

VASYL STEFANYK
The Pious Woman

Semen and Semenykha had come from church and were eating dinner: dipping cooled cornmeal into sour cream. The husband ate so that his eyes were just about ready to pop, but the wife ate more delicately. Time after time she wiped herself with her sleeve, for her husband was showering her with spit. It was his way to smack his lips while he ate and send a shower of spit into people's eyes.

“Can't you close that trap a bit? Can't even eat one's bread in peace...”

Semen went on eating without closing his trap. His wife had hurt him a bit by using that word but he kept on hauling the sour cream from the bowl.

“He smacks like four swine. My God, Christ! You've got such a disgusting snout; like an old horse.”

Semen remained silent. He felt a bit at fault and besides, first of all he wanted to get something under his belt. Finally he got up and crossed himself. He went outside, gave the swine some water and came back to lie down.

“Will you look at him? He's stuffed himself and now he's gonna lie there like a log. D'you think he'd show his puss someplace? No, he rots like that every holiday and Sunday.”

“Why are you itching for it? I'll give you such an itch you'll be scratching for the rest of your life.”

“Every Sunday I'd eat you alive.”

“If only pigs had horns.. .”

“He stands there in church like a near-dead ram. Other men are like men; but he's as sloppy as dishwater. My face burns on account of a man like that.”

“Oh, poor me; I'll probably miss the Heavenly Kingdom for that. Work your head off all week and then stand at attention in church. You stand there for me and I'll get to hear the Lord's word without it.”

“You sure listen to the Lord's word. You don't know one word of what the priest said in his sermon. You stand there in the middle of the church like a sleepwalker. No sooner are you there than your eyes go blank, your mouth opens as wide as a gate, and the spittle starts running out of it. And I look at you and the earth is about ready to swallow me up with shame.”

“Leave me alone, you pious female, so that I can get some shuteye. It doesn't matter to you if you go on squawking like that, but I'm dead tired.”

“Well, don't stand there in church like a pole. No sooner does the priest start to read than you pop your eyes like two onions. And you wag your head like a horse in the sun, and you dribble spittle threads as thin as a spider's web; you just about snore. And my mother told me it's the evil spirit sneaking up on a man that snags him into sleep so that he won't hear the Lord's word. There's no God near you, honest to God there isn't.”

“The hell with you, woman. Leave me alone. You're a holy one! So you've joined some “archroman” sisterhood and you think you're a saint already? Boy, will I tan your hide until it has blue lines, just like a book! So the ladies've formed a sisterhood? No one's ever seen or heard anything like it: one had a kid while she was still a girl, another while she was a widow, a third had one without a husband; real respectable ladies you've got together. Boy, if those priests knew what kind of a crowd you are, they'd chase you out of church with a whip. Look at the pious females; all you need is a tail. They read books, they buy holy pictures; they want to get into Heaven alive.”

Semenykha, on the verge of tears, trembled with anger.

"Then you shouldn't have taken me when I had a child. So-oo what a fate I found for myself! Even a bitch wouldn't have gone for a bull like you. You should thank God that I ruined my life with you or you'd still be hanging around alone 'till you died."

"Because I was stupid and greedy for land, I took a witch into my house. Now I'd even add some of my own land to get rid of you."

"Oh, no you won't. You won't get rid of me. I know, you'd like to have another wife with land, but don't you worry, you're not going to get rid of me that easy. I'll live and you'll have to put up with me and look at me and that's that."

"Go ahead-live 'till there's sun and a world to live in."

"And I'll keep going to the sisterhood, and you can't do anything about it."

"Well, we'll see about that. You're not going to belong to any sisterhood as long as I'm around. I'll throw those books of yours to the wind and I'll tie you up. No sir, you're not gonna keep bringing me any of that wisdom from the priests ..."

"Oh, yes I will, yes I will and that's that."

"Lay off woman, 'cause I'm gonna grab something and I'll latch onto you, but good."

"Oh, mother, did you ever marry me off to a Calvin; look at him there, he's planning to beat me on a Sunday!"

"Well, did I begin the fight? And she still thinks she's holy! Oh, my dear, if you're gonna carry on like that then I'll have to take you down a peg or two, I'll have to close that mouth of yours a bit. Or I'll have to leave my house because of this pious female. But whatever happens I'll beat you."

Semenykha was running out of the house, but her husband caught up with her in the hallway, and he beat her. He had to beat her.

- *Translated by D. Struk*