



Mykhailo Starytsky
(1840-1904)

THE SHREWD CONSTABLE

Not far from the town of Mohiliv-Podilsky, there is a village called Konatkivtsi. As befits a village, it had a tavern run by a tenant, the Jew Shmul. It goes without saying, that this Shmul catered both to the local villagers, who pawned their *siriak* and *svitka* coats for drinks, and to occasional travelers. Once in early February, an elderly traveler, apparently a peasant, visited the tavern. He ordered half a pint of *horilka*, settled in a corner, produced a piece of bread and a sea-roach, and humbly began to partake of his evening meal. It was already late. Apart from Shmul and the stranger, there were two local villagers whom Shmul wished to show the door, because they had spent their money and were insisting on another round of drinks on credit. No sooner had Shmul got rid of them, declaring categorically that he did not have any more vodka, and was about to bolt the door than the stranger all of a sudden wrongly swallowed his drink, broke into a cough, and dropped to the floor. Shmul raised a cry that made his frightened wife, Sura, come running into the tavern. They began pouring cold water on the head of the unfortunate man, but all in vain: the peasant was dead. Horror-struck, Shmul rushed out of the tavern after the two villagers who could be the only witnesses to this incident. Beside himself with terror, he yelled and knocked on the windows of the houses nearby. There was only one thought obtrusively revolving in his mind: this horrible mishap would be his ruin, and the next thing he'd have on his neck would be the village elder, district superintendent of police, medical examiner, and the constable, especially the constable. Oh, this one won't show any mercy! Shmul thought. And what if the peasant, God forbid, had been poisoned? They'll say that Shmul did it to steal the stranger's money! They'll say it by all means! *Okh, verfal, verfal!**

After catching up with his fellow villagers, Shmul, his voice choked with emotion, told them of the misfortune and beseeched them to return and be witnesses to the incident. He promised them as much *horilka* as they wished, not only on credit but free. The *horilka* settled the matter right away: the deceased was carried into the entrance hall and the two peasants promised to watch him while Shmul ran for the village policeman. The next day the entire village already knew of the mysterious death of the stranger in the tavern. The village elder informed the *volost* authorities, the *volost* authorities notified the district superintendent of police, and the superintendent the medical examiner. While all this took place, the deceased remained lying in the entrance hall of the tavern. Many curious people came to ask: who? what? and why? Shmul treated all to drinks and told each of the details of the death, eliciting sympathy and waiting for the superintendent and the commission with agonizing trepidation. Some of the peasants viewed

* It's the end, the end —Yid.

the situation philosophically: truth will surface like vegetable oil in water, or else the authorities will surely — well, the authorities are wont to put up a scare anyway. Others were remotely deriving malicious delight for God having inflicted punishment upon Shmul for his extortionate practices. All Shmul did was sigh.

The superintendent of police and the medical examiner arrived at last. Outside, a thaw had set in, causing the corpse to begin decomposing. The deceased was dissected quickly and it was learned that the man had died of natural chronic causes which did not evoke any suspicions of his end whatsoever. So, after drawing up an act, the authorities ordered the village elder to prepare a grave, a coffin, notify the priest, and commit the body to the earth. All this would be later supervised by the constable when he arrived. The authorities issued the order — and left. Shmul, who had been shivering in his boots all these days, was already praying to God for having allayed a storm, but... the prayer was premature. Toward nightfall the constable showed up and took charge over the burial.

Shmul scratched his pate, because the devil had brought the constable after all. The constable scratched his pate as well, because he had been on his way to the market to collect a petty tribute from the market women and had to let such a profitable chance slip. He ripped into Shmul for failing to inform him in time of the incident. But Shmul, aware of his invulnerability, coolly replied that the authorities had inspected everything and found nothing amiss. As to the constable's abuse, Shmul took it even with some indulgence: Let him cuss — the man had good reason to be annoyed for having missed his tinkling profits.

The local Mars ordered that everything necessary for the burial be made ready for the next day, and concluding his speech with a round oath, he fell asleep with the thought that if not today so on Thursday he'd pump Shmul. The next morning the constable was up early and in good spirits. From behind the alcove where Shmul slept with Sura, Shmul noticed the cunning smile on the constable's lips and hurried to perform his morning prayer. But no sooner had he taken the tallith out of the trunk which, apart from money, also held sacred objects and books, than the constable called him:

"Shmul, go to the deceased: he must be carried outdoors in the presence of the house's master."

"But what for?" the frightened Shmul asked. "Let him be!"

"Get moving, do you hear me? And don't argue with me, kike!" shouted the constable who did not brook any objections.

There was nothing to be done. They -went out into the entrance hall, in the middle of which lay the deceased covered with a bast mat. The moment the mat was lifted, they were overwhelmed by a horrible stench. Everyone made way for Shmul who, holding his nose, jumped aside to the door.

"Hey, why are you hiding? Just look at that softie! Come closer and we'll see whether anything's missing on the deceased."

"Why should I do that, Your Excellency? By our law we must not stand too close to a corpse."

"Rubbish! Don't you lie to me! Guards, bring him closer: we must list everything in his presence. I've been charged by the authorities to commit to earth everything thoroughly and completely."

"Your Excellency, don't offend me! I'll be in your debt forever," Shmul begged.

"Bring him here, I tell you!" the constable roared.

The guards took hold of Shmul, who didn't understand what was wanted of him, and brought

him closer to the deceased. Shmul covered his face with his hands and turned away.

"Sit down closer without ceremony. We'll undo the stitches and have a look through the intestines," the constable continued, smiling. "That's so you won't say that I kept something to myself and put the blame on you. The likes of you are no mean informers! You're monsters, and traitors! Drag him here," the constable hissed.

But the poor son of Israel trembled like a leaf, as a morbid sense of loathing contorted his features.

"*Gewalt!* Help! My dear lord, come and I'll tell you something! But don't pester me! I'll tell you something interesting."

"Well, well! So what is it you want to tell me? Guards, shut the door so that he won't escape."

The constable took Shmul to a side room.

"Your Excellency, my dear lord, here take a ruble and let me go! The deuce take everything else!"

"What, a ruble? Is this a joke?"

"My lord, why rob me? I could do for you..."

"Shut up!" the constable shouted, blood flooding his face. "Now off you go and take the lungs out of that corpse: I want to examine them!"

"My lord, take two rubles!"

"Go and take the lungs, you scum! Do you know where I could put you away?"

"*Okh, Weh is mir* *! Take three!" Shmul implored, barely standing on his feet.

In the end, the constable took the bribe and pushed Shmul out of the room, because the latter was on the verge of fainting.

Hoping to get away with only three rubles, you rogue? the constable cursed in his mind. Don't try that on me! He went up to the corpse and started looking at it with stoical intensity.

All of a sudden the constable jumped. His face flared up with noble indignation.

"There's something wrong! The sutures have been tampered with. That's an offense against the law. Bring Shmul here! How did the guards overlook such a sacrilege? Call the elder! Draw up an act! I'll bring all of you to court!" the constable shouted for everyone in the tavern to hear. "Carry the deceased into the tavern: his intestines must be taken out, put into the trunk and sealed up for inspection by the authorities. Drag him in!"

Shmul, more dead than alive, was brought before the constable. He realized that this was a disaster, that the only thing the constable really wanted was yet another bribe. But he also realized that nothing would stop the constable, and in a minute or so all the vileness would be in the trunk and defile everything Shmul held sacred.

With tears in his eyes, Shmul began to beseech the constable.

"What do you want from me, Your Excellency? I'm a poor man, I have a wife and children.... *Okh, Gewalt!* I have nothing more to give you. Sura, ask the kind lord to take pity on us and not defile our home," Shmul entreated, sobbing and wiping his tears off with the end of his coat, while Sura was trying to catch the constable's hand to kiss it.

The tears, of course, only amused the constable. All he wanted was to squeeze out yet another bribe, but more substantial this time. It was hard to tell what turn the haggling would have taken if Shmul had not added a random phrase to his plea:

"My lord, I don't have anything more to give you, really. I'm a poor Yid! Why is it only me

* Woe is me — Yid.

you're after? Aren't there enough peasants in our villages, and rich peasants for that matter?"

"All right, to hell with you! Give me another three rubles," the constable concluded. "Guess I can't have no more of a cat but her skin."

Why, Shmul communicated a very clever idea to me, the constable thought. The deceased can't lie just at one man's home until the grave is dug and the coffin built; the entire community must share this duty!

Right away the constable ordered a sled to be brought. After the deceased was put on the sled and covered with a mat, the constable told the two guards to pull the sled into the street. This strange train, with the constable at the head and the policeman behind, moved toward the first house on their way. When they drew up to it, they saw a girl of about eight years old sitting on the *prizba* **. She was dressed in her mother's sheepskin coat and held an infant in her arms.

"Is your mother or father at home?" the constable asked.

"Father's left on his wagon, and mama's ill," the girl answered in a squeaky voice.

"Open the door!" the constable ordered. "Take the deceased off the sled and carry him into the house," he said to the guards.

The horrified girl ran inside to inform her mother of what was to happen. The sick woman became alarmed, climbed down the stove, threw an *opancha* woolen overcoat on her shoulders, and, shivering, went out into the entrance hall. There she saw the disfigured, decomposing corpse on the mat, as the guard of law insisted on her opening the door into the room.

"My dear lord, what sort of an outrage is that?" the panic-stricken woman wailed. "Why do you treat us so cruelly? I'm here alone with the children, I'm ill... Have mercy on us!"

"I can't, and I don't intend shouldering the responsibilities of others!" the constable insisted. "This is no kike for you to be thrown into a pigsty. He's a Christian after all. Wherever did you see a Christian body lying in an entrance hall or pigsty before burial? He must be placed on the table in a room under the icons with due honor until the priest conducts the office for the dead."

"But, God forgive me, he stinks so horribly he'll chase me and my children out of the house!"

"You foolish woman, what do you expect that I take the consequences of sin? Am I supposed to go to hell because of you?" the constable yelled, opening the door.

The frightened woman went down on her knees at his feet.

"My dear lord, don't do that! Don't defile my home. Show some respect, because I'm barely standing on my feet! I'll do you a good turn for your kindness."

"Out with three rubles and you can go to hell! I'll take my old man to another house!"

"Woe is me! Where am I supposed to get three rubles? We haven't such money in our home! Just look at our poverty!"

"Out with it! And stop sniveling or I'll put him right on the table and keep him there for three days according to law!"

"You might as well cut me to pieces, but I haven't the money! What am I to do? Woe is me!" she lamented, wringing her hands, as her children sobbed.

"Bring in the deceased!" the constable commanded, oblivious to the woman's tears.

"Stop!" the woman cried and rushed to a trunk. With trembling hands she opened the lid, took out a bundle with coppers and almost threw them on the table.

"Take everything there is. May you choke on it!"

The constable counted the money; there were eighty kopecks in all. Should I take offense or not? he wondered. Dismissing his hesitation, he ordered the deceased to be put back on the sled.

"Do you think I need that money?" he justified himself, leaving the house. "It's not I who

** A mound or ledge of earth banked against the outer walls of peasant houses — *Tr.*

needs it, but the deceased: who'll make him a coffin for nothing, who'll dig the grave, who'll perform the funeral rites? That's why I collect the money from Christians. God will take your offering into account!"

The woman didn't say anything to this consolation: she only sobbed bitterly, pressing the children to her side.

The sled was pulled on further, with the constable in the lead and the policeman behind him. They stopped at the next house. The constable entered it. Near the window sat an old man on a homemade stool and stitched a boot. There was no one else in the room.

"Hello, old man," the constable said on entering.

"Hello," the host replied, and bringing up a hand to his weak eyes, began to study the guest.

"Get on your feet, brother," the constable continued. "Pull the table out here: I'll have to put a deceased man on it until the coffin for him is made."

The old man became fidgety, rose, came closer to the constable, and only then did he realize with whom he was dealing.

"What deceased man are you talking about?" he asked, puzzled.

"The one who died so suddenly in the kike's tavern."

"Have mercy on me, lord. He's been in that tavern, so let him stay there. People say that you can't come close to him anymore."

"That's just the reason I brought him to your home: you live by yourself and will bear the discomfort, but for people with families it's difficult."

"What sort of a shamelessness is that, sir? Don't do such a nasty thing to me! I've never done any wrong to anybody."

"Why do I have to fuss with you? I can't possibly throw a Christian into a pigsty!"

"But, sir, he should have been buried a long time ago. I was told that he was disemboweled yesterday."

"Don't you teach me! I know what I'm doing. Hey!" he shouted to the guards. "Carry the deceased into the house!"

"What's that supposed to be? It's a vile outrage!" the old man protested. "I won't let you defile my home! I'll go straight to the police superintendent!"

"Shut up or I'll put that deceased on your head!"

"Who do you think you are? This is my home: I won't let you defile it!"

"Oh, so you're being rude!" the now enraged constable shouted, grabbing the old man by the scruff of his neck. "Arrest the rebel!"

But the old man wouldn't calm down.

"You can bind me, beat me, you filthy bloodsucker!" he screamed.

The constable stopped: swinging fists was not exactly his intended line of action — the scandal would interrupt his rounds which promised a handsome gain.

"Now hit me!" the old man shouted beside himself. "Hit me, you cutthroat, you robber! Haven't you fleeced enough people yet? Hit me!"

Nobody knew to what end this scene would have come if it were not interrupted by a young, beautiful girl who suddenly rushed into the house. She was the host's granddaughter who had been at the sheepfold and heard her grandfather scream.

"Sir, dear sir, leave my grandfather alone!" she pleaded, kneeling at the constable's feet which she tried to catch. "Don't beat my grandfather!"

"I'll send him off to prison in Siberia! How dare he revile the authorities!"

"Dear sir, pardon him! Have mercy on him!" the granddaughter begged, crying. She took a

yellow bill tied in a kerchief and shoved it into his hand.

The bill produced its proper effect. By now the constable regretted having got mixed up with the raving old man, and so he let him go.

"Now listen, old man!" the constable said now calmer, but with a great sense of dignity. "If it were not for my respect for your age and your granddaughter, I would've made it really hot for you."

Having come to his senses, the old man had cold feet by now.

"Forgive me, Your Excellency," he whispered.

In response, the constable spit in disgust and slammed the door shut as he went outside. The sled was pulled to the third house. Here the mistress proved to be clever and experienced. She began haggling right away: they agreed on four *zlotys*, a piece of wax and four pounds of honey (the woman had an apiary).

In this way the procession slowly moved through the village, not missing a single house. Everywhere the reaction was about the same, and the size of the tribute was more or less, depending on luck. Those who had been fleeced in this manner came together, venting their chagrin, and then repaired to the tavern to seek counsel. Toward evening a sizable crowd had gathered in the tavern. The villagers' discontent was mounting. Outcries of protest were already in the air:

"What sort of an extortion is that? We've never seen anything like it! He goes around the village with the corpse like a Russian vendor with his wares and robs every home!"

"Why do you keep silent about that fiend?" Shmul worked up the crowd. "Go to the priest and tell him everything you know! I'll be your witness!"

"Really, why do we keep our mouths shut? Let's go!" someone cried out with determination.

Excitement stirred the crowd and the peasants set forth to the priest. The latter took the matter close to heart and immediately sent a letter to the district superintendent of police.

In the meantime, the constable and his men continued paying their calls until twilight. They had collected an ample tribute of lengths of cloth, wax, cheese, eggs, butter, five-kopeck coppers and gold coins. After the day's work, our shrewd constable made camp for the night in the middle of a street and sent his men for *horilka*. They went on a spree. Later on, already doused to the gills, he fell asleep, dreaming of how much he would rake in from the second part of the village the next day.

How it all ended we do not know.

Translated by Anatole Bilenko