Uncle Mikhail's. Sometimes she would stay away for several days, and then grandfather would cook for us himself, howling and cursing, burning his fingers, breaking the dishes, and becoming more stingy with every day.

When he came to visit me in my corner of the garden, he would seat himself comfortably on the turf and watch me for a long time without speaking. Then suddenly he would ask:

"Why don't you say something?"

"I don't know."

"We're not the quality, you know," he would begin in an instructive tone. "Nobody's going to teach us anything—got to learn it all ourselves. Books have been written for others, schools have been built for them—but not for us. We've got to get everything ourselves...."

He would go into a brown study—mute and motionless—almost awe-inspiring.

That autumn he sold the house. At the breakfast table one morning preceding the sale, he announced to grandmother in a sad, resolute voice:

"Well, Mother, I've been feeding you for a long time but now it's over—have to shift for yourself from now on."

Grandmother remained utterly unmoved, as though she had long expected him to say just this. She unhurriedly took out her snuffbox, stuffed her spongy nose, and replied:

"Well, can't be helped. Have to make the best of it."

Grandfather rented two dark rooms in the cellar of an old house in a blind alley. During the moving, grandmother took an old bast sandal with long laces and thrust it under the stove. Squatting down, she began to call the hearth goblin:

"Come, goblin, come, goblin, climb inside and take a ride to bring us luck in the other house."

Grandfather, who was out in the yard, glanced through the window.

"Taking it along, are you? I'll show you, you heretic! Disgracing me like this!"

"Be careful, Father! It'll mean bad luck for sure!" she warned, but grandfather flew into a rage and forbade her taking the goblin with us.

For three days he sold our furniture and other things to Tatar second-hand men, cursing and bargaining furiously. Grandmother watched them from the window, sometimes laughing, sometimes crying, and calling softly:

"Go ahead and take it—take everything—break everything...."

I was ready to cry at the thought of leaving my playhouse in the garden.

Two carts came to move us, and the one I rode in shook as though trying to toss me off the pile of goods and chattels.

And it was with this sensation of being constantly shaken off that I lived for the next two years—until the death of my mother.

Mother came to see us soon after grandfather moved into the basement. She was pale and thin with enormous eyes burning with a kind of hurt astonishment. She studied everything intently, as though she were seeing her mother and father and me for the first time. She looked at us and said nothing, while my stepfather kept walking up and down the room, whistling under his breath, clearing his throat, and twiddling his thumbs behind his back.

"Good heavens, how big you've grown!" said mother, taking my cheeks in her hot palms. She was wearing an ugly brown dress, bulging over her stomach.

"Hello," said my stepfather, holding out his hand to me. "How are you getting on?"

He sniffed the air.

"Damp here."

Both of them looked worn and dishevelled, as though they had been running and wanted nothing so much as to lie down and rest.

We had a dreary tea, during which grandfather watched the rain running down the windowpane and asked:

"So you lost everything in the fire?"

"Everything," said my stepfather in a resolute tone. "We hardly managed to escape ourselves."

"Hm. A fire's no joke."

Mother pressed up against grandmother and whispered something in her ear that made grandmother narrow her eyes as though struck by a bright light. The atmosphere became even more dreary.

Suddenly grandfather said spitefully, in a loud, calm voice:

"I've heard rumours, Evgeni Vasilyevich, that there wasn't a fire at all, but you just lost everything at cards."

A deathly silence ensued, broken only by the tapping of the rain on the window and the steaming of the samovar.

"Father..." said mother at last.

"'Father'!" roared grandfather. "Well, what next? Didn't I tell you it was crazy for thirty to marry twenty? Well, here you are—a fine specimen, isn't he? Made you a gentlewoman, eh? Well, how do you like it, daughter?"

Then all four of them began shouting, my stepfather loudest of all. I went out into the passage and sat down on a pile of wood, stunned. This could not be my mother—she was entirely different. I had sensed this vaguely there in the room, but now that I was seated out here in the darkness I could vividly recall what she had been like.

Then, in some forgotten way I found myself in Sormovo, in a new house with unpapered log walls. The chinks between the logs were stuffed with hemp and inhabited by innumerable cockroaches. Mother and my stepfather lived in two rooms facing the street; grandmother and I lived in the kitchen, whose one window overlooked the roof. Beyond the roof, black factory chimneys were silhouetted against the sky, pouring out thick, curly smoke which the winter wind scattered over the district. Our unheated rooms were always filled with the greasy odour of this smoke, and early in the morning the factory whistle howled like wolf:

"Oo-oo-aw! Oo-oo-aw!"

By standing up on a bench and looking through the top windowpane, I could get a glimpse of the lighted factory gates, open like the toothless mouth of an old beggar devouring a horde of little people. At noon there came another whistle. The black lips of the gates opened up, revealing a deep hole through which the factory vomited forth these same little people, now well masti-

cated. They flowed in black streams down the streets, driven into the houses by a rough white wind. The sky could rarely be seen. Above the roofs and sooty snowbanks of the district, hung another roof—flat and grey, stunting the imagination and blinding the eyes with its cheerless monotony.

In the evenings, a dull red glow hovered above the factory. It lighted the tips of the chimneys and created the impression that instead of rising from the earth, they were projected down towards the earth from that lurid cloud, breathing fire, belching and howling. It was insufferable to gaze on that scene day after day, and my heart became filled with aching boredom. Grandmother did all the housework. From morning to night she was busy cooking food, scrubbing the floor, chopping wood, and hauling water. When evening came she grunted and sighed with exhaustion. Sometimes after she had prepared the dinner, she would put on a short quilted jacket, tuck up her skirt, and set out for town.

"I'll just go and see how the old man's getting on," she would say.

"Take me with you!"

"You'll freeze to death. Just look how it's blowing!"

She would walk seven versts to town over roads lost in snow fields. Mother, yellow and swollen with pregnancy, would sit huddled in a ragged grey shawl bordered with fringe. I hated that shawl, which distorted her large, handsome body; I hated the tattered fringe, and would tear it off. I hated the house, and the factory, and the whole district. Mother went about in worn felt boots, coughing so that her enormous belly shook; her grey-blue eyes flashed with hard, dry anger or stared dully at the bare walls, as though glued fast to them. Sometimes she would gaze out into the street for a whole hour. The street was like a jaw in which some of the teeth had become blackened and crooked with age, while others had fallen out altogether and been replaced by clumsy new ones, too big for the jaw.

"Why do we live here?" I asked.

"Ah, don't ask," she replied.

She spoke little with me these days, limiting her communications to orders and requests:

"Bring me this, take that, run to the store...."

She rarely let me go out to play, for I always came home badly beaten by my fellows. Fights were my only pleasure, and I gave myself up to them with all the zest of my impassioned nature. Mother whipped me for this, but the punishment only irritated me, so that the next time I fought even more furiously—and mother punished me even more severely. Once I warned her that if she went on beating me I would bite her hand and run away to freeze out in the fields. She pushed me away in consternation and began to pace the floor.

"You little beast!" she said, gasping with exhaustion.

The living, vibrant rainbow of feelings called love gradually faded in my heart, giving way to blue flashes of resentment against her and to a smouldering discontent and sense of loneliness in this dull, nonsensical world.

My stepfather was stern with me and laconic with my mother. He was always whistling and clearing his throat and standing in front of a mirror picking his crooked teeth. Ever more frequently he quarrelled with mother, addressing her in cold, distant terms which I deeply resented. During their quarrels he would close the door into the kitchen, evidently unwilling that I should hear what he said, but I made a point of listening to his gruff bass voice.

Once he stamped his foot and shouted:

"I can't invite anybody to the house on account of your damn belly, you old cow!"

Overwhelmed with surprise and fury, I jumped up on the bunk and struck my head against the ceiling with such force that I bit through my tongue.

On Saturdays dozens of workers came to my stepfather to sell the food coupons enabling them to buy products in the company store. These were issued by the factory

instead of wages. My stepfather bought them for half their value. He would receive the workers in the kitchen, sitting at the table looking very important and frowning over every coupon.

"Ruble and a half."

"Evgeni Vasilyevich, for the love of Christ..."

"Ruble and a half."

This muddled, dark life did not last very long. Just before mother's confinement I was taken to live with grandfather. He now had quarters in a two-storied house on Peschanaya Street in Kunavino, above the cemetery of Napolnaya Church. The tiny room he occupied contained a large Russian stove and two windows facing the yard.

"Well!" he laughed with a little squeak as he met me. "According to the saying, your best friend's your mother, but in this case it turns out to be your old devil of a grandfather! Phoooh, what people!"

Scarcely had I become acquainted with my new home when mother and grandmother came with the baby. My stepfather had lost his job at the factory for cheating the workers, but he had appealed to friends and immediately received a job as cashier at the railway station.

Much empty time flowed by until I was again sent to live with my mother in the cellar of a stone house. Mother immediately sent me to school; I hated it from the very first day.

I made my appearance there dressed in a pair of mother's shoes, a coat made out of grandmother's jacket, a yellow shirt, and long trousers. This immediately aroused ridicule, and the yellow shirt won me the nickname of "the ace of diamonds". I easily put things straight with the boys, but the priest and the teacher took a dislike to me.

The teacher was a bald, yellow-faced man who was subject to nosebleeds. He would enter the classroom with bits of cotton stuffed up his nostrils, take his place at the desk, ask us questions in a nasal voice, and stop in the middle of a word to pull out the cotton and examine it

with a shake of his head. He had a flat, brassy, sour face with a kind of green mould filling the wrinkles. His ugliest features were his lead-coloured eyes, which seemed to have no place in the general ensemble and clung to my face so unpleasantly that I wanted to wipe my cheek with my hand.

For the first few days I sat on the front bench, directly under the teacher's nose. This was unbearable. He seemed to see no one but me, and kept saying through his nose:

"Pesko-o-v, change your shirt! Pesko-o-v, stop shuffling! Pesko-o-v, again your shoes have left a puddle on the floor!"

I repaid him by inventing the most extravagant tricks. One day I got hold of half a frozen watermelon. I scooped it out and hung it on a pulley to the door in the dark entranceway. When the door was opened, the watermelon rose in the air, but when the teacher closed the door, it descended like a cap on his bold head. The night watchman escorted me home with a note from the teacher, and I was given a hiding for my mischief.

Another time I sprinkled snuff in the drawer of his desk. He had such a fit of sneezing that he was forced to leave the classroom, sending his son-in-law, an officer, to substitute for him. The officer made us sing "God save the tsar" and "Ah my freedom, blessed freedom" over and over again; if anyone got out of tune he would tap him over the head with a ruler in a manner that made a lot of noise and was funny, but did not hurt.

The teacher of religion was a young and handsome priest with a lot of fluffy hair. He disliked me because I had no copy of "Sacred Stories from the Old and New Testaments", and because I imitated his manner of speaking.

As soon as he came into the classroom he would say: "Peshkov, have you brought the book or not? Yes, the book."

"No, I haven't. Yes."

"What do you mean, 'yes'?"

"No."

"You go home! Yes, home. I have no intention of teaching you. Yes, not the slightest intention."

I did not mind being sent home. I would wander about the dirty streets of the district until school was over, observing the noisy life about me.

The priest had a fine, Christ-like face with gentle, feminine eyes. He had small hands which seemed to caress everything they touched, whether it was a book, a ruler, or a pen. It was as though he loved every object and looked upon it as a live thing that might be injured by careless handling. He was less affectionate with the children, but they were fond of him nevertheless.

I received satisfactory marks in my studies, but I was soon told I would be expelled for my conduct. That upset me. Unquestionably the consequences would be severe: my mother was becoming more irritable every day, and had taken to beating me very often.

But I was saved from this disaster. Quite unexpectedly Bishop Chrisanth,* a hunchback as I remember, visited our school.

An unfamiliar atmosphere of warmth and good cheer filled the classroom when this little man, in flowing black robes and a comical hat like a pail, entered and took his place at the desk.

"Well, let's have a little chat, children," he said, thrusting his hands out of his voluminous sleeves.

My turn to be called up to the desk came towards the end of the list.

"How old are you?" he asked me. "Really? My, what a tall fellow for your age! Must have done a lot of standing out in the rain!"

* Bishop Chrisanth was the author of the three-volume work "Religions of the Ancient World" and the articles "Egyptian Metapsychosis" and "Woman and Marriage". The latter article, read in my youth, made a great impression on me. It seems that I have distorted the title—it was published in some religious magazine in the seventies.—*Author's note.*

He placed one thin hand with long, pointed nails on the desk, and took hold of his scanty beard with the other, while he gazed at me kindly.

"Well, tell me any story from sacred history that you like."

When I replied that I had no book and therefore could not study sacred history, he adjusted his head-dress and said:

"How's that? You have to learn these things, you know. But perhaps you know something without the book—may have heard the stories. Do you know the Psalter? Good! And the prayers? Now, then you see? And the lives of some of the saints? Even in verse? Well, it turns out you're quite a learned fellow!"

Our priest came in, all red and puffing. When the bishop had blessed him, he began to complain about me.

"Just a minute!" said the bishop, stopping him with a gesture. Then he turned to me again. "All right, supposing you tell us about Alexei, Man-of-God...."

"Wonderful verse, isn't it, son?" he said when I stopped because I had forgotten a line. "And can you tell us something else—about King David, perhaps? Good. Delighted to listen!"

I could see that he really enjoyed listening, that he was fond of the verse. He let me go on for a long time before he interrupted.

"Did you learn your letters from the Psalter? Who taught you? Your good grandfather? Your *bad* grandfather! Well now, you can't mean that. But they tell me you're always up to some mischief."

I blushed, but confessed my guilt. At some length the teacher and the priest confirmed the fact. The bishop listened with downcast eyes.

"Do you hear what they say about you?" he said at last with a sigh. "Come here!"

He placed a hand smelling of cypress on my head and said:

"What makes you so mischievous?"

"School's a bore."

"A bore? There's some mistake here, son. If you found school a bore, you would be a bad student, but your marks are good. There must be something else the trouble."

He took a little book out of his robe and wrote:

"Peshkov, Alexei. Hm. You had better stop your mischief, son. A little bit's all right, but people can't stand too much, you know. Am I right, boys?"

"Yes!" came a gay chorus of voices.

"And what about you yourselves—I suppose you do very little mischief, eh?"

"Oh no, a lot!" laughed the boys.

The bishop drew me to him and leaned back in his chair, saying with an air of surprise that made even the teacher and the priest laugh:

"Just think—I was a mischief-maker myself at your age! What do you suppose makes us like that?"

The boys laughed and he asked them questions, cleverly entangling them in their own words so that the atmosphere became more and more merry. Finally he got up and said:

"A pity to leave you, rascals, but it's time for me to be on my way!"

He raised his arm, tossing back his wide sleeve, and made the sign of the cross above the class.

"May you live and do good in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Farewell."

"Farewell, Your Holiness! Come back soon!" shouted the boys.

"I'll come, I'll come," he replied, nodding his head. "I'll bring you some books." Then he turned to the teacher: "Let them go home now."

He drew me with him into the entranceway and said in a low voice:

"You won't make trouble any more, will you? Good. Oh, I understand why you do it. Well, good-bye."

I was very much touched. A peculiar emotion seethed

in my breast, so that even when the teacher kept me after class and told me that from now on I must behave like a lamb, I listened attentively and willingly.

As the priest was putting on his coat he said affectionately:

"From now on you must attend my lessons. Yes, that you must do. But sit quiet! Yes, quiet!"

Things became better at school, but a nasty thing happened at home. I stole a ruble from my mother. This crime was not premeditated. One evening mother went out, leaving me alone with the baby. For want of anything better to do, I took out one of my stepfather's books—"Notes of a Physician," by Dumas the Elder. Among the pages I found a one-ruble bill and a ten-ruble bill. The book was too difficult for me, but on closing it I was struck with the idea that for a ruble I could buy not only the *Sacred History*, but *Robinson Crusoe* as well. I had learned about the existence of such a book a short time before. During recess one cold day I had been telling the boys a fairy tale. Suddenly one of them said scornfully:

"Fairy tales are no good! 'Robinson Crusoe' now, that's a real story!"

A few of the other boys had also read *Robinson Crusoe*, and they all praised the book. I was hurt that they should have scorned grandmother's tale, and resolved to get hold of *Robinson Crusoe* so that, having read it, I could say that it was no good!

The next day I came to school with the *Sacred History*, two dog-eared volumes of Andersen's fairy tales, three pounds of white bread and a pound of sausage. In the dark little bookshop at the corner next to Vladimir Church I had found a copy of *Robinson Crusoe*—a thin little book in a yellow binding. On the title page was the picture of a bearded man with a fur cap on his head and a goat skin over his shoulder. This did not attract me, while I found even the worn bindings of the fairy tales fascinating.

During the long recess I shared my bread and sausage with the boys and we began reading "The Nightingale", a wonderful tale which gripped the heart from the very first page.

"In China, all the people are Chinese, and even the Emperor is a Chinaman." I can still remember how this sentence delighted me with its simple humour, its smiling music, and something else that was wonderfully good.

I had no time to finish reading "The Nightingale" at school, and when I came home my mother asked me in a strained voice, as she stood frying some eggs:

"Did you take a ruble?"

"Yes. Here are the books...."

She gave me a vigorous drubbing with the frying pan and took away the fairy tales, hiding them for ever, a punishment more painful than the drubbing.

I did not return to school for several days. Apparently my stepfather told the people at work what I had done and they in their turn related it to their children. The boys carried the tale to school, and when I returned I was greeted with a new nickname—the thief. Brief and clear—but unfair. I did not deny taking the ruble, but when I tried to explain this, nobody believed me. So I came home and announced to my mother that I would never go back to school again.

Pregnant once more, she was sitting at the window feeding my brother Sasha. She turned her grey face and stared at me with crazed, tortured eyes, opening her mouth like a fish.

"That's... not true," she said softly. "Nobody could have heard about your taking the ruble."

"Go and ask them."

"You must have told them yourself. You did, didn't you? Don't lie—tomorrow I'm going to school to find out myself."

I named the pupil. Her face became drawn and melted in tears.

I went into the kitchen and lay down on the bed

behind the stove, which had been made for me out of some old wooden boxes. I could hear mother sobbing in the next room:

"Oh Lord, oh Lord...."

The smell of warm, greasy rags became intolerable, and I went out into the yard.

"Where are you going?" called mother. "Come here!"

We sat together on the floor with Sasha on mother's knees pulling at the buttons of her dress and saying: "Bubbons", which meant buttons.

I pressed close to mother, and she put her arm round me.

"We're very poor," she said. "Every kopek—every single kopek...."

I felt her arm tighten round me. She seemed unable to finish what she wanted to say.

"Oh, what a rotter, what a rotter!" she suddenly burst out, repeating a word I heard her use once before.

"Otter," mimicked Sasha.

He was a strange baby—clumsy and largeheaded, with wonderful blue eyes that looked smilingly about as though expecting something. He began to speak at an unusually early age and never cried, living in a constant state of quiet joy. He was so weak that he could hardly crawl, but he always rejoiced on seeing me, stretching out his little arms and pulling at my ears with his soft little fingers, which for some reason smelled of violets. He died quite unexpectedly, without having been ill at all. In the morning he was quietly happy as usual; in the evening, when the church-bell was tolling for vespers, he was already laid out on the table. This occurred soon after the birth of the second baby, Nikolai.

Mother carried out her promise to go and speak for me at school, and so once more I was studying. But I had to go and live with grandfather for the following reason.

One day at tea time, as I was entering the kitchen from the yard, I heard mother crying desperately:

"Evgeni, Evgeni, don't go, I beg you not to!"

"Nonsense," replied my stepfather.

"But I know: it's to her you are going."

"Well, what of it?"

Both of them were silent for a few minutes, then mother said between fits of coughing:

"What a mean and worthless creature you are!"

I heard him strike her. I ran into the room and saw her on her knees, bracing herself against a chair with her back and elbows, her head thrown back, her eyes shining terribly and a wheezing sound breaking out of her throat, while he stood in front of her, spick and span in a new suit, kicking her in the breast with a long leg. I picked up a silver-handled bread knife—the only one of my father's things left to my mother—and aimed it at my stepfather's side with all my force.

Fortunately mother had time to push him away, so that the knife only ripped his coat and grazed his flesh. He let out a groan and ran out of the room, holding his side. With a shriek mother seized me and threw me on the floor. My stepfather tore me away from her when he came back.

Late that evening, when he had gone out in spite of everything, mother came to me where I lay behind the stove, gently embraced and kissed me.

"Forgive me, dear. I have wronged you. But how could you have done such a thing? A knife!"

With a perfect understanding of the full import of my words, I swore that I would kill my stepfather and myself as well. And I think I would have done it—at least attempted it. Even now I can see that loathsome foot with the bright braid down the trouser-leg swinging in the air and striking a woman's breast.

Sometimes when I recall the abominations of that barbarous Russian life I ask myself whether it is worthwhile to speak of them. And with renewed conviction I answer: Yes, it is—for they are the vicious, tenacious truth, which has not been exterminated to this very day. They represent a truth which must be exposed to its roots

and torn out of our grim and shameful life—torn out of the very soul and memory of man.

But there is another, more positive reason impelling me to describe such horrors. In spite of their repulsiveness and the way in which they mutilate what would otherwise be fine natures, the Russian is sufficiently young and wholesome in spirit to overcome such things, and he will surely do it.

Our life is amazing not only for the vigorous scum of bestiality with which it is overgrown, but also for the bright and wholesome creative forces breaking through it. And the influence of good is growing, giving promise that our people will at last awaken to a life full of beauty and bright humanity.

13 Once more I was living with grandfather. "Well, you rascal," was his greeting as he rapped nervously on the table. "I'll not feed you any more. It's up to your grandmother now."

"I'll do it," she said. "As though that was such a job!"

"Well, go ahead," he shouted, but then he explained to me more calmly: "Everything's separate with us now—each for himself."

Grandmother sat at the window making lace. Her bobbins clicked cheerfully above the pillow bristling with brass pins that glistened in the spring sun like a golden porcupine. Grandmother herself seemed cast of bronze, she had not changed in the least. But grandfather had become leaner and more wrinkled. His red hair had gone grey and the calm pompousness of his movements had been replaced by an impetuous fussiness. His green eyes looked at everything suspiciously. Chuckling quietly, grandmother told about the division of property which had taken place between her and grandfather. He had given her all the pots and crocks and dishes and had said:

"That's all yours, and don't be asking me for anything else!"

Then he took all her old dresses and belongings, including a fox cape, and sold them for seven hundred rubles, which he lent at interest to his godson, a converted Jew who traded in fruit. He had become sick with greed and lost all shame. He went to old acquaintances—rich merchants and artisans with whom he had formerly worked—and asked them for money, saying his sons had ruined him. Out of respect for his former position they made him generous gifts. He would come home and wave a sizable banknote under grandmother's nose, gloating like a schoolboy:

"See this, you old fool? Nobody'll give you a tenth as much!"

Grandfather lent this money at interest to a new acquaintance—a tall, bald-headed furrier nicknamed "The Whip", and his sister, a fat, red-cheeked, dark-eyed shop-keeper, as sweet and sticky as molasses.

Everything in the house was divided: today grandmother prepared dinner from products bought with her money, tomorrow grandfather bought the bread and food. The dinner was always worse on his days. Grandmother bought good meat, while he bought lungs and tripe. Each kept his own store of tea and sugar, but tea was brewed in the same teapot, and grandfather would ask in alarm:

"Wait—let me see—how much did you put in?"

He would sprinkle the tea leaves into his hand and carefully count them.

"Your tea's finer than mine—mine's thicker, makes a better brew, so I don't need to put in so much."

He watched to see that grandmother poured him tea that was just the same strength as hers, and that they both drank the same number of cups.

"One more?" grandmother would ask just before pouring out the last of the tea.

"Suppose we may as well have one more," agreed grandfather after a glance into the teapot.

Even the oil for the icon lamp was bought by each in

turn—and this after fifty years of labouring side by side!

I found grandfather's tricks both amusing and disgusting—grandmother found them only amusing.

"Forget it!" she would say to me. "What of it? He's old, is the old man, and he's gone queer. Four score already—just think the number of years! Let him be queer—it doesn't hurt anybody. As for me and you—be sure I'll always earn a crust of bread for us!"

I, too, began to earn money. Early on Saturday and Sunday mornings I would take a sack and go through the streets and yards collecting old bones, rags, nails, and paper. The junkman would pay us twenty kopeks a pood for rags or paper or metal, and eight or ten kopeks a pood for bones. I collected junk after school during the week as well, and every Saturday I earned from thirty to fifty kopeks (or even more if it had been a particularly successful week). Grandmother took my money and hurriedly deposited it in the pocket of her skirt, lowering her eyes as she rewarded me with words of praise:

"Thanks, pigeon-widgeon! You and me can't feed ourselves? You and me? Why, it's nothing!"

One day I caught her gazing at my coins and weeping softly, one bright tear hanging from the end of her spongy nose.

But I found that the profits from junk dealing were less than those from stealing boards from the lumberyards on the bank of the Oka River or on The Sands, an island where they traded in metal during the annual fair, putting up makeshift booths for this purpose. When the fair was over, the booths were taken apart and the lumber stacked on The Sands, where it remained until the rising of the river in the spring. Houseowners would pay us ten kopeks for a good board, and we could steal two or three in the course of the day. However, it was necessary to carry on operations on foggy or rainy days, when the watchmen were indoors.

It was a friendly band of youngsters with whom I worked: there was Sanka, the Dove, the ten-year-old son

of a Mordovian beggarwoman—an affectionate child who was always quiet and good-natured; there was the waif Kostroma, a skinny ragamuffin, with enormous black eyes—later, when he was thirteen, he hung himself in a home for juvenile delinquents to which he had been sent for stealing a pair of pigeons; there was the Tatar Khabi, a twelve-year-old Samson, who combined extraordinary strength with a simple, generous nature; there was the pug-nosed Yaz, eight-year-old son of a gravedigger and cemetery watchman, silent as a fish and afflicted with the “black sickness”; and finally there was the oldest of our band, Grishka Churka, son of a widowed seamstress, a very just and reasonable person, and an expert at fist fighting. All of us lived on the same street.

Stealing was not considered a crime in our district. It was the usual, and almost exclusive means of getting a living for most of the half-starved townsmen. The month and a half of the annual fair could not keep them alive throughout the year, and many respected householders “made extra money on the river”, that is, they fished out boards and logs washed away by the tide, and hauled light baggage on makeshift rafts; but for the most part they went in for stealing—“monkeying” along the banks of the Volga and the Oka, robbing the wharfs and barges and riverbanks of anything they could lay their hands on. On Sundays the grownups would boast of their luck, and the children would listen and learn.

In the spring, during the busy weeks of preparation for the fair, drunken artisans and other workmen would fill the streets after their day’s labour. Then the children of the district would ply their trade of pickpocketing, an occupation accepted as quite legitimate and fearlessly carried on with the grownups as witnesses.

They stole hammers from carpenters, monkey wrenches from fitters, axle bolts from carters. Our band did not go in for such things.

“I won’t go stealing—mom won’t let me,” Churka announced one day.

"And I'm scared to," put in Khabi.

Kostroma always shied from thieves and pronounced the word "thief" with a peculiar emphasis, and if he found boys robbing a drunkard, he would chase them and give them a merciless beating. This sullen, large-eyed boy was always posing as a grownup. He walked with a rolling swing like the stevedores and tried to make his voice deep and gruff. Altogether there was something tight and old and unnatural about him. The Dove was convinced that steeling was a sin.

But the snatching of boards and poles from The Sands fell into quite a different category. None of us was afraid to do it, and we worked out a technique that greatly simplified the task. In the evening when it was already dark, or on foggy days, the Dove and Yaz would set out over the bulging, slushy ice to The Sands. They would go openly, trying to attract the attention of the watchmen, while the other four of us would creep up unnoticeably from different sides. While the watchmen were busy keeping an eye on Yaz and the Dove, we would gather at the appointed place and select our boards; then while our fleet-footed comrades teased the watchmen and fled from them, we set out on the return trip. Each of us had a rope with a bent nail at the end with which we hooked the board and hauled it over the snow and ice. The watchmen rarely saw us, and if they did they were unable to catch us. When we sold the boards we divided the spoils into six equal parts. Usually it came out to five or seven kopeks apiece.

This was enough to eat as much as we liked for one day, but the Dove's mother would beat him if he did not bring her vodka; Kostroma saved his money for buying pigeons; Churka's mother was ill, so he needed all he could get for her; Khabi was saving money in order to return to the town from which he had been brought by an uncle who was drowned shortly after they came to Nizhni-Novgorod. Khabi had forgotten the name of the

town, remembering only that it was on the Kama River near the Volga.

For some reason we found the idea of this town very funny, and kept teasing the slant-eyed Tatar about it:

*There's a town very fair,
But he doesn't know where—
Here or there
Or up in the air!*

At first Khabî would flare up when we teased him; but once the Dove said to him in a cooing voice which well justified his nickname:

"Come off now, who ever heard of getting angry at pals?"

The Tatar was ashamed. He accepted the rebuff and thereafter he himself used to sing the song about the town on the Kama.

But still we preferred collecting junk to stealing boards. It became particularly interesting in the spring, when the snow had melted and the rains came to wash the cobbles at the empty fair grounds. It was always possible to find nails and bits of metal in the gutters of the fair grounds. Often we found copper and silver coins, but in order to keep the watchmen from chasing us and taking our sacks away, we had to give them two-kopek pieces or lick their boots. Generally it was not easy to make money, but we became the best of friends in the effort. Occasionally there would be quarrels among us, but I cannot remember our ever having had a fight.

The Dove was our peace-maker. He was always able to find the right words to calm our passions—simple words, but ones which had the effect of surprising us and making us ashamed of ourselves. He himself seemed surprised when he spoke them. He never took offence at the mean tricks Yaz would play, calmly dismissing everything bad as foolish and useless.

"Now why would you do such a thing?" he would ask,

and it became clear to everyone that there was really no sense in it.

He referred to his mother as "my Mordovian" and none of us found it funny.

"Last night my Mordovian came home soaked to the gills," he once told us laughingly, his little round eyes glinting with gold. "Flopped down on the doorstep and there she lays singing her head off, the old hen!"

"What did she sing?" asked Churka seriously.

The Dove slapped his knees in time to the music as he sang his mother's song in a high voice:

Tap-a-tap-tap!
The young shepherd's rap
At my windowpane—
I am off with my swain!
The sunset glows,
The shepherd blows
Upon his pipe, so sweet and clear
That all the village stops to hear.

He knew many such gay songs, and sang them with zest.

"Yes," he went on, "she fell asleep right there in the doorway, letting all the cold air in, and me shivering my pants off, and I couldn't shift her—too heavy. This morning I says to her, 'What do you want to get so drunk for?' 'It's all right,' she answers. 'Try to bear it a little longer, I'll soon be dead.'"

"Yes, you can see it won't be long, all bloated up the way she is," confirmed Churka impressively.

"Will you be sorry?" I asked.

"Of course," answered the Dove with some surprise. "She's been a good one to me."

And although we all knew the Mordovian beat the Dove, we were convinced that she was a good soul; on days when our gains were slight, Churka would say:

"Let's each throw in a kopek to buy the Dove's mother some vodka, or else she'll lick him."

Churka and I were the only ones who knew how to read and write. The Dove envied us.

"When my Mordovian dies," he would coo, pulling at his pointed, mouse-like ear. "I'm going to school too. I'll beg the teacher to take me. Then when I finish I'll be gardener to the archbishop, or even to the tsar."

That spring the Mordovian, accompanied by a bottle of vodka and an old man who collected donations for the building of a new church, was crushed when a stack of logs collapsed on her. She was taken to the hospital and Churka said to the Dove:

"Come live with me. Mom'll teach you your letters."

One day soon after, the Dove stopped in front of a shop:

"Gorceries," he read, his head lifted proudly.

"GROceries, you dolt!" corrected Churka.

"I know, but the sybalels get mixed up."

"SYLLables!"

"The letters jump around—they're so happy to be read!"

The extent of his love for trees and grass amazed and amused us.

Our district was sandy, so there was little foliage; only here and there in the yards could be found sickly willows, twisted elderberry bushes, or some dry grass hiding under the fences. If one of us sat down on this grass, the Dove would reprimand us angrily:

"Don't spoil the grass! Can't you sit on the sand? It's all the same to you."

In his presence we hesitated to break off a bit of flowering elderberry or cut a willow wand on the bank of the Oka.

"Why are you always spoiling things, you devils?" he would say, shrugging his shoulders in amazement.

And this amazement made us ashamed.

All week long we collected old bast sandals in preparation for the sport we had on Saturdays. On Saturday evening when the Tatar stevedores were leaving

the Siberian wharf, we would hide behind some street corner and throw the sandals at them. At first they were angry, and cursed and chased us, but soon they themselves were drawn into the game. In expectation of the coming battle, they, too, would arm themselves with bast sandals—more than once they even stole our ammunition, having discovered where we hid our supply. But we objected.

"That's no game," we said.

So they would divide up the stolen goods and launch the fight. Usually they took up their position in an open place while we yelled and danced about them as we hurled our missiles. They also yelled, and they would roar with laughter every time one of us buried his nose in the sand, tripped up by a well-aimed sandal.

Sometimes the game went on until dark. The towns folk would watch us from the shelter of some corner, remonstrating for decency's sake. But the sandals kept flying through the air like dusty, grey birds. Sometimes one of us took a staggering blow, but the pleasure of the contest outweighed all pain and injury.

The Tatars grew as excited as we did. When the battle was over, we would occasionally go home with them, there to be treated to stewed horse meat and a peculiar dish of vegetables after which we were served strong brick-tea and nut cakes. We were extremely fond of these huge men of extraordinary strength; there was something simple and childlike about them. I was surprised to see that they never took offence, and were always kind and considerate to each other.

All the Tatars laughed irresistibly—laughed till the tears rolled down their cheeks. One of them (a man from Kasimov with a broken nose and fabulous strength—once he carried a church-bell weighing twenty-seven poods off a barge and far up on to the riverbank) would howl when he laughed and cry out:

"Oooo! Oooo! A word's a bird; heard the word—caught the bird; a golden bird!"

One day he sat the Dove on the palm of his hand and lifted him up into the air.

"Bird ought to live in the sky," he said.

On rainy days we would gather at the little house in the cemetery where Yaz lived with his father. His father was a crooked, bedraggled creature with long arms and sprouts of grimy hair on his head and face. His head was like a withered turnip on the skinny stalk of his neck. He would blissfully narrow his yellow eyes and mutter quickly:

"Lord preserve us from sleepless nights!"

We bought a bit of tea, some sugar and bread, and a little vodka for Yaz's father.

"Put up the samovar, you good-for-nothing muzhik!" Churka would order.

And the muzhik would laugh and obey orders. While waiting for the water to boil, we would talk about our affairs, and he would give us advice.

"Look sharp—the day after tomorrow's forty days after the funeral at the Trusovs—ought to be a lot of bones left!"

"The Trusov's cook collects bones herself," said the all-knowing Churka.

"Soon the weather'll be nice enough to go to the woods," mused the Dove as he glanced out of the window into the cemetery.

Yaz rarely spoke, and would silently watch us with his melancholy eyes as he demonstrated the toys he had found in garbage cans: a wooden soldier, a legless horse, buttons, and bits of brass.

His father set the table with odd cups and brought in the samovar. Kostroma poured the tea, while the old man drank his vodka and climbed up on the stove-bunk, gazing down on us with owl-like eyes and muttering:

"Curses on the bunch of you—is it humans you are or what? Phoo! A bunch of thieves—Lord preserve us from sleepless nights!"

"But we aren't thieves," said the Dove.

"Thievelings, then."

When Yaz's father got on our nerves, Churka would bawl at him:

"Shut up, you good-for-nothing muzhik!"

The Dove, Churka and I could not stand hearing him enumerate all the sick people in the district and conjecture as to which of them would die first. He seemed to smack his lips with anticipation and showed not the slightest pity. When he saw that we disliked hearing this, he would purposely tease us:

"Aha! Afraid, are you, you little warts! There's one big fat fellow scheduled to kick off soon. Won't it take him a long time to rot, just!"

We stopped him, but he was not to be suppressed.

"And your turn'll be coming soon! Can't expect to last long living off garbage heaps!"

"Very well, we'll die—and get promoted to angels," said the Dove.

"You? Angels?" marvelled Yaz's father and broke out laughing. Then he continued torturing us with loathsome tales about corpses.

But sometimes he began saying strange things in a low, buzzing voice:

"Listen, fellows, the day before yesterday they buried a lady with a queer history. I found out all about her and what do you think?..."

He often spoke about women, and always in a filthy manner, but there was something plaintive and inquiring about his stories, as though he were appealing to us to help him think it through. We listened attentively. He spoke haltingly, often interrupting his speech to ask questions, but what he said always left irritating splinters in our memory.

"'Who started the fire?' they ask her. 'I did,' she says. 'How's that, you fool? You was in hospital that night!' 'I did!' she insists. Now what would she say a thing like that for? Lord preserve us from sleepless nights!"

He knew the life history of almost every one he had

dug into the earth of that bare, dismal cemetery. And when he spoke, it was as though he opened the doors of the surrounding houses to us and we entered and observed the lives of the inhabitants, sensing something solemn and important in the act. He seemed capable of talking the night through, but as soon as darkness drew about the windows, Churka would get up from the table and say:

"I'm going home—mom'll be worrying. Who's coming along?"

We all went with him. Yaz walked as far as the fence with us, locked the gate, and pressed his dark, bony face to the bars as he said good-bye.

We called to him, feeling uncomfortable about leaving him there in the cemetery. One evening Kostroma looked back and said:

"One fine morning we'll wake up and find him dead."

Churka often asserted that Yaz lived even worse than the rest of us, but the Dove objected:

"We don't live bad," he said.

And I agreed with him. I enjoyed the independent life of the streets, and I was fond of my comrades. Our companionship filled me with a great new feeling, the desire to help and benefit them.

Again I was encountering difficulties at school. The boys began to call me a tramp and a scavenger, and after one of our quarrels they announced to the teacher that I smelled so strongly of refuse that it was impossible to sit next to me. I remember how deeply this hurt me and how difficult it was to go back to school after that. The complaint was a mean invention: I always washed myself carefully each morning and never attended school in the same clothes I wore while collecting rubbish.

At last I passed the examinations for the third class. As a reward for good work I was presented with a Certificate of Honour, a Bible, a volume of Krylov's fables, and another book, unbound, bearing the enigmatic title of *Fata Morgana*. When I brought these presents home,

grandfather was deeply touched and overjoyed. He announced that we must carefully preserve the books, and so he would put them away in his strongbox. For several days grandmother had been ill and had no money. Grandfather groaned and wailed:

"You'll be the ruin of me—you're eating me out of house and home...."

So I took the books to a bookstall and sold them for fifty-five kopeks, which I gave to grandmother. I spoiled the Certificate of Honour by scribbling on it and then handed it to grandfather. He carefully put it away without noticing the scribbles.

Now that school was over for me, I returned to the life of the streets, which with the arrival of spring became even more fascinating. We made more money now, and on Sundays our whole group would go out to the fields and woods, returning home late in the evening pleasantly worn out and bound even closer to each other.

But this life did not last long. My stepfather lost his job and again went away, and my mother and little brother Nikolai came to stay with grandfather. Since grandmother had gone to live in the home of a wealthy merchant for whom she was embroidering a coverlet for the Body of Christ, I had to act as nursemaid.

My silent, wasted mother scarcely had the strength to lift her feet. My brother had scrofulous ulcers on his ankles and was so weak that he could not even cry. If he was hungry, he would moan horribly, and if he was not hungry he would drowse and give great sighs, purring the while like a kitten.

"What he needs is good food, but where can I get enough to feed you all?" said grandfather one day, after a careful examination of the baby.

"He doesn't need much," replied mother with a raucous sigh.

"This one a little—that one a little—and altogether a lot...."

He gave a disgusted wave of his hand and turned to me:

"Nikolai needs to be out in the sun, in the sand...."

I brought a sack of clean, dry sand and dumped it in a sunny spot beneath the window. Then I buried my brother in it up to the neck, as grandfather had ordered. The baby seemed to like it. He would sit there squinting blissfully and gazing at me with strange eyes that seemed to be nothing but blue irises encircled by a ring of lighter blue.

I grew very fond of my brother. I imagined that he understood all my thoughts, and I would lie beside him for hours, under the window through which came grandfather's squeaky voice:

"It don't take much brains to die. If you were only smart enough to know how to live, now...."

This was usually followed by mother's having a prolonged fit of coughing.

Nikolai would free his little arms and lift them toward me, nodding his head. His hair was thin and silvery; his face was old and wise.

If a cat or a chicken would come close, Nikolai would watch it intently, then turn to me with a faint smile. This smile disturbed me—could it be that my brother realized how bored I was sitting there beside him? Did he know how badly I wanted to leave him and join my friends in the street?

The yard was small and filled with all sorts of trash. A straggling line of sheds extended from the gate to the bathhouse at the lack of the yard. The roofs were piled high with boards, logs, bits of damp wood and the wreckage of boats—trophies fished out of the Oka when the ice broke and the river was swollen with spring. The entire yard was cluttered with riversoaked wood which, when heated by the sun, exuded an odour of decay.

Next door to us was a small slaughterhouse. Almost every morning we could hear the moaning of calves and

the bleating of sheep, and the smell of blood was so strong that it seemed to me it hung in the dusty air like a fine red mesh.

When the cries of the animals were silenced by an axe blow between the horns, Nikolai would frown and purse his lips, as though trying to imitate the animal sounds, but he succeeded only in producing a puffing little "phoooh, phoooh".

At noon grandfather would poke his head through the window and call: "Dinner!"

He himself would hold the baby on his knee and feed it by chewing up bread and potatoes, then pushing it between the baby's lips, smearing its mouth and sharp little chin. When he had administered a little of such food, he would lift the child's shirt, poke its bloated stomach, and say:

"Wonder if that's enough—maybe a little more?"

"Can't you see he's reaching for the bread?" mother would say from the dark corner where she was lying.

"A baby can't tell when it's had enough."

So he would push another ball of mush into its mouth. I suffered from the shame of this feeding. Something rose in my throat, choking me and making me want to throw up.

"Here," said grandfather at last, "take him to his mother."

When I took Nikolai in my arms, he would moan and reach towards the table. Mother, so emaciated that she looked like a barked pine sapling, would lift herself to meet me, stretching out her long, fleshless arms.

She rarely spoke any more, and the few words she uttered were wrung raspingly from her seething chest. All day long she lay silently dying in the corner. I sensed that she was dying, and grandfather made it clear by speaking too often and too insistently of death, especially in the evenings when the air was filled with the heavy odour of decay.

Grandfather's bed stood in the corner almost under the icons. He slept with his head toward the window, and before falling asleep he would mutter to himself:

"Well, the time's come to die. A fine sight we'll present to our Maker! What are we going to say? As if I hadn't been working all my life—always doing something. And look what comes of it!"

I slept on the floor between the stove and the window. The space was too short for me and I had to push my feet under the stove, where the cockroaches tickled my toes. But my observations from this vantage point often gave me a malicious satisfaction. In doing the cooking, grandfather was always breaking the glass in the window with the other end of the poker or the pole with which he pulled the pots out of the oven. It was strange and ridiculous that anyone as clever as he was should not have thought of cutting off the end of the pole.

One day when something was boiling over in the oven, he gave the pole such a yank that he upset and broke the clay pot and smashed the cross piece of the window and both panes of glass. This was so great a misfortune that the old man sat down on the floor and wept.

"Oh Lord, oh Lord..." he wailed.

When he left the house, I took the bread knife and hacked off the end of the pole.

"Curses and damnation!" cried grandfather when he returned and saw what I had done. "You ought to have sawed it off—do you hear? Sawed it off! Could have made some rolling pins out of the piece and sold them! Devil of a family I've got!"

"Better not touch anything," mother said when he had run out into the passage.

She died at noon on a Sunday in August. My stepfather had recently returned from his trip and again had a job. Grandmother and Nikolai had already moved with him into a clean little apartment next to the station where they were to have taken mother within the next few days.

On the morning of the day she died she said to me in a voice which was faint, but clearer than usual:

"Go and tell Evgeni Vasilyevich I want to see him." She sat up, leaning against the wall for support.

"Run as fast as you can," she added, sinking back on the pillow.

It seemed to me that she was smiling, and a new light gleamed in her eyes. My stepfather was at mass and grandmother sent me to the Jewess for some snuff. She had none ready, and so I had to wait while she pulverized the tobacco.

When I got back to grandfather's house, I found mother sitting at the table dressed in a clean lavender dress, her hair carefully combed, as proud and haughty as she used to be.

"Feeling better?" I asked, with unaccountable shyness.

"Come here," she said, giving me a fearful look. "Where have you been gallivanting?"

Before I had time to answer she seized me by the hair, took a long flexible knife made from a saw and struck me with the flat blade until it fell out of her hands.

"Pick it up! Give it to me!"

I picked up the knife and put it on the table. Mother gave me a push and I sat down on the step of the stove-bunk, and watched her with frightened eyes.

Rising from the chair, she slowly made her way to the corner, lay down on the bed and began to wipe her perspiring face. Her hand moved uncertainly, twice falling weakly on the pillow, the handkerchief twitching in her fingers.

"Some water...."

I dipped a cupful of water from the pail. Raising her head with difficulty, she took a swallow, pushed me away with a cold hand, and drew a deep sigh. She looked at the icons in the corner, then at me, moved her lips as if in a smile, and slowly lowered her long lashes over her eyes. Her elbows were pressed close to her sides, while her hands, the fingers moving feebly, crept over her breast

towards her throat. A shadow stole over her face, then seemed to sink into it, drawing her yellow skin taut and making her nose sharp. Her mouth opened in surprise, but no breath came.

I stood there for countless ages with the cup in my hand, watching my mother's face stiffen and turn grey.

Grandfather came in.

"Mother is dead," I said.

"What you lying for?" he replied with a glance at the bed.

Then he went to the oven and pulled out a pie with a deafening clatter of pan and poker. I watched him, knowing that mother was dead and waiting for him to realise it.

My stepfather came in in a white linen coat and cap. He quietly picked up a chair and carried it to mother's bedside. Suddenly he dropped the chair and bellowed like a brass horn:

"She's dead! Look!"

Grandfather staggered over to the bed, with the poker still in his hand and his eyes starting out of his head.

When they threw the dry sand down on mother's coffin, grandmother wandered off among the other graves. She stumbled blindly over one of the crosses and fell, cutting her face. Yaz's father took her to his house, and while she washed the cut he quietly whispered words of consolation in my ear:

"Come, lad!... Lord preserve us from sleepless nights!... This is... just one of those things.... Am I right, grandmother? The poor and the rich, all go in the ditch—am I right, grandmother?"

He glanced through the window and suddenly ran out of the house and came back, beaming and cheerful, with the Dove.

"Look at this," said the old man, holding out a broken spur. "Just look what a find! The Dove and me are making you a present of it. See that little wheel, eh? You

can be sure it dropped off some Cossack's boot! I'm buying it from the Dove—for two kopeks."

"What you lying for?" muttered the Dove angrily, while Yaz's father kept hopping in front of me and winking.

"How's that for a Dove, eh? No fooling with him! Well, it's not me but him is making you a present; he...."

When grandmother was ready, she tied a kerchief round her blue and swollen face and asked me to go home with her, but I refused. I knew there would be drinking and probably quarrelling at the funeral feast. While we were still in the church I had heard Uncle Mikhail say to Uncle Yakov:

"Well, we'll have a good drink today, eh?"

The Dove tried to cheer me up by hanging the spur on his chin and trying to reach it with his tongue. Yaz's father laughed with obvious exaggeration, crying:

"Just look what he's doing! Just look!" But when he saw that this failed to amuse me, he said seriously:

"Enough, enough! Pull yourself together. Everybody has to die, even the birds. Listen—if you want, I'll put turf on your mother's grave, would you like that? We'll go to the fields now and gather it—you and the Dove and me—and my Yaz too. We'll cut the turf and put it around pretty—won't be another grave to match it!"

I liked this idea, and we all went out into the fields.

A few days after mother's funeral grandfather said to me:

"Well, Alexei, can't exactly call you a medal hanging around my neck! No room for you here any more. Time you were getting out in the world...."

So I got out into the world.

TALES OF ITALY

Gorky's *Tales of Italy* were written during his first stay in that country (1906-1913).

Gorky's name had been well known in Italy long before he came there. Stories by him had been appearing in Italian translation since 1901 and his plays had been produced in Palermo, Rome, and Naples in 1904. He was also well known as an active participant in the Russian revolutionary movement. When the writer was imprisoned in the Peter and Paul Fortress in 1905, Italian cultural figures signed a protest against his arrest along with their English, German, and French colleagues. A group of Italian parliamentarians proposed to their government that it should demand Gorky's liberation.

On 13 October 1906 the Italian people welcomed Gorky to their country. "Everything is amazingly beautiful here," he wrote to Ekaterina Peshkova on 20 October 1906, "the countryside, the people, the sounds, and the colours. You really ought to be here."

Gorky came to the island of Capri on 20 October, was delighted by it and decided to settle there.

"Italy welcomed me amazingly warmly," Gorky wrote in a letter to Peshkova from Capri on 6 November 1906, "but the police are keeping an eye on me and my correspondence is being read. One town has offered me the title of honorary citizen and the local Capri Union of Workers has elected me to life membership and so on."

The beauty of Capri and the Italians' *joie de vivre* and generosity of heart stimulated the writer in his work. "I am working like a thousand devils," he wrote to K. P. Pyatnitsky in February 1908. "Never before have I

* English translation © Progress Publishers, 1980.

written as willingly and easily as now...," he informed Ekaterina Peshkova at the same time. The second half of the novel *Mother*, *The Last Summer*, *The Confession*, *The Life of an Unnecessary Man*, *The Townlet of Okurov*, *The Life of Matvei Kozhemyakin*, *Complaints*, *The Cranks*, *The Zykous*, *Vassa Zheleznova*, *Tales of Italy*, *The Master*, *About Russia*, *Childhood*, *My Apprenticeship*, and many other works were written by Gorky on Capri.

Gorky met with Italian intellectuals and travelled a great deal about Italy, studying the country's history, architecture, sculpture, and painting. Gorky caught his first sight of Rome on 6 March 1907. Seeing the town took five days, after which he wrote to Peshkova:

"I've just come back from Rome, which impressed me very much indeed. I feel as if I have absorbed a wave of spiritual health and vigour, my faith in life and in the strength of human spirit has been considerably enhanced, my heart is in turmoil, and I feel strong, energetic, and capable of performing a great deal."

Gorky on several occasions said: "...I love this country and its people!"

Gorky's *Tales of Italy* are an expression of his love for the Italian people.

A few years after he had completed his *Tales of Italy*, Gorky asserted that they were written in 1906-1913. This assertion might at first sight seem to be inaccurate since the earliest publication date for any of the tales is December 1910.

If, however, one takes into account the time during which the idea matured and material was collected, then the date mentioned by Gorky becomes more plausible. On the very day he arrived in Italy, Gorky was in fact asked if he intended to write about Italy, as he had written his American essays during his trip to that country. "I would like to do so," Gorky replied. "But before writing, it is my usual practice to spend a long time observing all that is around me. It is only by means of such observation that

one can obtain the right ideas. To write for the sake of writing is something incomprehensible to me."

Gorky put the final touches to his tales in the spring of 1913. The cycle was finally made up of 27 stories, the last of which was published in April 1913. "...A book to bring a little liveliness into the hard Russian life that so quickly exhausts people..."—thus the author himself defined the purpose of his tales while he was writing them. In 1919, when editing the *Tales* for a proposed book to be published by Z. I. Grzhebin (the edition that first used the title *Tales of Italy* to which we have become accustomed), Gorky defined the main point of these stories in the introduction from the "editors" as follows:

"...In essence, these are not 'tales', that is to say the product of the imagination of a person whom harsh reality or the heavy boredom of life has exhausted and who therefore consoles himself and others by drawing on his imagination, to create a new life that is brighter, and more festive, gentler, or, perhaps, more frightening; nor are these tales 'inventions' of a writer concealing a moral or some cutting truth as in the wonderful wise stories of the famous Voltaire, Laboulaye, Saltykov-Shchedrin, and other writers. Gorky's *Tales* are scenes of real life as he saw it in Italy; he called these scenes tales only because Italy's nature, the customs of its people, and their whole lives are so unlike Russian life that to the simple Russian they might appear to be fairy tales.

"It is possible that the author has embellished the Italians a little, but their country is so beautiful that the people may involuntarily be seen as perhaps better than they are. All in all, though, it is no great sin to make people out to be a little better than they are; they are too frequently and insistently told that they are bad, and the fact that they could—should they wish so—be better is almost completely forgotten."

The social and pedagogical significance of *Tales of Italy* was emphasised by Gorky later, too. In so doing, he would lay particular stress on his story about the Mothers. "I

expressed 'romantically' and as best I could my view on women. Do not take the title *Mother* purely in the physiological sense—it should also be understood allegorically: mother of the world, mother of all the great and small builders of the 'new nature', of the new life. It seems to me that women should set out towards their freedom from that point, from their realisation of their world-important role."

The *Tales of Italy* evoked a large number of comments from writers, critics, and also readers.

The Bolshevik press, in which the best of the *Tales of Italy* were printed, took pride in publishing Gorky's works. Active participants in the revolutionary underground thought of these stories as part of the proletariat's struggle. The *Tales* were praised by Lenin: "By contributing your wonderful *Tales*, you have greatly helped *Zvezda* and I am extremely pleased."

"I think that they will be very successful indeed," V. Veresayev wrote to Gorky about the *Tales* on 24 November 1912. "I have just re-read them and found that I like them still more. A certain bright joyfulness, tenderness, and love for people in them grips one."

"Thank you for your nice letter and for the *Tales*," wrote M. Kotsyubinsky from a clinic not long before his death. "There is so much love for people in them, so much knowledge about their hearts and understanding of nature. A wonderful, sunny book!"

The opinion of the Italian Communist writer Giovanni Germanetto is of particular interest:

"Many wonderful pages have been written about Italy, about its sky, its sun and flowers, about Venice, Naples, Rome, and Florence, but so little has ever been said about its people. Maxim Gorky... has been able to show us in an enchanting setting of Italy's lovely nature and in true words the whole life, poverty, sufferings and heroic struggle of the Italian people. ...Gorky never lived in Italy as a foreign visitor—he lived the life of the country, the life of its people."

1. ...The midday gun has just gone off...—midday is marked by a cannon shot in a number of Italian towns.

2. Sharifu'd-Din—presumably Sharif Eddin Ali, the 15th century Persian historian.

3. ...the whole East has sprung to life!—a reference to the Russian revolution of 1905-1907 and its influence on the development of the liberation movements of the Eastern peoples.

4. Salvator Rosa—Italian artist (1615-1673), born in Naples. He took part in the Neapolitan popular uprising of 1647.

5. Tommaso Aniello, or Mazaniello (1623-1647)—a fisherman who led the Neapolitan popular uprising against the political and economic oppression of the King of Naples. He was murdered on the tenth day of the uprising by a hired assassin.

6. ...good allies who presented us with the sands of Africa in reward for our friendship—Italy's colonial expansion into Africa was persistently promoted by the Kaiser's Germany.

CHILDHOOD

Childhood is the first part of the autobiographical trilogy Gorky spent over a decade (1913-1923) writing, a trilogy in which the writer describes his childhood and youth from 1871 to 1888. The three books *Childhood*, *My Apprenticeship*, *My Universities*, although written at different dates, were regarded by their author as parts of a single narrative.

Gorky's life experiences were of exceptional importance in all of his work. In 1930, Gorky replied, "I use mainly autobiographical material..." to the enquiry "What are your main sources" in a questionnaire addressed to writers.

Gorky tried his hand at autobiographical narrative early on in his career as a writer. We have the testimony of the publisher I. P. Ladyzhnikov that "Alexei Maximovich, on deciding to write *Childhood*, asked me to seek

out an 'ancient' copy-book with his first attempt at an autobiography in it". This copy-book in fact contained Gorky's *Description of the Facts and Thoughts Which Together Led to the Best Parts of My Heart Drying Up*, dated 5 April 1893. Two years later Gorky published the autobiographical story *Grandmother Akulina*. The following year he published *A Ten-Kopeck Coin* and *Beauty*, both also autobiographical. Certain scenes in these stories correspond to episodes in the books *Childhood* and *My Apprenticeship*. The style and emphasis in the early attempts are, however, quite different.

The writer was not able, at that early stage in his career, to create a fully-formed autobiographical story and he returned to this task in his mature years. In 1906 Gorky wrote to Ladyzhnikov from America: "I have a great many different literary plans, and I am, incidentally, also thinking of finally writing an autobiography...." According to Maria Andreyeva, Gorky spent a long time in the summer of 1908 talking to Lenin, who was staying with him in Capri, "about Nizhny-Novgorod, the Volga, his childhood, his grandmother Akulina Ivanovna, and about his youth and wanderings.... Lenin listened to him most attentively, screwing up his eyes as was his habit, and on one occasion said to Gorky:

"You ought to write all that down, my friend, you really ought! It's wonderfully instructive, all of it, remarkable...."

"Gorky immediately stopped short, and, after a silence broken only by an embarrassed cough, said unhappily:

"I'll write it ... some day..."

He was only able to set about this work in 1910.

Gorky made his first attempt at an artistic treatment of autobiography in the story *Musica*, written in November 1910 and published two months later in the Italian journal *Primavera*. This story was followed by *The Writer* (1911), *An Event from the Life of Makar* (1912), *The Master* (1912), the first eleven works in the cycle *About Russia*

(1912-1913), *The Creepy-Crawlies*, a second story called *Music* (1913), the books *Childhood* (1913) and *My Apprenticeship*, the continuation of the cycle *About Russia*, and a whole number of other autobiographical works. "Italy," A. Zolotorev remarks in his memoirs, "drew Alexei Maximovich closer or rather returned him to his far-off childhood, bathing even the hard days in gentle sunlight. The writing of *Childhood* is what makes Gorky's Capri period one of the most significant stages in his literary career."

The publication of *Childhood* began on 25 August 1913 in the newspaper *Russkoye Slovo*. Gorky was sending the work chapter by chapter from Capri to Moscow. And at the same time began to negotiate with Ladyzhnikov for its publication in book form in Berlin.

Before the publication of *Childhood* had even drawn to a close in *Russkoye Slovo*, the author began receiving letters full of high praise for his latest work.

On 15 September the publisher of *Russkoye Slovo* I. D. Sytin, telegraphed to Gorky: "... am reading *Childhood* with delight", while in a letter to Ladyzhnikov dated 15 November 1913, Dr. I. I. Manukhin asked him to tell Gorky that Ivan Mechnikov liked *Childhood* very much indeed.

When Mikhail Prishvin received an inscribed copy of the book from Gorky in 1915, he wrote the following to the author on 4 June 1915: "*Childhood* is a very good book... I would advise you to give each chapter a title when a fine edition is being prepared. My favourites will then be *Two Gods* (grandmother's and grandfather's) and also *That's Fine*. It seems to me that the young Peshkov comes through best in these chapters even though you are writing about others. ...Your book is good and conscientious."

In August 1915, D. A. Furmanov, the future author of *Chapayev*, read Gorky's *Childhood*. The young Furmanov was greatly struck by the description of the grandmother, whom he saw as the "personification of the round

principle" ("I recalled Karatayev"). "And when I thought about her sweet, kind God," he wrote in his diary, "I kept recalling Brand's Jehovah, immovably severe and terrible, and understood how much more acceptable and more valuable the earthly grandmother's bright God was. He is a God of life and of the earth while Brand's God is a lord of thought, theory, and of the skies." Furmanov, however, was above all entranced by the description of how the book's little hero was tempered and taught by life. "There is in him an instinct for living life, and ... a desire to get a grip onto the root of things and not to value those things which stick or cling to either side."

Most of the critics' responses to *Childhood* date from 1915-1916 as that is when the story was published as a separate book in Russia. They for the most part hailed Gorky's new work as one of great artistry.

"This book has great value for us," Kornei Chukovsky wrote, "not just as a work of art, but also as a biography of the author, as a commentary to all his writings." Chukovsky compared Tolstoy's *Childhood* to Gorky's *Childhood*, calling the picture of life painted by Gorky "street pedagogics". "But the miracle is that" this terrible tale about terrible things "literally shines with light, is one great song of joy, and, although it contains so many curses and wounds, is the happiest, most buoyant and joyful book to have come out in the last few decades.... Gorky has never before written such an airy and enchanting tale. It is the best thing he has ever done." The central source of the "light" in the story is grandmother Akulina Ivanovna, "the most attractive character ever drawn by Gorky". Chukovsky called the book's little hero a born rebel and "a little falcon": "From the cradle on, his element is rebellion!" In the scenes describing the boy's resistance to the way of life around him, Chukovsky discerned the source of Gorky's "romantic feelings about storms and rebellions".

Another response to *Childhood* which interested its author was Alexander Blok's. On 22 February 1916, Blok

wrote the following to P. S. Sukhotin: "Read Gorky's *Childhood*. Never mind about his statements, articles, and so on. What a grandmother he had!"

Blok's response to *Childhood* forms a part of his opinion of Gorky, associated in his mind with the subject of Russia and the nation's fate, one that concerned him too. As early as 1907 Blok wrote: "...if that great, boundless, spacious, sad, and promised land which we are accustomed to calling simply Russia really exists, then it is expressed to a very great extent by Gorky."

The dialectic link between the national and international principles in *Childhood* was discerned by the Armenian writer A. Shirvanzadeh.

"In my opinion," he wrote to Gorky on 26 January 1916, "the whole book is a symbol of the life of the Russian people, of the oppression they suffer, in fact, not just the Russians, but all nations. For example, I myself am not Russian—I am an Armenian born and bred far from Russian life—and yet all you have described affects me as profoundly as anything in the life of my people. And, believe me, you will be told the same by any French, English, or other writer who has risen from his people or who knows it well.

"That it touches the whole of mankind is the most important virtue of your great book."

The Gorky Archive also holds a large number of letters from foreign writers praising *Childhood*.

1. "...there was a man on board who forbade the eating of fruit..."—this interdiction was connected with the cholera epidemic which began in Rybinsk and gradually spread down the whole Volga. The epidemic reached Astrakhan in 1871.

2. "...she ... married against his will..."—this secret marriage against the will of their parents is described in detail by the grandmother in Chapter 11. This version, however, is not confirmed by documents: Alexei Peshkov's parents were married on 27 October 1863 in Nizhni-Novgorod's Church of the Annunciation.

3. "...Evgenia,... our pock-marked, red-faced nanny..."—in his article entitled *On Fairy Tales* Gorky writes that two old women acquainted him with folklore in his childhood—his grandmother and his nanny Evgenia. "My nanny lived in my grandfather's family for twenty-five years or more, 'nursed' my grandmother's numerous children, buried them, and wept for them together with her mistress. She also brought up the second generation—my grandmother's grandchildren and I remember the two old women not as housewives and workers but as friends."

4. "...'Twelve Holidays', with the Feodorovsky Virgin in the middle..."—The Feodorov Icon of the Virgin Mary is one of Russian icons believed to work miracles. It is bordered by pictures about the Orthodox Church's twelve most important holidays.

5. "Weep not, oh Mother, beside my coffin"—icon depicting the Virgin Mary at Christ's sepulchre.

6. "...to open the Holy Gates in the Church!"—there was a superstition that in order to make birth easier, the priest should be asked to open the Holy Gates, the doors leading to the altar in Orthodox churches.

7. "He was a brave fellow ... but just like that—all the same."—During the war of 1812, Napoleon, hoping to use discontent with serfdom to his own ends, contemplated abolishing serfdom in the Russian territory he occupied.

8. "... they combed the forest for the Olonchans."—Of Olonets Gubernia contained many Old Believer settlements and was one of the centres of sectarianism. The peasants of the Gubernia used to be sent to factories against their will and from these they would run away and hide in the forests.

9. "That was in '48, the year of the march on Hungary..."—a reference to the expedition organised by Nicholas I against the Hungarian revolution in 1849.

10. Yefrem Sirin—one of the Fathers of the Church (4th century A. D.). He wrote many prayers and hymns. Yefrem Sirin's poetry is gloomy and is ascetic in spirit.

11. "'Til late at night from early morn...."—lines from *The Beggar* (1857) by I. Nikitin.

12. "So you're off to the war?"—the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878.