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WANDA WASILEWSKA

THE RAINBOW

STALIN PRIZE WINNER 1943

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I

One road ran from east to west, the other from north to south. On the low hill where they crossed sprawled a village. The cottages huddling in rows along either side of the two roads formed the arms of a cross. From the tiny square in the centre the belfry of a church jutted. At the foot of the hill a river, hidden beneath ice and snow, wound its way through a deep gully. In a few places where the pale blue ice mantle had been broken the living water gleamed black.

A woman came out of one of the cottages with a pair of water buckets. Dangling from the yoke they swayed to and fro in rhythm with her slow, measured tread. The woman passed on down the slope, walking gingerly over the slippery path. The dazzlingly brilliant rays of the sun reflected* from the snow-drifts made her screw up her eyes. When she came to the river she put her buckets down near a hole in the ice and glanced round. Nobody in sight. The cottages stood there mutely as if smothered in their snowy featherbed. The woman remained motionless for a moment, and then, leaving her buckets on the ice, began to move slowly along the river bank, constantly casting uneasy glances upwards, at the village.

The river made a turn into a deeper gully, which was overgrown with bushes, their branches barely visible beneath the heavy covering of snow. A narrow, scarcely perceptible path led through the bush. The woman turned into this path. There was a rustling of ice-coated bushes around her as she pushed her way through them. The upper branches lashed her face and she thrust the sharp ice-coated twigs aside, causing a shower of soft, downy snow.

The footpath ended' abruptly. The woman stopped and peered ahead with dead, glassy eyes.

The ground here was undulating with fissures, low hillocks and narrow gullies. Lone plumps of bushes grew here and there. But it was not at the snow-clad hillocks, nor at the bushes with their scant blood-red rose hips which had outlived the autumn that the woman was staring.

Here and there vague, dark outlines were visible through the snow. A heap of rags lay in one of the fissures. Scraps of metal, rusty bits of iron protruded through the bluish snow.

She took another two steps forward and slowly sank to her knees. There he lay, frozen stiff and stretched out as taut as a violin string. Yet he seemed smaller, much smaller than he had been in life. His face might have been carved in ebony. Her eyes wandered lingeringly over that face whose every feature she knew so well, but which was at the same time the face of a stranger. The lips were frozen into immobility, the nostrils distended and the lids lowered over the eyes. There was a petrified serenity about the face. On one side, quite close to the temple, a round hole yawned. The congealed blood at its edges was an unnaturally brilliant crimson. A bloody seal on a black ground.

Apparently death from the wound had not been instantaneous. Apparently he had still been alive when they had dragged off his clothes. He had either been alive or still warm. It was not death, but the hand of the marauder that had straightened out his legs and pulled his arms down stiffly by his sides. On the day of the battle, the day when he had been killed, there had also been a bitter frost, which had immediately siezed the dead in its clutches, turning their bodies to stone. They could never have stripped the dead. And plunder him they had, leaving only his shirt and under-pants. They had torn off his greatcoat, pulled off his boots and breeches, even stripped him of his socks. The 'blue

underpants seemed to have grown into his body ; they looked as if they had been painted on wood, so impossible was it to distinguish cloth from skin. His bare feet, unlike his dead black face, were white with an inhuman, chalky pallor. One foot had split in the frost and the dead flesh had come away like the sole of a boot, leaving the bone bare.

The woman stretched out her hand tremulously, touched the dead shoulder, felt the rough cloth of the shirt and the Stony rigidity of the body beneath it.

"Sonny. . . ."

She did not weep. Her tearless eyes gazed, saw, drank in this sight: the face of her son, black as iron, the Sound hole at the temple, the split foot, and the single token that told of the agonies suffered before death—the fingers crooked like claws digging into the snow, evidence of his last convulsions.

Gently the woman stroked the wind-blown snow from his dark hair. One raven lock lay on his forehead. She could not bring herself to touch it—the hair clung to the open wound, had grown into it, held fast by the clotted blood.

Every time she came here she wanted to brush back that lock of hair. But she was afraid to touch it, afraid to disturb him, as though she might cause the dead lad pain, might irritate the wound.

"Sonny. . . ."

Her parched lips whispered that one word mechanically, as if he could hear her, as if he might even raise those heavy, darkened lids and look at her with his dear, grey eyes.

The woman did not stir, her eyes fixed on the black face. She did not feel the cold, nor did she notice the numbness in her knees. She just gazed.

A raven rose from the solitary tree which stood over the gully. Heavily he flapped his wings, described a circle and then pounced on a heap of rags lying under a bush. Cocking his head, he looked round. Rusty patches of blood had

seeped through the bullet-riddled cloth. For a moment the bird stood there, his head to one side, for all the world as though he were plunged in thought. Then he took a peck. Crack! The frost had done its work: everything that had been left here a month ago had become as hard as stone.

The woman recovered from her deathlike immobility.

"Sh-o-oo!"

The raven raised himself cumbrously and sank down again a few paces distant from the snow-covered human figure.

"Sh-o-oo!"

She picked up a lump of frozen snow and threw it at the bird. The raven hopped and then flew lazily back to its former perch on the tree. The woman rose from her knees, sighed, took a last look at her son and turned down the path.

She stooped over the ice-hole, drew up some water and slowly climbed the slope, bending double under the weight of her full buckets. The sun had risen higher in the heavens, but the frost had not abated. The snow looked blue, but she did not know whether it was really blue or whether her eyes were still seeing the blueness of the cloth frozen into the flesh of the motionless, outstretched, chalk-white, fearful legs of her son.

In front of the cottage a frozen sentry was stamping up and down. He hopped from one leg to the other, hunched up his shoulders, thrust his hands under his armpits, rubbed his cheeks, with his stiff fingers. The piercing frost penetrated mercilessly through his shoddy boots, through his greenish summer greatcoat, nipped his fingers and clawed his eyes. The sentry looked closely at the woman, although he had known her for a long time, ever since his unit had come to this village. She walked past without even seeing him. The door creaked and a cloud of steam billowed out.

"Why have you been so long? It's simply impossible the way I have to wait for you!"

She did not answer, but pressing her lips together walked over to the stove and poured some water into a pot standing on the fire. She threw some wood onto the barely glowing embers.

"Give me a glass of water, I'm thirsty,"

"There's water in the bucket. Take some," she answered curtly.

The other woman quivered with rage under the eiderdown.

"You wait till my husband comes, I'll tell him!"

The woman shrugged her shoulders. Husband indeed. . .

Slowly she piled dry wood in the stove. Yes, such it seems is fate. There were three hundred peasant homes in the village, and every one of them had sent somebody to the war. But only her son lay there in the gully near the river, a month already and they hadn't allowed her to bury him. He had been lying there in the snow for a whole month, while the frost turned his face into black iron, split his feet like kindling wood, and made his fingers blue. There were others lying there as well, also of their own people, but still they were not sons, brothers, husbands, they were not from this village. Only he. Only he had been fated to perish here, beside his native village, some two hundred paces from his own home. She alone had been fated to see how the hungry ravens circled over the unburied corpse of her son. And it was in her house, of all others, as if it had been done deliberately, in sheer mockery, that the German officer had installed his kept woman.. If only she had been a German, brought here from afar, a stranger who spoke a different language, who was as hostile and as thoroughly hated as those others in the green greatcoats. But no, just to make it worse it had to be a local woman who had sold herself, who for silk stockings and French wine had betrayed her country, her kith and kin, her own husband, a commander in the Red Army, those who lay slaughtered in the gully—she had betrayed them all. It turned her stomach and made

her blood run cold to think that the woman should have found sanctuary under her roof, lolling in a featherbed, shouting out orders and playing the grand lady in her house. She was not in the least ashamed ; she did not walk about with downcast eyes or blush when she met people. She went her way smugly, brazenly and demanded that she be waited on.

"You just wait, just wait a bit," whispered the woman into the fire as it began to burn up, paying no attention whatever to the stream of abuse that came from the bedroom. "Oh, you'll get it, you'll get it all right, get it so you'll wish a hundred times over that you'd never been born."

She did not look up when she heard hurried, heavy steps in the lean-to. She knew who it was without looking. Only her face set grimly.

The officer passeli into the bedroom, paying no attention to the woman bending over the stove.

"What, aren't you up yet?"

The woman in the bed pouted petulantly.

"What's the use of getting up? You're never here. . . . I'm bored to tears. . . . You go out but I'm here all the time with that nasty woman. . . . You'll see, she'll poison me yet."

He sat down on the edge of her bed.

"Don't be silly. . . . You're mistress here, understand? Why must you be bored? Turn on the gramophone, you've got heaps of records, or read. As it is I spend every free minute with you. It's war, you know. . . . Always something up."

She sighed.

"War, always war. . . . You could at least ask for leave and take me away from here."

The officer shrugged.

"Silly. Now's no time for leave. And if I send yoti to Germany alone what will you do when you get there?. It's better to stay together."

She did not answer. Slowly she rose and stretched out her hand to the chair for her clothes. The officer got up from the edge of the bed and sat down on a bench, hisses fixed on her. Yes, she was good to look at. Otherwise he wouldn't have dragged her around with him for three months as he had. She was different, quite different from the women he was used to, and different from the other women he had met here too.

"Listen, Pusya, someone told me the local teacher was your sister,"

The stocking in her hand remained suspended in the air. She tilted her head to her shoulder with the grace of a sick monkey. Yes, she was very attractive when she did that. A fragile, ethereal little animal.

With one baby hand she tucked her hair behind her ears. They were tiny, comical ears, narrow, triangular, coming to a point on top like a baby animal's. And her teeth were triangular, only now did he notice it, after three months. She was biting her pale underlip with them.

"Well, so what?"

Again she pushed back her hair. Her red-lacquered triangular finger nails glinted like bloodstained claws.

"Yes, she's my sister. And what of it?"

"She's not very fond of us, your sister."

Pusya's round black eyes gleamed suspiciously.

"And—er—do you like her?"

He laughed, a hoarse cackling laugh.

"No! What an idea! I don't like plump blondes. She's got fat legs like. ..." He was going to say, like my wife's, but stopped himself in time.

Pusya glanced contentedly at her short but well-shaped legs.

"Yes, that's true, she is a bit stout. ..."

"You never told me you had a sister here."

"Why should I? She used to live here and I there, we hardly ever met. She's quite different."

"In»what way different?"

Pusya thoughtfully brushed a stray lock of hair behind her ear. Her paste earrings flashed.

"She teaches children, works and works. . . . And what does she get out of it? Nothing. She's satisfied with everything, everything pleases her,"

"A Bolshevik, to put it bluntly?"

"Who knows . . ., maybe she is," she answered lazily, and then suddenly flared up: "Why are you asking so many questions about her? You say you didn't take a fancy to her, and yet you keep asking about her."

"I was just asking. If I am interested in her it's not as a woman, I can assure you of that, not as a woman."

Pusya did not notice the peculiar note in his voice. She carefully drew on her stockings, and pulled a silk slip over her head. From his pocket, he took out a little package.

"Here you are, baby, I really just ran in for a minute to bring you some chocolate. I've got to go, I've loads of work today. Keep yourself busy till evening. I shan't be late."

She made a wry face.

"Alone, alone, the whole day alone. . . . When will this war end?"

"It will end."

"It's all right for you to talk. . . ."

She opened the coloured wrapper and sank her pointed teeth into the chocolate, taking a bite from the whole bar without breaking off a piece.

"Put on the gramophone. Your dinner will be brought to you. Well, good-bye."

He kissed her carelessly and went out.* The sentry was still stamping his feet in front of the cottage, trying hard to get them warm. He sprang to attention when he saw the officer. The Captain passed him and turned towards the square. The big building which had formerly housed the

Village Soviet was crowded with soldiers and N.C.O.'s. They drew themselves up stiffly and saluted ; he scarcely answered them. The room was dim with clouds of grey, smoke.

The officer pushed open the door of the room which served as his office.

"Bring her in."

He sat down at the table and yawned. He envied Pusya, who could lie about in bed to this hour, while he had to jump up when it was barely light, in addition to which his whole day had been filled with unfinished jobs.

The soldiers led in a woman wearing a heavy sheepskin jacket, a dark dress showing beneath. He threw a distrustful glance at her.

"Is-that her?"

"It's her."

She stood somehow awkwardly and heavily in front of the table. A few strands of hair, grey at the temples, escaped from under her shawl. Her face was plain, rough-hewn, -an ordinary peasant face.

"Name."

"Olena Kostyuk."

He twirled a pencil in his fingers, running his eyes over the woman standing in front of him. One of the two: either the soldiers had made a mistake, or, judging by the determined, firm line of the chin and the eyes that looked him straight in the face, he had before him the prospect of a long and tedious interrogation.

"You were with "the guerillas?"

She was neither taken aback, nor startled. Without removing her eyes from him she answered:

"I was with the guerillas."

"Ah. ... So, so. ..." This unexpectedly ready admission astounded him. Mechanically he began to draw garlands of fantastic leaves on the paper that lay in front of him.

"And why did you return to the village? Why did they send you?"

"No one sent me. I came on my own."

"I see. You came on your own. . . . And why did you come?"

This time she did not answer. Her dark eyes were fixed on the thin, gaunt face of the officer, staring straight into his colourless eyes, framed in their faded eyelashes.

"Well?"

She said nothing.

"How's that? Here you were with the guerillas and suddenly you come home, to the village. What's the matter with you there, haven't you any discipline? You had better tell me straight off what they sent you for."

"I came on my own. I couldn't stay any more."

"Couldn't stay. . . . Why not?" His interest was aroused. "Things were going badly, eh? Your commander was shot during the last attack, wasn't he? The unit disbanded, eh?"

"I don't know anything about the unit. I came home."

"But why, all of a sudden, just like that?"

Her lips moved, but no sound came from them.

"Did you decide that it was all nonsense, criminal, banditry? Just didn't want any more of it?"

She shook her head.

"No. . . . I simply couldn't stay any more."

"But why couldn't you?"

She made an obvious effort. Then she said straight at those watery, blinking eyes with their colourless eyelashes:

"I came home for my delivery."

"What's that?"

"I came to give birth. . . ."

"So that's it. . . ."

He burst into his hoarse, cackling laugh and a shiver ran down her back at the sound.

"Cold, are you? This place is heated and you're bundled up as if you were out in the frost. Take your shawl off!"

Obediently she took off her thick, heavy shawl and laid it on the bench:

"Take off your coat!"

She hesitated a moment, then unbuttoned and removed her heavy jacket. He stared at her closely. Yes, no doubt about it. This was the last month of pregnancy.

The woman was breathing heavily. He realized that it was an effort for her to stand, and deliberately dragged the business out, twirling his pencil, asking his questions more and more slowly, with longer pauses between them.

She answered promptly to every question that concerned her personally. Yes, she was married. Her husband had been killed in the war. In the past, before the Revolution, she had worked on an estate, had reaped the landlord's wheat and milked the landlord's cows. After the Revolution she had worked on a collective farm. She had joined the guerilla detachment as soon as it had been formed, but had kept her condition secret. When it had become difficult for her to get about, and the time of her confinement had come close, she had returned to the village. She wanted to bear her child in peace.

"So. . . . Bear the child in peace. . . ." he repeated. "You blew up a bridge last week."

"I did."

"Who helped you?"

"Nobody, I did it myself."

"You're lying. We know all about it—better tell me straight out."

"Nobody, I did it myself."

"Very well, then. Where are the guerillas now?"

She was silent. Her dark eyes looked the officer calmly in the face. He sighed. It was the old story over again. Stubborn silence, long, endless investigation, the employment

of all possible ways and means, and, as a rule, all for nothing. He knew: either they began to talk at once, or you could never drag anything out of them. This time he had been misled by the first answers. But he had been right in his first impression of her outward appearance—the stubborn lines of her chin, the firm and confident lines of her lips. Yes, she would talk about herself, tell him everything concerning herself. But about those others—not a word.

"Well, where were you before you came to the village?"

Silence. He tapped his pencil on the table nervously, not looking at the woman he was interrogating. A sudden wave of boredom, disgusting, cloying, hopeless boredom, swept over him. Wouldn't it be better to give it all up and go to Pusya? He could hand over the interrogation to someone else. . . . But he wanted to squeeze at least something out of her about the guerilla detachment which was making itself felt all over the District, and he had little faith in the intelligence of his subordinates. Besides they had to depend on an interpreter who really had a poor knowledge of the language and who was not any too bright. He himself was fluent in the language, in two of them in fact: Ukrainian and Russian. He had trained for quite different work in these parts. But still the languages came in useful even in wartime, and the hours he had spent on learning them had not been wasted.

"Well, what have you to say? They call the commander Curly, don't they? But that's a nickname, of course. What's his real name?"

Silence. He could see that she was dead tired. Beads of perspiration stood out on her temples, on her forehead, around her lips. The deep lines on either side of her mouth became deeper, her arms hung limply at her sides.

"Are you going to speak or not?"

Quite suddenly he realized that he was tired himself. Akh, better throw up the whole thing and go home. He wondered,

was Pusya up yet, or had she taken advantage of his absence to dive under the covers again?

But Pusya was not sleeping. She spent a long time putting on her dress, and a long time looking at herself in the mirror. She put on the gramophone, but soon wearied of the well-known tunes. She wanted to talk to somebody. But to whom?

She went into the kitchen and helped herself to some water from the bucket. Fedosia Kravchuk was sitting on a low stool by the stove peeling potatoes. Pusya sat down on the bench under the window and watched the potato peels curling between the woman's fingers in long narrow ribbons and falling into the basket below.

"Awfully small potatoes," she said.

Fedosia did not answer.

"Are they always like that here?"

Silence.

"Why don't you ever answer me?"

The woman raised her head and glanced at her—taciturn, indifferent, cold. Again* she bent over her work.

"Looking at me like that! Don't you think I'm a person? Nobody to say a word to the whole day long. It's enough to kill *you!*"

She began to feel sorry for herself, in addition to which she felt sick, and it struck her that she should have saved part of the chocolate. She never could restrain herself from immediately gobbling up everything Kurt brought her.

A potato splashed into the pot. Drops of water spattered the clay floor.

"don't think I've ever done you any harm, have I?"

The grey eyes took her in with a rapid, keen glance. But still she received no reply.

"I'm forever alone. . . . Kurt runs in for a minute and then goes away again. . . . Nobody to talk to, to sit with . . . And outside it's freezing, it's impossible to go out. I'll

go mad here. . . . Gramophone and more gramophone, I know all those records by heart. Do you like the gramophone?"

She clenched her tiny fists angrily till the sharp nails dug into her palms.

"Why don't you answer me? I haven't got the plague, have I?"

Fedosia raised her head.

"You've got something worse than the plague, far worse! And you'll die worse than people die of the plague."

Pusya's mouth dropped open in utter amazement. Her round eyes grew even rounder. She had never really believed that Kravchuk would speak. And suddenly she had spoken, broken that stupid silence, which had lasted a whole month. And how she had spoken! What should she do? Scream, go up to her, hit her, burst into tears, or get up, go into her own room and put on the jolliest, noisiest record she had?

Unexpectedly for herself she did none of these things.

"What do you want from me? What else could I have done? Starve to death? Wait? Wait for what? They've come here to stay! I had to get myself fixed up somehow. . . . Seryozha has most likely died a long time ago. . . . Kurt's not a bad chap, I know, not at all a bad chap, and what's more, I don't want to live here any longer, I've had "enough of all this. And he'll take me back to Dresden with him, it's better there than it is here. What sort of life did I have here? Nothing to wear. Worry your head off over every pair of stocknigs, always afraid they'll tear. You know how easy it is to g6t another pair!"

"There you are, that's you all over. . . . That's just what I'm saying. . . . Stockings. . . . Your sister is a decent woman, a teacher, everything nice and proper. But you—stockings. . . . I don't even want to call you what you really* are. . . . And your Kurt will never take you

anywhere. He'll throw you off like they throw off all their fancy women. He'll ditch you even before he'll have to clear out himself, and you can bet he'll have to! Never mind, sit tight while you can, and sleep with your German in my featherbed. It's not so long that the pair of you will be sitting here, not so long! Our men will come and they'll show you a thing or two!"

Pusya shrank back on the bench. The quiet words lashed her like a whip. In a voice that trembled with wrath she choked out the words:

"All right, all right, I'll tell Kurt why you're away so long when you go for the water! As soon as he comes, I'll tell him!"

The woman sprang up. The freshly peeled potatoes rolled across the floor. The knife dropped with a clatter. Bending forward, her face hard as stone, she went straight up to Pusya, who white with fear thrust her feet under the bench, and, as though it would protect her, raised her hands to her breast.

"How do you know where I go? How do you know?"

Then Pusya remembered that there was a sentry marching up and down under the window and that one shout would be sufficient. That calmed her.

"I know everything I have to!"

"You. . . ."

Fedosia suppressed the desire to seize her by the throat, to strangle her, to stamp out that tiny black creature so like a cringing rat. She was filled with inexpressible revulsion at the idea of having to touch that weak, fragile body, the revulsion of the healthy, normal person in the presence of deformity and sickness. She spat, returned to her stool by the stove and hurriedly set about the potatoes; a long potato peeling again wound out of her hand, the water in the pot splashed, sprinkling the floor. And Pusya, her head held high, went to her room to put on the gramophone. She

began to look through the records. At first she wanted something lively, the very liveliest, but at the last moment she felt sorry for herself, felt the insult sticking in her throat, and selected another record.

Fedosia went on peeling potatoes and felt her heart grow cold. That one knew then. She knew and would surely tell the German. She had kept her secret until the time had come to use it, like an adder does it sting. And now she would tell him in revenge.

In the bedroom a low, thin voice was singing:

"The fireplace is aglow. . . ."

What would happen? She did not doubt that the officer would not leave things as they were. The order forbidding the burial of those who had died in the last battle was still in force. Let them lie there in the gully near the village at the mercy of the winds, the frosts and the ravens. Let them lie there naked and plundered to warn and put fear into the hearts of others—a symbol of the German triumph. At first the peasants had attempted to bury the dead. They had not managed it, for the gully was kept under constant observation. Young Pashchuk had crawled as far as the bridge one night with a spade, and from that night on he had lain there together with the others, a bullet in his chest, his head in a snow-drift. So everything had remained as it was. People realized that there was nothing to be done.

But nobody else in the whole village had a son there. Nobody but she. It had been Vasya's fate alone to be in the detachment that had passed through the village. What a joy that had been then! . . . He had suddenly run into the cottage, laughing and jolly as ever. Only for a moment, a tiny moment. And at dawn the Germans had come, had caught them unawares, and Vasya had been in just that group which they had surrounded'—and annihilated in the gully.

She found him the same day. Her heart led her straight

to the spot where he lay. He was already dead and they had already stripped him of his clothes.

Every day since then, a month past now, she had gone there and looked at her son, had seen how his body had grown stiff, how it had changed, how the frost had blackened his face with blackness of iron, and split his naked foot. She was already accustomed to the fact that every day, even twice a day, when she went down for water she could see her dead child. And now? What would happen now?

"Tenderness, love, caresses, dreams of you. . . ." sang the gramophone. -

He wouldn't leave things as they were, he wouldn't overlook it. She was not afraid for herself. She was afraid for her child, for her dead child, who had perished there in the gully, frozen, petrified, for her child with the round bullet hole in his temple. It was as if she were about to lose him a second time—they would take him away, throw him into some unknown pit, abuse him, mutilate him, deform him—they were capable of that, oh, more than capable. . . .

"Tenderness, love, caresses, dreams of you. . . ."

The gramophone was insufferably irritating.

Pusya as daydreaming, and for the tenth time played the same record. The gramophone sang of love that had passed, of happiness that had gone, of letters that no longer meant anything. In tune with the sombre thoughts of the woman sitting by the stove, the gramophone sang tender words. Fedosia Kravchuk grasped the blunt knife in her hand but felt no pain. A drop of blood appeared where she had cut the skin. She wiped her hand with the corner of her apron.

"The fireplace is aglow. . . ."

What should she do? How should she go about it? It seemed to her that she had to save Vasya's life, that she had to save him from something horrible and cruel, more cruel than death itself. But how?

She knew that it was impossible to take him away from there. He had frozen into the snow, grown into the ice-crust. Only the warmth of spring would free him from his icy bed. But even if. . . . How could she lift him up, even though he had shrunk and was now no bigger than he had been when he was fifteen or sixteen? How could she lift him? Where could she take him, where could she hide him from the murderers' eyes?

"Tenderness, love, caresses. . . ."

The foul paws of the Germans would touch him. The loathsome German jackboot would kick him. Cow-like German faces would grimace and guffaw over him, and amongst them she would hear the hoarse cackling laughter of Captain Kurt Werner. Fedosia wrung her hands in hopeless despair, in her extremity of helplessness. She forgot the potatoes, forgot the fire, over which the grey ash was growing thicker and thicker, and sat there without stirring, her unseeing eyes staring straight ahead.

She had thought that there could be nothing worse, that every possible blow had already been dealt her heart. But it seemed that this was not so. There was no limit, no bounds to the black cloud that had settled over the village on that December day, threatening it every minute with countless disasters to come.

Then suddenly the thought struck her: how had that one come to know about it? Who had told her?

Familiar figures flashed through her mind. The teacher? No, Fedosia hastily thrust aside that suspicion. Under no circumstances. Who then?

The village, of course, knew. But the villagers were all her own people. Pelageya never went anywhere, nobody talked to her, how could she have found out? Who had betrayed the sorrow of this mother into the enemy's hands, who had delivered Vasya's body, his blood, his death, his sufferings into the hands of the German hangmen?

The gramophone scratched and stopped. Pusya pulled on her felt boots and carefully buttoned up her fur coat. It was a bit on the large side, that coat ; Kurt had torn it off somebody in the town and presented it to her, his wife. But it was warm, you could tuck your hands into the sleeves, and the big fluffy collar protected your cheeks from the frost.

Pusya stepped off the porch and took a deep breath. The air was as transparent as ice and as cold, a huge block of ice filling the whole world. The snow was bluish in the shadows but in the sun it sparkled like diamonds, glittered and flashed, cutting into the eyes with its pitiless glare. To the right and left of the hill on which the village stood stretched an endless plain of dazzling white and blues. The frost had gripped earth and sky in its pincers, had nipped the little village quietly nestling at the crossroads. Pusya looked towards the cottage. Here and there soldiers were bustling about, and on the square in front of the church, where the black outlines of the artillery battery were visible, were more soldiers. But not one of the villagers was to be seen. She moved on, resolved to visit Kurt in his office.

At the edge of the square stood a gallows—two upright posts and a cross-beam. The body of a man was hanging from the centre. Indifferently Pusya passed. ~~It was~~ **symbol** of Kurt's authority in the village. She was at accustomed to the sight, the young fellow had ~~been hanging~~ **been** there when she had come here with Kurt a ~~man~~ had become stiff and rigid, losing semblance to a human being and looking more like a block of wood than a human body. The snow crunched loudly, as if she were treading on glass, crackling and squeaking unpleasantly. She walked along an absolutely deserted street. The cottage windows, covered from top to bottom with a thick coating of frost as if they had been boarded up, looked like white-filmed eyes. Smoke was rising from a few of the chimneys—those belonged to

the houses where the Germans were quartered. In the other houses nobody was cooking—there was nothing to cook.

The door of one of the cottages opened and a blond head peeped out, button seeing who was coming down the street the head disappeared and the door slammed shut. Pusya shrugged her shoulders. It was true that they avoided her as though she had the plague, trying not to meet her even accidentally. Children scampered off if they happened to cross her path. Well, let them, let them if they liked. In any case they would all die of cold and hunger, that's what was in store for them. She, on the contrary, was walking about in high feather, "healthy and strong, wearing a lovely fur coat and able to nibble as much chocolate as she liked ; later she would go to Germany with her captain husband. Everyone is master of his own fate—they had made their choice and so had she. Fools, they believed in something that would never be and were waiting for something that would never come. They were doomed to bitter disappointment. "Kurt had explained and made clear to her why the German^ were bound to win, and why all this rabble here had to perish if they would not work honestly for the Germans. But they simply refused to understand anything, though it was so simple. They were waiting for those others—she say, wasn't a bit, anxious to see them. Wasn't she better off now? Much better off.

The snow screamed under her feet and her eyes were dazzled by the glare. When would there be an end to these accursed frosts? She dreamed of the warmth. She wanted to curl up like a cat and warm herself in the sun, to feel the caressing warmth of the sun with her whole body and to let it soak into the very marrow of her bones. Even the blindingly brilliant sun was like an ice splinter now and seemed itself to be radiating cold.

The sentry at the door admitted her at once. She knocked and without waiting for an answer or paying any attention

to the uneasiness of Kurt's subordinates, walked into his office.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing's the matter," she answered peevishly. "I just got lonesome for you." She cast an appraising glance over the woman standing by the table. An elderly woman, already turning grey, with a big stomach, pregnant. Pusia seated herself on the edge of a chair.

"Will you be through soon?"

"I've already told you. . . . Can't you see I'm busy." He was obviously annoyed. Pulling her over to the window, he whispered angrily:

"How many times have I told you not to come here! What sort of way is that to act? I'm busy, you can see that I'm busy. As soon as I'm through I'll come home."

She pouted like an offended child.

"I'm so awfully, dreadfully lonely. You might at least come home so we could have lunch together! I'm so miserable. . . . You're never there. . . . What pleasure do you get out of talking to an old hag! Can't somebody else do it?"

"No, they can't. And that old woman is a guerilla, understand?"

Pusia was thunderstruck.

"A guerilla! Kurt, what are you talking about! Look at her, she's about to give birth!"

"There, you see," he interrupted her. "Now run along, run along. I'll be coming soon."

Humbly she stroked his sleeve.

"Kurt, darling, I'll sit here for a minute and listen. All right? I won't be in your way?"

Well, siWhere if you want to only this is just as boring," he said" with a wave of his hand and pushed up a chair for her,

She unbuttoned her coat and sat down. The silly smile

never left her lips, and her round black eyes watched the woman standing at the table. So she is a guerilla. That's funny, real funny that is. . . . She knew that Kurt was afraid of the guerillas although he himself had never admitted being afraid of anything. But he was afraid of the guerillas, she could feel it, and although she didn't know why, it afforded her a slight feeling of triumph. There was something then that roused fear in the self-confident, invincible Kurt, who always had an answer pat and to whom everything was always so clear and simple.

No, she hadn't imagined the guerillas like this. She had pictured them as giants armed with axes and overgrown with hair ; mysterious people who hid in the woods and were not afraid of these terrible frosts that had held the whole world imprisoned for such a long time. And this was just an ordinary village woman, like Fedosia Kravchuk, and pregnant into the bargain. Pusya glanced at the enormous stomach stretching the woman's rusty-black skirt. She felt a sense of pleasure in the fact that she herself was small and slim, that she was sitting there quietly, wrapped in soft furs, and if she wanted to could get up and walk off with an easy gait, could put on the gramophone and dance with Kurt. This very evening, if she wanted to.

Kurt kept asking questions in a dull, tired voice. And the woman answered. At first Pusya listened to the questions and answers, but soon realized that this was indeed uninteresting. Not only was it uninteresting, it was silly. Kurt kept asking the very same thing over and over again and that one kept answering in the very same words.

Olena was tired to death. Black spots danced before her eyes, and black waves, rising from somewhere underneath the table, darkened her sight. She had to strain her every nerve to barge through the growing blackness that was engulfing everything around her, and at such times the officer behind the table, the papers lying in front of him, and the

windowpane behind him would swim out of the darkness. She felt the perspiration breaking out on her face, cold, clammy, unpleasant. Her arms were as heavy as iron weights, her legs ached unbearably, most likely they were terribly swollen. How long had she been standing here? An hour, two, three? May be more, may be a whole day? But, no, the sun was still shining brightly through the window, so it hadn't lasted as long as she thought.

Her abdomen ached, and all her insides hurt as though someone were slowly drawing out the nerves. And to cap it all that one had come. Olena knew about her, knew who she was. And there she sat with her round buttons of eyes. Now she had taken off her fur hat and was tucking her hair back behind her ears. The woman's tired eyes caught the glint of the paste jewel in her earring and rested on it. The glass was flashing, scintillating with a tiny fire. Then again the darkness began to roll up, and only that sharp little ray penetrated through the black waves that enveloped her. Olena swayed, clenched her fists and drew herself up again. No, no. She must not fall, must not fall here, before the eyes of this officer's mistress, who had sold her own people and gone to bed with the officer, who was sitting there now in furs, flashing her earrings and looking at the pregnant woman being tortured by the German officer as if it were some spectacle for her benefit.

The vacant smile seemed to be carved on Pusya's lips, but she was not thinking of Olena or listening to the questions and answers. She was warm and it was pleasant to think that she was sitting in Kurt's office, that she was the only one here who could come in alone and go out when she wanted to. Those others were brought in by soldiers with bayonets and were then taken away to some place from which no one ever returned. And how they all feared Kurt, and Kurt belonged to her, to her alone, and she could be hard to please and capricious, and Kurt would call her little

monkey and was going to take her back to Dresden with him. . . .

"You are a mother," said Kurt, and Olena, who was already giddy, seized on this word, as if it were a lifesaver.

Of course, she was a mother. No, it had never even entered the German officer's head that he had helped her, helped her at the very moment when the earth was giving way under her, when she was overcome with a strange weakness and when everything around her was swimming and plunged in gloom.

"You are a mother. . . ."

Who had said that? The German officer behind the table, or Curly, the jolly pock-marked lad in the woods, commander of the detachment?

"You are a mother. . . ."

She was not thinking of the child that lay under her heart, that took the breath from her lungs and prevented her from standing up straight. She was thinking of those others in the woods, of all those who had called her mother. She had been older than all the rest, much older. And she had gone out on reconnaissance, had even blown up a bridge, but she had not regarded that as her main job. She had washed, cooked, looked after the men, who really had nobody to look after them. She had tended the sick, bandaged the wounded, mended their torn clothing. She had done what a mother usually does. And they had called her: "Mother."

"You are a mother. . . ."

To her these words were like a call from the men in the woods, from those whose lives now depended on a single word from her. It was like being reminded of a duty, like a greeting from them, like their voices carried here from afar.

"Where are the guerillas hiding out?"

She remembered every path, every bush and every tree in that woodland thicket. The road the officer was asking about stood out clearly in her memory. She was even afraid

that those watery eyes in their framework of colourless lashes would see, would trace the road in her thoughts. Quickly, quickly, she must think of something else, about her own house, about the river, the neighbours. But in her mind there stubbornly appeared the path, and the shelters under the fir trees, and Curly's jolly, pock-marked, comical face. Sixteen lads, and she, their mother. Yes, there in that woodland glade were sixteen of her sons, sixteen brave, fearless sons. Sons of a woman farmhand, who had waited so long, waited until happiness had come, the happiness of a free man, who knew nought of the whip of the master's bailiff.

"I don't know anything about the detachment. They've gone off, but where they went I don't know."

Kurt clenched his fist. After four hours of questioning he had arrived at the same dead end from which he had started. Angrily he folded up his papers.

"Hans!"

A soldier came into the room.

"Take her away—to the shed. You'll sit in the cold for a bit, perhaps that will sober you. Sit and think it over, and when you've finished thinking call the sentry. He'll let me know." With an irate movement he locked his drawer.

"Come along, Pusya, we'll have lunch together."

Pusya jiiumped with joy. After all, it was a good thing she had come. • If she hadn't he would certainly have sat there till evening.

The glare of the snow blinded her again. Kurt's jackboots made the snow crunch even louder than her felt boots. The icy air bit their cheeks.

"What under the sun-is that?"

She stopped short and looked in the direction in which Kurt was pointing. In the distance, where the blue of the ground merged with the chill blue of the sky, a rainbow was gleaming, a glowing column of colour rising aloft and dis-

appearing, melting away in the infinite heights. Green, blue, violet and rose hues, a crystal clear, translucent vision, pure and light, like tinted down.

"A rainbow," said the astonished Kurt. "A rainbow in winter. . . . Do you have such things here?"

Pusya thought for a moment.

"No, I don't think so, at least I've never seen one before."

Kurt was still standing there, his eyes bent on the glowing column of colours joining heaven and earth.

"Come on, it's cold, my feet are frozen. . . ."

"They say the rainbow is a good omen. . . ."

"A rainbow is a rainbow," said Pusya, finally losing all patience and tugging at his sleeve.

In those few minutes the column had soared still higher and curved round. Now the rainbow hung over the earth in a triumphal arch, rose, violet and green, glowing with a luminous gold-steeped sheen. The sky, a huge glass cupola, covered the earth like a glass bell. On the square, the soldiers at the guns, their heads thrown back, were staring at the unusual sight.

When they got home, Fedosia Kravchuk was standing in front of the cottage. She too was looking at the rainbow, quietly, keenly, intently.

"They say the rainbow is a good omen," remarked the officer as he passed.

The elderly peasant woman shrugged her shoulders.

"Yes, yes, so they say," she answered in a strange voice, and stood aside to let them enter. She herself remained standing at the door. Dressed only in blouse and skirt, her arms bare, she stood there completely oblivious of the bitter frost, unable to take her eyes from the glowing vision, the triumphal arch flung across! the sky, iridescent, pervaded with a soft, golden, diffuse radiance.

II

Curled up in a ball, her head thrust under Kurt's arm, Pusya slept clamly, breathing evenly, like some small animal. The officer lay on his back, snoring. Fedosia Kravchuk, lying on -the sleeping shelf over the oven in the kitchen, was listening to his snoring. It irritated her unbearably, and she felt as if it was this snoring that prevented her from sleeping. With wide-open eyes she stared at the window, where the moonlight was sparkling on -the thick coating of frost. An uncanny blue light penetrated into the room, and the table, the benches and the bucket on the floor cast strange, terrifying shadows.

Still, it was night at last. The day had come to an end. Another day. She no longer heard the cackling snigger of the officer and the simpering lisp of his tart, no longer saw the insidious glances which that one had been darting at her the whole evening. She had apparently decided to play with her for a while, not to speak out at once. No, she hadn't said anything. She kept looking askance at Fedosia and following her with a smirk, deriving pleasure from the fact that the latter was wholly at her mercy and that she could strike at any moment. She rejoiced in her momentary power. She could do whatever she liked now with the heart of a mother, and she had him in her power as well, lying there on the snow in the gully. At any moment she could hand him over to the loathsome German hands, at any moment she could shatter his last rest, could fling him to the Germans to make game of.

The old woman's heart had been heavy the whole evening. But now, as she lay there sleepless, watching the flickering blue light on the window and listening to that odious snore coming from the bedroom, everything in her suddenly rebelled.

Let them, let them do what they liked! They had taken everything from him, had dragged off his boots, his greatcoat, his breeches. German hands had already touched him once, had flung him down on the snow, flung him down while he was still alive, perhaps, in that savage frost. A German bullet had already drained his blood. He was already dead, had perished defending his village. Never again would his merry grey eyes see, nor his ringing voice sing: "Unharness the horses, lads. . . ." What if they did abuse him again, flout his dead body? The worse for them, the worse for them. . . . In any case people would always remember happy Vasya Kravchuk, who sang better than anyone else in the village, and who had fallen near his own home, in the gully by the river where he had watered the horses so many times, who had died for his village, for his country, for his native tongue, for the happiness of his people and their liberty. German hands could not erase this from people's memories". And they would also remember that even after death they had not left him in peace, that even after death they had made mock of his body. Her mother's heart would not be alone in remembering this. The people would remember, and those who were coming, who would send the German cutthroats packing, they would remember, too. They would pay a hundred times over for every drop of his blood, for every minute he had lain naked in the frost, for every kick of the German boot.

Now she wanted morning to come more quickly. Let her tell him, that black little rat, let her hiss it through her sharp teeth, let it be soorf." And let her see with her round black eyes that Fedosia Kravchuk does not grow pale, does not cry, does not throw herself on her knees, does not beg and pray that they do not take from her the only thing she has left, the body of a son turned to stone by the cold. The accursed woman was hiding her discovery, playing with it like a toy, playing with the fear and anguish of a mother's heart.

But Fedosia would spoil her sport. The black rat had made a mistake, she would not live to see either weeping or beseeching, there, would be no triumph for her.

Fedosia felt her heart hardening, the blood rising to it, and she knew that nobody could do anything to her now, that nobody could in any way wound her. She was protected from all blows by the impenetrable armour of hatred.

From time to time, a shadow fell on the blue glow of the window. It was the sentry packing back and forth in front of the house. The snow squeaked under his feet and she could hear him stamping up and down in a vain attempt to warm his freezing feet. She smiled to herself. Keep watch, keep watch over the officer's sleep, the warm sleep with his mistress in a plundered peasant bed, under a stolen peasant quilt. . . . You cannot guard him, you cannot protect him, not if you stamp a hundred times harder, not if your feet freeze off, not if *you* run up and down outside the cottage till you drop. . . . The night will come when you will have to awaken from this sound sleep and run out into the frost bare-footed in your underclothes. The night will come when you will envy those who lie unburied in the snow, when you will envy Levonyuk, whose body has been hanging from the gallows a month. Yes, the night will come when the officer's kept woman will envy the fate of Olena Kostyuk.

And again that tormenting question arose: who had given her away? Olena had come quietly, and had gone to her own cottage. After all, the Germans hadn't counted, hadn't had time to count, all the women in the village. Olena, had sat quietly at home, never going out, and yet before two days had passed, they had come, dragged her out, and hauled her off to be questioned. Someone had given her away, informed on her, told Pelageya about Vasya. Somewhere an enemy was hidden, so well hidden that the village knew nothing of him, that no one could even guess who he was. An enemy who saw everything, knew everything and reported

everything. Someone of the local people who knew Vasya, knew Olena, knew everybody. Who could it be?

She herself had known about Olena as soon as she had returned to the village. Others knew as well, but they were all her own people, her fellow-villagers, collective farmers, the fathers and mothers of soldiers who were fighting along the whole front of their boundless native land in those fearful frosty days and bright nights. Who was the serpent, the poisonous viper, fed of the golden wheat of that native land and now driving his fangs into it?

Somewhere in the distance she could hear voices. In the clear frosty air, in the utter silence of the icebound night, the slightest sound rang out loudly and distinctly. Voices and someone's cry. Fedosia jumped down and ran to the window, where she scratched off a patch of the thick frost. It sprinkled down like snow. Breathing on the windowpane, she thawed a little round hole through which she could see what was going on in the street. The glass clouded over and froze again so that she had to breathe on it constantly and rub it with the corner of her kerchief. She could see part of the street, up to the square and the building which used to house the Village Soviet. Beyond the building was the dark outline of a big shed.

It was as bright as day. The moonlight had turned the whole world into a block of blue ice. Fedosia could see clearly: a naked woman was running along the road from the square. No, she was not running—bending forward she was taking short, laboured steps, tottering from one leg to the other. In the moonlight her enormous belly could be seen plainly. Behind her was a soldier. A bayonet glittered on his rifle. When the woman paused for a second, the bayonet pricked her in the back. The soldier bellowed something, his two comrades shouted, and the pregnant woman again lurched forward, drooping, trying to run. Fifty yards forward—and the soldier made his victim turn back. Fifty

yards back—and over and over again. The torturers were roaring with laughter, their wild guffaws penetrating to the cottage.

Fedosia's fingers gripped the window-frame as she looked and looked. So that was what was taking place on this night while the officer lay snoring with his tart. The soldiers were faithfully carrying out his instructions, he could sleep in peace.

There she was, Olena Kostyuk. Once, long ago, they had worked together in the landlord's fields. Together they had trembled under the bailiff's lash and still more before his advances. Together they had wept over their lot, the dreary, hopeless lot of girl farmhands.

Then later they had worked together on the collective farm, had rejoiced together at the sight of the growing wheat, at the increasing yield from the collective farm cows, and at the fact that life itself was smiling, becoming ever brighter and happier.

And how this was the fate that had overtaken Olena. Fifty yards forward, fifty yards back, naked, barefoot in the snow, a day or two before her confinement. The soldiers' ribald mirth and the bayonet pricking her in the back.

Fedosia's eyes were dry, nor did she cry out. The blood boiled in her heart till it was thick and black. This is what had to happen, it could not be otherwise so long as they were here. As though they were determined to show what they were capable of. As though they wanted to show that there was no limit to their cruelty. She looked at Olena, but it was not sympathy that gripped her heart. No, there was no room for pity there. It seemed to Fedosia that it was she herself running there barefoot in the snow, naked, abandoned to the taunts of the soldiers ; that the frozen snow was lacerating her feet, and the bayonet prickiiig her back. It was not Olena Kostyuk, it was the whole village running over the snow, driven on by the soldiers' laughter. It was not,

Olena Kostyuk, it was the whole village falling face downward in the snow, rising heavily under the blows of the rifle butts. It was not from Olena Kostyuk's feet that the blood was flowing on the cruel, frozen snow, it was the whole village shedding its blood under the German fist, under the German iron heel, under the yoke of the German bandits.

Fedosia stared grimly through the tiny circle of clear glass. Yes, this is how it had to be. With bayonet and mailed fist the German soldier was teaching the peasants to know him for what he was. But he did not know, did not even suspect, that he was teaching the people something else—what Soviet power was. He did not know that in whatever village German rule had left its mark amidst streams of tears and blood, even if that rule had lasted only a single day, there would never again for all time, for all eternity, from generation to generation, be disgruntled, idle people, indifferent to Soviet rule. Fedosia remembered arguments with the women, old and new arguments—life itself had provided the answers, life had taught them, taught them a grim and dire lesson.

Once again Olena fell, and once again she rose. Where did she get the strength? Fedosia knew. She knew, felt, that in Olena's heart too the blood was boiling, the blood that in Olena's heart too the blood was boiling, the blood of hatred, which gave her

In every cottage people stood behind the frosted windows and looked out through the tiny circles their breath had thawed. Together with Olena they ran over the snow, together with her they fell, rose, felt the pricking of the bayonet and heard those harrowing savage guffaws.

Olena felt the eyes of the whole village on her. Her village, where she had grown up amidst bitter toil and want, where she had lived to see better days, where with her own hands she had helped build the golden bridge to happiness. Blood flowed from her feet, torn and lacerated by the sharp humps of frozen snow. Consuming pain gnawed at her vitals.

There was a ringing in her ears. Again she stumbled and fell, hardly feeling the blows of the rifle butt. It was not because they were beating her that she rose. No, she would not, could not, lie on the road under the soldiers' boots. She would not and could not give the enemy the satisfaction of knowing that he was torturing her, harassing her to death, like a hound runs down a hare. In actual fact she no longer felt anything. Her body was streaming with blood, fell, dragged itself over the snow. But it was as if Olena herself was somewhere outside that body. As in a delirium she saw the road, the soldiers. Her ears were ringing, buzzing. "Mother!" Curly called her merrily. High overhead the tree-tops whispered as the wind rocked them ; the poles of the shelter tents creaked. Swift flames crept along the beams of the bridge, licking it with fiery tongues, eating their way through it. Mikola went away to the war, waving his hand as he came to the bend in the road.

Olena fell. With difficulty, leaning heavily on her hands, she raised herself again.

"Lively, now!" screamed the soldier walking behind her.

"Give her one in the belly, in the belly," advised the other.

"She'll peg out before her time," grinned the first, and pricked Olena with his bayonet, "She hasn't said anything yet, she's got to start talking."

"Don't worry, all the Captain wants to know he'll drag out of her together with her guts."

"I'll say! Hey, you, get a move on," shouted the first soldier.

The point of the bayonet came down. A thin stream of blood ran down the woman's back.

"Make it snappy! Where do you think you are, out for a stroll with your boy friend?"

It was all the same to them that the woman did not understand a word of what they were saying. They were quite

satisfied with the shouting itself, with the cursing and coarse words. They were tired and bad-tempered. The frost was getting worse, and they had to freeze on account of this accursed woman instead of sleeping peacefully. They wanted to teach her, to avenge themselves for their tiredness and their sleepless night.

That night an unusually fierce frost seized the earth, a frost which seemed to reach up to the very moon and freeze it solid. The silvery light had drained the colours from the rainbow, which was now traced against the background of the sky as a scarcely perceptible band. But on either side of the moon stood two bright columns. They rose up from the horizon, towering aloft on either side of the lunar disk like the columns of a triumphal arch. They glittered with the silvery frost in which they were plunged from the distant heavens to the edge of the earth.

"Move, damn you!" they screamed at the top of their voices, nor was it only because they wanted to scream. The night terrified them, filled them with dread. With their screams and shouts they wanted to drown out the horror that pressed on their hearts, to tear aside the veil of mystery, to bring something normal into these ghastly night hours. It was as light as day. The dazzling moonlight flooded everything with its spectral beams. Columns of light such as they had never seen before flickered and flamed. Snow of a blueness they had never seen before glistened in the moonlight. And the snow crunched under their feet, evidence of frosts such as they had never known before and of whose very existence they had never even dreamed. Gloomy and silent were the houses along the road. Not a soul anywhere, only the cottages staring at the road with their frozen windows like living eyes. Eyes peered into the dense blackness of the shadows cast by the houses as if drawn by a magnet. On a dark moonless night the Germans would not have ventured out at all. They knew that death awaited

them behind every corner, behind every bush, a death as swift as lightning, so swift it would not even give them time to blink. Today, in this blinding glare, it was difficult to hide, to creep up, but still their hearts were cold with fear. They would suddenly look around, strain their eyes, try to make out something in the shadow of the shed and then shout, endeavouring to screw up their courage. The frost gnawed their cheeks and put an icy crust on their lips, while they hurriedly, feverishly rubbed their ears, stamped in the snow, and drove the naked woman backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards along the village street.

At last they tired of this amusement. It was the same thing all the time: Olena fell more often, took longer to get up, but still she did not cry out, did not shriek, evinced no desire to see the Captain in order to make a statement. And all the time the frost grew worse, so that now it not only gnawed mercilessly at their cheeks and hands and feet, but stopped the very breath in their lungs. It filled their eyes with tears and made their whole bodies shiver so that they could not stop the shaking.

"Come on, now, get going, home at the double!"

Shouting and hooting they drove her into the shed as one would a wild animal. She stumbled over the threshold and plunged face downwards onto the earthen floor, instinctively shielding her swollen belly with her hands. Her temples were throbbing and there was a fierce stabbing pain in her heart. In a few minutes the frost nipped her in its ruthless pincers. The wounds on her back, which she had not felt until now, began to burn unbearably. Making a super-human effort, she raised herself, sat up, and began to rub her shoulders, legs and hips clumsily with her frozen fingers. The moon threw even strips of light on the floor through the chinks in the walls. A bundle of straw lay in one corner of the shed. She dragged herself to it and sank down, striving to burrow deeply into it.

"I shall freeze," she said to herself, and felt better.

Her sheepskin coat and shawl had remained on the bench in the officer's room. And at night, before the soldiers had driven her out, they had stripped her of every stitch of clothing, not even leaving her shirt.

"Suppose they've forgotten and left it all here in the shed," the thought came into her head. She looked around. No, there was nothing there. The bare floor and this wretched bundle of straw, which gave her a moment's shelter.

Outside all was quiet. Apparently the soldiers thought there was no need to keep guard over her, as they had locked the door and gone away. Her whole body burned as if she were on fire. She could not fall asleep, was afraid of falling asleep, and with wide-open eyes watched the strips of moonlight creep slowly across the floor.

Suddenly she heard a rustling. She listened intently. The snow was crunching, but this was not the sentry's footsteps. Someone was treading over the snow slowly, cautiously. A slight crunching of the snow, and silence; and then again that stealthy crunching. Someone was stealing along, scarcely moving his feet. Olena was frightened. What was it, who could it be?

The footsteps ceased. Most likely she had imagined it, dreamed it. Again the crunching of the snow. No doubt about it, someone was there. She raised herself up in anticipation. The steps came nearer and were now heard from the back of the shed. Which way would they turn. But they did not turn. They became slower, more cautious and finally came to a halt against the wall itself.

Olena sat dead still. Someone was standing on the other side of the wall. She could hear him breathing. Now he had pressed his face against the logs and was looking through a crack.

She waited. Who was it? A friend, a foe or a chance passer-by? But what passer-by could there be when the

villagers had 'been forbidden to leave their houses after dusk on pain of death?

"Auntie!" a child's voice called to her in a soft whisper.

Olena did not stir. She wanted to answer but all that tore itself from her breast was a dull, suppressed moan.

"Auntie Olena!"

One of the neighbours' children had crawled up to the wall and was calling her. She groaned.

"Auntie Olena, I've brought you some bread,"

Bread. For two days nothing had passed her lips. Neither bread nor water. She had not felt the hunger so much, but thirst had tormented her, both when she was being interrogated by Werner and later when she lay in the shed. When they were chasing her along the road she had managed to grab a few handfuls of snow and carry them to her mouth. The snow had strengthened her, freshened her parched mouth. The soldiers had noticed it and begun to watch her, so she had taken up snow with her lips when she fell to the ground. Now she realized that she was hungry. There was a gnawing pain in her belly, her stomach was convulsed with terrible cramps.

She calculated the distance from her corner to the place from which the boy was calling, and mustered her strength.

"I'm coming," she whispered as she crawled across the earthen floor, supporting herself on her elbows and her* side, feeling that she could no longer get up, that she could not lift herself. Her back and abdomen were racked with piercing pain, her legs ached just as though oaken stakes were being driven into them.

She crawled a step, a second—and suddenly the silence was broken by a deafening explosion, followed by a shrill, penetrating cry. She fell flat. Only a second later did she realize that it had been a shot, a shot quite close by. She lay there motionless, her mouth wide open, gazing intently in front of her at the black wall behind which something had

happened. She heard the sound of feet crunching over the snow, firm, heavy steps, heard cursing in German and the blow of a rifle butt on something soft. Somebody else came up ; now the two of them were shouting and cursing together. She listened for further sounds. The shot had apparently hit home.

Only now did she suddenly feel all the torments of those two days, the exhaustion more than flesh and blood could bear, the nerves strained to snapping. She felt everything spinning and whirling around, the floor heaved under her, and she dropped irresistibly into the oblivion of unconsciousness.

The shot and the cry had been audible for some distance. They were heard all the more clearly in the neighbouring cottage, where three heads were glued to the window and three little circles thawed by their breath enabled them to see the dark outlines of the shed.

Little Zina began to cry:

"Mamma, Mishka! Mamma, Mishka!"

Her mother squeezed her arm so hard that the girl cried out with pain.

"Be quiet!"

"Mamma, Mishka! What have they done? Mamma!"

"Didn't you hear? They've killed our Mishka!" said the woman in a dull voice.

Eight-year-old Sasha turned from the window.

"Mamma, I'll take Auntie Olena some bread."

"You won't go anywhere. They'll keep watch now, they'll keep watch until morning," she answered sternly. After a moment's silence she added;

"And there isn't any more bread, either, not a crumb. Mishka took the last."

The boy turned back to the window and looked out. But from here there was nothing to be seen.

Mishka lay beside the shed. The bullet had struck him

in the back under the shoulder blade and had gone straight through him. He had hardly had time to cry out. A soldier kicked the little body and a piece of bread fell out of his small fist.

"He brought her bread, the little beast," said the soldier and again struck the lifeless body with his foot. "They wanted to feed that woman. . . ."

"And how he crept up the guttersnipe. . . ."

"Another minute and he would've given it to her. . . . As soon as we came out I noticed something small moving, and right up close to the wall. So I took aim. . . ."

"Good shot," his comrade praised him, looking at the brown patch soaking through the grey homespun shirt.

"You bet! I've got a pretty good eye! But what'll we do with him now? Leave him here?"

"Why here? Let's throw him into the ditch."

This idea pleased them both. Grabbing the lad by the legs, they dragged him away. His bright head bumped over the uneven frozen ground. The soldiers swung the body and with a heave threw it into the snow-filled roadside ditch.

"Let him lie there. I wonder where he came from?"

"The Captain will find out tomorrow. Although a hell of a lot you can find out here. . . . The whole gang stick together and keep their mouths shut as close as clams."

"Don't you worry, our Captain will loosen their tongues all right!"^{fc}

"It's about time he did. I tell you straight, it's fierce here."

The tail soldier leaned on his rifle and looked intently at his companion. Apparently he did not see anything suspicious in that round 'face with the turned-up nose, and continued.

"Fierce. . . . And how I want to go back home. My Michael will be ten years old next spring. Haven't seen him for two years, just think of it, two years. . . ."

The other nodded his head in sympathy.

"I had leave in the autumn."

"When I left I promised to buy him a bicycle when I came back. The kid's been waiting two years for that bike. It's hard to send one from here.⁰"

"The Feldwebel has sent two of them,"

"The Feldwebel . . .*" said the tall soldier slowly, "he's the Feldwebel, but do you think they'll take one from me? You know how it is yourself. A parcel is another thing, but a bicycle, they wouldn't let me send that."

They walked to and fro in front of the house where Werner had his office. There was a light burning in the windows. The office was working.

"What (time is it? I'm thinking fl's about time we were relieved."

"Still half an hour to go."

The cold was getting worse. The tall German still found it supportable, his head was wrapped in a woollen shawl under his field cap. But the other, the shorter one, was rubbing away desperately at his ears.

"How do these people live here? Do they always have frostslike this?"

"How do I know? I suppose they do. . . . What's it matter to them, savages!"

"Did you see the rainbow?"

"Yes, I saw it."

"What's it mean?"

The tall man shrugged his shoulders.

"What can it mean? I suppose they have rainbows in winter. But just look at those columns!"

"That's from the frost."

"Of course, and the rainbow must be from the frost, too."

"Possibly," agreed the short German, breathing on hk hands, and looked around uneasily.

"What's there?"

"Nothing, I was just looking,"

A minute later the tall one also looked round and then cursed himself in a temper. He knew from experience that he only had to look around once, and finished—he would keep wanting to look round over and over again with the result that he would become more and more frightened each time.

"Don't go looking round. There's nothing there."

"You're looking that way yourself all the time."

"I keep thinking someone's coming down the road. You look and there's nobody there. Then again you think there is."

By tacit agreement, they confined their walk to a few paces along the house and (back again.

The door opened. It was their relief.

"Who fired?" asked the Feldwebel.

"I did," said the tall soldier springing to attention. "They tried to give bread to the prisoner."

"And then what, Raschke?" The Feldwebel was interested.

"I hit my mark ; some kid, I suppose the neighbours sent him."

"Where is he?"

"We threw him into the ditch."

"Come on, let's have a look at him."

The three of them walked over to the ditch.

"Here's the place," said Raschke, pointing.

The Feldwebel bent down.

"There's nothing here."

"What d'you mean, nothing?" exclaimed the dismayed soldier.

"Franz, this is where we threw him, isn't it?"

They jumped into the ditch and began to walk along it.

"Where are you going so far? We never went there."

The Feldwebel looked at them suspiciously.

"Listen here, you two, what's all this about?"

"Hejr Feldwebel, I swear, and I've got a witness, it was right here we threw the boy; there, look here!" He brightened up as he caught sight of a small bloodstain on the snow.

The Feldwebel shook his head as he scanned the spot closely.

"Got down into the ditch and trampled over all the tracks. . . . I must say you kept good watch here! Somebody dragged the body away right un'der your noses. If there ever was a body," he added sternly.

"Of course there was, why, I've even got a witness. . . . The both of us dragged him by the feet. . . ."

"Perhaps he was still alive, you blockheads, and just got up and walked off!"

"No, no, the bullet went right through him. He fell face down and died on the spot. . . ."

The Feldwebel went back to the shed. There was a big red stain on the snow, beside it a chunk of black rye bread. Traces of a child's footsteps in the packed snow led straight across a fresh, untrampled snow-drift.

"Here's the place . . . and then we dragged him to the ditch. . . . Look, you can see the trail."

"All right," agreed the Feldwebel. It was clear that the men were telling the truth. "Come along, you're under arrest."

The soldiers stopped short.

"Under arrest?"

"You heard me! And don't stand there gaping at me! Were you supposed to guard this place or not? You were. Ajnd things happen in your area you haven't the slightest idea about. The body of a criminal has been stolen, and you two jackasses didn't even notice it. Some guard you are! With such a guard' they'll cut our throats one by one, they'll wring our necks as if we were sparrows. . . ."

The men followed him, their heads hanging.

"Damned hole this is," muttered Raschke. His comrade answered with a sigh.

"There was nobody there, there couldn't have been anybody there!" insisted Raschke stubbornly.

Little Vogel shrank with terror. He felt his hair standing on end, and a cold shiver ran down his spine. Raschke insisted that no one could have been there. And he was right—the snow had not crunched, nothing had stirred, there had not been a sound not a single shadow had slithered over the moonlit snow. And yet the body had disappeared. What could it mean?

Private Vogel was afraid to answer his own question, and merely quickened his step unconsciously. He breathed a sigh of relief when at last the door of the cottage was thrown open and warmth, light and human voices greeted them. The ditch, the snow and this fearful night that made one's flesh creep were shut out. For a moment he forgot that he was under arrest. For a moment he thought himself lucky—he was among people again, the night had retreated, conquered by human voices and the light of the lamp. The night could not penetrate the walls of the cottage.

"When the Captain comes he'll decide what's to be done with you. You will remain here till morning," said the Feldwebel.

They sat down on the floor in a corner. It was warm and pleasant. Raschke leaned his head against the wall and dozed off. But the lice would not let him sleep. He scratched himself for a while, half asleep, then he opened his eyes and cursed.

"How the hell can a man sleep here. . . . In the frost these damned vermin keep quiet, but they're making up for it now. . . ."

They moved over to the stove, took off their jackets and shirts, and by the flickering light of the burning firewood

began a careful hunt for lice in the folds and seams of the coarse material.

* * *

Galya Malyuchikha was sitting on the floor, breathing heavily. It had been no easy job crawling on her stomach for over three hundred yards along the ditch. A hundred times she had buried her face in the snow so that the Germans would not spot her. She had set her teeth—come what may, she would not leave the boy lying in the ditch like a dog.

The way back had been even more difficult. The little body of her son had weighed heavily on her back, slipping off all the time, and hindering her movement. With the utmost difficulty she had crawled to the fence, and with difficulty had climbed out of the ditch, taking advantage of the fact that the soldiers had stopped in front of the house to talk. And now here she was indoors at last, and little Misha, rigid, stretched out, was lying on the table. He had already become stiff in the frost, just as though he had been dead a long time. The children stood around their brother. His fair hair, tousled round his face, his mouth open wide for that last cry were clearly visible in the moonlight that streamed in at the window. Zina cautiously put out a little finger and touched the bloodstain on his jacket.

"What's that?"

"Don't touch it," said Sasha sternly. "That's where they shot him, isn't it, Mamma?"

"That's the place, Sonny, that's the place," she whispered in a muffled voice, running her fingers through Misha's soft hair. He was gone. A short time ago he had thrust a piece of bread inside his jacket for Auntie Olena and warily tiptoed out of the cottage. She had been sure that he would manage, that he would get to the shed. But it had happened otherwise.

"We shouldn't have, let him go," wailed little Zina suddenly,

"He had to go, he had to, my dear," she moaned dully. "Oh, he had to go. . . ."

"They don't give Auntie Olena anything to eat there," explained Sasha in a voice that he tried to make deep and manly.

"Yes, Sonny, yes," she agreed. "Auntie Olena was in the same unit with Daddy. . . . And just see what happened to her. She'll die now, die for nothing at all, 'will Olena. . . ."

"Perhaps I could take her some potatoes, there were some left in the pot from supper," muttered Sasha angrily.

"No, Sonny, nobody can get to that shed now. They're watching it for all they're worth. . . . You'll only get killed for nothing. . . . We thought there was nobody near the shed, but they saw Misha. . . ."

"They wouldn't have seen me," said Sasha stubbornly.

"You're talking nonsense, and saying things that are not nice. . . . If Misha couldn't manage then nobody could, nobody. . . ."

Sasha said no more. The mother looked at the face of her dead son and gently stroked his hair.

"Where can we bury him? In the morning they'll begin poking around looking for him. They'll take him away if they find him."

"We can bury him in the garden," suggested Sasha.

"How can we bury him in the garden? They'll hear us and come running to see what's up. . . . Besides the ground is as hard as stone. We could never dig a grave, and just to cover him with snow. . . ."

Utterly helpless they stood around the table on which (the dead boy lay.

"What shall we do?"

"We must bury him in the house," whispered Malyuchikha.

"In the house?" echoed Zina in astonishment.

"Where else? He'll lie in his own home, stay with us. . . . I can't think of anything else."

"Here, in the room?"

She looked around at her wits' end.

"No. . . . In the lean-to. . . ."

They went into the lean-to, a small, close place. Malyuchikha looked at the earthen floor.

"We'll dig here. Get the spade, Sasha, there it is, behind the door."

She crossed herself, marked out the grave, and put her foot to the spade.

The ground was hard, trampled down by the many feet that had passed over it in these many long years. The spade hardly went into the stubbornly resisting earth. The woman was soon out of breath.

"You try now, Sasha. . . ."

The youngster dug away stubbornly, sticking out the tip of his tongue as he exerted himself.

Zina, squatting on her heels, raked the loose earth away with her hands, getting it under her linger nails.

Taking turns in this way they dug for a long time, delving persistently into the stony soil. Once they had broken through the top layer, digging came easier. - At last the shallow grave was ready.

"Now we must dress him, children. . . . Okh, to think* that we have to lay Mishutka in his grave without a coffin. . . ."

She dipped up some water from the bucket and set about washing his face, his bloodstained chest, his thin back in which the bullet had made a round hole under the shoulder blade. Then she took a clean shirt out of the chest and with great difficulty pulled the sleeves over the rigid, cold arms.

"To bury him like this. . . ."

Zina burst into -tears.

"Don't you cry. Mishutka died like a Red Armyman.

He died from a German bullet, died for what is right, do you understand?"

She was talking to Zina, but actually she was saying this to herself. The sobs were rising to her throat too, and she was afraid she would not be able to hold out, afraid that she would fall on her knees beside her son's body and howl like an animal, howl so that the whole village would know of her misfortune, of her sorrow, of the death of the son whom she had borne, fed and tended with loving care for ten years and whom a German bullet had now killed.

"When father went off with the guerillas he said to Misha: 'See that you don't disgrace me here!' And Mishutka has done what his father told him to do, he hasn't brought disgrace down on us. . . . Do you understand?"

"I understand," sobbed Zina.

"You mustn't cry. Mishutka will lie uneasy if tears are spilled over him. You mustn't cry. Help me spread the cloth."

They spread the linen shroud in the open grave, laid the murdered boy on it, and wrapped him up.

"This is so that the earth won't fall into his eyes," said the mother.

"So the earth won't fall into his eyes," repeated Zina in a thin little voice.

"Take a handful of earth, Zina, and sprinkle it down on your brother," said her mother.

Zina squatted down, took up a handful of the brown clayey soil and sprinkled it onto the shroud. Sasha did the same. Then the mother threw in the earth with the spade. She kept throwing in earth until the white cloth could no longer be seen, until a tiny mound had grown up over it.

"We must stamp it down," said the woman, "it can be seen. They'll come and dig him up."

All three of them began to stamp on the grave. Malyuchikha trampled down the earth step by step, painstakingly,

thoroughly. And all the time she kept thinking of how, contrary to all custom, contrary to the dictates of her own heart, she was trampling, on her son's grave, doing what no one ever did, trampling on the fair head of her son, on his bloodstained chest, his frail childish arms and legs.

"We must do it," she said aloud in answer to her own thoughts, and little Zina answered her like an echo :

"We must. . . ."

"Is that enough?" asked Sasha.

"No, Son, the ground is still soft, it can still be seen. Stamp, stamp on it till it is quite level."

She carefully gathered up the earth that remained, took it into the house and scattered it around the oven. Then she swept up the floor of the lean-to so that no trace of the grave remained and threw around chips, bits of straw and the like, leaving the floor as one usually sees it in a lean-to.

"Can you see it?"

Sasha peered at the ground.

"No. . . . We can make sure tomorrow when it's light."

Malyuchikha stood there and looked at her son's strange grave, strewn over with straw and wood chips. Not a trace of Mishutka remained. Children did die. But each of them had his little coffin and his grave overgrown with green grass. Only of Mishka had no single trace remained. He lay there in his own house, but even she, if she had not known, would never have been able to find his last resting place.

"Go to bed, children," she said.

"And you?"

"I'm going to bed, too. It's not long till morning, and we must get some sleep."

But she did not sleep. She was thinking of Mishutka, thinking of her husband, who was with the guerillas. He had not been accepted by the army ; in 1918 he had lost

two fingers and had been pronounced unfit for active service. But the guerillas did not look to see whether a man had fingers or not, they needed stout hearts.

Platon would come home and would ask where Misha was. The boy had always been his favourite. What would she tell her husband? Mishutka, she would have to say, lies in the lean-to, under the earthen floor, with a German bullet in his heart.

But all the same she knew that Platon would listen calmly to the news and say just what he had said when the Germans had first entered the village and he and others like him, with bundles over their shoulders, had left for the heart of the forest where their guerilla detachment found cover. "Hold out, old girl. In case of anything grab an axe or a pick or anything that comes to hand, only don't give in. We've all got to fight nowadays. Old men, women, even children!"

Platon would say: "Well, our Mishutka died fighting the Germans. Don't wail, old girl, he died for his country, do you understand?" And Malyuchikha did not cry, but stared with wide-open eyes at the door behind which, under the floor of the lean-to, lay her son's secret grave.

Meanwhile the sentries outside were still discussing the night's events.

"Hellish place this is. Who could have taken him? Raschke said they didn't hear a thing. And yet the snow squeaks if you only move an inch."

"Search me," muttered the other gloomily. "Can you understand anything here?"

And all the time they kept darting glances around them, looking in every direction.

It seemed to them that the snow was crunching, most distinctly crunching, they could almost hear footsteps. You look around, and there's nothing there. A misty halo was

shining around the moon. The columns of light, columns of the triumphal arch, gradually began to fade, flickering as they died out.

"Seems to be getting warmer," said one of the soldiers.

"Says you! I'm just waiting for my ears to drop off. While you're outside you don't notice it so much, but as soon as you get in the house and sit down where it's warm they begin to burn as if they were on fire."

"Frost-bitten, I suppose."

"Of course, they've been frost-bitten. And my feet hurt like hell too. . . . As soon as it begins to get warm, they'll just rot away."

"So much the better for you. They'll send you to the hospital."

"Catch them sending me! Did they send Maler? And his feet were as black as coal."

"You needn't shout like that."

"There's nobody here."

"You just think there's nobody here, but tomorrow the Feldwebel will know everything."

"Do you mean you're going to run squealing to him?"

"Are you asking for one on the jaw?"

"Now keep your shirt on and don't talk nonsense. There are no such things as miracles."

"No, there aren't. Of course, there are no miracles. . . . But you just tell me, who took that body away?"

"That's another matter. . . % I'm talking about the Feldwebel. . . ."

"**Urr.**" . . .

The halo around the moon was growing wider, denser, a milky blue on the crystal clear sky.

"Say what you like, the frost will get worse towards dawn, but just now it's a bit warmer."

"Maybe it is warmer."

The motionless air, which had been frozen into a huge icy block until now, seemed to stir. A barely perceptible wisp was blowing.

"I tell you the weather's changing, my legs are drawing,"
"Rheumatism?"

"Yes, rheumatism, an old story. Whenever the weather changes they draw like blazes."

They continued to pace the street.

"Is that woman still in the shed?"

"Yes, she's still there."

"She'll freeze by morning."

"Not if it gets warmer she won't."

"Rotten work—the boy, the woman. . . ."

"What did you expect? That sort of woman would give you one in the side so's you wouldn't even have time to take a breath. . . . And the kids are the worst of the lot. They creep about all over the place, poke their noses in everywhere. They send them here to spy."

For a minute they remained silent.

"I would have done it all quite different. . . . Something like the Captain in that other village, remember?"

The snub-nosed soldier nodded his head.

"You see . . . they'll never work for us anyway, I know them. In the long run we'll have to wipe them out all the same, so it's better to do it right away. It would be a lot quieter."

"Allot them?"

"All of them. You see yourself what sort of people they are. Even little tiny children have been so propagandized that it's impossible for us to reeducate them. Why should we—it's labour wasted. They're different people and they'll remain different."

- The soldier sighed and did not answer. The rainbow columns had completely faded. There was a rustling among the branches of the trees lining the road. Fine snow showered

down from them. The moon was wrapped in mist, through which it shone pale and sad.

"See, the weather really is changing. Only a minute ago the moon was shining as bright as the sun, and look at it now!"

"There's a wind rising."

"It's good that it's getting warmer. I'm just about ready to croak in this frost."

The snow still crunched underfoot, but no longer made that squeaking noise. The weather was changing rapidly. The crystal transparency of the sky was dimmed by a grey mist ; the wind became stronger, whipping up long swirls of snow from the fields. The cold blast penetrated to the marrow of their bones, blew in their faces and got under their thin coats.

"That's what you call getting warmer. ..."

"How much longer to go?"

"It's still a long way off to morning, plenty of time to get our fill of walking."

From the distant snow-covered plain came a strange roar, growing in volume as it drew nearer.

"What's that?"

They stopped and listened. The roar grew louder, fiercer, and suddenly burst full on the village in a long-drawn-out howl. The trees began to rock, all their branches fluttering madly. The wind scooped up the snow from the ground, tossed it about, threw it aloft, so that the dry, silver flour came sifting down everywhere. The sentries scarcely made any headway, bending over almost double, their heads thrust forward. When they turned around and the wind blew at their backs it was easier to walk, the wind carried them along as though on wings. But the wind kept changing its direction,, blew from the right, then from the left, blew across the road raising huge fountains of snow, drawing them higher **and**!

higher until they suddenly collapsed, covering the earth with white down.

"What a winter! Now we're in for a blizzard. There's no seeing anything in such a snowstorm."

And as if at a command the two of them glanced over their shoulders simultaneously. But the road was as deserted as it had been before.

III

"My dear Louisa. . . ."

Captain Werner raised his eyes from the letter and glanced at the window. A storm was raging outside. It looked as if it were snowing, but it was only the wind raising the white snow-drifts high and tearing them to pieces, sprinkling the bushes, and dashing snow against the windowpanes with a piercing howl. The wind was blustering across the vast snow-covered plains, growing stronger, beating its wings against the earth, and pouncing down on the village so that the very houses trembled.

Kurt Werner's heart was heavy with homesickness and gloom. He could not breathe, the blizzard cut him off from the world. Everything was smothered in snow, plunged in meters of snow, lost in flying snow as fine as desert sand. He mailed his home in Dresden. What were his wife and his ~~children~~ doing there now? It was a long time since he had ~~seen~~ *seen* them. On leaving France he had hoped that he would be able to go home, if only for a day. But they had been brought across Germany in a mad rush and had not been allowed to get out of the train for even a minute. His native town had flashed past the train windows and all he could do was to throw a glance in the direction of his home. And now he wanted terribly to go there, even if it were for only half an hour, even for ten minutes. The wind did not howl there,

nor did death crouch in frozen gullies, waiting to spring. They would be sitting at the table drinking coffee, while Louisa cut the bread. It was warm and cosy. Louisa would smile, hand him a cup with her plump hands. When would he see all this again?

A dull rage against everything and everybody seized on him. He was angry with Pusya, with her eternal caprices, sleeping till noon and complaining of boredom ; it never entered her head to make her bed or clean up the room. He recalled with disgust the unmade bed, the cigarette butts on the floor, the hairpins and nail scissors on the table together with the bread and the butter. His tidy little flat in Dresden, everything in its proper place, Louisa with the inevitable duster in her hand. . . He was enraged with his own soldiers, stupid, slow-witted, lousy, frost-bitten and sick with every possible disease. He was in fury of rage with the village where he had already had to spend a whole month—a gloomy, secretive village, where people walked past him with their eyes fixed on the ground though he knew all the same that hatred lurked in those eyes and that no power could possibly wring from them what he wanted—fear and submission.

"I'll show you something *yet*," he muttered through his clenched teeth. His glance fell on the sheet of white paper. He bent over the table and began to write quickly, so quickly that tiny drops of ink spluttered in all directions.

"I'm counting the days till I shall at last be with you again. We are advancing, Louisa, advancing all the time in this terrible, wild, barbarous land, and our campaign will soon be crowned with complete victory."

Let Louisa -be pleased. She would not know that they had been held up in one place for three months—just one miserable little village could not be taken into consideration—that for three months they had been tortured by the most fearful, pitiless frost, that guerillas were lying in wait for them in the woods and gullies, that the soldiers were getting weaker with

every day, and that day by day there were more and more sick, that there was practically no one left of the unit with which he had left France, that with the exception of Smacher none of his Dresden friends were alive. No, she would not know this, how could she? A letter from the front should inspire courage, should arouse and intensify the spirit of patriotism. All the more so because besides Louisa and before Louisa the letter would be read by others who would judge Kurt Werner's sentiments from it.

"The winter here is terrible, we are not accustomed to such frosts. But we derive warmth from the Führer's orders and are proud that it has fallen to our lot to carry out his great plan, that it has fallen to our lot to serve the grandeur of Germany."

He wrote a few more sentences and then reread the letter from the beginning. It didn't sound so bad, better than the leaflets issued for soldiers which they sent them from Germany. More mettlesome and more convincing.

He thought for a while, chewing the end of his pen, but decided that it would do. He must ask about the children, for in this letter he must show himself as husband and father and not only as a captain in the German Army.

"My dear, how are you managing? How is Liesel? Did Willi get over his quinsy all right? I will try to send for him fur for a coat so that he won't catch cold again. You ask me for stockings, but unfortunately they are hard to get, we have been garrisoned in villages all the time. As soon as we occupy some town, I'll try to get some. Last week I sent you some butter. Please let me know punctually when you receive my parcels. Next time I will send you some honey—you can treat Willi's throat . . ."

There was a knock at the door.

"What do you want now?"

"The village elder is here."

"Let him wait," he snapped over his shoulder, and again bent over his letter. But his thoughts were already off in another direction ; he was back from the house in Dresden and in the Ukrainian village, again. Irritation prevented him from writing. He hurriedly closed the letter with kisses and regards, signed it and put it in an envelope.

"Now, then, where is he? Send him ify"

A tall, round-shouldered man appeared in the doorway.

"You sent for me, Gospodin Captain?"

"I sent for you. . . ."

He stretched out his feet under the table and for a moment regarded the man who stood before him searchingly.

"When, at long last, will the grain transports be ready?"⁰ he suddenly barked, leaning forward abruptly.

The village elder shuddered and ducked his head into his collar.

"I'm doing all I can, I'm at it tooth and nail—there is no grain. . . ."

"What do you mean there is no grain? There are three hundred houses in the village, there was a bumper harvest this year, and you say there's no grain? They've hidden it!"

The man sighed plaintively.

"Yes, they must have hidden it. . . ."

He pointed to the window beyond which the blizzard was raging.

"Where am I to look? What can I find there?"

"You can find it," the Captain cut him short. "You have only to search properly, Gospodin Gaplik, search properly. . . . Sit down."

The elder sat down gingerly on the edge of a chair.

"I'm not satisfied with you, not satisfied with you at all. In fact I don't even understand what they brought you here for. . . . I think it would have been better to have found a local man. . . . You haven't even gotten to

know the people in the month you've been here. Do you know who lives here in the village?"

A gleam of hope flickered in the elder's eyes. He agreed with everything, rapidly nodding his little bald head.

"Of course, I didn't get to know them. . . . It's a big village, and who wants to have anything to do with me? It would be easier for a local man, of course, much easier. . . ."

The Captain leaned back in his chair.

"Ah-a. . . . Seems you're not very pleased with your job, eh?" he asked cunningly.

Gaplik twisted his cap round and round in his hands, but did not answer.

"So. . . . Don't you forget that the Red Armymen would have shot you there, or still worse, the peasants would have run their pitchforks through you. . . . You owe your life to the German authorities, and you must do whatever they demand, particularly as they really don't demand very much, do they?"

The peasant sighed.

"You're not taking any interest in your work, not taking any interest in it. . . . The Bolsheviks took your land away from you, kept you in prison, we thought that you would do everything in your power. And actually you've done nothing. . . . All we have is what my soldiers could squeeze out of the village, but there's nothing to show for your efforts. . . . And we get practically no information from you."

"But I told you about that Kostyuk. . . ."

He tried to save himself with the one achievement he had to his credit, information which he had picked up by accident while he was stealing on his way to Headquarters through backyards.

Werner frowned.

"Well, and what else?"

"About the schoolteacher. ..." muttered Gaplik.

"Well, yes, about the teacher. . . . That's very little and still has to be looked into."

"It would be easier for a local man. ..."

"Don't you keep throwing your local man at me all the time! Of course, it would be easier, only where would we get him from, this local man of yours? Three hundred houses and three hundred families in the collective farm! Not a single individual peasant farmer. Their land was confiscated from a big estate owner, and the people, you know yourself. . . . Poverty-stricken ragamuffins who got hold of the land thanks to the Bolsheviks! Most of them former farmhands! Where can you get a man from here?" exclaimed Werner irately, and struck the table with his fist. "You must try, you must do your job, or else I shall find another way of dealing with you, Gaplik. I give you three, or let it be four days in which to get the grain! The army must be fed. We're not going to let the army starve just because you can't manage the peasants."

"I can do nothing alone," said the elder gloomily. "I need the help of the army. ..."

"Have I ever refused you help? If you need help, I'll give it to you, but you must do something yourself, think of something."

The elder's little eyes brightened.

"All right, I'll think of a plan and report to you. ..."

"Very well, very well, only don't think too long. Remember, four days. And about that boy. . . . The guilty persons must be found, must be, or else you'll be held responsible. I give you four days for that as well!"

He turned towards the window. Outside, the wind was still raging, the snow swirling, and the house creaked and groaned as though it were being torn to pieces. Gaplik realized that the interview was over. He bowed low to the Captain's square back and went out.

Only when he was in the street did he put on his cap. He walked away with his head hunched into his shoulders, hopelessly revolving in his mind how he could at last manage to squeeze the grain out of the stubborn village. In the blinding snow he almost bumped into a man coming from the opposite direction. Suddenly emerging from the importunate thoughts which beset him, he jumped back in a fright. A grey-headed old man peered at him closely and upon recognizing him, spat demonstratively, and turned off the road towards the houses.

Hurriedly Gaplik made his way to his house, took a sheet of paper, and seating himself at the table set about drawing up an order. He inclined his head first to the right, then to the left, scratched out words and crossed out what he had rewritten, sighed. The wind howling outside his windows, the worrying memory of the Captain's harsh voice, and the no less terrible memory of the faces of the local peasants preyed on him. He broke out in a sweat, wiped his bald head; he realized that he was playing his last card, that he must, at last, satisfy Werner, that he must, at last, break the resistance of the villagers at all costs.

Meanwhile the village lay calm and silent in the clouds of snow raised by the wind. People sat in their houses listening to the wind howling outside their windows. Only old Yevdokim Okhabko was so tormented by loneliness that he disregarded the blizzard and decided to visit his neighbour. Barging against the fierce wind, he made his way along the Malyuk's fence and stood for a long time at the door beating the snow off his boots. Not a sound came from the house. Yevdokim knocked at the door, and without waiting for an answer opened it. Three horror-stricken pairs of eyes gazed at him.

"How are you all?"

Malyuchikha gasped. Her heart was beating frantically.

"Is that you, Granddad Yevdokim?"

"Can't you see it's me? What are you all so scared about?"

She did not answer. He stood still, leaning on his stick.

"Why don't you ask me to sit down? New customs here, eh?"

"It is -better not to sit with us, better for you not to come here at all," she said softly.

"Why not?"

She shrugged her shoulders. The old man waved his hand and sat down on the bench under the window.

"What's the matter with you, Galya, gone crazy, or what? Why are you sitting like that? Where's Mishka?"

Little Zina suddenly burst out crying at the top of her voice.

"What's wrong with you?"

"Keep quiet, Zina, don't cry," said her mother sternly.

Yevdokim scratched his head.

"There's such a blizzard, it's simply awful. The whole house is shaking. It's miserable sitting alone. . . . So I just thought I'd drop in on my neighbours. . . ."

"Such neighbours as we are right now., Granddad. . . ." sighed Malyuchikha.

He crossed his hands on his stick and rested his chin on them, staring intently at the woman.

"Something's happened, has it? Where's Mishka wandering in such a storm?"

"Misha's gone, Granddad. . . ."

"What d'you mean, gone? Where's he gone?"

"He hasn't gone anywhere. . . . The Germans shot Misha this evening."

The old grey head trembled.

"Sh-o-t Misha? What are you talking about, woman?"

She wrung her hands till the fingers cracked.

"Listen to what I tell you. . . . He went to take some bread to Olen^ in the shed and they shot him. . . ."

She could read a question in his grey eyes.

"No, I didn't leave him to the Germans, I didn't do that. I dragged him out of the ditch and brought him home on my own back. . . . We've buried him so that no one will find him now. . . ."

"Do they know who it was?"

"How should, they know? They just killed him and threw him into the ditch, like a dog. . . . Now they'll probably look for him, but so far everything is quiet. When you knocked I thought they were coming."

He shook his head.

"So that's how it is. . . . How many people are being killed. . . . Little children. . . . And you, Sasha, remember this, remember it well. . . ."

Silently the boy nodded his head.

"Your father will come, the othert will come, and then **you tell them everything, everything. . . .**"
youtellthemeverything, e v e i y t h i n g A n d d o y o u t h i n k t h e y d o
drily.

"Of course they know. . . . They see for themselves. . . . But all the same one thing is added to another, one after the other. . . . Before this, Platon was taking revenge for others, now it'll be *for* Mishka, too. He must avenge his own son. . . ." " "" .

"It is all one," said Malyuchikha quietly.

"Of course, of course, it's all one. . . . But still a son is a son. My son Jthey killed in 1918. . . . I've got a score to settle with them for lots—but that most of all. After all, the nearer the heart the more painful it is. Here I am now just a dried up old man, no use to anybody. . . . And there would have been grandchildren, it would have been cheerful in the house. . . ."

"You have a whole village full of grandchildren, Granddad."

"The village is like that, of course, but still your own kith and kin are different. . . ."

"Listen, they're banging on the rail, that means a meeting. . . ."

Malyuchikha turned pale.

"It must be to find out about Mishka. . . ."

The old man waved his hand.

"Maybe it is about Mishka, maybe it isn't. . . . Do you imagine they can't think up anything?"

They were still banging away at the rail, which rang like a bell.

"Well, we'll have to go, otherwise they'll come and drive us there. Are you coming, Granddad?"

"I'm afraid we've no choice in the matter, let's go," he said getting up and leaning heavily on his stick.

"And you, Sasha, don't go out anywhere. Look after Zina. As soon as it's over, I'll come home."

They made their way slowly down the road through the curtain of fine snow floating in the air. Doors were flying open on both sides of the street; and women, girls and old men were coming out.

"Do you know what it's all about?"

How should I know? I know just as much as you do. I heard them banging on the rail and so I'm going."

"Oh Lord, what can it be?" one of the women sighed heavily.

"Now don't you go groaning and moaning," snapped Fedosia Kravchuk, who was passing, "You still don't know what it's for and you're already whimpering. . . ."

"But you know, my dear, it won't be anything good. . . ."

"Did you expect good from them? Good indeed! Such a lot of good comes from them that you expect nothing but good. . . ."

"That's just it. . . ."

"But there's no need to sigh beforehand. Neither before nor after," said Fedosia.

No one answered. They all knew about Vasya. They knew what had caused the hard lines at the corners of her mouth. If anyone, she certainly had a right to say that this was no time for groaning. She did not groan though she had not even that hope in which the others lived ; at least their sons and husbands were in the army or with the guerillas ; they were alive and these others would see them in that happy hour when the last German would breathe his last right in the middle of the village, killed by a Red Army bullet.

More dark, muffled figures kept appearing through the whirling snow. People were coming from all directions and making for the school. They still called it the school out of habit. It was a large building, with big windows, high ceilings and white tiled stoves. The rooms were big and cheerful. Only there was no longer a school here. The Germans had chopped up the desks and benches for firewood, had torn the maps from the walls, smashed the little cupboard with the school supplies, torn up the pictures and portraits. The school assembly hall breathed emptiness and cold. The people poured into this hall till it was packed with a grey crowd of women and old men.

Malanya Vishneva alone was standing by herself. It was as if some invisible barrier, which nobody wanted to cross, divided her from the crowd. Deathly pale, she stood against the wall, her frenzied eyes focussed on one point. Locks of dark hair stuck out from under her kerchief, but she did not tuck them back.

Gaplik was sitting at a small table on a raised platform which had escaped destruction. The Feldwebel, who was beside him, yawned and threw an indifferent glance over the people gathered in the hall.

"Everybody here?" asked Gaplik raising his long, gaunt

body from behind the table. His small bald head waggled on his long neck.

"Everybody," muttered somebody near the door.

The elder picked up some papers from the table, then for some reason or other put them back, turning them over with somewhat trembling hands.

"He's scared, the old bald head," whispered someone in the crowd.

"He must have thought up some filthy new trick, something we've never had before. ..."

"Why shouldn't he be scared? He most likely knows that when our troops come they'll skin him alive. ..."

"That is if we don't get him beforehand and give it to him so's he won't be so anxious about being the village elder any more!"

"What'll you do with him?" asked old Alexander, the lame collective farm stableman.

"What a question! We know what to do!" came the immediate answer from tall, pretty Frosya.

"Silence! What's all the talking about! The meeting has begun!" said Gaplik angrily looking the crowd over.

"It doesn't look as though it's begun," muttered Yevdokim.

"What's the matter with you! Gospodin elder has condescended to come, his lord and master is also here, what also do you want?" somebody retorted.

"Silence!" shouted Gaplik in a voice that was not his own.

"How many times must I tell you! What's all the whispering about?"

"Be quiet, you women, be quiet, let's listen to what he's got to rave about," Terpilikha put in, blowing her nose loudly.

Gaplik cleared his throat, raised the sheet of paper to his eyes, took a pair of steel-rimmed spectacles from his pocket and fixed them on his nose.

"Oh-ho. . . ."

"He's going to read the paper. . . ."

"Looks like it's a new order. ..."

The elder glared at the crowd over his spectacles. Everybody stopped talking. Again he cleared his throat and in a thin, whining voice began:

"Up to date the inhabitants have not delivered the set tax in kind, that is, grain."

A murmur ran through the crowd and immediately died down.

"The inhabitants are hereby warned that the time allotted for the delivery of the tax in kind, that is, grain, in the quantities previously announced, expires within three days from the date this is made public.' "

Again the murmuring began.

"Anyone failing to fulfil his obligation to his country and the German Army within these three days will be sentenced. . . .'"

Gaplik paused. From under his spectacles his glance swept triumphantly over the crowd. At last the silence was complete and all eyes were fixed intently on his lips.

"Will be sentenced, in accordance with the injunctions concerning non-compliance with instructions issued by the authorities, sabotage, active and passive resistance. . . .'"

"We know, we know," someone said loudly in an exaggeratedly calm and careless tone.

The Feldwebel rose to his feet behind the table and peered intently into the corner from which the voice came. But everyone there was standing perfectly still, their eyes fixed on the elder.

"Will be sentenced,' " Gaplik raised his voice as though transported with joy, " 'will be sentenced to death.' "

He drew a deep breath, paused slightly, read the date of the order and Captain Werner's signature, and folded the paper.

"Did everybody hear?"

"We did," answered someone in the crowd.

"Did everybody understand?"

"We understand, we sure understand," said Terpilikha, who was standing right beside the table. "We understand that as it should be understood."

Gaplik glanced at her suspiciously. But she calmly looked him straight in the eyes, her face grim and serious.

"Well, then, if that's the case everything's all right. . . ."

There was a stir in the crowd, and some of them began to make for the door.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"Isn't it over?"

"There is one more matter," said the elder sternly. Malyuchikha felt her heart drop again and then begin to pound madly with fear.

"The matter is the following. . . ."

The peasants waited tensely.

"Last night somebody tried to pass bread to a criminal under arrest."

Malyuchikha seized her neighbour's hand. Chechor looked at her in astonishment.

"What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing . . . nothing. . . ."

Holding on to Chechor's hand she gasped for air.

"It was a boy of about ten who tried to pass on the bread.""

A buzz went up in the crowd. - People began to whisper to one another and exchange glances.

"Quiet! A boy of about ten. The criminal was shot."

Chechor cast a searching glance at Malyuchikha's mortally white face and hurriedly closed her free hand over the one that was gripping hers. Gently she stroked the fingers of the woman whose nails were digging into her palm.

"Bear up, dear! He'll notice you," she whispered in Malyuchikha's ear.

But Gaplik was not looking at his audience. In his nasal voice he began to read:

"The body of the juvenile criminal was stolen and hidden by a person or persons unknown. Anyone aware of the identity of the criminal, or-of those guilty of removing the body, must report to the German Commandant.¹"

Gaplik raised the paper closer to his eyes and glancing at the Feldwebel, who was sitting beside him, coughed. The Feldwebel rose, made his way towards the door through the crowd, which parted before him, and looked into the lean-to. Everyone could see the armed soldiers there. The bayonets fixed to their rifles glittered. People glanced at one another. The whispering and talking ceased.

"With a view to guaranteeing the maintenance of law and order and ensuring the apprehension of the malefactors, the German Commandant orders. . .,"

The peasants waited with bated breath for what would follow.

"That the following inhabitants of the village be held as hostages. . .!"

All heads leaned forward. Yevdokim cupped his hand behind his ear so as to hear better.

"The following inhabitants of the village: Palanchuk, Olga. . .!"

A young woman near the door swayed. She opened her mouth as though she were going to shriek, but did not utter a sound.

"Okhabko, Yevdokim. . .!"

Yevdokim looked in surprise at the people standing around him.

"What?¹"

"Okhabko, Yevdokim," Gaplik repeated emphatically, and continued: "Grokhach, Ossip. . .!"

A stocky, one-legged peasant gloomily nodded his head.

"Chechor, Maria. . .!"

Malyuchikha released her neighbour's hand and looked at her in horror.

"Never mind, Galya, never mind. . . . Look after my children," Maria said to her softly.

" 'Vishneva, Malanya. . . .' "

The girl did not even stir, but continued staring fixedly.

Suddenly it occurred to the elder that these hostages could also be used for the purpose of obtaining grain. Shooting is shooting, but suppose someone could be found who was not afraid of dying himself but who would not be willing to sacrifice the life of another? He had seen such things before. And entirely on his own—who would verify what had been agreed upon with the Germans and what not—he announced:

"If the guilty persons are not found within three days and if the grain deliveries do not begin within that time, the hostages will be hanged."

The crowd swayed and again a low murmur ran through it.

"Is that all, may we go?" asked Fedosia Kravchuk suddenly.

A great sigh went up from the crowd and everyone felt easier.

"The meeting is closed. You may leave, with the exception of those whose names I read out."

One after the other the peasants walked towards the door. The five hostages, without waiting for the order, lined up near the table. People passed them, some hanging their heads, others looking them straight in the eyes.

The school hall soon emptied, but the people did not disperse. They remained standing on the street in the whirling snow. Gaplik and the Feldwebel came out, followed by the five hostages escorted by soldiers with fixed bayonets. Maria Chechor and Olga Palanchuk had their arms around one another. Yevdokim was striking the ground sharply with

his stick. Slowly they passed the silent crowd. Suddenly Maria Chechor turned around.

"Never mind this, hold out, don't give in! Don't think of us! Hold out!" she shouted in a strong, clear voice.

The soldier walking beside her struck her in the chest with his fist. She staggered, but with head held high passed on.

The crowd dispersed slowly, in sullen, stubborn silence. Gaplik was all but running in his effort to keep up with the Feldwebel's long strides. Not for anything in the world did he want to remain alone at this moment. It was, in fact, the first time since his appointment as village elder that he had acted so decisively* publicly announcing orders that were direct attacks on the village. When he recalled the peasants' faces a cold shiver ran down his spine. He was, however, still more afraid of Captain Werner and his threats that morning to deal with him in no uncertain manner if he failed to produce results. The village was only a village after all, a crowd of old men, women and children, whereas Captain Werner was a representative of German authority and his word was backed up by rifles and bayonets. Gaplik had squirmed and manoeuvred at first, but after that morning's interview he realized that further evasion was impossible, and that a bitter lot awaited him. He cursed the hour and the day when he had left Rostov with the retreating Germans. He ought simply to have hidden, -to have lain low and moved to some other place. He would have pulled through somehow. In these war times it would not have been so easy to establish that it was he who had welcomed the Germans into his own village and shown them the way through the marshes.

"The Germans will win," he reassured himself, although this was poor consolation so long as he had to live in this village with its three hundred families all of whom hated him from the bottom of their hearts, where any house might shelter his murderer, who would not hesitate to strike at the first opportunity.

He sighed deeply and went to the Commandant's to report on the meeting. The peasants also went to their houses. Malyuchikha was half dead with agitation. The earth seemed to heave under her feet and her heart ached excruciatingly. Sasha was amusing Zina by making figures with sticks near the stove. She glanced at the children's blonde heads and the pain in her heart became even sharper.

"Well, how've you been, has Zina been a good girl?"

"Yes, she's been good. . . . Is the meeting over?"

"Yes, it's over. . . . I'll just run into Maria's for a second, I'll come straight back."

"Why do you want to go to Maria's?"

"Maria has been arrested by the Germans, we must take the children," she said dully. Sasha raised his eyes from the sticks.

"Arrested? Why?"

"Don't you know the Germans yet?" answered his mother indefinitely, and went out. She soon returned with Maria's three little ones. The eldest was Sasha's age, about eight.

"Mamma, mamma!" wailed three-year-old Nina.

"Don't you cry, mamma will come soon. She'll come," the woman pacified her. "Sit down, children, and I'll give you something to eat."

She pulled out some potatoes from under the stove where they had been hidden, washed them and put them on to boil in their jackets so that not a bit of them should be wasted. Except for these potatoes and a little crushed rye lying in the loft there was nothing in the house. Grain, potatoes, bacon and a keg of honey had all been buried in the earth, a long way from the house, and now they were frozen over and covered with snow so that it was impossible to get at them.

"Eat some potatoes, there isn't anything else. Wait till our boys come back and then we'll bake some bread."

"Nothing but potatoes," Zina whined miserably.

Her mother scolded her.

"What else do you want? You're lucky we have a few potatoes. . . . Choosey, you are!"

She glared wrathfully at her daughter, and suddenly became aware of the child's thin arms, the pitiful little wrinkles at the corners of her mouth. She was filled with an unbearable sorrow.

"Don't cry, don't! Our boys will come back and everything will be all right. We'll bake bread and I'll spread honey on it, and then you'll eat! But now potatoes are enough. . . ."

"Of course it's enough," said Sasha stoutly, and Zina hastily repeated:

"Of course it's enough. . . ."

Malyuchikha fed the stove, talking to the children all the time, but she could not suppress her growing uneasiness. She kept dropping things, forgetting what she had just been talking about, pushed a plate of potato peelings over to Zina, spilt the water. The children looked at her in amazement.

"What's the matter with you, Mamma?" asked Sasha, at last. She looked at her son in alarm.

"Nothing, Sonny, nothing. . . . What should be the matter with me?"

"Have you got a headache?"

"Headache? Why, yes," she said hurriedly grasping at this explanation. "My head aches, that's right."

"That's from the meeting," decided Sasha seriously.

"Yes, from the meeting. . . . It was terribly stuffy there, such a lot of people. . . . I expect it's from that."

The children were satisfied with her explanation and busied themselves with their own affairs. Malyuchikha washed the dishes and stole glances at the children playing near the stove. Her hands had gone cold and her heart was near "bursting with distress. Three dark heads, three-year-old Nina, five-year-old Oska, and eight-year-old Sonya. Tiny mites. . . .

Chechor himself was in the army. She was in a fire of distress, which ate into her and burned her heart. Every now and then she went over to the window and looked out.

"Is anyone coming?"

"No, Sonny, no, but I must go out. I won't be long. . ."

"You keep on going out all the time," said Zina on the verge of tears.

"And what if I do? If I must go, I'll go. I don't go running around the village for nothing," she said crossly.

"Take your shawl," Sasha reminded her, seeing that she was going to the door just as she was, without coat or shawl.

It was quite far to the Grokhachs' cottage. The wind lashed at her face and the fine particles of frozen snow stung her cheeks like bits of glass. By the* time she got there, she was out of breath. She stopped at the gate, telling herself that she ought not to go into the house panting like that. Actually she only wanted to put off as long as possible the moment when she must face the Grokhach family. They were probably sitting in the empty cottage now, weeping bitter tears, the wife and two daughters of a man whose neck was as good as in a noose.

Suddenly the sound of a saw rasping away in the yard came to her ears. Galya was astonished. Who could be working at the Grokhachs' on such a day?

Grokhach's wife and their tall, black-eyed eldest daughter, Frosya, were sawing wood near the shed and were just as surprised at the sight of Galya. There was not much visiting being done these days. Every one kept to himself, in his own cottage, wondering what the Germans would think of next.

"I wanted to have a chat with you, old girl. . ."

"That's nice," answered the other straightening her back.

"Let's go inside."

In the cottage Malyuchikha glanced at Grokhach's youngest daughter, who was sitting at the window.

"I would like to see you alone. ..."

"Alone?" Grokhaohikha asked in amazement. "Whatever about? All right, if you like. Lyda, go on out and saw for a bit, and we can talk here,"

The girl folded up the shirt she had been mending, jabbed the needle in the coarse linen and silently left the room. Her eyes were swollen with crying.

Malyuchikha sat down on a bench and began to crack her knuckles nervously. Her hostess looked at her without speaking.

"Quite a blizzard outside," she said at last.

"Quite a blizzard," repeated Malyuchikha and again they dropped into silence.

Grokhach's jacket was hanging from a nail over the bed. Malyuchikha looked at that jacket. One pocket was torn and there were patches on the back and front. One of the buttons was hanging by a thread. His working jacket.

"What did you want to tell me?" said the other woman at last. Malyuchikha looked at her with anguished eyes.

"They took your man away. ..." she whispered.

The other frowned.

"Yes. . . . But what can we do. . . . Such is our fate it seems. Perhaps he'll come back. You wanted to talk about that?"

"Yes, and no. ..."

"What is there to say about it? At first I was so heart-broken I thought I'd simply drop dead on the spot. Then I came home and thought, better get on with some work, woman, it'll be easier for you. So I set to work sawing wood with Froska. You can't break through a wall with your head—and sitting and crying won't help -any. Today it's he—tomorrow it's somebody else. If it keeps up much longer, there'll be no one left in this village, that's one sure thing. They'll kill us all off, one by one."

"Maybe it won't keep up?"

'That's what I said—if it keeps up. So far there's nothing to be heard. At the slightest-sound; I think I hear shots, hear our boys coming. How long is it already? A month. Seems like a year. And how many people lost! When that elder read my man's name out he looked at me. And I thought to myself: you're staring, waiting for me to cry, but you'll never live to see it, never! In front of you, you spawn of a cur, I'll never cry. The time will come when you will be the one to cry, to weep tears of blood! As for us village women, we're hard as nails, we are, you can't get anything out of us. . . ."

"Old girl. . . ."

"What is it?" she urged.

Malyuchikha had risen from the bench and was bowing down low, almost to the very ground, before Grokhachikha.

"Have you gone crazy? What are you doing?"

"Old girl, it was my Mishka the Germans shot last night. . . ."

"Mishka?. . ."

"It was I who went out at night and dragged him out of the ditch and buried him. . . . It's because of me that your man and those others have been arrested by the Germans. . . ."

Every fibre in her body was trembling, her legs were giving way under her. But suddenly she felt easier. She had said it at last. Her hostess leaned forward.

"Why do you tell me that? Why should anybody know?"

Malyuchikha did not understand her.

"Why! Your man's been taken. . . . What I'm saying is I must go and tell their Captain all about it. Then they'll let the people go."

Grokhachikha jumped to her feet.

"Have-you gone stark, raving mad? Taken leave of your senses altogether? You'll go to the Germans?"

"To tell them what happened. . . . The people aren't to blame,

"And are you to blame? Do you think you should have left the lad to them? The very idea? Where's your sense of what's right? It's not a peasant's and not a woman's! Just playing into the elder's hands! They only had to lock up five people and right away the one they're looking for pops up. Do you know, you idiot, what the result will be? Do you want to show them the way, show them how to get at us? You go to them today, and tomorrow it won't be five but fifty they'll lock up! Never heard of such a thing! So far none of our folk have gone crawling to the Germans, and you go and take it into your head. . . ."

"People are locked up because of me, because of me they'll. . . ."

"Not because of you! It's because of our sorrow they're in prison, because of our misfortune, because of the war, because of those German mugs! They killed Mishka. . . . Shooting at children, dogs that they are!"

Malyuchikha stood there like one stupefied.

"Then, you think. . . ."

"Think! What's there to think about! Go home, woman, and don't you breathe a word to anybody. It's true we're all your own folk, but why lead people into temptation? There's no need for anybody to know anything about such things. It's just because of those long tongues of ours that they're pitching into us and will keep on doing it. Go home and get on with your own business, and don't you go acting crazy!"

"But your man. . . ."

"Now, I ask you! Is he my man or yours? And I sit still and hold my tongue. What is to be will be. If it's his fate, they'll kill him. If not, then he'll live. And if things come to such a pass that we have to live under the Germans, then the sooner we die the better. . . ."

"It's not forever we'll be living under the Germans."

"My dear woman, if I thought otherwise for a single moment I wouldn't wait—I'd tie a rope round my neck and hang it from that nail! I only know one thing—times are bad for us, but they have theirs coming yet. Okh, they still have it coming to them!"

The woman's face was flushed and a joyous light flamed in her eyes.

Malyuchikha sighed.

"You've got me all mixed up. . . ."

"Strikes me you've been mixed up a long time. . . . You've got the conscience of the Lord himself, but the silliest ideas. Don't think about yourself. Just don't think about yourself, think about everybody. When you think about everybody then it's quite clear, you have no right to say anything. You have no right to put your neck in the German noose on your own! They can't do anything to us. Let them torture, hang and shoot. . . . One, two will die, but all of us are more than they can manage. . . . We must hold on till our boys come home, hold on tooth and nail. . . ."

Malyuchikha nodded her head inanely. She was seized with an overpowering weakness, all her strength had deserted her. She wanted to sit down, to sit down straight on the floor, and weep bitter tears. She wanted to weep and weep for Mishutka, for Grokhach, for the three tots whom she had left in the cottage with Sasha to look after them, for Vasya Kravchuk lying in the snow in the gully, for young Pashchuk, whom they had shot near that gully, for the lad on the gallows, for the whole village, and for those who had fought for the village and had been forced to go away, to retreat before the tanks—it was already a month since they had seen them.

"Take yourself in hand, or you won't be fit for anything," said Grokhachikha testily.

Malyuchikha bid her a silent farewell and left. She could not make up her mind to speak to Lyda and Frosya, who

were sawing wood in the yard. Her ears were still buzzing from the dressing down Grokhach's wife had given her. There was a woman for you. . . . Everyone knew that the Grokhachikha woman was bad-tempered, liked to quarrel and shout, never had a good word for anyone. And now—what a woman she had turned out to be. . . .

At home Sasha was busy building a house and yard of sticks, putting cows and horses in the cowshed and stables. Even little Nina had stopped crying and was watching with interest.

"And what are you going to put here?"

"Here we'll put the sheep, the new ones they just brought."

"Uhuh."

"Give me a cinder. We'll have black sheep. Give me another one, were going to have lots of sheep. . . ."

"Where's the cat?" demanded Nina.

"The cat's gone out, cats always go out," explained Zina, and Nina was satisfied.

"The Germans are coming, we've got to drive the cattle away," ordered Osva in a business-like voice.

"All right, but who's going-to drive them?"

"Me!" volunteered Nina.

"And I'll stay with the guerillas," decided Osva. "Come on now, let's drive the herd off."

They moved away the splinter of wood which was supposed to be the gate and led the white twigs and black cinders, the whole property of the collective farm, into the open field.

"And where'll we drive them to?"

"Far into the rear," said Sasha seriously, "over the river. Our men won't let the Germans get across the river."

"But they may bomb the river," Osva put in.

"Never mind, we'll cross at night," said Sasha. "Give me that board, that'll be the river."

Suddenly the door flew open. Five pairs of eyes looked up. Sasha was unable to stir.

On the threshold stood a German soldier. Bloodshed eyes stared at the children from under the rags which were wrapped around his head. He was all covered with snow. Glancing round the cottage and finding no adults there, he turned to the five children in front of the stove. At first Sasha could not understand him. He was quite certain that the man had come about Misha, that the Germans knew everything, that they had arrested his mother and that this man in the greenish greatcoat would immediately set about digging up his brother's grave in the lean-to. The soldier had to repeat his request several times before Sasha understood the mispronounced Russian word:

"Milk, milk. . . ."

"We haven't any," answered Sasha in a muffled voice.

But the soldier persisted.

"Milk, give milk. ..."

Sasha got up, and without taking his eyes from the soldier went into the lean-to. As he crossed the lean-to he was conscious of his brother's grave under his feet, of Mishka lying there dead in the ground. The soldier followed the boy's movements closely. Sasha opened the door of the cowshed, and with a movement of his hand indicated that there was nothing there. And, indeed, how could there be anything, when the Germans had dragged away their cow Pestrushka on the very first day of their arrival and had slaughtered it then and there in front of the Commandant's house.

The soldier looked around the empty cowshed. There was a little straw and dung on the floor, so that it still smelt like a cowshed, but the ice-cold manger was empty. It was quite clear that there was no milk to be obtained here.

Meanwhile Zina had begun to scream desperately. Her mother was not there, Sasha had gone into the cowshed with the German, and she was afraid. Nina, who was always ready to burst into tears, soon followed suit.

The soldier came back to the room and turned an inane smile on the children.

"Don't cry," he said in German, exposing his decayed, blackened teeth.

Zina began to howl in even greater terror. The German levelled his rifle at her. Desperately Sasha sprang forward, placing himself in front of his sister. He spread his arms wide and glared straight into the bloodshot diseased eyes, which looked out at him from under the service cap tied on the German's head with rags.

"Ho-ho", grinned the soldier, and the muzzle of his rifle began to move towards Nina. Little Nina did not understand what was going on, but she stopped crying, and stared at this strange man, at this German, with wide, round eyes. Even she knew that this was a German..

"I'm going to shoot," said the soldier. She did not understand his words, but she felt that there was something terrible in them. Zina, too, had fallen silent. Sasha watched the black hole of the muzzle tensely.

This black hole was not lifted very high, moving so that it aimed first at one small head and then at another.

A sudden idea struck Sasha: suppose he were to make a jump for it and grab the rifle? How do you shoot with them? And what would happen afterwards, when he had killed the German? And most important, would he be able to get the rifle away from him?

The German grinned, baring his black teeth. He liked this game, the fear in the children's eyes, the way the colour drained from their cheeks, the strained expression on the oldest one's face. Sasha soon realized that the soldier was amusing himself. Amusing himself with them as a cat plays with a mouse. Yes, the soldier was obviously amusing himself. The black muzzle of the rifle moved up and down. Sasha even wished that the soldier would shoot, shoot quickly and put an end to it at last*.

He thought that the German would kill him first, because he was the oldest, and he stared at the muzzle all keyed up. Let him shoot quickly, shoot and get it over with.

At last the soldier tired of this game, and with a parting guffaw, slung the rifle on his shoulder and went out without so much as glancing back. The children remained there rooted to the spot, their eyes fixed on the door. Sasha waited—perhaps the German was only hiding behind the door, perhaps he was only waiting, and as soon as one of them made a move he would open the door and shoot. Even Nina was as still as a mouse. And sure enough they heard footsteps, footsteps in the lean-to. The door opened—it was their mother.

Only then did all the pent-up feelings explode. Zina began to howl at the top of her lungs. Nina burst into tears, and Olya and Sonya started crying, too. Only Sasha stood silently in front of his mother,

"What's the matter? What has happened?" she asked in a fright.

"Nothing, there was a German here," answered Sasha.

"A German? What did he want?"

"Nothing. He asked for milk."

"Well, and then what?"

"I showed him we had no cow."

"And he went away?"

"Yes."

"Then what are you all howling for?" she exclaimed angrily. "He went away, so that's that. Did he hit you?"

"No, he didn't hit us," answered Sasha gloomily. Feeling calmer, the woman began to brush the snow off her shawl in the lean-to so as not to bring it into the cottage.

"Such a wind, doesn't seem to die down at all. . . "

From outside came the sound of a distant scream.

"What's that?"

"Nothing Olena is giving birth," Malyuchikha frowned.

The children listened intently. A long-drawn-out, suppressed scream came from the direction of the locked shed. It rose and fell, died away for a moment, then broke out again with growing force.

IV

The room was the one behind the Commandant's office. Four walls and a bare floor. Once there had been a bookcase here and a cabinet containing the papers and books of the Village Soviet and the collective farm.

The walls of the old house were built of stout logs. The Germans had boarded up the windows so that it was dark in the room., The only light came through the cracks in the door which led to the guard-room, where a lamp was burning. The five prisoners were led into this dark room. They heard the key turn in the lock, once, twice, and there they were, bounded by four walls and plunged in darkness. There were neither benches nor stools. Gradually their eyes became accustomed to the gloom. They sat down on the floor against the walls. Grokhach stretched himself out at full length, placed his head on his fist, and soon his regular snoring could be heard.

The others, however, could not sleep. Olga Palanchuk pressed up against Chechorikha. She was afraid. She was afraid of this room, afraid of the dark, afraid of the light behind the door. She was afraid of what was to come. Chechorikha put her arm around her, and so they sat, clinging to one another.

Only Malasha did not press close to the others. Hugging her knees with her arms, she sat alone in a corner, leaning against the wall and staring into the darkness with wide-open eyes. She was not thinking of what her prison-mates were

thinking. Motionless, with fixed gaze and bated breath, she was listening intently. Nor was she trying to make out the muffled sounds coming from the next room, or to catch a sound of what was going on beyond the walls, in the village. Knitting her brows, she sat there listening to something within herself. It was a week already—no, more, ten days. And still there was nothing. Stubbornly, painfully, she kept thinking one and the same plaguing thought : yes or no? Yes or no? The blood throbbed in her temples. Her heart was palpitating. It seemed to her that she could hear the blood flowing in her veins, flowing, coursing through her veins, trickling by devious ways throughout her body, beating with tiny hammers in her wrists. How could she know, how be certain?

Again she counted the days, perhaps she had been mistaken. But again and again it came to the very same ten days. And after all, there was a reason, a reason. . . . Ten days. But her thoughts did not stop at these ten days; they went further, counting day by day back to that one day which had cut her life in two. Malasha suffered physical pain, anguish past bearing when her thoughts went back to that day. She clenched her fists so that the nails dug into her palms, drew up her knees till she was as tightly pressed together as a jackknife. Her very bones felt as if they were cracking on the wheel of her agonized suffering. She felt that she could not bear it another moment, that she must scream, a wild, animal scream. *And she wanted to cry out, to howl at the top of her voice, to tear her hair, to drown everything in that one scream: that day and those ten days which had passed in ceaseless calculation, in constant checking and rechecking of the total which kept coming to the same figure. . . .

Her body was convulsed with pain. She was sure she could stand it no longer, but would drop dead there on the spot. But death did not come. It was not so easy to die.

She had to sit in the darkness listening to human breathing and remembering, remembering without a moment's respite, that she, Malasha, was accursed, a leper, a thing apart for ever and ever from other people, from the village, from all that had been her life until now. And why? Why was it so? Why had it had to happen to her of all the girls in the village?

Before her eyes was not darkness, but those three faces, those disgusting faces leaning over her. They were imprinted once and for all on her memory, as on a photographic negative, were forever before her eyes. Nothing could wipe them out of her memory, nothing could bar them from her mind's eye. Three faces—unshaven, red bristles, teeth protruding like the fangs of a wild beast from under cracked lips, savage eyes.

A few months ago she had been in that same room with Ivan. The same room and the same bed. But now the air was filled with down from the shredded pillows, straw littered the floor, the flower pot with the tea rose had fallen from the window-sill and the fragments had crunched under the jackboots of the Germans. She did not want to think of it. She could not. But nevertheless it was always in her thoughts, stubbornly, persistently, never giving her a moment's rest. Three of them. And again the faces, the red stubble of their unshaven chins, their guffaws and shouts, and the vice-like grip of their ice-cold hands on her body, on her twisted arms and wrenched legs. Then the crash as the door closed behind them and the grey cloud of steam that had billowed in. And afterwards—afterwards one long, harrowing, intolerable nightmare of suffering. And these last, still more intolerable ten days, when from morning till evening and throughout the long sleepless nights she listened to her own body and counted, counted till she was on the verge of madness, as day was added to day until now they numbered ten.

Yes, people in the village had perished, had disappeared. Levonyuk was hanging from the gallows. Olena, pregnant

Olena, was being tortured at the hands of the Germans in a shed. But no one, no one but she, carried the seed of the German within them. Not one of those who had perished or who were being tortured carried the enemy within their own bodies.

In another corner Olga Palanchuk was sobbing quietly like a child. Malasha was seized with a sudden dull rage, a sudden unaccountable hatred. What had that fool to cry about? What reason had she to cry? The Germans had not violated her, she had not experienced the most fearful thing that could possibly happen to one. What was she afraid of? That they would kill her, hand her, shoot her? Malasha did not believe that such a thing could happen. It would be too good, too fortunate a fate simply to die at the hands of the enemy. No, she could not believe it. They would keep them under arrest, most likely think up something terrible for them, something more horrible than death. But they would not die, nothing good ever happened to people at the hands of the Germans, good fortune could never come to them from German hands. And death would be good fortune. Again she began to count the days—one, two, three. She got as far as ten, and writhed and squirmed in agony. She felt as if her heart would burst—she could not stand it another minute. But her heart did not burst, the little hammers continued to beat away in her temples, and staring fixedly into the darkness, Malasha thought that she would continue counting in this way, counting the days, one after the other, until she had counted to the end, until the appointed time came when she, Malasha, wife of a Red Armyman would give birth to a German mongrel.

She kept listening and listening. And the blood beat like little hammers in her temples and wrists. She put her hand on her stomach. There too her blood was throbbing with its little hammers. She was overcome with irrepressible repugnance for her own body, that nest of a German who was

not yet, and yet who was, who still did not exist, but who nevertheless existed. If she ate, it was not she who was eating but the German who devoured everything, in order to grow, to develop, to brand her misfortune with disgrace. If she slept, the sleep did not strengthen her, it was not she who was resting but the German. She could not think of it as a child. A child—that was Olena's baby, whose cries could be heard from time to time even here in this tightly locked building of heavy logs. A child—that was that unknown boy whom they had shot in the night, that was Chechorikha's three children and the Malyuks' children—all the children who had been born and who had grown up in the village and who now, with the appearance of the Germans were threatened sooner or later with inevitable death. These were children. Mothers bore children, fair-haired and dark-haired, light-eyed and dark-eyed^v whimpering and merry, cooing and gurgling as they lay in their cradles. Mothers conceived children, carried them, gave birth to them and nursed them. But what she was carrying and would continue to carry, what she would give birth to was no child. It was a whelp, a German. And that was something that could not be changed, she thought with horror. Even if it died—and she would strangle it with her own bare hands—all the same that would not help. All the same she would remember for all eternity with loathing and aversion that she had borne a German, that she had fed it with her own blood. People would look at her distending belly, at her heavy gait of pregnancy. Everybody would make way for her—not in order to make it easier for her to pass, but out of profound contempt, from fear lest they touch her, the German's bed-mate, who bore a German within her.

Of course they all knew. Everybody was sorry for her, cursed the Germans and spoke of the day when all would be avenged. But Malasha knew that it was not as simple as all that. Everything could be 'avenged, Pashchuk and

Levonyuk, and Olena, the razed cottages and the murdered children, but no one could ever avenge her. This was something that could not be remedied. She could see, although nobody ever spoke about it, that the other women did not look her in the eyes, that people avoided her as if she had the plague. That day when the three had forced their way into her cottage stood like an impenetrable wall between her and the village. The day when they had violated her and had not even wanted to shoot her as they usually did to their victims. She had remained among the living in order to live a life of agony. And as though all this were not enough, as though it were not enough that they had dishonoured her, made a filthy rag of her, she was now compelled to count the days, and every time the total was the same. She clutched desperately at illusory fragments of hope, at the mad will o' the wisp idea that she had made a mistake, that it was not true, that it sometimes happened and didn't mean a thing, that another day or two would pass and everything would be all right. But it was all in vain, for in her heart of hearts she knew that she really was pregnant and that nothing could alter it.

She recalled one summer, a sunny, flowering, fragrant summer. The nights silver with dew, the grass growing as high as the waist, the haymakers' camp at the river, nights spent in tents amidst the sweet-smelling hay, glittering stars, whirlwind nights of madness. No child had been born of those caresses. Sweet, happy nights, lips pressed to lips, the pounding of ecstatic hearts—all that had passed and left no trace, just as if it had never been. And yet there had been many of those nights, the whole haymaking season. She had given herself with stormy, mad love, even though afterwards nothing had come of it, and they had parted without wrath or reproach.

And now there had been only a moment, one ghastly half hour, and this half hour would bear its stinking fruit, would

become a festering wound in her life, oozing its fetid virus forever.

She thought of Ivan. True, her married life had been brief, but there had been nights of bliss, and the stars had peeped in through the chinks in the shed, and the June nights had breathed of warm summer. There had been such a time, before he went to the army, and still—nothing.

She had walked through the village with her graceful step, her breasts small and firm, like the breasts of a virgin, her waist slim, and all the lads had looked at her chatted with her, forgetting that she was already married and would never change her Ivan for anyone. They wanted to see her flashing teeth, to hear her gay laughter, to catch the merry twinkle in her black eyes.

One crushing, nightmare half hour had been enough to change everything. So far nobody knew, so far it was not noticeable. But the day would come when her misfortune would be visible to all, just as though it were not enough that she had already been branded with the mark of indelible disgrace. That was not enough. She had to carry the German within her, to bear the German in agony. Who would help her, who would want to be near her in her hour of need? What woman would want to soil her hand by contact with the wolf's whelp, the spawn of the red-headed murderer? Olga was crying in fear of death. But for herself, Malasha was certain that death would not come. She did not know how they would be saved, had never even thought it possible that anybody would appear to give up the dead boy or those who had snatched his body from the Germans' hands. And of course nobody would give the Germans any grain. She did not know how it would happen and why it should happen, but she was certain that she would not die, that they would not kill her. And if they did not kill her, then the others would remain among the living as well.

At first Chechoriktya stroked Olga's hand in silence. But Olga did not stop crying, and at last she lost patience.

"What are you wailing about? What is to be will be. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, crying,"

"I don't want to cry, but I can't help it," sobbed Olga in a helpless, baby voice, which sounded in Chechorikha's ears like the voice of her daughter Nina. She softened.

"Now, now, don't carry on like that. . . . We don't know anything yet. . . ."

In her corner Malasha smiled bitterly into the darkness. She knew well enough what would happen. There was no hope of death.

"I left three children at home; what's happening to them now. . . . And yet I'm not crying," said Chechorikha. She was suddenly seized with an insatiable longing for her children. If she could only see them for one minute! What were they doing, how were they getting on? Had Malyuchikha taken them to her house or not? Perhaps they had been left alone, shivering with fear at the coming of night, terrified at the footsteps in the street, frightened as they now were of everything ever since the day the Germans had come and turned them out of their house.

"Scram!" the tall Feldwebel had shouted, striking her with his rifle butt when she had tried to get a few rags together so that the children wouldn't freeze. "Scram!" he had repeated, and the children had rushed out of the house into the frost and snow in insane fear, Sonya in just her little shirt.

The Germans had not liked the cottage and had moved to another so that they were able to return and live at home once more. But first they had to clean up the entry. Apparently the Germans didn't like the idea of going out in the frost and had befouled the entry, right by the very door. It did not worry them that in order to get into the house they had to tread over all that filth, and that there

would be a stench in the cottage! Setting her teeth against the nausea that turned her stomach, she had cleaned up the Germans' filth and had examined the cottage suspiciously lest they had befouled that, too. At that time she had thought it just malice on their part, befouling a house that they did not like and were leaving. But after they had been in the village some time, she saw that they acted in the same way everywhere, that it simply made no difference to them.

How would the children get along at Malyuchikha's? If only Oska did not quarrel with Sasha ; he was younger and weaker, and so quarrelsome that he was a constant worry. He was forever coming home beaten up, covered with bruises, always picking fights with boys bigger than himself. Sonya was easier, she was smart for her age. But the other two, Oska and Nina. . . . However would Malyuchikha manage with this brood of children, what with two of her own! However would she be able to feed them all in these hard times!

Yevdokim sighed in his corner by the wall:

"Just look at Grokhach there sleeping. . . ."

The regular, light snoring sounded loudly in the darkness.

"And you, Granddad, don't you want to sleep?" asked Ghechorikha, trying to drive away the thought of those three dark heads.

"I'm not much of a sleeper these days. It's a long time since I wanted to sleep. . . . Two or three hours, and then I can't sleep any more for the life of me. The day's a long one. . . ."

"Have we been here long?" asked Olga suddenly.

"Who knows? Time drags when you sit around like this. . . . It's evening already you can see; there's a lamp burning in the other room, so I guess it's evening. . . ."

"Only evening," sighed Olga disappointedly, "and it seems to me I don't know how long already. . . ."

"Now, now! You take yourself in hand, my girl, who knows how long we shall have to stay here yet. . . ."

"She's young. Young people are always in a hurry," sighed Yevdokim.

Chechorikha turned to him in the darkness. Her eyes had already become accustomed to the gloom, and the narrow crack under the door let a little light into the room. The old man's white head could be seen indistinctly against the wall.

"What's the hurry anyway? We have nowhere to hurry to now, Granddad. . . . The time we sit here is ours; as to what comes after that, well, we'll see. . . ."

"And if our people come?" Olga put in timidly. She could not think that there was no hope at all, that the doors of this dark lumber-room would open only for death.

"Don't forget the Germans gave us only three days."

"But in these three days?"

"In such a blizzard? It is not so easy. How can they get through, dragging their machine-guns and cannon? There's such a fierce snowstorm you can't even see your own nose, and you can be snowed under in every gully, every hollow. . . ."

Chechorikha spoke calmly, but suddenly realized that she did not believe her own words.

The snow was certainly there, but still they waited, waited stubbornly, with unwavering faith. Why, only that morning she had been thinking that they were coming, that perhaps they had already got as far as Leshchan, that perhaps even then they were coming down the gully or making their way over the hill path. Then why shouldn't they come now? There had been a snowstorm yesterday and the day before—what was a snowstorm to them? They would know the place by the paths and passes; after all, it was their own native land. They were used to blizzards and

snow, it wasn't the first time they had encountered them. . . .

Yes, Olga was right. They might come. They might come on just one of those three days that remained before death. The doors would suddenly burst open, shots would ring out, and they would all go out of that dark lumber-room into the great open, see their own soldiers, and then hurry home, hurry to the Malyuks' for the children. . . .

Perhaps they were already coming. Under cover of darkness, hidden by the night, screened by the whirling snow, which smothered every sound, they were now creeping quietly towards the village and would suddenly strike, like lightning, kill, destroy, crush like vermin the whole German gang which had fastened on the village and was sucking its blood.

"And maybe they'll come," she said aloud, "maybe we'll live to see them."

"Do you think so, do you think they'll come?" breathed Olga.

"Maybe they will," muttered Yevdokim. "Okh, it's time they did, it's high time!"

"They'll find us all right, everybody knows where they've locked us up," Olga whispered feverishly. At that moment it seemed to her that the most important thing was that they should be found, that the doors should be thrown open immediately, so that they would not have to sit there another minute while the Germans were fleeing from the village into the raging blizzard at the point of the Red Army bayonets.

"Don't let that worry you—if only they come," said Chechorikha soothingly. "You speak as though they were right near the village already."

"And perhaps they really are?"

"Perhaps they are," repeated Chechorikha, nervously pulling at her fingers.

Malasha continued staring fixedly at one spot in the darkness. Yes, it was all right for them to wait, they could hope to be saved in this way. But nobody could help her, nobody could save her. Their troops would come, and then what? She could not go to meet them, welcome them, share their happiness. She could not even offer them a cup of water, or ask them into her house. Who was she? A German's bedfellow. She carried a German in her belly, she was cursed for all eternity. Their troops would come, the village would spring to life, the girls would start singing on the street, smile at the Red Army men. There would be love-making in the cottages and nobody would condemn it—were they not their own boys? Why should the girls begrudge them a kiss when nobody knew whether this lad or that would be alive another month, a week or a day? It was only at her that nobody would even glance; everyone would shrink from her. And even if the war would end and Ivan return, he would no longer come to her. They would tell him, and he would avoid the cottage, and if he met her in the street, pass her by like a stranger, and maybe even spit in disgust.

She could hear Olga whispering in the other corner. "Sat down as far away from me as they could," she thought venomously, forgetting that she herself had waited until they had all taken their places and had then gone to the corner farthest from them. Yes, Olga could wait, Olga had cause to fear death, Olga had something to live for. Ostap would come back from the army and then they would get married and live like everybody else lived, work like everybody worked before the war, and she would bear him children. And she alone, Malasha, the most popular girl in the village and the best worker, would never again be as she had been before the war.

Fedosia would get over her weeping for Vasya. Days would pass, months, and she would recall her son calmly.

After all, he was neither the first nor the last who had died for his country. Levonyuk's parents would also forget, they had two more sons and two daughters. When the lads came back from the war the house would be full. The cottages the Germans had destroyed would be rebuilt, new trees would be planted in the orchards in place of the ones the Germans had ruthlessly cut down for fuel. Wounds would heal and everything would again be as it had been before. She alone had nothing to hope for—nothing would return and nothing would be forgotten. Everyone had a road open to him, some difficult, others easier. She alone had no road before her.

What pleasure she had once derived because she was the prettiest girl in the village, because she worked better than any of the other girls in the collective farm, because all eyes turned to her even when there were a dozen other girls around, because when they sang her voice sounded clearer and purer than anybody else's, because nobody had such eyes, such braids, such rosy, sun-tanned cheeks, such thin arched eyebrows. And she had held her head high, delighting in her beauty.

But it was this that had brought her sorrow and misfortune. Better if she had been wrinkled and withered, like old Grannie Marfa. Better if she had been bent and hunch-backed, like lame Ustya, or ugly, like red-headed, freckled Klava. She was not like these, and that had been enough for those three to notice her and bring about her doom.

From time to time the sound of voices and footsteps came through the door. They, the Germans, were there, bossing around in the building of the Village Soviet as though they were in their own home. They felt themselves the masters. Malasha clenched her fists. They were not only here. They were in Kiev, where she had once been to visit a fair. They were walking about the wide Kiev streets, past the golden domes of Kiev, trampling over Kiev pavements in their

jackboots. They were in Kharkov, treading the Kharkov pavements with their jackboots. They were stalking over Ukrainian soil in their soldiers' jackboots. Not only she, Malasha, but the Ukrainian soil had been violated, dishonoured, bespate and trampled under foot. Cities had been laid waste and the winds carried the ashes of villages. Unburied bodies lay about the land, and the dead still hung from the gallows. The earth was steeped in blood, drenched with tears.

But the day would come when the liberated land would again stretch under a golden sun. The Dnieper, free once more, would roll on its way; the Vorskla, the Lopan and Psel would continue noisily in their courses. The tempestuous waters would wash the land, wash away from it all the abomination and filth, and the blood-steeped soil would yield a hundredfold harvest. The full-eared wheat would wave in a boundless sea, the fields of sunflowers gleam like pure gold, the hollihocks flowers again in the gardens, and garden beds would be covered with the fiery balls of the tomato.

The land would flower again, clean again, magnificent, brimful of treasure.

But she, Malasha, would forever remain what she had become, a wretched outcast to whom all roads were closed. An involuntary groan tore itself from her breast.

"Aren't you sleeping, Malasha?" asked Chechorikha.

Malasha started. She seemed to hear constraint in the woman's voice, and that enraged her. Don't speak if you don't want to. Why pretend?

"I'm not sleeping. What's it to you?" she snapped.

"I was just asking."

"There's nothing to ask. You had better not be curious about me."

"Why are you angry? We're all in the same boat."

Malasha laughed, a grating, unpleasant laugh.

"All in the same boat? No, I'm in a different one."

"That was a misfortune. . . ."

"A lot you know about misfortune!" She felt a dull malice rise within her, and wanted to vent it on someone. "You could at least sit there and keep quiet, so long as you're all right. Just listen to Grokhach snoring."

"Don't talk to her. . . . She's bad-tempered," Olga whispered softly, touching Chechorikha's sleeve.

Malasha heard her.

"That's right, why should you talk to me? I I'm bad-tempered, everybody knows that, mean. Now you're sweet, of course!"

The women stopped talking. Malasha was breathing heavily, staring into the darkness.

She remembered what they had written about her in the newspaper at harvest time. Akh, she hadn't been bad-tempered then. The girls and the women had all hugged her. Her picture had been in the paper. Malasha hadn't come out too well in that photo; her teeth flashing in a smile had been too noticeable, while her face was lost in the shade. But still she had had her picture in the papers, and there had been a write-up about her, Malasha, as a model collective farmer. And there had been something to write about, too. . . . And now she, Malanya Vishneva, model collective farmer, was carrying the spawn of a louse-ridden German in her belly.

The wind was howling outside. It could be heard through the thick walls, through the great logs of which the house was built. Grokhach suddenly awoke and yawned loudly.

"You sure sleep soundly," said old Yevdokim enviously.

"Why not? It doesn't hurt to snatch a wink of sleep. You never can tell what's going to happen next."

"What can happen? We know what's coming."

"Perhaps our boys will come," Olga said hurriedly. She wanted Grokhach to confirm that they were coming, that they could come.

"Of course, they might. . . . But that it should happen during just these three days. . . ."

"Or our guerillas may come. . . ."

"That's already too much," protested the peasant. "How can they get here? They're a long way into the woods, and there they are stuck. They can't even think of making their way here through snow like this. They'd be followed and killed. In the summer it's a different matter. In the summer you can go where you please, every bush will protect you, give you cover. But in this weather you can't go out into the open field,"

"And the Army?"

"The Army's another thing. The Army can fight its way through."

Olga sighed.

"How the wind is howling. . . ."

"They say that Death stalks abroad on nights like this," said Yevdokim.

Olga felt a cold shiver run down her spine. It was dark and fear-some in the lumber-room. Why did the old man want to talk of such things?

"It's the truth they tell," Chechorikha confirmed gloomily. "He's stalking over bur land. . . ."

They fell silent as if they were listening to the footsteps of Death through the thick walls, as if they were watching Death as he wandered along the road.

"Nowadays there are two Deaths," remarked the old man.

"How so, two deaths?"

"Quite simple, two. . . . One is the German Death that takes our people. The other is the Death that awaits the Germans."

Olga pressed closer to Chechorikha.

"You shouldn't talk about such things, Granddad. . . . It's terrible."

"Don't you be afraid of terrible things," said Grokhach sternly. "The world is terrible nowadays, and the people are terrible. . . . You should know what you want and be afraid of nothing. Just let them frighten you once, and they'll be able to do anything they like with you."

"Who will?"

"Who? Why, the Germans. . . . That's the main thing they're driving at, to put fear into people. Once you're afraid of them, you're finished. But if you don't let yourself be afraid, then the Germans can't do a thing to you."

"Vaska wasn't afraid of them, but they shot him just the same. And Pashchuk. . . ."

"Did I say they wouldn't shoot? That's why they've got rifles in their hands—to shoot with—and they kill because they're Germans. I wasn't speaking of that, that's not where strength lies. . . ."

"Then where does it lie?"

"Don't you know yourself?"

She did not answer, not knowing what to say.

"Strength lies in sticking to your guns and not giving in. Strength is remaining silent when you have to, so that they can't get a sound out of you. The most important thing is to remember that all this will end, and not one of them will get away from here alive. And if they do shoot. . . . Ekh, you're still young. . . . How many people were killed in the last war, and in the Civil War. . . . And look at what the Germans did to us in 1918. And yet what was the result? Not a trace, not a sign of them remained, but we remained. The land remained, and the people on that land . . . in other words, everything remained."

"Okh, but now they're killing off the people worse than they did in 1918, just killing them off."

"Of course it's worse. Only they can't kill all of us. Somebody will be left to plant and build anew. Wait a bit; if we live, we'll see, if we don't live, then others will

see how it'll all turn out. Better, richer, wiser than before the war"

"All the same I'd like to see it myself. . . ." Olga sighed.

"I should say you would! How old are you?"

"Nineteen."

"Nineteen. . . . How long is it since we were nineteen, Granddad Yevdokim?"

"Now, now!" exclaimed Yevdokim testily. "My beard was already grey when you were walking under the table. . . ."

"That's as it may be. But compared with her I'm an old man. Of course you want to see it for yourself, lass. . . . Nineteen years old, oh-ho! Granddad and I are both older than you and we want to live to see it. . . ."

"Just to see what it will be like after the war," murmured Olga wistfully.

Grokhach jumped up suddenly.

"No, it's not only that I want to see! I want to see the last German die here, in our village! I want to see the last German hanging from the gallows in Kiev! To put up a gallows on the hill over-looking the Dnieper and hang the last German on it! And then I want to see them bring those people here who sat at home over there twisting a rope for our necks. I want to see them rebuilding the villages that were burned down and the towns that were razed, building them up brick by brick. Do you remember what it said in the newspapers? Brick by brick!"

"Better to do it all ourselves rather than ever see them here again," Chechorikha put in.

Yevdokim sighed :

"Our people are terribly soft, okh, terribly soft they are. . . . Today they're angry, and tomorrow they'll have forgotten all about it. . . . Our people don't know how to carry malice in their hearts."

"Don't you worry, Granddad, they may be good-natured"

enough, but when the knife digs in as far as the liver, then look out! And "it's gone that far already. . . . How can they forget? This is something the people will never forget to their dying day! Ne-v-er!"

Sitting there in her corner, Malasha listened to them. Some of Grokhach's words were like echoes of her own thoughts. Yes, to see the last German hanging from the gibbet, to see them working till the sweat rolled from them in rivers. . . . But that would not bring relief to her. Every one of them could take his revenge and ease his heart, but her heart could never be eased. Her memory would rankle forever, and no blood, no act of vengeance, no time could wash it clean.

Grokhach's last words seemed to hang in the air, as if they had been blazed on the black beams of the ceiling in letters of fire :

"This is something the people will never forget to their dying day!"

And Malasha echoed :

"Never!"

"I'm thirsty," whispered Olga.

"Don't think of it," said Grokhach. "They won't give us any water. You'll have to go three days without water! It's not hot here, and just sitting and doing nothing you'll hold out! Only you mustn't think about it or you'll want to drink."

"Oh. . . ."

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, girl," Chechorikha intervened. "Moaning and groaning like that. . . . D'you think you're the only one that's badly off? Who is there in the village that's better off?"

"But we are hostages. . . ."

"And what if we are! They promised to shoot us in three days. Well, and what of it? Didn't you hear for yourself? Ordered us to give up our grain, threatened us with shooting.

But d'you think anybody will give them anything? Everybody has death hanging over him nowadays. ..."

Silence. Olga listened intently, as if she were trying to catch the footsteps of Death stalking through the village.

To all appearances the village was sleeping quietly in the howling blizzard, the whirling snow. The cottages were half buried, as if they had crouched down to the ground. Olena's cries mingled with the screaming of the wind. Apparently she had still not given birth to the child. But apart from these cries not another sound was to be heard. The whole village seemed to be fast asleep.

But the people in the cottages were not sleeping. Everyone was listening to what Yevdokim had been talking about—Death stalking through the village. Death swirled in white clouds over the road, flew on the whirlwind over the houses, crept through the chinks in the walls like a white wraith, tore at the thatch on the roofs and ruthlessly shook the few lindens on the road that had so far escaped the German axe. He fell to earth with his icy breast, covering all the land with his mighty wings.

Down below, in the gully, dead people were lying. Death rolled up the snow and covered over the remains of their bodies and clothing. With a howl he covered Vasya Kravchuk's black face, which his mother so carefully cleared every day. He sprinkled fresh mounds of snow on the Red Armymen who had fallen near the village a month ago. Here, in the gully, was his kingdom; here the dead lay in a heap, petrified by the frost.

Death rocked and swayed the hanging body of Levonyuk, who had tried to get to the guerillas. This body, too, was black and petrified. The rope creaked. When the wind set the body to swaying more violently, the hanged lad's feet hit against the post with a dull, heavy thud.

Twirling and howling madly, Death beat at the doors of the shed where Olena was giving birth on the straw.

Death was awaiting his hour, roaring with laughter, passing over the village with a hoarse cackle. People heard him. They were not sleeping in the cottages. They lay motionless in their beds, their eyes fixed on the ceilings. They were listening to him in the darkness, listening to this howling, German Death. He was exulting, chortling, sharpening his claws. He was expecting an abundant harvest. It was no longer just Pashchuk shot in the gully, just Levonyuk hanging in a German noose. The German noose hung over all, the black muzzle of the rifle was aimed at the hearts of all.



In the lumber-room they spoke only¹ of those things that were in the thoughts of all, that drove sleep from the eyes of all during this night of howling whirlwind and death. Old Yevdokim was the first to break the long silence.

"They can't shoot everybody. . . . How can "they? The whole village? Nobody will give them any grain. . . ."

"What does it matter to them?" Grokhach laughed gruffly. "Is it the first time? What did they do in Levanevka? What did they do in Sahdi? In Kostinka?"

They saw before them the ghosts of villages that no longer existed. Levanevka razed to the ground—where the Germans had set fire to the village from all four skies, shooting the peasants as they ran from the flames, throwing children back into the roaring bonfire before their mothers' eyes, and all because of a shot that had been fired at a German soldier from around a corner. The ghost of Sahdi, where the whole population of a hundred and fifty people had been driven into the pit which had once supplied the clay for the brick works and had there been blown up with grenades. Kostinka, where they had executed all the men

and driven the unclad women and children into a forty-degree frost so that they had perished on the road to the distant neighbouring village, where they sought succour.

"Sahdi, Levanevka, Kostinka. . . . That's in our district. And what about the others? What did they do in Kiev, in Odessa, in other towns? What is left of our little country towns and villages? And in 1918? Ekh, Granddad, one would think this was the first time you'd heard and seen it. . . ."

Olga covered her eyes with her hands mutely. Only just now it had seemed to her that everything would be all right, that soon she would hear shots, followed by the well-known "hurrah," the doors would fly open. . . . Liberty, life! And all they talked about was death and death, as if death must come, must inevitably come. Her heart filled with horror at what they were saying so calmly, as though it were the merest trifle. 'It's all right for them," she thought, bitterly. "Yevdokim has already lived out his however many years it is. Eighty, they say he is; it's easy to die at that age Grokhach Grokhach was in the war of 1918, he 'has grown-up daughters and a wife as bad-tempered as a dog, what's it matter to him? Chechorikha. . . ." Olga wavered, hesitated. "Well, yes, Chechorikha has three little children and a husband in the Army. But still, she's had a husband, she's had three children, and what have I seen of life? It's all right for them to talk. . . ."

"And alj the same nobody will give them any grain," said Yevdokim.

"Of course they won't," confirmed Chechorikha.

And everyone thought the same, the whole village, down to the last cottage above the gully. The grain had been carefully hidden, buried deep in the ground. It lay in pits dug in the distant field, in ground frozen hard as stone. In

the ground lay the golden wheat, and the rye, and the barley, everything they had not managed to hand over to the Red Army, everything that was left of their golden, lavish, unequalled harvest of last autumn. The golden grain lay carefully covered in the ground. It lay under a thick mantle of snow, under snow-drifts piled up by the wind. Nobody could find it, nobody could even guess where it lay. Would the Germans ever dig up hundreds and hundreds of acres, dig it all up two or three yards deep?

For the golden grain lying in the earth was not merely grain which provided the village with bread. They could have denied themselves bread for the sake of their lives. But in the earth lay the golden heart of the country, secreted, hidden away, out of sight of the insatiable German eyes. There lay the harvest which the soil had given over to the peasants, the flower of this soil, its heavy golden fruit. To surrender the grain meant giving the German army bread. To surrender the grain meant feeding the lousy Germans, filling their empty stomachs, warming their rotting, frozen bodies. To surrender the grain meant dealing a blow at the hearts of those, who, in frost and blizzard, were selflessly, devotedly, heroically fighting the enemy. To surrender the grain would mean betraying the land to the enemy, betraying one's own people, admitting before the whole world that the German was master of the gold-bearing Ukrainian soil, the lord of the Ukrainian villages. To surrender the grain meant betraying oneself and one's own people, meant disobeying the order which had flown from village to village, which had reached every ear and impressed itself on every heart : not a crust of bread for the enemy! To surrender the grain meant renouncing one's own country, selling oneself to the enemy, betraying those who had died for their country in this war, in the Civil War, in 1918, and still earlier—to betray all who had fought for human liberty, who had won liberty at the cost of their life's blood.

And not a single heart wavered in that village where former farm labourers lived on their own land, in their own flourishing collective farm. The women figured out, planned how things would go when they were no longer there.

Middle-aged Kovalchuk listened in the darkness to the breathing of her eight children sleeping in their beds and on the sleeping shelves over the oven. She figured in a calm, housewifely way that Lena was already, a big girl and would be able to look after the others, to wash and mend for them. When their own troops came there would be sufficient supplies in the ground to feed them all. Until then they would manage somehow, like everybody else.

In the darkness Vishenkova leaned over her baby's cradle and thought over in her mind who could feed the mite, who was still nursing her babe. She was sure they would not let him die, that a mother would be found who would feed him from her own breast.

Grokhachikha stared into the darkness, meditating calmly on the situation : Grokhach was being held as a hostage, so who would be held responsible for their not handing over the grain, he or she? She decided that she would be held responsible. But this did not worry her. She had no small children, the girls were grown-up and could manage.

Her heart nearly bursting with sorrow, young Vanyuk thought that now she would never see her husband again. A month ago he had sent her a letter saying that he lay wounded in the hospital and would probably have a few days¹ leave home when he was discharged. A month had passed and the Germans had entered the village. When their own troops came she would no longer be there. She was sorry, not for herself but for her husband. Gentle, helpless, it would be difficult for him alone.

People lay in the darkness, thinking. Each had his own thoughts, each was thinking about his own people. They

thought about the grain. It came pouring down in a golden stream, avalanching in a living flood, the golden blood of the earth. It lay in the soil awaiting better days, when their own people would return. People lay in their beds, all so different, not resembling one another a bit. But that night they all knew and thought of only one thing; and without talking it over or discussing it, each for himself, they decided firmly and irrevocably that the grain would remain in the earth, that it was more important than life itself that German paws should not dig it out of the pits where it was cached.

And the German Death rode over the village in the uproarious blast of the wind, cackling and groaning and shrilling. Terrible, clamorous, cruel, chortling over his victims. In the houses everyone heard him.

And the German soldiers who stood on guard that night, freezing at their posts, kept looking around tremulously, striving to step more quietly over the snow. They too could hear Death. He kept hiding, stealing up, passing quite close by them, puffing his silent, icy breath in their faces. They could feel him crouching in the ditch, lurking round the corner of a house, soundlessly prowling over the thatched roofs. He looked at them with thousands of bleak eyes, and with lips tight pressed, mutely passed sentence on them. Noiselessly he passed along the village fences, stood by the hedges and leaned over the wells. He was everywhere, and the German soldiers could feel his presence in all places. Death stalked beside them in the village street, stood still with them near the houses, did not leave them when they went home. And it was he who drew the black film of heavy sleep over their eyes. They could feel his cold glance on their bodies; his invisible eyes pierced them, and the breath from his invisible mouth froze them. This silent, pitiless Ukrainian Death penetrated to the marrow of their bones, as he counted and recounted them with a bony finger.

V

The wind whined and blared. The shed trembled as if it would tear loose at any moment and crash down into the gully. The beams creaked and the thatched roof rustled as the wind clutched at wisps of straw and carried them away, far beyond the village, to the open plain, the snowy field where they were lost in the haze of the whirling snow.

Olena screamed. She screamed at the top of her voice. Her body was being racked by excruciating pain. It was not only the birth pangs—she was now feeling the effect of all the blows of the rifle butts, the bayonet pricks, her falls when the soldiers had driven her along the road at night, the effects of hunger, thirst and cold. All these pounced on her like a pack of ravenous wolves, snapped at her, gnawed her with their rapacious fangs. Her body felt as if it were being torn to pieces, as if it were burning with living fire, as if thousands of poisoned blades were being plunged into it.

Olena screamed. Now she could scream. She was giving birth and she could break the seal of silence which had kept her strained to the very limit of her will-power. She had maintained silence from that moment when the Germans had dragged her from her house to the moment when she realized that in spite of everything she was giving birth. Neither the blows of the rifle butts, nor her falls in the snow, nor the frost had killed the child in her womb. He was alive and wanted to come into the world, to force his way into the light, breaking his own road, pitilessly lacerating her body.

She screamed with inhuman, animal cries, and the screaming brought her relief. In it the pain was drowned, the cold disappeared, the wind which was howling dolefully outside died down.

The door of the shed creaked. She *did'* not even turn her head. The pangs were coming more frequently and more forcefully and she screamed and screamed to her heart's desire, in response to the demands of her tortured body.

The soldier stopped at the entrance and was going to shout at her, but realized that the woman was giving birth. A moment later another soldier came. They looked, sniggered, and passed remarks to one another. But it did not matter to her that she was lying naked on the straw, that the brazen eyes of strange men were watching her, that they were making merry over her. She was bearing a child, and that separated, her from the world in which the Germans ruled, that screened her from their shameless glances and protected her like armour from their stupid guffaws. She was bearing a child, and they, apparently, had decided to allow her to give birth, for they stood in the door waiting and did not come in.

Her cries became louder. The women in the neighbouring cottages crossed themselves and peered out into the whirling iblizzard with horror-stricken eyes. Olena Kostyuk, alone, without help, was giving birth in a cold, bare shed. They thought that she had already died, that she had long since perished of the frost, that the child in her womb was long since dead. And yet she was giving birth, and she had no one near her, no one to give her a drink, to moisten her parched lips, to place a pillow under her head, to extend the helping hand of a friend. She was giving birth as nobody in the village had ever borne a child before—naked, in the frost, on the bare earthen floor of a shed. The women crossed themselves, pressed their lips tightly together, covered their ears, but curiosity got the better of them and compelled them to listen again. Would she cry out once more? Yes, she is crying out again, strong, deafening cries—how could such cries come from that harassed, broken, tormented body?

At last her cries gave way to a howl, then broke* off suddenly.

"She has given birth," whispered Malyuchikha, whose cottage was the nearest, and sank down onto a bench.

"She has given birth," repeated little Zina.

For a moment Olena lay like one stupefied. And there lay her child. In spite of everything and everybody he had come into this world, the child of a father who had already been killed, of a mother who by right should have died ten times over. There he was—a son, A tiny, red little creature.

She took him up in her arms. There was no midwife, there was no one to do the things that are necessary, and she, like a dog, gnawed through the navel cord, and bound it with a strip of rag torn from her shawl on that first day when she had lain here before the investigation. She rubbed the baby with her ice-cold hands and dreamed of a pot of water, of a few drops of water with which to wash at least his face.

He cried with the natural healthy voice of a healthy child. Olena held her breath. It was a son. Her first son, the first fruit of her body, barren for forty years. And now he had been born, born despite everything.

"Mikola, a son," she wanted to say, to please her husband and to repay him for all his kindness. Although he had wanted a son so badly, never once in all those years had he offended her, said one bitter word of reproach, cursed her because he had taken unto himself a barren woman, strong and healthy in appearance but seemingly rotten inside, not like other women who conceived, bore and nursed their children.

She had not even believed it herself at first when she had suddenly discovered that she was with child. She was old already, forty. And yet it was true.

Then Mikola had been taken into the Army. He said goodbye to her and she knew that the hardest thing of all was for him to bid goodbye to their unborn child.

And now Mikola was gone, he had died at the front, and the child had been born, the son he had desired. He had been born in a German prison, under the shameless gaze of German soldiers who did not even respect a woman in confinement, had been born to the sound of their shameless sniggers.

The child lay on the straw, on the wet, cold straw. She took up the naked little body and pressed it to her breast, she breathed on him, trying to warm him up. She was seized with unutterable horror at the thought that he who had been born in spite of everything would now freeze like a naked fledgling or a blind kitten. She tried to warm him with her own body, to breathe some of her own warmth into him, but she felt her hands turning to ice, the piercing cold penetrating through her, and the blood freezing in her veins. The soldiers at the door exchanged a few words. Then one of them went away and soon returned.

"Here," he said carelessly.

A shirt, blouse and skirt dropped onto the straw. It was her own clothing, which they had torn from her that evening, before they had driven her out onto the road. Olena glanced mistrustfully at the soldier. He smiled sheepishly. With trembling hands she seized the shirt and wrapped up the infant, bundling him up tightly in the linen. His tiny face, framed in the cloth, looked so comical, so doll-like, with misty blue eyes, like the newly opened eyes of a puppy. She sobbed with joy. She had something in which to wrap up her baby. That was the most important thing and for the moment she forgot everything else. Everything would now be all right, it seemed; the nightmare was over. Her fiands shook as she put on the skirt and blouse. This did

not make her any warmer, but she felt better on covering her naked, tormented body with these rags. Her coat and shawl. . . . If only she had the coat and shawl that had been left in the officer's room. . . . But she forced herself to remain silent. She would do with what she had. The baby lay wrapped in clean linen, bound up so that the cold did not yet threaten him. She placed him on her lap and folded her skirt around him. He lay there quietly, apparently not feeling the cold—what more could she want? The fact that part of her clothing had been returned was something quite out of the ordinary, something miraculous, something she could not understand. She had seen the German soldier throw her the clothing, but still she could not understand it. It seemed as if the skirt, the blouse and the shirt had fallen from the ceiling, or that the wind had swept them into the shed straight from the snow-covered fields.

The door closed with a creak. She leaned her head against the wall and dozed off in a feverish semi-slumber. A cold shiver ran down her back; she was hot and cold by turns, and as she dozed she dreamed. Mikola was walking down the road and opposite stood that little black insect, the officer's woman. Mikola said something, and an unbearable, savage jealousy stabbed suddenly at Olena's heart. She shivered, came to herself, and looked around with stupefied eyes. No, there was neither Mikola nor that officer's woman. There was only the shed, an armful of straw and her son in her arms—a white bundle with a little, round, red face. She realized with a shock that she could have dropped the baby while she was asleep, and pressed against the wall more closely. Again she began to doze.

Jumbled fragments of miseries surged through her brain in an endless stream. The bailiff was shouting. . . . Yet how could that be? He had been killed, felled by the blow of a hatchet and yet there he was standing, shouting away, with the Red Army men passing by. But Mikola was not

among them. Curly was there. Curly waved his hand. He was carrying a large piece of linen, which kept unrolling and unrolling in an endless road leading through the village. And along this narrow white path, her newborn son came toddling.

"Look, he's running already," said Fedosia Kravchuk in astonishment. Olena was so amazed that she again woke from her doze.

Her throat was burning. Thirst tortured her. Her tongue felt numb and lay in her mouth rough and rasping, as though it were not hers. Her lips were cracked and when she touched them they left traces of blood on her fingers. There was a ringing in her ears, her bones ached and a boundless languor was overwhelming her. She looked at the baby, felt his tiny forehead, and it seemed as cold as ice to her, although she realized that she was burning with fever. Again she dozed off. She dreamed of water, water, water without end, a flowing river which ran into a lake; but her buckets were leaky and she could not scoop up any of the water. She knelt down, and with a vividness surpassing reality saw a hole in the ice. The edges were greenish and the dark water was surging, moving like a living being, gurgling and welling up to the open space, only to disappear again beneath the ice, where it continued on its distant journey. A thick mantle of snow lay on the ice, and in one place was sprinkling into the water in a thin stream, like flour trickling through the hole of a millstone. As it fell into the water the snow suddenly turned green, was whirled up into a ball, and danced there in the hole. Olena wasted to catch hold of this ball of snow, to raise it to her parched lips, but the water carried it away from her under the ice, and it disappeared.

Suddenly long cracks appeared around the hole, and the ice began to break up. Olena felt herself tottering, felt the watery depths opening up under her. She came to, but she

lacked the strength to raise her head. She could hear the quiet, regular breathing of her child. He apparently did not want to drink. But would there be any milk in her breast when he did require it? It was so long since she had drunk anything, a whole eternity it seemed. She could hardly count those two or three mouthfuls of snow that she had managed to swallow under the eyes of the Germans. Oh, how she wanted to drink, how desperately she wanted to drink! Her lips, tongue and mouth ached, and a painful cramp held her throat in its grasp. Her whole insides were shaken by a terrible fit of hiccoughing. She dozed off, and the white sand began to sift down again, white as river sand on a hot summer day, flying like dust, like white flour trickling out from under a millstone. The whole world was enveloped in clouds of white flour. She could not breathe. Her mouth was crammed with the white dust and she had to make her way along the dusty road, cost what it may; she had to go, had to hurry, for she knew that she had not a minute to lose. Her feet dragged in the sand, the sun beat down mercilessly, the cottages were ablaze—the village was burning. At all hazards she must save the baby from the flames, and there was a wind up, scattering sparks in all directions. Her skirt and her shawl were already smouldering. And why had she put on her coat and shawl in such a heat? No time now to throw them off, she had to run, run as fast as her feet would carry her, so that the flames would not touch his little head. Ah, and there the bridge was burning, the flames shooting high into the air. With a crash the whole thing came tumbling down. . . . Apparently, she was too late, she had not run away in time, and now everything was crashing on top of her. In despair she began to look for the baby—he had fallen out of her arms, and the debris had piled over him, lapped by flames. From the forest she could see the Germans waving their arms and shouting, bustling around the burning bridge.

Their shouts woke her. A German was standing over her, poking her with his boot.

She immediately came to herself. With signs the German ordered her to get up. Making a tremendous effort to overcome her weakness she rose to her knees, raised herself with difficulty, the child pressed to her breast. The soldier pushed her with his rifle butt, directing her to the door. The white snow-covered world which opened up before her eyes blinded her. She walked obediently in front of the soldier, staggering like a drunkard. She realized that she was being taken for interrogation again.

Werner glanced at her with aversion. She was frightful to see. Her face was an inhuman, repulsive yellow. A thin stream of blood had trickled down from her cracked lips and dried on her chin. A huge black, red and purple bruise spread under her eye. One eye seemed to have been pushed upwards. Her hair hung in matted, sticky strands on either side of her hollow-cheeked face. Her bare, swollen feet were beginning to turn black.

The officer drummed on the table with his fingers, and with a nod of his head indicated to the soldier that he should give the woman a chair. She was surprised, but sat down immediately, without waiting for permission, staring intently at the watery eyes under their colourless lashes.

"Son or daughter?" he asked unexpectedly, nodding towards the child.

"Son," she answered in a weak, hoarse voice. He gave an order, and the soldier brought a mug of water. Olena thought she was delirious again. She seized the mug, and greedily, rapidly, choking on the cold water, gulped it noisily, feeling the moisture on her aching lips, her parched tongue and burning throat.

"Enough," said Werner. The soldier snatched the mug away from her.

She looked after it with wild, despairing eyes. But she no longer had the water, it stood on the edge of the table. Its surface was still rippling there, quite close* beside her, the fresh, cold water in the mug. Her lips ached more than ever, but she felt the refreshing moisture in her throat, and it made her even thirstier than she had been before, if that were possible. .

"A son, then. ..." drawled the Captain. Olena mustered all her strength to hear and understand what was going on.

This room harboured some horror, threatened her with some peril, the nature of which she dared not even imagine. The water, a few mouthfuls of which she had been permitted to drink, the chair they had placed for her, the quite human question put by the Captain—all this inspired her with such terror that she began to shiver. A light shudder ran swiftly over her body spreading to her every muscle. She kept her eyes strained on the Captain's face. .

"So you have borne a son," he said again. "A live, healthy son. ..."

She waited for what was to come next.

"Well, I hope now you will show more sense. Now it's not only a question of yourself. Now you can either save or ruin your son. Isn't that so? Save or ruin," he said slowly and emphatically.

Instinctively she pressed the child closer. The Captain studied her with a penetrating look, watching her every movement, her every change of expression.

"Last night somebody tried to pass you some bread. Who was it?" he asked softly, as though his question was of no consequence.

"I don't know."

"What do you mean, you don't know?"

"I don't know," she repeated, looking him straight in the eye, and speaking so convincingly that he believed her. It was certainly possible that she did not know.

"Which of your neighbours have children?"

"Children?" she exclaimed in astonishment. "They all have children. How could it be otherwise?"

Yes, they all had children but she. And now she too had a child, a son, a little son. He was fast asleep in her arms, wrapped up in his mother's shirt, in the German Commandant's office. He didn't even know what a German was. No, he didn't know yet.

"Who do you think could have brought you bread? Who could have sent a boy of about ten or eleven?"

She went over all the neighbours in her mind. Not that she wanted to answer him, but because she herself wanted to know who could have tried to help her in her hour of dire need, who had risked a German bullet in order to bring her food. All of them had children, and so many had boys of about ten or eleven. She could not guess even for herself.

"I don't know. There are so many boys in the village. There are children in every house. ..."

Werner frowned, realizing that she really did not know.

"Very well. . . . Now tell me, where could Curly be at this moment?"

Olena went cold. So it was beginning all over again! She felt her son's warm body in her arms, and this gave her heart strength and courage. She was no longer alone under the cross-fire of the German interrogation. Now she had her son with her, the son who had been born in agony on the bare earthen floor of a shed, the child that had come to her after twenty years of waiting.

He was with her, sleeping quietly, and his little heart, like the heart of a bird, was beating rapidly and faintly under her hands. His tiny, round, red face, his barely perceptible brows, his wee button of a nose—he was the prettiest, the most marvellous baby she had ever seen. She felt a boundless tranquility, an absolute confidence that nobody could do anything to her now that her son was with her.

"Where is he likely to be now?" Werner repeated quietly, menacingly.

She shook her head.

"I don't know. . . ."

"You don't know. . . . And where were they when you came back to the village?"

"I don't know. . . . In the forest."

"In which forest?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"The forest. . . ."

Her answer told him nothing. The white, plain which spread around the village on all sides was hemmed in everywhere by forests. Forests stretched away to the north and south, to the east and west. Only this section of the district was devoid of woods, and this alone enabled his detachment to remain so quietly in the village. But the other German detachments were the victims of all sorts of surprises, a circumstance which impelled Headquarters to demand any information that would help uncover Curly and his band of guerillas.

"There are many forests around here. . . . From which side did you enter the village?"

"I don't remember, I don't know. . . . There was snow everywhere, and they brought me as far as the road, that's all I know. . . ."

"So. . . . Which road?"

"I don't remember. . . ."

"Have you forgotten so soon? It's only four days since you came to the village."

She remembered with a shock that it really was only six days since she had come to the village. Two days Werner knew nothing about, then. Six days, and it seemed as though a whole lifetime had passed since she had quietly left the dugout* in the forest.

Werner slowly rolled a cigarette, then raised his eyes and glanced at the sallow, bruised face.

"Look here, you're a mother. . . ."

Again that word. But it was true now, she had her child in her arms, a tiny mite born on the floor of a shed and wrapped in his mother's shirt.

"You have a son."

The wan face was lit up by a smile that came from the depths of *her* soul. Yes, she had a son, a son. . . .

"Do you want your son to live and be healthy; do you want him to grow up?"¹

Oh, how she wanted her son alive and well! How she wanted him to grow. . . . He would begin to raise himself, would stand on his little feet. He would toddle all over the cottage and crawl out over the threshold. He would grab a spoon from the table with his tiny fingers. He would chase the cat, and the dog, and the calf. He would get into the vegetable garden and pull up a carrot for himself. Then he would grow bigger and would go to school, would take his satchel of books, looking so important and solemn. And then? No, she could not imagine what would come after that, could not imagine that the tiny little creature that she was holding in her arms would grow up, marry, and himself have children. . . .

"You have a chance to save him. You have a chance to save your own life and your son's. I am giving you this chance. Don't be a fool now, take it!"

Olena made no reply. She did not quite understand what the German was getting at, but uneasiness gripped her again, and a shiver ran over her. What did he want? Why did he talk so quietly, calmly and convincingly, as if he really did understand her and wanted to talk to her like one human being to another?

"We shall find them in any case. It doesn't matter whether it's a day sooner or a day later. Remember we have every-

thing in our hands. The Red Army has been smashed, everything is all over, so why this foolish stubbornness? Your men are in the woods and do not know what is going on. They are surrounded on all sides and there is no way out for them, no chance of escape. If not to-day, then tomorrow they will fall into our hands and be punished. But I am willing to forgive you the crimes you have committed in their company. They persuaded you, deceived you. You had no son then. . . . We will even overlook that you blew up the bridge. You will be able to live quietly in the village and bring up your child. . . ."

She listened attentively without once taking her eyes off him.

"Don't think that I'm a beast or a fiend. What else can I do, it's duty! . . . I do whatever my duty as a soldier demands, my duty to my country. . . . I'm sorry for you, sorry for your child. If you do not begrudge yourself, at least have pity on your son. You gave him life, but you have no right to take it away from him."

"Take it away?" she repeated mechanically, as though she were thinking of something else.

Werner tapped his cigarette on the table impatiently.

"You know perfectly what I mean, you understand well enough that if you refuse to answer me you are sentencing your son to death. Think it over, think it over a little, I can wait. Will you make a statement or not? I think you will be sensible about it. In any case nobody can help them, and you will be saving your own life and your child's."

He took some tobacco and cigarette papers out of his drawer and began slowly to roll another cigarette. Olena watched his fingers, knotty fingers covered with red hair. Inanely her eyes followed the falling crumbs of tobacco, stared at the creases in the white paper. A match burst into flame, and rings of blue smoke rose to the ceiling.

"Well?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"You won't answer?"

"I don't know anything."

He stood up and resting his hands on the table, leaned over towards her. His face was distorted with rage.

"So that's how you are, is it? Here I treat you like a human being, and you. . . . You just wait, I'll show you! . . . Hans!"

A soldier appeared in the doorway.

"Come here, both of you."

Two armed soldiers came in. She recognized them. They were the men who had been on sentry duty at the shed and who had watched her with guffaws while she had been giving birth.

"Hold her. Give me the brat."

A soldier had snatched the infant from her arms before she realized what was happening. She sprang after him, but iron hands held her on both sides. Olena did not take her frantic eyes from the child. The soldier held him clumsily in his hands and she was afraid he would drop him.

"Put him on the table!"

The child was now lying on the table between her and the German. The soldiers' claws dug deeply into the flesh of her shoulders so that she realized the impossibility of escape.

There he lay on the table, a little bundle with a tiny red face barely peeping out of the folds of the heavy linen shirt which covered him from head to foot. Werner looked at the peacefully slumbering mite with disgust. Suddenly the tiny eyelids fluttered and two misty blue pools appeared. The little chin quivered. Olena felt a pang go through her heart. Her baby was crying with the pitiful, helpless wail of the newborn infant. His little mouth was gasping, his forehead had become even redder, so that his light eyebrows looked like white lines. She tried to get to him, but the heavy hands pressed her still more firmly to the chair.

"I'm not going to play the nursemaid to you any more," said Werner in a hoarse voice. "Now then, are you going to speak?"

She did not even look at him, her eyes fixed on the child. He was whimpering like a puppy. Oh, if she could only take him and press him to her breast, rock him, soothe him, put to sleep. . . .

"D'you hear what *I'm* saying to you? Are *yóu* going to speak? I ask you for the last time!"

She dragged her eyes from the child and whispered distinctly:

"No, I have nothing to say. . . ."

The Captain tore open the wrapped shirt. Her little son, naked, "his stomach distended, his little fists clenched, his legs drawn up, lay crying on the table. Werner seized the infant by the scruff of the neck like a puppy and lifted him up between two fingers. The tiny feet with the transparent pink nails on the toes like the petals of some flower began to beat the air.

"Well?"

Slowly, slowly he raised his revolver.

Olena was petrified. Her legs and arms turned to blocks of ice. The room began to expand, while the German towered up before her eyes. The man who stood behind the table was no longer the man who had been talking to her, but a giant of incredible size, whose head reached up to the very clouds. And alone in all that tremendous, infinite emptiness her son was hanging, tiny, pink and naked between heaven and earth. The tightly drawn skin seemed to be choking him. He had stopped crying and was not making a sound. Only his legs were twitching spasmodically, and his little hands were clenching and unclenching, clawing at the air.

"Now let us see what you are, Bolshevik carrion or a mother!"

Olena recovered herself. The Captain ceased to tower like a huge mountain before her. The room assumed its normal proportions.

"Answer!"

"I am a mother," replied Olena, calling herself by the name they had given her there, back in the forest, the name with which they had thanked her for the solicitude, for the tender words she had given them, the dinners she had cooked and the shirts she had washed.

"Then you'll tell me where they are?"

She did not look at her boy. She looked straight into the watery eyes framed in their colourless eyelashes.

"I'll say nothing, nothing. I'll say nothing. ..."

The muzzle of the revolver moved nearer the tiny baby face. She saw that without looking.

"This is your only child, isn't it?" asked Werner.

She shook her head in negation.

"No. . . ."

The hand holding the revolver froze in the air.

"What? Have you other children? Sons? Daughters? Here, in the village?"

A sudden smile lit up her swollen, cracked, parched lips.

"Sons. . . . Only sons. . . . -Many, many sons. . . . There, in the forest. . . . Curly . . . all of them, there in the forest. ..."

A shot rang out. Right in the tiny face. There was a smell of powder and smoke. The soldiers holding Olena shuddered.

The Captain shook the tiny corpse.

"Here, mother. ..."

The tiny legs and the tightly clenched fists hung lifeless. There was no face...only a gaping bloody wound.

"That's what you have done with your child," said Werner.

She shook her head. At that moment she was far away in the forest.

What were they doing there now? Were they sitting around the fire, or were they creeping towards the German units along the forest paths? Were they surrounding the building where the Germans had their Headquarters? Or were they retiring into the forest, carrying off their wounded? The soldiers looked at her with superstitious horror. The Captain noticed that blood was dripping from the child's body onto the floor. He shuddered in disgust.

"Take it away!"

The soldier hesitated.

"What's wrong with you?" hissed the Captain venomously, and the soldier hastily snatched up the body.

"I ask you for the last time, will you speak, or not?"

Olena did not answer, she did not even hear him. She looked out of the window at the snowstorm raging over the fields.

"If you don't answer I'll put an end to you, too!"¹¹

She did not hear him, did not answer. Everything, everything was finished, Her son was no more, the boy for whom she had waited twenty years was gone. Her heart had grown quiet, in it nothing but a dead emptiness, without fear, without alarm, without a tremour.

Olena looked at the Captain with vacant eyes. Her look was one of complete indifference. She might have been looking at some inanimate object, at a block of wood or stone.

"Take her away and finish her off!" ordered the Captain. "Only not near the house, there's enough of that offal here already. The river is the best place!"

She went obediently in the direction in which they pushed her with their rifle butts. Yes, this was the village where she had been born, where she had grown up, where she had married and waited in vain for a child that had at last come only to spend a few short hours with her. She herself had

given him up to death; she had seen with her own eyes how the muzzle of the revolver had been lowered ever nearer and nearer, and she had not said the word that could have moved that revolver away, that could have pushed it aside from the tiny face. No, she had not said that word.

"No, my son, I could not," she whispered, as though the dead child could hear her.

She looked round—one of the soldiers was carrying the little body, awkwardly, with repugnance, its head hanging down. Olena held out her arms. The soldier hesitated for a second, then, because carrying it was most unpleasant, decided on his own responsibility to hand the dead child over to its mother. She pressed the dead body to her breast. It was still warm, the legs and arms had not yet had time to stiffen. If it had not been for the ghastly patch which had remained in place of the face, one might have thought that the child was sleeping.

Olena walked on between the two soldiers without giving a thought to where they were taking her. The order had been shouted in German, and she had not understood. All she knew was that this was most certainly the end, but this thought did not trouble her. Everything had ended for her with the death of her son.

The wind was blowing the fine, powdery snow through the air. Olena glanced at the frost-covered windows of the houses. Not a soul was to be seen. Alone she travelled her last road, the road to death. No one looked out of doors, not a person showed himself anywhere. The houses were dead. Here and there the Germans were busy at something, but they paid no attention whatever to the prisoner.

A blow from a rifle butt drove her from the road onto a footpath. She was a little surprised, but went where they pushed her. She had thought that they were taking her to the church square where they hanged people opposed to the German authorities. The path, however, avoided the houses

and led down into the gully. There was hardly any wind here, for the gully was sheltered.

Olena walked along the frozen path as if she were walking on broken glass. During those four days her feet had become covered with wounds and sores, and were now a mass of bloody flesh, with pieces of skin hanging from them. The women carried water along this path so that it was covered with a coating of ice. Her lacerated feet slipped on the ice, and tiny ice splinters cut into the swollen flesh. Olena stumbled, and from that moment began to stumble at every step. An unbearable pain tore at her just below the stomach. She could feel streams of warm blood trickling down her legs.

Down below, the river wound its way. It was bound by a thick layer of ice, which in turn was covered over with snow driven there by the blizzard, so that no trace of it would have been visible if it had not been for the hole in the ice from which the people at this end of the village dipped their water. In the distance, Olena saw the dark hole that was broken through anew every day. She could not make out where they were taking her. Further on in the gully lay the dead that the Germans had forbiddep the villagers to bury. Surely they did not intend to shoot her there? She, a simple village women, to be shot alongside Red Armymen, alongside those who had died in battle.

"Hey! Where do you think you're going?"

She did not understand the words, but a blow from a rifle butt explained their meaning, and obediently she turned down the slope. The soldiers, one in front and one behind, directed her straight to the black hole in the ice.

"Give me that pup!" shouted one of the soldiers, and stretched out his hand for the child. Frightened, she pressed the dead body closer, as if they could still do something to him, as if danger could still threaten him.

"Come on, now, hand it over!"¹ repeated the escort menacingly, and snatched at her arm. The tiny body flew

onto the snow. Olena fell on her knees beside it. His little arms and legs had -turned blue on the road, and the rosy tinge had disappeared from his skin. The blood on what an hour before had been his wee face had turned black and had congealed in dark clots.

Before she had time to pick up the little body, one of the soldiers thrust his bayonet into it and threw it into the air. The infant fell near the hole in the ice. The other soldier ran over, lifted it with his bayonet and again tossed it. He was more accurate—the water splashed, bubbles rose to the dark surface, and the current carried the body away under the ice.

Olena remained motionless on her knees. Now she recognized her dream. She recognized the place and the dark hole in the ice. The edges of the ice were greenish, and the dark water surged and moved like a living thing. It gurgled and rushed towards the tiny open space hacked' in the frozen surface, only to disappear again under the ice, off on its long journey to far places. On the banks and on the ice covering the river, the snow lay in a thick blanket. Where the body had fallen beside the water-hole, there remained a clear red impression like that of a seal.

With dead eyes Olena looked into the gently gushing dark water. If had carried away the little body, her son was no more. The only sign, the only trace of his ever having existed was that bloody stain on the snow, the seal impressed on the white shroud. The water was now carrying him away beneath the ice, carrying him on its own unknown, distant ways. It was carrying him beneath the ice, forcing him down, dashing him against the rocks, hurtling him up to the surface, bruising him against the ice! No, no, Olena knew, knew as well as if she could see through the snow and ice with her own eyes, that their own dear river was carrying the little body carefully, tenderly, protecting him like a mother, enveloping him in its soft wavelets. The river was

washing him of the blood, the powder burns, the contact with the German paws. Their own, native river, the pure water of their native land! The water had accepted with open arms the tiny mite that had not lived even a single day. Their own waters of their own land.

The soldiers were talking together, making some sort of plans, examining the water-hole, measuring it. Olena did not stir. Her eyes were fixed on the wavelets which kept eddying from under the ice and disappearing under it. . . . He was already well hidden, nobody would be able to find him now. The ice stretched in a thick sheet, and above it lay the down quilt of the snow. As far as the eye could see lay deep, deep snow, and the water went its invisible way under the snow, under the ice, well hidden from German eyes. "Where does it flow?" thought Olena in distress, and remembered that it flowed eastwards. Joy flooded her heart. Her son was floating to his own people, her son was being carried to a land free of German chains. Perhaps he would arrive at a place where there were water-holes—there were certain to be water-holes—where people would see him, and guess what had happened. They would look at his bullet-shattered head and realize. They would bury him in a fitting manner, bury the little one, bury him in his native soil. But perhaps he would not float to the surface, and only in the spring, when the ice melted and the tempestuous waters of the river flooded the meadows, would the people find that tiny body. . . .

The soldiers were arguing among themselves. They moved a few paces away and again measured something. Then one of them hacked away at the edge of the hole with his rifle butt and broke off a large piece of ice. A long, dark crack squirmed through the snow. The ice slid into the water, where it rocked to and fro, and the glistening green edge of the hole was a little further off.

There was the crunch of footsteps on the path. The

soldiers turned round. Captain Werner was coming down the path. Olena did not even turn her head. She remained kneeling, like one bewitched, her eyes fixed on the water, on the sparkle of the wavelets.

The Captain prodded her with his boat. She turned her face towards him unseeing eyes.

"Hey, you! You're going to die now, understand? Where are the guerillas?"

He was trembling with barely suppressed rage. He had hardly sent Olena off with the soldiers when Headquarters had called him on the telephone. He was ordered at all hazard, cost what it may, to obtain at least some information concerning the whereabouts of the guerillas. Headquarters had ascertained that the majority of the guerillas came from the village where Werner's detachment was stationed. His orders were to procure the necessary information without fail. And this accursed woman who had only to say a few words for the demands of head-quarters to be satisfied, would not speak, but remained as silent as though she were under a spell. Werner was beside himself at having to come out here to the river in the wind and frost, after having said the last word and given his orders, only to begin his questioning again, to look at the bruised, swollen inhuman face again. Driven to desperation he was ready to beg to pray that stubborn, savage woman for an answer. But he knew that it would be of no avail. It was easy for the people at Headquarters to say "we categorically demand!" It was easy to demand information "without fail!" "Use all means," they had said. It seemed to him that he had already used every conceivable means. Fate itself appeared to have sent him the best means of all—a newborn baby! And nothing helped. . . .

"Where's the pup?" he said turning to the soldiers.

"We threw him into the hole," answered the younger timidly. What could have happened, why had the Captain

come here, why was he asking about the child, when only a quarter of an hour ago he had told them to take it away? The soldier was frightened. Perhaps they had not understood the order, perhaps they had not done what he wanted?

Werner waved his hand.

"Listen, you! Where are the guerillas?"

Olena did not answer. Just as scrutinizing as she had previously looked at the water she now stared into the Captain's face. She saw everything, down to the tiniest detail. The light brows, one hair longer than the others sticking out comically on his forehead. A tiny scrap of cigarette paper that had stuck to the corner of his mouth in a little white spot. The network of fine, red veins on his cheeks. His white eyelashes constantly blinking. One of his ears had been frostbitten and was swollen so that it was bigger than the other.

"What are you looking at? I'm asking you, where are the guerillas?"

He realized that the question did not penetrate to her mind, that she did not hear it, -that there was nothing to be gained by repeating it. A passion of hatred seized on the Captain. He regretted that he could not get her child into his hands again, he had finished him off much too quickly. He should have flayed him before her eyes, slashed off his ears and gouged out his eyes. Perhaps she would have wavered then, perhaps that would have convinced her. But he had been in too much of a hurry, and tomorrow they would ring up again from Headquarters, for he had let them know—what a fool he had been!—that he had caught a woman guerilla. Of course the people at Headquarters would never understand how impossible it was to squeeze anything out of the woman. And the pleasure his kind friends would get out of doing him a good turn, the satisfaction it would give them to be able to report to their seniors that Captain Werner did not know how to deal with

prisoners so as to get information out of them; he was, apparently, too soft, too lenient in his treatment of the local bandit population. . . .

He bit his lip, and with a nervous movement snatched the rifle from the hands of one of the soldiers so suddenly that he sprang back in fright. Olena was no longer looking at the Captain. Her eyes were again fixed on the gleam of the water, on its ceaselessly flowing life.

Werner took a step back and then with all his strength plunged the bayonet into the kneeling woman's back. She fell face down at the edge of the hole. Her fall sent a thin stream of snow into the water. Like flour pouring from under a millstone. Olena watched it, her face almost touching the dark water. As the snow trickled into the water it took on a greenish hue, was whirled into a ball, and danced on the surface.

The Captain wrenched the bayonet out with an effort and lunged a second time. The woman shuddered and sprawled on the snow-covered ice, her limbs outstretched. Stray locks of hair hung down into the water. The water seized them, and rocking them on its ripples sent them dancing up and down like live creatures.

"Push her into the water !" ordered the Captain.

The soldiers jumped up and began to shove the body with their rifle butts. The hole was small. Her head tumbled into the water but her arms stretched out over the edges as though they were offering resistance.

"What's the matter with you,-, can't you manage a woman?" stormed the Captain fuming with rage.

The soldiers threw themselves hurriedly on the corpse. They broke her arms and forced her into the water, under the ice. She sank up to her breast, then up to the waist. The soldiers now began to push her with their feet and with the butt ends of their rifles, hastening under the eyes of the Captain. At last the water splashed as the whole body

fell in. Only the blue, swollen feet, that looked like nothing human, were still sticking out of the hole. With their rifle butts the men beat on these terrible, mutilated limbs. At last the water splashed again, gurgled and swelled. The body had disappeared. A bubbling wavelet surged out-from under the ice and disappeared again, off on its long journey to far distant climes.

Werner rapped out an oath and went back, slipping on the icy path. The soldiers followed him humbly, furtively using their rifles as supports.

Below, the dark waters gurgled in the ice-hole, green where it eddied over the glistening edges. The footprints of soldiers' boots were plainly visible in the trampled snow. Only on one side there remained a crimson patch in the white snow, where the body of the child had first fallen. A crimson stain on the white surface, vivid and distinct, looking as if it would never disappear, as if it would remain here until the sunny days of spring came, when the ice would melt and the snow run away in streamlets, when the liberated river would carry its stormy waters over the distant plains to the far-off boundless sea, the beloved sea of their native land.

VI

Pusya was bathing. Fedosia Kravchuk was carrying water for her in gloomy silence, pouring pots of hot water into the tub. And that-one, she sat in the tub soaping her slim shoulders. She was not abashed in the presence of her German, who sat there alongside smoking cigarette after cigarette. As if she couldn't bathe in the kitchen! But just imagine such a fine lady in the kitchen! That was not for the likes of her. She had to show her dainty bones to her German, she had to splash the floor so that there was something to wipe and clean up after her.

Pusya was luxuriating in the hot water, although from time to time she cast furtive glances at Kurt. The whole evening he had been silent and morose.

"Kurt. . . ."

He recovered from his thoughts.

"What?"

"You're so quiet. You take as much notice of me as if I didn't exist. . . ."

"I'm tired," he answered drily.

"I waited all day, and you didn't even come in once."

She squeezed the sponge and watched the soapy white streams run over her breasts.

"Fat lot of time I've had to run in and out to-day," he muttered, thinking all the while of that telephone message from Headquarters. Tomorrow he would have to report that he had got nothing out of that woman. The Major be furious. Interesting to see what he would have got out of her himself! He always thought everything was simple and easy. . . . The worst of it was that Werner was expecting promotion shortly and this fool business with the guerillas might spoil everything. It wasn't him that the guerillas were worrying anyway, but them ; well, let them get on their trail themselves, let them find their hiding places. . . . They, of course, had come to the conclusion that it would be easier to push the whole thing onto Kurt and make him responsible for it. He cursed his own foolishness. Why had he reported the arrest of that Kostyuk woman when he had still not known himself whether he would get anything out of her?

He had thought of something. Pusya felt his eyes fixed on her.

"What's wrong?"

He drew at his cigarette slowly.

"Listen," he began apparently hesitating.

Pusya waited, raising her plucked eyebrows.

"Couldn't you talk to that sister of yours, eh?"

She turned around so abruptly that the water slopped over onto the floor. Just then Fedosia came in with a bucket.

"Don't you hang around here," he snapped angrily.

The woman shrugged her shoulders. He got up and locked the door behind her.

"Talk to my sister?"

"Yes, you heard what I said!" He was in a temper.

"But why should I talk to her?" She opened her big, round eyes, and with her usual gesture of a sick monkey, tilted her head to her shoulder.

"You've got to help me. Yes, help me. There's nothing funny in that, is there? You've got to talk to that teacher. You see, she knows many things that I want to know."

Mechanically Pusya dipped the sponge in the water and squeezed it out.

"She won't tell me anything. ..."

"Well, it'll be your business to talk to her in such a way that she will say something. . . . Explain to her that all this playing around will come to a bad end; so far I've been easy-going, but when my patience gives out. ..."

"What playing around?"

"Oh, you're a fool!" he burst out.

She was offended, and pouting, set about soaping her legs industriously.

"Explain to her that it would be better for her if she worked with us. Surely she's not so foolish as to expect they'll return, is she?"

She did not answer, and it was only now that he noticed the offended look on her face.

"What's eating you anyway?"

"I'm a fool, how can I explain anything to her?"

"Offended? Now listen, I really am tired. I've had a terribly hard day. Don't sulk, that's silly. You will talk to her, won't you?"

"She won't want to talk to me."

"Why?"

She glanced at him and shrugged her shoulders.

"Can't you see for yourself that nobody here talks to me? I might as well be a leper. . . . It's all the same to you, leaving me here alone day after day. . . ."

"Still harping on the same thing. . . . Drop that, I'm talking seriously'now,."

The scowl wrinkling his forehead frightened Pusya.

"Oh, all right. But what shall I talk to her about?"

He glanced at the door.

"We have received information that she's connected with the guerillas. She's got to tell us where they hide out, understand?"

"She won't tell me."

"Why do you decide beforehand that she won't? If you go about it cleverly enough she'll talk."

The water was getting cold. Pusya dried herself slowly and carefully. Then she stretched out her hand and took her nightdress from the chair. She delighted in touching the soft silk. The nightdress was pale blue and hand-embroidered. Werner had brought it from France, but had not had time to give it to his wife on the way, so that Pusya was wearing it now. The silk fell in soft folds around her and she felt its touch as a caress. The bath had tired her and she wanted to sleep.

"Why don't you undress?" she asked him petulantly.

"I've no time for sleeping. . . . Look here, about those guerillas, I've absolutely got to know. . . ."

Pusya sat down beside him and pressed her cheek against his tunic.

"Kurt. . . ."

He moved away impatiently.

"Really, it's impossible to talk to you seriously."

"Right's no time for talking," she said pouting, and

tucking her hair back behind her ear. But noticing that he was getting angry, she hastened to add, "All right then, but how did you find out that she knows something?"

"I know, don't worry. You'd better not bother about that." You can tell her that I know everything and that if she doesn't talk I'll have her arrested."

"O-o-oh!"

"What d'you think, that because she's your sister she can work against us here and we'll just look calmly on?"

Pusya tossed her head.

"It's all one to me. Arrest her if you like. What's that to me? I can talk to her, of course, only she won't let me in the door, you'll see."

"In any case you can try."

"I'll try," she answered soothingly, thinking that in any case it would be tomorrow and now was no time to quarrel! With Kurt.

"Come to bed. . . ."

He got up and stumbled over the full tub.

"Where's that woman? And you, too, could wash in the kitchen."

"In the kitchen? In her room?" Pusya shuddered with distaste.

Werner waved his hand. Fedosia, her lips tight pressed, carried out the buckets, pulled the tub out with a jerk and mopped up the wet floor. Pusya, who was already in bed, watched her contentedly. Should she speak about Vasya now? No, let the old woman suffer a bit more, let her wait, there would always be an occasion. . . .
* * *

The door closed. Werner took off his tunic. His boots clattered as he dropped them to the floor. The light went out. Pedosia dipped up the water from the tub and went outside to empty the buckets. A gust of wind struck her in the face. The sentry looked round, but seeing the buckets

in her hands, said nothing. She walked found the house and went behind the barn to the dunghill. As she slopped out the water she heard a penetrating whisper.

"Mother!"

She started and dropped the buckets. The snow made the night lighter and there behind the barn she saw a silhouette outlined against the background of the white snow-drift. A familiar cap. It took away her breath.

"Who's there?" she whispered, although she knew already. With a soft cry she dropped to her knees, stretched out her hands and touched the rough cloth of the greatcoat, the leather of his belt. The Red Star showed distinctly on his grey fur cap. A sob rose to her throat. The Red Armyman was alarmed.

"What's wrong with you, what's the matter?"

"It's you . . . it's you . . . you ..." she whispered feverishly, her lips quivering. She felt as if she were in a delirium, as if she were dreaming. Her heart was pounding with joy.

"It's you, you. ..."

He leaned forward and shook her gently by the shoulder. In the feeble light reflected from the snow he saw her tear-stained face lit up with a smile.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, nothing. . . ." Making a tremendous effort, Fedosia tried to master her feelings. Suddenly she remembered the sentry. She seized the Red Armyman by the sleeve.

"There are Germans in my house! There are Germans in the village!"

"I know. I want to talk to you, mother. Do you belong here?"

"Of course, I'm from this village. ..."

"I want you to tell me what and how. ..."

"Listen, son, there's a sentry in front of my house, and if I'm gone too long he'll start looking for me. You just

wait here a tick and I'll run home; there's another way I can get out and I'll come straight back. You'd better go off a bit, into the shed behind the barn; there's straw there and it's not so windy."

He regarded her searchingly, his suspicions suddenly aroused. She understood.

"What's the matter, son? Don't worry, I'm from this village, from the collective farm. . . . I've a son lying there, in the gully, a Red Armyman. . . . He's been lying there a month; they won't let me bury him, the swine. . . . Stripped him naked. . . ."

It was not so much the words as the tone in which she spoke that convinced the lad so firmly that he felt ashamed of himself.

"You know yourself, mother, there are all kinds of people. . . ."

"You go along and I'll be right back. . . ."

With trembling hands she picked up the buckets and returned to the house. As she passed the sentry she could scarcely repress a nervous laugh. Keep it up, keep it up, back and forth, stamp away! But our men are in the village already! There's a Red Armyman there behind the barn and you know nothing, guarding the officer's fancy woman, the officer's bed. . . . Keep safe watch, there'll soon be an end to you. . . .

She carefully fastened the outside door of the lean-to and moved out the bench in the kitchen as though she were going to bed. From the bedroom she could hear the German snoring away. Noiselessly Fedosia stole into the lean-to. There was a loose board in the little attic overhead. She removed this board, crawled through the opening and cautiously let herself down at the corner of the house. Her long skirt hindered her movements. How funny it was, she thought, for an old woman like her to be clambering about like a tomcat, and she smiled to herself.

The wind was rustling in the thatched roof so that the sentry on the other side of the house could not hear anything. Her heart pounded madly as she dropped to the ground and paused for a second or two to listen. No, it would never enter his head that there was anything going on behind the house. There was nothing but a blank wall here at the back, and he was stamping up and down under the windows in front. And she could get into the house from here, flashed through her mind joyfully.

She crept around the barn with catlike footsteps and then suddenly went cold all over—there was nobody there. The shed was empty. Had it all been a dream then, a delirious mirage born of longing and suffering? No, it couldn't, couldn't be. . . .

"Where are you?" she whispered warily.

There was a stir in the straw and Fedosia's face brightened. Of course he was here, and not alone, either. There were three of them, three, she thought with joy as she caught sight of two more figures. They crouched down on their heels at the door of the shed, and Fedosia sat down beside them.

"How we've been waiting for you! Day and night we keep looking out for you!" she intoned in a whisper, stroking the sleeve of a greatcoat. "And, oh, I've lived to see it, lived to see it. . . ."

"That's all right now, mother, but we've got to talk things over. . . ."

"Well, then, let's talk. . . . But aren't you hungry?" she suddenly exclaimed.

The Red Armymen smiled.

"No, thanks, we didn't come here to eat."

"Well, then, ask me what you want to know."

"You're from this village?"

"Of course I am, where else would I be from?" answered Fedosia in surprise. "I belong here, was born here and live here. . . ."

"We want to know a few things. . . . Where are the Germans quartered? What have they got here?"

She clasped her hands imploringly:

"Our troops will come to the village?"

"They're coming all right. . . . Only first we want to find out what's what."

"All right. . . ." She placed her hands on her knees. "Ours is a biggish village—three hundred houses. There are two roads which cross here. At the crossroads there's a square. Used to be a church there, but only the ruins are left now."

"Just a minute, mother."

They got out a map and bent over it, shielding it with their great coats as they directed the flashlight on it.

"There it is. . . . That's it, the crossroads, square in the middle. . . ."

"They've set up their guns on the square near the church."

"Are there many guns?"

Fedosia thought for a moment.

"Wait a bit. . . . One, two . . . three . . . Yes, that's right, four! To the right of the church there's a big house. It used to be the Village Soviet, now it's their Headquarters And there's the lock-up; they've got five hostages there now."

"Where else are the Germans?"

"They're near the square, in every house, you might say. Here on the outskirts of the village where my house is there are not so many of them, but still there are some. They've got more guns under the lindens, just as you go out of the village, but they're different, smaller. . . ."

"Anti-aircraft guns?"

"Maybe, who knows? . . . They point straight up, sort of long and thin. . . ."

"I see. And did you notice any machine-guns?"

"Yes, of course there are machine-guns. . . . They're

all at the other end of the village, straight ahead from here and then left. They've made holes in the walls in all the houses there, and in every hole there's machine-gun."

The Red Arminymen bent over the map, made a number of crosses and circles on it.

"They've chased the people out of those houses and live in them themselves. Let's see now, how many of them would there be? One . . . three . . . yes, five houses. . . . And then there's another on the way to the square from here. . . ."

"Are there many Germans?"

"There's no telling. . . . They keep coming and going; only that Captain of theirs doesn't budge, just stays put They say there are about two hundred of them. . . ."

"Many sentries?"

"Oh, they just hand around, like that one outside my door. They don't amount to much—scared to death at night, won't go off any distance to speak of and then always in pairs. They're bolder in the daytime, but at night they're afraid, even though there's an order that none of us can go out after dark. If they see anybody they don't ask questions, they just shoot. . . ."

"Are there any bridges along the road?"

"Bridges? No, it's just an ordinary road. . . ."

"Woods?"

"No woods around here at all. Just the trees in the orchards, and most of those the swine have cut down for firewood. They love the warmth. There are still a few lindens along the road the other side of the square. But there are no woods¹ anywhere, just open field for miles around. There are bushes in the gully, but nothing else. We're hard up for firewood, we burn cow-dung."

She glanced round uneasily.

"What's the matter?"

"I'll just have a look around in case the sentry's taken it into his head to see what's doing in the yard." She slipped out quietly and stood listening. The wind was moaning dismally, blustering in the gully and rustling the thatch on the roof. When it died down for a minute she could hear the heavy, measured tread of the sentry in front of her house and the crunching of the snow under his feet. Fedosia went back to the shed.

"It's all right, he's still tramping up and down. . . ."

The Red Armymen folded up the map.

"Well, we've got to be going. Thanks, mother."

"What's there to thank me for? My Vasya was in the Red Army too. They killed him here, just outside the village. . . ."

The flashlight went out.

"When can we expect you?"

"Well, can't say just now. . . . It depends on what the commander decides and on whether we can make it come off all right. . . ."

"Why shouldn't it come off! Only do hurry up, it's high time. . . . We've been waiting a whole month . . . going blind with looking out for you. . . ."

"It's not so easy, mother."

"I know it's not easy, but it's not easy for us here either You try hard, boys, pitch into it 'good and proper. . . ."

Suddenly an idea occurred to her.

"Wait a minute? There's something else. . . ."

"What's that?"

"Their chief, sort of commander he is, is in my house There's nobody about, only the sentry in front there. The chief's sleeping like a log with his girl friend. You can kill the sentry. No, I can let you in quietly through the roof. You can catch him like a rat in a trap."

The eyes of the youngest of the Red Armymen glistened.

•"What about it, boys. . . ."

"Hold on a minute, this wants thinking over. ..."

"What's there to think about? Just drag that skunk out by the scruff of his neck. It's easy as pie!"

"Oh, yes? It's always easy to do something daft! You finish him off and then what? In the morning there's a hell of a row, they inform Headquarters, and then they send so many of their troops here that we can't do a thing. ..."

"There's something in that, of course. ..."

"That'd be a fine end to our scouting! Right now they're sitting here nice and quiet, safe in the arms of Jesus. You can see for yourself, one sentry on guard outside the Captain's house. If you give them a fright you'll spoil everything."

"But wouldn't I just love to drag that Jerry out. ..."

"Wait. Another time. And now, back home we go!"

"And where is this home of yours?" asked Fedosia curiously.

"That's just a way we have of talking, mother. Our homes are a long way off. But in wartime, your home's where your unit is. You just tell us how to get of hfer; we all but sunk in the snow on our way to this place. ..."

"I'll show you—here, straight down to the gully and follow the river all the way. Only our lads are lying there unburied, so go carefully., The river will bring you out onto the plain where you'll see Okhabi and Zelentsi. Only there are Germans there, "too."

"We know that. The main thing is not to run into anybody here."

"You don't have to worry. The only sentry here is outside my house, there's nobody else. Go quietly and when the wind drops you keep still, otherwise he may hear the snow crunch under your feet."

Three crouching shadows followed her, halting when she halted.

"There's the gully; go straight down, only be careful, it's slippery."

,"Goodbye, mother. Thanks for everything. You're a brick."

"Good luck to you, boys. Only hurry back, do hurry back. . . ."

"We'll do our damndest, you can be sure of that! And now you'd better get along home, it's awfully cold."

"It doesn't matter, I'm used to it."

Fedosia stood on the brink of the gully and looked down. They moved quickly and it became harder and harder to make out their white-clad silhouettes against the background of snow. At last they faded into the gloom, vanished in the darkness of the night, swallowed up by the howling snow-storm that had arisen over the earth. They had disappeared as completely as if they had never been there. Fedosia turned homewards. She walked slowly, lingeringly. She felt as if she had been released from prison for a minute, as if she had breathed her fill of free air for a minute, and now she was going back to her chains of her own free will. With hatred in her eyes she looked at the dark outline of her house, where the German was sleeping with his hussy, where she would have to go and listen to his detestable snoring.

Yes, he was still scoring, whistling through his nose, while that woman of his was muttering something in her sleep. Fedosia smiled grimly in Vengeful ghee: there'll soon be an end to you. The Red Army men are coming and they'll go straight into the bedroom and drag you out of that featherbed.

Would she hear them as they crept up, or would she wake only when they entered the house? No, she was quite sure she would not fall asleep, that there would be no sleep for her until they came, until the village was free.

The snow squeaked under the sentry's boots, and Werner whistled through his nose. Everything was just as it had been yesterday and the day before. And yet everything was

quite different. For the first time in all that month, for the first time since the day Vasya had been killed, there was joy in her heart, a joy that blazed, giving off light and warmth, mounting in surging flames. Fedosia pressed her hands hard against her mouth to keep herself from shouting out this great joy for all the world to hear. She alone knew of it and nobody else, nobody in all the village. She alone knew that now they need not wait as they had formerly waited, with implicit faith but with no idea of how long they must still wait. Now she could figure out how much longer it would be. Today, tomorrow, the day after? How long would it take the three to get to 'their unit'? And how long would it take their unit to get here? A day, two days, three? She knew, she felt that it could not be more than three days. Surely such a cruel, stupid thing as the death of the five hostages who were in the Commandant's office could never happen.

Werner had given them three days. The idea suddenly struck her that this three-day period had nothing to do with the hostages. These were the three days in the course of which a bottomless pit would open up before the Germans. The Germans would look into the relentless faces of the Red Armymen, would look death in the eyes.

There were three hundred houses in the village, and in every house, except those from which the Germans had driven the tenants into the snow, lived people who suffered, waited and wept, consoling themselves with the unwavering hope expressed in those magic words which gave them strength: our troops are coming. And she, she alone of the whole village, knew for certain not only that they were coming—she had never doubted that—but that they were already on their way. She knew that a death sentence from which there was no appeal had been passed on the German gang. Olena had not lived to see it, but the five in the Commandant's office would, of that she was sure.

* * *

That night the village elder sat up late in the Commandant's office. With the help of the collective farm records, he was painstakingly calculating how much grain each of the peasants must deliver. Beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead, and he made a fresh mistake in his calculations every minute. The oil lamp was smoking. With sleep-laden eyes the soldiers watched the two men sitting at the table. Gaplik calculated, added, multiplied, making mistake after mistake and thereby provoking waspish remarks on the part of the Feldwebel.

Gaplik tried to concentrate, but without success. He could not rid himself of the idea that all these figures and calculations might prove unnecessary. It was the most likely thing in the world that they would not be needed. It was easy enough to work it out on paper, easy enough to calculate; it was even comparatively easy to hand each one an exact account of how much grain he must deliver to the German government. •But this was not enough. Papers would not satisfy either the Captain or Headquarters, which was demanding deliveries. They wanted grain as well as papers, and Gaplik very much doubted whether anybody would give the Germans grain. And when all was said and done, he, Gaplik, would be held responsible. The Captain had threatened him most conclusively, and the elder knew that the German might carry out his threats at any moment.

Nor had Gaplik's scheme of taking the hostages led to any positive results so far. There they sat under lock and key, but somehow nobody had appeared at the Commandant's office to give information about the little criminal. Again he would be held responsible. The Captain had to find the guilty person, had to produce him in order to demonstrate his efficiency to Headquarters. And the guilty person would, of course, be Gaplik.

"What are you scribbling there?" growled the Feldwebel. "You've messed up that whole column of figures again. Now

we have to begin all over again. What are you thinking about, anyway?"

Gaplik smiled fawningly. What was he thinking about? No, he couldn't tell the Feldwebel that. He bent still lower over the paper, and scratched away more diligently than ever.

At last all the calculations were finished. It was pitch dark outside. The wind howled piercingly. Slowly the elder buttoned up his sheepskin jacket.

"Somebody might see me home," he muttered at last. There was a sentry in front of his house, but in order to get under the protecting cover of his rifle he had to walk a considerable distance through this dark, stormy night. The Feldwebel shrugged his shoulders.

"What's the matter with you? Can't you get home by yourself? I can't send a soldier without the Captain's orders."

"And, what about yourself?" suggested Gaplik timidly.

The Feldwebel struck the table with his fist.

"What under the sun are you thinking about? Headquarters may ring up any moment, and here you want me to chuck my post and lead you home like a nursemaid! What are you afraid of anyway? Nobody here dares poke his nose out at ni^ht."

The elder made no reply and slunk to the door. At the threshold he stopped short. Coming out of the light, the darkness seemed impenetrable, as thick and tangible as pitch. He stood there for a minute until his eyes became accustomed to the gloom so that he could distinguish the road, the outlines of the trees across the street and the silhouettes of the roofs. Turning up the collar of his jacket he set out for home. Yes, they treated him like a mangy cur, he thought bitterly. Every one of them had the right to shout at him, every one could vent his wrath and ill temper on him. The Capta'n, the Feldwebel, any of the soldiers, all

considered themselves above him, while he had to slave away like a horse, risking his life constantly. He glanced around apprehensively.

Orders were all very well, but anything might happen in this accursed village. The Feldwebel himself was afraid to go out. It was not a matter of the telephone, he was simply yellow. Yet he had turned Gaplik out into the inky night, where danger dogged his every step.

He tried to walk softly, to slink through the village silently, but the snow crunched and squeaked under his feet, and the wind, as if on spite, died down for whole minutes at a time so that his footsteps were most likely heard by the whole village. Suddenly he thought he saw somebody standing at the bend in the road. He stopped stock-still, frightened out of his wits. The shadow did not move. Gaplik waited in a panic for what would happen next.

It flashed through his mind that he could turn back and spend the night in the office. At least he could sit there till morning. But he was afraid to turn his back—whoever it was there would pounce on him. . . .

With the determination of despair he walked on. And there at the bend of the road was a bush! However could he have forgotten that bush! How many times he had passed it in the daytime!

But just then Gaplik slipped, and in that instant realized that something terrible was happening. He gasped. Something blinded his eyes, covered his mouth, swathed the whole of his head. He would have cried out, but a heavy blow felled him. He felt himself being lifted, felt himself swaying back and forth as they carried him. He heard the snow crunching and heavy breathing. Then a door creaked. He was thrown roughly onto the floor. He could feel somebody's hands on him, and realized that he was being bound. At last the cloth that covered his head was removed. He blinked. A

tiny lamp dimly lit up the interior of the cottage and the people who were in it. He recognized lame Alexander and Frosya Grokhach's dark-complexioned face. He was trembling all over, and his bald head was wobbling so he could not stop the quivering.

"Sit down, Alexander," ordered a little wrinkled-up old woman whom Gaplik had never seen before. "You can write, and we've got to put it all down properly, all in good order."

They sat down at the table. Leaning against the wall Gaplik looked on in abject terror. Shadows flickered over their faces as the reddish light from the smoky kerosene lamp lit them up from below.

"And you stand up, seeing you're before the court," said a stocky woman, blowing her nose energetically.

With some difficulty he rose to his feet.

"Stand here, you ape! What are you squirming for? Stand up like a man!"

You're asking too much of him, Terpilikha," remarked Frosya.

Terpilikha misunderstood her.

"He's got to stand up properly. A court's a court. Should have finished him off out there on the road. But we, we're giving him a proper trial. So let him behave himself properly."

Fear made Gaplik's blood run cold. There he was in a cottage of whose existence he had so far been unaware, but which was right alongside the German Headquarters, in a village that the Germans had occupied for all of a month. He was standing with bound arms, and at the table sat a few women and the lame stableman. They had declared themselves a court and were going to pass sentence on him, the elder, appointed by the German Command. Nor was this some ghastly nightmare, it was stern reality.

"Well, now, what's your name, you louse?" asked Terpilikha.

Gaplik wanted to answer, but his voice died in his throat and the only sound that came was a queer squeak.

"What are you squawking about? Pretending to be a baby, or what? Just look at him. And don't you play the fool, but answer! We've got no time to be fussing around with every piece of junk that comes along. And you, Alexander, write everything down, write it all down! Now, then, what's your name?"

"But you know it yourself," he mumbled grumpily.

"I'm not asking you whether I know or don't know, you snake-in-the-grass! A court's a court, and when I ask you something you've got to answer! What's your name?"

"Gaplik, Pyotr."

"Imagine that? Pyotr! My father's name was Pyotr Some specimen you are to be given a real man's name. . . ."

"Hold on a minute, Grannie. I've got to write this down. . . ."

"Write away, write away, put it all down properly. . . . What comes next? Oh, yes! How old are you?"

"Forty-eight."

"Forty-eight. . . . How could the world bear such filth for forty-eight years! Write it down, write it down. Alexander."

"I've got it all down long ago. Carry on with the questions."

"Uhuh. . . . What else is there? Yes. . . . You're the elder, eh?"

"The elder," he confirmed gloomily.

"The elder. He sure wanted to be something. . . . And what were you before?"

Gaplik remained silent, his eyes fixed on the ground.

"Why don't you answer? Ashamed, are you? I suppose you were something worse than an elder, eh?"

Again he made no reply, but stood there staring stolidly at the tips of his boots.

"Hey, you! If I land you one on the jaw your tongue'll loosen up pretty quick! Now, then, answer."

"Just a minute, Grannie, let me ask him," put in Alexander.

She opened her mouth to protest, but thought better of it and waved her hand.

"Go on, question him. Let's see how you manage,"

Regarding the elder closely, the stableman asked in a low, calm voice.

"You've been in prison, haven't you?"

The elder did not raise his eyes from his boots.

"Were you in for long?"

"Long. . . ."

"About how long?"

Silence.

"What were you in for?"

Again silence.

"What were you before—peasant, worker, landlord?"

Terpilikha was just about to put in a word when the elder unexpectedly answered:

"A peasant. . . ."

"Ah-ha, a kulak?"

"So he's a kulak!" exclaimed Terpilikha triumphantly.

"And he wanted some more peasants' blood to drink!"

"Hold on a bit, Grannie. . . ."

"Why should I? Is this a court or isn't it? I have as much right to speak as you have! More, in fact! Who was it kept saying all the time that nothing would come of it? And now you see something did come of it."

"Right you are, right you are. . . . Only wait a bit, I wanted to ask him something else."

"Go ahead, then, ask away,"

"So you were a kulak. . . . And when did you escape from prison?"

"As soon as the war began."

"I see. And you went home, did you?"¹¹

"Yes."

"Where is that?"

"Near Rostov."

"So, near Rostov. . . . And where did you come across the Germans?"

"There, near Rostov."

"Is that where they recruited you?"

"Yes."

"Just a minute, Alexander, you've still got to ask him what he was in for,"

An expression of indefinable stubbornness appeared on Gaplik's face.

"Won't you tell us what you were in for?"

Silence.

"You were in prison before we got rid of the kulaks, weren't you?"

"Yes."

"So that's it. . . . You were in Petlura's gang?" Alexander's sudden question took Gaplik by surprise.

"I was. . . ."

Terpilikha threw up her hands.

"Just imagine!"

"Everything's clear," began Alexander. "Kulak, bandit, Petlura thug. You were against the Soviet power from the very beginning, eh?"

"From the very beginning," Gaplik confirmed in a low voice.

"And finally entered the service of the Germans. . . ."

TorpTkha jumped up from behind the table.

"It's his fault that Levonyuk was hanged, it's his fault that five people are locked up the Commandant's office

.waiting to be executed! He went; round with the Germans, dragged the cows out of the barns, took my last one away, he did. Let the kids die of hunger for all he cares! He took away the very last animal from the Kalasyuks and the Migors and the Kachurs."

"And from Lis and Smolyachenko," added Frosya.

"He looted the village together with the Germans!"

"What's the point of all this talk? Everything's quite clear."

"Shut up, you women!" said Terpilikha, who was making more noise than anybody. "If we're to have a court, let it be a court; everybody must have his say!"

"What else is there to say? We know who's who and what's what; we see it every day. Every day people get killed on account of him, every day tears and blood flow...."

"Well, then, what do you propose?" asked Terpilikha solemnly.

"Finish the bastard off!"

"Finish him off!"

"Comrades, it has been proposed to finish the bastard off. All those in favour?"

All hands flew into the air.

"Anybody against? Anybody abstain from voting?"

"Nobody."

"Well, that's that, comrades. Alexander, write it down and then read it out."

The stableman scribbled away for some time. They all waited in silence. At last he stood up.

"A court composed of Alexander Ovsey, Gorpina Terpilikha, Frosya Grokhach. ..."

"Yevfrosinya," she corrected, and Alexander bent over the table.

"Yevfrosinya Grokhach, Natalya Lemesh and Pelageya Puzyr, having interrogated the accused Pyotr Gaplik, kulak,

criminal and German elder, have unanimously decided on the death sentence."

Gaplik went pale and looked round at the court, his eyes popping.

"So everything's in order," announced Terpilikha.

"Just a minute though," interrupted Frosya. "We've sentenced him all right, but how'll we finish him off?"

They glanced at each other in perplexity.

"That's right, how indeed?"

"We ought to hand him," said Pelageya Puzyr.

"And where will you hang him? Here in the house?"

"You're talking nonsense. Give him one with the axe, and that will be that."

"We can't shoot him, we've nothing to do it with. ..."

"That's all we need, just enough noise to make the Germans come running. ..."

Gaplik began to shiver and shake. They were talking about him and discussing what means to use to execute him as if he weren't there at all, as if he were a mere block of wood. He was harrowed with fear, and a wave of nausea flooded over him. He dropped to his knees.

"Good people, have pity on me! I have wronged you but I'll never do it again!"

He crawled on his knees, striking his head on the floor at the women's feet. The latter recoiled as though they had been scalded.

"Get away, you rat!"

Gaplik burst into tears. The tears rolled down his face, leaving dirty streaks.

"Good people,-I swear to you, by your children I swear!"

"By our children! It's because of you, you bitch's spawn, that our children are dying, because of you!"

"They made me do it, they used force to make me," wailed Gaplik despairingly.

"You stop your howling or I'll break a log over your

thick skull. . . . Just imagine, they made him do it, poor little fellow. . . . And you rushed to Rostov to look for them, eh?:'

"Pity me, have mercy on me," he whined, grovelling on the floor.

They looked at him with disgust.

"Ugh, makes me sick to look at you! You couldn't live like a man, and you can't die like one, either!" said the indignant Pe'ageya.

"Listen here, you women, we can't be fooling around with him so long. He'll bring the Germans down on us with his howling."

Alexander went up behind him and threw a rope round his neck as he lay on the floor.

"A sacred duty," he said and spat on his hands, Frosya squeaked.

"Silence!"

Gaplik's clawed fingers dug into the earthen floor. His legs quivered, then relaxed. The elder was dead.

"Give me a hand. . . . Frosya, help me."

He seized the body under the arms while Frosya got hold of the legs. Terpilikha took a cautious look out into the yard.

A'l was quiet but for the howling wind, which was raising clouds of snow.

"Come on now, hurry up, into the well with him. . . ."

In the yard there was an old well that had dried up many years ago. It was half full of snow now. Into this well they threw the body, and Alexander shovelled in snow over it, whisking off the snow around the edges of the well afterwards.

"He'll lie there all right till spring, and then we'll have to drag him out. By morning everything will be covered with snow, and there won't be a trace of anything."

"How are we going to get home now."

"You'll have to wait, you can't go traipsing around at night. You got away with it once, but that doesn't mean you'll get away with it again," objected Alexander. "I've plenty of room here. Sleep till morning and then you can go home quietly."

They fixed themselves up as best they could on benches and on the floor, but they could not get to sleep.

"Alexander, see to it you hide those court proceedings carefully; when our people come we'll have to hand them over."

"Don't you fret. I'll hide'em all right so's nobody'll find'em."

"You see, Alexander, something did come of it," Terpilikha again stressed her point.

"Why shouldn't something have come of it," he mumbled, already half asleep.

VII.

The door slammed. Fedosia started and dropped her bucket.. A stream of water spread over the clay floor of the kitchen.

"What's wrong with you, butter-fingers?" shouted Werner wrathful!y, jumping back before the dirty water reached his polished boots.

She made no reply. A sharp pain stabbed her heart. She wiped up the water, but her hands were trembling, and she went over the dry spots several times, leaving the little puddles where the floor was sunken. She simply could next do anything to-day. Every sound, every rustle, made her flinch as at the blow of a knout. She was on tenterhooks with expectat'on. They were coming, at any moment they might be here!

The fact that she alone of the whole village knew weighed heavily on her. Of course it was better that nobody knew,

but how hard it was to wait alone! Her heart stood still, her breath came in gasps; they might be here at any moment, at any moment they might come. ...

"And you'd better think over how you're going to go about it," Werner said over his shoulder to Pusya, who was still in bed. He went out, slamming the door again and making Fedosia start again.

Pusya lay there biting her lips, her arms folded behind her head. The tone in which he had said that! As if she were a slave at his every beck and call. He could not find the guerillas even though he had soldiers and telephones and everything under the sun, and yet he demanded that she, with whom nobody in the village even wanted to speak, should find them. Pusya was fuming. He was taking too much for granted. Did he think he could shout at her as he liked just because of the silk chemise and those measly stockings!

She knew quite well that nothing would come of her talk with her sister, that it was hopeless. They had not been on speaking terms since before the war. Olga had often visited the little township where Pusya lived, attending all sorts of congresses or teachers' courses, but had not even taken the trouble to look her up. Apparently she thought Pusya wasn't worth visiting. Naturally! In her opinion it was a crime that Pusya did not work, did not ruin her hands washing clothes, did not scrub floors or learn to drive a tractor! Olga wanted everybody to take after her. She forgot that she was as strong as a bull, while her sister was delicate. Olga never troubled about her looks, just wound her thick braids round her head anyhow. In the winter her hands were always chapped with the cold, and in the summer she was always as black as a Gipsy. Pusya reached out for the mirror that was hanging over the bed and began to study her face closely, her fine plucked eyebrows, her black curls, her round eyes under their dark lashes, and her thin lips between which gleamed her sharp, triangular teeth.

No, she was not fit for the sort of work that Olga did. Nor was there any need for it. Seryozha had been an officer and had earned more than enough money for what she could buy in that place. Olga had never understood that. She had always thought Seryozha badly off. Why so? He had a wife who knew how to dress well even in the miserable rags they managed to get; her hair was always just so; she took care of her hands, and looked far better than any of those local simpletons, who were always in a hurry, always dashing about doing something. And as to the fact that they had no children, that Pusya had not wanted them? She just did not want them, and that was all there was to it. There were children enough in any case. Seryozha had married her, and not children, and when he had married her he had not said anything about children. And all this had been enough to make Olga regard her sister with hostility. What, then, would she think of Pusya now? And yet, what did she expect of her? There had not been a single word from Seryozha since the day he had left for the front, all of five months ago. He had either been killed or taken prisoner. How else explain the fact that there had not been a single letter or even a postcard for five whole months? Who knew how long the war would last? What should she do, wait a year, two years, or who knows how many more, only to peg out with hunger in the end? No, she had found a more sensible way out. And if Kurt was a German—what of it? The Germans were the bosses here now, the Germans were the rulers and would continue to rule. The Bolsheviks were done for, that was quite clear. And everything would have been all right if only Kurt had not been so irritable and bad-tempered these last few days. He spoke to her so rudely. And now he was demanding this interview with Olga. Pusya knew that she couldn't even bring herself to try to see her sister. But how could she get out of it? And anyway, who had told him that Olga was her sister? She dressed

herself slowly, very much out of sorts. That was the last straw, Kurt making demands of her. She would have thought he had his scouts and spies, a whole machine.

Pusya* carelessly pulled the covers over the bed and took Werner's jacket from the chair in order to hang it up in the wardrobe. Some paper rustled in the pocket. She glanced around at the door and then hurriedly pulled the paper out. It was a letter in a long blue envelope, addressed in German. She could not read German, but all the same she opened the letter. That blue envelope struck her as being suspicious.

Four pages of blue paper were covered with small, neat handwriting. A pressed flower had been attached to the top of the first page. Pusya raised the paper to her nose. It exhaled a faint aroma of some perfume quite unknown to her. There could be no doubt about it—the letter was from a woman. Pusya bit her lip until the blood came. A woman was writing to Kurt, a woman from over there, from Germany. On good letter paper, in a small, neat handwriting. Of course the letter might be from his mother, but the flower?

What would she not have given to be able to read that letter, to know what this unknown woman had written to Kurt! She glanced at the date. The letter had been written quite recently. Yes, it had apparently arrived yesterday. Kurt was wearing another jacket today, and he had forgotten to transfer the letter. Up to now she had never seen any letters or photographs in his possession.

None at all? She thought hard. What about the pocket-book which he never parted with and which he would not allow her to touch. What could he have in that pocket-book? And then his mail was delivered to his office and not to the house. He could keep letters and photographs in that drawer which he always locked so carefully whenever he left the room. What did she really know about him after all? Only what he told her himself. At the beginning, when she had

Agreed to leave with him, he had given her his solemn promise that he would take her to Dresden and that they would be married there. There really was no place here where the ceremony could be performed, and she realized quite well that she would have to wait. But that wasn't so very important.

Until now she had been quite easy in her mind, for she felt that Kurt cared for her. It was only Kurt's demand that she talk to Olga that had put ideas into her head and made her see certain things in a different light. Why did he so seldom speak about Dresden these days, and why was he so loth to discuss the subject whenever she raised it? Why was he always so busy, always so cross and touchy? She certainly had not changed. She was just as she had been at the start, when they had first met in the German occupied town, where Kurt had been billeted in a room in her flat. It was Kurt who had changed, Kurt who was different, and now on top of everything else there was this letter. . . .

It occurred to her that she should not be sitting there like that with the letter in her hands. In any case she could not read it, and if Kurt came in there would be a row. He was always ins'ting that she keep away from his papers, whatever they were.

Pusya replaced the blue sheets in the envelope, and hung up the jacket. She decided to keep a keen eye on Kurt. She would certainly find out who was writing to him, and wheth'er his surliness towards her was due to over-tiredness and nervousness or to something else.

Fedosia was rattling the pans in the kitchen, and the clattering irritated Pusya to the point of fury.

"You might be a-little quieter!" she screamed in a shrill, piercing voice.

Fedosia glanced in through the open door, and Pusya caught a strange look on her face. It was not that cold hatred

and contempt she had always seen in the peasant woman's eyes. Her eyes were gleaming now with triumph, with a sort of joy, shining as they had never shone before. Pusya was boiling with rage. What was she so pleased about? Most likely she had been listening at the door and had heard how Kurt had spoken to her. Even this woman had noticed it, even sfte was filled with malicious glee!

She remembered that she could have her revenge on the old woman. She had not yet told Kurt that Fedosia's son lay in the gully. For two days she had deliberately kept quiet in order to torment Fedosia, then she had simply forgotten about it when Kurt had begun to worry her and insist on this talk with Olga. Now she gave vent to her rancour.

"You just wait, I'll tell my husband as soon as he comes, I'll te'l him,"¹ she threatened.

Fedosia gave a malicious laugh, and placing her hands on her hips looked Pusya over deliberately from head to foot.

"Lots I care! Tell him, tell your 'husband'!"¹ she retorted boldly, tauntingly stressing the word "husband."
"Tell him. I can tell him myself, for all the good you'll get out of it. Go on and tell him, a hundred times over if you like! Put your things on and run to his office; go on, now, hurry up!"

Pusya stared at her in wide-eyed astonishment.

"What's the matter with you?"¹

"Nothing's the matter with me. What are you so surprised about? You wanted to tell him, so I'm just saying—go on and tell him. That's all you're living for, to spy on people, to go tattling to the Germans! Well, then, go on, run and tell him everything you know!"

"And I will, you can be sure of that. I will tell him."

"That's what I'm telling you. Go on and tell him. But you just keep on threatening. You can't frighten me that way."

"They'll take him away from you."

"Let them. They took him away from me a month ago. They can't take him away any more."

"Then why do you go there every day?"

"I go because I go. That's my business. If they take him away I shan't go any more, that's all."

"Kurt will have you arrested. You know very well you're not allowed to hang around there."

"You're sure frightening me! Much I'm scared of your arrest! Can't you see me shivering in my shoes. . . ."

Fedosia walked into the room. She was no longer smiling. Her dark eyes were menacing.

"You're the one who ought to be scared, d'you hear! You'd better shiver and shake with fear!"

Pusya sank to a bench.

"What are you talking about? What's there for me to be afraid of?"

"You've everything to be afraid of! You can be afraid of the people: they won't forgive you! Afraid of water: you'll want to drown yourself in it and it will throw you up again! Afraid of the ground: you'll want to hide in it, and it won't screen you. My Vasya is better off lying there in the gully. Levonyuk is better off with his neck in the noose. Olena was better off when she ran naked through the snow at the point of German bayonets. They're all better off than you'll be! Oh, but you'll be envying them yet! You'll be weeping tears of blood because you're not in their place! You'll wish a hundred times over that you'd been strangled on the gallows, that you'd been run through with a bayonet, that you'd been shot!"

She was breathless with rage and hatred, with savage joy at the knowledge that her people were already on the way, that they were coming nearer, that at that very moment, perhaps, while she was throwing these words into the face of this renegade, shots could be heard on the outskirts of the village.

"Get out of here," Pusya gasped. "Get out of here this minute!"

Once again Fedosia laughed contemptuously.

"I can go. I don't get much pleasure in looking at your mug. You'll remember yet how you drove me out of my own house!"

She went out, shamming the door behind her so hard that flecks of plaster fell from the walls.

"And you run and compla'n to your man that I've been shouting at you!" she muttered to herself, as she placed kindling the stove. "He won't be thinking of you much longer. He'll have other things to think of. Maybe right now even!"

But Kurt wasn't thinking about Pusya at all. He strode into the office in a towering passion, and the soldiers, seeing h's tightly pressed lips and scowling forehead, stood to attention more stiffly than ever, while the Feldwebel sprang to his feet from behind the table.

"Have they rung up from Headquarters?"

"They have, Herr Kapitan."

"Why didn't you let me know?"

"There were no orders to, Herr Kapitan."

"What do you mean, no orders?"

"They said I needn't tell you."

"Then why did they call?"

"They asked me whether the prisoner had given any information yet."

"And what did you say?"

"I reported that she hadn't given any information."

"And then what?" A note of venom had crept into the Captain's voice.

The Feldwebel turned pale.

"And then ... I also ... I also reported. ..."

"Well, what else did you report? !"

"That . . . that the prisoner had been executed. ..."

"Who gave you permission to report that? Who asked you to give information? Who gave you any such orders? Did I?"

Bending forward, Werner took a few short steps towards the man who stood stiff as a ramrod in front of him. The Feldwebel did not dare to step back.

"Did I order you to do that, did I give you any such instructions?"

"You did not, Herr Kapitan."

A heavy hand descended on his cheek : the Captain had swung his arm from the shoulder and struck him with all his force.

The Feldwebel staggered, but continued standing to attention, looking Werner straight in the eyes.

"Who gave you such orders, who gave you permission?" hissed the officer, swinging back his arm again.

A red patch had appeared on the Feldwebel's cheek. The white imprint left by the Captain's fingers had darkened quickly as the blood flowed into it.

"Where is the elder? Has he been in today?"

The Feldwebel continued to look the Captain straight in the eyes without so much as blinking.

"He hasn't come yet."

"How much grain have they brought?"

"No grain at all. So far nobody has shown up."

Werner cursed.

"And what about that business of the boy?"

"Nobody has reported, Herr Kapitan."

The Captain pushed his chair back furiously and swept the blotter from the table. Stooping down quickly, the Feldwebel picked it up and put it back in exactly the same spot it had been before.

"Send for the elder! Lively!"

Jawohl, Herr Kapitan,"

Clicking his heels, the Feldwebel left the room. Werner pulled open his drawer and tossed all the papers out of it. He

was seeing red. The Italian woman hadn't said a word, and wouldn't have said anything if he had continued questioning her for a year. She would have died a hundred times over without speaking. At Headquarters, however, they would draw the conclusion that he had been rash, that he had acted thoughtlessly and lost the only clue that led to the secret guerilla detachment, which, elusive as the wind, was raiding the villages in the area covered by Headquarters. And that idiot couldn't have thought of anything better than to blurt out that he had finished the woman off. Quite naturally, of course, they had said that he was not to be called to the telephone and had simply talked with his subordinate behind his back. Of course they were digging a pit for him there, carrying on all sorts of intrigues against him. And to cap everything, no grain had been delivered to this day. Almost twenty-four hours had passed, and nobody had shown up, nobody had confessed where he had hidden his grain. That idiot of an elder had been sure they would be scared. . . . Scared, indeed! It was all very well for the people at Headquarters to keep shouting, elder, elder—but the elder had proved absolutely useless, couldn't accomplish anything, couldn't get the least results, hadn't the slightest influence over the villagers.

The Feldwebel again clicked his heels at the door.

"Well?"

"Herr Kapitan, permit me to report that the elder's not here!"

"What's that? Not here? But I told you to send for him!"

"Permit me to report that I went myself—he's not at home."

Werner shrugged his shoulders.

"Where has he gone to?"

"Permit me to report—I don't know."

Werner was in a ferment.

"Have you gone completely crazy? D'you expect me to find him for you?"

"Her Kapitan, permit me to report that we've already looked everywhere. Yesterday evening the elder sat here till very late. We were reckoning up the stocks of grain there should be in the village. He left for home around midnight, but he never got there, and nobody has seen him since."

"Have you asked everywhere?"

"Jawohl, Herr Kapitan."

"Run away, has he?"

"Jawohl, Herr Kapitan. Most likely he's run away."

"And there you are," said the Captain gloomily, looking at the telephone with unseeing eyes. "What now?"

"Permit me to report, I don't know."

"Idiot!" bawled the Captain. "What did we want him for, that elder? How has he helped us? What has he done? What has he arranged? Eh?"

"Really, Herr Kapitan. ..."

"Ah-ha, really. ... Sit down and write a report to Headquarters that the elder has run away. Let them send another, perhaps they'll find one with more brains."

The Feldwebel went into the next room and set about drawing up a report on the flight of the elder. Then he began another report to the effect that the Captain wanted to keep Olena Kostyuk's execution secret from Headquarters.

"Zause!"

He sprang to his feet, and with a quick movement born of long practice tossed the second report into his drawer.

"Who was on patrol in the village last night? Have them all questioned."

"I've already questioned them, Hferr Kapitan, and they know nothing."

"A fine state of affairs, I must say! It seems you can walk about, leave the village, and our sentries 'know nothing.' One of these fine days we'll be slaughtered like sheep, together with all the sentries. How is it they don't know anything?"

He didn't fly away, he walked on his own two feet! What were they doing, sleeping?"

"They couldn't sleep in such a frost. But there was a fierce blizzard, and a man who knows the country well could creep through. We ought to have sentries posted around the whole village,"

"I'm not asking you what we ought to have or ought not to have! Who would you post round the village? Where would you get so many soldiers from? And what were you thinking of yourself? Didn't you know that the elder should have been kept under special surveillance?"

The Feldwebel remembered that the elder had asked for an escort home. He had evidently been afraid to go out at night. That meant he would most likely have been just as afraid to run away at night. But the Feldwebel preferred not to mention this to the Captain lest he add fuel to the flame. The Feldwebel felt guilty—after all, he should have seen Gaplik home.

"It's a job and a half working with you, let me tell you! Pack of idiots!" growled the Captain.

The Feldwebel, standing at attention, waited at the door.

"Well, what are you standing around for? Get on with your writing, give them something to be happy about, write! A fine assistant they picked out for me, I must say!"

The Feldwebel withdrew and hurriedly set about adding new remarks to his report, using material provided by Captain Werner himself during his furious outburst. From time to time he raised his hand to his burning cheek.

Werner laid out his papers, but soon realized that he was in no fit state to work, and called for the Feldwebel.

"Stay by the telephone, "I'm going out for a walk."

"I take the liberty of reporting, Herr Kapitan, there's a terrible frost. ..."

"I know that without you, I came here through it," grunted the Captain, and turned up his collar.

The wind had died down, but the frost was even keener. The snow squeaked underfoot. There was no sun, but the bright glare of the snow hurt the eyes! Werner stood in the doorway and glowered at the village with hate-filled eyes. There it lay, just as though it were in a featherbed, snowed-up, quiet, apparently calm. The roofs wore thick white head-dresses. On'y in a few places had the wind laid bare the straw of the thatch. There was trot a'sign of life.

Here and there, German soldiers were bustling about, but otherwise there was not a sound or a movement—deathly silence. Not even the sound of barking¹ dogs. The soldiers had shot them the day they arrived. The dogs—no less savage than the people—had rushed at them and hadn't allowed them to enter the houses.

Werner sensed some lurking peril in this apparently sleeping village. Yes, it was certainly better at the front, where one fought face to face with the enemy. And they called this rest, to sit here and establish law and order in an occupied village. Fine law and order—a month had passed since they had driven the Bolsheviks out, and so far they had not managed to do anything. Every mortal thing, all their plans and decrees, had gone to smash against that unyielding, stubborn, mute resistance. What did these blockheaded people expect to achieve? Surely they must realize that they would be forced to surrender in the long run, that even if every man-jack of them had to be wiped out, things must inevitably take their course, leading to the fulfilment of the Germans' original plans. But they did not want to realize this. Apparently they really did believe in a Bolshevik victory.

From somewhere in the distance he could hear the drone of an engine. He turned down his collar and listened. An aeroplane was flying up there. The hum of the engines came through the clear air like the buzzing of a mosquito. But the sound kept growing louder, nearer. Shading his eyes from the glare of the snow, the Captain peered up at the sky.

"There it is, Herr Kapitan," the sentry at the door of his office made bold to point out.

Werner looked in the direction indicated. There it was, a first no bigger than a gnat, then growing to the size of a fly, and still growing and growing as he watched it.

"Ours?" asked the Captain half questioningly half assertively.

The sentry was listening intently.

"I don't think so, Herr Kapitan. Different engine."

Werner was worried.

For a whole month not a single enemy aircraft had appeared in the district. Surely they hadn't come to life again?

Several soldiers came out of the building.

"Bolshevik," said one of them.

The street was no longer deserted. People had appeared as though they had sprung up from under the ground. The women stood outside their houses, and the children came tumbling out in batches. They were all shading their eyes and staring up at the sky.

"Ours!" shouted Sasha.

Malyuchikha seized him by the shoulder.

"Ours?"

But already there was no longer any doubt about it. The plane was flying low as low could be. And in the dazzling glare of that snowy day, everyone could see the unmistakable mark—Red Stars—on the wings.

Malyuchikha dropped to her knees. Following her example, all the other women dropped to their knees like one person. The children, forgetting ever} thing, dashed out into the middle of the street, threw back their heads, and waved their hands.

"Ours! Ours!" they shouted joyfully. Tears ran down the concentrated, solemn faces of the women. An aeroplane, their aeroplane, was fly'ng over the village, carrying on its wings a message of hope from the East, the symbol of liberty, the Red Star. It was the first Soviet plane they had seen for

a whole month. It was the first plane that had not whined out its dismal death howl, the intermittent, short-breathed howl of the German aircraft engine, the first whose wings did not carry that black, coiling serpent—the swastika.

The Captain heard the children's shouts. He glanced down the street and saw a sight such as he had never seen in all the time he had been in the village. There were people everywhere. Women were kneeling in front of their houses; children were hopping about in the road like a flock of sparrows; elderly people were waving their hands to the bird flying high above them. He quivered with rage.

"Disperse that gang!" he screamed to the soldiers. They did not understand him. Werner drew his revolver and fired into the crowd of children. A shot rang out, followed by another. But the Captain missed. His hand was trembling with mortification. The children flew in all directions like a flock of sparrows when a stone is suddenly thrown into their midst, the women after them. In a minute they had all disappeared as though carried away by the wind. Doors were hurriedly slammed to, and Werner barely had time to look around before the village was again deserted, dead. Not a soul to be seen anywhere.

"Didn't you hear what I said, you blockheads?"¹¹ he hurled at his dumbfounded soldiers, enraged that they had all seen him fire and miss at such close range. "Standing there calmly and watching a hostile demonstration! And what's wrong with the anti-aircraft guns, where are they?"

Just then the AA guns opened fire. A shell burst in a black cloud of smoke far behind the aircraft. A second burst still farther behind it. The plane rose higher and disappeared in the distance.

"Woke up, did they! Trying to put salt on its tail. . . . Having a nap, were you?" he shouted at a sergeant who came running up to him.

"Heir Kapitan, permit me to report, we thought it was ours. . . . And then. . . ."

"All the women in the village recognized it, only you people got all sorts of ideas into your head! I'll show the lot of you. . . ."

"It was the first plane, Herr Kapitan. . . ." began the Sergeant in an attempt to justify himself. ,,

"Shut up! I didn't ask you! The first plane! If he drops a bomb on the battery it'll be the first plane all right! Imbeciles!"

The Captain turned on his heel furiously and went back into his office. He was trembling with rage from head to foot. What an accursed day, what accursed people!

"Well, have you found the elder yet?"¹¹

The terrified Feldwebel jumped from behind the table.

"Herr Kapitan, there was no order to continue the search. . . ."

Werner snorted wrathfully and sat down. Of course, blasted idiot, none of them could think. . . . But the responsibility would fall on him alone. His friends at Headquarters would see to that.

Suddenly it occurred to him that if trouble started there might be additional complications over Pusya. It would just cap the talk about his liberal attitude towards the population.

"I'll have to get rid of her,"¹ he thought reluctantly.

He had no desire to do anything. There he was, an army officer, loaded down with all sorts of municipal duties, forced to concern himself with establishing law and order in this damned village. What could he do here? He was snowed under by piles of paper, sheets, scraps, bits, and he could not dig himself out. The elder and the Feldwebel were constantly delving into the collective farm books, but this too yielded no results. The army demanded grain, meat and fats. But those cunning Bolsheviks had driven off their herds way back in the autumn, and the few cows that had remained in

the farmyards were barely sufficient for his own detachment. As for the grain, it had either been taken away or so well hidden that nothing could bring it to light.

"What about the hostages?"

"They're locked up, Herr Kapitan."

"Have you given them anything to eat?"

"N-no. . . . Nothing at all, Herr Kapitan."

"Anything to drink?"

"Nothing to drink either," the soldier mumbled still rrtore hesitantly.

"Good! Excellent. . . . Not a crumb of bread or a drop of water! They don't want to give us anything to eat, and we won't give them anything either. . . . If they want to peg out, let'em. No great loss if they did. . . ."

He just could not sit at his table. Once again he went out. He thought of going home, but the idea of Pusya there bored him. He turned towards the gun positions. Artillery was his weakness, although he was no specialist in this field. He decided to divert himself by arranging a bit of target practice for the gun crews.

A few minutes later his sharp voice could be heard on the square showering commands and curses at his men.

"He's in a fury," remarked one of the soldiers in the guard-room.

"He's got reason enough to be sore. . . . Not a smell of the grain, and on top of that the elder's bolted. . . ."

"Shrewd egg. . . ."

The Feldwebel looked at the speaker suspiciously.

"Sounds like you sort of envy the elder?"

"What's there to envy, Herr Feldwebel?" asked the soldier, fixing his eyes innocently on the Feldwebel. "He won't run far. Our men will pick him up."

"If he's run to the rear." added the other.

"And if he's gone forward, the Bolsheviks will skin him alive. No, there's certainly no envying him."

"Maybe the mouzhiks have simply laid him out somewhere."

The Feldwebel shuddered.

"What are you jabbering about? How could the mouzhiks have laid him out? He sat here till late, and then didn't go home."

"On the way, say. . . ."

"Nobody goes out at night here. The order's clear enough!" rapped out the Feldwebel.

The soldier glanced at him askance, but made no reply. Surely the Feldwebel could not have forgotten in a single day that in spite of the order, in spite of the patrols, some youngster had crept up to the shed, while, strange as it might be, the body had disappeared in a way that was quite inexplicable, since bodies do not move from place to place of themselves.

"And anyway, what's the idea of all this gabbing. Get on with your work!" fumed the Feldwebel.

The soldiers fell silent. The Feldwebel was just as likely to take a swing at them as the Captain. And as he had had a taste of it that very morning—the red fingermarks were still visible on his cheek—he was liable to vent his rage on anybody that crossed him,

"Where's Neumann?"

"Gone with a party to look for meat."

The Feldwebel raised an eyebrow.

"To look for meat. . . . Don't they know where the cows are?"

"There are hardly any cows left, Herr Feldwebel, the Herr Kapitan sent ten of them to Headquarters the day before yesterday. They've gone to hunt up some chickens."

The Feldwebel shrugged his shoulders and buried himself in his papers, awaiting the telephone call from Headquarters. He gloated secretly at the Captain's discomfiture. Slapping his face was easy enough—but to get the grain which Headquarters was demanding was a little more difficult. Nor was

it easy to find out where the guerillas were. He knew that the Captain had it coming to him in a big way. And although he realized perfectly, working with the Captain as he did, that no one could get results here, he was pleased that Werner's goose would be cooked over this business. He was altogether too high and mighty, thought too little of his work and too much of his rat-like mistress. He would have to pay for all of this now.

Silent resentment had begun to swell in the Feldwebel's heart from the day they had entered that township and broken into a flat from which someone had fired at the German troops. There was no one in the flat by the time they broke in, but the Feldwebel had found a beautiful grey fur coat in a wardrobe. He could have sent it away the very next day—Mitzi had been begging him for a fur coat. But the Captain had taken it from him for that monkey of his. Now they were stationed in a village; where would he get a fur coat here? Nothing here except those foul smelling sheepskin jackets. Mitzi was freezing in her shoddy coat, while the Captain's mistress was strutting around in furs. The Feldwebel could not think of this without boiling over, and was constantly turning over in his mind what he could report to Headquarters about the Captain. They did not like him there either, because he gave himself airs, thought himself better than any of them. In what way was he better? Feldwebel Zause never forgot that the Fihrer himself had been a Feldwebel in his day. The rays of the Fihrer's glory were reflected on Feldwebel Zause, and he would never forgive the Captain either for robbing him of that fur coat nor for the slap in the face, which was not the first he had received.

The Captain's shouts could be heard all the way from the church, and Zause smiled maliciously. Shout away there, shout away for all the good it'll do you!

The soldiers were blustering through the village. They went from house to house in a crowd. If anyone had accused them

of cowardice they would have been terribly put out, but even in broad daylight they did not feel at ease in this accursed village, and preferred going about in crowds.

Grokhachikha opened the door at their knock and looked at the so diers gloomily but boldly. The girls hid in a corner.

"What d'you want?"

"Chicken, give chicken!"

"There aren't any chickens, you've gobbled them all up."

They understood her meaning even though they did not understand the words, but they did not believe her. They scoured the farmyard, looked into the chicken coop and the empty cowshed, threw the straw about in the barn, as though there might be chickens roosting there.. She shrugged her shoulders as she watched them rushing around.

"There's nothing here," said one of the soldiers who was raking in the straw.

They went on from house to house, from shed to shed.

"Chickens, give chickens!"

Banyuchikha's one and only hen, which she had hidden under the stove to protect from the requisitioning party, cackled out of turn, to its own great misfortune. The Germans dragged it out triumphantly. The hen tore itself out of their hands and flew to the window in a panic, beating its wings against the pane.

"Come here, come around this side!"

With a piercing squawk the hen fluttered into the lean-to and then into the yard, the soldiers after it. The bird ran with its wings outspread, raising a cloud of powdery snow. One of the soldiers drew his revolver and fired. The bird, now a ball of bloody feathers, collapsed in the snow. The soldier p'cked it up by its legs, and with the air of a victor waved it about.

Their insistent, demanding cry: "Chickens, give chickens!" marked their progress from house to house.

The people could see them coming and hastily tried to hide everything that could be hidden. They hid their chickens under the stoves, under beds, in beds and in the attics. The Germans searched, sniffing around like hungry dogs. Their haul, however, was not a very rich one. At last they decided, even though no such orders had been given, to take one of the few remaining cows. Lokutikha wept and wrung her hauds. They pushed her aside so roughly that she all but fell.

"Spotty, Spotty!"

The cow gazed out of her gentle, moist eyes, like rich brown chestnuts just out of their burs. They dragged her by her halter rope, but she stubbornly refused to go. The glittering snow blinded her. She would not step over the high threshold and fell on her forelegs. One of the soldiers started pulling her by the tail and she moed plaintively.

"She's with calf, she's with calf!" cried Lokutikha. "Oh, good heavens, what under the sun are you doing! The cow is with calf!"

"Don't scream, Mother," said her ten-year-old son Savka dismally, frowning at the Germans.

"Oh, my children, whatever will I give you to eat, how will I feed you! We've nothing left but Spotty, and now thy're taking her away! Okh, my children will die, they'll die of hunger!"

"Don't scream so, Mamma," said Savka even more solemnly.

At last the cow stepped over the threshold. They pulled her, pushed her, showered her with blows. Lokutikha ran alongside, trying to stroke at least once more the distended sides of their provider.

"Spotty, Spotty!"

The cow looked at her mistress with large, moist eyes and gave a long-drawn-out plaintive moo.

"My darling! Even the cow understands what they're doing!"
Spotty!"

She ran, hampered by her long skirt, her face red and tear-stained, forgetting the Germans and everything around her, until one of them gave her such a push that she fell to the snow with a groan. Savka went up to her with a firm, manly tread.

"I told you, Mamma. . . . What good will that do you? Get up, Mother, get up, you mustn't lie there in this frost!"

She buried her face in the snow, her body shaken with sobs, Savka tried to lift her with his weak childish hands.

"What shall we do, what shall we do now?"

"Oh, do be quiet," he said flaring up. "All the cows they've taken away, and nobody made such a row as you!"

"But I have five of you to feed," she said in justification.

"And others have as many as eight. . . ."

"Now don't you start teaching me, for the Lord's sake. Is that the way to talk to your mother?"

"Come on, you'd better come home. Nyurka is screaming her head off."

"Screaming, is she?"

"The frozen hem of her skirt swished as she ran towards the cottage. Savka followed her with the heavy gait of a tired man.

The gang of soldiers driving the cow disappeared behind the Commandant's office. Here in a shed the Germans had rigged up something like a miniature slaughter house. Within a few minutes the smoking flayed carcass was hanging from a cross-beam.

In the meantime, Werner, tired of the sound of his own voice, shouting on the square, had returned to the office.

"Herr Kapitan, permit me to report that we've requisitioned a cow," the Feldwebel told him.

The Captain waved his hand. He was absolutely fed up with all this supply business. Today a cow, tomorrow a cow, but what were the prospects in another few days? Headquarters had given strict orders that the troops were to supply

themselves from the villages in which they were garrisoned. Scarcely a month had passed, and the village had already been cleaned out completely. The geese, the chickens, the ducks and the pigs had all been eaten. Only a few miserable cows remained. What would they do when these were gone?

"Have they sent us any food supplies?"

"Wine and chocolate, Herr Kapitan."

"And besides wine and chocolate?"

"Nothing else, Herr Kapitan. The day before yesterday they again reminded us that we must depend on local resources for our supplies. Shall I send the wine and chocolate to your quarters?"

"Send them along, only see to it that they're not gobbled up on the way!"

"They won't be, they're in a sealed crate."

Werner unbuttoned his greatcoat, and slowly rolled himself a cigarette, plunged *in* thought.

"By the way, Zause. ..."

"*Jawohl, Herr Kapitan?*"

"There is no system in our supply methods. From today on, you will answer for the comm'.ssariat."

"*Jawohl, Herr Kapitan,*" answered the Feldwebel. His face flushed with anger. Werner was already at the door.

"Herr Kapitan!"

"Now what?"

"Will you permit us to make requisitions in the neighbouring villages?"

Werner shrugged.

"Don't be an utter ass! You know very well that those villages have been allotted to other units."

"There's nothing left here, Herr Kapitan."

"It's the easiest thing in the world to say, 'There's nothing left.' Your job is to find something, get me? Look around! If you look properly you'll find something!"

He went out, slamming the door behind him.

VIII

Pusya glanced around undecidedly as she came out of the house. She felt that the whole business was absolutely useless, but Kurt had insisted, and kept on insisting more and more stringently and rudely.

"After all, it's your own sister. Surely you know how to talk to your own sister? You simply don't want to! Very well, the time will come when I won't want to do something. . . ."

Pusya was scared. She depended entirely on Kurt. What if he decided to throw her off in this village, where everyone regarded her as an enemy?

Tucking her hands into the sleeves of her coat, she walked slowly down the street. This talk with her sister was quite hopeless. She couldn't tell Kurt that she had already had a talk with her sister, that is, if you could call the uproarious row between them when Pusya had first come to the village a talk. Olga had simply spat in her face, and all that Pusya had been able to make out was some rage-choked words about Vasya lying there in the gully. Olga had wanted to insult her, to humiliate her because she lived in the house of a woman whose son had been killed in battle. What had that to do with Pusya? But Olga had felt that it really did concern her; she had railed at Pusya and left. That was all. How could she go to her now and talk to her?

The branches of the roadside trees shone silver with the hoar-frost. The snow glittered and sparkled in the sunshine, hurting her eyes with its pitiless glare. Pusya sighed and thought of Seryozha. No, Seryozha had never shouted, had never been angry with her. He would simply sigh and grow thoughtful. But why should she think about Seryozha now? Her husband was Kurt.

A wave of anger swept over her. How dared he? But she knew that he did dare and that there was nothing she could do about it. Her attitude towards Kurt was just the same as it had been towards Seryozha. That meant it was not she who was to blame for this misunderstanding. It was simply that Kurt was nothing like him, that they did not resemble each other at all.

She was already near the house where Olga was living. Just a few more steps. What should she do? Knock and walk in? no, that was impossible. Pusya stood there for a moment, undecided, but in spite of her warm boots the frost nipped her toes, and she turned and walked back. Let Kurt do what he liked, let him shout and fume—there was no sense to her putting up with Olga's vicious, contemptuous words again. If there was anything to be gained by it, that would be different; but she knew that nothing, absolutely nothing would come of that Conversation. She walked on a few more steps, and again hesitated. What should she do? Better if they had killed Olga, like they had killed Olena, then there would not have been all this worry and fuss.

Pusya glanced at the house in which her sister lived, and her heart fluttered unpleasantly—someone was coming out of the door. She stamped about in the snow, like a criminal caught red-handed, and glanced sideways at the house. It was not OLGA but the woman with whom Olga was staying. The woman stood at the door, and, shading her eyes from the sun, stared intently into the distance. Then she pushed open the door slightly and shouted something. A group of people soon gathered around her, all shading their eyes from the blinding glare of sun and snow, and looked in the same direction.

Fedosia Kravchuck came out as well when she saw the people in the street. She, too, looked in the same direction. For a moment her heart stood still, then began to beat wildly, madly, like the clapper of a bell; On the road, slowly drawing nearer to the village, people were marching. They

marched in serried ranks, and here and there bayonets glinted in the sun.

"Are they Germans?" someone asked.

"You'd think there weren't enough of them here. All we need is more of them. . . ."

"Do they think they're going to find grub here?"

"Put they're not Germans!" exclaimed Banyuchikha suddenly in a voice that sounded like the twang of a tightly drawn violin string. "Oh, my dears, just look at them, they're not Germans!"

"You're crazy! Who could they be but Germans?"

"They're our men, merciful God, our men coming. . . ."

"Use your eyes, woman. How can they be our men?"
Marching along the open road in broad daylight!

"Mamma, there are stars on their caps, stars!" cried Grisha Banyuk in his piping little voice.

"What are you talking about? Can you see them? Can you really see them?"

The glare of the snow prevented them from seeing. They strained their eyes desperately in an effort to make out the men who were approaching the village.

"Ours? Germans?"

"How can they be our men? Grisha was just seeing things. . . . Look at the Germans standing quietly at their posts, without even thinking of shooting. . . ."

"All the same, Grisha's right!" exclaimed Alexander suddenly. "The caps are ours. . . ."

"Ours?"

"Only there's nothing to be so happy about, look again, you can see them now,"

• Sileice fell. They could see the men plainly now. A party of Red Army men were marching along the road. They weren't really marching, but dragging their feet through-the snow, and on either side of them marched an armed Gfcrtaaiii convoy:

"They're bringing in Red Army prisoners," came the despairing whisper,

"They're bringing our men. . . ."

More and more people had gathered on the street. With horror-stricken eyes they watched the group draw nearer. They could already see that the men could scarcely walk and were completely played out with the effort it cost them to move their feet. The soldiers escorting the prisoners kept shouting at them menacingly.

"Merciful God, there are wounded among them. . . ."

"They've taken their boots away, they're marching bare-foot."

"All bloodied, look, Sonya."

A passing German shouted savagely at the people crowding in front of the houses, but they paid no attention to him and continued staring intently at the approaching procession.

"Merciful God. . . ."

They were already in the village. Now the people could see at close hand the tormented, bloodless faces of the prisoners, blue with cold. One of the Red Army men in the second rank could hardly drag himself along, and was staggering as if he were drunk.

"Hey, you!" shouted one of the German escorts, and the wounded man drew himself up in an attempt to march like the rest. One of his comrades tried furtively to support him when he staggered more than usual. But the sudden blow of a rifle immediately fell on the supporting arm, which dropped lifelessly to the man's side like a broken branch.

"Merciful God. . . ."

Painfully they dragged along their bare, gashed feet, leaving bloody tracks in the snow. They fell and raised themselves heavily on their arms. The blows of rifle butts rained down on them.

Pusya stood and watched them like everybody else. She saw the appalling, wan faces, the eyes burning with fever, the

red blood frozen on the dirty rags that served as bandages, the blackening, frost-bitten feet. Her usual inane simper froze on her lips.

"Take that grin off your face!" she heard someone hiss in her ear, and started back in a fright. It was Olga. Her lips pressed tight, her fists clenched, her brows drawn together, she had been watching the prisoners. And suddenly, through the red nr'st before her eyes, she had seen the slim, pale face of her sister, the flash of earrings over the fur collar and the smirk fixed on her painted lips.

"Take that grin off your face!"

Pusya stepped back. She was looking straight into Olga's large rage-distended eyes, at her lips Quivering with wrath.

"I'm not grinning,"¹ she answered flinching.

"Yes, you are," said O1?a, and struck out with all her might at that fixed, inane simp^or, at that pale face, at the face of the officer's mistress. Pusya squealed like a pup, shrank back, and suddenly bursting into tears, pressed her hands to her head and ra for borne, stumbling and tripping over the long skirts of her fur coat.

And all the while, the newly-arrived men kept marching on. They drew abreast of the crowd. Their feverish, burning eyes turned towards the women standing in front of the houses.

"Bread,"¹ said one of thnn. A rifle butt descended on his head. But the cry was immediately taken up by another.

"Bread. . . . We haven't eaten for a week. . . ."

"Oh Lord, Oh Merciful Lord. . . ." groaned Banyuchikha.

And everyone ran into his house, dashed to his larder, and with trembling hands pot whatever food was left, out of bundles, out of pots, from the niches behind icons.

"Oh Merciful God, hurry, hurry. . . ."

Banyuchikha was the first to rush out again, Ignoring the escort she broke into the ranks. In her hands was a lump

of black bread, the last crust that she had hidden for the children. " -, i

"Beat it!" shouted a German. But she neither saw nor heard anything. She pushed the soldier away any tried to thrbst the bread into the hands of a wounded Red Armyman. , "Beat it!" shouted the German again, and swinging his rifle struck her in the stomach.

> Banyuchikha dropped onto the snow without uttering a sound. The-,German kicked the fallen bread aside. The crust flew off into a ditch. One of the gaunt phantoms dashed after it. A shot rang out. The prisoner fell by the rbadside.

The women did not so much as glance at the unconscious Banyuchikha. -They ran after the prisoners, trying to throw or jfmsh into their hands bread or rye cakes baked in the ashes. Soldiers came runn'g out of the guardroom.

"Get going!" shouted the Feldwebel savagely. The soldiers threw themselves at the women, beating them back with their rifles. Shielding their heads with their arms, the women dropped on their knees and tried to throw the bread under the prisoners' feet. One of the prisoners bent down to p'ck up a piece. Again a shot, and the man dropped dead at his comrades' feet.

"Don't do it, citizens, don't risk your lives for nothing," a young wounded soldier who was scarcely able to hobble along in the ranks shouted to the whole street in a high-pitched, penetrating voice. "Don't women. Go away, mothers, it's no use. They won't let us pick up a crumb anyway. Why sho'uld people be killed for nothing?"

And indeed the women could see that there was nothing they Could do here. Two dead were already lying in the road. With difficulty .Banyuchikha had managed to raise herself a¹ bit, while the others stood with the bread in their hands watching the Red Armymen, who stared hopelessly at the food.

'sasha!" Malyuchikha called to her son. "We can't do anything here. Get hold of the kids, take the short cut to the bend and throw the bread down there in the road. The Jerries won't see it, and perhaps our boys will manage to pick up at least a little bit,"

The children disappeared as if into thin air. The women returned to their doorways. They were crying, biting at the ends of their kerchiefs, swaying back and forth in speechless grief.

"Well, how do you feel?" asked Frosya Grokhach as she gave Banyuchikha a drink of water and rubbed her temples with snow.

Banyuchikha sat up, and covering her eyes with her hands, broke into short, anguished sobs.

"Does it hurt much?"

"No, n.O. . . . What do you think I am, Frosya. ..."

"Don't cry, it'll be all right. Lie down for a bit and you'll feel better."

"Don't be silly, Frosya, I'm not crying because of that. I felt a bit sick, but that'll soon pass. . . . Listen, Frosya, I was thinking that if Pyotr's like that. . . . Do you hear, better if he died in his first battle, better if he was blown up by a bomb, better if he was crushed by a tank. ..."

In a passionate, muffled voice, she whispered straight into the girl's face. Frosya pressed her hand.

"Bear up, bear up. ..."

"Do you hear? If there's no other way let him put a bullet through his own head, blow himself up with a grenade, only not that, not that!"

"Of course. . . . But you'd better get up. I'll help you, you'll freeze here."

Banyuchikha rose to her feet painfully, leaning on the girl's shoulder, and with ah'effort made her way home. Grisha looked at his mother with big, frightened eyes. She dropped

onto the bed with a groan. She was aching all over and felt nauseated. But she was not thinking of that.

"Come here, Grisha!"

The boy went over to the bed.

"Grisha, are you listening to what I'm saying?"

"I'm listening, but you didn't say anything yet."

I'm listening, but you didn't say anything

forbid, between death and German captivity, then choose death!"

"Have you gone off your head completely!" exclaimed Frosya in amazement. "The boy's only five. . . ."

The frightened lad burst into tears.

"Why are you frightening the child? He doesn't understand anything about that yet, and by the time he grows up there won't be any Germans left. . . ."

Banyuchikha thought for a while.

"Maybe you're right at that. What justice would there be in the world if every last one of those mongrel's spawn weren't wiped out in this war!"

She groaned and clasped her stomach,

"Oh, Frosya, I think I'm going to be sick. . . ."

"So much the better. I'll get you some cold water."

She busied herself soaking some linen rags in a bucket of water. Banyuchikha followed her with her eyes, groaning softly. Suddenly her glance fell on Grisha's tear-streaked face.

"Are you still at it? Little softy. . . . I guess he takes after Pyotr. . . ."

"What are you talking about! He's only a bit of a thing, and you've frightened him, that's why he's crying! What's so unusual about that? And what do you want from your husband?"

"I don't want anything. . . . There's only one thing troubling me, and that's whether he'd have sense enough, in case of anything, to put an end to himself."

"Don't you fret, he'll do whatever's necessary."

"But, you see, I'm afraid. . . . You know he's that sort of fellow; never thinks things out for himself, always comes for advice; wants to know what and how. . . . Who's he got to adv'se him now, poor thing?"

• "He's in the army now, he gets his orders, and that's that," Said Fros^a, applying the damp cloths to the woman's stomach where a big blue bruise was spreading.

"Orders, that's true enough," said Banyuchikha.

"Come on, Grisha, let me wash your face. Look what a mess you're in! And don't cry. You see how mamma's lying there; a German hit her with his gun, and she's not crying."

The boy stood there looking at his mother with great, round eyes, picking his nose.

"Take your fingers out of your nose, Sonny," scolded Banyuchikha. "Your father's a Red Armyman, and you stand there picking your nose!" She groaned again. "Okh, Frosya, not a crust, not a crumb of bread did they get. . . . They'll all die, the poor fellows, they're certain to die. . . . Just think of it, going through our village and nobody could help them, nobody could give them a crust of bread, nothing to eat and nothing to drink. . . . To have to die on their own land. . . . Where were they dragging them?"

"They say there's a camp in Rudy. They're taking them there, I suppose."

"How can they walk as far as Rudy? They can hardly stand on their feet! How many versts is it? No, they'll never get there besides they'll kill them off on the way like-those two. . . ."

"The kids have gone out beyond the village to throw some bread down for them. As they go past they'll pick it up. Maybe the Germans won't notice it, won't guess. . . ."

"If they've only thrown it down properly. . . . In the middle of the road. . . . Our lads are in front with the escort behind. . . ."

"Leave it to the kids, they'll know Vvfiat to do," said Frosya soothingly. "Our kids are worth their weight in gold: You know that."

Banyuchikha nodded her head silently. Quite suddenly she felt sleepy. An unpleasant languor had overcome her, and she was unbearably nauseated. But what tormented her more than anything else was the memory of those feverish, sunken eyes of the Red Army prisoner, and the swift, hungry movement with which he had reached out for the bread which he did not get.

"Okh. . . ."

"Does it hurt?" asked Frosya anxiously.

"No, no. . . . If I could only sleep. . . ."

"Yes, go to sleep. Sleep's the best thing for you, then it will pass off," said the girl.

Banyuchikha closed her eyes, But even before her closed eyes, she saw that young, grey face bearing the stamp of death, a lock of hair poking out from under his cap. How frantically he had stared at that bit of back bread! She realized that never in her life would she forget those prisoners, wandering over the frozen ground, falling in the snow, or the young Red Armyman to whom she had been unable to pass that piece of bread.

Meanwhile the children who had gone out with bread were running towards the bend through the deep snow. The going was easier near the houses and barns, but in the open fields the snow was unexpectedly deep. Oskachor immediately sank into it up to his shoulders.

"Sashka, Sashka!"

"Don't shout, the Germans'll hear you and come running. You're too small, go on back!"

"We can't. . . ."

"Scramble out somehow! Come on, boys, let's get a move on!"

The ground here was very irregular, all hummocks, pits and furrows, and everything was covered with the wind-blown-

snow.' Holes in the ground had become veritable pitfalls* The snow on top was frozen into a hard crust on which it was possible to walk for some minutes but which would suddenly give way with a crack and a crash, like ice on a river, while the boys would find themselves hopelessly stuck in a deep drift. They could not help themselves with their hands, for they were carrying bread, rye cakes and potatoes. Besides the snow cut their h'ands like splinters of glass. One after another the children began to lag behind. But Sasha and Savka Lokut doggedly pushed ahead. In order to reach the place where the road made a deep bend, they had to skirt the village and cut across a wide, open field.

"Hurry up, hurry up,"¹ 'Sasha urged. He was breathing heavily and bathed in perspiration. Streams of sweat ran down his collar and in little rivulets along his back. Sweat dimmed his eyes, and the stitch in his side made him dizzy. His feet stuck as though in the muddy bed of a river or a sucking quagmire. He-fell several times and got up aga'n, cutting his fingers on the sharp splinters of frozen snow, The blood coming from his lacerated hands quickly turned the snow a rosy hue. Fortunately,' he was not carrying the bread in his hands like the others, but had managed to snatch up the linen satchel in which he used to carry his school books before the Germans had come. That satchel came in handy now. The bread was safely stowed away in it, and his hands were free to help him clamber out of the snow-drifts. Savka, his tongue hanging out, hurried after him. It was easier following in Sasha's tracks, otherwise Savka would have been left behind, for he 'was smaller and weaker.

The snowbound field seemed endless. Yet in spring they used to graze the cattle here, and the meadow was not so big at all. It had been quite easy to run over the soft, short grass from one end to the other. The pasturage was very well known to them, for they had run about there ever since they had been able to walk. But today it seemed like a boundless

desert, strange and unknown. Where were those little hillocks over which they had run barefoot so often, or the ditches over which they used to jump? Huge humps stuck up under the snow and every once in a while they unexpectedly came across nasty, treacherous cracks in the ground. In vain they tried to pick their way," to determine where there was level ground, where ditches and depressions under the snow. But the snow was silent, and would not disclose its secrets. The children wandered from the path, floundering in the snow up to their waists and armpits, hurting their arms on the edges of the pits. There was no end to that distressing journey.

"Hurry,"* gasped Sasha, tumbling into a hole, scrambling up again, and spitting out the snow that filled his mouth.

The satchel that hung at his side became soaked and grew heavier and heavier. But this did not matter, they would eat the cakes even if they were wet. His feet were wet, too, and his trousers were soaked through. When he managed to walk a few steps on the surface of the snow, his wet clothes froze on him. The frost's merciless talons clawed through to his very bones. Sasha could see nothing but the red and black spots which danced before his eyes. The blood was throbbing so at his temples that he thought it would burst his veins and come spurting out on the snow.

"Hurry," he said hoarsely, and that drove Savka on like the lash of a whip, although Sasha had long forgotten that there was someone behind him. He was spurring himself on, for he felt as if he would drop any minute now, never to rise again.

Savka fell far behind. But Sasha knew that he must, simply must get to the road, that he must leave the cakes there. It was the last possible chance of giving the prisoners at least a crumb of something to eat. If he did not manage it they would be driven on through fire-raised Levanevka to Rudy and the concentration camp, where—

people spoke of it in whispers—prisoners died by the hundred behind the barbed wire, died without a crust of bread or a spoonful of soup. Only he, Sasha, stood between the Red Armymen and the camp at Rudy, and it seemed to the lad that his few scorched rye cakes would save them all, save them from death by starvation.

One more little hillock, that was all. Hurry, hurry, Sasha goaded himself on, hardly able to drag his feet out of the snow and struggle forward. He had a stitch in his side, his ears were ringing, and he felt the unpleasant, cloying taste of blood in his mouth. Hurry, hurry! He fell head first and scrambled up awkwardly, flapping his arms like a drowning man. Almost on all fours he crawled up the last hillock. Here at last should be the road.

Yes, there was the road, quite close. And along it the Germans were leading the Red Armymen. To Sasha the whole thing seemed like some nightmare. He could not, would not believe it. But it was no nightmare. Sasha lay on the hill, supporting himself on his elbows, just as he had clambered up there. And they passed close by him. The wounded were staggering like drunken men, the Germans shouting ; in the rear somebody fell, but rifle butts, kicks and curses got him to his feet again. Sasha watched as they marched on and on, passing so close by him. He was too late. Too late by two or three minutes. The empty white road stretched away before the Red Armymen, and on it nothing but snow, just snow. The rye cakes remained in the satchel, water-logged and heavy. There they lay in the linen satchel beside him, a dozen paces from the prisoners, who would never get them because he had come two or three minutes late, because he had not run fast enough, because he had risen to his feet too slowly, because he had not been able to do what he ought to have done. He thought of Mishka. Yes, Mishka would have got there in time. Mishka would have run fast enough. And now they would

be driven to Rudy and put behind barbed wire, and they would die of cold and hunger because he, ...

The last rank was passing him. Now they had passed. Farther and farther away, disappearing. Already they had vanished in the whiteness of the road, of the endless, snow-covered fields. Sasha's head dropped to the snow and he wept the scalding tears of childhood. The tears dropped into the snow, ran from his nose, wet his whole face. An icy chill gripped his wet legs, and his side pained excruciatingly. He could not, did not want to get up. They had gone, gone, and he had been two or three minutes late.- . . .

How cold it was, how frightfully cold! Sasha was crying, crying for the men who were marching down the road in that cold, for Misha, whom they had buried in the lean-to, for his father, who had joined the guerillas, and most of all he cried because he had been unable, had failed to do anything. . . .

He grew colder and colder. Well, what of it. ... He recalled a story Grandad Yevdokim used to tell about how once, long, long ago, some Whiteguards had wandered about in the woods until they froze to death, every one of them. The Reds had come and shouted: "Hands up!" But they had remained sitting there, not even budging. And only Yevdokim realized what had happened, and went up to them. There they sat, as though they were alive, and all of them frozen stiff as boards. Only nobody would ever come here. Who would even dream of looking for him here? He would lie, and lie, and lie. . . .

"Sashka, get up, get up!"

He shuddered and buried his face still deeper in the snow. . . "What's the matter, Sonny? Get up, the frost's something awful . . . Don't cry, there's nothing to cry about!"

His mother sat down beside him and stroked his shoulders tenderly.

"Why, you're soaked through! Get up and come along

home; I'm cold, too, my skirt got all wet coming here. It was hard going. Come, now get up. ..."

She forced his head up. He looked at her with tear-filled, swollen eyes.

"It can't be helped, it just didn't pan out," she said sadly.

"I was late," whispered Sasha, his voice broken by sobs.

"Never mind, jSonny, it just didn't pan out. There's such a wind and blizzard that I hardly made my way to you. Come, we must go home. ..." She tugged at his arm. Sasha got up slowly, unwillingly.

"It didn't pan out this time, but we're bound to have better luck next time. . . . We didn't realize straight away how it would work out. . . . Next time they bring our soldiers through here, we won't wait, and we won't go running a long way off. We'll stay indoors and leave whatever there is on the road for them. Today we all came rushing out in a mob, raised a hullabaloo, and nothing came of it. . . . But who could have known?"

Savka walked slowly by her side, his eyes fixed on the ground.

"Savka came running back half dead. I asked him where you-Vvere and he said you were lying in the snow. . . . I dropped everything and ran. . . . And don't you cry, you can't do the impossible. . . . Such deep pits here. . . . It's a long time since there was such a winter. ..."

The going was hard for her, but she tried to keep talking all the time and to help her son along.

"You keep behind me, behind me, it's easier that way. . . ."

It occurred to him that they were going along the path that he and Savka had first made, after which Savka had then gone back and his mother come along, so that now it was nothing like it had been. And even so his mother said that it was a hard road. But even though there was

a beaten path to walk on now, he could hardly drag himself along. His boots weighed a hundred pounds, and his arms and head were as heavy as lead. He could feel every bone in his arms, legs and back, and every one of them ached with a keen, gnawing pain.

When they came out onto the road, he staggered and almost fell. His mother's hands caught him.

"What's the matter, Sonny?"

"N-n-nothing," he stammered, although the whole world was dancing before his eyes and his head was spinning round and round.

His mother bent over and took him up in her arms.

"What are you doing, Mamma!" he began to protest, but as soon as he felt her arm under his head he dropped off to sleep. She smiled into his sleeping face.

"What's the matter, has something happened?" exclaimed Terpilikha, who was coming down the street with a bundle of faggots. Her face was tear-stained and her voice troubled.

"No. . . . The lad's simply exhausted. He ran all the way to the road across those pits and ruts. . . ."

"Was he in time?"

"No, how could he. . . . It's hard enough for a grown-up to make any headway there. . . ."

She was panting, and walking more slowly.

"He's heavy for you. . . ."

"Of course he's heavy. . . . He's already turned nine," she said, and pressed her sleeping son more closely to her breast. "He's fallen asleep just as if he were in bed. Help me, Gorpina, or I shan't be able to open the door. . . ."

Terpilikha lifted the latch. A cloud of warm air billowed out of the cottage.

"Mamma!" cried Zina tearfully. "What's the matter with Sasha?"

"Nothing, he's sleeping. Don't shout or you'll wake him."

"Sleeping?" echoed the children in surprise. They stood round her and watched her put him on the bed, gently tugging off his boots, removing his wet trousers, and rubbing him down with a dry linen cloth.

"Your skirt's soaking, said Sonya. "Where have you been?"

"That's nothing, it'll soon dry. Put his boots near the stove."

Zina sniffed and took the boots away.

"What's in the bag?"

"Rye cakes, take them out."

"They're sopping wet. . . ."

"It doesn't matter, you can eat them like that too,"

"Can I have some?" asked Zina, glancing longingly at the sodden, brown balls as they came out of the bag.

"Yes, of course you can. That's your dinner. Sonya, share them out. And leave some for Sasha, he'll want to eat when he wakes up."

Zina went up to her with a bit of the wet rye cake in her hand.

"That's for you, Mother. . . ."

"I don't want any, dear, I'm not hungry. . . ."

She watched the children eating, eagerly picking up every crumb that fell on the bench. The cakes had not reached those people who were being driven to their death. She felt a tightening in her throat. Fair heads and dark heads bent busily over the cakes, tiny fingers carefully gathering up the crumbs. . . . Sasha had been too late, too late. . . .

The boy was breathing calmly and evenly. His cheeks were rosy. But Misha was gone—the memory stabbed at her heart.

And suddenly she felt that later, after her son's death, something even worse had happened, something even more terrible. Before her eyes there again appeared that crowd of prisoners driven on by blows of rifle butts, their heart-

breaking gaunt faces, their deep-sunken eyes burning with fever in the blackened sockets, their bloody feet on the snow, their thin, clawlike hands stretched out for bread, the bread that was so near and yet so far, and the two dead men on the road. . . . The figure of Misha lying on the table with the bullet hole in his chest faded before this second picture.

She covered her eyes with her hands. The boy was asleep on the bed. The children, her own and Chechorikha's little ones, were eating rye cakes and carefully gathering up the crumbs that had fallen onto the bench. What did the future hold in store, what was yet to come when every day brought more and more misery? Where was Platon? Would she ever see him again? Misha lay under the ground in the lean-to. She had no news of Platon—perhaps he had been poisoned like a dog, perhaps dead already and covered over with snow. . . . Olena, young Levonyuk on the gallows, all, all. . . . Was it possible that only a month had passed, that they had lived through only one short month when it seemed as if a whole lifetime had passed, as if years, many, many years had gone by, so much sorrow and horror had this period brought with it. . . . "A month !" she thought in astonishment. There had been months of sowing, haymaking, harvesting, flax-picking potato-digging, quiet months, flowing evenly, one after the other, in untroubled happiness merging into years, passing unnoticed. And now one month, one single month containing more than a lifetime, lay on her like a crushing weight, leaving on her memory cuts and wounds which would never heal, which would hurt for all time. . . .

Sasha woke up with a start. He was surprised to find himself at home. How had he come there ? He did not remember his mother taking him in her arms, or how he had fallen asleep. For a minute he let his eyes wander over the ceiling. It was the ceiling of their cottage. Zina

was by the stove, prattling away in her piping, tearful voice. He let his eyes wander around the room and saw his mother sitting hunched up on the bench, motionless, staring straight ahead of her. He stretched out his legs under the blanket, enjoying the warmth. There was still a stinging sensation in his fingers and toes, but his whole body was wrapped in a pleasant lassitude, and it was good to feel the warm blanket and the soft pillow under his head.

"What are you thinking about Mamma?"

She started and turned round to him swiftly.

"Are you awake already?"

"Yes, I don't want to sleep any more."

"Then lie still a bit and get properly warm. . . . You were so frozen and wet. ..."

She tucked in the blanket, which was slipping off the boy, and then said, as though she had only just heard his question:

"I was thinking of the day when our men will come, Sonny"

He stared at her with wide-open eyes.

"Come here, to our village?"

"Yes, to us here. ..."

"And will they go to Rudy?" he asked in a whisper as though he were confiding a secret to her.

"To Rudy, too, of course, to Rudy, too. . . . They'll go every-where—as far as the Dnieper and beyond, to all the towns and villages. . . . As far as the border and farther, everywhere, to every place where people are dying under the Germans, to every place and every country."

"And will Dad come home?"

"Yes, he'll come back, Sonny. The guerillas will all come home from the woods."

"And will everything be like it was before?"

"Everything will be like it was before,"¹ she repeated.

"Yes, Sonny, even better than before."

She stopped talking and sat there in silence, musing. Was

it possible that everything would again be like it had been before? Would the sunflowers grow around the cottage again ; would those big pink hollyhocks, the seeds for which Lyda had brought from town, bloom in the garden again ; would the children run chattering gaily to school again ; and when summer came, would Zina go to the kindergarten, where the tots sang and danced so merrily? And there would be plenty of bread in the house, and milk in the earthenware jugs, and of evenings they would go to the club. . . .

All this would return. In spite of everything, in spite of the ravages made on the village. Mishutka would never go to school again, Mitya Levonyuk would not sing in the fields, Olena would not sit at the wheel of her tractor, the village girls would not make eyes at Vasya Kravchuk, but life would go its way, potent and flourishing. With each passing year the wheat would grow higher in the fields, the young fruit trees would become heavier with their burden of fruit, the collective farm cows would fill the milk pails fuller and fuller, and ever more young people would go to the city to study. Only one thing was required of them—endurance, patience, and no surrender, not for anything in the world. . . .

A ruby glow flooded the cottage. The sun was sinking, painting the heavens with all the colours in its palette. The fantastic leaf patterns made by the frost on the windows blossomed out in rose fringed with gold. The sky darkened rapidly, and the shadows became denser. The colours of the sunset had scarcely faded on the horizon when the moon rose, cold and silver as ice, and set out on its long journey. The sunset glow gave way to moonlight, and gleaming columns soared up in the sky, shimmering, frozen, motionless. But that evening an impenetrable gloom lay on the hearts of all, a gloom that was more profound and dreary than anything they had yet experienced. The tramping on the road had not ceased ; the prisoners were still passing through

the village, a procession of wraiths, gaunt, ashen-faced consumed in the flames of fever and hunger. Their lacerated feet left a trail of blood in the snow. Their hoarse, imploring cry, forbidding sleep, still echoed in the houses: 'Bread !' Deepsunken eyes, burning with frenzy, looked into the eyes of the people. The blows of German rifle butts thumped at their hearts, the shouts of the soldiers driving on the prisoners lashed them.

Oh, bitter wept our peasant lads.

Enchained, the slaves of Turks. . . .

When was that? ' What was it? Turkish captivity, the Turkish galleys sailing distant seas, the Turkish curved scimitar over their heads. No, this was not even the row of stakes stretching from Nezhin to Kiev on which Pan Potocki had impaled the peasants. Nor was it the long, long distant Tatar raids on the Ukraine. To-day there was more blood and fire on Ukrainian soil, more sorrow in the Ukraine than in all those years of which songs were sung, and of which the memory of the people would never grow dim.

What song could ever tell all that was taking place now on either bank of the Dnieper, what was happening throughout the vast Ukraine? What song could convey the terrible dark days that had overtaken the land, spreading like a pestilence, like a deluge, like a raging whirlwind? What song could express the streams of blood, the creaking of the gallows, the moaning of the children, the death of thousands upon thousands, the billows of black smoke rising over villages, the endless graves, and those youngsters perishing by the score in Rudy and hundreds of other places, behind the barbed wire of a concentration camp? And who would want to sing such a song, a song which froze one's blood with horror?

"No," thought the women, trying to rid themselves of the vision of the prisoners marching down the road, "there will

never be such a song. We will roll up our sleeves and rebuild house and home. We will sow the earth with grain so that the boundless fields will rustle, and the wheat wave in the wind like the sea. We will cover the blood-drenched earth with the gold of the wheat, the sunshine of the sunflowers, the smiling white of flowering orchards, blue flax, pale pink buckwheat, forests of tall hemp—so that not a trace of the German remains by the rivers that flow into the Black Sea."

The village sank into a depressing, troubled sleep which brought no rest to the eyes, no peace to the heart, no tranquility. Malyuchikha kept getting up to look at the children. Sasha was tossing in his sleep, crying out unintelligible words.

"Sonny, Sonny. . . ."

He awoke in a fright. "What is it?"

"Wake up, you seem to be having bad dreams,"

He looked at his mother blankly, turned over on the other side, and immediately fell asleep. And again he was troubled by nightmares, which weighed heavily on his chest, worrying and torturing him.

Banyuchikha groaned as she turned in her bed. Her whole body ached, and there was a drawing pain in her stomach. But it was not this that kept her from sleeping ; it was a gaunt face that had long been unshaven, and burning eyes under a bloodstained rag.

. . . Except for Grokhach, none of the hostages slept. Malasha continued to weave the web of her thoughts, stubbornly, hopelessly. Another day had come and gone, and nothing had changed. Dry lips cracked with thirst, and before her eyes that day. Yes, yes, that was indeed what had happened. . . . There, in the village, things were taking place, people lived and died—in the daytime shots had been heard from the streets, and the Germans did not fire for nothing—people had died there, but she, she was still

alive. She was alive, sitting there behind the stout log wall, raising within herself the German offal, the German spawn.

Yevdokim sighed and rolled over in his place near the wall.

"Can't you get to sleep?" asked Chechorikha.

"No. . . . I don't feel like sleeping. . . . Not much sleeping you can do here anyway! I see you can't sleep either. . . ."

"I've been wondering and wondering who they could have been shooting at? There was firing somewhere near here. . . ."

"You can't tell whether it was near or far. . . . It may just seem that way because of the wall. . . . I don't think it was any nearer than the other side of the church."

"Who knows. . . ."

"When we get out we'll know," said Olga Palanchuk softly.

"Of course, of course," affirmed Chechorikha.

It was apparent that the girl was extremely anxious to hear someone confirm that they really would get out, that they would not be taken out to the square to be shot by a German firing squad, but to freedom, to the village, where they could talk to people, as free people to free people. She sighed.

"You ought to tell us a story, Grandad, since we can't sleep in any case. Time will pass more quickly."

"What can I tell you," he said thoughtfully. "Anyway I don't feel like telling stories. . . ."

"Sing us a song, then," asked Olga.

"Whatever are you thinking of! What an idea! Sing in here?"

"Why not? Sing softly, they won't hear you."

He threw back his grey head.

"All right, I'll sing. . . . An old song, my grandfather

used to sing it. . . . And he learned it from his grandfather. It's an old, old song, as old as the Ukraine itself:

Oh, nowhere, nowhere in this world is right alive today;
Far and wide and everywhere wrong along holds sway,
Oh, every soul who longs to live a life that's good and bright
Must fight with brawn, must fight with brain, must fight
for what is right!

"But I can't sing it! They used to sing it with the bandura long, long ago."

"Oh, do sing it, even without a bandura. . . . It won't be so sad. . . ."

Oh, Lord above, send good to him
Who fights for what is right. . . .

"Oh, Lord above, send good to him who rights for what is right," repeated Chechorikha in a whisper.

In a quavering voice the old man sang this song of the past, the song of a shackled people, written in the gloom of bitter days, in the darkness of tear-filled nights during a period of slavery and oppression. A forgotten song that had grown silent, passed away, died out in the days when the sunflowers had blossomed forth in a free Ukraine and the new life had struck up new songs.

But now, in the darkness of that close room, in the village where the body of a sixteen-year-old lad was hanging from the gallows, where the dead lay in a ditch, where the waters had carried a woman's dead body away under the ice, where death had spun its web over all the houses, the old song rang with the same lament, the same sorrow that had steeped it for hundreds of years.

Oh, Lord above, send good to him
Who fights for what is right. . . .

Yevdokim's voice died away. They began to doze, their tired heads nodding lower and lower.

IX

Fedosia Kravchuk woke with a start, as though someone had shaken her. She sat up in bed. Her heart was beating as though it would burst. She gasped, and listened intently.

What had awakened her? And when had she fallen asleep? She had thought she would never be able to get to sleep, and then suddenly she had dropped off. Something had roused her from her deep slumber. What was it?

It was not anyone knocking. Dead silence reigned. Even the snoring of the German was not disturbing the stillness of the night. Evidently Werner was staying late in his office, as he frequently did, and hadn't returned yet. All the same, she had not awakened of her own accord. Something had awakened her, something had suddenly broken her sleep. That was why her heart was beating so wildly.

She did not lie down again, but sat there straining her ears. Inside the cottage and out, there was complete silence. The wind had dropped in the evening. Once again the night was clear. The moon was sailing through the skies in a rainbow halo, and the shadow of the window-frame was distinctly drawn on the floor. The potted geranium looked jet black against the white background of the frost-covered windowpane.

Suddenly there was a stir outside the window. A sound like a stifled groan ; a hoarse cry that was broken off suddenly, forced back before it left the throat. Fedosia jumped out of bed and ran barefooted into the lean-to. With trembling fingers, she felt around for the bolt, but found it open. Apparently Werner had really not come in yet. He never forgot to soot the bolt carefully behind him.

She opened the hatch in the door. Black shadows were flitting about.

"Who's there?"

It was not she who asked. She knew who was there, had known from the moment she had started up from her sleep and pressed her hands to her racing heart.

"It's me, the woman of the house," she replied in a whisper. "Quiet, lads, he's not here. . . ."

They were already inside the lean-to. She recognized little scout.

"He hasn't come in yet, he must still be in his office."

"Well, then, there's no need for us to go in. Come on, boys, to the Commandant's office!"

"Wait, wait!" exclaimed Fedosia. "She's here, though."

"Who is 'she'?" asked the Commander hurriedly.

"The German's mistress."

"Oh, that! We can't be bothered with women now! Tomorrow we'll decide what to do with this German woman."

"She's no German, she's one of us," said Fedosia grimly.

"Is that so? Well, that's a different matter! Where is she?"

"Asleep in her room."

The Lieutenant made a wry face.

"Well, let's have a look at her. . . . Can you give us a light of any sort?"

"The sentry'll see it."

"There's no sentry any more, mother."

"All right, then, I'll light the lamp."

With shaking hands she groped for matches.

They had come, they had come at last, at long last!

The little scout handed her a box of matches. She lit the lamp and turned up the wick.

"There are five of our folks locked up in the*Commandant's office, hostages. . . ."

"Don't worry, mother, we've got people there Already."

They'll let them out. We wanted to get the Commandant without too much fuss. . . ."

"Can't be helped, he hasn't been here to-day. I suppose they've got some rush work to do."

Cautiously, lest it creak, she opened the door. The Red Armymen, trying to step "softly in their heavy boots, followed her into the room. Fedosia lifted the lamp high, so that the light shone on the bed.

Pusya awoke, and thinking that Kurt had come, muttered something sleepily. But there was no reply, and she turned around, throwing the hair back from her face.

With a sudden movement the Lieutenant snatched the lamp from Fedosia's hand and stepped towards the bed.

"Who is this?" he demanded in a terrible voice.

"The Commandant's mistress, one of our women, from the town," explained Fedosia.

With horror-stricken eyes Pusya was staring transfixed at the man with the lamp. Her blue nightdress had slipped from one shoulder exposing a small breast. She drew up her legs and with a scarcely perceptible, subconscious movement kept edging away towards the corner of the bed, as though she wanted to hide, to take cover, to crawl into a crack in the wall. The Lieutenant began to tremble. Pusya's red-lacquered finger nails flashed in the lamp light, and for an instant her triangular teeth gleamed between lips as white as paper.

"Seryozha. . . ."

The whisper was softer than the rustle of a leaf in the wind, but Seryozha heard, or rather read his name from the movement of her lips. He could not stop trembling. As though to shield herself, Pusya raised a small, frail hand, a hand with nails that looked as though they had been dipped in blood. Horror looked from her round eyes. The bed seemed enormous, with her crouching in one corner of it, doll-

like, her bare breast peeping out of the blue silk, her tiny feet drawn up under the hem of the nightdress.

Somewhere outside a shot rang out.

"That's at the Commandant's," said Fedosia.

But at that moment shots cracked from another direction, then from a third. There was firing on all sides now.

Sergei raised his revolver. Without the quiver of an eyelash he stared into the black eyes he knew so well. There was a loud shot. A convulsive shudder ran through Pusya. Her lips parted to a gleam of sharp, triangular teeth. Her round eyes opened wider than ever, then grew glassy and fixed.

"To the Commandant's!" ordered Sergei, and stumbling over the threshold and the buckets in the kitchen they dashed into the silver street that lay sparkling in the moonlight.

There was fierce fighting in the village. The first shot they had heard in the house had been fired by Private Zavyas, who was in the party that had been detailed to capture the enemy battery.

While Sergei and his men had been crawling up to Fedosya's house in order to take the Commandant as he slept, the other party had crept up the snowy slope of the low hill towards the church. Unseen in their white camouflage suits, they had crawled over the snow, keeping in the shadows of the houses and stealing through the ditches. Ahead of them, keeping his eyes strained, went Sergeant Serdyuk. In this way they had crawled right up to the enemy battery without being detected. The black barrels of the guns stood out clearly against the background of snow and sky. The silent, monstrous jaws of the guns were out-thrust high over the heads of the crawling men. Three soldiers were sitting near the guns and talking in low tones. A sentry was pacing back and forth along the battery lines, the snow crunching under his feet.

Holding his breath, Serdyuk waited. Just at the ditch, the sentry turned. The Sergeant looked at his narrow back and the bayonet sticking up over his head. Without a sound he climbed out of the ditch and lunged at the German. They rolled over together in the snow. Serdyuk had his adversary by the throat before he could utter a sound. But the gun crew had noticed the sudden disappearance of their comrade.

"Hi, there, Hans!" called one of them uneasily. Just then one of the Red Army men trod on a dry twig. The twig cracked treacherously. Without waiting for the command, the gunners turned their rifles in that direction, and it was then that Zavyas, unable to contain himself any longer, fired at the nearest one. The German fell face down. After that things happened so quickly that they themselves were flabbergasted: not a man at the guns, and the battery in their hands. Simultaneously shots came from the side of the road where, according to the plan, German Headquarters was located.

"At the double, boys!" ordered Serdyuk, but as soon as the words left his mouth, black shadows loomed up before them.

The Germans had apparently realized by now that the raiders were few in number, and were running up without taking cover or even bending low. There was a crackling of shots, and Serdyuk fell to his knees as a sharp pain stabbed his right leg.

"What's happened?"

"Nothing! Come on, now, at your targets, boys, fire!"

One of the running figures dropped, but this did not deter the others. They were all armed with tommy guns, and the volleys merged in a ceaseless rattle.

"Lie down! Fire from the ground!"

They took cover behind the guns, drawing a bead on those dark figures silhouetted so distinctly against the snow. Serdyuk took careful aim, so as not to waste a cartridge.

He suddenly felt his face go terribly cold, and thought it must be the butt of his tommy gun Against it. His forehead and nose were freezing, and his cheeks were numb.

As he was loading his rifle he glanced down and saw a big black puddle in the snow.

"Let'em have it, boys! Fire in volleys!"

What was that puddle he was kneeling in? His breeches were soaked at the knees, and that was strange in such a frost. Just as though somebody had poured water over them.

The Germans were on the other side of the square now, lying in the roadside ditch, firing steadily and without let up. Serdyuk raised his head over the mound of snow which protected his face, and took in the situation. Such an exchange of fire from behind the guns at the ditch and from the ditch at the guns might go on indefinitely. Meanwhile firing could be heard from all over the village, and he did not know how things were going. His small party of five men and he himself might be very useful there.

"Well, boys, what do we want to keep fooling around with them so long? Hurrah! For country and for Stalin!"

They jumped up like one man. Crouching as they ran, they burst into a rattling of machine-guns and cracking of automatic rifles, their bayonets held out in front of them like stings. In several spurts they reached the ditch and leaped down on the dumbfounded Germans, who still did not realize what was happening. They gave the Germans all they had. The roadside ditch was silent. The bodies of the Germans lay like dark patches on the snow, strangely small, cringing and wretched.

"Where to now?" asked Zavyas breathlessly.

But Serdyuk did not answer. The men looked around in astonishment.

"Comrade Serdyuk, where are you?"

"What's happened?" asked blonde Alexei, Serdyuk's closest friend.

"Did he run up with us or didn't he?"

"Are you crazy? Of course he did!"

"Then where is he?"

"Here he is! He's lying here!" cried Vanya, the youngest of the group.

Alexei rushed over.

Serdyuk was lying halfway between the guns and the ditch, his arms outflung, one hand firmly gripping his rifle.

"What's happened?" asked Vanya in a choked voice.

Alexei looked down at the snow.

The pool of blood and the bloody trail from the guns to the spot where his comrade had fallen were plainly visible in the moonlight.

"Where did he get it?"

Silently, Alexei pointed. The foot and part of the shin lay almost at right angles to the rest of the leg. The snow around that place had become a black pool.

"Shot his leg away, as if it was hacked off with a knife. ..."

"Think of it, and him running like that!"

"This is no time for thinking. Let's get on to the Commandant's. Looks like they're having a hot time there!"

Quickly they followed Alexei. The frost clawed at them, cut off their breath.

When the first shot rang out, Captain Werner was sleeping on a field cot in the office. He was expecting a telephone call from Headquarters and could not go home. He lay down fully dressed, covering himself with his greatcoat. The Feldwebel was sleeping soundly, against the other wall, and in the next room, the soldiers, as usual, were sleeping huddled together. The Captain waited for a long time, but the telephone did not ring. The wheezing from the adjacent room irritated him, as did the snoring of the Feldwebel. The

cot was hard and uncomfortable. At last he fell asleep. The shot woke him.

"Somebody wandering about the village again," he thought grumpily. This fresh proof of the impotence of the orders issued by the Germans enraged him.

But almost immediately there came a second, then a third shot. The Captain sprang out of bed.

"Zause, get up!"

The Feldwebel was already on his feet. His sleepiness had passed away in an instant. There was a crunching of boots under the window and a band of German soldiers poured into room.

"The Bolsheviks are in the village!"

"Bolt the doors! Put out the lights!" ordered Werner, and they rushed to push home the heavy bolt and get the crossbeam in position.

The room in which the telephone hung was the biggest and easiest to defend. Although it had never entered Werner's head that they would actually have to defend this place, everything was in readiness. He had had the heavy door of thick planks covered with sheet iron and reinforced with bars. The walls were of stout logs and the windows were heavily shuttered. The building was an old one and had apparently been intended for a warehouse or granary. The wing in which the soldiers slept and where the hostages were locked up had been added later, when the building was already being used as quarters for the Village Soviet, the village club and the library. The walls there were thinner and the doors had ordinary locks.

But this room was just like a fortress.

"Open the loopholes!"

In an instant they had rolled away the beam that extended along the wall, laying bare the loopholes. There were sand bags stacked near here, and narrow trenches had been torn up in the floor itself. The soldiers fell prone. The cold air

streamed into the warm room through the loopholes, causing clouds of steam.. Rifles began to bark.

"Ring up Headquarters, get a move on, now! Are they guerillas?"¹¹ Werner asked the panting sentry who was inserting a belt in a machine-gun.

"No, regulars!"

"Many of them?"

"I don't know, they're firing from all directions, looks as if they came in from all sides."

Werner swore.

"Get that call through!"

"Herr Kapitan, the telephone's not working. ..."

Werner lurched over to the table, shouted in vain into the handset and struck the silent box with his fist. The telephone was dead.

"They've cut the line, damn them!"

In a towering rage, he crashed his fist down on the useless box. The telephone clattered to the floor. With a kick he sent it flying into a corner.

"We'll manage ourselves! Stand by!"

There was a burst of firing in the street, and bullets rattled against the thick walls. Rifle butts could be heard battering at the door of the neighbouring room, but that was all, the door did not give way.

"Bang away," muttered the Captain. He had faith in the staunchness of that door.

* * *

The attack on the Commandant's was led by Lieutenant Shalov. His men had just managed to break open the first door and get into the building when the party that had captured the battery arrived.

"Where's Serdyuk?"

"Serdyuk's been killed ; the battery is taken."

In the first room they found soldiers' cots, things thrown about in disorder, but not a living soul.

"Guess the rats woke up and scampered into that room." We'll smoke them out of there. . . ."

"Outside everybody! We'll attack from outside!"

They spread in open order around the building, but soon realized that it was something in the nature of a fortress. The stout logs were impervious to bullets. Splinters flew off, but the walls as a whole remained undamaged. Machine-guns were barking spitefully. Blue and red flames spurted from the loopholes. The house was belching death.

"They don't grudge their cartridges," murmured Shalov.

"Looks like they've prepared for defence, Comrade Lieutenant. . . ."

There was shooting all over the village. Apparently separate detachments had encircled the Germans at their various posts. The roar from the fortified house, however, drowned out everything else.

"Well, boys, we've got to wind it up. . . . We've got to take them before dawn, we can't be messing around here any longer. Some detachment of theirs may chance to come this way in the morning, and then it'll be all up. . . ."

They lay behind humps in the ground and in the ditch, taking advantage of all irregularities in the terrain, and with carefully placed shots tried to smash the rifles peeping out of the loopholes. But the fire from the house did not die down for a minute.

The Germans in Levonyuk's house had been taken un-awares. The Red Army men who burst into the house caught them asleep. The German soldiers jumped up in alarm and seized the rifles that lay beside their beds, stumbling over the equipment which was strewn all around.

"Lie on the floor!" Minchenko shouted to the terrified Levonyuchikha.

She dropped down obediently, trying to push her baby under the bed. She had not properly realized what was happening before the room became quiet again. The Red

Armymen had run out, vanished like a dream, and on the floor lay the bodies of the Germans in their underclothes.

"Come on, Vasyutka, give me a hand. We must throw that filth out of the house," she said to her son, still trembling. Together they began dragging the bodies out. Breathing heavily, she tugged at the Germans by the feet. Vasya was only twelve, and she herself was pregnant.

"Go easy, there, easy! What's the hurry?" she shouted to her son.

But Vasya had a reason for hurrying. He had not managed to dodge out after the Red Armymen, and now his mother was keeping him back at this idiotic job. There was firing in the village, shouting could be heard, and he had to drag dead Germans about by the feet instead of running down there and seeing what was going on with his own eyes. Perhaps they would even give him a gun! Who knows, suppose they did?

The silence with which the attack on the village had begun had long been broken. Now no one tried to steal up any longer, creeping behind fences, afraid lest their shadows on the road give them away.

"Remember, boys, not a soul must escape, not one living soul!" the Lieutenant had said when they had broken up into groups before entering the village.

And they realized that the success of the whole venture depended on this.

The Germans behaved differently in different places. In some places they decided to make a stand in the houses ; in others they ran out into the yards, panic-stricken, in their underwear, but with their rifles and a supply of cartridges. Half-naked, they ran through the bitter frost, dropping down around the corners of sheds and firing away doggedly.

"Keep out of the way, don't hinder us!" shouted Sergei to the women, who had suddenly appeared as though they

had sprung from the ground, popping up everywhere, to be caught in the cross-fire.

"Comrades, there are six Germans in my house, six Germans! Hurry up!" urged Pelcharikha, tugging at the sleeve of a Red Armyman.

"Where's your house?"

"You just come along with me, I'll show you. It's quite near here, just a second," she begged, as though she were praising a house to let.

A group of Red Armymen ran after her, but soon saw that it was not so simple a matter. They were met by raking fire. Here, too, the walls had been loopholed, and the house spat death at them.

Pelcharikha lay flat on the ground alongside the Red Armymen. Suddenly the lad beside her clutched at his chest, and with a groan dropped his head onto his rifle.

"There's no earthly use to this, boys!" she cried. "They'll only kill you off one by one this way, while they themselves keep sitting tight. Set fire to the house!"

"Is it your house?"

"Whose else should it be? Go on, boys, set fire to it!"

"Is there anyone in the house?"

Pelcharikha clenched her fists.

"The baby. . . . The bigger ones managed to slip out, but in there . . . in the cradle. . . ."

"What's wrong with you, woman! Have you gone off your head or something!"

She seized the Red Armyman's arm.

"Listen, son, I know what I'm doing. . . . Why should all of you get killed because of my baby. . . . I'm a mother, and I tell you—set fire to the house!"

"You're mad, mother, stark, raving mad!"

"Set fire to the house! I'm not hesitating, why should you? Maybe we'll save him. . . . There, you see!"

A second Red Armyman was hastily binding his arm with a handkerchief. The blood seeped through the bandage in a big stain.

The men refused to heed Pelcharikha, but she kept beseeching them, hanging on to their coats.

,"You'd better get out of the way, they'll kill you! Can't you see how they're shooting?"

"Who wants to shoot an old woman. . . ."

The rifle in one of the loopholes ceased fire.

"There, you see! All we have to do is shoot straight and everything will be all right!"

"Listen, boys, what about getting in through the roof? Round the other side and through the roof?"

"Now that's more like it! And all the time you were just talking about burning the house down! How do we get there? Show us the way!"

Several of the men stayed behind and continued firing with redoubled energy. The others dashed off after Pelcharikha.

A few minutes later it was all over in the house.

"Don't shoot!" cried Pelcharikha as she threw the door open. "Don't shoot!"

The Red Armymen rushed in. The Germans lay there dead, one face downwards on his machine-gun, the others killed by bayonet thrusts.

"Look at that, Seryozha, got him square in the forehead. . . ."

The German had been killed instantaneously.

Meanwhile Pelcharikha was kneeling by the cradle.

"They've killed him," she said in a dull, lifeless voice, "they've killed him."

The men looked round. The woman raised the tiny body with the crushed skull in her arms. The cradle was drenched with blood.

"He must have been crying, so they smashed his skull in. . . ."

Pelcharikha stood there with the dead baby in her arms, mechanically rocking the little body to and fro.

"See. . . . And you didn't want to set fire to the house. . . . You were sorry for a dead baby. . . . Two of you were wounded because of him. . . ."

"Steady, mother, steady. . . ."

"I'm not crying, my son, I'm not crying. If you'd only give me a gun. . . ."

The firing had begun to die down in the village. Fighting continued only at the Commandant's. The sky was growing lighter. The moon with its rainbow halo and the rainbow columns on either side of it were already fading. The air merged into the infinite blue, and the whole world became like a glass ball filled with ice. The silver and blue was pierced only by the little red flames of the ceaseless firing at the Commandant's.

"We'll never get anywhere this way, boys. . . . We ought to sling a couple of grenades at the window, maybe the shutters aren't too strong."

"How are you going to get near them? They're filing like mad. . . ."

A steady stream of fire came from the loopholed walls. Shots cracked incessantly and the snow kept puffing up in tiny clouds in a hundred places at once.

"It's getting light," said Shalov uneasily, glancing at the sky.

Far away on the horizon a rosy streak was already visible. The fight was lasting longer than they had anticipated. At daybreak German units might appear on the road, unexpected reinforcements might arrive. Fighting that took place under cover of night might pass unnoticed. With the coming of day the Germans lost their fear of the unknown, felt free to go out and move around. If there was the slightest interest in this detachment anywhere, and no doubt the Germans were interested in it, then they would notice the disrupted

telephone connection and send men, begin searching Daytime favoured the Germans.

"Well, boys. . . ."

"Looks like it's no go, Comrade Lieutenant. . . . We can sit here like this for a year. Now if we could only throw a grenade!"

"Well, then," Sergei said suddenly, "there's nothing like trying."

"How can you try here?"

"Never mind, I'll have a try. . . ."

He worked his way round the house some distance from it and then crawled back towards the side of the house where there were no loopholes. The Red Army men ceased fire lest they hit him.

"What's he thinking of doing?" Shalov was worried. But Sergei still crawled calmly on.

In the chill half-light of dawn they could see the muzzle of a rifle moving in the black hole, searching for its target, shooting persistently and sowing death.

And suddenly Sergei sprang to his feet. Before they grasped what was happening he was standing between them and the death-bleching loophole, and with a mighty swing had thrown a bundle of grenades at the window. Everything thundered and rattled, and disappeared in a cloud of smoke. Tongues of flame darted out. The man in front of the window seemed to be suspended in thin air. It looked as if he were falling endlessly, his tall figure outlined distinctly against a background of fire. Then he crumpled up and slowly sank to the ground.

"Forward!" ordered Shalov.

They made a dash for the building. The machine-gun in the loophole was silent, blood streaming over its sides, and the machine-gunners were silent, too. The grenades had done their job.

"Follow me, boys!"

They plastered the building with shots, and leaped in through the hole that the grenades had smashed open, cutting their hands on the broken glass. Flames were licking the heavy beams.

"Our people are there! Our people!" cried Malyuchikha in a penetrating voice.

Only then did they remember the hostages. They were still in the dark room, standing with their ears glued to the wall. They had not been asleep when the first shot was fired, and each of them had heard it immediately, like a thump of his own heart. They had waited for an instant on tenterhooks. And the first shot had been followed by a second. No, there was no doubt about it—that had been no casual shot fired by a sentry.

"Our men," said Chechorikha in a high, shrill voice.

"Our men," whispered Olga.

Malasha alone did not stir from her place, but continued to stare into the darkness with glassy eyes.

"They're shooting near the church," said Yevdokim.

"And by the German battery. ..."

A shot rang out right close to the wall. Olga shrieked.

"Stop that row! They're here, here. ..."

There they sat as if they were in a trap, hemmed in by darkness, seeing nothing. And on the other side of the wall there was firing, running, fighting, yet they saw nothing, knew nothing.

"The Germans'll get us before our troops reach here," thought Grokhach, but he did not say anything as he did not want to frighten the women. He listened with agitation to what was going on beyond the door. But a minute later, he heard rifle butts crashing against the outside door, and the trampling of feet in the next room. He began to hammer at the door with his fist.

"Let us out! Let us out!"

But on the other side of the wall, the uproar and stamping of feet continued, and nobody heard his shouts.

"Come on, you women, help me, or they won't hear us! How long are we going to sit here, anyway. I"

Olga immediately began to pound away at the wall. Chechorikha followed her example.

"Let us out, boys!"

The hubbub, shouting and firing continued on the other side of the wall. Nobody answered the desperate call of the prisoners.

"Louder, louder. They must hear us if we keep it up. . . ."

"Surely somebody in the village will tell them. Have they forgotten us?"

Once again they began to hang with their fists, and at that very moment heard the tramp of feet outside. Apparently the Red Army men had left the building. For an instant there was complete silence. The prisoners felt as if an abyss had opened up before them, all hope of rescue gone.

"What is it all about?" asked Yevdokim hoarsely. "Are our men retreating?"

"Oh!" wailed Olga.

"Shut up, stupid! And you, too, an old man, but stupid! They're trying from the other side, can't you hear them?"

Everyone was silent.

From the other side the commotion and firing to them even more loudly.

"They want to take the building from the street. . . ."

"Whose machine-gun is that. . . ."

"The Germans'. . . . That's ours, hear it?"

Huddled together they listened tensely. Only Malasha sat motionless, as though what was taking place did not concern her at all.

"Oh, my God, merciful God," breathed Yevdokim.

Grokhach glanced at him.

"Are you going to start praying?"

"Let him pray if he wants to," said Chechorikha coming to the defence of the old man. "Doesn't do you any harm, does it?"

Yevdokim sank to his knees in front of the door, and in the trembling voice of old age began:

"... from hunger, earthquake, pestilence and enemy invasion deliver us, oh Lord. . . "

Grokhach shrugged his shoulders. The firing continued outside and suddenly there was a terrific explosion. The whole house shook as though it were falling.

"Oh-oh-oh!" Olga screamed.

They could hear voices, and the uproar outside increased. From somewhere quite close by came a women's terrifying shriek. Almost simultaneously rifle butts again began to batter at the door.

"Get away from the door! Get back!" ordered Grokhach.

Everyone drew back. With a crash the door caved in.

To them it seemed as if bright daylight came pouring into the gloom. The next room was lit up by the pale light of dawn, pierced by stabbing red flames. Malyuchikha was the first to come rushing in breathlessly.

"Our men are here! Our men are here! Come on out!" she called, crying and laughing as she caught at Chechorikha's sleeve. "Your children are in my house, alive and well. . . . Our troops are in the village! They're in the village!"

"Not so much noise, you women!" Grokhach shouted at them. "Let's get out!"

In a bound, Malasha sprang from her place on the floor, and without uttering a single word ran out of the house. A young Red Armyman was sitting on the doorstep bandaging his leg. Confidently she snatched up the German rifle lying near him.

"Hey! What's the idea!" he exclaimed, reaching out.

But under the harrowing gaze of those half-insane black eyes, he quickly drew back his hand.

"Ugh, she's mad. . . ."

"Let her have it," Grokhach put in. "Aren't there enough German rifles here?"

. A shout arose from behind the house:

"He got away! That Jerry got way !"

* * *

Captain Werner was almost suffocated by the smoke. The tightly sealed room had become quite dark with the incessant firing. The smoke choked him, ate into his eyes. His rifle barrel was overheated. The wounded soldier against the wall was groaning irksomely. Werner would have liked to turn round and fire right into his face, but he could not leave his automatic rifle for a second. The wounded were lying around on the floor. Werner felt that he would never get out of the place alive. They had taken him unawares, senselessly, suddenly, at a time when he had considered it utterly impossible. And over at Headquarters all they thought of was grain and fats—those they had demanded incessantly. But as for attending to the safety of the roads leading to the village, that had never even entered their heads. They shivered in their boots at the very mention of the guerillas and never stopped talking about them, but they had no idea of what was going on around them, and did not know where the Bolsheviks were.

Werner could not make it out. According to all information they were a long way from the front, quite a long way. And suddenly the German Commandant's office is surrounded, not by guerillas—which was something that might happen even far behind the lines—but by regular Red Army troops. Grain indeed, they'd get grain now all right!

The wounded man's groans became more and more penetrating ; he had been wounded-in the stomach. The devil take it! Surely someone would hear what was going on here,

would get wind of the hell that had broken loose in this place! There was a ringing and buzzing in his ears, and he felt as if his head would burst. How long could it last? The wire was cut and there was no way of getting word through. He heard the firing die down in the village, heard the mounting tumult on the square in front of the office. Evidently his detachment had been wiped out and the office was the last stronghold.

The next moment the floor heaved under his feet, and a deafening explosion rent the smoke-laden air. The blast threw him against the wall. Shouts reached his ears. The shutters had fallen in, and he realized that a bundle of grenades had been thrown at the window. Tongues of flame shot out. Werner felt a sharp pain in his shoulder. Mangled flesh, arms and legs were lying on the floor. No, there was no sense in remaining here any longer. With lightning speed he darted into the next room. It was quieter there. The small store-room had only one loophole, and the machine-gunner was maintaining constant pressure on the trigger, firing into the blue, although no one answered his fire. Apparently they had all gone from that side. Werner jerked back the bolt. The shutters flew open with a clatter. A blow of his fist smashed the windowpane. He jumped out onto the snow without even stopping to see if there was anybody there, or whether he would be in the line of fire. The pure, icy air made him gasp, and the early morning glare of the snow and sky dazzled his eyes. He could hear footsteps and shouts behind him. The Red Armymen were evidently in the building by now. With giant strides he made for the first shelter he could see, the Malyuks' shed.

Suddenly Malasha arose in his path, as if she had sprung from the ground. Holding her rifle by the barrel, she flung herself at him. Werner saw her dark face and burning eyes quite close. Big, black eyes. Dishevelled hair streamed around this face, fearful but inspired. With a mighty sweep

of her strong arms, Malasha swung the rifle over her head. Werner took rapid aim. A shot rang out, but at that very moment the rifle butt crashed down on his head with terrific force. He groaned and dropped to the ground. His nose was broken, his forehead smashed, and the blood came pouring down his face. He choked on blood. It poured into his eyes, filled his throat, gurgling in a thick stream. Werner was suffocating.

Two steps from him lay Malasha. She heard the shot simultaneously with the snapping and shattering of bones. She felt the bullet in her body as a stroke of good fortune. It was in her stomach, just where it should be, in her stomach. It did not hurt. No, that was not pain, that was happiness. A blissful smile played on her lips. The expression that had given her face the cold mask of age for the past month had disappeared without leaving a trace. There she lay with her arms outspread, face lifted towards the heavens, black-eyed, bronze-skinned Malasha, the prettiest girl in the village. She still grasped the rifle in her hand, but she herself was already far, far away from everything, floating in the rainbow sheen, in the azure blue of the icy morning, in the sparkling snow on which the sun's first rays were falling.

The first rays had awakened the rainbow. Its pale arch had been visible overhead all night long, but only as an indistinct, pearly strip, hardly noticeable in the depths of the sky. Now the sun gave it brilliance, warmth and colour, and it played in the heavens with a pure light, and the delicate hues of tinted fluff. It was steeped in the glow of rosy petals, the violet of early spring lilac, the fresh green of lettuce, in the shades of bluebells, the brilliant purple of roses and the gold of campion. And over all was a warm, translucent gleam, an undying radiance.

Malasha's eyes were turned towards this rainbow, to the luminous arc sweeping across the sky. Her life was fast ebbing away, seeping out of her body with her blood. Her

fingers stiffened, her legs grew cold, her body froze. But all the while her happy eyes looked at the rainbow, at the lustrous path stretching from end to end of the distant heavens. A path of light leading to an unknown destination, a path of happiness in the blue of the heavens which the sun was making brighter and brighter. She was travelling the rainbow path, she, Malasha, the prettiest girl in the village, the best worker on the collective farm. It was about her they had written in the newspapers, for her that the summer nights had been filled with love.

There was no longer any ice or snow. The hay rustled under her head, fragrant, redolent of flowers. Somewhere nearby a spring of fresh water was gurgling. The meadow was sweet-smelling. The sound of voices, of girls singing and of boys' laughter came to her from afar. The silence of the night was broken by an accordion. Her eyes sought the rainbow in the sky, but, no, how could there be a rainbow, it was 'a summer night. . . . Ivan was laughing merrily. There were his eyes in front of her face, grey eyes beneath black brows. The picture faded, wiped out by nocturnal darkness. But the rainbow had been there, had just been there. She wanted to see it once again, to let her eyes feast on its radiance.

With difficulty Malasha raised herself on her elbow. A savage, inhuman pain ran through her, and she fell back again onto the snow. She felt that she was dying, knew that she was dying, and her hands reached up in an endeavour to seize that gay ribband, the rainbow thrown across the sky. But it was only darkness that her fingers grasped. Her eyes, turned towards the sky, became glassy. Her even, white teeth gleamed through her parted lips. Her face set in a strange expression, in a smile filled with suffering.

* * *

The uproar behind the houses grew louder and louder. It was the women leading off the Germans they had caught.

Terpilikha had unearthed a fugitive in her own barn. Throwing down his rifle, he had run hi through the open door and buried himself under a heap of straw in the corner. His footprints in the snow gave him away. Terpilikha did not bother about calling the Red Army men to her assistance. She had Grokhach's two daughters had armed themselves with pitchforks and rakes and had stealthily entered the" barn.

"Hey, Fritz, come out of there! There he is, Frosya! He's crawled under the straw. ..."

"Don't push! I'll just tickle him with my pitchfork!"

"Go round by the wall, he may shoot at you, the rat. ..."

The beleaguered warrior did not understand what they were saying, but he could see the levelled pitchfork through the straw. Hastily, he crawled out, brushing the straw from himself. His tattered uniform hung from him in rags. Around his head he had wrapped a pair of women's bloomers of a poisonous purple.

"Some lady-killer! Just look at him, girls! Get a move on you, come on now. ..."

The terrified Germane made a bee-line for the door. He stumbeld over the threshold.

"Look at him crawling. . . , Come on now, pick your hoofs up higher! Froska, just have a look and see whether there's a rifle in the straw. It would come in handy. ..."

The girl searched the corner carefully.

"No-, there's nothing here. He must have thrown it away."

"There's a hero for you! And the boots on him! Phew!" exclaimed Terpilikha.

The German's feet were bound round with rags.

"His feet must be frozen. Look at the way he's dragging them!"

"Nobody asked him to come here! He could have stayed at home and kept himself warm by the fire as much as he liked. But, no, he got a hankering for our land!"

People came running out into the street.

"Where'd you pick him up, Terpilikha?"

"Ho-ho, just look at this!"

"And what d'you want? Can't you see I'm leading off a prisoner? • You ought to be hunting around in your own barns and sheds instead of hanging around here with your eyes popping! They've run all over the place like roadie's. We've got to catch them all I"

"She's right," said lame Alexander. "Come on, let's see if there aren't any more of them hiding out anywhere."

Everyone ran off, snatching up pitchforks, shovels and axes.

"Let's all go together!"

"It's jollier in a crowd."

"Oho, Frosya's afraid she may tread on a German. ..."

"Don't you worry, if I have to I'll tread on him so's he won't even have time to squeak!"

"Now, now, you women," said Alexander trying to calm them, don't chatter so much."

The whole crowd of them went from house to house. They turned over the straw in the sheep-pens and examined the barns. The children ran about under their feet, poking into every corner and squealing delightedly.

Just then Sasha came running up all out of breath.

"There's a German in our barn!"

Pushing and shoving they all rushed off to the barn and proudly routed out a cringing German. The Red Army-men, who were also combing the village, smiled when they encountered the women, but the latter knew every nook and corner, and their search was more successful.

"Well, boys, who's got the most prisoners?"

"You have, you have," laughingly admitted the soldiers.

"Where's their Commandant?" Shalov fretted. "Have another look round for him, boys. Surely he can't have skipped!"

They looked over the dead Germans. The Feldwebel, privates.

"The Captain, look for the Captain!"

But Werner lay in the deep snow behind the sheds. One eye had been knocked out by the blow. The other was looking straight up at the sky over his head. The pain in his head was past bearing. He felt as if a sledge hammer were banging away on it, scattering red, orange and purple sparks. A flame seemed to be raging where his eye had been, and blood streamed into his throat. He kept swallowing as fast as he could, swallowing and choking, but still the blood flowed and flowed, as if it came from some bottomless well. And all the time he kept swallowing. He realized that if he stopped swallowing, he would choke on that deluge of cloying liquid. His throat was already hurting so that he could not swallow normally, and his convulsive efforts to do so shook his whole body. He felt himself freezing, knew that he would inevitably freeze to death if someone did not find him immediately and help him. He shuddered. Who would help him? The mouzhiks, the accursed mouzhiks of this accursed village? Terror swept over him: suppose he did not die but fell victim to the mouzhiks' pitchforks or was taken prisoner by the Bolsheviks. . . . All was silent. The firing had ceased. He did not deceive himself. He realized that his unit had been wiped out and that those others had won. Despair dug her claws into his heart. He, Captain Werner, had been taken unawares by those louts in the grey coats. How could it have happened?

He stared into the distant blue with his one eye as though seeking an answer there. And there he saw the rainbow: a great arc flung from end to end of the horizon, a gleaming ribbon linking heaven and earth. The tender, iridescent hues were glowing. A vague memory glimmered in his befuddled brain: where had he seen such a rainbow? Why, of course, before that snowstorm. . . . What was it the

woman had said then? She had claimed that the rainbow was a good omen.

Captain Werner groaned. The rainbow was smiling with a joyous radiance. It was a good omen—but not for him. The rainbow shone joyously, but he no longer saw it. He had sunk into darkness.

X

They were buried in the little square by the church—those who had been killed that night, and those who had been lying in the snow of the gully for a month.

Fedosia Kravchuk herself helped carry the body of her son. She supported the motionless, strangely light head, feeling his soft hair like silk to her fingers. Without pain or sorrow she looked down at that black face, which seemed to have been carved of wood. Vasya had waited long enough. The hands of brothers had dug him out of the snow, the hands of brothers were laying him to rest in the common grave.

The sleighs moved slowly up the steep slope of the gully. Fedosia walked alongside, holding the body of her son so that it would not slip off into the snow. With the tenderness of a mother she straightened out the bodies of those other unknown men who lay beside Vasya.

"Bury the girl with them," ordered Shalov. "She fell in battle, like a soldier."

"She's a grown woman, not a girl," remarked Malyuchikha. "She has a husband in the Army." But when they brought in Malasha's body, she felt as if she had been mistaken. It was a girl, a young girl, who lay there on the snow. She was as Malyuchikha remembered her a year ago, before the gay and noisy wedding.

"She was a beauty," said one of the Red Army men softly.

Yes, it was she, Malasha, the most beautiful girl in the village. Her long eyelashes shadowed her cheeks. Her hair

billowed round her head in dark waves. Her black brows were like swallow's wings on her pure, smooth forehead. Her lips were frozen in a smile of suffering, a smile from which one could not tear one's gaze.

They took Levonyuk's body down from the gallows. His mother, who was with child and already suffering the first birth pangs, refused to stay at home. She held out her arms for the stiffened, black body of her son, who had been swaying on the gallows in the wind and snow for the past month.

"Gently, gently," she cautioned, as though he could still feel and be hurt.

The girls helped her. He was light and weighed almost nothing. Though he was sixteen, his face was now as the face of a child carved in wood.

They dug a grave, wide and roomy, and laid the dead in it side by side, the petrified, blackened bodies of those who had been killed a month earlier, the mutilated remains of Sergei Rachenko and Serdyuk, who looked as if he were sleeping, the young soldier who had been killed at the Commandant's, and Malasha. Shalov spoke on behalf of all his comrades. His stern, simple words carried far and wide in the clear air, carried to the glassy sky with its rainbow sash.

The whole village, women, old men and children, stood at the graveside and listened, looking down at the men of the Red Army lying side by side, and Malasha. No one cried. They stood there grimly, their heads bared. Fedosia Kravchuck committed the remains of her only son to his native soil. Old Sharikha gave over the remains of her daughter to the earth. The others were unknown, but to everyone the bodies lying in the grave, were as those of their own sons, husbands and brothers.

On that day there were none nearer and dearer to them than those who had perished and who lay there now with their dead faces staring up at the sky. These were soldiers of the Red Army. Their army.

"Never will our native land forget them," said Shalov in a voice that shook with emotion.

Yes, they knew that they would never forget. They knew that the faces of the fallen and this day when they had been committed to the earth would never fade from their memories. A common grave united those who had perished as they retired under a hurricane of enemy fire, and those who had come to liberate the village and had torn it from enemy hands.

The gaze of all was calm and steady. Yes, this was war. With blood and fire and iron it had descended on the village. But in the hearts of all was that unwavering faith which had sustained the village during its darkest and most terrible days. Faith that their own troops would return and that theirs would be the last word.

Shalov stooped, picked up a lump of frozen earth and dropped it into the grave. And one after the other, everyone at the graveside bent down and threw a handful of their native soil into the grave. May they rest peacefully in that grave. May they feel their native soil, their free native soil over their very hearts.

"You 'throw some in too, Nyura," said a mother to her two-year-old daughter.

The little one took up a handful of earth and carefully threw it down into the grave. Children's hands dug up the dark earth from under the snow and tossed it down. The soldiers set to work with their spades. At last the grave was level with the ground. Over it a mound was made.

"We'll plant flowers on it when spring comes," said Malyuchikha.

"And green grass," added Frosya. "And everyone will bring plants from his garden."

Slowly the crowd melted away. There was no sorrow in their hearts, only a reverent solemnity. The dead had given their all for their native land. It had happened before, as

in 1918, and everybody remembered that. No few from this village had perished in those days too. That was the way of things. The land had to be defended with the life and blood of the people who had been born and bred on it. That was plain and simple enough.

They dispersed in silence, but a minute later the village was bubbling over with noise and chattering. Not a woman but was urging some Red Armyman to stop in her house as her guest. Everyone wanted to feed the men, to treat them to whatever she had.

A whole delegation came to Shalov.

"Comrade Commander, we have a request to make," began Terpilikha. "We wanted to give you all a treat, but we haven't a thing. ..."

"How can I help you?" he laughed.

"We could manage to find something if only you'd help us. . . . We've buried everything, hidden it in the ground. When the Germans came we ducked it all. The points is, how can we dig it out now? We haven't anything to do it with, and the ground's as hard as flint. But you've got tools, and if you gave us a couple of Red Armymen we'd have the stuff out in no time."

"O.K. We'll have a go at it. Hey there, fellows, who wants to help?"

There were plenty of volunteers. The women, sinking in the snow up to their waists, set out for the fields.

"Here, beside this bush. ..."

"What are you talking about, Mamma! It was on this side, over here!"

"What are you poking your nose in for? Children should be seen and not heard! Don't you think I remember?"

Meanwhile the lame Alexander was trying to persuade his guests:

"You just go right ahead and slaughter that sheep, it's

not a bad one. Stick it in the pot and there'll "be something to eat,"

"But that's your only sheep, isn't it?"

"The only one. . . . I had more, but the Germans slaughtered them. Just this one's left."

"D'you think we'd take your last sheep? "No, no, that wouldn't do at all!"

He clasped his hands imploringly.

"Don't turn me down, lads. I want to give it to you, from the bottom of my heart. What else can I treat you to? That sheep is all I have. . . . You mustn't refuse it, you're really hurting my feelings. . . ."

As for the women, they went around pulling out all that they had from their hiding places, out of the lofts and from under the floors. Bacon from pigs that had been slaughtered the previous autumn, bunches of garlic, which the Germans hadn't touched, jars of honey, even sunflower seeds. Hurriedly they milked whatever cows had remained, so that there would be milk for the wounded.

The wounded had been put up in two rooms of the Village Soviet. Frosya, to the envy of all the others, was already busy there, for she had at one time taken a course in nursing. Looking most important, she rushed from room to room in a white apron, with a white kerchief binding her hair firmly. Women and girls were crowding round the door.

"Well, what can we do for you?" the jolly young doctor asked as he passed. He had been with the Red Army men when they had taken the Commandant's Headquarters the previous night, and was now just finishing bandaging the wounded.

"We want to help . . . in the hospital. . . ."

"We really don't need any more help. I've got two girls and we have our own nurses. . . ."

"We could wash the floors, they're plenty dirty. . . . i"

"The floor? Why, yes, that wouldn't be a bad idea at all."

They rushed home and soon reappeared in a whole crowd with buckets and floor rags.

"Are the whole dozen of you going to wash the floor "

A regular argument began among them, although they took care to speak in whispers so as not to disturb the wounded. At last they divided up the floor and each one set about washing her own little patch.

"The blanket's slipping off a patient, and you don't even see it," said Pyzichikha to Frosya.

"Tut it straight if it's falling," snapped the girl, walking past with a basin full of bloody water.

Pyzichikha went over to the bed and carefully covered the wounded man's legs, slowly putting the blanket to rights. After that she didn't leave the wounded any more.

"What are you doing here?" the doctor asked her.

"I'm keeping the blankets straight. They keep slipping off," she answered with dignity, smoothing out a pillow for one of the wounded.

He waved his hand:

"All right, straighten away, if you want to so badly."

Yes, indeed, she certainly wanted to. They all wanted to help. The tiniest little job, the least thing they could do to help in any way. To give them water to drink, to rinse the mugs, to wash their socks, to brush their hair back from their foreheads, to make sure that nobody left the door ajar so that it would be draughty.

Just then Lyda Grokhach timidly poked her head into the room.

"Do you want to help, too?" the doctor asked her.

She shook her head:

"One of our women is giving birth. . . . Perhaps you'd go to her, seeing as you're a doctor. . . ."

"Well, I never! But I'm a surgeon. . . ."

"That doesn't matter, you're still a doctor. She's suffering terribly. This morning she kept dragging the Germans

out of her house by their feet and I suppose that must have started the pangs. . . ."

"Well, there's nothing to be done about it, I suppose I'll have to go,"¹ said the doctor cheerfully. "A new citizen is being born, I'll have to help. I'm leaving the wounded to your care, Kuzma. Now, where do we go?"

Lyda quickly led him to the Levonyuks' house. Rubbing his frozen hands he hurried after her.

"You should've put on your mittens in such a frost!"

"Well, you see, I had a pair, but they up and got lost during the night. . . . I must have dropped them. Haven't any now."

She glanced at him shyly, then quickly stripped off her thick shaggy gloves, which she herself had knitted and embroidered with red and blue flowers.

"Whatever are you doing!" he exclaimed. "What about yourself?"

"Oh, I have another pair," she lied stoutly. "I hid them in a safe place and the German didn't find them, and you're a doctor, you need your hands."

Seeing that her lips were quivering and that she was on the point of bursting into tears, he smiled:

"Well, if you insist, let me have them."

A crowd of women had gathered in the entry at the Levonyuks. They quickly made way for the doctor. They already knew him.

"Then I'm not needed here?"

"The baby's already been born," one of them said.

"Yes, you are* You'd better have a look at her all 'the same. She was in pain an awfully long time and she's all worn out."

"Here you are, Auntie, I've brought you a doctor," announced Lyda.

"What under the sun did you do that for? What would I be needing a doctor for? So young he is!" said the sick

woman in amazement, "you a oetter taKe a lOOK ai me baby, there's nothing you can do for me. Goodness, it's not the first time I've given birth!"

He leaned over the cradle :

"Boy?"

"A boy, a boy. (I've only got one girl, Nyurka, the others are all boys. . . . Boys run in our family. . . ."

"He's a fine boy! What are you going to call him, eh?"

"I've just been talking to the women about that. . . . I wanted to call him Mitya, after his elder brother, but they say it's bad. . . ."

"Why, what happened to his brother?"

"Well, you see, his brother, my eldest, was buried today, with the others. . . . For a whole month he hung on the gallows, that son of mine, and only today I took him down myself," the woman explained quietly.

The doctor was taken aback.

"I clidn't know that was your son. . . ."

"My eldest, yes. . . . He was trying to make his way to the guerillas, well, and the Germans caught him. . . . My first-born, going on seventeen he was. I wanted to call the baby Mitya after him. But they advise me not to, they say I shouldn't do it, and now I don't know what to call him. . . ."

"Call him Victor," advised the doctor. "That's a good name. He was born today, so he has every right to be called Victor. . . ."

She thought for a moment.

"That's not bad at all. What do you think, Lyda?"

"(If that's his advice. . . ."

"Well, no need to chew over it! There isn't a single Victor in the whole village. Let him be Victor. But sit down, sit down, sit with us awhile."

"Thank you, but I've got to going back, my patients are waiting for me."

"But you've already bandaged them all, the women say. Sit here for a minute. They all have Red Armymen in their houses, but just because I was confined, there's nobody here, nobody at all. . . . And you, Lyda, get the vodka out of the cupboard, there's a bottle there."

"You had better not drink," put in the doctor hesitantly.

She smiled :

"And why not? You know a lot about healing the wounded, but I guess you don't know much about women's insides. A bit of vodka'll put anybody on their feet again."

He raised no further objections. Lyda poured the liquor into a thick, greenish glass.

"To the new baby, may he grow up strong and healthy. . . ."

"May he never see Germans in the house."

"May his birth be the sign for a new victory every day."

"May he grow up to be like Mitya was. . . ."

The doctor was tired to death. He had had very little sleep, and the liquor sent a pleasant warm wave through his whole body, then went to his head. He was sitting on a bench, and it seemed to him that the war and the battle had remained somewhere far, far away. The walls of the room were a pleasant white; the flower designs on the oven and the embroidery on the scarves in the corner stood out vividly. Pretty Lyda was smiling at him. It was just as though there were no wounded lying a few houses away from here, just as though no mound had been raised over a grave on the square by the church, just as though the toilsome road he had travelled since the first day of the war had never existed.

"Lyda, show the doctor the photo, it's there behind the icon, show it to him. . . ."

The doctor took the faded photograph in his hands. A cheeky, boyish face looked up at him, the simple, ordinary face of a village lad.

"He changed so much in the frost that you wouldn't know him. That's what he was like before," the mother explained calmly.

The doctor recalled his own mother. Her trembling white hands when she bade him farewell, her voice breaking, her big eyes dark with emotion. He recalled the nights, filled with painful thoughts and the fear which he could not overcome, fear which preceded the arrival of every fresh batch of wounded, fear of blood, of suffering, of death. "Nerves," he would tell himself, but it did not help. Nerves remained nerves, and made themselves felt with ever-increasing insistence. Instead of becoming stronger during the war, they had been shattered more than ever.

She looked at the woman in the bed. She lay with her head on a pink-checkered pillow. Her smoothly combed hair framed a tranquil face. For a whole month this woman had listened to the howling of the wind as it rocked the body of her eldest son. For a whole month she and her children had been starving and living in terror. Pregnant as she was, she had carried to the grave the body of her sixteen-year-old son, which she herself had cut down from the gallows. And then she had gone home to give birth. There she lay now, talking to him peacefully, treating him to the last drop of liquor which she had managed to conceal from the Germans.

The women came into the room from the entry, and sat around on benches and stools. He glanced at them covertly. All of them had lived under the German yoke, under the German lash. Their husbands and sons were far away at the front. None of them knew whether their dear ones were still alive or not. They had all lived through the frosts of that terrible winter, through the hunger that the Germans had brought. Many of them had bruises on their bodies, the result of blows of rifle butts. But one had to know all this, for one could never have guessed it from their

behaviour. Their faces were serene, untroubled, filled with a dignity that came from some hidden source, from the innermost depths of their hearts.

"Peasant women/" he thought, ^ and these words now had a new shade of meaning, a new significance for him.

"If only we had some more vodka we could drink to Mitya's memory again," said Levonyuchikha softly.

"What for?" interrupted Terpilikha curtly. "We'll remember him anyway, without a reminder. Ain't I right, girls?"

"How could we forget him!"

"There's Victor in his place. He'll grow up like Mitya and work as he should, and if it comes to that give his life for his country like Mitya did."

The alcohol fumes had wreathed his brain in a light, pleasant mist. He wanted to say something nice to the women, something pleasant, but his heart was heavy with unutterable sorrow for the lad who had died on the gallows, for the mother who herself had released him from the noose, with sorrow for all those who had lived through such tribulations.

"You're drunk/" he told himself severely, but it did not help, and tears rose to his eyes.

"What's wrong?" Lyda asked with concern.

"I feel sorry," he managed to blurt out trying to control himself.

Levonyuchikha looked at him steadily with her wise dark eyes.

"There's nothing to be sorry about, this is no time for ~~being~~ sorry," she said quietly. "Mitya's gone, but there's ~~nothing~~. We are a strong people, we grew out of the fei. . . . If you cut down a pear tree, a new shoot pushes up and finds its way to-the sunlight before you can look round. . . . Mitya is gone, and others are gone, too, but the land has remained, and the people have remained. . . .

How often we too thought that before we'd live to see anything they would kill us all off. But still we lived to see what we were waiting for. . . . The people can live through anything. . . . No, they're too hard a nut for the Germans to crack, our people.

. The mist before his eyes grew thinner and dissolved. This peasant woman had answered all those difficult, tangled thoughts that had worried him so much, had answered them simply, calmly, in peasant fashion. He felt ashamed of himself.

"Yes, yes. . . ."

"You're young that's why it's hard for you. Never mind, all this will end and you 'll live your life quietly, curing the sick, and as for us—we'll get on with our job. . . ."

He got up, remembering that he had been sitting there too long already.

Voices resounded through the village. Somewhere back of the houses, despite the frost, the girls were singing. Men's voices joined them. The song poured forth into the icy air, which was undisturbed by the slightest breath of wind. It soared aloft like the song of the lark, as if in recompense for the month of silence that had spread its shroud over the village. The soprano voices of the girls were supported by the deep voices of the Red Armymen.

The villagers had been accustomed to sing from childhood. They welcomed the dawn with a song, with a song they bade farewell to the parting day, with a song they lay down for the night. A ringing song helped them gather the wheat in the fields, helped them rake the sweet-smelling hay, helped the children pasture the herds, and the men to thresh the grain. The women were married to the strains of d song, and with a song on their lips they took leave of their dead when they committed them to the earth. There were both sad songs—the old-time songs, older than the roadside lindens—and songs of joy—the new songs, born of the life they

were living. The people were accustomed to connect song with life and life with song.

For a whole month they had been silent; for a whole month not a song had passed their lips, not a song had sounded in the village. Silent were the cottages, roads and gardens.

But now they could sing again. And the song of the girls carried over the whole village, over the distant snow-covered plain. One after the other, they sang the songs that were dear to them, songs that came right from their hearts, and swept over the gully, along the road, through the square and to the front of the Village Soviet, where lame Alexander was nailing up a big signboard with the words "Village Soviet" on it. Children stood around in a crowd, craning their necks as they looked up at the familiar inscription, the familiar letters. Inside, all traces of the night's battle were being rapidly cleared away. The loopholes which the Germans had cut in the walls were boarded up and the sand bags carried out. The women, spitting in disgust, washed the German blood from the floor.

"So that there won't be a trace of them left by evening," said one of them, and they all set to work with a will.

That is what everyone wanted so ardently—that by sunset, before nightfall; on this very first day, not a single trace of the German's thirty day's rule should remain. Somebody pulled down the gallows on the square, trying hard to dig the uprights out of the frozen soil, while somebody else who noticed him, fetched a saw and levelled them with the ground. The women were already hastily whitewashing their neglected cottages and using shovels and pitchforks to throw out the filth the Germans had left behind in the corridors and hall-ways. Work was in full swing, as at harvest time, "So's there won't be a trace of them," said the women, as they scrubbed the floors and whitewashed the walls.

"So's there won't be a trace of them," repeated the children as they collected metal scrap, empty cartridge cases,

and ragged German uniforms in the Commandant's office and at the battery.

The Red Army men, ploughing through waist deep snow, were hurriedly laying telephone cables. Lieutenant Shalov was establishing communication. In the school building the German prisoners were being interrogated. The villagers were extremely eager to listen in, but they understood that this was an army matter and that they mustn't interfere.

"Fussing around with them!" said Terpilikha heatedly. "Examining and cross-examining! Ought to take 'em behind the shed and put a bullet through their heads!"

"Lots you understand! We've got to get everything we can out of them, so where's the sense in killing them?"

"All right, then, only afterwards they should positively get a bullet through their heads!"

"Prisoners? Who kills prisoners?"

Terpilikha started as if she had been stabbed.

"What an idea! Prisoners! You saw how they treat our prisoners, didn't you? Prisoners! I'd boil 'em in oil and flay 'em alive! And what do we do? Lock 'em up all nice and sweet like and that's that!"

"That's not up to us," insisted Pelcharikha. "That's the rule—prisoners must be left alive. . . ."

"Rules indeed! What rules are there nowadays? Maybe in the last war there were such things, but not now. And is it the rule to kill children and torture people?"

The other woman sighed :

"You're telling me? You know yourself what they did to me."

"That's what makes it so funny that you're so hot about defending this here rule. Rules are for soldiers! D'you call them soldiers? Lousy Huns that they are!"

Pelcharikha did not answer. She thought the same herself—the same as they all did. Only they felt it would be a disgrace to do anything like the Germans.

"They'll sit around here, feed up~on our bread, and then go home safe and sound! Like being tucked away in a savings bank for the rest of the war!" said Terpilikha indignantly.

"Don't you worry, the Lieutenant will do what's necessary," said Alexander, interfering in the women's argument.

"Am I saying anything against it? Do I want to tell lift, Lieutenant what to do?"

"It's a wonder!" muttered Alexander, and hobbled home to paint another sign: "School." It wouldn't be as nice as the sign that had been there before, still that did not matter as long as he could wipe out the traces of the German paws and help make the village look like it did before.

Suddenly through the song-laden air, through the pure, clear azure, came a thunderous roar. The song broke off, as though it had been beaten to earth. The children playing in front of the houses froze into immobility.

"What was that?"

The roar was repeated, deafening, booming. The whole sky was thundering with gun-fire.

"The big guns are firing. ..."

"That's at Okhabi, over that way. ..."

"It's at Zelentsi. ..."

"Is it our men firing?"

They listened intently. An artillery barrage was roaring, and they heard the rumbling echo of bursting shells. Everyone was silent.

"What is going on over there?"

"It's a battle. . . ."

"Those are our guns firing, they're ours all right. ..."
"How do you know so much about artillery that you can tell the difference?"

"I can hear, can't I? The noise comes from the direction of our guns."

