

***Ivan Franko***

**LITTLE MYRON**

**THE EDUCATION OF HRYTSKO**

*Translated by Stephen Shumeyko*

Ivan Franko was the most prolific of the Western Ukrainian writers, poets, and educators and a researcher in the Ukrainian and Slavic languages. He was born in 1856 in the village of Nahuievychi, not far from the town of Drohobych. He was educated in Lviv and Vienna. He took to writing at an early age and published his poems in student journals. In the latter half of the 19th century he was carried away by the socialist slogans of the times and thus came into conflict with the political and social authorities of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, and was imprisoned several times for his political convictions. Beside publishing many collections of poetry, Ivan Franko was also the author of a long series of stories, a historical novel, *Zakhar Berkut*, 1883, another work called *Boa Constrictor*, 1884, the theme of which was taken from the life of the workers at the oil refinery in his native Drohobych; the life of the Ukrainian intelligentsia in Eastern Galicia, *Foundations of Society*, 1894-95; *Crossroads*, 1900, and others, as well as a collection of stories, *By the Sweat of One's Brow*, 1890; *Seven Tales*, 1900; *Good Profit*, 1902; *Little Myron*, 1903; *In the Lap of Nature*, 1905, and others, including those in this selected collection. In his earlier prose works Ivan Franko was a follower of Emile Zola and a representative of the realistic trend in Ukrainian literature. The greater part of the themes in the stories of Ivan Franko were taken from the peasant way of life during the second half of the 19th century. After a long, lingering illness Ivan Franko died in 1916 in Lviv. In his poetic work he takes second place in Ukrainian literature to Taras Shevchenko.

## LITTLE MYRON

Little Myron is a queer child. To his father he's the apple of his eye, wondrously clever; but then, a father can be a partial judge, all the more so, a father like Myron's father, a man well advanced in years, who had almost lost hope of ever having a child. Such a parent, naturally enough, could have any sort of an offspring and yet consider it the most precious, the most beautiful and clever in the whole world.

The neighbors used to whisper that Myron "is not like other children." As he ambles along, he keeps swinging his arms in a peculiar way, whispering to himself, now picking up a switch and either swishing it through the air, or else knocking off the head of weeds with it. In the company of other children he is shy and awkward; and if he ever ventures to say something, it is enough to cause the elders to shrug their shoulders.

"Vasyl," said Myron to another little boy. "How far can you count?"

"Who, me? How much should I? Five, seven, fifketeen . . ."

"Fifketeen? Ha-ha-ha! And how much is fifketeen?"

"How much should it be? I don't know."

"It means nothing at all. Come, let's sit down and count together."

Vasyl sat down, and Myron began to count, striking the stick against the ground at each number: one, two, three, four . . .

Vasyl listened for a while, then rose and scampered away. Just then old Riabyna passed by, coughing and breathing wheezily. Myron could not even notice him. The old man stopped and began to listen . . . Myron reached up to four hundred . . .

"Why, you foolish child," explained the old man in his somewhat nasal voice. "What are you doing?"

Startled by this sudden interruption. Myron turned his frightened eyes on the ancient Riabyna.

"Don't you realize you're beating holy earth? Don't you know the earth is our mother? Here, give me that stick."

Myron gave his stick to him, without the least idea what the old man wanted of him. The latter flung the stick deep into the nettles. Myron nearly burst out crying, not so much because of the

loss of the stick, but rather because the old man had interrupted his counting.

"Go home and say the Lord's Prayer instead of performing such antics," snorted the old man angrily, as he shuffled away, muttering to himself. Myron watched him till he was out of sight, unable to comprehend what the old man wanted of him, and what wrong he had done.

## II

Little Myron loved to roam in the green flower-covered valleys, among the wide-leaved burdocks, the scented corn camomiles, to breathe in the sweet odor of the dew-laden clover, and to cover himself from head to foot with sticky flowering burrs. Nearby there was a brook with high steep banks and gurgling fords which ran through the pasture. Its clay bottom was covered by soft water-weeds that looked like skeins of green silk, all in all a most paradisiacal and alluring spot to Myron. In this idyllic place Myron loved to while the time away, hidden in the deep grass. He would gaze at the splashing water, at the water-weeds, and the little fishes that from time to time emerged from their hiding places in search of prey, sometimes darting upwards until their gills broke through the surface and gulped down a little air, then swiftly fleeing to their hiding places as if they had just stolen some delicious tid-bit. And in the meantime the sun would blaze down from a cloudless, deep-blue sky; but since the wide leaves above him guarded him from sunburn, Myron felt only a delightful sense of warmth and happiness. His little grey eyes looked out eagerly at the world, and his forehead would wrinkle up with childish concentration as thoughts kept stirring in his young mind.

"That sun above me — why is it so small, when father told me it was very big? Perhaps the hole in the sky was made so small so as to let out just that much sun and no more."

But then another thought struck him.

"Well, how can that be? When the sun sets, the small hole is there, and when it rises, it is still there. Does the hole travel through the sky with the sun?"

This was too much for him to comprehend, and he promised himself that as soon as he reached home he would ask his father about the peep-hole of the sun.

"Myron! Myron!" someone yelled in the distance. That was his mother. Myron jumped up to his feet and ran down to the ford in order to cross the brook. Suddenly he stopped in his tracks. He had crossed here many times before without the least hesitation,

but now he saw something that made him pause. He was standing directly facing the sun, but instead of seeing the shallow bottom with its pebbles and water-weeds, as he always had, a deep blue bottomless pit now met his gaze. He did not know that this was just the reflection of the sky smiling up at him. And so he stopped in amazement. How was he to wade through such great depth. And from where did it appear so suddenly? He stopped and began to examine it more closely. It remained the same, except that near the bank he could see the familiar pebbles and hear the usual pleasant gurgling of the water. He turned his face in another direction away from the sun, and looked into the water; now everything was all right; the abyss had vanished and the ford was as shallow as before. This discovery both calmed and surprised him. He began to turn around back and forth, experimenting with this strange vision, somehow made happy by it. And as for his mother's call — he had forgotten all about it.

Little Myron stood there for a long time, turning this way and way, yet not daring to cross the brook. He could not get over the feeling that this shallow stony ford would suddenly open, and a deep blue abyss would appear between the banks into which he would fall and disappear like a pebble thrown into a deep, dark well. Who knows how long he would have stood there, had a neighbor, Martin, not appeared, hurrying with rake and pitchfork to his hay.

“Why are you standing here? Your mother is calling you. Why don't you go home?”

“I want to go home, but I'm afraid.”

“Of what?”

“Of this, — see,” said Myron, pointing at the bottomless pit in the water. Martin, however, didn't understand.

“What's there to be afraid of? It's very shallow.”

“Shallow?” said Myron unbelievably. “But look at the big hole!”

“Hole? What kind of a hole?” said Martin; and without taking off his shoes, he crossed the brook, hardly wetting them. The example of Martin assured Myron; he, too, crossed the ford and ran home hurriedly.

“What a foolish child! Five years old and he's afraid to cross such a shallow brook!”, the neighbor blurted out testily and hurried on his way.

### III

In summer, when the grown-ups were out in the fields, little Myron remained at home, but not in the house; he was afraid to remain there, scared of the “gray beards in the corners,” that is

"the shadows," the wide chimney with its cavernous black interior, and the wooden hook fastened to the ceiling window which served as a ventilator in wintertime for smoke from burning pine splinters that illuminated the house. Myron played outside for the most part, gathering flowers and plucking their petals one by one, building houses out of sticks and chips that lay strewn about in the woodshed, or sunning himself on the abutment of the front wall of the dwelling. There he would listen attentively to the chirping of the birds in the apple trees and gaze at the blue sky. For a while this was sheer delectation, but then in turn his childish forehead would cloud up with other thoughts not so pleasant.

"What makes a person see the sky above, or the flowers, or daddy and mother?" he would ask himself. "With what do I hear? I can hear the call of the kite and the cackling of the hens. But how?"

It seems to him that it is the mouth that enables him to see and hear. He opens his mouth, and lo and behold! He sees all and hears all . . .

"But wait, maybe it's these eyes?"

He closes his eyes; now he can't see a thing. He opens them; now he sees and hears; he closes them again; now he cannot see but he still can hear.

"Oh, so that's it! I see with my eyes, but with what do I hear?"

Again he opens and closes his mouth, with no effect upon his hearing.

He does likewise with his eyes, but the result is the same. A sudden idea strikes him. What'll happen if he should close his ears with his fingers? He pokes his fingers into his ears but hears a dull constant noise. What new sound has replaced the call of the kite and the cackling of the hens in his ears? He removes his fingers from his ears. In place of that noise he now hears the kite and the hens. He tries it again, with the same result.

"How come?" puzzles little Myron. "Ah, now I know. With my ears I hear the cackling, but with my fingers I hear that noise. That's it!" And to assure himself that his reasoning is correct, he repeats the whole process again.

When at noon the reapers returned home for lunch, Myron ran out to greet his father.

"Daddy! Daddy! I know something!"

"What do you know, my child?"

"I know that a person sees with his eyes."

His father smiled indulgently.

"With his ears he hears the cackling, and with his fingers he hears a noise."

"How is that?"

"Well, when I don't stick my fingers into my ears, I hear the hens cackling, but when I do, then I hear a funny kind of a noise."

The father roared with laughter at this observation, while the mother, glancing reprovingly at her offspring, waved a reproaching finger at him, saying:

"Hush, you scamp! You'll soon be old enough to marry, and here you are spouting such rubbish! How else could you hear if not with your ears?"

"But why doesn't a person hear this cackling and this funny noise all at the same time?" asked Myron. "When his ears are not closed, he hears the cackling, but when he shuts them with his fingers he hears that funny noise. Just try it yourself." And to encourage his mother, he stuck his fingers in his ears.

His mother, however, made no attempt to follow his example; and though she continued to scold Myron, it was evident she could not find an answer to his question.

#### IV

Myron's greatest trouble lay in his inability to think properly. He just couldn't think, that's all! No matter what he said there usually would be something wrong with it; and whenever he said anything, each time it was his mother or someone else who would reprove him for it.

"You big dunce, why don't you think before you speak, and stop balling things up so much."

Despite all his efforts, however, poor little Myron just couldn't help putting his foot in his mouth every time he spoke. And so poor Myron decided that thinking was out of his line.

One time, for example, the whole family was seated around the dinner table. The mother had served some appetizing cabbage soup. Myron had swallowed one or two spoonfuls and then suddenly realized that a hush had fallen upon all those present, so intent were they on their meal. Aha, he thought, here's a fine chance for me to say something clever. But what could he say? That obviously required some thought; so he began to think. He thought so intently that the spoon he was carrying to his mouth suddenly froze in the air together with his hand. He stared vacantly into space and then his eyes fastened on a picture of the Virgin Mary hanging on the wall opposite him. Only his lips moved, as if he were whispering.

The servants noticed this and glanced significantly at one another, while the maid whispered to old Ivan: "Watch him pull another boner."

"I wonder," little Myron began slowly, "why the Holy Mother looks and looks, but still does not eat any soup."

Poor Myron! Despite all the pains he took he could not think of anything better than that to say; perhaps it was because he had so often been reminded by pressure from above to talk "like other people."

Smiles, laughter and his mother's customary berating that included the rather derogatory appellation, "You 18th degree dunce," was enough to make Myron cry.

"Can I help it if I can't think like other people?" he asked, wiping away the tears.

## V

What will happen to Myron? What kind of a flower will blossom from this kind of a bud? It is not hard to foretell. Such types are common in our villages. Already at an early age they stand apart in walk, appearance, words, and acts. And when such a child is forced to spend all his time in a crowded peasant hut, without any chance of getting an education, when his parents constantly remind him of his dissimilarity to other people, it all tends to stifle his individuality and inherent ability; which then by constant disuse becomes atrophied, and thus degrades our little Myron to the status of an incompetent husbandman, a poor lout; or worse still, divests him of the ability to direct his talents into channels of constructive work, thereby increasing the danger of his straying into paths of evil and becoming either a criminal or a charlatan.

If, on the other hand, such a child happens to have loving parents who are not too poor, and who will sacrifice even their penny for his education, then, well, what then? Do you think such a child's fate will be a better one, that is, better in the common sense of the word? Not at all. In school he will pursue knowledge with great eagerness, imbibe it as a sick man would fresh air; and then upon his graduation ardently propagate knowledge and high ideals among the ignorant and downtrodden . . . But for this, however, an unenviable fate awaits him — he will become familiar with prison walls, suffer all kinds of indignities from his fellow men, and end up by languishing in poverty, friendlessness, and loneliness in some God-forsaken spot; or carry out from prison the germs of mortal illness which will send him to an early grave; or, having lost faith in holy, absolute truth, will begin to drown his woes in liquor even to the point of complete forgetfulness. Poor little Myron!



## THE EDUCATION OF HRYTSKO

The geese knew nothing about it. Even that very morning when the father intended to send Hrytsko to school, they knew nothing of his intention, while Hrytsko knew even less. As usual he rose at early dawn, ate his breakfast, cried a bit, scratched himself, found himself a willow switch and, skipping along, drove the geese before him from the pen to the pasture. The white gander as usual would point his rather small head with its wide red bill and red eyes at him, hiss fiercely, and then, cackling something unintelligible to the geese, waddle into the lead. The old "hryva" goose, with the grey top and the white under-bottom, also as usual, would refuse to remain in the ranks for long, and so would wander off beyond the bridge into a ditch; and for this dereliction Hrytsko would give her a smart cut with the switch and call her a "rascal," a name he reserved for all those who refused to recognize the sovereignty of his rule in the pasture. Clearly then, neither the white gander, nor the "hryva" goose, nor anyone in the entire company—of which there was a full score and five—was aware of the impending transfer of their lord and master to a far less exalted position in life.

And thus, when the final and unexpected news broke, when the father, coming in from the field, called Hrytsko, and handed him over to his mother to wash, comb and dress him, just as God ordained; and when his father took him by the hand and without even a word of explanation led the already alarmed boy through the pasture; and finally, when the amazed geese perceived their erstwhile leader entirely transformed into a new being with new boots, new felt hat, and new red belt, they emitted a sudden and very loud cry of wonder. A white gosling, neck outstretched, ran up very close to him, as if to see him all the better; while the brownish goose also stretched out her neck and dumbfoundedly regarded him for quite sometime, without even a peep, until finally she hissed out a "de-de-de-de?"

"Foolish goose!" Hrytsko muttered scornfully, turning away as if to say, "I haven't fallen that far from grace as to have to reply to a goose's question!" Or was it because he didn't know the answer himself?

Soon they entered the upper stretches of the village. Neither the father nor Hrytsko said anything. Finally they reached a rambling,

old straw-roofed building with a chimney on top. Approaching this building were many boys of the same size or even bigger than Hrytsko. Beyond the building a man in a vest could be seen walking around in the garden.

"Ha!" said Hrytsko.

"Do you see that house?"

"Yes."

"Well, just remember; that's a school."

"Bah!" replied Hrytsko.

"Just behave yourself; don't show any of your tricks; listen to your teacher; I'm on my way to get you registered."

"Bah!" repeated Hrytsko, understanding but little of what his father was talking about.

"And now you run along with these little boys. Take him along with you, boys."

"Come along!" yelled the boys; and they took him along with them.

Meanwhile the father had gone into the yard to talk things over with the teacher.

## II

They entered the porch which was dark and smelled of last year's decayed cabbage.

"Do you see that over there?" one of the boys said to Hrytsko, indicating a dark corner.

"I thee," lisped Hrytsko tremblingly although he actually saw nothing.

"There's a hole there," said the boy.

"A hole!" repeated Hrytsko.

"If you don't behave yourself, the teacher'll throw you into that hole and you'll have to sit there the whole night through."

"I don't want to," shrieked Hrytsko. Meanwhile another boy whispered something into the ear of the first boy; they both laughed; then the first one, getting hold of the school door, spoke to Hrytsko:

"Rap on the door! Faster!"

"Why?" asked Hrytsko.

"You have to! It's the custom for anyone who comes here for the first time."

There was a buzz in the school, just as in a bee-hive; but when Hrytsko rapped at the door the noise quieted down. The boys opened the door slowly and then pushed Hrytsko inside. Soon some birch switches lashed on his shoulders. Hrytsko became frightened and began to shriek.

"Hush, you fool, you shouldn't do that! Whoever raps on the door should also be rapped on the shoulders. Didn't you know that?"

"No-o-o-o, I didn't," whimpered Hrytsko.

"And why didn't you?"

"B—b—because this is the first time I've been in school."

"The first time! Aha!" the boys yelled as if surprised that there could be such a first time in school.

"Oh, I see we'll have to act as hosts to you!" said one of the boys, who fished out a long piece of chalk and handed it to Hrytsko.

"Here, you fool, take a bite; faster!"

They all stopped talking in their anticipation of seeing Hrytsko actually putting the chalk into his mouth and chewing on it; which he did.

"Eat, you fool, faster!" the boys reminded him, meanwhile dying with laughter.

Hrytsko began to chew the chalk and finally to eat it up. The school room was filled with a paroxysm of laughter that actually made the windows rattle.

"W-W-Why are you laughing?" asked the astonished Hrytsko.

"Nothing at all. Do you want to eat some more of it?"

"No; what ith it?" lisped Hrytsko.

"Don't you even know? What a fool! That's a kind of Jerusalem; it's very good."

"Oh, not very good," said Hrytsko.

"But you've not really tasted it yet. It's proper to eat for everyone who comes to school for the first time."

It was at this moment that the teacher appeared. Like a lot of alarmed sparrows all the boys rushed pell-mell to their seats; Hrytsko alone remained standing with tears in his eyes and his lips laden with moist chalk dust. The teacher approached him sternly.

"What is your name?" he yelled.

"Hrytsko."

"What kind of a Hrytsko? Aha, you're a new one. Why aren't you in your seat? Why are you crying? How did you get so white? Ha?"

"Why I ate some Jerusalem."

"What? Some Jerusalem!?" questioned the teacher. Again the boys could hardly contain themselves from laughter.

"The boys gave it to me."

Hryts looked around the room, but he couldn't recognize anyone.

"Well, now! Go ahead, sit down! You had better learn something, but don't eat any more Jerusalem, or else you'll get a whipping!"

## III

The class began its lesson. The teacher was saying something, displaying little squares upon which were written or drawn curiously-shaped hooks and props; and everytime he displayed a new one the boys would shout something; but it was all above Hrytsko's head. For that matter, he didn't even pay any attention to the teacher, but found a great deal of amusement in the antics of the boys seated around him. One was picking at his nose, another was trying to stick a straw into Hryts's ear, while a third was most diligently applying himself to the task of pulling out loose threads from his thread-bare jacket; already he had a good-sized pile of threads before him, yet he kept on pulling more.

"What you pulling dem for?" asked Hryts.

"Oh, I'm goin' to take 'em home to eat 'em with my borsch," the other replied calmly; and for quite some time afterwards Hryts wondered whether the boy was in his right senses or not.

"Hryts! You're not paying the least bit of attention!" the voice of the teacher suddenly boomed at him, and at the same time Hryts felt a sharp pain in his ear, which the teacher had seized and given a sharp tweak. The pain was so excruciating that tears appeared in his eyes. When he recovered his senses the boys were already reading from a set of tablets which the teacher had arranged before them. Untiringly, over and over again, they chanted in a sing-song fashion "a-ba-ba-ha-la-ma-ha." For some reason or other this pleased Hryts and he too joined in the chorus, his thin piping voice shrilling above the others: "a baba halamaha." Even the teacher became impressed by this, and thinking that he had an apt pupil before him sought to give the boy a further opportunity to distinguish himself by arranging a new combination of the letter, reading "baba"; but Hryts, not even looking at the new word, shrilled at the teacher: "halamaha." The whole class roared with laughter, not even excluding the teacher. Hrytsko looked around him in a puzzled manner, and then turning to the boy next to him, asked, "Why don't you say 'halamaha'?" And not until he felt the sting of the teacher's ruler over his back, did he first realize that something was amiss somewhere.

"Well, now, what did they teach you at school?" his father asked him when Hryts had returned home for lunch.

"Oh, we learned to thay 'a baba halamaha!'" the boy replied, proudly.

"And did you know it well?" asked his father, ignoring for the moment the question of what this strange word could possibly mean.

"Of courth," replied Hryts, loftily.

"Well then, be a good boy!" admonished his father. "When you finish this village school I shall send you to higher schools, and then you'll become a priest. Woman, give him something to eat."

"Bah," said Hryts.

#### IV

A year passed since that fateful day. The high hopes of the father for his son as a scholar had long since been dissipated. The teacher had frankly told him that Hryts was a "dunce of the 18th degree" and that he would do better to take the boy out of school and return him to tending geese. And indeed he was right, for after a year in school Hryts returned home just as wise as when he first entered. To be sure, he had by this time memorized that awe-inspiring "a baba halamaha" so well that even in his sleep he was heard to recite it. But that seemed to be the limit of his education. The other letters of the alphabet whirled about in such a manner that he could never recognize any of them. And as for reading and writing! . . . Whether all this was because he did not have a retentive memory or perhaps because the teacher was to blame, no one could say; however, one thing was certain, — that the designation as the "18th degree dunce" was not only not limited to Hryts but applicable to most of his companions, for all of them dreamed of that day when they would be freed from the constant canings, ear-twistings, jabs, hairpullings, and once more appear in the full glory of their dignity and importance as lords of the pasture.

Hryts, of course, was more anxious to return to this status quo than any of the others. The blasted reader, which a year's hard use had well-nigh reduced to shreds, that confounded "a baba halamaha," and the accursed nagging and prompting of the teacher had upset him so much that he had actually lost weight and color, mowing about as if in a daze. But finally the Lord had taken pity on him, sending along the month of July. His father, too, had relented with the promise one fine morning: "Starting today you won't have to attend school anymore."

"Bah!" was Hryts's only reply.

"Take your shoes, hat and belt off; you'll need them only for Sunday wear. Gird yourself with a baste-belt, don your baste-hat and go out and tend your flock of geese."

"Bah," said Hryts happily.

## V

The geese, as usual, being woefully dumb, had no inkling of the impending change that awaited them, — a happy one this time. For during the whole year they had been tended by a neighbor's boy, Luchka, who, as a rule, did nothing more in the pasture than dig holes, make mud pies, and cover himself with dust. And as for the geese, he hardly gave them a thought, letting them drift for themselves. Misfortune and tragedy dogged their footsteps at every turn. More than once they wandered off the pasture into some neighbor's farm, receiving much abuse and even blows for their errant ways. Once five young ganders and ten geese were sold by the "hospodynja" in the market; it was a heart-breaking event for the rest of them. The ashen colored one, wandering into someone's garden, was caned there to death; and then tied to the end of the cane and barbarously dragged all over the pasture and finally tossed unceremoniously over the fence into her pen. On another occasion a young gander, the fine pride of the flock, was killed by a hawk when he had wandered away from his own kind. And yet, despite all these unfortunate mishaps, the flock had increased in size. Thanks to the white gander and the "hryva" goose, as well as to two or three of her gosling daughters, the flock had increased during the year to as high as forty.

Thus when Hryts appeared among them that morning, willow switch in hand, the sceptre of his authority, the geese just stared at him at first, emitting but one faint hiss of surprise. But neither the white goose nor the "hryva" goose had forgotten their former pastor. With loud outcries of joy and furious beating of wings they threw themselves at him.

"De-de-de-de?" gaggled the "hryva" goose.

"Why, in school, of courth," lisped Hryts loftily.

"Oh! oh! oh!" exclaimed the white gander in surprise.

"Don't you believe me, you old fool?" cried Hryts angrily, giving the goose a cut with the switch.

"Eh, whot-whot-whot-whot?" honked all the geese, swarming around him.

"You mean what did I learn in school?" said Hryts formulating their question.

"Eh, whot-whot-whot-whot?" honked all the geese again.

"A baba, halamaha!" said Hrytsko in reply.

Again there was a hiss of surprise and wonder, as if none of the geese could comprehend such profound wisdom. Hrytsko just stood there in unapproachable pride; but not for long; for at last the white goose found his voice.

“A baba halamaha!” he replied to Hrytsko. “A baba halamaha!”, repeating it again in his ringing metallic voice, raising himself erect, stretching out his neck and flapping his wings. And then, turning to Hrytsko, he hissed, as if to shame him all the more:

“A kshee, a kshee!”

Hryts was heart-broken and ashamed! To think that the gander in one fleeting moment had grasped and repeated all the wisdom that it had taken him one whole year to gain! That was the final straw!

“Why didn’t they thend him to thkool?” thought Hrytsko bitterly, as he drove the geese to the communal pasture.

# THEIR LAND

AN ANTHOLOGY OF UKRAINIAN  
SHORT STORIES

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