

Ivan Franko

Boa Constrictor

Translated (From a Russian Translation) by Fainna Solasko¹

Herman Goldkramer got up in a black mood that morning. He always did after spending the night in Boryslav, and this happened every Friday, when he came in from Drohobych to inspect the wells and pay the workers. He was worth a million, but Herman Goldkramer never trusted others to oversee or pay out the wages for him. He had his own new brick house in Drohobych, an attractive place full of light. Here, however, he had to spend the night in a cottage set among storehouses full of barrels of crude oil and piles of paraffin wax. True, he had built this house himself and it was certainly one of the best in Boryslav, but it could not hold a candle to the Drohobych houses. The walls were white and the windows large enough, but the scene through the panes was dreary, miserable, and repellent: stacks of firewood, mounds of clay, filthy storehouses, and still filthier hovels. You'd never see a blade of grass or a smiling face here. The stifling air was saturated with the smell of oil, which, like a narcotic, made Herman's head swim. As if this were not enough, there were the people who hurried past his house among the dirty sheds and heaps of clay and scurried tirelessly round the wells like ants—God! were these people? Was this what people were supposed to be like? The oil and the clay made them look as black as ravens, they were dressed in pitiful rags, and there was no way of telling whether the rags were actually part of them, or some ancient shreds of clothing; they reeked of filth, drinking, and corruption. Their voices—but no, these could not be human voices!—were howls, a hollow grating like the jarring of a broken cast-iron pot. And their eyes—their eyes were wild and menacing!

Several men were heading towards the wells. Despite the early hour, they had already had a few drinks, for no sober person could hold out down there, and in passing they saw Herman through the window. He shuddered when their eyes met. "If these men saw me sinking in a bog," he thought, "they'd never pull me out, they'd push me in deeper." Such were the people who surrounded him, the aristocrat, for a day and a half of every week. He spat through the open window and turned away. His eyes darted across the painted walls of the clean, cheerful room, over the highly polished floor, the small round walnut table, the chest-of-drawers, and the desk. Everything shone and sparkled in the rays of the rising sun, which bathed the gleaming objects in a golden-crimson light.

Herman averted his eyes, for he could not stand the bright light. In the semi-darkness of the wall opposite the door hung a large, gold-framed painting. His eyes came to rest on the well-done tropical Indian landscape. In the misty blue dimness lay the far-off bamboo forests of Bengal; you could practically see the clouds of hot vapours rising from this distant green sea and spreading disease throughout the world, you could practically hear the faint cry of the blood-thirsty tiger blending with the breeze in the thicket. There were no bamboo shoots in the foreground of the picture. Instead, there were clumps of magnificent, dazzling-green ferns reaching upwards to the towering groups of broad-leaved, graceful palms over them. There was

1. Original publication: Ivan Franko. *Boa Constrictor and Other Stories*. Moscow: Foreign languages Publ. House, Moscow, nd [1957?]. pp. 197–294. This text slightly edited by Maxim Tarnawsky.

just such a group of beautiful trees in the foreground of the picture. Several gazelles had apparently come to graze in the shade. The carefree animals did not see the terrible snake, the boa constrictor, that was hiding among the huge green leaves, alert and lying in wait for its prey. They came up to the palms fearlessly, light-heartedly. The snake hurled itself at them like a bolt from the blue. There was a moment of terror, the shriek of the caught gazelle, the last cry it uttered, and the little herd scattered in hasty confusion, while one, the largest of the group and probably the dam, remained in the coils of the snake. The painter had caught the gazelles' flight and that split second in which the snake had raised its head and attacked. The reptile had encircled the gazelle's neck and back in a grip of steel, and the unfortunate animal's head protruded from the brightly-coloured, glittering coils. Its large bulging eyes were full of agony and seemed liquid with tears. The veins on its neck bulged, and one could practically see the last quivering movements of its head. The snake's eyes, on the other hand, burned with such demoniacal, sinister glee, with such confidence in its own power that a chill would run down your spine if you looked at it closely. It was most extraordinary! Strangely and inexplicably, Herman Goldkramer was drawn to the picture and could sit there for hours looking into the frightening, satanic eyes of the snake. He had discovered the picture on exhibit in Vienna many years before and had taken such an immediate liking to it that he had bought two copies then and there and had hung one in his house in Drohobych and the other in Boryslav. He would often show the picture to his guests and always comment on the stupid gazelle who had walked right into the snake's maw. Once alone, however, he could never jest about it. He had a vague and superstitious fear of those eyes, and he felt that one day the snake would come to life and bring him something extraordinary—either great joy or great unhappiness.

The heavy, cold fog that had enveloped the town during the night was slowly lifting. Herman Goldkramer drank his coffee and sat down at his desk. He opened a large ledger and was about to tally up the week's accounts, but the sunshine pouring in through the window, the cool of the morning, and the low, distant hubbub of the workers all conspired to dull his senses, to weaken and to lull them to sleep. He was tired from yesterday's trip and his household worries, and for a moment the sight of the cloth-bound book, of the long columns of figures in it, and the carved ivory penholder repulsed him. He felt at peace, not a thought stirred in his head as his chest rose and fell evenly. He leaned his head on his palm, and although he certainly did not belong to that category of men who think and reason a great deal, for the first time in many years he permitted the impressions of his past life to revive in his memory and pass in vivid review before his eyes.

The first years of his life fled past him like a sombre cloud.

He still shuddered at the thought of the poverty and misery that had welcomed him into the world. No matter how bitter life now seemed to him at times, he never wished and never would wish his early years to return. No! Those early years hung over him like a frightful curse. It was the curse of poverty, a curse that killed in the bud every kind feeling in his soul. He had felt that curse in moments of his greatest speculative triumphs, the ghost of that early poverty had often poisoned his greatest joys, adding a bitter drop to the sweet nectar of wealth and luxury. To this very day he had a vivid memory of that tumbledown, rotting, damp, filthy, and neglected hut on the Lan in Drohobych where he had first seen the light of day. The hut stood on the bank of a

stream, opposite a decrepit, hideous tannery. Twice a week two pimply tanners with festering eyes would haul out armfuls of soaking-wet waste bast that spread a sour, choking, killing stench a mile round. There were many other huts next to his mother's, all just as crowded; each roof was so uneven, rotten, and full of holes that the whole place looked more like a miserable ruin, like a great heap of trash, dirt, rotting wood, and rags than like human dwellings. The air there was always so foul and stifling that even the sun's rays that peeped in through the cracks and chinks in the walls and roofs seemed bleak. This seemed to be the breeding ground of disease which then spread for miles around. There were several families to each hut, that is, several cranky, lazy, and unkempt Jewesses, each with at least five squealing, swarming, whining children at her feet. Their red-headed men were infrequent visitors there—at best, they dropped in once a week on Friday nights to celebrate the Sabbath. They were beggars, money-changers, rag and bone pickers, and others, who did God knows what for a living. Some came very rarely, others lived in the city, and when they came on Fridays they tried to spend the night on a bench in the tavern, or in the bushes out in the cold, under the open sky, just so as not to breathe the foul, unhealthy air and not to hear the shrieks, the bickering, and the constant stream of cursing from their wives and children.

Herman's mother was no better than the rest—if not worse. She was still a young woman, twenty or twenty-two at most, but she had already become fitted, so to speak, to the mould of a type of Jewess so common to our cities, whose development had been affected by unhealthy living conditions, bad upbringing, a complete lack of education, early marriage, slothfulness, and hundreds of other causes. Herman did not recall that she was ever animated, bright-eyed, cheerful, or dressed-up, although there were still some traces of a former beauty on her face. That face had once been round and rosy-cheeked, but it had become grey with dirt and want and sagged loosely as an empty bag; her once firm red lips had become blue and puffy, her eyes were dull and festering. She was married at fourteen, and was divorced three years later, for her husband refused to support her any more. He took his eldest son away with him and they disappeared. He was a rag-man and went from village to village in his one-horse cart, trading needles, mirrors, awls, and other small household items for rags. The younger boy, Herman, remained with his mother. He was a year and a half old when his parents separated and he remembered neither his father nor his elder brother; he later found out quite by chance that they both died of cholera out in a field, where they were discovered nearly a week later beside their dead horse. Growing up as he did in such an unhealthy atmosphere, he developed slowly and dully, he was often ill, and the first clear memory he had of his childhood was his enormous stomach, which the other children often pounded like a drum. He had a dim recollection of games among a swarm of filthy, naked children. They used to join hands and run about the crowded yard between two huts, screaming at the top of their voices, running till they got dizzy, and then they would flop down on the ground. Sometimes they would go wading in the puddles, splashing round like a bunch of frogs in the putrid water of the stream, blackened by the waste bast, and scaring the huge, long-tailed rats that scurried away to safety in their holes. He had a vivid picture of himself and his friends sliding down the bank into the water on their bellies, and of the men of the settlement standing on the bridge and bursting with laughter at the sight of his

bloated grey-blue stomach and the two long, skinny legs that were like two little sticks attached to it. His memory of the nights spent in the crowded, stinking hovel with a dozen other small children was more vivid still. Those were nights spent on the damp floor, on rotting hay full of maggots and other filth, terrible nights filled with the muffled laughter and cries of the children, the cuffs, the fights, and the screams of the women, endless nights spent rolled up in a ball to keep warm, nights from which he would awaken with festering eyes, his body burning from bug bites! Oh, those terrible nights of his childhood, which to others for ever bring fond memories of the tender smiles and kisses of their mothers, of the quiet and happiness that were the greatest joy in life—to him they were the first and greatest torture! They haunted him all his life, and at the slightest recollection of them he felt he was choking, his heart filled with loathing, with a dull, mortal hatred of everything poor, ragged, beggarly, surrounded by filth, and crushed by misfortune. He knew not the reason for this loathing, he knew not that such a childhood would dull any normal person's nerves and blot out all feeling, making him deaf to the tears and grief of another human being, causing him to feel repugnance, not kindness, at the sight of misery. Herman Goldkramer never bothered to think about this or to try to analyze his behaviour. Many were the times when cheated workingwomen, with emaciated faces and dressed in oil-soaked rags, wept and begged him to pay them their full wages and he would spit, turn away, and order his servant to throw them out.

He remembered his mother sitting out in front of the house with a stocking and a ball of yarn, spending her days in endless cursing, shouting in her rasping voice to drown the sound of a bickering neighbour's curses. At first glance it would seem that she knitted constantly, yet, actually, she added very few rows to what had already been done. Sometimes she would carry the same stocking and the same ball of yarn around for months on end, till the unfinished stocking and the unchanging ball of yarn would acquire the protective colouring of their surroundings and become dirty-grey. Many were the times when she would give chase to some boy who had enraged her with an insolent remark; she waddled through the puddles, dishevelled, out of breath, hoarse, and purple with rage, and when she would finally catch up with the unfortunate child, she would grab him by the hair and pommel him mercilessly till he would sag to the ground. Herman had often been at the receiving end of her practised hand. Like all slothful poor people, she was cross and hot-tempered, easily took offence, and when enraged she actually did not realize whom she was thrashing, what she had in her hand, or where the blows were falling. Herman remembered the time when she had hit him so hard on the head with a stick that he had fallen in a pool of his own blood. She had then dragged him to his feet by the hair, plastered the wound with a lump of chewed-up bread, spat into his mouth to stop his crying, and thrown him out like a squealing puppy. Herman did not know how his mother got along or how she supported the two of them. He did know that the hut they lived in was not theirs, that they rented it, and he also remembered a tall, fat, grey-haired Jew who used to come, shout at his mother for looking so frowzy, and take her off somewhere—Herman knew not where. His mother would often go off by herself in the evenings and not return till dawn. She would come back tired and bitter, as if she had spent a sleepless night, and would bring home a few coins. Herman soon found out how she earned the money, but it did not bother him at all. Nowadays he tried never to think of her.

Such was the life of Herman Goldkramer, future millionaire, up to the age of ten. At the age of ten he looked like an underdeveloped child of seven. He was not strong and had nothing of the child's boundless energy. It was then that he first felt the sweet pangs of idleness and would often sit dozing on a bench in the hut for days on end, although his mother would make him go into town to sell matches to the peasants or find some other kind of work, like the other boys did.

In the summer of 1831 a terrible cholera epidemic, the like of which had never been heard of, descended upon our region. There were ominous rumours circulating among the people that "God's wrath" would soon be upon them, and the Christian world lived in terror of the advent of inevitable, sudden death. And it came, but it was a hundred times more terrible than had been expected. Entire villages died out, whole families disappeared from the face of the earth, melting away like wax over a flame. One knew not of another's death, yet waited for his own death to come. Brother turned away from brother, fathers from their sons, so as not to see the terrible brand of death on them. The living spent their days at taverns, drinking and howling songs at the top of their voices in their madness. There was no one to comfort the despairing and the orphans, there was no one to save the stricken who begged and pleaded for a sip of water as terrible death convulsions racked their bodies. Horrible stories of vampires who attacked people passed from mouth to mouth among the people, and in some villages drunken, panic-stricken mobs began burning at the stake those they thought to be vampires.

Drohobych was not spared, either. Lan was the worst hit by cholera, more so than any of the other suburbs, perhaps because the foul and stagnant air was a breeding-place of germs, or perhaps because the people lived so closely and were so crowded that they quickly infected one another. Men, women, and mostly children fell like grass before a reaper's scythe, dying quietly in the corners and nooks of the huts. God alone knows how many died. Those who had money fled to the mountains, to the clear air, but the plague found them out there, and only a small handful survived to return. Herman's mother had no money; she was now deprived of her livelihood, and there was nothing left to eat in the house. She raved about the hut in fear and hunger, cursing in a hoarse voice, until she finally dropped to the ground with the plague. Herman remembered running over to her, full of childish curiosity at the sight of the twisted, blue body awaiting the terrible end. He could still see her face, so full of pain, so contorted and changed that, small child though he was, chills ran down his spine at the sight of her. He remembered every word, every movement she made in those terrible moments of parting. She waved her arm at him, to keep him from coming any closer, for in this moment of greatest suffering the mother's love, that had not been lost beneath her coarse shell, won out. Her outstretched arm fell limply to the ground. Herman watched every tendon and joint in her body contract and extend convulsively, she was shivering with cold and he saw more and more blue and green spots appear on her body.

"Hersh," she rasped, "don't come ... near me!" The boy stood there in a daze. He did not really understand what was happening. His mother's body jerked convulsively. For an instant he caught sight of her eyes: they had become bloodshot and were bulging from their sockets with strain.

"Hersh! Be honest!" the poor woman moaned weakly and her head fell back on the ground.

Herman stood there, too frightened to come any closer, yet just as frightened to run away.

“Water! Water!” the dying woman whispered, but Herman was too dazed to move. He did not know how long he stood there, within two feet of his mother’s blue and stiffening body. He could not even remember who brought him back to his senses, he did not know when the corpse was taken away, or where it was taken. His memory blacked out those moments for ever.

He came to himself late at night, out in the street. Hunger tore at his entrails, thirst burned his throat, terror gripped his chest in an iron vice. The quiet was all-embracing, dark, depressing, and absolute, though at times a muffled sob, or moan of a dying person, could be heard from some far-off corner. There were lights in the windows of the houses where there were still living beings; they flickered in the distance, cutting through the darkness like a knife. It was then that little Herman first felt the great abyss of his loneliness and orphanhood. Looking at the lights in the windows he felt still more terrified, his teeth chattered, his knees trembled, and the world began to spin around before his eyes. A cold wind from the east cooled his head a bit. He prowled the streets in mortal fear, turning to look back every few seconds. Hunger drove him on, obliterating every other feeling, putting a new, daring thought into his mind. Herman had no time to lose. Stealthily as a cat he crept up to the first dark house he saw, where everyone must have been dead. The first house was locked, it was no use trying to break in, he had not the strength for that. He crept towards another house. The last living person there had just died. The door was wide open, and Herman walked in. He ransacked the cupboards and the china closet to see if there was anything edible, and was lucky, for he found a big piece of bread.

He grabbed it up, shuddered, and fled in terror. As he dashed out of the house he tripped over a corpse lying on the floor and tumbled face down on the ground, but he still clutched his great find.

When he had eaten his fill, he crawled under a fence and fell soundly asleep among the burdocks. He awoke with new energy the next morning, and was comforted by the clear, warm, sunny day which banished all his fears. He ran down the streets taking no heed of the wailing and moaning coming from every side. The thought that he too might die never entered his head. He was not afraid of going hungry, as he still had a good-sized chunk of bread left over from the night before. He came out on a street where they were carting the corpses from the dead-house to the cemetery outside the city limits. He watched the scene with great interest. There was an unending chain of carts stretched out along the street, each piled high with hastily-made coffins of rough-hewn wood. There were two or three corpses stuffed into each coffin, for there were not enough to go round. Arms and legs stuck out from under the bulging lids, some naked and repulsively green, others in rags, and others still clad in good clothes. The wail that went up from the mourners was unending. People of all classes flocked behind the carts and many fell stricken to the ground. Herman was terrified at the sight of this endless procession. He ran as fast as he could, just to get as far away as possible from the frightful street. For a long time afterwards he could still hear the clatter of the coffins piled high on the wooden carts bumping along the cobble-stones, and the inhuman wailing often returned to haunt him at night.

He could not remember where he wandered that day, or how he spent the following days. There were too many unusual impressions which his young mind could not cope with and which

dulled his memory. He remembered entering empty houses, driven by hunger, searching the dark corners for food and bread; he remembered tripping over cold, frog-like, slimy corpses and the revulsion he felt; he remembered the time a gang of boys chased him—they were probably orphans too whom hunger had driven to seek their food as he did; he remembered that he slept under fences, among the weeds, or beneath the trees along the road. The following events were all jumbled in his mind: his head was burning, his chest was on fire, there were red circles spinning in front of his eyes—and then everything disappeared, all was blackness.

He came to in a large, cold room. He was lying on a cot, shivering under a blanket. The sun was setting, and its slanting rays caught at the black lacquered plate over his head. The room was full of cots, and the sounds of sighing and moaning were heard all around. An old woman in black was walking softly between the rows, peering at the beds. He became frightened and shut his eyes. Again all was a blank.

His quiet was broken by the maddening, monotonous sound of a shrill voice singing an endless song. He knew by then that he was in a hospital, but he did not know how he got there or why he was there.

Herman never knew how long he was in hospital, what had been wrong with him, or who had picked him off the streets. His memories of those days were like flashes of distant summer lightning.

He left the hospital one dreary, rainy day in autumn. When he found himself out in the fresh air again after his long illness he suddenly felt so weak, abandoned, and at a loss for what to do next that fear gripped him once more on the wide, deserted street, as it had before at the sight of the flickering lights in the windows that black night. He could hardly remember anything of his life before his illness. He wanted to cry, but he managed to hold back his tears and wandered aimlessly through the puddles.

“Hersh! Hersh! Come here!” someone shouted to him in Yiddish. The boy turned and saw a short, grey-eyed Jew with a sparse reddish beard. The man was wearing a long torn coat, and his boots were splattered with mud up to his ankles. At first Herman did not understand what the stranger wanted, and he walked over to him reluctantly.

“Don’t you recognize me?” the Jew asked.

Herman shook his head and stared at him.

“I’m Itsyk Schubert, remember? My wife lived there with your mother. Do you know me now?”

Herman had a very vague recollection of Itsyk, but at the thought of his mother he suddenly burst out crying.

“Now, now, don’t cry,” the Jew said gently. “My family died too. What can we do? Everyone died, all of them,” he added sadly, as if he were speaking to himself. “Tavba died, and the boy, and everyone! Now, now, my child, tears won’t help now. I thought you were dead too, but here you are—alive!”

Herman did not say a word. He stood there sobbing and wiping his eyes with his sleeve.

“You know what, Hersh? Come with me!” Itsyk said.

Herman stared as if he did not understand him.

“Where to?”

“To Gubichi! I have a hut there, and a horse and cart. Next spring we’ll go collecting rags. Do you want to? It’s a good life. That’s what your father did too, until he died, poor man!”

Herman had no home to go to, no place to spend the night, and Itsyk did not want to leave him in the street like that, so he took him to his house. The cold and rain of autumn broke the long siege of cholera, but the people could still not come to their senses after the terrible calamity. There were hardly any people in the street, and if a person did appear, his face was so frightened, miserable, grief-stricken, and sallow that one would think he had just been let out of prison after being locked up in semi-darkness, dampness, and cold, and having undergone the most terrible tortures.

It was a long way to Gubichi, the road was muddy, and great clods of clay stuck to their feet like heavy shackles, making them short of breath from the effort of plodding through the mud. They kept at it doggedly and crept ahead inch by inch like snails. Itsyk was barely able to drag along, but imagine little Herman, just out of the hospital! He nearly gave up his ghost to his Maker by the time they reached Itsyk’s house. All the while his kind-hearted guardian carried and led him, or, rather, dragged him along, talking to him to keep his spirits up. It was late at night by the time they reached their destination. Herman tottered over to a bench, flopped down on it, and was sound asleep in a second.

Gubichi was a large village on the bank of the Tismennitsa, half-way between Boryslav and Drohobych. A sloping plain rises to the north, the high hills to the south turn into another high plain, crowned by the lovely quadrangle of the Teptyuzh oak forest. The village lies in a hollow, about a thousand feet wide, that stretches along the Tismennitsa from the Boryslav hills to the Kolodruby, where it becomes part of the great Dniester Valley. The strange beauty of the environs of Gubichi is unique. There are neither the sharp peaks of the high Beskydy Mountains, nor the stark cliffs of Chernogora, nor the steep clay slopes of the mountains beyond the Dniester. There is beautiful harmony in the landscape where the enchanting and tempting variety of a mountain region blends with the boundless monotony of the Podolye flatlands. The impression is not one of towering grandeur, but, rather, of a homely, familiar confusion of colour and objects, in all possible combinations. The contours all seem soft, rounded, and in close harmony. The small, clear rivers are fast flowing, the bracing air is that of the mountains, yet it lacks the sharpness peculiar to mountain air which soon becomes unpleasant. There was a magnificent view of the far-off plains, the cornfields, copses, and villages scattered now in rows, now in picturesque groups, or in fanciful chequerboard patterns.

Life took on a new meaning for Herman. Itsyk was a kind-hearted little man who had never really asserted himself in life, as from childhood on he had been used to always letting other people of his “faith” have their way. His attitude towards Christians was the same as any other’s: he heaped abuse on some of them while playing up to others, but he cheated and tricked them all as best he could, considering it quite normal that he do so. Here Herman first found out what sort of people Christians were, and his childish mind was quick to note that every person of the Jewish faith had, so to speak, two faces: the one that was turned towards the muzhiks was always the same—squeamish, sarcastic, threatening, or crafty; the one that was turned towards people of

his own faith was exactly the same as all ordinary faces—that is, each had its own peculiarities: kind or bitter, crafty or sincere, angry or gentle. Itsyk's "real" face was truly kind and sincere, opening up a whole new bright side of human nature for little Herman, who had never known the meaning of kindness, concern, or care. Just being out in the fresh air was in itself a joy to him. He had been suffocating in the overcrowded, filthy settlement for so long—ever since the day he was born he had been breathing foul, putrid vapours—but now he could fill his lungs with the clear country air. It made his blood course faster through his veins; he was drunk with the heady air. Itsyk put up a comfortable, roomy, warm, dry bed for him, and Herman thought his trestle-bed and straw mattress and the old fleece-lined coat for a blanket fit for a king, especially since his own guardian's bed was just like his. Itsyk did the cooking himself, Herman helped as best he could, and although it was often badly prepared, they thought it delicious, because it was flavoured with hunger. Itsyk treated Herman as an equal. He noted that the boy was nimble and industrious, and he discussed every new venture with him, as he would have with a grown man. By nature he was too soft and complaisant to even dream of taking the boy in hand and instilling a feeling of absolute obedience in him, as is the favoured method of upbringing of many a guardian, who, under the guise of wanting to lead his charge on to the right path in life, kills his initiative and makes the child cower before him; when the poor child's will has been broken completely, when he stands there lifeless and dull-witted before his guardian, ready to obey his every wish and whim, he boasts, "There! We must have order in life, above all—order!" And if the child protests, he will reproach >it with the words, "Don't bite the hand that feeds you!"

During the winter Itsyk began teaching Herman to read and write—in Yiddish, of course, as he himself knew nothing else. It was hard going. Herman's early environment had been so alien to the development of spiritual qualities that only his natural stubbornness helped him overcome the first obstacles. He was very quick-witted and had a lot of common sense for everyday matters, yet in the field of studies he turned out to be so extremely dull, uncomprehending, and lacking in memory, that even good-natured, patient Itsyk would often become exasperated, slam down the book, and call off the lesson for several hours. Despite his patience and Herman's diligence, they did not accomplish much that winter, keeping strictly to a difficult mechanical method of learning.

The first warm, sunny days of spring gave Herman a new lease on life. Itsyk harnessed his horse to the cart, bought a quantity of small items the peasants needed, and off they went from village to village. How Herman loved to sit on the little chest in the back of the cart, between the piles of rags and tattered clothes, his small curly head and rosy cheeks peeping gaily above the heaps of rags. There was a clear blue sky overhead, on every side were the lush green fields, the rustling groves, the gleaming, silvery streams—all was warm and still and wonderful. The twittering and chirping of the birds blended with the chirring of the grasshoppers, the rustling green leaves, and the rippling brooks to make an ode to joy, majesty, and calm.

Herman Goldkramer, the millionaire, still recollected those happy, care-free days of his Gypsy life with Itsyk. Not that he recalled them with especial joy—oh no!—for he now regarded with disdain his former state of poverty, his struggle for a few coppers, and his feeling of satisfaction when they had collected a great amount of rags; he was even peeved at that quiet

feeling of happiness and satisfaction, but deep down in his heart he knew that those were the happiest days of his life, and that the peaceful, blissful days of poverty with Itsyk would never return.

Often they followed the winding roads through the cornfields. There was not a soul in sight, the rye was still green, and a breeze rippled the surface of the heavy, ripening ears. Here and there were bright-green strips of bewhiskered barley, and the smooth slender stems of winter wheat swayed proudly in the wind. No matter which way you looked, there was not a trace of a human dwelling, for the village lay in the valley. Far, far to the east was fragrant green meadowland. The wind brought with it the sound of the ringing scythes and it seemed as if the grass was covered with rows of creeping white insects—those were the mowers. Itsyk's horse too seemed to feel the joy of the magnificent stillness, the warmth, and the sweet odours as it plodded along the soft dusty road, nibbling at the clover along the roadside. Itsyk was humming a Yiddish melody, probably "The Carrier's Song." He had stuck the whip in his belt and was nodding slowly to the left and right, as if he were bowing to the magnificent, blessed cornfields, the far-off meadows, and blue Dil Forest growing on the high hills to the west, its mild contour rearing against the skyline, majestic and calm. Little Herman sat among the heaps of rags, whittling on a stick and keeping up a conversation with himself, as if he were the rag-man and the women were bargaining with him about the rags they'd brought him.

They would descend the hillside in a cloud of dust, heading towards the green willows and cherry-trees and a gleaming streak of river between the huts. Children were playing on the outskirts of the village and cattle were stamping around in the enclosures. Herman hopped down to open the gate and shut it quickly as soon as the cart passed through, running after it; he could hear the dogs yelping their greeting. The rag-man's strange clothes and strange cart set them all a-quiver and every time Itsyk or Herman would call out, "Trade your rags! Trade your rags!" in their singsong voices, they would howl, gasp and choke, and tear up the dirt with rage. They ran round the cart in a pack, some of them attacking the horse, which kept shaking its head left and right, as if greeting its old friends. If one of the dogs would get too bold in its snapping, the horse would snort and walk on. Some of them aimed for the rag-man and raced round the cart, snapping foolishly at the wheels. Herman would have a lot of fun watching their futile rage. He would tease them with a twig and taunt them, and then would nearly burst with laughter if one of the more courageous animals got up on its hind legs in order to jump up on the cart, which had meanwhile moved on, so that the poor dog would do a neat somersault in the dust.

Suddenly there would be a great stir and commotion in the huts and the yards. Women, boys, and small children would pour out into the street and run shouting after the cart, trying to catch up with the rag-man. He took no notice of them whatsoever, and did not seem to hear them shout: "Wait a minute, mister!" He saw that there were not too many of them yet and rode farther on, towards the planked footway and the enclosures where others were awaiting him outside their cottages. He sang out, "Trade your rags! Trade your rags!" and would finally pull up, toss an armful of hay to the horse, and turn round to get the little chest so full of things the villagers traded their rags for. "What a lively, noisy, merry time it was! There was work for Herman, too. A big crowd of people had come to trade their rags, and while some would walk off, new ones

kept arriving. Itsyk would never have been able to manage all of them alone. Herman kept an eye on the cart and did a bit of trading himself, for Itsyk put him in charge of the village children—they were the hardest to get rid of, but the easiest to trick. Herman still smiled at the recollection of the way he used to dart in and out among the village boys, how quickly he used to be able to get rid of them, how smart he was when it came to giving each boy what he hankered for most and getting three times as many rags for it as it was worth. What arguments, screaming, and cursing there was at every village square! It was hardest of all to manage the women. They'd take it into their heads that they wanted something for so many rags and that was all there was to it! Itsyk was a changed man: he would be just as stubborn, he'd shout at the woman, curse her whole family, and get his own way in the end. The trading and cursing seemed endless, but Itsyk kept prodding the horse along slowly through the village, surrounded by a crowd of girls and boys who had no rags and were enviously eyeing the penknives, rings, and ribbons their friends had traded.

As the cart crept through the village, the piles of rags on it grew higher and higher. Itsyk would rub his hands together happily as he watched the growing heaps, for that meant he would soon have over two hundred pounds of rags and would then be able to take them to the dealer in

Drohobych. When they came to a large brick tavern in the centre of the village, Itsyk would drive into the dirty yard of an inn kept by his friend, Moshko. He would have dinner and pay for it, of course. There he could talk to a man of his own faith, give his horse a rest, and stack the rags away in the barn for the time being, since there was no sense carting them around the countryside. He would get a hearty welcome, and he was happy to spend a few hours in the little cubby-hole that seemed filled to the ceiling with feather beds and pillows, talking above the squealing of the innkeeper's children and the halting conversation of two villagers, who had come in for a couple of pints of beer, and sat sprawling on one of the benches, puffing at their pipes and occasionally exchanging a few words. Herman was glad of the chance to run shouting about the yard with the innkeeper's boys, to wrestle and roll around in the soft grass. The sun was directly overhead. It was hot and stifling. The gadflies and mosquitoes were getting the best of Itsyk's horse and it snorted and swished its tail in a vain attempt to chase them off, while it kept munching the sweet hay the innkeeper's boys had given it. The children felt sorry for the horse and drove the flies off, but they would soon tire of this and then they would cover its back with willow branches to give it some protection.

The sun was setting. Itsyk had rested after having a good meal, watering his horse, and stacking his rags away in a specially prepared sack in the innkeeper's barn. It was time to get going. The empty cart rolled and bumped easily down the road. Itsyk urged the horse on and cried, "Trade your rags! Trade your rags!" once more. The morning's scene was repeated once again: there would be lively trading, shouting, scurrying back and forth, and the rag-man's cart rolled on, filling up slowly with new piles of rags. It would nearly be twilight by the time Itsyk had settled all his business with the women, and by then they would have reached the end of the village. Herman would run ahead to open the gate, but this time they would sail through quietly, for the dogs had long since quieted down. Once again they were out in the open fields, following the dry clay road uphill, bumping along noisily. Itsyk was in a hurry, for they had to reach the

next village by dark to stop at another innkeeper's place for the night. "Gee-up, gee-ho!" Itsyk shouted at times, urging the horse onwards as he picked up the old melody again and hummed softly to himself. On and on and on! From village to village, from mountain to valley, over rivers, up hill and down vale, through the fields and forests, the little cart bumped along, accompanied by Itsyk's plaintive call. The scenery kept changing, but life went on as ever! The surroundings changed, but it was all the same region and the beauty never changed, it was eternal, magnificent, it was the calm beauty of the Podgorye.

II

Memories were lulling Herman to sleep. He felt that the ice that had encased his heart for years was thawing. He had been carrying it within him for years and years, since the time of his marriage, when he felt that his heart had been caught in a terrible spasm. He breathed easier now. Was it because he had recalled so vividly the tranquillity and the warm days and calm nights of his life with Itsyk? However, his moment of respite was short. It seemed as if a thick fog had blotted out his thoughts, his soul was shaken by increasingly strong convulsions as scenes of his later life materialized in his mind.

He had passed through Gubichi on his way here last night and had ridden by the familiar tottering wreck that had once been Itsyk's hut. It had changed hands three times since then. Two tall willows were growing out in front near the broken fence. The walls of the hut had tilted and sunk into the ground and the small windows were plugged with rags. He had passed it hundreds of times, but the thought of looking over the high fence and seeing who was living there had never entered his head before. For no reason at all, he had decided to do so yesterday. He had told his man to stop the carriage and had stood up in it to look over the fence. Three Jewish children were playing in the yard beside a dilapidated shed, where Itsyk had once kept his horse. Two of the children were plump, round-faced, black-eyed, and lively. The third, a boy who was slightly older than the other two, kept more to himself. He was not playing with them of his own free will, and he did everything the younger ones told him to do. He did not resemble them at all and was probably an orphan or an abandoned child. The girl who seemed about six was very cross with him. She would pull at his hands, pinch his ears, slap his face, or just taunt him, but he did not cry, or whimper, or even flinch. He just looked at her mournfully. He seemed to be scared of her, and still more of the mother who at that moment was screaming at someone inside the hut.

Herman could watch such playing no longer and had driven off. He was struck by the anxious, sickly expression on the boy's face. The child had not cried or shouted when the other two had taunted him. He remembered his own games with the village children. They had always been glad to have him join them, and it was such fun to play together, to make water-lily wreaths for the cows in the spring, go gathering mushrooms and nuts in the forest when Itsyk had stopped travelling through the villages in the autumn. Why had they all felt equal? Why was there now such hostility among three small children of the same faith?

But then he thought of his own son who, since he had been a little boy, had always found pleasure in whipping puppies till they bled, who used to shove other children into ditches whenever he felt like it, who had frequently splashed boiling water on the cook to see what her reaction would be. He thought of his wife and of the disgusting quarrels at home. He furrowed

his brow and cursed through his clenched teeth.

Once again memories of his childhood calmed him. However, no longer were these scenes of quiet, hopeless poverty. No, this was the beginning of the fight, the terrible, stubborn, day-by-day struggle for wealth. Herman was now able to watch the growth of his fortune from its very beginning, from the insignificant embryo that was to grow and develop and multiply into thousands and finally millions. He could see his money conquering and swallowing up countless enemies, ensnaring and milking dry countless others, spreading endless want, suffering, and ruin, and, nevertheless, despite the luxury and security it gave him, it had not brought him happiness or satisfaction. Long ago, he had been thrilled by his first successes, something had leaped and fluttered with joy in his breast, but even that had passed. His fortune kept growing and multiplying as if by magic. Today, for the first time in his life he had looked around carefully to see where his power was coming from—and he was frightened, frightened of himself and of his wealth. Not that he was suddenly deeply touched by the fate of those thousands of people whom his wealth had robbed of their daily bread, as a tall tree deprives the grass growing round its roots of water. No, Herman was not particularly concerned with the fate of those unfortunate people. The thought that thousands went hungry because of him had never frightened him. He was superstitious, and at that moment he thought he could hear the thousands of curses they showered upon him. His wealth became a burden to him at that moment. A strange thought suddenly occurred to him: his wealth was a hundred-headed monster which was devouring others, but which—who could tell?—might also devour him. Involuntarily he looked up at the sunlit picture on the wall. The gazelles seemed to have vanished and faded in the bright light, but the coils of the snake glittered like live gold rings, ready to smother its prey, and its eyes, those crafty, fiery eyes pierced Herman through and through. He was terrified. He shut his eyes tight so as not to see the light and the horrible apparition.

How was Herman Goldkramer able to amass such a fortune? He had lived with Itsyk Schubert for three years, and the fresh air, the peace, and their frequent trips had completely revived him. His cheeks became rosy, his movements lively, and even his memory and agility improved considerably. Nature herself was erasing the traces of his unhappy childhood and the memories of it. Apparently, Itsyk's wife and son had been of no comfort to him when alive, and he rarely spoke of them, although Herman often heard the Gubichi villagers talking of the cholera epidemic, and he shuddered at their stories. He would sometimes dream of his mother, so horribly blue, racked with terrible convulsions, or else the endless stream of coffin-laden carts, clattering along the cobble-stones to the accompanying wailing of the mourners. Such dreams became less and less frequent. Herman was growing and getting stronger and healthier by the hour, although there were still many traces in his nature left by his early years. He would often become enraged for no reason, at times he would feel so listless and lazy that he would spend his days sitting on a bench without saying a single word to Itsyk. None of this spoiled their good companionship, though, and Herman would probably have outgrown these traits had he stayed on in Gubichi. This was not to be.

Herman still remembered the winter night of the accident. He had spent the whole day in the hut by himself and was impatiently awaiting his guardian's return from Drohobych. Itsyk had

gone to the market. It had thawed a bit during the day, the sun was shining brightly, and the icicles on the roofs were melting. Towards evening the sky had become overcast and it had begun to snow. Soon everything was a mass of falling snow. It became suddenly dark. Herman kindled the fire and sat down on the stove-couch to wait, but Itsyk did not return. Their hut was at the very roadside. He heard some merchants shouting on their way home and ran out to ask if they had seen Itsyk. "He's probably on his way now, we started out before he did," one of the men answered. Herman sat down to wait again. The fire was crackling and hissing in the stove as he set a pot of peas to cook and boiled a couple of eggs for Itsyk. Night fell and the frost made strange and beautiful designs on the window-panes. Soon the wind was howling, flurrying snow at the windows, whistling between the steep banks of the river, tearing at the thatched roof, and carrying off tufts of straw from it. The fire died down. Herman grew frightened, threw some more wood in the stove and kept pressing his face to the window, listening for the sound of their horse's bells. All was quiet. The cold seeped into the room through the chinks in the walls. Herman suddenly thought he heard the sound of a bell. His hair stood on end as the thought of a fire flashed through his brain. He listened again. No, everything was quiet. The wind cried, whistled, and roared louder than ever, as if a mad pack of wolves were racing through the snowstorm towards the village, howling with hunger and churning up the snow. The village children had told Herman many stories of robbers who would break into houses on terrible nights, and now he thought he heard the front door creak and someone creeping stealthily, feeling his way along the walls—he could clearly hear the rustling coming closer and closer to the door. Herman wanted to scream, but could not utter a sound for fear. Without realizing what he was doing, he hid in the small dark corner behind the stove. Beads of cold sweat stood out on his forehead, he was shaking like a leaf and waiting for the door to be dung open any second and a terrible, bearded robber with a huge gleaming knife stuck in his belt to appear on the threshold brandishing a huge club. The minutes passed, but there was nothing to be heard except the howling of the wind. The colour crept back to Herman's cheeks, but he dared not crawl out of his corner. His fevered imagination recalled the stories of unbaptized children, buried outside the church yard or under a willow. He thought he heard someone treading the attic floor softly and he raised his eyes to the trap-door in terror. His hair stood on end as he thought he saw the trap-door move and then rise very, very slowly, revealing a deep, black hole. He was frozen with terror and could not take his eyes from the door. There was a ringing in his ears, as if somewhere deep inside him wild, panic-stricken voices were arising and growing into a piercing shriek. The poor boy was mad with fear and expectation. But the voices did not fade away, they were becoming clearer and louder, and a sudden clanking sound could be heard above the general din. Herman sat frozen to the spot, not knowing whether the sounds were coming from within him or from without. Then he was at the window in a bound. The noise was now coming from their yard. There were black shadows moving in the snowstorm and he heard the clinking of the horse's harness—it was Itsyk, Itsyk had come home!

The noise was right outside the hut now. Someone knocked. Herman ran to open the door and dashed back into the room, for it was so fearful, dark, and cold in the passage. But what was that? Was he imagining things again, or did he really hear a deep, terrible moan coming from

under the ground? Still trembling with fear, he tossed some more wood into the stove and turned expectantly towards the door. It opened and four villagers walked in slowly, stepping heavily and carrying a bloody, half-dead Itsyk. Every now and then a deep, rending moan of pain would escape his lips. Herman stood stock-still when he saw the bloody sight. He pressed close to the stove, frozen to the spot.

“Careful, Maxim, careful,” one of the men was saying to another. “Hold him by the arm carefully. Can’t you see the blood’s seeping through his coat?”

“Oh, oh, poor Itsko, it must be terrible,” Maxim said.

Itsyk groaned again. The sound was so fearful that Herman’s hair bristled. The villagers laid his guardian on the bed and began to dress his wounds as best they could (the barber they had sent for would be a long time in coming from Drohobych in such a storm), and while Maxim was warming his frozen, blood-stained hands at the fire, he told Herman of the terrible thing that had happened to Itsyk.

“You see, my poor boy, what misfortune can overtake a man on an even road!” he said in a whisper, shaking his head sadly. “What misfortune! God save us and protect us from such misfortune! Well, there we were, following the road along Gerasim Cliff—you know, where it’s so high and steep beyond the village—there we were, plodding along, one cart behind the other, and the wind howling all the time! The snow was blinding and the horses were dragging their feet. It was terrible! Then, all of a sudden, Stepan, who was out in front, yelled, ‘Ho, there!’ We all wanted to know what the matter was. And Stepan shouted, ‘Listen! Something terrible has happened here!’ We all listened, and sure enough—he was right! Way down, at the water’s edge, someone was groaning so pitifully and terribly that it made our blood curdle. ‘Oho,’ Panko says, ‘Jesus save us, maybe it’s the devil leading us into a trap?’ ‘You’re wrong, Panko,’ Stepan answered, ‘someone was walking or riding past here and missed his footing and fell down the bank. Come on, men, we must save our fellow-creature.’ Panko said, ‘I’m scared! I’m scared to go down there!’ And the moaning and groaning kept coming up from below, as if a sinner burning in the hell-fires was begging for a sip of water. We put our heads together. What should we do? ‘Come on,’ Stepan said. ‘Panko can stay behind here to look after the horses.’ We started out. You know what a wide detour you have to make to get right down to the edge of the bank. It took us about half an hour to reach the ice. The wind was pulling the ground out from under us, the ice on the river was cracking, and you’d think someone was shovelling snow in our eyes. Lord, what a snowstorm! It was so dark and terrifying. We joined hands and walked blindly towards where the moaning was coming from. Then we saw something black lying motionlessly on the ice. When we got closer we saw it was a horse lying beside a splintered sleigh. Someone must have lost the road and fell down the steep slope. We felt the horse—it was dead. Then we went on farther and came to where your poor Itsyk was lying on the ice and hardly even moaning any more! Thy will be done, O Lord! What a misfortune!”

Maxim had been rubbing his numb hands over the fire and puffing his pipe as he whispered his story to the boy. Herman did not cry. He was shivering and eyeing the bed warily. He was frightened by the maimed, bloody, moaning mass that had once been his guardian. He begged Maxim and Stepan to remain with him for the night, and they promised to come after they had

stabled their horses. Itsyk was unconscious. He could not speak and did not recognize anyone. Herman peeked at him only once. His head was bandaged with blood-soaked kerchiefs, his hair and beard were clotted with blood, his coat and shirt bespattered, his lips were blue, his eyes were lifeless, and the expression on his face was frightening!

Towards morning, when the wind had died down a bit, the barber arrived from Drohobych and began to berate the villagers for taking it upon themselves to bandage the wounds without having any idea of how to do it properly.

“The man would have died if we hadn’t, sir!” Stepan said. “After all, we did stop the bleeding.”

“Shut up, you old windbag!” the barber shouted angrily. “How do you know he would have died? How could you know such a thing?”

Stepan held back his sharp tongue and said nothing, while the barber examined the wounds. He had to admit to himself that the men had not done such a bad job of it after all. The villagers helped him to wash the wounds and bustled about as if their closest relative’s life were at stake. It was only then that they were able to see just what it was that was wrong with Itsyk. In falling from the steep bank he had probably landed on his left side on a sharp rock, because his left arm was broken below the elbow and there was a deep gash on his left shoulder. Then he had rolled over and smashed his head against another rock. The barber saw that there was little hope for him, and when the people, and especially the women who were crowding the hut, asked him whether Itsyk would recover, he shrugged his shoulders and said it would really be a miracle if he lived to see the next day.

The barber was right. Itsyk died the very same day without having regained consciousness. Herman did not cry at the funeral. He was still shaky from the terrible night, and fear blotted out all other feelings. He slept at the Gubichi innkeeper’s house, as the man had immediately taken custody of Itsyk’s property and belongings, allegedly to keep an eye on them for Herman. Herman stayed at his house till spring, and had no idea of what was happening to the property. When the village authorities finally undertook to see what it was all about, the innkeeper showed them a handful of bills and Itsyk’s receipts. His house and garden were sold, and after his debts had been paid off, there remained ninety-two gul- dens, which the innkeeper handed over to Herman as his inheritance. Herman took the money and left Gubichi. He had set out to seek his fortune and these ninety-two guldens were the basis of it.

Thus ended the quiet and happy period of his village life. The practical businessman that was now sitting at a desk before an open ledger in Boryslav had never attached much importance to the mark that life had left on him. He even tried to look upon those years with disdain and contempt, he thought of all sorts of scornful words to characterize that life, but despite everything he was unable to keep his thoughts from returning time and time again to those joyous days, and for some strange reason he always felt his heart dilate when he thought of his life in Gubichi. He did not miss that life, and he did not wish to go back to that time, yet he felt that his present life of wealth and luxury was by no means better than the other had been, if it was not worse. He never knew why it was that whenever he would think of Itsyk or of Gubichi he would feel like a person wandering along a winding path in a dense and dark forest who suddenly comes to a

warm, flower-decked sunlit clearing. Under this impression he began to think of his further life after Gubichi, and he felt as if he were going into the dark forest once more and that he was fated to wander there for ever. How long was he to wander and what was his goal—who knew? His heart grew heavy, his spirit weary, he felt somehow choking, frightened, and chilled, despite the warm sun.

He had not known why he had set out for Drohobych. He had had no clear plans of earning his living, and besides, he neither knew how to go about it, nor desired to do so. He lived on his money for a few days, but when he saw that it was melting quickly and realized that he would soon be left penniless, homeless, and hungry, he became worried and swore he would sooner die than spend another penny of it. Needless to say, nothing would have come of this decision had not fate led him to a livelihood of sorts. One evening a group of besmirched and foul-smelling people came into the tavern where he was spending the night. At first Herman was cautious of them, but when he heard them speaking Yiddish he came closer and listened to what they were saying. These were young lads of about eighteen or twenty who were starting out in the morning for Boryslav to “skim” oil there. Herman listened carefully to their talk of “skimming,” but had no idea what it was all about. He asked one of the boys who said, swallowing his glass of beer in a single gulp:

“What? Don’t you know there’s black oil everywhere on the surface of the swamps in Boryslav, the kind the peasants grease their carts with? Well, you take a horsetail and skim it over the water. The oil clings to the hair, and you squeeze it off with your hand into a pail. That’s called ‘skimming.’”

“What do you do with the oil?” Herman asked.

“We bring it here to Drohobych. There are people here who buy it.”

“Do they pay you well?”

“Sure! Two shistkas a pail. If you keep at it, you can fill two pails a day. The hard part’s getting them here.”

Herman pondered over what he had heard. The pay was not bad, and although it was a messy job, it was not hard. Why not try his hand at it? He decided to join the boys and set out for Boryslav with them in the morning. They were glad to have him, but said he owed them all a drink. Herman was only too happy to stand them to a round of beer to mark the occasion.

This was the beginning of a new life, so unlike his life in Gubichi. His time was now divided between two towns—Boryslav and Drohobych. It was a long way from one town to the other and the “skimmers” had to walk both ways every day: in the mornings they would set out with empty pails for Boryslav, and in the evenings they returned to Drohobych, carrying the heavy pails of oil on yokes.

Herman had a vivid recollection of that first day in the swamps. It was a cool May morning when the six of them set out along the path through the fields towards Boryslav. They crossed Teptyuzh Forest, leaving Gubichi far on one side. The sun rose over Drohobych, shedding its crimson rays on the town hall and the Church of the Holy Trinity. The Tismennitsa meandered its glittering way like a golden snake, and its waters bubbled over the rocks in the distance. The oaks were beginning to blossom, but far below, the nut-trees were already covered with wide

dark-green leaves. They walked quickly, and no one spoke—some were mumbling their prayers, others were humming; each had a horse-tail over his shoulder and a little bag of bread and onions tied to his belt—his food for the day. They passed Teptyuzh and came out to a wide green field, followed by a meadow full of flowers, then another hill with a winding path up its side, and finally the Boryslav valley. Before reaching the village, they dispersed over the soggy meadow and swamps. Each chose a spot and they began the day's work.

In those days the Boryslav hollow was not at all what it is today. The poor Podgorye village was scattered in groups of huts near the river at the edge of Dil Forest. The village fields lay on the hill slopes, while the meadows and swamps were in the valley. The earth here was not the usual kind. It exuded a mysterious smell, especially on warm summer evenings. When the snow melted in spring and the clay became soft, one could clearly hear a movement in the earth, as if it were sighing, as if its blood were pulsating deep down in invisible veins. The people spoke of times long past when terrible fratricidal battles had been fought on the site of Boryslav. Many innocent people had been killed and buried there, and it was thought that each year their corpses tried to rise up from the earth and would continue doing so until their hour came. When it did, they would break through the earth, destroy Boryslav, and roam over the world, fighting new battles. The poor settlers of Boryslav never dreamed that the fairytale they told each other on long winter evenings was soon to come true, that the terrible underground monster would soon break through the earth's crust and destroy their poor, peaceful village, ruining them and their children. They never dreamed that the monster was not the corpses of ancient warriors, but none other than the awful, black, foul liquid that burnt out their meadows and was soon to spread across the world as refined oil, bringing the landlords and merchants unprecedented profits, and misery and grief to them.

Herman was still thinking about his first day of work, and the more he thought of it, the clearer each detail of that day became in his mind, the more unhappy and wretched he felt. It was as bright and sunny a day as today. On a day such as this twenty years ago he had first been engulfed in the choking oil fumes which had quickly shut out the sun and the bright day, killed the smell of the flowers, drowned out the songs of the birds, and turned him into a heavy, sticky, clayey mass that rolled downhill, smothering everything in its path and urged on by an insatiable thirst for money, profits, and wealth. Twenty years had passed since that first day, but the choking smell of oil still held him firmly in its grip, drowning out and killing every kindly, human impulse of his heart.

"Oh, to be free, to be free from this stinking jail!" he whispered subconsciously, not knowing yet what sort of a jail it was and whether or not one could escape from it.

The memories kept crowding his head, bringing back pictures of the past, without asking whether they left a feeling of happiness or sadness and grief in his heart. He had made good money from the very start. The oil kept rising constantly from hidden sources, covering the surface of the murky water with an iridescent film. Herman often wondered what force was driving the strong-smelling yellowish liquid upwards and where its source lay. As he stood skimming for hours on end, he thought that if he were to find the hidden source he would really become rich. His companions said it was the earth "sweating" and that he'd never find any

source of oil, because there was no such thing, and as far as getting rich was concerned, he had a long wait ahead of him. Herman did not like to be the butt of their jokes and he stopped not only speaking of the source of the oil but even thinking of it too.

Meanwhile, he was able to make a profit from what there was at hand. He had been hauling buckets of oil to Drohobych on a yoke for only a short while, but he realized that it was not the job for him. He had his small inheritance and there was no need for him to kill himself when he could make his life easier and still gain a profit from the others. He took his companions into his plan for using the money he had to buy a horse and then cart the oil to Drohobych. He was rewarded three-fold. First of all, he no longer had to haul the buckets to Drohobych every evening, he could cart them instead; secondly, he now went to Drohobych every other day and thus wasted less time on travelling and had more time to do the skimming. He carted the other skimmers' buckets for them and they in turn gave him one bucket free for every five of theirs he sold. The cost of the horse's upkeep was practically nil, as the villagers gave him as much hay as he wanted and let him stable the horse and cart for a bucket of grease they themselves had no time to collect.

Several years passed, during which Herman's capital, far from dwindling, nearly trebled, thanks to his skill and cunning. All the while he lived very thriftily: he drank nothing but water, ate little and poorly, and soon the unhealthy atmosphere of the swamps began to sap his strength. Herman ignored this. He was money-mad and kept thinking of ways to make a fortune here. He spent his winters in Drohobych, usually with the man who bought the oil from him in the summer. He was a thin, unattractive, middle-aged Jew who dealt in lubricating grease, ropes, hardware, and other odds and ends the villagers needed. When Herman stayed at his house during the winters he often helped him in his shop, and his experience as a rag-man came in very handy then. The merchant usually set a price for every article and put Herman in charge of selling; whatever he was able to get over and above the fixed rate was his. Needless to say, Herman was never one to suffer loss because of a thing called honesty. He cheated the customers and fleeced them shamelessly, and if a villager took it into his head to argue and curse him, he would laughingly show him to the door. In this way Herman was able to put a bit of money away. No one knew of his savings and they all thought he was no more than a work-hand. He did all sorts of odd jobs around the house for his landlord during the winters and had his share of injustice and thrashings from the man's wife and the other people there. He feigned meekness and never let them see his anger. It stands to reason that he soon got tired of this kind of life and awaited with eagerness the coming of the spring. The wide world would open up before him in the spring, and although life in Boryslav was a miserable and squalid affair, the days passed quickly and were lively with the laughter and jests of the skimmers. But that was not what he wanted. His poverty had taught him the value of money, he knew that life was terrible without it, and that money alone could banish the drab poverty, filth, and humiliation that were his lot. He was soon possessed by a blind lust for money, a terrible desire for it raged within his soul, wiping out every other feeling, forcing him to disregard every obstacle in his insatiable quest for gold. He kept a wary eye on the money he had inherited from Itsyk, as well as on his earnings, counting his savings every week. He kept it a dead secret and never let a single word about it slip

from his lips, fearful that his companions might coax him into spending some of it. But he knew that money hidden away would not grow and so kept his ears pricked for all rumours of profitable deals, making cautious inquiries whenever possible. He soon found out about just such a deal. The government planned to build barracks in Drohobych and was seeking contractors to supply the various building materials. Times were hard, there were not many contractors to be found, and in order to hasten the project, the government fixed easy and profitable terms for them. That was all Herman was waiting for. He signed a contract to supply the lumber and lime, but what savings he had were far from sufficient. He turned this way and that, racked his brains, worried, but all was in vain. There was no use waiting for help, and Herman was close to losing his all on the deal and returning to Boryslav as a skimmer. An unexpected, if not entirely fortunate, incident saved him.

When the trader Herman had been living with for several years found out that his assistant, an ordinary skimmer, had taken it upon himself to supply the government with building materials, he could not believe his ears. Then he decided it was a great joke, and when he finally saw that Herman was going at it in all earnest—he had left a down payment of several hundred guldens and had begun delivering the lumber and lime—he became very angry. He wanted to know why Herman had not taken him into the deal, but when Herman approached him for a loan, his wrath was so great that he loudly cursed the young profiteer and threw him out for good.

“Get out!” the enraged trader yelled. “How do I know where you got your money? Maybe it’s stolen, and then I’ll be in trouble too! Get out! I never want to see your face again!”

Herman gathered up his belongings and left. He was more upset by his disappointment and the refusal of his request for a loan than by the unjust words and petty suspicions. What was he to do? The authorities wanted him to speed up his deliveries, but he did not have enough money left to buy any material or even to pay for the carts. True, things were five times cheaper in Drohobych than they are now, but it did him no good, since he had no money. He was faced with a problem: if he did not deliver everything in time, he would stand to lose his down payment, and he had no hopes whatsoever of anyone helping him.

It was getting dark, the night promised to be cold and rainy. Herman walked the streets, engrossed in thoughts of his deal and paying no heed to the late hour or to the weather. He carried a small bundle under his arm. His thoughts were like frightened sparrows in a cage, darting and flitting hither and thither, seeking an escape. He broke out in a cold sweat at the thought of being forced to give the whole venture up as lost and.... To give everything up as lost when he had saved and planned for it for so many years! No, never! He must find a way out, he had to think of something! Night had fallen and the cold rain beat against his face. The small, cold, stinging raindrops fell so unexpectedly on his flushed cheeks that he stopped for a moment and looked round, as if he had just wakened from sleep. He tried to recall where he was and what he was doing there. Then he remembered that he had been thrown out of the house and that he had nowhere to spend the night.

“I’ll have to go to the inn,” he thought and began to look around to see what part of town he was in.

“Why, this is Lan!” he grumbled. “I’ve come all the way from Zvarytskoie! Bah!”

He turned sharply to start back to Zvarytskoie and the inn where the skimmers usually spent their nights. He turned quickly at the end of the street and caught some- one sharply in the dark with his elbow, nearly shoving him into the deep ditch by the roadside.

“God damn your father!” a girl’s clear voice cried out in Yiddish and two soft hands clutched his arm so unexpectedly that he started and nearly lost his balance.

“What’s the matter?” he asked, turning to face the enemy. Despite the harsh words the strange girl had spoken, there was neither anger nor irritation in his voice. The touch of those soft hands had had a strange effect on him; he knew not what it was himself, and tried to make out the girl in the darkness.

She was a Jewish girl of about twenty, round-faced and plain-looking. Herman saw dozens of similar faces every day in the street, but that evening, under the influence of the soft touch of her hands, she seemed to him somehow more attractive than the rest, her dark eyes seemed more lively, and her voice more pleasant—in a word, he stopped, spellbound, and stood staring at the girl with a most foolish expression on his face. Even now, when he remembered that chance meeting and the whole scene in the street, he spat in disgust.

“Misfortune did not know how to catch up with me, so it trapped me out on the open road!” he muttered, frowning. “What a damn fool I was!”

At the time of their first meeting, however, such indelicate thoughts and expressions were farthest from his mind. But then, he did not quite know what he was doing the first few moments, until Ryvka’s clear laughter brought him out of his stupor.

“What are you standing here goggle-eyed for? Run, can’t you see it’s going to rain?” she said.

She wanted to walk on, but Herman involuntarily grabbed her sleeve. She looked at him strangely, and her look was half-angry, half-taunting. Herman took heart and began talking as he walked alongside her. It was thus that they became acquainted.

Ryvka, like Herman, was an orphan. Her parents had also died during the cholera epidemic, and she had been left as a baby in the care of an old aunt, with whom she still lived. The aunt was the childless widow of a Zalesye tenant farmer who had adopted Ryvka and promised her a dowry of five hundred guildens and a trousseau. Ryvka told Herman all this while they were walking towards her house that first evening. When he had seen her to her doorstep he turned and walked thoughtfully back to the inn. “What luck—if only I can manage it!” he was thinking. “I’ll marry Ryvka and her dowry will certainly get me out of the hole!” This thought never left him and he decided to do something about it as soon as possible, as his business would not wait. He stood outside Ryvka’s house the next evening, waiting for her to go to town, and told her of his plan. At first she felt embarrassed and bestowed her usual “God damn your father!” on him, but when Herman told her about himself and his earnings she became a little kinder, although still casting distrustful glances at him from time to time. Finally, she told him to speak to her aunt about it. It was soon settled, although not without the usual bargaining and squabbling, and two weeks later Ryvka and he were married. His business, thanks to Ryvka’s money, was soon flourishing and bringing in huge profits. Once married, Herman’s lust for money increased even more, because he knew that his family would grow and that he would soon be responsible for

feeding several hungry mouths. The last thing he wished for was his former state of penury, with the added burden of a family to support. He would become frantic at the mere thought of such a possibility, and would throw every ounce of energy he had into his business; he cheated everyone left and right, manipulated this way and that, deceiving the government on the quality of the lumber and the weight of the lime, bribing the foresters and getting half his lumber for nothing from the landlords' forests—in short, he believed in “making hay while the sun shines” and did as much, grabbing at every opportunity that arose. This petty, exhausting, dirty work in an atmosphere of constant bickering, cursing, shouting, and humiliation seemed made to order for him. It sapped all his strength and all his thoughts, it never gave him a moment's rest, completely obliterating any inner human voice except the indefatigable, insatiable demand for more profits. Herman lived with Ryvka and her aunt, and they both marvelled at his energy and applauded his resourcefulness and brains when of an evening he would tell them about his deals and machinations. The three of them still continued their former frugal way of life. The two women took in some kind of work that paid for their food, and Herman's needs were very simple. Thus, his savings grew, and he was soon able to withdraw the full sum of his wife's dowry from circulation as net profit. When there was no longer any need for lumber or lime, Herman took over the contracts for supplying the government with boards, poles, and other necessary items, and was able to make a sizable profit on everything, owing to his acumen and the shameless way in which he swindled the “Christian” draymen and foresters out of their pay. It took four years to build the barracks during which time Herman's capital reached the impressive ten-thousand-gulden mark. Anyone else would have rubbed his hands with joy and been happy with his good fortune, and, calling to mind the old saying: “The more you get, the more you lose,” would have put the money away in a safe place and lived as best he could off the interest. But Herman was made of different stuff. He lived by and for the vicious, constant struggle over a copper, a gulden, or a hundred guildens. He now sought a new field of action wherein he could pitch his strength against new opponents. Just such a field existed near by in Boryslav.

When Herr Doms, the famous Prussian capitalist who was responsible for the first steps of practically every branch of Galician industry, drove through Drohobych, he noticed the strange grease in buckets the Jews sold the villagers in the market. When he saw that it was oil mixed with earth and other minerals, he insisted on seeing where they got it from. He was told it came from the Boryslav swamps. The villagers told him that it floated up to the surface of the water, that it burned out the grass and other vegetation, and some even spoke of the accursed underground warriors whose rotten blood it was. Herr Doms was a practical man, and paid no attention to the fairy-tales. He realized that the source of the oil must be close to the surface and quite rich for it to keep rising like that. He then drove to Boryslav, had a look at the swamps, and immediately decided to test for oil there. He bought up a few poor peasants' fields for a song and hired some Boris-lav lads to dig the first narrow wells. They reached oil at twenty-five feet. Herr Doms was triumphant. He began putting up oil refineries, consulting engineers and experienced technicians. Meanwhile, a great cloud was gathering which was soon to dim all his hopes.

News of Herr Doms' find spread throughout the region, and every rich or enterprising person was keenly interested in the “clear profits” involved. All of them poured into Boryslav in a

mighty tidal wave. Some had capital to invest, others had come to seek their fortune. A battle such as Galicia had never known was on. Slippery and go-getting elements penetrated into every nook and cranny, like water at flood-time, they swarmed like thousands of maggots, worming their way into every place they were least expected. These people had the upper hand over the German capitalists and other businessmen, for they knew the plain villagers closely, knew how to exploit them, and cheat them constantly in petty matters. Herr Doms could not take that kind of competition, and although he stayed on in Boryslav, the wells were not bringing him the profits he had expected. None but the new arrivals with their predatory business tactics could secure a foothold there. They stopped at nothing in their quest for oil. The wells were sunk very narrow, the shafts lined with wattle-work, from the very outset there was a lack of ventilation, and such things as safety control features or healthful working conditions were unheard of. Thousands upon thousands of workers lost their lives for slave wages while the speculators kept raking in thousands and millions in profits. They used the same cut-throat tactics on each other too: where one had struck oil, another dug his well next to the first, digging deeper and coming out right under the first well. The government could do nothing, because it was a long time before there was any government control or police in Boryslav, where all sorts of violations and often outright crimes were a usual occurrence. The village itself was gradually dissolving in the chaos, like foam on the water. The defeated “warriors” of yore rose up from their graves and in doing so they destroyed the village that had sprung up over them!

Herman Goldkramer was among the first profiteers who flocked to Boryslav like vultures to carrion. He soon had three main wells, that is, wells which were located on the main oil-bearing seams. He became rich overnight. It had been a constant struggle until then, but he had his feet planted firmly on the ground now. The money kept pouring in, but he could not get rid of that feverish lust which had driven him on to his first deal. For a long time afterwards he spent his days racing round Boryslav, keeping an eye on his wells, arguing, shouting, and shoving the workers around. They would say, “He’s in such a rush that you’d think they were going to drag him off to the cemetery tomorrow.” At first he mistrusted his own luck and was fearful lest it melt away and go up in a puff of smoke. He would often check his wells anxiously in the evenings, and looking down into the dark, narrow pit-mouths he would think of his life as a skimmer, he would recall the stories the villagers told of the human blood in the earth, of the horrible “dog-heads” buried alive and waiting for someone to let them out. Terror would grip him. His superstitious imagination conjured up hideous monsters, in his sleep he could even hear the moaning supposed to be heard from the wells in the dead of night. However, such moments of reflection or perhaps bodily fatigue were rare indeed. Herman was so wrapped up in his business that he was like a blind man, or like a sleepwalker whom some invisible force is driving onwards along the brink of a precipice and who is able to skirt it only because he sees nothing around him. Being in such a state, he failed to see many important things which later were to make themselves felt all the more. For one thing, he paid no attention to the turn his family relations had taken during those years. His wife had given birth to a son, Gotlieb, but Herman had had no time to waste watching the child grow or taking a hand in his upbringing—not that he would have known how to go about it or would have had any inclination to do so. He knew only

that when the boy was four years old a tutor slightly better dressed than the rest came to the house to teach him Hebrew and the Scriptures, and that when he was six he was enrolled in the “German” school in Drohobych.

He also learnt from the school-masters that Gotlieb was very dull-witted and backward. But he had no time to reflect on all this and, therefore, he put his money to work for him: he showered it upon the private tutors who “helped” Gotlieb with his studies, and sent wine and sweetmeats to the Basilian Fathers who ran the school. Thus, Gotlieb was able to pass up from class to class with difficulty and the greatest of efforts.

Gotlieb’s education was no drawn-out affair, for when he had completed four classes of elementary school he told his father in no uncertain terms that he did not intend to “suffer in that damn school any more.” Herman was shocked to hear this, flew into a rage and began threatening the boy. When he finally saw that this had no effect on him, he yielded and sent him to work in a shop and learn a trade. Gotlieb was there to this very day. That first encounter with his son had opened Herman’s money-mad eyes. He saw that this lazy, good-for-nothing child who was practically an idiot could be frighteningly stubborn and persistent. He could not chase the sight of the stocky, challenging little figure of his son from his mind: the low forehead, bristly hair, thick lips that were blue with rage, and little grey eyes that burned with such dull stubbornness, malice, and rage as he had never seen in a child’s eyes before. Gotlieb had rushed squealing at him with clenched fists—yes, he had thrown himself upon his father, he had clawed him savagely and his tantrum had been like an epileptic fit.

Herman’s speculative fever had not yet subsided then. Gotlieb had calmed down when he had got his own way, but Herman now saw that a cretinic expression of dull stubbornness, which sometimes changed into senseless idiotic glee, never left his face. Another thing Herman now noticed about his son was his desire for money, or, rather, his mad desire to squander it. He would smash his toys the minute he got them. He ruined dozens of school-books a year, wore his clothes to shreds in no time, everything got in his way and interfered with his plans, and he had to smash and destroy everything that fell into his hands. Gotlieb was really becoming a hobgoblin. The walls of his room were full of holes made by pocket-knives, and often broken knife-blades could be seen protruding from them. He was driving the servants mad, for he would lie in wait for them with a whip or a stone, or splash them with mud whenever he could. Herman was rarely at home, and as Gotlieb was at first scared of him, he knew very little or nothing of what was going on. That was why he was so shocked when his son pounced on him and made such a terrible scene. However, he did not ponder over its significance for too long and consoled himself with the thought: “Oh well, everyone knows that children are vivacious and easily impressed.” He settled back contentedly once his friend Menckes, a silk-merchant, had taken the boy on in his shop. This period of relief was short-lived, for his son had not changed: he was still what nature and his mother’s upbringing had made of him, and the shop-assistants or Menckes himself never ceased complaining to Herman. He was for ever paying out considerable sums for the damage his son had done. Then, as his fortune grew, the money fever in his blood cooled off. He was now the richest of all the Boryslav capitalists. He had a few hundred wells and over a dozen refineries, he had several thousand workers working for him, and they were supervised by

ruthless, hard-driving idlers and scoundrels whom Herman paid from three to four shistkas a day, just for making the workers work from morning till night. Fifteen years had elapsed since he had dug his first well, and in that time Herman had bought up a lot of land and several estates around Boryslav. However, there was an important, if as yet barely noticeable, change taking place in Herman's life at the time of his good fortune. His eyes, which until then had been filled only with lust for wealth, having found it, began taking stock of what was going on around him. This great change did not come overnight and was not too apparent until now. Nonetheless, there were many things which he never would have noticed before and which now attracted his attention, jarred his complacency, and, falling steadily day after day like drops of cold water on a heated body, they went deep, disturbing him and slowly changing his whole outlook and character.

Soon after he had noticed the strange ways of his son his gaze shifted to his wife, and she too struck him as being no less a strange and unhappy creature, for if his son's behaviour patterns could not be termed other than morbid, she herself was far from normal. After his marriage Herman's business affairs had taken up every waking moment of his life. He did not notice the change that had gradually come over the lively, outgoing, and rather sociable girl he had married, turning her into a person so unlike her old self. She had had no education whatsoever and while Herman's position had been precarious, making her fearful of the future and forcing her to some activity, she had retained her human semblance. Soon, however, Herman was doing so well that he no longer had to worry about making a living. Before he knew it he had begun to live more comfortably in a fine house and had servants and horses, then he bought several brick houses in Drohobych—thus changing his wife's life completely. She stopped working or doing anything at all and began to eat and eat, as if she were trying to reward herself for her former frugality. For a while she was taken up with the purchase of fancy clothes, but as she grew older she became fatter and lazier. She could spend days on end sitting before the window in an easy chair and watching the market-place. Her once attractive, shiny black eyes became dull and leaden, her face became bloated, her voice deeper and coarser, and her every movement was heavy and sluggish. The human being in her was lost among the overlapping layers of flesh and fat.

Madame Goldkramer made an unpleasant and even revolting impression on all who saw her. Her mental and physical laziness knew no bounds. In turn it gave rise to a stubbornness characteristic of idiots who are too lazy to think and, therefore, too lazy to make any decisions or undertake any new ventures. She was terrified of action, or of any change in her surroundings. She had passed her idiotic laziness and dullness on to her son, who had also inherited his father's restlessness, a fact made apparent in his rare fits of rage and his constant, all-consuming need for destruction—destruction for the sake of destruction. When he went to school and had to mingle with the other boys, his wild nature was toned down a bit, but it did not actually change. His tantrums were less frequent, but the minute something really displeased him he would flare up again.

It did not take Herman long to see what was going on. At first he thought it unimportant, but his wife's perpetual immobility, her idleness and stubbornness angered the hot-headed, high-strung businessman in him. He tried to quarrel with her, but it was useless. She either refused to answer him altogether, or else her reaction to his accusations was a half-merry,

half-idiotic laugh. This angered him even more and he would run out of the house. Such scenes were becoming more and more frequent. With each passing day Herman found his home more unbearable. He felt that he was in a butcher shop full of the smell of fresh meat. He had to get out of the house, but he did not know where to go. It was his good luck that he could not yet see through his wife and son. It was his good luck that he knew not why they seemed so strange, so capricious and stubborn, for he considered them to be normal human beings. If he had only known how far from normal they were, how mentally unstable they were, he would have probably never been able to spend another day under the same roof with them! To tell the truth, nature and life, those very consistent forces, soon showed him the reverse side of the medal, but if he had been more observant he could have changed matters radically, or else he could have perhaps led them down the quiet path of competent psychiatric care.

Herman had never before given himself to such self-analysis, but even now he could not linger long on scenes of his family life—he hated it so! For instance, yesterday he had had a terrible quarrel with his wife, and his son had joined in too. He could not even remember how it had started, all he knew was that both his wife and son had made such a scene that he had been forced to leave the house. His wife had cursed him and his son turned blue with rage as he too had threatened him. Herman spat in disgust. “God damn such a life!” he whispered and returned to his work.

His pen was soon scratching along the coarse grey paper, but his mind was still reflective, and in another minute he had stopped and was staring at the long columns of figures crowding the sheet of paper before him.

“Whom is this for?” he whispered. “Who will make use of it? This is my life’s work—my strength and my soul have gone into this!”

The businessman in him immediately came to the rescue, and all the idle reflections and thoughts died down and hid, like little children at the sight of the birch rod. Herman stood up, crossed the room, had a glass of water, and returned to his accounts.

It was after ten. The sun was beating down and the wind brought in the hot smell of oil and the shouting and noise of the workers. He kept to his work, paying no attention to anything. He was purposely trying to fill his head with figures and calculations in order to drive away the unpleasant thoughts.

Suddenly the door to his room banged open and his son burst in upon him like a flash of purple lightning. He was panting, covered with dust, his wide face was flushed, his eyes glittered, and his fists were clenched.

“Ah!” he said, breathing heavily, and flopped down on the couch.

Herman stared at him in surprise and fright.

“What brought you here?” he asked a few moments later.

Gotlieb did not answer. He had apparently come all the way from Drohobych on foot and had not been going at a leisurely stroll. “What has happened? What does he want?” Herman thought as he watched his son and waited for an answer. There was none forthcoming.

“Tell me, what happened? Why did you come here?” Herman asked more gently.

This last question hit Gotlieb like a bolt. He sprang to his feet and rushed at his father.

“Give me money! Do you hear me? Money!” he shouted, grabbing his father by the vest. “Give me money! I need money, lots of it, do you hear?”

His voice struggled to escape from his parched throat, his hands were trembling. Herman blanched. He did not know what to do: to shout for help or to try and pacify his son.

“What do you need the money for?” he asked calmly, trying to control himself, but he felt something rising to his throat that was choking him.

“I need it! I need it! Don’t ask me why!” Gotlieb shouted, pulling at his vest. “Come on, give it to me, you have so much of it. Hurry up, or else....”

Gotlieb’s voice broke. Herman looked at his face, at his eyes. God, how wild and horribly greedy his eyes were! He felt frightened and revolted, as if it were not his own son standing there, but a slimy creature touching him. His surprise changed to anger. With a sudden movement he pushed Gotlieb away and his thrust was so violent that he stumbled to the far end of the room.

“So!” Herman shouted, shaking with rage. “Who do you think you are? Is that how you’re supposed to come to your father to ask for something? And you dared raise your hand against me? Have you forgotten what it says in the Bible: ‘May the hand wither that is raised against a father!’ So you’ve come for money? What do you want it for?”

Gotlieb had landed on the couch and remained motionless there. Once only had he looked at his father, but there had been so much hatred and wrath in his eyes that Herman stopped speaking, spat and sat down to work again, paying no attention to his son.

The clock struck twelve. A maid entered and announced that lunch was ready.

“Let’s have some lunch,” Herman said harshly.

Gotlieb followed his father out of the room silently. As was his wont, Gotlieb gorged himself with food, but this did not surprise Herman; what did surprise him was the fact that Gotlieb greedily kept drinking one glass after another of the wine that was standing on the table. Herman saw that Gotlieb’s eyes had begun to glitter, his thick lips moved, but he did not utter a sound. It seemed as if he were discussing matters with himself in a voice no one else could hear. Herman wanted to take the wine-bottle away from him, but he changed his mind. “He might as well drink it up, then he’ll fall asleep and it will all pass,” he thought. Herman was right—he did not have long to wait. They were still sitting at the table when Gotlieb suddenly fell back on the divan and was dead to the world, snoring loudly through his open mouth, his arms and legs spread out wide. He lay motionlessly in front of Herman, his lips moving occasionally, as if the mysterious conversation he had been carrying on with himself was still going on in his sleep.

III

The hot glaze of the afternoon sun was like glittering hailstones falling upon the Boryslav hills, scattering over the grey mounds of clay brought up from the deep wells. It made the thin wire cables wound round the windlasses burning-hot, it was refracted and sparkled with every colour of the rainbow in the puddles and streams, where the putrid water was covered over with a thick film of oil. The clear, cloudless sky was singed by the scorching town and seemed just as grey as all its ruined suburbs. Not for a moment did the wind stir the air or make it cooler; it did not disperse the heavy, stifling fumes which rose up from the wells, the clay, the ditches, and the filthy store-houses—they hung in a cloud over Boryslav, making every breath an effort. The

surrounding treeless hills, dotted with stumps or burnt-out sandy or rocky patches, added to the gloomy scene. The voices which had blended into a steady, rumbling noise and since the morning had filled every nook and cranny of Boryslav had died down. A dead silence enveloped the town. The oil-stained workers in their oil-soaked clothes moved phlegmatically beside the wells, turning the windlasses, and carpenters worked away with their axes like huge woodpeckers. Every movement and every voice reminded one of the slow, sleepy motion and sound of an enormous machine, whose wheels, cogs, screws and bolts were living, breathing people. One could find nothing to please the eye either on the surface of the earth or beneath it, and one's thoughts involuntarily plunged down the dark awful wells where thousands of men were suffering and digging at that very moment, where work was in full swing, where hopes flared up or died down, where life challenged death, where man challenged nature. How many sad sighs, worried thoughts, fervent prayers, and drunken howls echoed in the depths, with nothing reaching the surface save the choking fumes! Everything was swallowed up by the earth, the depths, and the darkness, as the legendary god used to gobble up its young. The sun blazed away in the sky like a fiery cannon-ball, and it seemed as if it wanted to sap all the strength and draw every drop of moisture out of those blackened, work-weary men and the bare, treeless hills that grinned through stumps as black as rotten teeth.

Sleep would not come to bring Herman Goldkramer forgetfulness that afternoon, for he was too disturbed and excited by the impressions of the day. He left the house and headed towards New World, where most of his wells, and the richest ones at that, were located. He passed many other wells on the way, but did not even glance at them, trying not to notice anything, for he felt that the most ordinary things had a strange and irritating effect on his jangled nerves. It was as if he were burning with fever and even the slightest touch seemed like a heavy blow to his suffering body. Herman could not understand what had come over him today. "Either I did not get enough sleep or I've caught cold. What else could it be?" he grumbled, sensing the sudden change. It seemed to him that that day he was looking at the world with different eyes, and that Boryslav too appeared in a new light to him. What could it mean? Why did the drawn, hollow-cheeked, black faces of the oil-workers pluck at his heart-strings today whereas he usually never even noticed them? Why was he more concerned with their torn and tattered, oil-soaked clothes than with the heaps of paraffin wax they kept bringing up from the wells? How did the thought suddenly enter his head that this one or that probably had a terrible time of it, labouring down so deep in the earth without any air six hours at a stretch—or often, in his wells, even twelve hours? What unknown force suddenly made him think: "What can these people's lives be like at home if they are forced to work here for a pittance and are so poverty-stricken?" "Work for a pittance!" "Poverty-stricken!" Yes, these were the very same phrases which he had so often ridiculed and which he had never really accepted as being true, and now they had crept into the inner sanctum of his soul like the black clouds that herald a storm. What had happened to Herman? What miracle had changed his way of thinking? Was he not the firm, calculating businessman who thought nothing of penalizing his workers for the slightest mistake, for coming to work a minute late, or even for a disrespectful tone of voice? Where had these new thoughts come from? Did he not know that all this was foolishness and nonsense a commercial man had no business thinking

about—as he was wont to tell others.

Oh, Herman knew this only too well, and the years of his own apprenticeship were still fresh in his mind, but there seemed to have been a slip somewhere when these troubling thoughts lodged in his brain. He tried hard to drive them out of his mind. He wanted to make himself think of his accounts and of new deals as he walked slowly along the lane between the wells, past the workers and the Jewish hiring bosses who bowed reverently before “such a great man of our own faith.” For example, the profits from the wells these past two weeks had been twenty thousand less than usual, his business was beginning to be in arrears, and, to top it all, his contracts with various firms would soon be due. True, there was still a way out: all he had to do was to hire more workers and re-open the two wells he had been compelled to close down recently because of a labour shortage. It was a risky proposition though. What if he found water in the two wells? That was not too improbable, as it was already seeping through in several of the galleries. What a waste of money, and it would take a long time to pump the water out. There was no sense in staking his hopes on the oil, because the sources were nearly dry; besides, there were no profits to be gained from it any longer, as foreign oil was cheaper. Times were bad! If only he would strike a good vein of paraffin wax—that was just what he needed! Herman stopped. For the past week he had been worried by the thought that luck had forsaken him, and here he was asking for good luck again in the form of a vein of paraffin wax! It was a useless request. He would never strike the vein, his arrears would increase, the galleries would be flooded, his contracts cancelled, and everything he had saved up over the torturing, weary, feverish years would be lost, gone, blown away like dust in the wind, and all because luck had forsaken him! It was true, he was certain of it. Experience told him that while luck was with a person his body was as strong as iron, his nerves were like steel, his every thought was clear and incisive. Such a person was like a sharp shining arrow shot from a bow and whizzing towards its mark. Until so recently Herman too had been just such an arrow. No longer though. Today he was irritable, exhausted, and broken; today he was so depressed that his strength had left him, his thoughts were muddled—today luck had turned from him, had forsaken him!

Such were Herman’s unhappy thoughts. Before he knew it he had reached his first well. The shed of logs and planks rose above it like a Gypsy tent. Although the shed was never locked it was stifling within, the darkness was blinding, and it would take a long time to get used to it and make out the shapes and forms. Herman entered.

The men had just finished their lunch and were going back to work. There were four of them, all youths. One had been standing at the pump for some time already, pumping fresh air into the shaft, as it was impossible to descend until that had been done. The other two lads were getting the third ready for the descent. They strapped a leather belt under his arms and attached it to a wire cable. The lad stood quietly at the edge of the well.

“We might as well get started,” one of the youths said. “Hey, Mikola, hand him the pick and lantern! Hurry up!”

“What’s the rush, we’ve plenty of time till evening,” the lad at the pump answered. Just then Herman came into the shed.

“So! You have plenty of time, eh? Easy does it?” he shouted angrily. “It’s past one and

you're still up here?"

The youths did not stop their work or appear frightened. In fact, not one of them even looked his way when he came in. Mikola was calmly loading a pickaxe and hoe into an iron tub that was hooked on to the end of the cable; Semyon went on working the pump, swaying to and fro like a drunkard, while Stepan tied a cord to a spring with a bell on the end, lit the lantern, and handed it to Grigory.

"Why are you so slow?" Herman shouted again, enraged by the indifference and wooden calmness of the workers.

"We're doing the best we can!" Semyon answered. "After all, we can't send him down if there's no air there! It's over five hundred feet, and that's no joke, you know!"

"Here, Grisha, take the lantern, and God bless you!" Stepan said.

Grigory took the lantern, grabbed the cable with his free hand, and put one foot into the tub. Stepan and Mikola manned the windlass. Its bars turned slowly and the red, snake-like cable began unwinding from the drum. Grigory stood there at the edge of the well. The thick layer of dirt and oil did not hide the anxiety and struggle going on within him that was reflected on his face. The thought of his old mother, expecting him home tomorrow for Sunday dinner, flashed through his mind. There was a five-hundred-foot abyss at his feet: a yawning hole as filthy, stinking, and cramped as his own life of want. What unknown dangers lurked there, deep down in the earth? Who knew but that in another hour or two his companions would be pulling up his lifeless body? Who knew, who knew! He shuddered as the tub began to move downwards and the heavy chill of the underground wafted up in his face. He had never felt so bad in all his life. He had one foot in the tub and was holding on to the cable as he hung swaying, suspended over the chasm. The windlass kept turning and turning, the coils of cable slipped off the drum with steady certainty and went down, down, down, slowly and noiselessly. His heart stopped beating and he shouted the usual miner's words to his friends in a shaky voice:

"Good luck!"

"Good luck!" three voices answered in the stillness—but no, it was not three! Herman's hesitant, muffled voice joined them:

"Good luck!"

"God bless you!" Mikola added.

Grigory was swallowed up by the dark chasm.

It was quiet in the shed; they all worked in silence. The greased wheels turned soundlessly like sprites in the gloom. The cable slipped off quietly and trembled slightly. The feeling was the same as at a funeral when the bier is being lowered into the ground. How strange! Each one of them saw the same scene repeated every single day when a man was being sent down into the well shaft, yet every day the same terrible premonition pursued them: "We're lowering a live man into a grave!"

Herman stood there and watched in silence, not knowing, what had come over him. He had scrutinized their faces so carefully and especially that of the one who had disappeared underground, the one who had been "buried alive." It was unbelievable! The same thoughts that had made them tremble with pity and anxiety were raging in his soul too, but how strong and

frightening they were! Herman's mind had repeated every thought that had flashed through Grigory's mind as he had stood on the brink of the well, but these thoughts were so vivid and depressing! It was not that he saw just one example of desperate want in his mind's eye—he saw thousands of them, and they all merged into a turbulent sea, into a single horrible wave of misery and grief that was pounding and throbbing with the muffled cries of far-off voices. He did not understand what they were moaning about, but he knew it was something terrible. He stood rooted to the ground in a corner of the shed, feeling cold and trying to shake off the gruesome images. He opened his eyes wide to let reality chase away these images. However, reality could neither cheer nor comfort him, for were not his hallucinations a slightly fanciful interpretation of reality? “Good luck! Good luck!” he repeated subconsciously. “May God grant you happiness, the happiness we have never known! May God grant you happiness, for we have suffered and died of want all our lives! May God grant you happiness. But whom?” The question arose in his mind, drowning out the sea of voices. “Whom? Us, naturally. Us, the Goldkramers of the world, who could calmly watch the windlass turning and the cable unravelling and slipping down, who could calmly force these men to work harder, and who could calmly listen to their terrible, gripping farewell: ‘Good luck!’”

Herman left the shed without saying another word to the youths. Once out in the bright sunshine he gradually calmed down. His spirits rose as he continued walking towards the other wells and he tried to get his emotions under control. He thought: “What's so special about it anyway? A man climbs down into a well and gets paid for it—a gulden a day! You don't want to go down? Well, you don't have to, nobody's forcing you to. And if anything happens down there, well, I can't be held responsible for everything in the world. I do what I can as far as safety measures are concerned. Why, the sheds and pumps and the new lanterns are costing me a fortune! No one can say a word against me. After all, isn't it natural that I demand they work for their money? Therefore, my conscience is clear and I've nothing to worry about. It's silly to even think about it!”

It was thus that Herman tried to quiet the invisible force which had risen up in him that day and had turned all his calculations upside down, banishing his peace of mind. And it did subside, as if in response to his command. Herman felt like a new man, he even perked up considerably. However, from time to time a slight trembling of his muscles would tell him that the terrible alien force within him had not died down and that all it needed was a slight jolt to come to life again.

When he walked up to the second well he was already in fine spirits. He wanted to catch the workers unawares, to see how they worked. He knew that the overseer was not there at the moment and he would have a good opportunity to see if the men were worth the money he was paying them. He crept up to the shed, stepping noiselessly on the clay, and peeked in through a knot-hole. This method of supervision was not new to him and most of the workers were well aware of it, for Herman usually withheld up to a quarter of their earnings on payday, saying, “Don't you think I know how you were wasting time all week, bungling round the well? And now you've come for money, have you?” If the poor worker tried to argue and called on God as his witness, Herman would turn as red as a turkey, threaten to have the man arrested, and would

order his assistant to throw him out.

Herman looked through the knot-hole. The entrance was just opposite and some of the light reflected from the shed next to it penetrated into the shed; Herman had a good view of what was going on inside. As usual, two youths were standing beside the windlass, but they were not turning it. Apparently, they had just lowered another youth into the shaft and were waiting for the signal to start pulling up the tub of wax. Another youth was working the pump and seemed to be a part of it himself as he swayed from side to side. A small, bedraggled-looking boy sat at the entrance; it was his job to pick out the small pieces of paraffin wax from the clay. As he had nothing to do now, he was dozing near the wall, his dirty, skinny arms hanging limply at his sides, his palms resting on the clay floor.

The workers were talking while waiting for the signal.

“Did you see the boss’s son go charging by as if someone were hot on his tracks?”

“Ah, he probably came for money. I wouldn’t wish that boy on anyone! Lord, I’ve seen him throw his weight around in Drohobych! And money is just so much dirt to him! When he sees something he wants, he’ll run over and buy it, then he’ll smash it to bits and dash off to find something else to buy!”

“That’s the least of it! It’s all right for him to play the fool if he’s got money to throw around. The thing is it’s our labour he’s flinging about, damn him!”

“You know,” the lad at the pump said, “I always have the same feeling when I look at him—that he’ll never die a natural death. He’ll run through his father’s thousands and then he’ll start robbing people.”

“The hangman’s rope is itching for him, that’s for sure! I get the chills from just looking into his toad’s eyes!”

“That’s how God has punished old Hersh for making others suffer! It’s true what they say: people’s suffering will have its effect even down to the third generation!”

“Drive the wedges in! Drive the wedges in!” the boy shouted in his sleep and awoke. Herman’s gaze fell on his sallow, emaciated, prematurely aged face, and his son’s sleek, ruddy face flashed through his mind. He did not know why he should feel the way he did at the comparison, but he suddenly felt he could not breathe. He was frightened and uneasy, as if the worker’s prediction about his son had actually come true.

“I wonder why Miron hasn’t rung yet,” the worker at the pump said. “Hey, somebody, shout down and find out what’s the matter.”

One of the youths at the windlass leaned over the pit-mouth and shouted at the top of his lungs:

“Miron! Miron!”

There was no answer. The workers exchanged expectant glances, while the pump wheel spun around twice as fast as before. The small boy walked unsteadily over to the pit-mouth and gaped at it, not really understanding what was going on. Herman stood there, listening.

“Miron! Miron, lad, are you alive? Answer us!”

There was another long minute of silence. No sound came from the well. A chill went through their veins; pale and worried they looked at each other.

“Let’s pull’er up. Hurry, God forbid, maybe something’s happened!”

“Come on, let’s pull!”

With trembling hands they clutched the bars of the windlass and were ready to start....

Ding-a-ling-a-ling! the bell pealed loud and clear. They all heaved a sigh of relief and livened up,

“Thank God! He’s alive! And we thought....”

“Stop it! Don’t ask for trouble.”

The bell rang again: that was the signal to start pulling up the tub. The windlass turned round, all conversation ceased, and for a long time Herman heard nothing save the monotonous whirring of the windlass. He walked away from the wall and was at a loss whether to enter the shed or not. He no longer thought of spying on the workers and was still trembling under the spell of that awful minute of silence before the bell had rung. True, his nerves were calmer than they had been a few seconds before, but all his thoughts were muddled like shadows in a fog. Even the things the workers had said about his son seemed to have evaporated from his memory. Moreover, their words had lightened his soul’s burden, they had dispersed some of his anger at his “good-for-nothing lout,” as he usually referred to Gotlieb. “After all, he’s my son, and when he inherits the business, he’ll respect it,” he said resolutely, trying to convince himself. His firm tone of voice consoled him and he repeated, “After all, he’s my son!” with satisfaction. Meanwhile, his feet were taking him towards the third well which was some distance from the others. There was a tall mound of earth overgrown with weeds beside it, proof that the well had been dug long before. There was no shed above it; it had been dug the old way. This was where Herman’s first thousands had come from. The well had been abandoned several years previously when it had run dry, but since paraffin wax was now bringing in more than oil, Herman had ordered it to be re-opened and deepened, for it was only two hundred feet deep. When the planking covering the mouth of the well had been removed they had discovered water there and it had to be pumped out before work could begin. They had been pumping for three days now, and today Matvei, an old, experienced hand, was to go down into the well to see what had to be fixed and decide where the galleries were to be dug. As Herman walked up to the well he saw that the workers were pulling up the tub. Matvii had been down on the bottom for a good hour already.

“Well, how’s it going?” Herman asked the workers.

“Not bad,” they answered. “Matvii rang, so we’re pulling up the tub.”

“What could it be?” Herman sounded surprised. “Is it heavy?”

“No, it’s not very heavy. The old man must have found something.”

Herman stood leaning against a pole over the shaft, peering into the dark pit with mounting interest. The slanting rays of the sun lit up the top of the shaft, but it was pitch black below. Herman was puzzled by a strangely unpleasant, rotting smell. What could it be? The stench was as bad as the city dump. His nose began to twitch, but curiosity prevailed, and he seemed hypnotized as he gazed into the blackness while the cable wound in iron coils round the windlass drum. He looked at the hawser and it seemed to remind him of the boa constrictor in the picture; then his superstitious and irritable brain linked the two with a premonition of some calamity. At that moment the badly-greased windlass screeched loudly. Herman came out of his trance, looked

down into the well, and stood petrified. A hideous, rotted, black skull was rising slowly towards the sunshine from the dark pit. The teeth and fleshless cheek-bones were pointing upwards, the eye sockets were packed with clay, and the skull was lying among the ribs and other human bones that had been stuffed into the tub. While this frightening, nauseating load was slowly rising to the surface, Herman stood there, unable to tear his eyes away. In his agitated state he could actually see the inhuman, malicious grin on the naked chipped cheek-bones, the lipless mouth, and in the huge, black, clay-filled sockets. He was trembling like a leaf from superstitious fear and revulsion.

The workers turning the windlass gasped and nearly let it go when they saw the horrible load in the tub. This would have been a usual occurrence in the old days in the Boryslav oil fields, but nowadays such things rarely happened, so that the young workers would certainly never have seen such a sight in their lives. Just then the bell jangled loudly and shook them from their stupor. They hoisted up the tub quickly and turned it over. The bones rattled eerily, and the head fell out, rolled some distance, and came to rest at Herman's feet.

"Damn you! See what you're doing!" Herman shouted as he recoiled to avoid the skull.

He could say no more, his throat was constricted. The bell rang again. The workers kept whispering, "My God, my God!" and were quickly preparing to lower the tub once more. Herman fled from the well. He felt frozen, shaky and weak, and the same sentence kept whirring round in his head: "God has cursed me! God has cursed me!" He did not know how his brain had formed the phrase, but he kept repeating it over and over again senselessly as he ran down the path past the wells. The head had only touched his shoe, yet he felt as if his whole leg was on fire: something was burning it, gripping it, and from there a sickening sensation spread throughout his whole body. He ran madly from well to well, hearing the noise and shouts from the top of the hill where the workers and prospectors had gathered round the bones and were trying to determine whose they were. Finally, old Matvii climbed out of the tub, holding the dead man's hand. It was completely rotted away, save for a verdigris-covered copper ring with a red glass stone on one of the fingers.

"Look, Mi try, don't you remember this ring?" he shouted.

Mitry looked at it closely from where he stood. Then he exclaimed:

"Lord, that's my ring! I gave it to Ivan Pivtorak when he got engaged three years ago!"

They were all shocked when they discovered the dead man had been Ivan Pivtorak, the man who had suddenly disappeared two years previously, leaving a young wife and baby.

"So that's what happened to the poor fellow—may God rest his soul!"

"My God, one never knows where and how death will suddenly claim him!"

"And what a fine fellow he was!"

"Don't I know it! Why, the two of us were like brothers!" Mitry said, wiping away a tear with his greasy sleeve.

From where he stood Herman could hear every word that was being said. Several oil-workers came up to him and were discussing the event, but he did not hear them. His blood was pounding in his veins as he kept looking back in terror to where he first saw the corpse, although it was now obscured by the crowd. The noise of the crowd calmed him down a bit, or,

rather, he made himself act calmer and even took part in the conversation, although he had no idea what he was saying. However, the oilmen and the workers had no time to waste in idle talk. They discussed the event a while longer, sighed a bit over the fate of the dead man, then dispersed, having first covered the pile of bones with earth, “so’s they would not be lying around naked in the sunshine,” and resumed work in monotonous, depressing silence, as if there had been no interruption at all. Now and then the workers at the windlass would muse aloud, “What will his wife say when she finds out?” or, “How will they bury his bones?”

Meanwhile, Herman walked on. His fright subsided gradually, he began to shout at the workers if he noticed that they were working slowly, and with each burst of anger he drew new strength and courage that crushed his feeling of anxiety. He finally succeeded, and his thoughts turned to everyday, practical things. Herman took out his memorandum-book and began jotting down the names of those workers who could be sure that they would not get their full pay today. However, he was bothered by something. He stopped checking the wells and ran off to inspect the storehouses, and from there to the refineries, rushing about, looking in on everything and shouting—in a word, trying to be what he had always been until so recently: a tireless, practical businessman.

“Sir! Sir!” he heard someone shouting behind him. It was the foreman, the one in charge of hiring the workers, placing them, and seeing to it that they slaved all week.

Herman turned round. The foreman, a small, worn little person, was running after him all flushed and panting, his head bobbing and arms flying as if he were on springs.

“Well, what’s the matter?” Herman asked in Yiddish, for the foreman had not uttered a single word.

“Come here, come here!” the foreman shouted, still waving his arms about and bouncing up and down.

Herman took several steps in his direction, and was at a loss for any explanation as to why the usually calm and phlegmatic foreman was so excited.

“Come here! Come here!” the man kept shouting. “They’ve found such an enormous seam of paraffin wax in Number 27! God Almighty, what a seam!”

As he was saying this, the foreman grabbed his head with his hands, waved his arms about, and went into the weirdest contortions, as if he were showing Herman the extent of the seam.

“Ah-hh!” Herman gasped. So that was the cause of the foreman’s agitation! Although Herman had been hearing this kind of good news for many a year now, he was suddenly thunderstruck. He had thought that good luck had forsaken him, but it had not! Luck was still with him, he was as strong as ever, afraid of nothing, and had nothing to worry about! What did he care now for the stupid workers’ idle chatter, his son’s curses, or his quarrels with his wife! Luck was with him, and they were all miserable worms in comparison with him. Could they ever hope to be strong enough to poison his life? No, never! He would not even let them becloud a single minute of it with all their nonsense! This new and unexpected success hit him like a tornado. His pride had been humbled so many times today by all his memories and had been undermined so badly by his relentless train of thought, but now it came to life again, became stronger, puffed out, and reared its head once more. In fact, he even began to think that there was

nothing so very special about this new stroke of luck. Nature owed him a debt, for was she not aware of the terms of his contracts? Did she not know how great his losses would have been had she not come to his aid in time with her treasure? She knew it only too well, and had therefore come just in time. She was obedient to him and served him as she would serve all power. He was Power, he need not even give orders, it was enough that he wished something for it to become a reality, for his will was the law of nature, and it had to be carried out, as all laws must be carried out!

Herman set out towards the lucky well with firm, proud steps. There was a huge pile of fresh paraffin wax beside it—the first from the new seam. While his happy eye roamed over the treasure, the tireless windlass was hauling up yet another load.

Herman's calm voice was magnificent as he ordered the paraffin wax to be taken to the storehouse, and his promise of an extra gulden a week to the workers of the well was a royal gesture in itself! His sudden burst of pleasure made him generosity itself as he gave the overjoyed foreman a five-gulden tip. At that moment he actually saw himself as the master, the all-mighty monarch who ruled over these people and even over Nature herself!

The sun was setting over Mount Popel. There was not a cloud in the sky, and a hush had fallen over the oil fields, broken only by the sound of human speech as the workers discussed the great event of the day—the discovery of Ivan Pivtorak's bones. Pivtorak's wife worked at Herman's oil refinery and as yet had no idea of what had happened, her only concern being the child she had left at home all alone. But this was no ordinary evening. This was payday! The pale, tired faces of the workers were animated today in anticipation of their hard-earned coppers. People who, in the course of the week, had hardly exchanged a couple of words with their fellow-workers, today became talkative, joked, and invited their comrades for a drink. As night advanced, the dead town of Boryslav began to come to life.

After he had exchanged a few more words with the foreman and listened to the profuse thanks of the delighted workers, Herman set out for home to get the payroll ready. His head was spinning with visions of stacks of paraffin wax, contracts, bills, and promissory notes; he felt a stream of tinkling gold and silver coins slipping through his fingers. He saw the world as a giant market with him the only supplier, with all the profits going to him. All the unpleasant, bothersome thoughts of the day had vanished as if they had never existed, for now, Herman thought, when his luck had returned and his business was flourishing once more, now there was no logical reason for all these worries. They were understandable if a man was unlucky, if things seemed unsettled, but certainly not as they were going now. Such were Herman's thoughts. He was so convinced of the truth of this that he would have been incredulous if someone had dared to protest that there was no master more powerful than one's conscience and no force which could dictate its terms to it. But he was that master! At his order his conscience and all its impulses withered, were stilled, and disappeared altogether!

When he entered his house, his first question was:

“What is Gotlieb doing?”

“He's still sleeping,” the maid answered.

“Hasn't he got up since then?”

“No, not yet.”

“That’s fine,” Herman mumbled and went into the room where his safe was located and where he paid the workers. It was a small, sparsely-furnished room, with a sturdy oak table in the centre and two easy chairs at the table; benches lined the walls and an iron Wertheim safe stood in the corner. Herman had his pay-books brought to him and leafed through them slowly, copying out figures on a separate sheet of paper. He would occasionally throw down his pen and pace back and forth, mumbling and calculating something, then he would go back to his books again.

It was getting darker. The foreman arrived, followed by a crowd of workers. They were all talking animatedly and the noise rushed in like a wave, filling the quiet room. The foreman was feeling as talkative and gay as the rest this evening and he immediately began speaking to Herman of the week’s work. This was a man who had been brought up on the charity of others, thwarted and dominated since childhood, a person who had lived his life complying with other people’s orders, who had not a thought of his own, and even seemed to lack any personal joys or disappointments. His employer’s good luck pleased him as much as his own would have, although this pleasure was by no means due to any attachment or love he felt for Herman. Herman was neither a relative nor a benefactor, and he was just as stingy in settling his accounts with his foreman as he was with his workers; the foreman was quite aware of this and could never resist the temptation of sneaking a little something from his master’s banquet table off into his own burrow—if only the chance presented itself to him. Despite all this, he was genuinely pleased at Herman’s stroke of good luck today, without ever stopping to think why he felt as he did, for this had become second nature to him by then.

“Matvii! Matvii!” the foreman shouted, opening the door to the entrance hall. “Come here, the boss wants to see you. Hurry up!”

Old Matvii was the focus of attention that day. He and Mitry were surrounded by a crowd of workers waiting in the hall to be called in for their pay and listening eagerly to their stories of Ivan Pivtorak.

“Say what you will,” Matvii concluded as he sat on the threshold puffing his stubby pipe, “but I’m sure I’m right when I say that someone helped poor Ivan along into the other world! God’s my witness, and I’ll be damned if someone didn’t push him down that well, if not something even worse than that.”

“What are you talking about?” the workers demanded. “That’s impossible!”

“I know what I’m talking about,” Matvii answered as he spat. “My words are no mere twaddling!”

“Well then, who could have done it?” they demanded. “Did he owe anyone money?”

“Of course not!” Mitry joined in. He stood beside Matvii, leaning on the lintel. “Even a saint has enemies. There’s certainly no shortage of them nowadays.”

“One thing’s for sure, you don’t have to look far to find an evil person,” someone said from the crowd.

“Matvii! Hey, Matvii!” the foreman called through the open door. Matvii did not hear him. He sat puffing his pipe in silence, deep furrows criss-crossing his forehead. His brows were knit, and it seemed as if some distressing memories were rising up in his mind and he was struggling

to bring them all together and extract something very important and terrible from them.

“What’s the matter, Matvii? Are you deaf? How many times do I have to call you?” the foreman asked from the doorway.

Lost in thought, Matvii did not hear his name being called above the noise, but Mitry put his hand on his shoulder and said:

“You’d better go in. Moshko says the boss wants to see you.”

“I hope you burst, you damn old scarecrow!” Matvii muttered as he got up, angry that his train of thought had been interrupted. Standing, his stooped figure was still head and shoulders above the others. They made way for him, and Matvii walked slowly and heavily into Herman’s room.

“The old man must know something,” Mitry said after the door had closed behind Matvii. “There must be some reason why he’s frowning so!”

“Who knows? Maybe there is something to it after all. They say he’s been around for a long time to know quite enough about the way things are run here.”

“Don’t think that anything will come of this!” came a voice from a far corner. It belonged to a middle-aged worker. “Why should anyone bother about a poor working-man? He struggled for a living, and then he disappeared like a dog—and that’s the end of it!”

“Don’t talk like that,” Mitry objected. “Remember the time Miterchuki fell down the well when the cable snapped? Didn’t the commission come to investigate the accident? And didn’t they question every last person, to find out how such a thing could have happened? And then they finally jailed some stranger. Remember?”

“Ah-h-h,” the worker in the corner answered, “that’s another story entirely. “Matvii didn’t actually see anyone push Ivan down the well, did he? And if he did see someone do it, why didn’t he say anything about it till now? What’s the use of all this talk? You can’t prove a thing in court with talk, and all that’ll come of this great rain-cloud is—pfftr

Meanwhile, Matvii was standing on the threshold of the room and looking round, as if to see that everything was in its proper place.

Moshko the foreman stood before the table, while Herman sat sideways to him. Moshko had no idea why the boss had told him to call Matvii in before the others, nor did he know what Herman was going to say to him.

“He’s here, sir, old Matvii’s here now.”

“Good, good,” Herman mumbled, finishing up his calculations. Then he turned to Matvii.

“Were you the one in the well who found the bones today?” he asked, coming straight to the point.

“Yes,” Matvii answered, as if he had been waiting for this question a long time.

“I heard that ... er ... that you ... that you told the others you ... knew who it was?”

Herman sounded very uncertain, and he felt uneasy once more.

“Yes. It was a worker named Ivan Pivtorak, the one who disappeared two years ago, leaving a wife and baby.”

Matvii said this in a firm, harsh voice and turned to look at the foreman. Moshko was as pale as a sheet, his knees were trembling, and it seemed as if he were ready to swoon.

“How can you be so sure?” Herman continued slowly and quite calmly.

“I recognized him by his ring.”

“Then you’re sure it was the very same Ivan? Are you willing to swear to it?” (

“A hundred times, if you wish.” *

Herman became thoughtful. The certainty of Matvii’s answers bothered him. “I’ll be involved in a lawsuit,” he thought. “How did the man fall down the shaft? Negligence! What a mess! I’ll probably be fined—that’s all I need.” As he was mulling this over, Herman kept his eyes on Matvii and finally noticed something about him that seemed to say the old man had not told him all there was to say.

“Eh, maybe there’s something else you want to say?” Herman said, wondering at Matvii’s mysterious expression.

“Well, I...” Matvii began in a very hesitant voice, “I would like to add ... no, rather, I’d like to ask you something, but...”

“Well, speak up! What’s the matter?”

Matvii was silent, but he kept looking at Moshko. Herman realized that he wanted to speak to him in private.

“Leave us alone for a few minutes,” he said to the foreman without looking at him. Moshko was trembling like a leaf. It seemed as if he would not have enough strength left to take a single step. In a changed voice he stuttered:

“B-b-but why c-can’t he speak ... now?”

Herman spun around at the sound of this strained, faltering voice. What was wrong with Moshko? What could this deathly pallor, this trembling and confusion mean? Herman was dumbfounded with amazement.

“What’s the matter with you? Are you ill?”

“Uh, yes ... yes! I’ve caught cold,” Moshko babbled, forgetting completely about the scorching day that was now drawing to a close.

“Caught cold?” Herman repeated doubtfully. “Well, if that’s the case, go and sleep it off.”

“B-b-but, uh, maybe, maybe I can ... I might as well stay.”

“You heard me—get out!” Herman shouted angrily. The death-like, trembling voice irritated and frightened him ever more. Moshko left, looking backwards anxiously several times on his way out. Matvii had not missed a word of what they had said and had watched Moshko’s every movement and gesture. His face was clouded now and sadder than before.

“What did you want to ask me? Speak up!” Herman said when Moshko was out of the room.

Matvii came closer, lowered his voice, and said:

“Sir, would you look in your book and see what it says there about Ivan Pivtorak? How long did he work for you?”

“What do you want to know that for?” Herman sounded surprised.

“Please look.”

Herman glanced through the ledger and then through the list of workers.

“He was with us till the autumn, approximately till ... m-mm, about a week after Intercession Day.”

“What? Till a week after?” Matvii repeated excitedly.

“Yes. Intercession Day fell on a Saturday, so it says here, and the following Saturday he took his pay for the whole quarter, seventy-five guildens in all.”

“He got paid for the whole quarter?” Matvii cried, but immediately calmed down and added softly, “A week after Intercession, eh? The last time I saw him was on Intercession Day.”

“Where?”

“At Kirnitsky’s tavern. He was drinking there with ... with someone.”

“With whom?”

“Can’t seem to recall who it was now. Well, that takes care of that. I got in the way of a couple of drunk workers and was Out flat on my back for two weeks. Next thing I heard was that Ivan had left for some place or other.”

“What’s the point of your story? Why did you ask me about him?”

“No special reason. Excuse me, sir, I thought...”

“What?”

“Nothing. Nothing at all. What can a stupid muzhik like me think about? Just muzhik thoughts. Excuse me, sir!”

With these words Matvii seemed to shrink and become more stooped, but his face and his whole figure bespoke of a great sorrow, and a great feeling of disappointment. Herman did not question him further, for he knew he would not get a word out of the old man, and so he lost no time in proceeding with the payroll.

“Something’s wrong with the boss today, he forgot to deduct ten coppers!”

“He’s probably worried about the corpse—it may mean an inquiry or other trouble. That’s why he’s so absent-minded.”

“Maybe he’s had an earful from his lout of a son. Remember how he came tearing by this morning?”

Thus the workers talked matters over as they headed towards their homes or the taverns. They could not recall such another lucky evening and were intrigued by the boss’s unusual generosity. Herman had promised to withhold a part of some of the men’s pay and they had sent not a few curses on his head for it, but they were astounded and pleased, for there had been no mention at all made of any deductions. Some of the men wanted to see Matvii after they had been paid, and asked for him, but the old man had gone, and in the general confusion of the crowd no one had seen him go. There was a lot of talk about the foreman Moshko, for they had all seen him come out of Herman’s “office” looking pale, trembling, and agitated. They had seen him stumble along down the street, stopping to look round fearfully every few steps. What could it mean? What could have happened? They were at a loss for an answer to the riddle.

At first glance it seemed as if Herman had actually become suddenly kind, but this was only at first glance. If anyone had watched Herman closely and noted his expression and his behaviour as he was paying his workers, one would have noticed quite a few things about him, but certainly not kindness. No, indeed, this was not kindness! His carelessness and absent-mindedness, his diffidence, the quick play of facial expressions, his pensiveness and apparent effort to control his emotions, the trembling of his hands, his dull gaze, the tension of sitting erect, and his toneless,

faltering voice—all these were far from being signs of generosity. There were dark forces raging within Herman's soul, boiling and trying to escape into the open, challenging his might and pride, and it took every ounce of strength he had to crush and hold them back and keep them from taking possession of him. He himself as yet knew not what it was he wanted, what he craved for, but he felt vaguely uneasy with one and all. What he feared most was the approaching night: an inner voice kept saying that it would faring him no good.

"Damn it all!" Herman muttered when he had done with the pay and the workers had all left. "I'm not feeling well, I must be coming down with something. I'd better go back to Drohobych tomorrow, because I can't stand this damn hole any longer. All kinds of things crop up at every step! What the devil, why am I so irritable today? I must be terribly sick! I'll have to see a doctor tomorrow. That's the only thing to do."

Just then the maid entered and said supper was ready. Herman asked her what Gotlieb was doing.

"He's still sleeping, he hasn't opened his eyes once since lunch-time."

"Perhaps he should be wakened for dinner?" Herman said.

"Why? He might as well rest if he's tired. If he wakes up at night and feels hungry I'll leave him some supper."

"All right!" Herman said and went into the dining-room, still pondering what had come over him and what should be done about it.

IV

Night had fallen. The stars had come out and were twinkling above sleepy Boryslav. It was cold. The air had become clean and transparent and only in the distance the Tustanovichi pastures were shrouded in mist. The mountains were dozing in the haze and the majestic stillness was unbroken by cries of human misery and humiliation; nothing could be heard but the vague echoes of a deep and mysterious sound—it seemed as if breathing Nature could be heard through its slumber.

Herman was sound asleep, lulled into that state not by comforting thoughts or by a feeling of fatigue after a hard day's work, but rather by a heavy dinner which he had washed down with a generous amount of various liqueurs. He was no drunkard, but today he had had to bolster up his strength, celebrate his lucky strike, and besides, soothe the dull ache that was gnawing at his peace of mind and devouring it. As he sat down to table he was suddenly possessed by such a -thirst that he could hardly wait for the maid to bring in the bottles of wine and liqueurs that had been brought from Drohobych. The more Herman drank, the more rapidly the blood coursed through his veins, the faster various thoughts flashed through his mind, the greater was his need to get drunk, to forget everything, to dissolve into nothingness, as long as the transformation was effortless and pleasant. His face became flushed, his eyes burned, his hands moved and jerked involuntarily, and his tongue babbled away incoherently—it was all the maid. could do to drag him off to his room, where she had already made his bed. When he sank into the eider-down pillows he still tossed about for a minute or so, mumbling something, attempting to think clearly, but everything had become jumbled in his mind, everything was rushing and pressing onwards, like the water in a mill-race when all the locks are open. In another minute he had calmed down

and fallen into a deep slumber.

But no! Who said Herman was asleep? Who said he was drunk? No, it was not true—he was neither drunk nor asleep! Perhaps, long ago.... He even remembered one such evening when he had had a lot to drink, got drunk, and had felt terrible. But now he felt so light-hearted, everything seemed so airy, he could have actually taken off into the distant smiling blueness of the sky that was hovering so lovingly above him! He was happy, happier than he had ever been in his whole life! There were green shrubs and grass all around him, flowers, crystal-clear springs and rustling forests; in the distance were the fantastic outlines of reddish-pink cliffs—this was not Boryslav, not the accursed suffocating trap with its stale air and evil-smelling exhalations. It was clean, bright and wonderful here. Herman breathed deeply, stepped as lightly as a deer over the flowering meadows, bruising the sweet-smelling flowers which in turn gave forth a perfume sweeter still and produced a sound so heavenly, so delightful that it made his heart stop beating. Where was he? Where had he heard those sounds before? He could not remember.

Happiness, these are your sounds, your smells, your glances in the verdure, in the clear azure of the sky, in the beautiful mountains, streams, and groves. Happiness, you are mine! You have surrendered to me as a loved one to her lover, you have shown me your face, given me your hand, and I am clasping you tightly. I feel your every breath deep in my heart, I feel your warmth warming my blood as it courses through my veins in bright streams of quicksilver. Happiness, let me embrace you, be mine for ever! I am strong, young, and handsome. I want to live, to love, to know the pleasures of life, to have peace, sweet perfumes, and languor! Come to me, I am yours for ever!

How weightless and free Herman felt. He sang this song, this invocation in such a strong, sweet, bewitching voice. Lo! The forests and groves, the rivers and mountains, the blue sky above and the fragrant flowers—all of Nature was ringing and rustling, echoing the sounds of his song. Such delight poured forth from every word, from every note! How easily one breathed there. It was more than he could bear. Waves of pleasure filled his chest, filled it to the bursting. He spread his arms wide over the earth. He had risen over it like a huge eagle, and all of Nature echoed his words:

“Happiness, I am yours, I am strong, young, and handsome! I want to live, to love, to know the pleasures of life, to have peace and languor! Happiness, let me embrace you! Happiness, be mine, be mine!”

Herman felt his strength was Herculean, infinite. He had embraced the earth. He had fallen against her luxurious bosom and could hear her heart beating deep beneath the surface. It was she—Happiness, and he was surprised that he had not realized it sooner. He was drunk with pleasure as he pressed his beloved to his breast and caressed her, he was filled with her warmth and her strength, he fondled her like a toy and worshipped her as though she were a goddess. She was everything to him: he wished for nothing else now that he had her, for now nothing could separate them. There was a heavenly smile on her lips as she gazed into his eyes and melted in his ardent embraces, until she was limp with ecstasy. This paroxysm of passion, the culmination of happiness for Happiness itself!

“Beloved, you are my goddess! You are eternal, immortal truth!”

How lovely the smile, how quiet and gentle the voice:

“Yes, I am a goddess, I am eternal and immortal. I belong to you!”

How passionately Herman pressed his immortal beloved to his breast! How wilfully and eagerly he drank in her fiery kisses! More passion! More fire! More pleasure! Each minute was eternity. More, more! He lost consciousness, the flames overcame him, flowed through his veins like streams of lava, blotting out all thought, taking his breath away. He became the embodiment of sensuality, and closed his eyes, the better to absorb with every pore of his body this pleasure for ever.

She melted in his embraces until she was limp with ecstasy. The fragrant flowers wilted and the streams all ran dry and turned muddy, as if from the heat. But he neither saw nor felt this; he knew only that the fire within him, his strength and vivacity had become more pronounced, and kept mounting, as if he were drawing it from her. The stronger his muscles became, the faster the blood raced through his veins, the stronger and fiercer his kisses and embraces were, the greater the passion that burned within him.

“You are eternal, immortal, and you are mine!” he whispered.

She melted in his embraces until she was limp with ecstasy. She had no strength left to smile or to utter a single word. She breathed so faintly and sweetly in his arms, ever fainter and slower. The pink mountains turned as black as coal, the bright azure sky became dull, dim, and black—the land of happiness vanished like a cloud, like a mirage. A thick, grey, stifling fog gradually enveloped everything. There was a chill in the air and the first breath of cold whisked away the last vestiges of happiness. Herman was still unconscious, he was still strong....

“Beloved, you are mine, say you are,” he whispered. At that moment there was another blast of cold—sharp and stinging. He stirred and looked round; then he saw a terrible black corpse where his eternally youthful goddess had just been! He felt his blood was on fire, pounding in his chest, but now everything around him was cold, repulsive, and dead.

“Happiness, Happiness, where are you?” he cried fervently. There was no answer.

“Oh, you have left me, you have turned away from me!” he shouted. “But you won’t escape me! I am strong, my blood is like a churning volcano, I can still catch up with you and bring you back. You shan’t escape from me—ever!”

He dashed off madly into the gloomy distance, but he knew not where or why. His strength kept growing, yet he did not feel as light as before. He could no longer soar up like an eagle and take in the whole world at a glance, to see where his Happiness was hiding. His hot and heavy breath preceded him like a cloud, dimming his view. His iron muscles became soft and were transformed into normal, human tissue, but as yet he did not feel fatigue. He flew on and on. Everything flickered before his eyes as if he were looking through a kaleidoscope; the rivers gleamed like pearl necklaces adorning the earth, but they could not stop him in this mad chase.

“Happiness, where are you, Happiness? I can’t find you. You surrendered yourself to me, you are mine!” he shouted, but there was no answer.

It became dark, but he pierced the darkness like a flash of lightning. He came upon a belt of frost and his fire melted everything around him like red-hot iron. The trees bowed down before him, the grass wilted and the flowers became charred in his wake. He had no eyes for this—he

flew on and on, for he knew he must find Happiness!

“Oh, exquisite apparitions, wait for me!” he pleaded, exhausted, his passion dying down, his body tired, and his blood cold.

“Happiness, stop! You are mine! You are!”

And Happiness did stop. The dense fog parted to reveal a wondrous, shining, blooming land. Where had he seen this land before? It was not the same one where he first met Happiness. It was not a place of peace and quiet, not the same clear blue sky, not the same pink mountains, nor the same fragrant flowers. The sky here was aflame, as red as the glow of an immense fire. There were no mountains here. Instead, there was a sea of dark, coarse, prickly verdure, and the dense fog that rose in a cloud over the forest of tall, graceful reeds was all that bordered the sea. There were no groves here. Instead, there were the lonely clumps of tall, stately palms with crowns of huge fronds, whose movements resembled the sails of a windmill. The silvery streams were gone too, all he could hear was the roar of a waterfall somewhere in the distance, tigers moaning in the thicket, and grunting rhinoceroses. Where had he seen all this before? Where? Why did everything seem so familiar? Why was his soul filled with such strange qualms as he stepped upon the hot earth and the prickly, thorny leaves? The fragrance was gone too, his nostrils filling with the damp vapours of fungi. Where was he? Where had his frantic search for Happiness taken him?

His knees trembled as he took several cautious steps. Hark! There was a rustling in the tall grass! He had frightened a sleepy gazelle and it bounded away and disappeared. Herman no longer wondered or remembered where he was. A strange force blotted out all thought. The heat was unbearable. He felt as if someone had covered his body with fire, but there was cold sweat on his brow. He hurried on. There were several palm-trees ahead and he was tempted by their cool shade and the thick green fronds that swayed in the still air like gigantic fans, waved by an unseen hand. He rushed towards the shade, he was overjoyed at the thought of resting, and the green fronds seemed so enticing.

He settled down in the shade of the palm beside a gurgling brook.

Suddenly, he heard a faint noise, and a multi-coloured lightning flashed through the verdure. It threw him to the ground. He was rigid with fear and pain. For an instant he knew not what had happened to him, but when he looked round he realized that the terrible boa constrictor—the very one he had admired so often on his picture—was crushing him in its powerful steel coils. What had he done! Why had he ever stopped to rest in the accursed shade? Herman knew his end was near. The boa constrictor was coiling itself around him quickly, crushing him against the trunk of the palm-tree all the while. The icy chill of the snake’s body pierced his own, freezing him to the marrow, sapping his courage and his strength; he could neither shout, run, nor defend himself. His legs were entangled and crushed as in a vice. The coils were reaching up to his chest and his neck. Herman could hardly breathe, and he felt that the snake had coiled itself all round him. He saw its head, its terrifying eyes, glittering with a demoniacal, horrible glee right before his face. Their eyes met and Herman froze. The snake’s eyes pierced his breast with icy daggers. The boa constrictor opened its mouth wide and it was like a bloody abyss. The snake’s iron muscles bulged beneath its glittering scales in order to squeeze its prey one last time and crush its bones.

He felt its awful weight, and shooting pains racked his body. His eyes bulged, a hoarse croak escaped his parted lips, his body became cold and limp.

“Oh, despair! Is this how I am to meet my death? Happiness, why did you lead me here?”

This thought flashed through his mind in his last, terrible moment. Red circles whirled before his bloodshot eyes. One last contraction, one more second.... But no! Herman summoned every ounce of strength left in his body—no, he did not do it consciously—the terrible pressure had made his mind go blank. His whole body lunged forward in a last effort to free himself and his movement was so swift and unexpected that the coils loosened and went limp, freeing him. Herman awoke with a start and jumped to his feet. In his arms he clutched tightly ... what? ... whom?

“Cod damn it! I’ve missed my chance!” a vicious, hollow voice rasped above his ear.

Herman was agitated from fear and pain, dazed with sleep, but he pulled himself together and flung down with disgust the cold, squirming, grasping body which he held in his arms. Something hit the floor with a thud and groaned in a dying voice. These two simultaneous and horrible sounds brought Herman back to his senses. In an instant he had struck a match on the wall and lit a candle. What a sight met his eyes! There, on the floor, lay Gotlieb, his head all bloody, for he had struck it when his father had flung him to the floor. He writhed and snarled from the pain, but a look of violent hate, an idiot’s hatred that had burned in his eyes when he had come to his father in the morning, was still there. Stunned, Herman stood over him. His eyes went towards the mirror and he was startled by his own reflection. His face had turned blue from the terrible exertion, the whites of his eyes were blood-red, and blood dripped from the many scratches on his face, inflicted by his son.

“What are you doing, you dog?” Herman asked, breaking the long silence, during which Gotlieb had remained lying on the floor, clenching his teeth and now and then jerking convulsively from pain.

“What are you doing? What do you want?” Herman continued in a hoarse voice.

“God damn you!” the idiot rasped. “I want money! Give me money!”

“Oh, you want money, do you? For what? What for? How have you earned the money you want? Perhaps you’ve suffered all your life to get it, like I have? And now you want to murder your father—you rat!”

“Yes, and I will, I will kill you, you can be sure of that!” Gotlieb raved, banging his bloody head against the floor. “Give me money, then I’ll let you live! Give it to me!”

“You miserable rat!” Herman shouted and came closer. “You dare to threaten me! You skunk! Can’t you see that I can trample you like a toad in a second if I want to! May the curse of Jehova be upon your hand that was raised against your father, and may it wither away like a dry branch!”

Gotlieb uttered a terrible roar and wanted to rise, but his strength left him and he slumped over, right at his father’s feet. He was deathly pale, his hair was matted with blood, and he began to scream with pain. His screams shook Herman to the depths of his soul and he bent down to bandage his son’s wound, but Gotlieb began to batter his head against the floor again, writhing and screaming to prevent his father from touching him.

“Leave me alone! Let me die! I don’t want your help!”

The maid rushed in, awakened by the commotion, and stood stock-still with horror.

“What are you standing there for?” Herman shouted at her. “Hurry, help me tie up this maniac before he bleeds to death!”

After quite a tussle they finally managed to tie Gotlieb’s hands and feet with kerchiefs, dress his wound and put him to bed. By then he was hoarse, exhausted, and more dead than alive. He kept on screaming for some time, but as he had no strength left at all, he soon fell soundly asleep.

The maid left the room. She was terrified and astounded by what she had seen and could not imagine what had gone on between father and son.

Herman was now alone in his study.

Everything that had taken place after the horrible moment of his awakening had been so swift, startling, unexpected, and unnatural that Herman had remained standing motionlessly there in the centre of the room, breathing hard, his mind a blank. He tried to recall everything that had happened during those few minutes, but his head was still in a whirl and his memory returned so slowly that one might have taken him for a statue standing in the middle of the study instead of a human being, so motionless was he.

Bit by bit he began to piece it all together until the horrible, naked truth became clear to him: “My son is the first one who would like to see me dead! He hates me as viciously and stubbornly as if I were his worst enemy! Why? Is that why I slaved all my life, why I suffered, stole, and squeezed everything I could out of people—just to live to see the day when I’d be afraid I’d be murdered, and by my own son? Where is the luck I prided myself on? Did I ever know the meaning of happiness in my life? Probably only during the days I spent as a little boy, riding in the rag-man’s cart! Oh, God! Why have You punished me by giving me wealth? For what sins have You poisoned my blood with a terrible lust for money? What have I done to deserve such a fate? Could I have not been a good man? I could have, I know that now, but You, You were the one who drove me on to this accursed road. You drew such pictures of happiness for me here, but they were false pictures! You have deceived me! I curse You! Let the blame for this night fall upon You, let the tears of those thousands whom I have made miserable be on Your conscience! Yes, on Yours! I am but a weak creature, I could never have done anything without Your Will to guide me. You willed it to be so, and now You are responsible for all!”

And Herman shook his fist at the sky in a fit of inhuman suffering. He repented all his sins as a child would have done, repented in the face of the last grain of humanity that had survived the burning, killing fire of gold fever. But the more he repented and the more he cursed the sky, the worse he felt. He was unable to take in at a glance the dismal abyss of misfortune, loneliness, and sin which he had fallen into. However, as he repented all his sins, he lay bare the abomination that had been accumulating in his life all those years, and for the first time he realized the cause of his present tortured state. There arose before him in fiery, burning letters the eternal concepts of brotherly love, honesty, and the equality of man that were engraved deep in his heart. All the ills of society, all the injustices of human life which, until then, he had barely noticed and which had never taken up his thoughts, suddenly demanded recognition. “You did your bit to increase these ills. You added your share to the burden that lay heavily upon your

brothers!” How great was the reproach! The struggle for social justice, which some people chatter about for nothing better to do, some—to gain profit, and others still—out of their bitter hatred of everything that is humane, honest, and natural, now faced Herman squarely for the first time in these terrible minutes of deep inner turmoil, of anguish, and unbearable heartache. Everything that had always flickered hazily before him as in a dream was now made clear to him. He now understood why his heart would often miss a beat at a time when he would be exceptionally lucky in some deal, why he would always feel melancholy and dissatisfied when he was toting up the week’s returns after paying the workers, counting the profit he had made by cheating them of their miserly pay. It was now that Herman finally realized what a terrible criminal he was, he who had spent so many years acquiring a reputation of being a hard-headed, cold-hearted businessman, who considered this the greatest of all accomplishments. He had prided himself on his heartlessness and inhumanity! Once all this became clear to him, Herman suddenly felt weak, miserable, and unfortunate. Had he become a monster of his own free will? No, it was inevitable, for once he had set foot on that cursed path he had had to reach the limit he had come to. It was inevitable that he should. He had once been a poor skimmer who had wanted to escape from poverty and find happiness in life—and everyone says that wealth is happiness. This was the happiness he had sought, the one he still sought, pursuing it tirelessly and single-mindedly. He could not have stopped or turned back, for a crowd of men, men like himself, were pushing him ever onward. Was he to blame that the path had finally led him to an abyss? Who was to blame, then? Herman could find no answer to this question; his thoughts were all muddled. “Who is responsible for my sorrow and my grief? Whose merciless hand kept pushing me on and on, faster and faster, who blinded my eyes to prevent me from seeing anything until I found myself at the bottom of a chasm?”

Who was responsible? Who?

Herman struggled with his thoughts, exerting every ounce of strength he had, but he could find no answer. His vacant gaze flitted from one object to another in his study. It finally came to rest on the picture hanging on the wall, the very same picture that had brought back a host of memories only that morning, and which had come to life so terribly during the night. Herman gasped. In an instant his anxiety and the superstitious fear that had clutched at his soul during the day were revived, covering his brow with a cold sweat. The boa constrictor was staring at him maliciously. It was the same look that had frozen the blood in his veins in his dream! How the many-coloured scales on the snake’s body gleamed in the light! Those were the scales and that was the body that had touched him in his sleep. Its terrible embrace had crushed him, choked him, forced his eyes from their sockets! Yes, yes, it was the very same boa constrictor! He must still be dreaming. In the flickering candlelight Herman could see quite clearly the snake begin to grow larger, move, straighten out, raise its head, and curl its tail into enormous coils as it moved closer and closer to him!

What was the strange thought suddenly born in his brain? It was not a boa constrictor, but an endless chain of coins, welded together and brought to life by some magic force—it was glittering silver and gold! Yes, it was that! Was not the blinding glitter of the snake’s scales the glitter of silver and gold? Were not the many-coloured spots on it promissory notes, contracts,

and banknotes? It was not a boa constrictor winding its powerful coils around him, but his own fortune! The magic monster was looking at him so cruelly and angrily! It was sure of its prey, for it knew that no one could withstand its metal coils and the burning glitter of its eyes! It knew that Herman, for one, would never escape, because he was already on the bottom of the chasm, the victim of despair, and it was the one who had led him there!

In an instant of horrible torture and anguish Herman understood all. He bellowed like a wounded beast, and his roar made the window-panes rattle. He felt that this thought was enough to reduce him to nothing, to lay waste his whole life, his hopes and plans, and he felt as a man being drawn and quartered must feel. He knew not what he was doing as he new at the picture in a blind rage and flung it to the floor with all his might. The gilded frame was smashed to bits, but Herman could not stop himself. He jumped on the picture and began to stamp on it like a madman, lie spat on it, tore at the paint with his nails, and finally stepped on one edge, grabbed hold of the opposite one and ripped the canvas in two, crumpling the pieces and hurling them out of the window. He seemed to be in a fit: his chest rose and fell rapidly, the blood was pounding in his temples, and everything spun round before his eyes, becoming jumbled and finally vanishing. He dressed and rushed out into the street as if someone were chasing him.

It was midnight. Most of the sky was covered with transparent shreds of cloud moving in slowly from the east. He could see the dark sky and the shimmering stars in the few open patches between the clouds. A cold wind was blowing from Gubichi Forest. Silent barns loomed up in the darkness and their sharp angular outlines resembled huge, pointed haystacks. Everything on the ground was lost in the utter darkness among the black hills of clay. All Herman could make but was the street, and it seemed to him as a once turbulent stream of mud that had suddenly frozen. There was a narrow, beaten foot-path along the ditch at the edge of the street. Herman was hurrying along the path, although he had not stopped to think where he was going or why. Something was chasing him from his own house—he felt he could not spend the remainder of the night in that accursed place—and he kept on and on, along the streets of Boryslav, as if he were running away from something, as if he were hurrying along on urgent business.

“God has cursed me! God has cursed me!” he muttered.

The sleepy town was spread out before him like a lake of mud, clay, filthy houses, storehouses, factories, misery, and torment. He knew very well that the whole heterogeneous mass was now deep in slumber, but, nevertheless, the cold wind that was blowing in his face lashed at his nerves so painfully that it made his surroundings sway, stagger, and fall apart before his eyes. Until a few hours ago he had been the undisputed master and ruler here, but now the dead town seemed to be rising up against him. The houses blocked his way, yawning pits appeared under-foot like traps, and he could hear the ear-splitting howls, curses, and cries of despair and agony of the dying from the bottomless depths. When his sanity would return, the apparitions disappeared, leaving an icy coldness in his heart and a feeling of anxiety that pierced it as an arrow.

“God has cursed me! God has cursed me!” he mumbled. Ivan Pivtorak’s skull and entire skeleton flashed before his eyes with amazing clarity; he thought he saw the skeleton standing in the middle of the road and shaking its rotted, bony fist at him. At that moment his foundering

mind, as frantic as a bird in a snare, fixed on a single thought and grasped it as a drowning man clutches at a straw.

Why had his foreman paled and felt ill so suddenly when old Matvii wanted to see him alone? Was his sickness quite natural? Or had Moshko sensed trouble? Why had Matvii wanted to know when Ivan had left work? Why had he refused to say anything else? These thoughts arose in Herman's mind again, but they were more intense than they had been originally. He was trying to occupy his mind with this case that had nothing at all to do with his own self, in order to obstruct the things that were pressing on his brain and scorching it. He began to think about the circumstances surrounding Ivan Pivtorak's death and weigh and consider them feverishly. Ivan had intended to save up enough money to buy a plot of land and a cottage in Tustanovichi, and therefore he did not draw his weekly pay. He lived with his wife and they somehow managed to scrape along on what she earned, putting his money aside. Then Ivan had disappeared, and when his wife had come to Herman to find out about her husband's money, Herman had found the following entry in the pay-book, written in his own clear hand: "Received all his money," with the date following. In vain did Herman try to recall whether he had given the money to Ivan. Perhaps, Moshko had withdrawn his pay for him, as was often the case among the workers. What if it had been so? Why, nothing, unless he took into account Moshko's pallor and anxiety as he listened to Matvii's words. That meant that... that either Herman's foreman had murdered Ivan or shoved him into the well when he was drunk, or else that he had known about it and had split the money with the murderer. There could be no doubt about it, as there was no money at all on the body. Ah, yes, had not Matvii said something about having seen Ivan drinking with someone on Intercession Day? Who had the other man been? Why hadn't Matvii wanted to tell him? There was something to it!

Herman was preoccupied with these unhappy thoughts and he kept walking until he reached the outskirts of Boryslav with several pitiful old huts thatched with rotten straw huddling together. These were the houses of the workers. There was a light burning in the hut nearest the road. Herman was attracted to this single light in a sea of complete darkness. He walked up to it quietly and peeped in at the tiny window. He neither knew nor cared to know who lived there. Something urged him on, to find out what the workers' home life was like, what they talked about and what they did. However, Herman was not too concerned about that either. How many times before had he entered huts like this one and cast a cold, contemptuous glance round the miserable poverty which filled them to the brimming point! But today had been a truly unusual day: he had seen everything in a strange light, everything he had come in contact with had changed, and, as if by magic, had been transformed into something else. All the familiar, everyday things had appeared as never before, and it was this that drew him to the window of the worker's miserable hut. However, there was an unexpected jolt awaiting him there which was to complete the moral turnabout in his soul, a change that was far-reaching, terrible, and torturous, which had come to a head today under the influence of his life's experience as the natural outcome of all the good and evil forces that were part of him.

Everything inside the hut bespoke utter poverty and ruin. The bare walls of the crowded room were in need of paint; they were covered with soot and peeling, and the room itself looked

more like a coffin than a human dwelling. The greater part of the hut was taken up by a clay stove. A wooden trestle-bed with straw and a coarse homespun cover on it leaned against the stove—and that was all there was to the bed! There was neither a chair nor a table in the place. Several shreds of woman's clothing were hanging on a peg above the bed, and a clumsy wooden cradle was suspended from two cords beside it. That was all the furniture Herman could see. A woman sat on the bed. She was still young, but poverty and hard work had sapped her strength and exhausted her. She was wearing a dirty, homespun dress and a still dirtier blouse; on her head she had an old cap with a tattered kerchief of indeterminable colour, and her long hair escaped from under it. She was rocking the cradle gently with one hand and wiping her tears with the other, as they seemed to be flowing unrestrainedly. Herman knew her well: she was Ivan Pivtorak's widow. Old Matvii was sitting on the stove-couch before her, facing the window sideways, puffing his pipe as always.

"Eh, Marysia, Marysia!" the old man was saying in a soft, shaking voice. "That's not the kind of life I foresaw for you and Ivan! What's the use! Either God did not wish it to be so, or evil souls would not let it be so!"

Marysia wept loudly in reply, sobbing like a child.

"Come, now," Matvii tried to comfort her, "tears won't help now, they'll only sap your strength. You should have wept and wailed when he disappeared—perhaps something could have been done about it then, but not now!"

"Oh, my God," the poor woman moaned, "how could I have known what had happened to him? He said he was going to go to Drohobych, and to Tustanovichi from there, to settle the deed to that miserable plot. And from there he was to go some place else. I remember I said to him, 'Perhaps you should buy a hut closer to here, no matter what it's like, for we'll be near our work then,' and he answered, 'God save me from this kind of work! May my eyes never look upon it again! I'd rather starve to death among honest souls—mow, and thresh, and mill, and work for my daily bread—than be in that death-trap day in, day out!' I haven't seen him since the day he left."

Matvii sat up at these words.

"When was that? Do you remember when Ivan left?" he asked.

"Why it was in the evening, on the eve of Intercession Day. Some people said they saw him at Kirnitsky's later on, but I don't know about that."

"Did he come back from town afterwards?"

"They say he came back and got his pay from the boss."

"Did you see him after that?"

"No, I didn't."

"Are you sure he got paid?"

"Yes, I am. I waited a whole week for him to come home, and then I finally went to the boss to get the money at least. He said, 'What have you come for? Your husband was here only yesterday and he got paid in full!' And then he shouted at me. That's all there was to it."

Matvii was listening intently and seemed to be trying to piece his thoughts together. They were both silent for a long while.

“It’s no use!” Matvii said finally, heaving a deep sigh. “It’s no use even thinking about it! If an evil soul sent him to his doom, may God punish him for everything! Good night, my dear. Don’t weep and worry. Some day the Lord will bring you happiness too.”

“Yes, He will,” the woman answered as the tears streamed down her face, “I’ll find happiness too, but it won’t be in this world! Take care of yourself, and may the Lord repay you a hundredfold for coming here to comfort me in my sorrow.”

Matvii left without another word. Herman hid behind a corner and watched the old worker walk off, mumbling something and shrugging his shoulders, as if discussing something with himself. He was soon swallowed up by the darkness. Herman was trembling with cold and from a mass of new thoughts and conjectures as he resumed his place by the window. His iron heart was melting at the sight of the unfortunate woman, and he was keenly aware of the tears that had welled up in his eyes at her words—heavy, burning, long-forgotten tears! He knew now that today marked the end of his old way of life and that tomorrow he would turn a new leaf. He was certain that he would not be the same man tomorrow as he had been yesterday. His soul was undergoing a rapid, deep, and tremendous change. Herman did not know and had no time now to think of what the focal point of this new way of life would be, or which way it would be channelled. And he cared not! It is not difficult to build a new house when the old house has fallen and crumbled to bits, when the ruins have burned and changed into ashes. What kind of house? What for? What of? Only time, and necessity, and one’s conscience would tell.

After she had locked the door behind Matvii, Ivan’s widow stood motionless in the middle of the hut. There were no tears in her swollen red eyes, there was no sound of moaning, cries, or weeping. She stood thus for a long while, silently watching the sleeping babe in the cradle, and the only sign of the ache in her heart and her suffering was the expression on her face. The moment of despair had passed, and the grief she had been holding back so long rushed forward in a turbulent flood.

“My baby! My baby!” she sobbed, her arms around the cradle. “Your Daddy won’t ever come home again. And my little sweetie has learned to call him ‘Daddy’ so nicely.

He’ll never hear you calling him, angel! Who will take care of us now? Who will help us in sickness and need? Who will look after us and protect us? O God, why did You take him and leave me behind to suffer so cruelly?”

She sobbed, ending her lament. The child in the cradle awoke at the sound of her voice, and, raising its head, it stretched forth its arms to its mother.

“Daddy!” the child called. “Daddy!”

Sobs racked the poor widow’s body. The dear, innocent voice had cut her to the heart. She kissed the child’s hands, pouring bitter tears on them.

Herman stood at the window, glued to the spot. The scene of poverty, broken dreams and despair, and of a child’s innocence put the finishing touch on all that had remained incomplete after the manifold, stirring experiences of the day. Hot tears flowed from his eyes. His hand closed convulsively over the silver coins in his pocket. He swung his arm and threw the money at the window. There was a sound of glass shattering and of silver jingling as it scattered over the floor of the hut. Herman was no less astounded by the sound of the shattering glass and of metal

jingling than was Marysia. He heard them as a moan of despair, reproach, and sorrow. A wild, unmanageable force shoved him, and he raced off down the street like a streak of lightning.

“Lord, what can that be?” the frightened woman cried out at the sound. She turned round and looked on with amazement as the silver coins rolled over the floor in all directions. What had happened? Where had such an unexpected gift come from? Who had taken pity on her and had sent her this aid in such a strange way? It was a long while before she could gather her thoughts. The sound of her baby crying startled her and she rushed out into the street. There was no one near the house, but the rapid tapping of someone’s heels on the pavement indicated the direction in which Herman had vanished.

How did it all end?

Ah, dear reader, life then continued on its usual course: Herman did not suddenly become a kind man. His kind-hearted gesture as he had stood at the poor widow’s window had been momentary; the moment passed, and once more he was forced to become what life had made of him—a cold, heartless profiteer who had no time to notice misery, want, or widow’s tears.

Moshko stayed on as Herman’s foreman. Marysia and Matvii went to court to ask for an inquest, as the body had been found, but who could ever prove Moshko’s guilt if his own conscience was silent? If Fate has deemed that someone is to be crushed underfoot, he will be crushed underfoot, and no court will help him if he does not help himself.

But that’s a different story, a story for the far future.

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