

Much Ado about Nothing

Ivan Kernytsky

Our friend Ivan Stepanovych came into the room after everyone else was already asleep. It might have been 11 p.m, or it might have been one in the morning. He had yakked and joked in Barrack 9 until late. He'd been at a christening.

Any other person accidentally finding himself in pitch darkness would invariably have staggered into some bucket of filth or become entangled in the clotheslines, like a fly in a spider web, or even stumbled with probing hands into the wrong family hearth.

Our friend Ivan Stepanovych was not that kind of person. Even though he had been godfather at the christening and stayed very late, having personally communed with more than one glass of beverage, he moored at his cot safely, without any adventures and on his own steam, with no help from anyone. But just as he was about to lie down to sleep, he smacked his forehead on the bed-frame so violently that the whole block shook and plaster sifted down from the ceiling.

“The devil take you!” mumbled our friend affably. Then he lay his weary head on the pillow stuffed with sawdust and instantly fell asleep like a rock.

I'm not denying that at the very moment when Ivan Stepanovych plowed his forehead into the bed-frame Madame Yazychynska was already asleep and that the thunderous crack ringing out in the middle of the night ripped her forcibly from the sweet embraces of Morpheus. But it is equally likely that the good woman was not sleeping but simply lying there, perhaps even waiting for an opportunity to launch her organs of speech into full operation. At any rate, the good lady immediately sat up in bed and began jabbering.

“Who the devil is making such a racket? Who's slamming doors at night and not letting people sleep? Oh merciful God, not only is there not a scrap of peace in this bedlam in daytime, these blasphemers don't even let you shut your eyes at night. Who's running nocturnal excursions out there? What are these nightly promenades, I'd like to know!”

The good lady fell silent and listened. It was quiet. The hall slept on.

Hidden in this ominous silence was the harbinger of an approaching hurricane. All might have ended well if someone had given a sympathetic sigh of solidarity, or at least muttered sleepily, “Oh, yes, yes...You're so right, good lady.” A lot of people talk in their sleep, don't they? For

example, Mr. Tsvirkun, patron of literature and arts, who occasionally assists during Holy Mass in the camp's tiny church and sometimes recites the entire Confiteor in his pleasant baritone... But this time, alas, no one uttered a peep. Everyone kept sleeping as if in a morgue.

This outrageous indifference and unresponsiveness from the hall affected the good lady painfully and, naturally, spurred her to further ruminations.

"I want to know who's slamming the doors so hard that the barrack is shaking. You don't have enough during the day that God gives, you rapsCALLIONS, so you kick up a row at night, too! You've got too much bread! Emigration is much too kind to you! At home you never had it as good as you do here, in a foreign country. Sure—you thump around until late at night and then laze about in bed until noon! Hey, you DP lords, don't get used to this aristocratic sleeping-in, because one day back home it'll be hard for you to wake up at dawn and go to the barn with a lantern to muck out the cows! Sweet Jesus, has anyone ever seen the likes of this? People converge from everywhere in the world, but no one does a thing! This one speculates, that one distills moonshine in a bunker; this one puts on shows in the theater, and that one goes and gets married. What people! Every week, three or four weddings in a single barrack! And the boozing! The music! The singing! And the carousing until dawn! And how many politicians have proliferated now, and how many patriots! In every room, behind every folding screen, they're building Ukraine, but there's no one to sweep out the courtyard! Oh, this kind of idleness will not end well! The person who created UNRRA was certainly misguided! A cane should be taken to these spongers! Chase them out to work, instead of fattening them up on tins of food!"

The good lady fell silent. She was all ears: no reply. Some twenty-odd émigrés in the hall were snoring, snorting, sniffing, and wheezing in a friendly chorus, if rarely in the same key. The most raucous snoring was emanating from the corner, where our friend Ivan Stepanovych was sleeping the sleep of the just.

The good lady felt a gnawing pain around her heart, and a dull grief crept to her throat. No, this silence was intolerable, and hateful! In this hush the good lady Yazychynska felt so alone, so miserable, and so aggrieved that she was powerless to stop herself from crying bitterly. She began to weep.

"Oh my God, why did I come here? What evil hour transported me from Tluste to such a distant world, all the way to Bavaria? Here I am, as alone as can be—with no family, no relatives, and strangers all around! Oh God—oh God! Did I ever think that in old age I would have to wander around and live in poverty, in louse-ridden barracks, or peer from behind wire fences, like a monkey in a cage? And what kind of honor or pleasure is it for me to look at those demolished Kraut buildings, at those ugly

Germans, and those Americans, white and black, whose jaws keep going back and forth like a hinge because they're always chewing on something!"

S-l-a-a-a-a-m—b-a-a-a-a-a-m!

Something solid and heavy, like a lump of coal or even a heavy military hobnail shoe, had whistled noisily through the air and with a deafening crash had collided squarely with the good lady's nightstand, on which a half-liter glass with her false teeth was standing..

Naturally, the good woman began to shriek:

"Help! Somebody save me! This is outright brigandage! Which of you bandits is throwing shoes? Police!! Call the police!"

"Oy, oy! Who's being slaughtered there?" groaned Mrs. Triska, who had been sleeping nearby, which is why she was the first to wake up.

"I'm being slaughtered! Murdered! Executed!" shouted her husband sleepily in a voice unlike his own. Mr. Triska, M.A., was a geography teacher at the camp's high school. It should be noted that Mr. Triska, M.A., was occasionally plagued by frightening and uneasy dreams stemming from the time when he was captured by Red partisans in Slovakia and escaped death only by a miracle. Since then the miserable wretch was constantly dreaming scenes of executions, tortures, and all manner of horrors.

The desperate cries of the poor Master of Arts woke up the entire hall. The little children launched such a symphony that they could have put an entire orchestra of alarm sirens and trumpets of Jericho to shame. From every corner and from behind every folding screen angry protests, grievances, complaints, and heavy curses fell profusely on the head of the good lady.

Meanwhile, after a concerted search the good lady found her false teeth, and then she made an official announcement with content as follows:

"Just so you know—I'm moving out of this lousy camp! What will be, will be! I'm going back, going back home! Don't try to stop me, and don't plead with me. Nothing will help! Tomorrow I'm going to go and see the commission!"

"Kindly do us the terrible injustice of going to see it tonight!" someone advised her.

"Lord, take her away to some other Zone—right now!" sighed some of her closest neighbors.

Naturally, these were only fervent wishes, because the good lady had often "moved out" and "set off" but never farther than from the room to the corridor and back into the room. The same thing happened this time. Without further ado, she packed up her belongings (in about twenty-eight trunks, sacks, and boxes), carried all that junk into the corridor, ensconced herself on it like a laying hen on her hatching chicks, and sat perched there until morning.

And so what if she was perched there? No one was able to sleep anyway. Their sleep disrupted, the impassioned and irritated residents of the

hall could no longer keep their nerves in check or maintain their spiritual equilibrium. Passions overflowed like rivers flooding their banks, while arguments and quarrels flared up like sparks! In no time at all, everyone was embroiled in a quarrel: neighbors with neighbors, wives with husbands, parents with children, older émigrés with younger ones, Eastern Ukrainians with Western Ukrainians, Ukrainian Catholics with Orthodox. Things finally escalated to such a point that the block leader, police, camp commandant, and UNRRA director had to be summoned.

Such a hullabaloo broke out—you wouldn't believe it!

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In the morning our friend Ivan Stepanovych woke up in a fine mood. True, there was a humming in his head like in a grain mill, and he was burping up the disgusting taste of gasoline, but in general he felt quite all right. Meanwhile, his neighbor and fellow countryman Stepan Ivanovych, who slept right next to him, was complaining up, down, and sideways that he hadn't slept a wink all night.

"But what were you doing during the night?" asked Ivan Stepanovych, yawning deliciously.

Stepan Ivanovych stared at him, his eyes bulging.

"What do you mean, during the night? Didn't you hear anything?"

"No, not a thing."

"Good Lord! No one in the hall shut his eyes the whole night! There was such a colossal uproar—it almost led to daggers being drawn. The police were called. Alarm bells rang all over the camp. A dead man would have risen from his grave—and you say you slept?!"

Ivan Stepanovych was completely mystified.

"The devil you say! A real mystery, for sure! But I must tell you, Stepan Ivanovych, that there is a special quality to my sleep. You could say that when I lie down, I sleep. The world can come crashing down around me, but still I'll sleep. The only thing I can't figure out is how such a huge bump sprang up on my forehead overnight..."

Translated by Marta D. Olynyk

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