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WŁADYSŁAW STANISŁAW REYMONT (1867–1925) was a Polish novelist and the 1924 laureate of the Nobel Prize in Literature. He is best known for his four-volume epic *The Peasants* (*Chłopi*), which was originally published between 1904 and 1909.

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Introduction

Details of the plot are revealed in this Introduction

Władysław Reymont was born on 7 May 1867 in a Poland which, by that time, had not existed as a political entity for seventy years. In 1795, the rulers of Austria, Prussia and Russia had met to agree a treaty to confirm the third and complete partition of Poland. Signed in St Petersburg in 1797, the treaty declared:

> In view of the necessity, as acknowledged by both Imperial courts, and also by His Royal Highness the King of Prussia, to abolish everything which could revive the memory of the existence of the Kingdom, now the annulment of this body politic has been effected . . . the high contracting parties are agreed and undertake never to include in the titles of their three courts the name or designation of the Kingdom of Poland, which shall remain suppressed as from the present and for ever.[1]

This partition was the result of an alliance between Russia and Prussia, which, from 1764, had a secret plan of military cooperation against Poland in the event that their interests were threatened. They had their allies among the Polish aristocracy, who supported the claims of Russia and Prussia to Polish territories during deliberations in the Polish parliament. Three empires divided Poland in three acts of parliament (of 1772, 1793 and 1795), with the participation of corrupt Polish politicians. Russia had the largest territory, though thanks to the lands taken from Poland, Prussia doubled its area and population. At the same time, resistance to the aggressive policies of Russia and Prussia was growing. In 1794, an uprising led by Tadeusz Kościuszko broke out, the insurgents wanting to save the country from the Russians and Polish traitors. It was these events to which Reymont dedicated his novel *The Year 1794*, published as a trilogy in 1913–18. After the uprising collapsed, the final partition went ahead, as a result of which Poland ceased to exist as a political entity until 1918.

Each part of partitioned Poland thus found itself under the rule of a different monarchy, and consequently, with a different language, culture,

administration and dominant religion. The profound and long-term consequences of this can be seen when one analyses a map of Polish political elections in the first decades of the twenty-first century. The distribution of votes generally corresponds to the map of the partitions, even though Poland regained its independence in 1918. Reymont and his family became citizens of Russia, as did all inhabitants of Poland who lived within Russia's share of the former kingdom.

Austria, Prussia and Russia seized Poland during its late feudal phase. The *szlachta* – nobility or gentry – enjoyed exclusive rights: the right to own and inherit land; personal inviolability and inviolability of property; judicial power over peasants; political rights and privileges (including the right to elect a king); the right to hold public office; exemption from taxes and customs duties; the right to produce and sell alcohol within one's property; and *liberum veto* – the right of any member of parliament to bring a session to an immediate end and annul resolutions.

By contrast, the bourgeoisie, particularly in the Russian partition, was weak, while the peasants, along with the land, belonged to the landowners, for whom they were obliged to provide labour without pay for a set number of days per week in a system that was in effect serfdom. These rights of ownership began to disappear with the partitions and enfranchisement of the peasants, however.

Serfdom was abolished in the Austrian partition in 1848, in the Prussian partition between 1811 and 1850, and, last of all, in the Russian partition in 1864. Its abolition and the decline of the landed class in Poland ushered in the capitalist system to the countryside. The landowner was now obliged to buy the labour of the peasants. Landed estates, newly deprived of free labour, began to fall into decline or to accumulate debt. That, in turn, translated into such low wages for agricultural labourers that they were not capable of surviving on them. Around half of the rural population was illiterate, limiting their ability to advance in society or find other types of work.

For Poland, a burning issue before regaining independence was the building of a sense of national identity in its former serfs. This is a particularly important theme in *The Peasants*. Since the Renaissance, the culture throughout Polish territories occupied by Russia had developed a symbolic language to express the identity of the 'Polish citizen', regardless of their ethnic identity. It reached its apogee in the period of the Romantic movement. The typical values of Western Romanticism – imagination, rebellion, individuality, idealism and the fight against tyranny – had a specific political and revolutionary dimension in Polish Romanticism. The loss of Poland's independence and the persecution

of patriotic youth provided the basis for Romantic political mythology, and the great Polish Romantic poets – Adam Mickiewicz, Juliusz Słowacki and Zygmunt Krasiński – codified the archetypal patriotic Pole in their work: a noble who was prepared to sacrifice his life in battle or conspiring in the cause of regaining Polish independence. That ideal was solidified following three failed uprisings against Russia: the Tadeusz Kościuszko insurrection of 1794, the November Uprising of 1830–31 and the January Uprising of 1863–4. Although the uprisings were initiated by the *szlachta*, the peasants also took part in them. The majority of landowners, however, were opposed to the enfranchisement of the peasants, which led to some reluctance, if not downright hostility on the part of some peasants, to the uprisings. For the political thinkers of the second half of the nineteenth century, it was clear that without building a national consciousness among the peasants, it was impossible even to dream of a strong, free Poland.

TAILOR, ACTOR, WRITER

Three years after the failure of the January Uprising, Władysław Stanisław Reymont was born. He spent the first twelve years of his life in the village of Tuszyn, to which his family had moved from the village of Kobiele Wielkie after the boy's birth. The experience of village life, including his father's position as a church organist, would be crucial to Reymont's work on *The Peasants*. As a child, he showed no particular aptitude for study, so his parents decided he would be a tailor. They apprenticed the thirteen-year-old boy to an atelier in Warsaw. The great city, once the capital of Poland, quickly revealed attractions other than tailoring. Reymont was captivated by the theatre. In 1855, as a newly trained journeyman, he joined a travelling theatre company for a season. Unfortunately, this and subsequent attempts revealed that he had no talent as an actor. His father found him a position with the Warsaw–Vienna Railway as a linesman at the Krosowo–Lipce railway crossing. The latter name was adopted as the locus of *The Peasants*.

Reymont's position ensured him a modest income, but his nature tossed him between theatre, the desire to enter a monastery, and finally writing, which he took up in 1891 on the publication of his first short stories. Abandoning his work on the railway, he returned to Warsaw, determined to be an author. Reymont's first success was a piece of reportage: *A Pilgrimage to Jasna Góra*. Published in 1895, it is an account of a pilgrimage he took part in from Warsaw to Częstochowa, where Poland's most famous Marian shrine was to be found at the

Paulist monastery on Jasna Góra (Bright Mountain). In *A Pilgrimage to Jasna Góra*, Reymont observes, listens and talks with fellow pilgrims, brilliantly describing their appearance, background, personalities and various reasons for undertaking the pilgrimage. The account breaks off at the threshold of Częstochowa, reflecting how the journey, not its goal, is the essence of pilgrimage.

As well as theatre, for several years Reymont was fascinated with theosophy and the occult, and he appeared as a medium at spiritualist seances. This drew him to London in 1894, where he attended a meeting of the Theosophical Society, co-founded in 1875 by the Russian author Helena Blatavsky. It was this spiritualist journey that resulted in the novel *The Vampire* (1911).

Reymont's career as a medium was as short-lived as his attempts to be an actor. His latter experiences contributed to a pair of novels: *Komediantka* (*The Deceiver*; 1896) and *Fermenty* (*Ferments*; 1897). The final years of the nineteenth century represent the most productive period of Reymont's life. Alongside his work on *Komediantka*, the author gathered material for one of his best-known novels, *The Promised Land*. Appearing in book form in 1899, it was set in an industrial city in the heyday of unbridled capitalism. The novel was inspired by Reymont's time in London, a city that had both oppressed and fascinated him; in a letter to his brother, he describes it as a 'monstrous colossus', a 'hell-city'.[2] Its magnitude, din and unpleasant stink foreshadow the depiction of Łódź in *The Promised Land*.

The exhaustive work on his novel of the capitalist industrial city turned Reymont's attention in a completely different direction: towards the theme of the countryside.

WORKING ON *THE PEASANTS*

Both *The Promised Land* and *The Peasants* were inspired by the work of Émile Zola, which Reymont acknowledged openly, referencing his reading of *La Terre* (*The Earth*; 1887) and the impression it had made upon him, although he did not agree with Zola's depiction of the French peasant. Zola introduced new heroes to his novels – the urban poor, peasants and criminals. But it was more important for him to present their fate as an effect of the environment in which they lived. He was fascinated by the ways in which nature and society shaped an individual. Influenced by Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, Zola believed that humans, just like animals, struggled for existence, economically as well as biologically, unable to escape the influence of the

external and the innate. Though Reymont did not know French well enough to read Zola in the original, and the first Polish translation did not appear until 1930, Zola was among the most widely reviewed authors in the Polish press at the time, so Reymont was familiar with discussions of the themes and issues raised in his novels. The beginning of his work on *The Peasants* dates back to 1897.

The actual novel apparently came to the writer while he was convalescing after a railway accident on 13 July 1900. He sustained a number of injuries and a medical statement plus a good lawyer secured him a substantial compensation of 35,000 roubles, which stabilized his financial situation and allowed him to work in peace on the final version of the manuscript of *The Peasants*. It was at that point that he destroyed, or fundamentally changed, the version on which he'd been working before the accident. Thanks to the research of Tomasz Jodełka-Burzecki,[3] we know the novel's four parts were a long time in the making. The first volume ('Autumn'), as we know it today, was written in 1901, and the first instalments appeared in *Tygodnik Illustrowany*, or *Illustrated Weekly*, in 1902. Readers received the second part ('Winter') at the beginning of 1903. 'Spring' took the longest; Reymont did not complete it until the summer of 1905. The last part, 'Summer', appeared in 1908. The book in its final form differs from the *Illustrated Weekly* version. Reymont reinstated the sections removed by the editorial censor (the erotic and political episodes) and changed or extensively amended other elements. In 1909, *The Peasants* was published in full. Such was its success that in 1918 the Academy of Learning proposed Reymont as a candidate for the Nobel Prize for Literature. He was declared laureate on 13 November 1924. Reymont, now gravely ill with heart disease, could not receive the prize in person. He died a year later, on 5 December 1925, at the age of fifty-eight.

FROM MYTH TO POLITICS

Throughout the twentieth century, *The Peasants* was read predominantly as an epic novel about the relationship of human beings to the land that they cultivate and which sustains them. The fortunes of its characters captured in the cycle of four seasons were supposed to prove the primacy of the naturalistic myth over history; of the pre-eminence of biological determinism – and the human order of work and its solemn rituals – over political and societal changes. The imperative of biological survival, the sexual drive, conflicts over land, familial and individual egoism – these are the forces that drive the protagonists and

bind them relentlessly within the narrow confines of the laws of nature, in the face of which individuality must give way to the law of the community. The survival of society demands a sacrificial victim: Jagna.

The universality of its theme is reflected in the setting of the novel. Though Lipce is an actual village that exists in Poland, it does not correspond to the village in the novel. The Lipce of *The Peasants* represents a typical Polish village at the end of the nineteenth century. Reymont separates that village from the 'world' at large, which for the majority of the characters remains closed, threatening, incomprehensible. Some of them leave or return to it, but the reader does not accompany them. The narrator focuses exclusively on Lipce, which means that the village reflects the world as a microcosm of reality. As Franciszek Ziejka puts it, 'This is a tale of every village.'[4]

But Reymont was more than just a novelist–mythographer of peasant culture. He was a politically engaged writer, maintaining close contact with politicians of the right-wing National Democracy – a political movement that came about after the failure of the January Uprising – including their leader, Roman Dmowski. From this perspective, the novel's investigation of the nationalist potential inherent in the Polish village at the threshold of modernity and Polish independence, which finally came about in 1918, is a more significant theme of *The Peasants*. The novel's view of that potential is sceptical, however, in that it tells the tale of the failed inception of a new political class in Poland – the peasants.

We come across at least a hundred characters by name in the text. The varied and individualized picture of the collective entity of the peasant class follows two plot lines. The first is the marriage of the wealthiest peasant, Maciej Boryna, to the rich and beautiful Jagna; the second revolves around Jagna's affair with Boryna's son Antek. This incestuous family romance unfolds in parallel with the battle over the forest whose owner wishes to sell it, despite the fact that the peasants are his co-owners. On the broader ideological plane of the novel, the main plot allows Reymont to conduct a simulation experiment: how does one turn peasants, formerly enslaved by serfdom in the service of the Polish *szlachta* and liberated by Russia, into Poles? How does one do that without Polish educational or administrative institutions, which were in Russian hands? And, finally, how does one make the peasants into citizens who would be sincerely and passionately attached to Poland?

From this perspective, Reymont has written a genealogical novel about the stillborn birth of a Polish peasant class. This is the biggest riddle of *The Peasants*, all the more intriguing given that, when he was writing the novel, the Russian Revolution of 1905 extended as far the

Polish lands and took place before the author's very eyes, leading to over 750 peasant strikes in the year of the revolution alone. In the years over which *The Peasants* was written (1900–1908) and the years in which it is set (1883–4), revolutionary events are surprisingly absent from the protagonists' actions and underlying motivations. Acts of revolutionary violence take place completely outside the scheme of the novel, whereas its characters appear paralysed by indecision. The narrative and stylistic dynamics mask the fact that the social and political world of the village is mired in total inertia. A lot goes on, but nothing of consequence happens.

The depiction of a passive village collective, fixed within a mythical–naturalistic cycle of nature, is an ideological abstraction that disguises but also explains and justifies the political violence responsible for the individual dramas of the characters as well as the unresolved conflicts permeating the Lipce community. The putative novel–myth about humankind's relationship with the earth obscures a political novel that considers the peasants' road to achieving a political and national identity. By removing the peasant characters from their own history, the author immobilizes them in a mythic timelessness; he leaves them only with a fate that – despite its richness and variety of individual experience – is common to all the village inhabitants. Reymont's narrative project is deeply conservative and seeks to lock the peasant community in a state of homeostasis, as it was understood by the American psychologist Walter Cannon: a biopolitical order that is insensitive to both external influences and internal conflicts, making 'self-righting adjustments' in order to preserve biological harmony.[5] From a political perspective, Lipce remains in almost perfect isolation from the outside world, while maintaining biopolitical 'good health', awaiting the right moment for Poland to regain independence. The abolition of serfdom by the Russians made Reymont realize that premature political emancipation of the peasants risked turning them into Russian citizens. His novel is a political project that restrains the social emancipation of the peasants until independence can emancipate Poland.

THE 'APPARATUS' OF LIPCE

How does one convince the reader that it is neither the powers that be nor history that are responsible for the situation in which the novel's protagonists find themselves but, on the contrary, that their fate is a metaphysical necessity?

In his essay 'What is a People?', the Italian philosopher Giorgio

Agamben proposes a two-part understanding of the category. A people can be seen equally as a 'constitutive political subject as well as the class that is excluded – de facto, if not de jure – from politics'.[6] The 'People', with a capital 'P', refers to a society that conducts a political life in which it shares in the decision-making, whereas the 'people', with a lower-case 'p', connotes a pre-political collective, deprived of those rights that the 'People' hold. This ordinary 'people' can be ruled, exploited, subjugated, deprived of their rights, excluded from the public stage and even exterminated. According to Agamben, in the history of the world, these two 'peoples' are in permanent conflict, and an ultimate unification is impossible, or it may occur only in theory as part of a 'messianic' event that confers divine righteousness upon humanity, when 'there shall no longer be any people.'[7]

At the end of the nineteenth century, across the Polish lands, an intense process of transformation was under way: the Polish 'people' were turning into a 'People', primarily through protests and strikes, but also through ever-sharper conflicts within the peasant stratum itself, in which rural capitalism and the growing hunger for land produced indelible social differences and discrepancies of wealth between the village proletariat (the *komorniki* – hired hands, or tenants) and the farmers. This is perfectly and succinctly expressed in the novel by one of its characters, Witek: 'Only farmers have land, the rest lodge and go out to earn, or take a place as servants' (p. 284). The impotence of the novel's patrician characters makes it clear that the non-existent Poland has nothing to offer to 'the people', either politically or socially.

There is nothing particularly strange about this. The partitions are still in force, and the actual administrators of rights and freedoms are the Russians. Reymont remembers, as do his protagonists, that the Russians were responsible for the most important empowerment of the peasants – liberating them from serfdom – which began in 1864, or even earlier, according to the tsar's edict of 2 March 1863.[8]

It would be too simple to ascribe the impotence of the noble democrats and the political passivity of the peasants directly to the Russian occupation. Nowhere does Reymont suggest that. The rural community in the novel seems to be autonomous, but its historical and economic unconsciousness holds the peasants in a state of political non-readiness. Although noble patriots maintain constant conspiratorial activity throughout the novel, and rural communities suffer poverty and injustice, a universal conviction persists none the less of the inescapability of the essentially unchanging *urządzenie* – 'ordering' – of the world. This word appears many times in the novel and, though Reymont uses it in a commonplace sense, it signifies precisely what Agamben refers to as an

'apparatus' (*dispositif*), and therefore a system that 'in some way has the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviours, opinions, or discourses of living beings'.[9]

The functioning of this system has consequences far greater and deeper than a profession of faith or a set of political opinions. The 'apparatus' ensures that a certain ideology and worldview and specific beliefs and propaganda are internalized by the community as their own convictions and feelings. The ultimate confirmation of submission to the 'apparatus' is reflected in the personal conviction, on the part of each individual, that the world 'is this way', never-changing, beyond history and cultural pluralism. This happens when a community begins to treat as sacred the norms and values acquired as part of the historical process. 'The apparatus . . . is literally a process of sacrifice: the transformation of what was profane into what is sacred.'[10]

Many figures in *The Peasants* use the term 'ordered' in the sense of 'apparatus' to describe the immutability of the laws of the world in which they live. There are three pillars of the apparatus in the world of the characters: religion, land and language. That is perfectly expressed in the novel's opening sentence: 'Praised be Jesus Christ!' (p. 3). Thus does the parish priest, supervising the ploughing, greet the vagrant Agata, who is leaving to go begging. The greeting is echoed at the other end of the novel, when the old beggar closes the narrative with the words: 'Go with God, dear people' (p. 893).

In this first scene we learn that the love affair between Antek and Jagna is already under way, and that the heroine surpasses all other women in the village in beauty and wealth: 'a right lady' (p. 8). Her mother is an 'old witch' (p. 9), the women gossip as they work, referring to Dominikowa's sagacity and independence. Jagustynka foretells the final events – that is, the lynching of Jagna – saying that once upon a time 'they'd drive that sort out [of the village]' (p. 9). The autumn landscape and numerous people drift across the priest's field of vision; as though unconcerned with building tension, the narrator babbles details that are key to the plot.

The narrator should not be blamed for such garrulousness, however. Everything can be told, since nothing is going to happen – that is, nothing ground-breaking – as the world's order is already determined. Commending people to God is, of course, a commonplace religious formula for greeting and saying farewell. But it is also something else, namely a sign of human helplessness and disengagement from any responsibility for the world – that is, for economic inequality, violence, class conflicts and the political indifference of the nobility and the clergy towards rural communities. Nothing is resolved, but only

suspended or suppressed. The figure of Agata, who opens the novel, exemplifies the cruel 'aliment' law. After signing her property over to her children, Agata was driven out to beg and earn a living to pay her relatives for her care in old age. Aware of her position and the unfeeling law behind it, the priest 'pushed a zloty diffidently into her hand' (p. 3). Occasional philanthropic interventions change nothing in the world of *The Peasants*, however, and even bolster it. This is even better illustrated by the attitude of the priest to Kuba. Rewarded with a zloty for hunting a partridge, Kuba, much moved, says: 'Only the priest respects 'un, only him!' (p. 49). Emboldened by this good treatment, at church the pious farmhand pushes his way to the front, to the outrage of the most prominent farmers. Boryna later explains to him the order of things that he has disturbed. 'That's how the world is ordered, it is, and your head won't change it' (p. 68).

Dozens of scenes reveal the protagonists' certitude concerning the all-embracing apparatus of their world in which things 'couldn't be otherwise' (p. 474). In response to the suggestion of Rocho – an underground conspirator – that they could offer each other mutual assistance, Boryna replies:

> 'I've other things on my shoulders. So I won't be crying that some Wojtek or Bartek has nothing to put in his mouth. That's the priest's business, not mine! One man, even if he wanted, cannot do everything.'
>
> 'But he can do a lot, a lot,' put in Rocho, sadly.
>
> 'Just try carrying water in a sieve and you'll see how much you fetch – that's how it is with poverty. That's how God has ordered it, seems to me, and how it will stay, that one man has enough, and another catches the wind.' (p. 292)

Rocho, too, is helpless. When Hanka comes to him for advice in the matter of Jagna, all he can say is: '"let her be, mind your own affairs, and leave the rest to the Lord Jesus . . ." He [then] praised God and headed for the village' (p. 473). Antek, when seeking advice from the priest if he should avoid his prison sentence by running away to America, receives the same reply, that it would be better to 'put yourself in the hands of Providence and wait on God's mercy' (p. 779).

In comparison, Jagustynka is a more striking character: Reymont created her to shatter false pretences, to thwart the 'apparatus'. Every now and then, her uncompromisingly frank statements expose shameful family secrets or the hypocrisy of the community's leaders. She indulges in social criticism and voices decidedly feminist judgements on the common responsibility of men and women when it comes to betrayal:

> A man can carry on sowing wild oats in the wind and not one single ill word does anyone have for him! A stupid order of things it is! Why, is a woman not a living human being, is she whittled of wood, or what? But since she must answer for her actions, then let her lover pay just the same – they sinned together after all. (p. 859)

Jagustynka expresses the most significant critique of social structures in a conversation with Boryna about Magda – a girl who, having fallen pregnant, is driven out in wintertime and after giving birth almost dies of cold. 'That's the way the world is and ever has been ordered – will you change it?' asks Boryna, using the now familiar phrase, to which Jagustynka responds with a surprising argument. Rather than displaying outrage in the face of Boryna's cruelty, she questions the principle itself that demands that everyone must cope alone. And she reminds him of a time when the village took care of the sick and the homeless. She shows that the 'apparatus of the world' is not eternal and universal, but historical and dependent on the will of the majority: 'I recall how earlier, before the war, during gentry times, there were a hospital for the poor in the village, in the house where the organist is now, I well recall, that folk paid for by the morgen' (p. 270).

Jagustynka's knowledge of the Lipce inhabitants' shameful secrets, her familiarity with local history and her uncompromising frankness make her a multidimensional character. She cannot abide Jagna, Antek or Boryna and vilifies the richer farmers. 'The poor she despised equally and mocked them even more' (p. 320). Her mockery is aimed as much at the hypocrisy of rural morality as at the providential interpretation of history as directed by Christ. She jeers at Rocho's naïve messianism, and then presents an alternative vision of the Second Coming: 'Come it will, but as the Antichrist, and that one will mete out justice and have no more mercy than a hawk on a chick' (p. 260). Outraged by her derisory scepticism, Rocho remonstrates with her at length: 'A long, long time he talked; the priest at the pulpit could not have done better' (p. 261).

Despite Jagustynka's polemical obstinacy, she does not contest the sanctifying function of the 'apparatus'. Her folk Darwinism is another version of that same determinism through which the peasant protagonists see the metaphysical principles that regulate their lives. Ultimately, then, Jagustynka assents to the domination of the 'apparatus', although she insightfully points out the accountability of individuals when it comes to injury and injustice.

She provides an internal vent for the system; she can speak the truth because her social position is weak. In the novel, she fulfils a function similar to that of a jester in a Shakespearian tragedy. Her instinctive

contention with falsehood and injustice is not transformed into political protest, but is discharged emotionally in anger or malice. Meanwhile, her rhetorical freedom, impudence, inclination to parrhesia (the heroic speaking of the truth) mislead the reader. In reality, she does not differ from Boryna in her conviction that human beings are not in control of the natural and human worlds because they are directed by incomprehensible and therefore sacred forces that, once sanctified, become part of the 'apparatus'. For all her insight into the world in which she lives, Jagustynka is unable to conceive an alternative, although she, like Agata, is a victim of the aliment system – of the ruthless relationship between the ownership of land and the right to life.

WHAT ABOUT THIS 'POLAND'?

It is clear from the outset of the novel that Lipce is the site of intensive and persistent efforts to 'nationalize' the peasantry. The chief advocate of Polishness is Rocho. He is supported by Jacek, a former insurrectionist and brother of the squire. Conspiratorial activity is also carried out by a steady and considerable stream of anonymous 'beggars' who pass through the village, bringing tales of ancient Poland and preparing the ground for a new Polish peasant class. Rocho's arrival is announced by Józia, who informs us that an 'old wanderer has turned up' (p. 100). He is presented as a pious pilgrim, who has been 'to Jesus' tomb' (p. 90), though few believe it. Kłębowa tells us more: 'Every third winter he comes to Lipce and stays with Boryna . . . He says to call him Roch, but that's like as not his name . . . Maybe he's a beggar and maybe not, who knows . . .' (p. 100).

The sober Jagustynka sees through the pilgrim's guise and maintains that he gleaned his knowledge of the holy places from newspapers. In the course of reading, we learn that Rocho speaks German and French, hands out pictures of saints and kings, teaches the children, doesn't eat meat, assuages quarrels and supports the destitute with small donations: 'So good was he and so mindful of community' (p. 481). Maria Rzeuska describes Rocho as 'a kind of intellectual emissary who has "gone to the people", an awakener of its national spirit',[11] and draws attention to his intensifying political activity in volumes III and IV. The narrator treats Rocho with a degree of detachment, and even questions the point of his activities, likening them to someone 'moistening parched lips with a drop of dew, without giving them aught to drink!' (p. 481). Rather than helping to solve the problems with which the inhabitants struggle, Rocho involuntarily fans the flames of conflict

between the people and their masters: 'Rocho's words, like a stick that carelessly agitates a dying fire so that the flames leap up strongly again, had served simply to drag the memory of all their injuries before their eyes once more. Hardly anyone even went to vespers' (p. 448).

The peasants' sense of grievance does not have its roots in the catastrophe of the partitions. Reymont clearly communicates that, for them, ownership of land and a secure life are more important than the independence of Poland, and that the main conflicts that afflict Lipce continue to be rooted in the former relations of serfdom, and had been newly stoked by the repressions following the January Uprising and by Russian policies of antagonizing the nobility and the peasants. Even though Boryna himself took part in the uprising, whose rallying cry was 'z szlachtą polską polski lud' (the Polish people [stand] with the Polish nobility), no positive trace is left in the novel by this 'wolf of a neighbour' (p. 318), as Boryna terms relations between the peasants and the manor. Meanwhile, Jacek, a member of the *szlachta* and former comrade-in-arms of Boryna, maintains in a tribute to him as he lies dead that the responsibility for this enmity lies with the nobility: '[Boryna] was a good man and a true Pole. He was with us at the uprising. He joined our party freely and did not spare himself. I saw him in action. And he was ruined on our account . . . A curse hangs over us' (p. 688).

In the novel, participation in the uprising does not awaken the respect of the community. 'It's not our cause,' says the Soltys (p. 656), reminding the peasants of how they were punished for supporting the uprising. Kuba is a disregarded farmhand at Boryna's, while Jacek is generally perceived as crazy. The burial plots of the insurrectionists are an anonymous 'row of graves right by the fence' (p. 129). 'Them lying there were trounced in the forest . . . aye, my kin lie there . . . my mother too . . . aye,' Kuba explains to Witek (p. 129). His own 'decision' to take part in the struggle was more an enforced choice than a patriotic impulse: 'when they all went off . . . they took me too' (p. 130).

Rocho's conspiratorial activities are also evaluated from the perspective of historical awareness, particularly among the older inhabitants, from Lipce and beyond. 'Rocho stands with the gentry and that's why he's setting people against the officials!' says a peasant from Przyłęk (p. 815). And old Pryczek adds: 'I know what that Poland of theirs means: nothing but serfdom, oppression and a whip to your back!' (p. 816).

The mask of the democrat drops from the squire at the very first criticism that a peasant dares to raise of the *szlachta*'s historical role in their oppression. When Antek confronts him with the accusation that gentlemen 'partied the whole nation away', the other, incensed,

replies: 'Keep your nose out of gentlemen's business, you peasant lout, and stick to dung and pitchforks, understand!' (p. 831).

Reymont makes it abundantly clear that the Polish discourse of independence cannot be the basis on which to agitate in promoting Polishness among the peasants. Another viable alternative is the language of social justice, but we will not find that in the novel, either. Historians of rural Poland convincingly explain this impasse. Tomasz Kizwalter, for instance, writes that 'the uprisings of the "nobles" and attempts at insurrection were seen by the peasants as the dangerous undertakings of "Poles", provoking deep hostility and sometimes panic and fear, transforming into aggression.'[12] The *szlachta* in turn were alarmed lest, on a wave of tsarist repressions, the peasants would begin to claim rights to the land they worked or, indeed, that they counted on receiving from Russian hands some of the lands confiscated for participation in the uprising.[13] That led to a scandalous alliance between the occupied and the occupier, and the peasants were encouraged to express tacit or open support of repression of the nobility: 'The habitual summoning of gendarmes and the army against revolting peasants by almost every landowner who came face to face with peasant resistance is a reliable indicator of this approval.'[14]

In this context, the farewell scene with Rocho appears particularly inauthentic. He declaims a fiery agitational speech (not quoted by the narrator) foretelling, we assume, a free and just Poland ('he opened heaven before them, showed them paradise', p. 855). To which Antek and the others gathered reply with elation:

> 'Jesus . . . just lead us . . . and I'll go even to my death, I'll go . . .'
> 'We'll all go, and trample whatever stands in our way!' (p. 855)[15]

The surge of political emotions and escalation of clandestine activity in the novel do not lead to any explosion, but gives way to a spontaneous defusion and, in fact, a deceleration. A curious political immobilization ensues in the novel's finale. It is the conspirator Rocho who is the basic narrative instrument of Reymont's political engineering, thus inhibiting the emancipatory energy of the rural community. Rocho refrains from intervention in key conflicts: he does not try to prevent Jagna's lynching; he takes no part in reconciling Boryna with Antek; he accepts Agata's vagabondage.

The work of the political emissaries – Rocho and Jacek above all – preserves rather than revolutionizes the peasants of Lipce. It certainly does not serve to make citizens of them, to transform them into

conscious political subjects. The aim is to maintain the identity and political potential of the community and individuals in a state of fluidity. In order to achieve the impression of the peasants' political passivity, Reymont blocked the narrator and the protagonists' access to two fundamental outlets of potential revolt: the language of social discourse and that of independence. But he activated a third.

THE DESECRATOR

Reymont permits one figure to question the foundations of the world's 'apparatus', and even to strike at them. In *The Peasants*, land and religion are the sacred foundations of the order of the world, and Reymont entrusts their desecration to Jagna alone, endowing her with extraordinary attributes. As well as being beautiful, she is also strong, matching 'the tallest of the men in height' (p. 52). Seeing her brother struggling to lift a load, 'she snatched the great bundle impatiently from him, threw it over her shoulder and carried it to the cart' (p. 87). Descriptions of her beauty are scattered throughout the novel but most intuitively grasped by Kuba, to whom Jagna looks like 'a picture' (p. 53), obviously having in mind the image of the Częstochowa Mother of God. Not only is she beautiful, strong, gifted with an aesthetic sense and artistic talent, she is also wealthy and free:

> She did as she liked and never heard an ill word. What did she care about portions and settlements and property? Next to nothing, a husband included. Was she short of lads running after her? They'd all send round [the vodka] on the same evening at her slightest whim. (p. 94)

Her freedom arises from the fact that her father is dead and matriarchy is the rule in her family. Her mother, Dominikowa, is well connected and intelligent: 'the Voyt himself was impressed at how sage the woman seemed' (p. 119). Jagna's two brothers obediently carry out their mother's commands, including those tasks that commonly fall to women. Most surprising of all, Jagna's independence of character does not weaken after her marriage to Boryna. She refuses to have her hair cut ('after the wedding, don't cut my hair!', p. 154) and withholds relations with her husband. Despite a number of liaisons, before and after her marriage, she does not become pregnant.

It becomes clear in the course of reading that the figure of Jagna does not fit within the realist conventions, which the narrator confirms, describing her as a personification of the earth:

> for like the earth beneath her was Jagna's soul; yes, like that earth. It lay in depths unknown to anyone, in the chaos of slumbering dreams: immense, but oblivious of its immensity; powerful, yet without will, without desire or volition; lifeless, yet immortal. And, like this earth, every coming gale seized, embraced and rocked it, bearing it off wherever it pleased. And just like the earth, the sun woke it in spring, filled it with life, set it trembling with love and desire. And it would give birth, because it must: it lives, sings, reigns, creates and destroys . . . it exists because it must . . . for as this earth was holy, so was Jagna's soul . . . just like this earth! (p. 94)

Deified by the narrator, Jagna is a danger to the peasant community. Nothing is 'sacred' to her; she is full of amoral, transgressive emotions. She is a desecrator, disrupting the moral and social codes that define something as 'sacred' or 'holy'.

Jagna's repeated acts of desecration reach their apogee in two scenes: when she deprecates the 'sacred' possession of land; and when she seduces the future priest. She does not criticize this obsession with land, but violates its absolute obligation, impulsively retorting to her mother: 'Land, land – that's all you've got on the brain: it's as much as nothing to me' (p. 253). When, during her quarrel with Hanka, she pulls out Boryna's settlement that entitles her to a portion of land and throws it at Hanka's feet, her gesture is pure blasphemy. To Hanka, it is incomprehensible: 'Why, she'd tossed aside a whole six morgen of fields like a cracked jug! Why, she must be wrong in the head!' she says to herself, deeply shaken (p. 738).

A final act of desecration that provokes the reaction of the collective is the seduction of Jasio, the son of the organist and a future priest. In Reymont's novel, Jagna evolves from a person into an amoral force of uninhibited sensuality. At the sight of the boy, she 'shuddered, licking her red lips and stretching, taut with pleasure' (p. 568). Her attractiveness easily elicits from the future priest what the establishment would like to diminish or hide by 'sanctifying' it. Jagna humanizes the 'envoy of Providence', drawing him into the secular order of human desire. The reaction of the community to Jagna's anarchic desecration does not spring from moral outrage. It is rather a systemic corrective reaction. Jagna is potential revolution; she disrupts the homeostasis of the social organism on so many levels that she must be rendered harmless, incapacitated, but not removed, since she is an integral part of that organism, its internal tester – a vaccine that activates the immune system. At the end of *The Peasants*, Jagna is left with her mother – battered, ill, incapacitated, but alive. There is much to indicate that, on recovering, she will succeed Jagustynka; in other words, that she will turn

from desecration to parrhesia. This future change is perhaps signalled by the discreet play on the names of both characters: 'Jagna' is contained within the name '**Jag**ustyn**ka**'.

THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF A 'PEOPLE'

The only narrative event that briefly disturbs the functioning of the 'apparatus' is the battle between the peasants of Lipce with the squire's people and the response of the Russian authorities, as a result of which 'more than fifty men [were driven] to prison' (p. 427). The immediate cause of the conflict is the squire's decision to sell the wood without negotiating with the peasants who are its co-owners. The peasants question this predatory economics and trading of the squire's arrears that eliminates them from the market in favour of financially stronger buyers of the debt-laden manor lands. The economic conflict could have formed the basis for integrating the rural community in the name of common interests, but this too fails. It is eclipsed by resentment, suspicion and the desire to outwit one's own neighbour.

Reymont, however, gestures in yet another direction of emancipation – the growing question of the role of women. The temporary absence of men from the village and the land, consequently lying idle, fundamentally alters social relations within the community. Above all, Hanka, the betrayed wife of Antek, becomes the true heroine of the novel. Without hesitation, she takes up the place left by Boryna and Antek. Previously timid, now she does not fear confrontation with the blacksmith, who is preying upon Boryna's estate:

> 'You'll be at war again!' Jagustynka remarked quietly.
> 'M'dear, warfare's all I live by!' Hanka retorted calmly (p. 460).

Reymont significantly modifies her appearance and personality, making her physically stronger and imbued with self-confidence. Hanka is self-controlled, she speaks precisely and clearly, 'directly, and to the point' (p. 336). The change leads to her immediate rise in social estimation: '"Well, well! She looked like she wouldn't say boo to a goose, and now she manages as well as a man," the first women of the village said of her' (p. 435). Even the fundamental conflict between Hanka and Jagna is a step away from resolution, for 'then came moments when they began to feel sorry for each other, and would have chatted amicably together' (p. 584).

The disruption of social relations dominated by men immediately

stimulates emancipatory potential and activates dormant social functions. Above all, people begin to help each other. Jagna's brother Szymek liberates himself from his mother's tyranny, moving out of the house and marrying a much poorer girl, and the village supports them materially. However, that does not happen until the men return from prison. Finally, something seemingly impossible happens: one morning, a group of men from neighbouring villages arrive and offer help in the form of free labour ('for thanks alone . . . That's never happened', p. 547).

A world temporarily without men provides a glimmer of another possible kind of community arising in the village – of greater solidarity, sharing part of the surplus of accumulated goods with those in need. But an interpretation like that is dangerously close to pure fantasy because Reymont encrusts these scenes with ironic counterpoints. The poorest women, described as 'hired hands', receive no help whatsoever. When they come complaining to the priest, he tries to cheer them and finally 'blocked his ears and left' (p. 554), while Rocho fobs them off, promising to find some other assistance.

The mechanism of homeostasis continues to function: the disturbance to the social organism is corrected and ultimately stabilized by the time of the men's return and the banishment of Jagna. Where a 'People' might have emerged as a conscious social entity, the 'people' reassert themselves as a pre-political community.

WITH NEITHER COMMUNITY NOR HERO

Communal life in the novel is exclusively impulse-driven. Anger, desire, fear, violence, rivalry, hunger for land and envy propel the social mechanism of Lipce. Even what is just and deserving does not emerge as a result of reflection, planning or discussion but from a sudden surge of affective energy. Antek's passion for Jagna emboldens him to challenge his father, fight him and leave home, resulting in his separation from the community ('Antek alone seemed cut off from the village', p. 241). We are on the threshold of the birth of a hero: the process of individuation begins. Antek sees his distinctiveness within the collective but is also able to express a sense of his own internal disintegration: '"I don't need anyone. I'm on such terms with myself I can scarce manage that," he told Kłąb' (p. 240).

But here Reymont is playing with the reader. The battle for the forest, the reconciliation with the father and the stint in prison should have formed a rebel; meanwhile, the opposite happens, as though the motif of the hero had undergone a kind of paralysis, frozen within the

plot. On his return from prison, Antek experiences a sudden regression and humbly accepts the 'apparatus' and its agents: the unseen Russian authorities; the tyranny of wealthy farmers; irremovable class and economic conflict; the right of the community trumping the right of the individual. Reymont has no mercy for either hero or reader when he offers us the image of Antek playing with his little son. The beaten and humiliated father explains to his baby boy the immutability of this order: '"even a hawk's got to eat, even the lowliest worm. That's the way the world is ordered!" he ruminated' (p. 756).

The ideological allegory masquerades as natural law, for Reymont manipulates the reader, subduing the force of the allegory by means of poetic imagery. We start to believe that the peasants' political passivity arises directly from biological determinism. Antek had 'sunk deep into something that emanated powerfully from these boundless lands, sating his soul with a heady and indescribable sweetness' (p. 757). Defeated by the inexorable narrator, he capitulates: 'I'm back and I'm staying!' (p. 757). He is repeating the words of the earth to the dying Boryna: 'Stay! Stay with us!' To no effect, however, because 'he had not the strength and the earth snatched at his feet' (p. 674). In the novel, agricultural land, sanctified as 'earth', becomes a chthonic monster that devours the characters, depriving them of their individual needs and desires. The narrator–ventriloquist simulates its non-human voice as it addresses Antek:

> 'Everything must take its course, everything. We plough to sow, sow to reap, and what obstructs needs plucking out like a bad weed,' some stern ancient voice spoke within him, as if issuing from the earth and these human settlements. (p. 887)

While this process of annihilation seems to symbolize the mystical unity of the peasant with the cultivated land, in reality the land masks the economic relations that society professes and enacts. The protagonists are absorbed by a community that is ruthlessly traditional and dogmatic, consolidating itself via rituals of exclusion of the stranger that reinforce inclusion of one's own kind, which is best exemplified by the stoning of Jagna: 'The people are sanctioned to punish and sanctioned to reward!' (p. 885). When asked for his opinion, Antek, the former rebel and lover of Jagna, replies: 'I live in the village, and I stand with the village! You want to cast her out, then cast her out; and if you want to stick her on an altar, then stick her on it! It's all the same to me!' (p. 885).

There is nothing mystical in this, but rather tacit recognition by the protagonists of their inability to change anything or to move on. They

live in a place with dwindling natural resources (land for cultivation), a non-existent public sphere, ruthless economic competition, widespread violence and a fear of the outside world that paralyses even a dream of living 'somewhere else'. Hanka is determined that Antek would 'not go to another village, to strangers, while there was life left in her' (p. 219). Desperate, Jagna fleetingly considers escaping the village: 'The world stood open on every side, but so terrifying, so unfathomable, so strange and hazy, that she almost died of fright at the thought, like a little bird that lads snatch and stick under a pot' (p. 391).

Even Agata, who knows the world and how to survive, returns in the spring in order to die in Lipce: she was 'Returning from her beggary, upon which she'd embarked for Jesus' bread' (p. 415). Perhaps most indicative of all is the xenophobic fear that devours the peasants, clearly demonstrated in their outright hostility towards the German settlers attempting to acquire land near Lipce, and even extending to inanimate objects, as expressed in the words of old Bylica, Hanka's father, when he says to a log of wood intended for the building of a new home: 'The Jews would have taken you off to town, but the Lord Jesus let you stay with your own, with farmers' (p. 623).

The power of these naturalistic allegories should not be underestimated. Even prominent literary critics who have written about *The Peasants* have succumbed to them. Kazimierz Wyka's powerful, imperious and seminal interpretation for decades shaped the reading of the novel, whose action, according to him, was played out 'nowhere' and 'always':

> And that is why, now that Boryna is buried, now that Szymek has established a new farmstead on the clearing, now that the dispute over the Polish school has died down, Lipce returns to its old days. After the harvest they return to that same timelessness that ruled them ten months ago, when they were digging potatoes.[16]

Franciszek Ziejka goes so far as to juxtapose nature and the apparatus, but still confirms their all-embracing domination:

> But these are, above all, children of nature. Just as the millions of peasants the globe over are the children of nature. All have been subsumed into the cogs of this great mechanism, forever in motion, marking the eternal temporal order: a sacred order.[17]

Even the vigilant and cautious Andrzej Leder repeats too eagerly Wyka's claim of a 'mythic timelessness', thereby spreading a literary veil over

the historical and political reality of peasant life: 'Yes, it is a peasant novel, but suspended in timelessness, as though torn from the teeth of historical transformation.'[18]

In truth, the passivity of peasant society has no mythical underpinnings but is the legacy of the historic relations between serfdom and manor, alongside relentless politico-policing activity that is clearly suggested and partially represented in the novel. 'The Land' is a symbolic fetish in bio-political rhetoric that the author employs to transform peasant history into the seemingly immutable fate of the peasants. We do not, therefore, end up in 'timelessness' at the end of the novel, but closer to the 'people' as bare life than to the 'People' as political group.

AT THE MARGINS: JEWS IN THE PEASANT COMMUNITY

As old Bylica's comment illustrates, Jews living within the peasant community are not regarded as fully integrated, a view that is constantly reinforced throughout the novel, not least by the way in which Jankiel, the innkeeper and a long-standing resident of Lipce, is referred to chiefly as 'the Jew' rather than by name. While the rivalry between Lipce and other villages is often touched upon – as exemplified by ironic references to the Rzepki 'gentry' or the outrage of the Lipce inhabitants when other villages are given tree-felling work by the manor – relations between peasants and their Jewish neighbours reflect a greater sense of friction.

From the sixteenth century, Poland became the site of the largest concentration of Jews in Europe, with up to 80 per cent of all Jews in the world living in Poland by the nineteenth century. In the Polish countryside, up until the end of the nineteenth century, conflicts between Jews and peasants were primarily economic and religious, rather than racial or political. The main source of hostility towards Jews was based upon the perception of them as Christ's murderers and upon the fact that they were traders and understood the rules of the market all too well. This perception was maintained not only in fragments from the Gospels heard at church, but also in spoken folklore. Typical behaviour towards Jews in the countryside included mockery and disrespect, interference with religious rituals and even fighting. At the same time, doctors in the Jewish villages were appreciated and the wisdom of the tzaddiks, or spiritual leaders, was respected. Fear and fascination mixed in the rural

attitudes towards Jews.[19] Reymont presents a probable picture of pre-political anti-Semitism in the Polish countryside, as illustrated by statements that crop up throughout the novel: 'Oh, Jews, aye – who else if not those plague-ridden Jews!' (p. 210); 'swindlers . . . Christ-slayers' (p. 212); 'When the time came for the nasty Jews and the ferocious Pharisees to lead our Lord to his martyrdom' (p. 108); 'Shouting like Jews on the Sabbath!' (p. 722).

The modern, political anti-Semitism that appeared in Poland in the second half of the nineteenth century echoed the anti-Semitism known in Russia, Austria–Hungary, Germany, France and England. Based upon the idea of a Jewish conspiracy aimed at the destruction of Christian nations, it was an effective way of manipulating the citizens' fear of 'internal invaders' – capitalists, socialists and enemies of the Polish nation – though as most of the peasants were illiterate, they were not recipients of anti-Semitic publications.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, National Democracy combined Polish patriotism with anti-Semitism in its political programme, but despite Reymont's close relationship with its leader, Roman Dmowski, neither *The Peasants* nor *The Promised Land* is an anti-Semitic novel. They reliably and factually show the situation of Jews in Poland at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth century. In *The Peasants*, Reymont already announces that there is a coming political anti-Semitism that will brand Jews as enemies of Polishness, as can be seen in the scene in which Jankiel supports the peasants in the fight against German settlers, and yet this is greeted with surprise, even though he is a native of Lipce: 'A Jew, and on the side of the people! Hear that, eh?' (p. 640).

Nationalism would try to change the cultural division, peasants/Jews, into a racial and political one, Jews/Poles. Reymont's novel documents the birth of a new stereotype: that a Jew cannot be a good citizen. Fortunately, in independent Poland, anti-Semitism never became the ideology of the state, as it did in Nazi Germany.

THE LESSON OF *THE PEASANTS*

Social exclusion of one kind or another is a prominent theme in the narrative, and a 'political' reading of *The Peasants* presents an alternative plot within this magnificent novel: an unsuccessful attempt to build the foundations of a political community within a social class that had been excluded from politics for centuries. But the benefits of such a reading are immeasurably greater, for Reymont offers us an

opportunity to understand also the mechanism of civil regression – that is, the process of losing one's civic rights as a result of fear, ignorance, lack of education, violent conflict, contempt for the common good and lack of interest in the public sphere. Particularly fascinating is Reymont's refusal to make the peasant characters the passive objects of political manipulation. We see how individual characters gain a consciousness of the 'world's apparatus' but somehow do not break free of it. What is more, they begin to be partly conscious, even cynical trustees of this apparatus for selfish ends. And the external authorities – the Russians or political activists from the nobility – are partners in this play of interests. That is best exemplified by the rivalry between the peasants and the squire over the forest and the purchase of the debt-laden land. It is reminiscent of an alliance between prisoner and guard in the common cause of strengthening a prison cordon.

In order to produce change, it is essential to imagine that a different political world is possible. The route to such thinking is via the 'profane' – that is, by questioning the immutable 'apparatus of the world', that collection of social constructs treated by the community as though they were 'sacred'. In *The Peasants*, Jagna is an unwitting desecrator. Unwitting and therefore ineffectual, she does not possess the language to describe the 'apparatus' that she treats so unceremoniously (patriarchy, marriage, land ownership, sex with a priest). She is unable to criticize the legal and economic abstractions that govern the life of the community. Only through her emotions can she vent her dissent, rebellion and desire for freedom.

By contrast, an actual desecration takes place in the language of the novel, in the democratic operation of literature that takes over the 'world' but does not rule it.

In Polish, Reymont's prose is characterized by stylistic excess that, with every consecutive page, throws off its skin to transform itself into a successive variant:

> For this is a language which does not conform to any of the Polish forms that coexisted in the Polish language framework at the turn of the twentieth century. It is not the literary language of those years, nor is it the dialect of the Łowicz region. It is a syncretic language in which opposing elements are combined and 'tamed'.[20]

The peasants do not speak a single language; there is, therefore, no 'world-ordering' discourse in the novel. The protean narrator does not have a language of his or her own, but activates variations and different types of jargon. In this way, the narrator breaks apart the strict

link between language (of bureaucracy), (correct) grammar and the state (which codifies the language). The language of the novel is not bestowed upon the 'peasants' by the 'master' so that they can then express their fate through it, since there is not a single language, or one type of Polishness. The novel thus contains radically diverse forms of communication and yet it remains comprehensible.

Here, in the tension between the nationalistic project of dictatorship and the dazzling orchestration of various stylistic registers, I see the prophetic politics of *The Peasants*. The route to a community of subjects speaking a variety of languages is the desecration of a single language by bringing it into juxtaposition with other languages and impelling them to perform the common work of expressing the experiences of incoherent and dissimilar individuals who wish, or consciously need, to create a political community.

Ryszard Koziołek

NOTES

1. See Karol Lutostański, *Les partages de la Pologne et la lutte pour l'indépendance* (Lausanne and Paris: Bureau Polonais d'Études et de Publications Politiques, 1918), vol. 1, no. 157, p. 229.
2. Marcelina Obarska, 'Reymont w Londynie – spirytystyczne przygody pisarza', https://culture.pl/pl/artykul/reymont-w-londynie-spirytystyczne-przygody-pisarza.
3. Tomasz Jodełka-Burzecki, *Reymont przy biurku: z zagadnień warsztatu pisarskiego* (Warsaw: PIW, 1978).
4. Franciszek Ziejka (ed.), Introduction to Stanisław Władysław Reymont, *Chłopi*, 2 vols (Wrocław: Biblioteka Narodowa, 1999), vol. 1, p. lxxxviii.
5. Walter Bradford Cannon, 'Homeostasis', in *The Wisdom of the Body* (1932; New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1963), pp. 177–201.
6. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 178.
7. Ibid.
8. '1. As of 1 May 1863 all mandatory relations between settled peasants and landlords shall cease. 2. From this date, the peasants will become owners of the land on which they are settled, under the condition that until such a time that the deeds of redemption are drawn up and the costs of redemption are determined they shall be obliged to pay to the treasury a rent reduced by 20% from the value of the dues as listed in the statutes' (*Wybór tekstów źródłowych z historii ustroju ziem polskich*, ed. F. Połomski (Wrocław: WUWr, 1975), p. 73, cited in Norbert

Dariusz Tomaszewski, '"Uwłaszczeni" chłopi i ich problemy w świetle dokumentów archiwalnych ze zbiorów Muzeum Rolnictwa im. ks. Krzysztofa Kluka w Ciechanowcu', in *Wolni i uwłaszczeni. Chłopi a przemiany społeczne, gospodarcze i polityczne w Europie Wschodniej w XIX i na początku XX wieku*, ed. Dorota Michaluk (Ciechanowiec: Muzeum Rolnictwa im. ks. Krzysztofa Kluka, 2017), p. 272).

9. Giorgio Agamben, 'What is an Apparatus?', in idem, '*What is an Apparatus?' and Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 14.
10. Ibid.
11. Maria Rzeuska, '*Chłopi' Reymonta* (Warsaw: Towarzystwo Naukowe Warszawskie, 1950), p. 69.
12. Tomasz Kizwalter, 'Naród historyczny, kraj pańszczyźniany', in *W stronę równości* (Kraków: Universitas, 2014), p. 119.
13. Andrzej Przegaliński, 'Z rozważań nad reformą uwłaszczeniową w Królestwie Polskim. Próba analizy i opisu na przykładzie guberni lubelskiej', in *Wolni i uwłaszczeni. Chłopi a przemiany społeczne, ospodarcze i polityczne w Europie Wschodniej w XIX i na początku XX wieku* (Ciechanowiec: Muzeum Rolnictwa im. ks. Krzysztofa Kluka, 2017), p. 324.
14. Witold Kula and Jerzy Jedlicki, 'Struktura społeczna Królestwa Polskiego w przededniu powstania styczniowego', in *Powstanie styczniowe 1863. IX Powszechny Zjazd Historyków Polskich w Warszawie* (Warsaw: Polskie Towarzystwo Historyczne, 1964), p. 55.
15. Jakub Malik sees this scene as a religious closure to the epic narrative, though it is perhaps impossible to separate or diminish the political aspect of this episode in the novel (Jakub Malik, 'Modernistyczne credo. O religijności Władysława Stanisława Reymonta', in *Inny Reymont*, ed. W. Książek-Bryłowa (Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 2002), p. 64).
16. Kazimierz Wyka, 'Problemy czasowości w *Chłopach* Reymonta', in *O potrzebie historii literatury. Szkice polonistyczne z lat 1944–1967* (Warsaw: PIW, 1969), p. 146.
17. Ziejka (ed.), Introduction to *Chłopi*, vol. 1, p. lxxxviii.
18. Andrzej Leder, 'Nienapisana epopeja. Kilka uwag o zapomnianym wyzwoleniu', *Teksty Drugie* 6 (2016), p. 228.
19. See Alina Cała, *Żyd-wróg odwieczny? Antysemityzm w Polsce i jego źródła* (Warsaw: Nisza, 2012), and Ryszard Löw, 'Z dziejów Reymonta w literaturze hebrajskiej: *Chłopi*', *Teksty Drugie* 1–2 (2000).
20. Ziejka (ed.), Introduction to *Chłopi*, vol. 1, pp. lxxxix–xc.

Translator's Note

This translation was made on the basis of the Biblioteka Narodowa (National Library) edition of *Chłopi* (Wrocław, 1991; based on the canonical critical edition of 1970), edited by Franciszek Ziejka, on whose invaluable endnotes I have drawn extensively, adding more notes for the contemporary reader.

The Peasants slips constantly between three narrative registers: we have the voice of the omniscient, more detached observer that alternates between dialect and a more formal, literary style; the intimate, confiding voice of the village raconteur; and the stylized, expressionistic voice of the neo-romantic 'Young Poland' sensibility that provides us with much of the natural description. All interspersed with the extensive, realistic dialogue between the peasants themselves. One might therefore suppose that the greatest challenge the work presented was the dialect in which the original is written and which poses significant difficulties for even its native readers. Should the translator, then, attempt to adopt some equivalent dialect in their target language, and run the considerable risk of tripping up at every point in the ensuing linguistic game?

Fortunately, Reymont's overarching use of dialect is more illusion than fact. Far from being a kind of eye- or 'ear-'witness account, the Polish version follows no particular region-specific variant, but draws freely on whatever aspects of dialect suit the author's purpose best. Reymont is far less concerned with accuracy than with the effect he wishes to produce and the emotional response he wishes to evoke, thus allowing the translator considerable freedom. Some things he is careful to avoid – typical modifications of consonants in Polish, for example, that would push the tone from comedy, which is acceptable, to mockery or parody, which are not. Reymont's peasants are never one-dimensional figures of fun. I have sought in this translation to parallel these aims, striving above all to create a sense of the peasants' language through equivalent vocabulary and syntax in English, and retaining the characters' tendency towards parataxis whenever

possible while avoiding pastiche. If there is an echo of any particular English dialect in this translation, its cadences are decidedly northern, hailing roughly from the Pennines.

The point, then, is not about dialect per se, but about the fact that the peasants have a language of their own. They are not merely speaking someone else's language imperfectly, being taught how to think in someone else's terms, but have their own way of expressing themselves, reflecting their own way of thinking.

Some observations on particular aspects of the text: in the original, a number of characters speaking one after the other are often not clearly identified (perhaps to give an impression of several voices speaking at once); for the sake of clarity, the translation occasionally identifies these voices. Reymont's use at times of very short paragraphs, and his idiosyncratic and extensive use of ellipses, exclamation marks and similes, has largely been retained. Finally, Reymont is notoriously inconsistent (he forgets how many children he has granted a particular family, for example), and, indeed, sets no great store by consistency. He isn't interested in providing us with an inventory of a peasant's vegetable garden or an exact account of specific activities. His approach in this regard is impressionistic and immersive. It is impossible, for example, to be absolutely sure just where a character is warming him- or herself. Is it by a range? A stove? An open fire? The vocabulary is ambiguous, with the original word for 'chimney' and 'stove' often being the same, and just when some detail seems to confirm one meaning, a page later a different detail contradicts it. Reymont is much more interested in the heat on someone's hands, the glow against the whitewashed wall, or a flushed cheek. The reader – and the translator – must work out the technicalities of it for themselves.

It has been remarked that, for the contemporary reader, Reymont's language has an archaic and 'over-picturesque' feel to it, that it lacks the charm it cast over earlier generations of readers. In striving above all to be faithful to Reymont's intensely painterly approach in *The Peasants*, and to the lively and distinct voices of its wide cast of characters, I hoped in this translation to recapture some of that charm and ebullience for the modern reader.

Anna Zaranko

VOLUME I

AUTUMN

CHAPTER 1

'Praised be Jesus Christ!'

'For ever, amen, dear Agata, and where might you be off to, eh?'

'Out into the world, good Father, into the great wide world!' She traced an arc from east to west with her staff. The priest glanced unwittingly into that distance and promptly dropped his gaze in the blinding sun, slung low in the west; then he asked more quietly, tentative almost . . .

'Have they turned you out, then, the Kłąbs? But perhaps just a disagreement . . . perhaps . . .'

She didn't answer right away, but straightened up a little, casting her faded old eyes slowly over the bare autumn fields and the village roofs, sunk among orchards.

'Ah . . . no, they've not turned me out . . . course not . . . good folk, they are – kin. And there weren't no discord. I saw myself it were time to be off. Better land on your own feet in a puddle than crowd another's cart. It were time . . . they'd no more work for me . . . Winter's afoot – am I to get a bite for free then, or a corner to sleep? . . . And there's the bullock just put from its mother . . . and goslings to come in under the thatch with the cold nights upon 'un, so I made room . . . it's a shame for the wee animals, God's creatures too . . . And they're good folk, they take me in come summer, not begrudging a bite nor a corner – till a body's parading like mistress o' the house . . .

'And come winter, it's out into the wide world for alms.[1]

'I don't need much and good folk'll give it me. By Lord Jesus' mercy I'll struggle through to spring, maybe squirrel away a grosz[2] or two, right handy for them, afore harvest's in . . . kin after all. And the good Jesus won't be abandoning a body in need.'

'That he won't!' he cried earnestly and pushed a zloty diffidently into her hand.

'Bless you, Father, bless you!'

She fell at his knees, her head shaking, and the tears spilled like peas down her old face, grey and furrowed as an autumn-ploughed field.

'Go with God now, go,' he whispered awkwardly, pulling her up.

With trembling hands, she gathered her bags and her staff topped with hedgehog spines,[3] crossed herself and took the wide rutted road towards the forest, but time and again she'd turn to look at the village, at the fields where they were lifting potatoes, at the smoke of herdsmen's fires drifting low over the stubble, glancing back mournfully until she disappeared among the roadside bushes.

The priest, meanwhile, sat back on some plough wheels, took a pinch of snuff and opened his breviary, but, plunged in autumnal musing, his eyes slid across the red-printed letters, darting instead over the vast landscape or the pale sky, or resting on a farmhand bent over a plough.

'Walek – here – that furrow's crooked!' he shouted, sitting up a little, his eyes now following a pair of stocky mares, step by step, as they pulled the creaking plough.

He began distractedly to scan the breviary's red print again and to move his lips as he read, but his eyes kept chasing first the mares, then a flock of crows hopping carefully about the furrows with outstretched beaks, taking flight at every crack of the whip and every wheeling of the plough, to land again quickly upon the freshly turned ridges, sharpening their beaks against the hard dry clods.

'Walek! Flick the right's behind, she's falling back!'

He smiled to see the right-hand mare pull evenly now, after the whip, and when the horses reached the road, he rose briskly and patted their necks genially so that they stretched out friendly muzzles to sniff at his face.

'*Heeet-aa!*'[4] Walek sang out, and taking hold of the plough, which shone like silver, he lifted it a little, tugged at the horses' reins so that they swung in a sharp arc, pushed the shining coulter into the stubble and cracked the whip. The horses took off so fast the whippletree screeched. Walek ploughed on down a great slope of land that fell away from the road at right angles and ran like long strands of carded ridges all the way to the village, submerged deep among orchards turning red and yellow.

It was a quiet, warm and slightly drowsy day.

The sun still beat down tolerably though it was already late September. It hung midway between the south and west, above the woods, so that bushes and stone heaps,[5] the pear trees in the fields[6] and even the hard dry clods cast dense and chilly shadows.

A silence had settled over the deserted fields and a heady sweetness hung in the sunlit dusty haze. High in the pale blue sky, great white clouds were scattered like snowdrifts, blown in and ravelled by the winds.

And below, as far as the eye could see, lay grey fields like a great

basin – a basin edged with a deep blue rim of forest and crossed by a river that glittered in the sun like a silver skein as it wound its way between the alders and willows along its banks. Reaching the middle of the village, it swelled into a great long oval pond before escaping to the north through a rift between the hills. At the bottom of the dale, the village was clustered around the pond, the autumnal hues of its orchards shimmering in the sun – like a red-and-yellow caterpillar curled upon a grey burdock leaf from which a long and tangled thread of plots stretched to the forest, strips of grey fields with baulks[7] roping through, full of pear trees and stone heaps. Here and there, threads of gold spilled through the silvery greyness – lupins yellow with fragrant flowers, the bleached dry beds of streams or sleepy sandy tracks, while, above them, rows of mighty poplars climbed slowly up the hills, stooping towards the forest.

The priest was startled from his reverie by a long mournful lowing somewhere nearby, making the crows take wing with a cry; they lunged across the potato fields – pursued below by their dark fluttering shadows across the stubble and shallow-tilled earth.

Shading his eyes with his hand, he gazed towards the sun. A girl was approaching along the forest road, pulling a big red cow on a rope. She praised God as she passed and made to turn towards the priest to kiss his hand, but the cow jerked her aside and again began to low.

'Off to market with her, are you?'

'Nay . . . just to the miller's bull . . . Stand still, you pain in the arse . . . you gone mad or what!' she cried, out of breath, but the cow dragged her on, so that both girl and beast tore off in a cloud of dust.

Next came a Jewish rag-picker, trudging along the sandy road and pushing a barrow ahead of him, evidently well loaded, since he was obliged to stop now and then, panting heavily.

'What news, Moishe?'

'What news? . . . Good news for them that fare well . . . the potato harvest is grand, praise God, rye's spilling over, there'll be cabbage. If you've potatoes, rye and cabbage – the news is good!' He kissed the priest's sleeve, adjusted the barrow strap and pushed on, more easily now, from the top of a gentle slope.

Next came a fat mongrel on a string, leading a blind old man down the middle of the road in a haze of dust raised by his shuffling feet.[8]

Then a boy with a bottle flew out of the forest, but spying the priest by the road, he skirted around him from a distance and raced cross-country through the fields to the inn.

Next came a peasant from a neighbouring village, carting wheat to the mill, and a Jewish woman driving a gaggle of geese she'd bought.

And each of them praised God in greeting, exchanged a few words and went their way, with a kind look and a word from the priest, who, watching the sun sink ever lower, got up and shouted to Walek:

'Plough as far as the birches and then off home with you . . . or the horses will be fit for nothing.'

And off he went slowly along the baulks, reciting his prayers under his breath, sweeping the fields with a bright affectionate glance . . .

Rows of women at work glowed red against the earth . . . potatoes rattled as they were emptied into carts . . . here and there, ploughs were still out before sowing . . . a herd of brindled cows were grazing on the fallow land . . . a rust-red brush of young wheat had sprouted down the long ash-grey strips . . . white geese dotted the close-grazed ruddy meadows like flakes of snow . . . a cow lowed somewhere . . . fires were burning and long blue plaits of smoke trailed above the fields . . . A wagon rumbled or a plough grated against a stone . . . then silence once again embraced the earth, so that the dull babble of the river could be heard and the rumbling of the mill, hidden behind the village in a dense thicket of yellowing trees . . . or a song struck up, a sudden shout flew low, knocked about the furrows and hollows, and sank without echo in the autumn grey, on the stubble wreathed in silver webs, on the bare sleepy roads overhung by the heavy, bloodied heads of rowans . . . A flurry of sunlit grey dust rose in the drag of the harrows, spread and drifted up the hillside and settled; underneath, as though from out of a cloud, appeared a peasant, bareheaded and barefoot, a cloth tied around his waist. Moving slowly, he scooped seed from the cloth and sowed with a solemn repetitive motion, as if blessing the earth. As he neared the end of the furrow, he collected grain from a sack before turning and slowly making his way back up the slope, so that first his tousled head, then his shoulders and then the whole of him emerged against the sun, sowing with that same gesture of blessing; with that same holy gesture, he tossed the grain and it fell like golden dust, swirling in a circle to the ground.[9]

The priest slowed, pausing at times to catch his breath, then looked back at his horses again, or glanced at some boys who were showering a great pear tree with stones and who ran up in a mob, hands behind their backs, to kiss the sleeve of his cassock.

He stroked their heads and cautioned:

'No breaking the branches now, or you'll not have pears next year.'

'We weren't aiming at the pears; yon's a rook's nest,' a bolder lad spoke up.

The priest smiled kindly and paused again by the potato diggers.

'God bless your labours!'

'Thank you, Father, bless you,' they replied together, straightening up, and all moved forward to kiss the hands of their dear priest.

'God granted a good potato harvest this year, no?' he said, offering the men his open snuffbox. They dutifully helped themselves to respectful pinches, not venturing to partake in front of him.

'Aye, potatoes big as cats' heads and plenty to a plant.'

'Ah, the cost of pigs will go up. Everyone'll want to be fattening them.'

'Them's dear already: they were dying of swine fever in the summer, and folk have gone as far as Prussia to buy.'

'True, true. And whose potatoes are these you're digging?'

'Boryna's of course.'

'I don't see the owner, so I cannot tell whose they are.'

'Aye, Father's gone off with my husband to the forest.'

'Ah, it's you, Anna. How are things with you?' he turned to a fine young woman wearing a red headscarf, who, since her hands were covered in soil, grasped his hand through her apron and kissed it.

'How's that boy of yours that I christened back at harvest?'

'God bless you, Father, he's faring well, on all fours already.'

'Well, God go with you.'

'And with you, Father.'

And the priest turned to the right, towards the graveyard, which was at that end of the village, beside the road lined with poplars.

They stood without speaking, watching his gaunt, slightly stooped figure as it departed. It wasn't until he'd passed the low stone wall of the graveyard and was walking between the graves to the chapel set among the yellowing birches and red maples that their tongues were loosened.

'There's not a better man in the whole world,' began one of the women.

'Yes indeed, they even wanted to take him off to town . . . If Father and the Voyt[10] hadn't gone begging the bishop, then you'd not have him . . . But dig now, people, dig. Evening's not far off, nor the last of the potatoes!' said Anna, tipping her basket on to the yellow pile lying on the fresh-dug earth, full of shrivelled potato stalks.

They set to work in silence, so that only the stab of hoes could be heard against the hard ground and the occasional ring of iron on stone. Sometimes one of them would straighten their bent and aching back, sigh deeply, look absently at the sower ahead and dig again, picking the yellow potatoes from the grey soil and throwing them into the basket set alongside.

They were a dozen or so workers, old women in the main or hired hands,[11] with two trestles erected behind them and a white sheet slung

like a hammock between them holding young children, who would wail from time to time.

'The old woman's gone off, then,' Jagustynka began.

'Who?' asked Anna, straightening up.

'Old Agata.'

'To beg . . .'

'Aye, to beg! Ha! To beg, not for fun. She's been slaving for her kin, working all summer long, so now they're letting her go and get a breath o' fresh air. She'll be back in spring, with all she's mustered in her little bags. Bit o' sugar here, bit o' tea there, a grosz or two; they'll soon be all over her, tucking her up in bed, not letting her lift a finger so she can take her rest. Then it'll be "Oh Auntie" this and "Oh Auntie" that, till they've got their hands on her last little coin . . . But come autumn, there'll not be a place for her in the hallway or the sty. The scum! Pox-ridden dogs, not kin!' exclaimed Jagustynka with such vehemence that her old face turned livid.

'Just goes to show, it's always the poor that get the wind in their eyes,' threw in one of the labourers, a withered, wry-faced old peasant.

'Dig, people, dig,' Anna urged, displeased at the turn their chatter had taken.

But Jagustynka, who could never hold her tongue for long, glanced at the sower and declared:

'Those Pacześ boys are getting on – the hair's a-thinning on their heads.'

'But bachelors still,' said another woman.

'And that many lasses here growing older or forced away to find places in service . . .'

'Indeed, and them with fifteen morgen[12] and the meadow besides, beyond the mill.'

'As if their mother'd let 'em wed . . . as if she'd allow it . . .'

'Aye, who'd milk the cow, do the washing, mind the house and see to the pigs . . .'

'They've got to wait on their mother and Jagusia. After all, Jagna's[13] a right lady, proper grand . . . what with dressing up, always washing, always peering in the looking glass, braiding her hair.'

'And always on the lookout for who to let under the quilt – any strong 'un'll do,' threw in Jagustynka again, curling her lip.

'The Banachs' Józek sent proposers round with vodka[14] – she wasn't having none of it.'

'Well, I'll . . . hoity-toity.'

'And the old dame's always in church, nose in her prayer book, always off to indulgences!'[15]

'Maybe, but she's an old witch anyhow. Who made the Wawrzons' cow dry up, ha? And what about Adam's boy, the one who pinched plums from her orchard? She said some evil word or other and straight off he were struck down with the manky plait[16] and then his limbs grew that twisted – Jesus!'

'And God's meant to bless folk when there's that kind in the village . . .'

'In the old days, when I used to mind my father's cows, they'd drive that sort out, see,' Jagustynka added again. 'But they'll not come to any harm, they've got those that'll protect 'em.' And lowering her voice and glancing sideways at Anna, who was ahead, digging at the edge of the first turned ridge, Jagustynka whispered to her neighbours:

'And the first to defend her would be Hanka's[17] man . . . he sniffs round Jagna like a dog . . .'

'Lordy, people . . . what on earth are you saying? Heavens! That'd be a sin, an offence against God,' they whispered to each other, digging and keeping their heads down.

'He's not the only one. The boys chase after her like dogs after a bitch.'

'She's got the looks for sure; well fed as a heifer, white skin, eyes like flax flowers . . . and that strong with it – there's plenty o' men couldn't handle her . . .'

'Well, what's she got to do all day but stuff her face and sleep, how is she not going to look bonny . . .'

They fell silent a while, as the potatoes had to be emptied on to a heap.

The talk was but fitful afterwards, touching on this and that, until it ceased, since one of them had spied Boryna's Józka running along the stubble from the village.

She ran up breathless, shouting from a distance:

'Hanka, come on back home, something's up with the cow.'

'Jesus, Mary, which one?'

'The skewbald . . . I never . . . can't catch my breath . . .'

'Lordy, you could have knocked me down – I thought it were mine,' Hanka cried with relief.

'Witek's only just brought her back, the woodsman chased 'em out the coppice.[18] The cow's done in, she's that fat . . . fell down right by the byre and won't drink a drop, won't eat a thing, only rolls about and, Lordy, how she bellows!'

'Is Father not about?'

'No, not back yet. Oh Jesus, Jesus, such a cow too, she'd give a gallon of milk. Come on, hurry up.'

'I'll be there in a flash.'

Anna pulled the child any which way out of the hammock, jammed down his tasselled hat, wrapped him in her apron and stepped lively, so alarmed by the news she didn't even let down her thick apron, completely forgot, so that her bare legs flashed white up to the knees as she took off over the fields. Józka ran ahead.

The diggers, each one straddled over their ridge, shifted along slowly, digging lazily now they had no one to urge and hurry them on.

The sun had already wheeled well to the west and glowing in a great crimson ball, red hot as from a frantic dash, it slipped down behind the tall black trees. Dusk deepened and crept over the fields, drifted over the furrows, skulked along the ditches, gathered in the thickets and spilled slowly over the ground, dimming, engulfing and quenching the colours, leaving only the tips of the trees, the towers and roofs of the church still aflame.

People were beginning to traipse home from the fields.

The sound of human voices, of neighing and lowing and the rattle of carts rang out more sharply in the quietly fading light.

The Angelus bell began to peal from the ridge turret of the church. People paused at the bronze chirruping, and the whispering of prayers floated in the dusk like the murmur of falling leaves. Cattle were being herded from the meadows with shouts and cheerful singing, raising such clouds of dust along the roads that only a powerful head and thick pair of horns emerged now and then.

Sheep bleated here and there, while geese flew up from the meadows in skeins and plunged into the western afterglow, with only their penetrating cries revealing their whereabouts.

'Ah what a shame, that skewbald were a fine cow.'

'Eh . . . at least she weren't a poor man's.'

'Still, it's a shame for the beast, and a waste.'

'Boryna's got no housekeeper – things slip through the cracks.'

'Isn't Hanka the housekeeper?'

'In her own bit o' backyard . . . They live like lodgers at the father's, so they've always one eye on what to snaffle for themselves, and the dog can watch out for the father's business.'

'As for Józka, she's no more than a silly chit, so what can she do?'

'Well, why can't Boryna hand the land over to Antek, then?'

'And pension[19] himself to their care, eh? . . . You're getting on, Wawrzek, but you're still dead stupid,' Jagustynka began smartly. 'Ho, ho! Boryna's still hale and hearty, he can marry. He'd be a fool to sign over anything to his children.'

'Hale and hearty, maybe, but he's getting on for sixty all the same.'

'Don't you worry, Wawrzek. Any young woman'll have him, he only has to say the word.'

'He's buried two wives already.'

'And he can bury a third, God help him. And while he's living, let him not give the children a furlong, not an inch, not so much as his clog will cover. The scum'd fix him good as mine did me. They'd grant him such a portion he'd be out labouring, or croaking from hunger, or off to beg his bread. Hand over what you've got to your children and see what you get in return: just enough for a rope or a stone round your neck . . .'

'Time to get home, people, it's getting dark!'

'It's time, it's time! The sun has set already.'

They quickly gathered up their hoes, baskets and double pots[20] and slowly walked in single file, chattering intermittently. Only old Jagustynka railed passionately without pause against her children and then against everyone else.

A girl was driving a sow with piglets in the same direction, singing in a small thin voice:

'*Oh, don't you go near the cart,*
Oh, don't you hold on to the axle,
Oh, don't you give a lad a kiss,
However much he asks you.'

'Hark at that idiot, shrieking like she's being skinned alive.'

CHAPTER 2

Quite a crowd had gathered by now in Boryna's farmyard, which was surrounded on three sides by outbuildings and on the fourth by an orchard that separated it from the road. A handful of women were conferring and exclaiming over the huge red-and-white cow lying in front of the byre on a heap of dung.

An old dog, somewhat lame, his coat rubbed thin at the sides, raced around the skewbald, sniffing and barking. He'd dart at the fence and chase into the road any children hanging on the pickets and gawking curiously into the yard, or he'd run to the sow by the cottage, groaning quietly as she lay sprawled on the ground, suckling her small white piglets.

Hanka ran up, breathless, fell upon the cow and began stroking her head and muzzle.

'Rosy, poor old thing, Rosy!' she wailed and burst into heartfelt tears.

And the women counselled first this and then that to save the cow. They poured salt and water down her throat, or milk and melted wax from a blessed candle; one swore by soap and whey, another urged blood-letting – but they could do nothing to help the cow. She stretched out more and more, lifting her head occasionally and lowing long and painfully, as though for help, until the pink whites of her beautiful eyes grew dim and her heavy horned head drooped with the effort, so that she could only put out her tongue and lick Hanka's hands.

'Maybe Ambrozy can help?' a woman suggested.

'True. He knows about sicknesses,' others agreed.

'Run, Józia. They've rung the Angelus so he must be at church. Lordy, when Father arrives there'll be a row, there will. And it's not any of our fault!' Hanka complained tearfully.

Then she sat on the byre step, put the whimpering baby to her full white breast and listened out, glancing with great trepidation from the heaving cow to the road beyond the picket fence.

In the space of a prayer or two,[1] Józia was back, shouting that Ambrozy was on his way.

Sure enough, an old man soon arrived, of maybe a hundred years or more, straight as a candle, despite his wooden leg and stick. Shaved clean and nicked with scars, his face was gaunt and wrinkled as a spring potato and just as grey. Wisps of hair, white as milk, fell over his forehead and neck, as he'd come bareheaded.

He went straight to the cow and surveyed her thoroughly.

'Oho, it's fresh meat you'll be eating, I see.'

'Can you not help and cure her? Why, the cow's worth three hundred zlotys, and she's just over calving – can you not help? Oh Jesus, Jesus!' Józia cried.

Ambrozy took a fleam from his pocket, sharpened it against his boot, examined the edge against the light and cut into an artery under the skewbald's belly – but instead of spurting, the blood trickled slowly, black and foaming.

The onlookers all craned over and watched, holding their breaths.

'Too late! Oho, beast's breathing its last,' Ambrozy declared ceremoniously. 'Must be a pox[2] or some such . . . should have sent for me straight off . . . but these wretched women are good for nothing but crying, and when there's owt to do they bleat like sheep.' He spat contemptuously, then went round the cow, looking into her eyes and examining her tongue, wiped his bloodied hands on her soft, shining hide and prepared to leave. 'I shan't be ringing the bell for this burial, you can rattle your pans.'

'Father and Antek!' shouted Józka and ran out into the road to meet them, for a dull rumbling could be heard from the other side of the pond, where the long dark shape of a cart and horses emerged from a cloud of dust that glowed red in the setting sun.

'*Tatulu*,[3] that there skewbald's dying!' she called, running up to her father, who was just coming round the pond. Antek was walking behind, propping up the end of the long pine on the cart.

'Stop your idle nonsense,' Boryna muttered, pulling up the horses.

'Ambrozy let her blood but it were no good . . . and they poured melted wax down her throat but no use . . . and salt but no use neither . . . it's the pox for sure . . . Witek says the woodsman chased them out the grove and poor Rosy straight away kept stumbling and groaning but he got her back . . .'

'The skewbald, my best cow! Devil twist your guts if that's how you mind her!' He threw the reins to his son and, ran forwards, gripping his whip.

The women all stepped back and Witek, who'd been tinkering blithely with something all the while in front of the cottage, leapt across the garden and fled in terror. Even Hanka got up from the step and stood there, helpless and frightened.

'They've ruined my beast!' the old man exclaimed at last, after a long look at the cow. 'Three hundred zlotys into the muck! Always a crowd of scum when the pot comes out, but no one to mind the cow. Such a cow! Such a cow! A man can't stir from his house without loss and ruin on every side . . .'

'I've been out digging since noon,' Hanka quietly excused herself.

'Like you ever see a thing!' he shouted furiously. 'Like you have a care for what's mine! Such a cow, such a beast, there's scarce a manor[4] where you'd find another like it!'

He lamented ever more ruefully as he walked around her, trying to lift her, pulling at her tail, peering at her teeth, but the cow rasped and struggled, her blood ceasing to flow from under her belly and instead clotting into dry black cinders – she was clearly dying.

'Nothing for it, got to finish her off, that's as much as we'll get back!' he declared at last, then fetched the scythe from the barn, sharpened it briefly on the peening jig[5] that stood under the byre's eaves, took off his spencer,[6] rolled up his shirtsleeves and set about the slaughtering . . .

Hanka and Józka burst into tears, for their rosy cow, as if sensing death, strained to raise her head, gave a dull bellow . . . and fell back, her throat cut and only her legs jerking . . .

The dog lapped at the blood as it clotted in the fresh air, and then

sprang into the potato pit[7] and barked at the horses standing at the cart by the picket fence where Antek had left them, while Antek himself observed the carnage calmly.

'Stop bawling, you stupid woman. Father's cow's no loss to us!' he said angrily to his wife and set about unharnessing and uncoupling the horses that Witek was already leading to the stalls, pulling them by their manes.

'Many potatoes?' asked Boryna, washing his hands by the well.

'Oh, a fair few – there'll be twenty sacks.'

'They need bringing in today.'

'Oh aye, bring 'em in yourself, then. I can hardly feel my legs nor back . . . and the off horse is lame in the foreleg.'

'Józka, call Kuba back from digging. He can hitch up the filly instead of the off horse and bring them in today. It might rain.'

But Boryna was still seething with anger and vexation, for he kept on stopping by the cow and swearing like a trooper, and then strode about the yard, looking in first at the byre, then the barn, then the shed, hardly knowing himself what he was seeking, the loss so gnawed at him.

'Witek! Witek!' he called as he unfastened the broad leather belt from his hips, but there was no sign of the boy.

The folk had all vanished; they understood that such a loss and such chagrin was bound to end in a brawl, for which Boryna was always ready as a rule, but today the old man only swore and went to the house.

'Hanka! Get me something to eat!' he shouted to his daughter-in-law through the open window and went to his own side of the cottage.

It was an ordinary landed peasant dwelling – divided in two by a great hallway running down the middle: the gable end led to the yard and the four-windowed front looked out on the orchard and the road.[8] Boryna and Józka occupied the garden side and Antek's family the other. The farmhand and herdsman slept with the horses.

The room was already growing dark, for barely any light filtered through the small windows, overshadowed by the eaves and framed by trees, and dusk was falling now, so that only the glass of the holy pictures gleamed, darkening in a row against the whitewashed walls. The chamber was large, but dominated by a black ceiling and the huge beams beneath it, and so crammed with all manner of objects that the only free space was around the great stove with its hood that stood against the wall of the hallway.

Boryna took off his boots and went into the dark storeroom. Closing the door behind him, he pushed aside a board from a little pane, so that the blood-red glow of sunset flooded the room.

The tiny chamber was filled with a jumble of lumber and farm

tools. Sheepskin coats hung from poles fixed across the room, alongside red-striped woollen aprons, white *sukmana*s,[9] whole bundles of grey yarn in skeins, trussed-up grubby fleeces and sacks of feathers. He pulled out a white *sukmana* and a red belt and then searched a long time for something inside the barrels full of grain, and in the corner under a heap of old leather straps and iron, until, hearing Hanka in the main room, he pushed the board back over the little window and again began a long rummage in the grain.

Meanwhile, on the bench beneath the window,[10] the food was steaming; the smell of cabbage and pork fat[11] rose from an enormous stoneware pot, with scrambled eggs in a generous bowl beside it.

'Where'd Witek been with the cows?' Boryna asked Hanka, cutting a hefty slab of bread from a loaf, big as a garden sieve.

'To the manor copses. The woodsman chased him out.'

'The scum, they did for my cow.'

'Aye, she were but a cow, and the chasing wore her out so as she got an inflammation.'

'Damn the beggars. That pasturage is ours, set down in the register clear as day, and they're forever seeing us off and claiming it's theirs.'

'They chased the others off too, and they beat up Walek's boy something awful . . .'

'Ha! We should take 'em to court or the commissioner's.[12] Three hundred zlotys' worth, gone.'

'For sure, for sure,' Hanka nodded, overjoyed that Father had been placated.

'Tell Antek to get on with the cow as soon as the potatoes are in. She needs skinning and quartering. I'll help you when I'm back from the Voyt. Hang her from the rafters in the hayloft – safe from the dogs and other vermin . . .'

He quickly finished eating and made to ready himself, but felt such heaviness, such a shivering in his bones, such drowsiness, that on rising from the bench he threw himself on to the bed to doze for the space of a prayer.

Hanka went to her side of the cottage and bustled about the room, stopping to lean out of the window to look at Antek, who was eating on the porch outside. Seated at a decent distance from the bowl, he slowly raised spoonful after spoonful to his mouth, scraping firmly against the bowl's sides[13] and glancing ahead from time to time at the pond – for the sun was setting already, forming gold and purple bands and fiery coils across the water, through which small white clouds seemed to sail like a skein of geese, scattering strings of blood-red pearls from their beaks.

The village began to swarm and buzz with movement; from the road, on both sides of the pond, came the constant rumble of carts raising clouds of dust and the lowing of cows wading into the pond to their knees. They drank slowly, lifting their heavy heads so that thin streams of water trickled from their wide muzzles like strands of opals.

Somewhere from the other end of the pond came the clattering of women's washing paddles and the dull hollow sound of flailing from a barn.

'Antek, won't you chop some logs? I can't manage myself,' Hanka asked, timid and apprehensive, for it didn't take much to make him curse or lash out.

He didn't even answer, as though he hadn't heard. Not daring to repeat it, she went to hack some bits of kindling from a log herself – while he sat silent and cross, exhausted after a long and hard day's work, gazing now at the pond and then at the big house on the other side, its white walls and windowpanes shining in the setting sun. Leaning out from behind a wall, clumps of red dahlias flamed bright against the cottage. In front, in the orchard beyond the fence, a tall figure was moving about, though it was unclear who it was since they kept vanishing on to the porch or between the trees.

'All right for some, sleeping like a squire while you graft like a farmhand,' Antek muttered angrily, for his father's snoring could be heard as far as the porch.

He went to the yard and looked at the cow again.

'Father's cow, sure, but it's our loss too,' he said to his wife who, seeing that Kuba had brought the potatoes from the field, tossed aside her axe and approached the cart.

'The pit's not yet ready, so shift them to the threshing floor,' ordered Antek.

'But that's where Father said you and Kuba are to skin and clean the cow.'

'There's room for a cow and potatoes both,' Kuba murmured, opening the barn doors wide.

'I'm no knacker to be skinning cows,' Antek retorted.

No more was said. Only the rattle of potatoes could be heard, tumbling on to the threshing floor.

The sun had gone down and evening was deepening. The afterglow still shone like clotted blood and cooling gold, scattering the pond with copper dust, so that the quiet waters trembled with a rusty shimmer, rippling sleepily.

The village sank into shadow, into the deep, dead silence of an

autumn evening. The cottages shrank as though cleaving to the earth, nestling against the drowsy drooping trees and grey fences.

Antek and Kuba carted potatoes while Hanka and Józka bustled about the farm: there were geese to be rounded up for the night; pigs to be fed to stop them from crowding on to the porch and sticking their greedy snouts into the wooden tubs of water for the cattle; and cows to be milked, for Witek had just brought the rest of the herd back from pasture and was stuffing a handful of hay behind the racks for each of them so they would stand quietly to be milked.

Just as Józia had begun to milk the first in line, Witek climbed out from behind the manger and asked quietly and fearfully:

'Józia, is the master in a fury?'

'Jesus, he'll skin you, you wretch, skin you alive . . . he were railing like anything,' she said, turning her head to the light and shielding her face with her hand as the cow flicked her tail, brushing off the flies.

'But . . . how's it my fault . . . but . . . the woodsman chased me and would've thrashed me with his stick, only I scarpered and straight off the skewbald starts trying to lie down and mooing and groaning so I drove her home . . .'

He fell silent, but you could hear his quiet, downcast sniffing and snivelling.

'Witek . . . don't bleat like a calf – won't be the first time Father's given you a hiding, will it?'

'You bet it won't, but I'm still scared stiff . . . I can't stand being beaten . . .'

'You silly, a great big lad and he's scared . . . I'll explain to *Tato* . . .'

'Will you, Józia?' he cried happily. 'It were the woodsman chased us out, me and the cows, see . . .'

'I'll tell him, Witek, just stop being a scaredy-cat!'

'Here then . . . take this bird!' he whispered, pleased, and pulled out a wooden marvel. 'Just watch how it moves.'

He placed it on the step of the byre, wound it up, and the bird began to totter, lift its long legs and waddle . . .

'A storkie! Why it moves like it's alive!' she exclaimed, astonished. Setting aside the milking pail, she crouched by the step and watched with the greatest delight and amazement.

'Jesus! You're a proper mechanic! And it's doing that on its own, eh?'

'On its own, Józia. I just wind it and off it goes for a walk like the master after dinner – see . . .' He turned it over and the bird, at once grave and comical, stepped forward, raising its neck and long legs at the same time.

They began to laugh heartily, amused by its antics, while Józia

gazed at the boy from time to time, her eyes full of surprise and astonishment.

'Józia!' came Boryna's voice from in front of the cottage.

'What?' she shouted.

'Over here.'

'I'm still milking the cow.'

'Watch the place, I'm away to the Voyt,' he said, poking his head into the dark byre. 'No sign of that foundling, eh?'

'Witek? Nay, he went off for potatoes with Antek, seeing as Kuba had to chop hay for the horses,' she answered quickly and a little nervously, for Witek had squatted down in fright behind her.

'Scum of a boy, good-for-nothing, ruining such a cow,' he muttered, returning to the cottage. He put on a new white capote,[14] its seams all trimmed in black ribbon, and a tall black hat, fastened a red belt around his waist[15] and took the road by the pond towards the mill.

'So much work still . . . firewood to collect . . . sowing's not done . . . cabbages still on the field . . . mulch not raked . . . ground needs harrowing for the potatoes . . . and the oat fields could do with it too . . . and now a court case, to boot . . . By God, the work's never done and a man's no better than an ox in harness with no time to sleep nor even rest,' he brooded. 'And here's this court . . . that filthy baggage . . . slept with her, did I . . . may your tongue shrivel . . . you slattern . . . bitch!' he spat in rage, stuffing his pipe with shag and striking a damp match repeatedly against his trousers before lighting up.

Puffing from time to time, he trudged along slowly; every bone ached and the sorry business of the cow kept disheartening and agitating him.

And there was no one to tell and no one to listen – he was lonely as a post. It was all on his plate, all for him to decide, all for him to chase like a dog . . . and no one to chat with, nowhere to turn for help or advice . . . nothing but rack and ruin . . . the lot of 'em like wolves at a sheep . . . snapping away, just waiting for the moment to tear it to bits . . .

It was darker in the village now, and since it was a warm evening, fires could be seen flickering through the wide-open doors and windows, and the smell of boiling potatoes and sour rye soup with crackling drifted on the air. Some ate in their hallways or simply sat outside, so that their chatter and the chink of spoons could be heard.

Weighed down with vexation, Boryna went ever slower, and then the memory of his dead wife, whom he'd buried that spring, caught at his throat . . .

'Oho, nothing would have befallen the skewbald under her eye,

God rest her that I think on of an evening; now that were a wife, a proper housekeeper! Aye, a curmudgeon maybe, and a shrew, never a good word for anyone and always at loggerheads with the other women . . . but a wife and a housekeeper!' And here he sighed piously in her memory, and even greater regret choked him as he remembered how things used to be . . .

He'd come back from work, dog-tired. There'd always be a hearty meal, and time and again she'd slip him some sausage, hidden from the childer . . . And how everything flourished! There were calves, and goslings, and piglets . . . every fair there'd be plenty to take to town, and always cash to hand, put aside from livestock she'd raised . . . As for her cabbage-with-peas – no one could match it . . .

And now what?

Here was Antek, bent on pulling his own way, his son-in-law the blacksmith on the lookout for what he could hustle, and Józka? A silly chit with a head full of nonsense still, and no wonder since the lass was barely ten years old . . . Hanka flitted about like a moth, forever ailing, and useful as a dog's tears . . .

Yes, everything was going to ruin . . . the poor skewbald slaughtered . . . a piglet had died at harvest-time . . . the crows had made off with at least half the goslings! So much waste, so much ruin! Everything slipping through a sieve, slipping away . . .

'I'll not give in!' he exclaimed, almost out loud. 'While there's life in these legs, I'll not sign over a single morgen and be pensioned to you lot . . . Soon as Grzela comes home from the war, Antek can go farm at his father-in-law's . . . I'm handing over nothing . . .'

'Praised be!'[16] a voice rang out.

'For ever, amen,' he responded mechanically and turned off the road into a long wide farmstead and towards the Voyt's dwelling, which was set back somewhat.

Lights were shining at the windows and the dogs began to bay.

He went straight into the main room.

'Is the Voyt home?' he asked a plump woman kneeling by a cradle and nursing a child.

'He'll not be long – he went off in the cart for potatoes. Sit down, Maciej; see, that one's waiting too,' she tossed her chin towards the old boy sitting by the hearth: it was the old blind man and his dog. The red glow from the fireside torches[17] lit up his great shaven face, bald skull and wide-open eyes, clouded white and set unseeing beneath shaggy grey brows . . .

'And whence has God brought you?' asked Boryna, sitting down at the other side of the fire.

'From the great wide world, mister, where else?' he drawled in a whining, almost suppliant voice, pricking up his ears intently and pulling out his snuffbox. 'Take some, mister.'

Boryna helped himself liberally and sneezed three times in a row till the tears came to his eyes.

'Strong, dammit!' He wiped his teary eyes on his sleeve.

'To your health. It's from Petersburg, good for the eyes.'

'Come by tomorrow – I've slaughtered a cow, there'll be a morsel for you too.'

'God bless you . . . Boryna, am I right, hey?'

'Ah, you recognized me, then? . . . Well, well.'

'By your voice and your speech.'

'What news from the world? Are you always on the road?'

'What indeed, m'dears! Good here, bad there, up and down, same as the world over. Everyone screeching, complaining when it comes to giving to beggar or neighbour, but there's always enough for the grog.'[18]

'That's how it is, truth be told.'

'Oho, so many years tramping about this holy earth, you get to learn a thing or two.'

'And what have you done with that urchin who was leading you last year?' asked the Voyt's wife.

'The scum went off, he did, and emptied my bags good and proper . . . I had a bit o' money from folk, offerings to take to Częstochowa,[19] to Our Lady. The bastard filched the lot and scarpered! Quiet, Burek! It's likely the Voyt.' He jerked the rope and the dog stopped growling.

He guessed right; the Voyt entered, threw aside his whip and called from the threshold:

'Something to eat, Wife, I'm hungry as a wolf. How are you, Maciej – and what's your business, Granddad?'

'I'm here, Piotr, about that case of mine tomorrow.'

'I'll wait, Mister Voyt. In the hallway if you want – that'll do me – but if you leave us by the fire, seeing as I'm old, then there I'll stay, and if you give us a bowl of potatoes or a slice of bread, I'll say a prayer for you, or even two . . . for a bit o'cash, ten kopecks . . .'[20]

'Sit down, you'll get your supper, and spend the night too if you like . . .'

And the Voyt sat down to his plate of steaming freshly mashed potato, liberally scattered with scratchings, and a bowl of soured milk alongside.

'Sit down, Maciej, and eat what there is with us,' the Voyt's wife urged Boryna, putting down a third spoon.

'God bless you. I'm back from the forest, so I've eaten well already . . .'

'Oh, take the spoon – it won't hurt, the evenings are longer now . . .'

'A long prayer and a big bowl never killed anyone yet,' threw in the old beggar.

Boryna resisted, but the pork fat so tickled his nostrils that finally he sat on the bench and ate, slowly and with restraint, as custom demanded.

The Voyt's wife, meanwhile, got up from time to time to top up the potatoes or bring more milk.

The beggar's dog began to whine and fidget at the sight of the food.

'Quiet, Burek, our hosts are eating . . . you'll get some too, never fear . . .' the old boy reassured him, sniffing the delicious aroma as he warmed his hands at the fire.

'So, it seems Ewka's made a complaint against you,' the Voyt began, when he'd eaten his fill.

'That piece! Claims I didn't pay for her service. I paid all right, as God's in heaven, and what's more I gave the priest a sack of oats out o' the goodness of my heart for the christening . . .'[21]

'She says the child is . . .'

'Father and Son! Is she raving or what?'

'Oho, there's life in the old dog yet!' The Voyt and his wife began to laugh.

'An old man's more likely to hit a bull's eye, what with skill and practice!' whispered the beggar.

'She's a lying dog, I never touched her. Tell me another, a baggage like that . . . she were dossing by a fence, whining and begging us to take her in to cook and give her a corner to sleep in since winter were coming. I wasn't keen, but my wife that's dead says: "Ah, take her, she'll be useful round the house – are we going to hire help? She'll be on the spot and handy." I didn't want to, there's barely work in winter and here's one mouth more at the pot. But the late wife says: "Don't you bother yourself, she knows how to weave linen and wool, I'll set her to stitching, she'll cobble something together." So she stayed, fattened up and soon got fixed. And as to who kept her company – there's all manner of talk.'

'She accuses you.'

'I'll murder the scum, foul Gypsy!'

'Still, you have to show up in court.'[22]

'I will. God bless you for telling me, I only knew about the dues – but I've paid her, and I've witnesses! That poxy gasbag, that beggar! God's sake, I'll not hold out with all these troubles, I will not – my

cow's dropped dead, I had to finish her off, there's jobs waiting, and here a man's utterly alone.'

'A widower's like a sheep among wolves,' the old beggar broke in again.

'I heard tell about the cow, out in the fields . . .'

'It's a matter for the manor, since it looks like the woodsman chased her out the copses. My best cow! Worth three hundred. It did her in, she were that heavy, her lungs got inflamed, so I had to finish her off. But I won't let it pass. I'll go to court.'

But the Voyt, who kept close company with the manor,[23] began to reason with Boryna and exhort him to restrain himself, since the first flush of anger always led to bad judgement, and finally, in order to turn the conversation in another direction, he winked at his wife and said:

'Well, Maciej, you should marry again and there'd be someone to mind the homestead.'

'Are you mocking me? Fifty-eight years I marked back at the Assumption. What are you thinking of? My last one's still warm in the grave.'

'Take a woman to suit your age and everything will soon right itself,' the Voyt's wife added and began to clear the table.

'A good wife's a crown for her husband's head,' the beggar threw in, groping for the bowl the Voyt's wife had set in front of him.

Boryna snorted, but pondered suddenly why it hadn't occurred to him before. For whatever woman you settled on, it was always better than struggling alone.

'Some turn out foolish and idle, some are quarrelsome, some are always tugging at the lads' hair, and some are slatterns and flighty for the inn and music, but a fellow's always better off and more comfortable,' the beggar continued as he ate.

'There'd be muttering in the village,' said Boryna.

'Oh aye – and will the village return your cow, or give you advice, or look after the farm, or have any pity at all?' retorted the Voyt's wife vehemently.

'Or prepare a nice warm quilt for you?' the Voyt said with a laugh. 'And the village is that full of lasses, it fair smoulders like an oven when you walk between the cottages . . .'

'Hark at him, the old lecher . . . that's what's on his mind . . .'

'Take Zośka Grzegorzowa, slim, a beauty, and not a bad dowry.'

'What's Maciej need with a dowry, when he's first farmer in the village?'

'Can't have too much of land and goods,' the old beggar protested.

'No, Grzegorzowa's not for him,' the Voyt took up. 'Too young and puny still.'

'What about Kasia Jędrkowa?' the Voyt's wife listed next.

'Spoken for. The Rochs' Adam sent round yesterday with vodka.'

'Then there's Weronka Stachowa.'

'That windbag, flighty and got a buckled hip.'

'What about Tomek's widow, what about her? Still good to wed . . .'

'Three children, four morgen, two cows' tails and a mangy sheepskin from her old man.'

'Wojtek's Ulisia, then, who lives by the church?'

'Eh, she's better for a young man . . . she's got a lad out o' wedlock, big enough now to herd the cows, but Maciej's no need o' that, he's got his own herdsman.'

'Oh, there's plenty more lasses to be married. I'm choosing only ones that might suit Maciej.'

'You've missed out one who'd be a perfect fit.'

'Who's that?'

'What about Dominikowa's Jagna?'[24]

'True, I'd forgotten her completely.'

'A bonny strapping lass, she can't climb a fence without snapping a picket beneath her, and beautiful face, white skin, fine as a heifer's.'

'Jagna,' Boryna repeated, listening to the tally in silence. 'They say she runs after the lads.'

'They've seen that with their own eyes, have they! Tittle-tattle for the sake of it, and all out of envy,' the Voyt's wife defended her fiercely.

'I'm not saying so, but that's the talk. Well, I have to go,' he said, adjusting his belt and tamping down an ember in his pipe before dragging on it a few times. 'What time in court?' he asked evenly.

'It's down for nine in the *povestka*,'[25] said the Voyt. 'You'll need to be up at daybreak if you're going on foot.'

'Ha . . . I'll go along slowly on the filly. God be with you, I thank you for the meal and the neighbourly advice.'

'Godspeed, and think on our counsel . . . Say the word and I'll be round to the mother's with the vodka and we'll fix a wedding before the Twelve Days are upon us!'

Boryna made no answer, just shot him a look and went out.

'When an old man takes a young lass, the devil rejoices, for he'll be the one to profit,' declared the old beggar sagely, scraping the bottom of his bowl loudly.

Boryna returned home slowly, mulling over their advice. Back at the Voyt's, he had not betrayed how exceedingly the thought had appealed to him, for he was a seasoned farmer after all, not some boy still wet

behind the ears, who almost squeals in anticipation and hops from foot to foot at the mention of taking a wife.

Night had now embraced the earth, the stars sparkling like silver dew in the dark and silent depths. The whole village was quiet, with only the occasional bark of a dog to be heard, and here and there tiny lights winked faintly beyond the trees . . . sometimes a damp breeze wafted from the meadows, making the trees sway gently and quietly rustle their leaves.

Boryna did not return the way he'd come, but headed down across the bridge under which the water flowed babbling into the river and tumbled to the mill. He turned and went round the far side of the pond. The waters shone black and still, the trees on the shore throwing dark shadows across the surface of the pond, edging its banks like a frame, and in the middle, where it was lighter, the stars were reflected as though in a steel mirror.

Maciej did not know himself why he hadn't gone straight home, but chosen the longer way – perhaps to pass by Jagna's house? Or perhaps to gather his thoughts and meditate a little.

'Certainly, it would be no bad thing! Certainly! And all they said of her is true enough.' He spat. 'A strapping woman!' He shivered; a damp chill was rising from the pond, and it had been mighty hot at the Voyt's.

'It'll all go to ruin without a woman, or end in handing the farm over to the children,' he thought, 'and she's a sturdy wench, pretty as a picture . . . And the best cow gone and who knows what tomorrow will bring? Happen best find a wife? All that frippery the last one left behind – it'll come in handy. But Dominik's old widow is a nasty piece . . . ah, but she has a house and land, so she'll stay at her own place. Three of 'em, and they've fifteen morgen; that would be five for Jagna and quittance for the house and livestock! Five morgen is exactly the fields beyond my potato field – looks like they sowed rye last summer, yes . . . Five morgen with mine . . . makes just short of five-and-thirty! A goodly bit of land!'

He rubbed his hands and adjusted his belt. 'Only the miller's got more . . . that thief garnered it through wronging folk with his interest and his swindling . . . and next year I'd cart manure and till and plant the whole lot with wheat. I'd need another horse, and another cow in place of the poor skewbald . . . but true, she'd bring a cow with her, she would . . .'

And so he pondered and calculated, pausing now and then amid his heavy deliberations, lost in his farmer's dreams. And shrewd peasant that he was, he mustered every point, racking his brains so as not to overlook anything or let it slip.

'They'll kick up a fuss, the louts, they will!' He thought of his children, but a sudden wave of strength and assurance flooded his heart, bolstering his as yet vague and wavering resolve.

'The land's mine – hands off, the rest of 'em! And if they don't like it, then . . .' He did not finish, for he was standing in front of Jagna's cottage.

It was still bright inside, a broad beam of light streamed from the open window, across the dahlias and low plum trees, right to the fence and the road.

Boryna stood in the shadows and peered into the room. The lamp was burning above the stove's hood, but a mighty fire must have been blazing inside, for the crackle of spruce could be heard and a red glow filled the great room, its corners in darkness. Hunched by the fire, the old woman was reading something aloud, and Jagna sat opposite, her face turned to the window; wearing just her smock, the sleeves rolled up to the shoulders, she was plucking a goose.

'She's bonny all right!' he thought.

She would raise her head occasionally to listen to her mother, sigh deeply and return to plucking the feathers, until the goose gave a pained squawk and began to struggle and honk in her hands, beating its wings so that down billowed about the chamber in a white cloud.

Jagna quickly soothed it, squeezing it firmly between her knees so that the goose gave only a quiet and plaintive honk or two and others answered it somewhere from the hallway or the yard.

'A beautiful woman,' he thought and departed hurriedly, for the blood had rushed to his head until he scratched at it, did up his *sukmana* and tightened his belt.

He was already at his gate and turning into the farmstead when he happened to glance back at her house, for he was exactly opposite, just on the other side of the water. Someone was coming out at that very moment – a beam of light streamed through the open door and streaked like lightning across the pond, then came the thud of firm steps and the sound of someone drawing water, and finally, across the darkness and mists drifting in from the meadows, a song echoed softly:

'*I'm on this bank, you're on that bank.*
How's my kiss to reach you?
I'll send it sailing on a little leaf.
Here it comes, my darling!'

He listened for a long time, but the singing faded quickly and soon the lights went out.

A full moon rolled across the sky from beyond the forest and silvered the tips of the trees, sprinkling light through their branches on to the pond and peering into the cottage windows opposite. Even the dogs had quietened; a deep silence enveloped the whole village and all of creation.

Boryna did the rounds of the farmyard, looking in on the horses, who whinnied and nibbled at their fodder, and poking his head through the byre doors that were standing open in the warmth of the night. The cows were lying down chewing the cud, groaning from time to time, as cattle do. He fastened the doors to the barn.

Taking off his hat, he walked towards the cottage, muttering his prayers under his breath. And since all were sleeping, he quietly took off his shoes and went straight to bed. But he couldn't sleep: first he was roasting under the quilt, so that he stuck out his legs; then his head teemed with all manner of matters, perturbations, ponderings . . . or his full stomach weighed so heavily that he groaned and muttered.

'I've always said soured milk does nothing but swell the belly, why take it at night . . .' And then he began thinking of Jagna; how fine it would be with her so bonny and thrifty and so many fields . . . Or he'd recall the children, or the talk about Jagna, so that his thoughts were all a muddle and he hardly knew what to do. He sat up and, as had always been his wont, made to call out to the other bed for advice: 'Marysia! Should I wed Jagna or not?'

But he remembered in time that Marysia had been lying in the graveyard since spring, and it was Józka lying there snoring and he was a poor wretch with no one to turn to; so he just sighed deeply, crossed himself and set to reciting Hail Marys for the dead woman and all the other souls left in purgatory.

CHAPTER 3

Dawn had already bleached the roofs and drawn a coarse grey blanket over the night and pale stars when the first signs of movement could be detected at the Boryna farmstead.

Kuba dragged himself from his bunk and peered out of the stable – the ground was covered with hoar frost and it was still grey, but on the eastern side the sky was already glowing, daybreak tingeing the tips of the frosted trees red. He stretched pleasurably, yawned a few times and went off to the byre to shout at Witek that it was time to get up, but the boy barely lifted his sleepy head and whispered, 'Coming, Kuba, coming!' before nestling back into the bedding.

'Sleep a bit longer, poor lad, sleep!' Kuba adjusted the sheepskin over the boy and hobbled out, for he limped badly since being shot in the leg and now dragged it along. He washed at the well, smoothing with his palm his sparse thinning hair, tangled into knots, and knelt at the stable threshold to say his prayers.

Inside the house they were still asleep. The crimson glow of dawn caught fire in the cottage windows and the torn rags of dense white mists, lingering over the pond, were slowly rolling away and rising upwards.

Kuba prayed a long time, fingering his chaplet and running his eyes now over the farmyard, then the windows of the cottage and the orchard still in shadow, the apple trees heavy with fruit as big as fists. He tossed something at the kennel by the door, at Łapa's white head, but the dog only growled, curled up and went back to sleep.

'Ha, you'd sleep till sun's up, you beggar!' And he kept throwing until the dog emerged, stretched, yawned, wagged his tail and sat down nearby to scratch and set his dense shaggy fur in order with his teeth.

'. . . and offer this prayer to you and all the saints. Amen!' Kuba beat his breast at length and, getting up, said to Łapa: 'Ha! A right dandy bastard, picking out his fleas like a wench off to a wedding!'

And being a hard worker, he set about his chores: rolled the cart out of the barn and greased it; watered the horses and topped up their hay until they began to whinny and stamp their hooves; and then fetched some stray ears of wheat, well garnished with oats, from the hayloft and tipped them into the mare's trough, in her separate stall.

'Get it down, old girl; you've a foal on the way, you need your strength, eat up!' He stroked her muzzle and the mare leaned her head on his arm, tugging his matted hair affectionately with her lips.

'We'll get the potatoes in by midday and be off to the woods come evening, for leaf litter – never fear, litter's light, I shan't wear you out . . . As for you, lazybones, you'll get the whip. Look at him, sniffing the oats, the sluggard,' he said to the gelding standing close by and pushing his head between the slats of the stall towards the mare's manger. He whacked the horse's rump with his fist so that it jumped aside and neighed.

'Aye, you Jew's hireling! You'd gobble up pure oats, but you won't shift without the whip, you rascal, hey?'

He skirted round the gelding and peered in at the filly who was already standing by the wall and stretching out her chestnut head with its white flash towards him, whinnying softly.

'Hush, little one, hush! Eat up. You're off to town with the master!'

He took a wad of hay and rubbed down her soiled flank. 'Mare

enough now for a stallion, but mucky! Wallowing like a sow.' Chattering away, Kuba went to the sties to let out the squealing pigs, while Łapa followed him everywhere, peering up at him constantly.

'Hungry too, eh? Here's a bit o' bread then, here!' He pulled out a piece from his bosom and tossed it; the dog caught it and ran to his kennel as the pigs rushed to snatch it from him.

'Ha, these pigs are like some folk, all for grabbing what's another's and getting it down their necks . . .'

He peered into the barn and gazed at the dead cow hanging from the rafters.

'Just a poor stupid creature, but it too met its end. I'm thinking they'll be roasting meat tomorrow. That's all that's left of you, poor beggar, a good Sunday dinner . . .'

He sighed at the thought of the meal and staggered off to wake Witek . . .

'The sun'll be up any minute . . . it's time to get the cows out.'

Witek muttered something, resisting at first and pressing against the sheepskin, but finally he got up and shuffled sleepily into the yard.

The farmer had overslept today, for the sun was up already, turning the frost pink, setting water and windowpanes ablaze, and still no one stirred at the cottage . . .

Witek sat on the threshold of the byre, scratching vehemently and yawning. Seeing the sparrows beginning to flutter down from the roof to the well and splashing in the trough, he fetched a ladder to look into the swallows' nest under the eaves as it was strangely quiet up there.

'Have they frozen or what?' And he began to pull out the poor distressed birds delicately and put them in his bosom. 'Hey, Kuba, look they've died – see.'

He ran to the farmhand and showed him the stiff, lifeless swallows. But Kuba just took them in his hand, held them against his ear, blew into their eyes and said: 'They're dead owing to the hard frost. The daft 'uns didn't fly off to warmer lands, aye, well . . .' And off he went to his chores.

Witek sat down by the cottage, at the gable end that the sunlight had just reached and was pouring over the whitewashed walls on which the flies were beginning to crawl. From his shirt he began to pull out the birds, which were now twitching, warmed by his body. He puffed at them, prised open their little beaks and fed them from his own lips, until they began to revive, opening their eyes and trying to struggle free of his grasp; then with his right hand he'd grope the wall, pounce on a fly and feed it to a bird before letting it go.

'Off to your mother, off you go,' he whispered, watching as the swallows alighted on the ridge of the byre roof,[1] preening their feathers with their beaks and seemingly twittering their thanks.

All the while Łapa sat on his rump beside Witek, giving droll little whimpers. He leapt at every little bird that flew off, chasing it for a few steps before returning to his post.

'Aye, try catching the wind in the field,' muttered Witek. He was so immersed in warming the swallows that he didn't see Boryna come round the corner and stand before him.

'Playing with birds, are you, you lout?'

Witek leapt up to race away but the farmer had already grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and with his other hand was quickly unfastening his wide, hard leather belt.

'Don't beat me, don't!' Witek managed to yell.

'A cowherd, eh? This is how you do your job, eh? My best cow done for, eh? You foundling, you oaf, you!' And Boryna beat him frenziedly wherever he could, until the leather whistled and the boy squirmed like an eel, yelling:

'Don't hit me! God! He's killing me! Master! Jesus, help!'

Even Hanka looked out of the house to see what was going on, while Kuba just spat and hid in the stable.

Boryna went on thrashing with a vengeance, scoring his own loss on to the boy's skin so fiercely that Witek's face was livid and the blood flowing from his nose. He shrieked at the top of his lungs and by some miracle broke away, grabbed the back of his breeches with both hands and shot behind the picket fence.

'Jesus, he's killed me, he's killed me!' he howled and ran so fast that the rest of the swallows flew out from his shirt and scattered along the road.

Boryna, still shaking his fist, put on his belt and returned to the cottage, looking in on Antek's side of the house.

'The sun's two fellows high[2] and you're still lazing about!' he shouted at his son.

'I was dead on my feet yesterday. I've got to rest up.'

'I'm off to court. Get the potatoes in, and when they've finished digging, get them to rake in the leaf litter. And you could knock in the stakes for the winter walls.'[3]

'Do it yourself – it's not draughty round this end.'

'You don't say . . . I'll do my side then, and you can freeze, you layabout.' Boryna slammed the door and returned to his own side.

Józka had lit the stove already and was off to milk the cow.

'Get me something to eat quick. I have to be off.'

'Well, I can't split myself and do two jobs at once,' retorted Józka and off she went.

'There's not a second's peace to be had! I must be always at odds with all of 'em!' he mused as he began to dress, but he was vexed and angry. It was constant war with his son; he couldn't say a word without Antek showing his claws or coming out with something that hit you in the gut. No one to lean on, nothing but graft and more graft!

And his annoyance grew so that he cursed under his breath and tossed his clothes and boots about the room.

'They should obey me but they don't! Why not?' he thought. 'Seems I'll get nowhere without the stick, good and hard! They've had it coming to 'em since the moment she died, God rest her, when they began squabbling over the land, but still I hesitated, so as not to cause scandal in the village. I'm not just any farmer, I've thirty morgen, and not just anyone by birth – a Boryna, goes without saying. But kindness'll get me nowhere, oh no!'

And his son-in-law the blacksmith came to mind, who was forever inciting the others while he himself kept insisting on six morgen to be signed over and a morgen of forest and, as for the rest, he'd wait . . .

'Not till I'm dead and gone! Wait, you beggar, wait away,' he thought crossly. 'You'll not get a sniff of a single field while I live and breathe! Hark at him, the know-it-all!'

The potatoes were boiling on the stove by the time Józka returned from milking and she soon had breakfast ready.

'Józka! You sell the meat yourself. It's Sunday tomorrow, people have heard already, so they'll soon be thronging; nothing on credit, mind. Leave us the haunch; we'll send for Ambrozy to salt and prepare it.'

'Blacksmith knows how to as well . . .'

'Oh aye, and he'd share it out like a wolf with a sheep.'

'Magda will be glum that it's our cow and she's not got a look in.'

'Well, cut a piece for your sister and take it over, then, but no calling the smith.'

'That's good of you, *Tatulu*.'

'All right, my girl! Mind the house, and I'll bring you back a roll or something.'

He ate a good breakfast, then put on his belt, spat on his palm to smooth his sparse, dishevelled hair, picked up his whip and paused to look about the room.

'Have I not forgotten something?' He wanted to look in the storeroom, but refrained since Józka was watching, and merely crossed himself and left.

But once on the cart, gathering the canvas reins in his fist, he said to Józka on the porch:

'When the potatoes are in, they're to go rake the leaf litter – the docket's behind the picture.[4] And get them to chop down a hornbeam or a spruce – it'll come in useful.'[5]

The cart moved off and was in the farmyard already when Witek flashed past under the apple trees.

'I forgot . . . whoa . . . Witek! Whoa! Witek, take the cows out to the meadow and mind them well, or I'll give you a hiding to remember, you varmint!'

'Eh, you can kiss my . . .' the boy shouted back impudently, vanishing behind the barn.

'Any lip from you and I'll show you what's what when I get down . . .'

Boryna turned left from the farm, towards the church, flicking the filly with the whip so that she trotted along the rough stony road.

The sun was just over the cottages and warmer now, for steam was rising and water dripping from the hoary thatch, and only in the shadows, under orchard fences and in ditches did grizzled ice still linger. The last wisps of mist drifted over the pond and underneath this milky film the water began to shimmer and reflect the sun.

In the village, the usual bustle began. It was a bright, chilly morning and folk were moving briskly and more noisily in the bracing frosty air: they headed to the fields together, some to dig, with mattocks and baskets on their arms, finishing their breakfast on the way; others dragged ploughs on to the stubble; some brought harrows in carts and sacks full of seed for sowing; and others turned towards the forest, rakes on their shoulders, to gather leaf litter. Noise and rumbling thus grew on both sides of the pond, for the roads were crammed with cattle being taken to pasture, loud with the barking of dogs and shouts erupting now and then from beneath the low heavy clouds of dust that rose from the dew-covered roads. Boryna steered carefully through the herds and flocks, sometimes brushing against the woolly fleece of some silly sheep or calf that hadn't moved out of the filly's way, until he had passed them all and was nearing the church, which stood in the shade of a mighty bulwark of yellowing lindens and maples, before joining a wide highway lined on both sides with great poplars.

Mass was in progress inside the church, and as the bell in the spire was ringing for the offertory, to the muffled booming of the organ, he took off his hat and crossed himself piously.

The road was empty and strewn so thickly with leaves that the bumps and deep wheel-ruts were covered in a carpet of rusty gold,

crossed by wide bands of shadow thrown by the trunks of the poplars as the sunlight shone aslant behind them.

'Gee up, missy, gee up!' Boryna swished his whip and the filly went more briskly for a couple of furlongs, but then slowed and plodded as the road began to rise, though only gradually, towards the forest, black in the distance.

Growing drowsy in the silence, Boryna peered through the columns of poplars at the fields, basking in the rosy morning light. He tried to think about the case with Ewka, or about the skewbald – but he could barely fight off the sleepiness . . .

Little birds twittered in the branches. Now and then the wind combed its fingers gently through the tips of the trees so that a leaf would break free and fall, spinning like a golden butterfly, on to the road or the dusty thistles whose fiery eyes stared impudently at the sun, while the poplars talked among themselves, rustling their branches gently, and then fell silent, like old biddies at the Elevation, who raise their eyes, spread their hands and sigh prayerfully, to crumble quickly into dust before the Majesty hidden in the golden monstrance and suspended above this dear, this sacred earth . . .[6]

On reaching the forest, he finally roused himself thoroughly and stopped the horse.

'Coming up nicely,' he murmured, surveying the grey fields against the light, with their short, rust-coloured brush of sprouting rye.

'Good bit o' land, and bordering mine, as though it were meant! I saw yesterday they'd planted rye.' Boryna swept a covetous eye over the harrowed strips, sighed and drove into the forest. He kept prodding the horse on, as the road was now level and firm, though densely overgrown with roots, over which the cart jolted and rattled. Enveloped in the harsh cold breath of the woods, he wasn't dozing now.

A huge and ancient forest, it stood dense and thick in the majesty of age and might, tree beside tree, almost all pines, but often a forked oak, grey with years, and sometimes birches in white smocks, their yellow plaits now hanging loose, as it was autumn already. The undergrowth of hazel, dwarf beech or quivering aspens nestled against the mighty red trunks, their crowns so closely bound and branches so entangled that the sun broke through only here and there, its rays creeping like golden spiders over the green moss and ruddy ferns.

'There's always my four morgen here!' he thought, devouring the wood with his eyes, and picking out the best trees by eye. 'The Lord Jesus will surely not let us be wronged – we ourselves shan't stand for it. The manor thinks it too much, while we say too little.[7] Let's see . . . my four, and Jagusia's one morgen, that's four and one . . . Gee up!

Daft beast, scared of a magpie!' He flicked her with the whip, for the magpies on the dry tree where a crucifix was hanging[8] were squabbling so vehemently that the filly had pricked up her ears and kept stopping.

'Magpies' wedding – rains a-spreading.' He gave the filly a few strokes of the whip and she broke into a trot.

It was well after eight o'clock and folk in the fields were sitting down to their second breakfast[9] when Boryna arrived in Tymów's empty little streets, lined with dilapidated houses squatting like old fishwives beside gutters full of rubbish, chickens, pigs and ragged Jewish children.

Almost instantly on his arrival, a crowd of Jewish men and women fell upon him,[10] looking into the cart and groping in the straw and under the seat, to see if he'd brought anything to sell.

'Get lost, you scabs!' he growled, driving into the marketplace under the shadow of some ancient peeling chestnuts languishing in the middle of the square where a dozen wagons were standing already, their horses unhitched.

He parked his own wagon too and turned the filly to face the cart-bed, where he'd tipped some feed, then stowed his whip under the seat, brushed the straw from his clothes and made straight for Mordko's, where three great discs shone outside,[11] to get a shave. He soon emerged, clean-shaven, with a single nick on the chin, plastered with a bit of paper through which the blood seeped.

The court was not yet open.

But in front of the court house, which was right on the square, opposite a huge former monastery church,[12] a sizeable crowd was waiting. They sat on the worn steps, or gathered under the windows, peering in from time to time; the women squatted by the whitewashed walls, letting the red aprons with which they had covered their heads slip on to their shoulders and chattering.

Boryna was instantly irritated at the sight of Ewka, her child in her arms, standing in the crowd among her witnesses, and since he was quick to anger, he spat and went into the other hallway, which ran the length of the judge's dwelling.

On the left was the court house and on the right lived the secretary,[13] where Jacek had just placed the samovar[14] on the threshold and was fanning it so fiercely with the shaft of his boot that it fumed like a factory chimney, while a sharp cross voice shouted constantly from the depths of the smoky hallway:

'Jacek! Fetch the young ladies' slippers!'

'Coming, coming!'

The samovar roared and belched flames like a volcano.

'Jacek! Hot water for the master to wash.'

'Aye, aye, it's on its way it is!' Sweaty, bewildered, Jacek raced about until the hallway thundered, returned, blew on the samovar and ran off again, as the lady of the house shrieked:

'Jacek, you oaf! Where are my stockings?!'

'Ha! Blasted samovar!'

On it went for a good few prayers, or even a whole chaplet, until at last the court-house doors opened and folk began to fill the large whitewashed chamber.

Jacek, as usher now, barefoot, in deep-blue breeches and a jerkin of the same colour with brass buttons, wiped his red perspiring face again and again on his sleeve as he bustled about behind the black grating dividing the chamber in two, and tossed his head like a horse tormented by a gadfly as his flaxen hair fell over his eyes like a mane. Peering cautiously into the neighbouring room, he then perched for a moment by a green-tiled stove.

Meanwhile, people were packed in tightly, like sardines, and pressed against the grating until it creaked. The murmur of voices, low at first, slowly grew, rippled and rolled about the chamber, booming at times and erupting occasionally into squabbles, so that a harsh word or two was ever more frequently heard.

Jews were jabbering under the windows, while inside women were recounting their grievances out loud and lamenting more loudly still, but impossible to tell who was speaking or whereabouts in the throng, with head beside head like a field of red poppies or spikes of rye that, when driven by the wind, sway and chatter and murmur, and then stand straight, ear to ear. Then Ewka, spying Boryna leaning on the grating, began needling him and hurling insults, so that, incensed, he retorted sharply:

'Quiet, you slut, or I'll rattle your ribs so that your own sister won't know you.'

At which Ewka, enraged, was out with the claws and yelling at him through the crush of people, until her headscarf slid off and the child began to wail, and who knows how it might have ended when Jacek suddenly jumped up, opened the door and shouted:

'Quiet, scum, court's coming!'

And indeed it was: first came the judges – a tall stout squire from Raciborowice and two magistrates – followed by the secretary, who sat down at a side table by the window and set out his papers, one eye on the judges as they stopped at a great table covered in red cloth and donned gold chains around their thick necks . . .[15]

All was now quiet, so that the chattering in the street under the window could be clearly heard.

The squire spread out his papers, grunted, glanced at the secretary and in a deep sonorous voice declared the court to be in session.

Next, the secretary read out the business of the day and whispered something to the first magistrate, who passed it on to the presiding judge, who nodded his head in affirmation.

The court began.

The first case involved a gendarme's[16] complaint against some townsman for the disorder in his courtyard.

Sentenced *in absentia*.

Then came a boy who'd been flogged for letting cows graze in someone's clover.

A compromise – five roubles[17] for the mother, and a new jacket and trousers for the boy.

A ploughing encroachment.

Dismissed for lack of evidence.

A case of timber theft from the judge's woods; a complaint brought by the bailiff – the accused being peasants from Rokiciny.

A fine, or a fortnight's imprisonment.

The judgement was rejected; the peasants gave notice of appeal.

So loudly did they begin to protest the injustice, since it was common woodland by right of easement, that the judge beckoned to Jacek, who thundered:

'Oi, quiet! A courtroom it is, not an inn!'

And so case followed case, like furrow after furrow, steadily and peaceably enough, with only occasional complaints, snivels or even cursing, which Jacek smartly suppressed. Some folk left the chamber, but were quickly replaced by so many newcomers they were stooked like sheaves, so that no one could move and it grew so hot it was impossible to breathe until the judge ordered a window to be opened.

It was the turn of Bartek Kozioł from Lipce[18] concerning the theft of a pig from Marcjanna Antonówna Pacześ.[19] The witnesses: the said Marcjanna, her son Szymek, Barbara Piesek and others.

'Are the witnesses present?' asked a magistrate.

'We are,' they chorused.

Boryna, who had been standing alone patiently by the grating, moved somewhat closer to Mistress Pacześ to greet her, since this was Dominik's widow, Jagna's mother.

'Let the defendant, Bartek Kozioł, approach the grating.'

A short peasant pushed his way forward so roughly that they all

began to curse him for treading on their feet and dragging against their clothes.

'Shut it, scum, the illustrious court is speaking!' yelled Jacek, letting him through.

'Are you Bartłomiej Kozioł?'

The peasant scratched his thick cropped hair worriedly: a silly grin twisted his gaunt clean-shaven face, his small reddish eyes darting sly as squirrels over the judges.

'Are you Bartłomiej Kozioł?' the presiding judge repeated, as the peasant stood silent.

'Aye, he's Bartłomiej Kozioł all right, if it please the illustrious court!' squealed a huge woman, forcing her way to the grating.

'What's your business?'

'Why, if it please the court, I'm the wife of this poor devil, Bartek Kozioł.' And she bowed, scraping her hand on the floor, so that her frilled bonnet bumped against the judges' table.

'Are you testifying?'

'Like a witness? Me? Nay, I'm only entreating . . .'

'Usher, remove her beyond the grating.'

'Out with you, woman, this ain't no place for you.' Jacek seized her by the shoulders and pushed her back.

'I entreat the illustrious court, my husband is hard of hearing,' she shouted.

'Out you go, while I'm feeling kindly,' said Jacek, and she fair yelped as he dashed her against the grating, for she wasn't going to take a single step willingly.

'Go out – we'll talk loud. He may be a goat by name,[20] but he'll hear well enough!'

The hearing began at last.

'What is your name?'

'Eh? . . . How dubbed? Why, they called me in, so they know, don't they . . .'

'You fool. What is your name?' the judge quizzed him regardless.

'Bartek Kozioł, your honour,' his wife threw in.

'Age?'

'Eh? . . . Age? . . . How do I know? Mother, how many years is it?'

'Fifty-two, to my mind, in the spring.'

'You're a farmer?'

'Eh, three morgen of sand and a cow's tail . . . a fine farmer.'

'Any convictions?'

'Eh? . . . Convictions?'

'Were you ever in the slammer?'

'The clink, you mean? Convictions? Mother, was I ever in the clink, eh?'

'You were, Bartek, you were. It were that scum from the manor over that dead lamb . . .'

'Aye, aye, I found a dead lamb on the pasture . . . so I takes it, dogs would have torn it apart. They complains, swears I stole it, the court tries me . . . and they locked me up and there I sat. It were unjust. Unjust,' he said quietly, glancing stealthily towards his wife.

'You're accused of stealing a sow from Marcjanna Pacześ! You took it from the field, drove it home, slaughtered and ate it! What have you to say in your defence?'

'Eh? Ate it! May I never set eyes on the Lord at my death's door if I ate it . . . Well, I never – ate it! Heavens above, ate it! Me?' he cried piteously.

'What have you to say in your defence?'

'Defence? What were it I was to say, Mother? Oh aye: innocent I am, I didn't eat no pig, and Marcjanna Dominikowa, let me say, is nowt but a yapping dog that needs grabbing by its nasty snout and thrashing . . . and . . .'

'Heavens above!' exclaimed Dominikowa.

'Well, you can sort that out later, but tell us now how the Pacześes' sow came to be at your place?'

'The Pacześes' sow – at my place? Mother, what's the honourable squire saying?'

'Why, Bartek, it's about that piglet what followed you home . . .'

'Oh aye, aye – it were but a piglet, not some hog. Begging your honour's pardon, let them listen to what I'm saying and I'll say it again: a piglet it were, not a hog; a whitey piglet, with a black patch near its tail or a bit lower down.'

'Very well, but how did it come to be at your place?'

'At my place? I'll soon explain exact so as the illustrious court and all the folk gathered here will see that I'm not guilty, and Dominikowa's a fibbing Gypsy and a pox-ridden tattletale!'

'Me, a liar! I'll be . . . by our Holy Lady, may a thunderbolt not strike you before you get to confession!' Dominikowa said quietly, with a deep sigh towards the picture of the Mother of God hanging in a corner of the chamber, and then, since she couldn't restrain herself any longer, she clenched her bony fist and stretched it towards him, hissing: 'You thieving swine! You thug, you!' And she splayed her fingers as though wanting to grab him.

But Bartek's wife leapt at her with a shriek.

'What! Hit him would you, you bitch, you witch, you tyrant of a mother, you!'

'Silence!' shouted the judge.

'Shut yer traps when judge is speaking or I'm chucking yer out!' Jacek seconded him, hitching up his coarse breeches, since his belt had come off.

Silence fell at once, and the two women, who had all but flown at each other, now stood quietly, though glaring and breathing heavily in their fury.

'Speak up, Bartłomiej; tell us the whole truth.'

'Truth? . . . I'm telling the truth, clear as glass, honest as confession, farmer to farmer, like kin to kin, for I'm a farmer, I am, from a long line. I'm no hired hand, nor some professionalist[21] or town crook. It were like this . . .'

'Think on carefully, so you don't forget anything,' his wife advised him.

'I'll not forget, Magda, no. It were like this. I'm walking along . . . I remember it were nearly spring . . . past Wolf's Hollow, by Boryna's clover. I'm going along and saying my prayers, since they'd rung the Angelus, and evening were coming . . . I'm going along . . . and then what's this I hear? A voice or what? Lordy, I think: is that grunting or what? I look around – nothing, nowt to be seen, dead quiet. Is it the devil, tempting me? I go a bit further and I've goosebumps with dread, so I say a Hail Mary. More grunts! "Well, I'll be!" I think to myself. "Can be nowt but a pig or a piglet, even." I go off the path a bit, into the clover, and look about . . . Aye something's creeping after me – I stop, it stops, and it's white and long and low . . . and its eyes are shining like those of a lynx or some wicked thing. I crossed myself, since my flesh were crawling, and I didn't hang about – I mean, who knows what's knocking about at night? And everyone in Lipce knows what haunts Wolf's Hollow.'

'Aye, it's true. Sikora were passing that way at night a year since and it grabbed him by the gullet and threw him to the ground and gave him such a whopping the fellow were ill two weeks,' his wife recounted.

'Hush, Magduś, hush! I'm walking, walking . . . walking . . . and it's right behind me and grunting! And since just then the moon's climbing up in the sky, I look and see it's only a piglet and nowt evil. I were mad as . . . what's the daft 'un thinking, frightening folk, so I throw a stick at it and I'm off home. Down the strip between Michał's beets and Boryna's wheat, and then between Tomek's spring wheat and the oats of that Jacek what the army took last year whose wife gave birth yesterday. Piglet's right after me like a dog, or at my side, or it's in

Dominikowa's potatoes, squeaking here, squeaking there, grunting, squealing, but it don't stop, keeps on after me . . .

'I turn by yon path that cuts across – it's right behind. I'm getting hot and bothered now, because is it really a pig or not? I turn on to the road by yon cross – piglet's behind. I seen it's a white 'un, but by its tail, down a bit, black patches! I'm over the ditch – piglet's right behind; then past those mounds near the cross – piglet's behind; I make for the stone heaps, and if it don't hurl itself at my legs – I come crashing down, flat on my face. Is it possessed, or what? I'm barely on my feet again when it jumps off and away with a flick o' the tail! "Off with you, then, pox-ridden beast," I think. But it's not run off, it were just running ahead – right to mine – right into my house, your honour, right past the fence, right into the hallway, and since the door to the room were open, right into the front room . . . so help me God. Amen!'

'And then you slaughtered and ate it?' said the judge, much amused.

'You what? Slaughtered and ate it? What were 'un supposed to do? A day's gone by, piglet's not leaving; a week goes by – there it is. You chase it out, it's right back squealing! My woman shoves it some scraps – can't starve it, can you, God's creature . . . Your honour's wise and'll see what's fair, what's a poor man to do with it? No one's coming for it, times are terrible hard – and it's stuffing more than enough for two down its face. Another month and it'd have eaten us, house and all. What's to do? It had us in a corner – so we ate it, and not all of it either. Village soon got wind of it, and Dominikowa comes complaining it's hers. She comes with the Soltys[22] and takes the lot.'

'The lot, you say? And the whole rump, where's that?' hissed Dominikowa balefully.

'Where? You ask Kruczka and them other dogs. We took it out to the barn by night. And the dogs, since they're a smart pair and there's holes in the door, pulled it out and had themselves a party at the expense o' my sweat and tears, and went about stuffed as squires.'

'Oh, the pig followed him, to be sure. A fool might believe it, but not this court. Thieving scum, what about the miller's ram, and the priest's goose – who took them, eh?'

'You saw, did you? Saw it?' shrieked Kozioł's wife, jumping up, fingernails at the ready.

'And the organist's potatoes, who took those? Something's forever missing in the village – a goose gone, a hen or a tool,' Dominikowa went on relentlessly.

'You scum! No one says a word about what you got up to as a lass, and what your Jagna's up to now with the farmhands, but there's you, yapping like a dog.'

'Don't you dare bring Jagna into it! Hands off, or I'll give you such a beating that . . . Hands off!' she bellowed, cut to the quick.

'Quiet, loudmouths, or I'll throw yer out!' Jacek shushed them, hoisting up his breeches.

The witnesses were then questioned.

First came Dominikowa, the injured party, who testified in a subdued and pious voice, avowing time after time by the Virgin of Częstochowa that the pig was hers, crossing herself and beating her breast, that it was true that Kozioł had stolen it from the pasture, but she did not demand that their worships punish him – no no, let the good Jesus instead not spare him purgatory; instead, she insisted in a loud voice, let the court punish him for vilifying her and her Jagna in front of all the people.

Then Dominikowa's son Szymek testified. His cap dangling from his hands, clasped as in prayer, he did not take his eyes off the judge and in a dazed and plaintive voice asserted that it was indeed his mother's pig, that it was white all over with a single black patch by the tail and a torn ear, from when Boryna's Łapa had snatched at it back in the spring and it had squealed so loud he'd heard it as far off as the barn.

Then Barbara Piesek was called, and others besides.

They each swore and gave evidence by turn, and still Szymek stood, cap in hand, gazing piously at the judge, while Kozioł's wife clamoured behind the grate with protestations of denial and shouts of abuse, and Dominikowa sighed towards the holy picture while squinting sideways at Kozioł who, eyes darting, strained to hear what was being said and cast about for his dear Magda.

People were listening attentively, and now and then a murmur, a snide comment or peal of hollow laughter rang out to the rafters so that Jacek had to silence them with a threat. The case dragged on, right until the recess, during which the court retired to the adjoining chamber to confer, and people poured into the hallway and just outside the building to recover somewhat: some to have a bite, some to conspire with their witnesses, some to air their grievances and others still to complain and rail against injustice, as is the custom with lawsuits.

After the recess and sentencing, Boryna's case reached the table.

Ewka stood before the court and, rocking her child, wrapped in her apron, began tearfully listing her woes and injuries, how she had served at Boryna's and worked till she was fit to drop and never a good word did she hear, nor did she have enough food nor even a corner to sleep, so that she had to eat at the neighbours', and then he did not pay her for her labours and instead cast her out, with his own

child, into the wide world . . . She burst into floods of tears and threw herself to her knees in front of the judges, crying:

'Wronged I've been! Wronged! And it's his child, illustrious court!'

'Lies like a dog,' muttered Boryna in horror.

'I'm the liar?! When everyone – the whole of Lipce knows that . . .'

'That you're a slut and a gadabout.'

'Your honour, it used to be "little Ewka", "Ewie mine" and words even sweeter, and I'd be brought beads or a roll and butter many a time with an "'Ere you go, little Ewie, here, because you're my dearest one", and now, Jesus, my Jesus!' She began to bawl.

'You lying beggar. Maybe I tucked you in under a quilt too and said: "Nightie night, Evie!"'

The chamber rocked with laughter.

'And did you not? Are you not lying, then, like yon dog by the door? You promised nothing, then?'

'Good God! You'd think lightning would strike such a monster!' Boryna exclaimed, astonished.

'Your honour, everyone knew how it was, all Lipce can testify that I'm telling the truth. When I were serving at theirs, he'd never give me no peace. Poor abandoned waif, I am! Wretched fate of mine! Like I could defend myself against a big man like that? I yelled, so he thrashed me and had his way . . . Where am I to go with this little one, where? Witnesses'll tell and testify!' she cried, amid her tears and wailing.

But in fact the witnesses could avouch nothing beyond gossip and surmises, so again she took up protesting and persuading, until at last, as a final proof, she unwrapped the child and placed it before the judges; the baby kicked its bare legs and shrieked to high heaven.

'Your honours can see for 'emselves whose it is. Here – same potato nose, same shifty grey eyes. Peas in a pod, couldn't be but Boryna's!' she cried.

But now even the court could not refrain from laughter, while folk hooted with merriment, peering first at the child and then at Boryna, their comments flying:

'A right little miss, like a skinned dog!'

'Boryna's a widower. He could marry her and the boy'd be handy for the cows . . .'

'She's moulting like a cow in springtime.'

'What a looker! Sling round some pea stalks and stand in her in the millet – all o' the crows'll scarper.'

'The dogs already leg it when Ewie comes through the village!'

'She's got a mug like it's been washed in slops.'

'Cause she's thrifty, washes once a year to save on soap.'

'She's got no time, what with lighting Jews' stoves,[23] so it's no surprise!'

The taunts grew meaner and crueller and she fell silent and gazed around at the people with the vacant eyes of a hunted dog, turning something over in her mind.

'Be quiet! It's a sin to mock poor wretches!' cried Dominikowa so loudly that they were silent, and many a one scratched his head in shame.

The case ended in nothing.

Boryna felt immeasurable relief, for though he was innocent, still he feared people's backbiting and the threat of being fined – for you never knew which way the law might go, or whom it would seize by the scruff, the guilty or the innocent. Oh, it would not be the first time, nor the second – nor even the tenth.

He left the court immediately and, waiting for Dominikowa, began to meditate and to ponder the whole matter. He could not understand why or to what end she'd accused him.

'Nay, it's not her doing. It's someone else by way of her, but who?'

He went with Dominikowa and Szymek to the inn for a drink and a bite to eat, since it was long past noon, and though Dominikowa hinted gently that this whole Ewka business must be the work of his son-in-law, the blacksmith, he could not credit it.

'What would he get out of it?'

'The satisfaction of provoking and mortifying, making you a laughing stock. That's how people are; they'd strip someone clean for their own amusement.'

'I cannot fathom that Ewka's doggedness! I did her no harm. What's more, I gave the priest a sack of oats for christening that bastard of hers.'

'She's working at the miller's, and he's a crony of the blacksmith's. Now do you see?!'

'I see, but I'm none the wiser! Have another drink!'

'God bless – you first, Maciej!'

They had another drink and another, a second pound[24] of sausage and half a loaf, the old man bought rolls for Józka and they made ready to return.

'Come ride with me, Dominikowa. It's dull alone; we'll have a talk.'

'All right, then – I'll just nip into church to say a prayer.'

Off she went, but was back in the space of a couple of prayers and they set off.

Szymek followed slowly, for his cart had but a single old nag and the sand on the road was atrocious. Somewhat confused besides,

being unused to drink and bewildered by the court, he swayed sleepily against the wicker chassis, and jerking awake again and again, he'd snatch his cap from his head, crossing himself piously, staring vacantly at the nag's tail, as if into the squire's face at court, and mumbling:

'Mother's pig, white all over, just a black patch near its tail.'

The sun was rolling to the west when they rode into the forest.

Boryna and Dominikowa talked very little, though they were sitting side by side on the front seat. One or other would pipe up from time to time, since it was unseemly to sit there like two curmudgeons, but just enough to stave off drowsiness or a dry mouth . . .

Boryna spurred on the filly as she was slowing down, and her flanks were lathered with tiredness and heat. Sometimes he whistled or simply sat silent, ruminating and pondering something, calculating and casting surreptitious glances at the old woman beside him, at her dry face as bleached as wax and set with long furrows, as she moved her toothless mouth as though praying quietly. Sometimes she pulled her red headscarf over her brow, for the sun was shining straight at them, and sat motionless with only her grey eyes burning.

'Finished with the digging?' he ventured finally.

'Oh, aye. Not a bad harvest.'

'It'll be easier to fatten a beast.'

'Aye, I've set aside a porker – might come in handy for carnival . . .'[25]

'Indeed, indeed . . . they say Rafał's Walek has sent the vodka round to yours?'

'He's not the only one, oh no . . . but they're throwing money away, they are. My Jagna is not for the likes of them. Oh no.' She raised her head and fixed her eyes on him like a hawk, but Boryna was getting on in years and no hothead, and his face was cool, calm and inscrutable. For a good while they spoke not a word, as though wrestling with each other in their muteness.

It was unfitting for Boryna to begin, for how could he, a man of his years and first farmer in all of Lipce, how could he declare that Jagna had caught his eye? He had his dignity after all, and knew his own mind – but being hot-tempered by nature, he was seized with exasperation that he must so guard himself, beat about the bush and solicit.

Dominikowa scrutinized him and marked what was distressing and disturbing him, but not a word did she say to help and only glanced about her from time to time or into the distant blue, until she observed casually:

'It's hot as harvest-time.'

'Indeed.'

And so it felt, for the road was surrounded by such mighty walls of forest that neither wind nor breeze could break through from the fields and the sun hung straight overhead and beat down, baking the trees, which drooped, languid and still, over the road, shedding amber needles now and then, which eddied down. The fungal smell of marsh and oak leaves filled their nostrils.

'You know, it's odd to me, and others too, that such a farmer, with more than common sense, and land aplenty, and held in high regard – such as yourself, for example – has no ambition to hold office . . .'

'You've hit on it, I've not the ambition. What's in it for me? I was Soltys three years since – it cost me plenty of cash. Wearing out myself and my horses besides! And the bickering and rushing about, worse than a dog out hunting . . . And the farm went to rack and ruin so that my wife didn't have a good word for me.'

'She had a point too. To be an official ought always to bring profit as well as honour.'

'Amen to that: bow to the guardsman, bend the knee to the clerk and any old upstart from the authorities – oh yes – a proper honour! If taxes aren't paid, or the bridge gets damaged, a dog goes mad, who cops it – who's guilty? Why, the Soltys, it's the Soltys who pays the penalty. Ha, there's your profit. Have I not taken chickens and eggs enough to the notary,[26] and a goose or two?'

'It's true, what you say, but being Voyt has done Piotr no harm, oh no; he's added to his land, built a barn, and he's got those great beasts of horses!'

'Indeed, but there's no knowing what'll be left of it when his term ends.'

'You think so . . .'

'I've eyes in my head and I mark a little . . .'

'Smug he is, and at loggerheads with the priest.'

'If it's going well, then it's all down to his wife; he can do his voyting but she holds the reins.'

They were silent again for the space of a good prayer.

'And will you not be sending round the vodka to anyone?' she asked cautiously.

'Eh, I'm not drawn to women now, too old . . .'

'Away with your nonsense! He is old who cannot move, cannot lift a spoon to his mouth and lingers by the stove . . . I've seen how you heave a sack of rye.'

'Indeed, I'm hale enough, but who would have me?'

'You can't know if you don't try. See!'

'I'm old, my children are grown . . . and I won't take the first lass to hand.'

'You need only make them a settlement[27] and the very best won't reject you . . .'

'For a settlement! Like swine! For a morgen the purest girl will pick up a beggar from outside the church . . .'

'Because men take no note of dowries, eh?'

He didn't answer, only flicked the filly with his whip till she lurched into a canter.

A long silence followed.

It was not until they'd left the forest for the fields, between the roadside poplars, that Boryna, who all this time had been seething and simmering inside, finally exploded:

'The devil take such an order of things in this world! Pay up for everything, yes, even for a kind word! Things are bad and could hardly be worse; even children rising against their fathers. There's no respect, and everyone at each other's throats like dogs.'

'Because they're stupid and take no heed that we'll all come to lie in the same holy ground.'

'One or t'other has barely learned to walk and already they're mouthing at their father for their piece of land. They mock their elders! Scum, the village is too cramped for 'em, the old ways don't suit 'em, even our dress shames some of 'em!'

'It's all because they have no fear of God.'

'Whether it's that or not, things are bad.'

'And not getting better, no.'

'How can it? Who'll make 'em?'

'Divine punishment! For the hour of the Lord's judgement will come, that it will.'

'But the folk who'll go to ruin before then, no one can undo that.'

'Such times; would be better if the pestilence came.'

'The times! Indeed, but people are guilty too. The blacksmith, what about him! And the Voyt? At odds with the priest, agitates and bamboozles the people, and the stupid are taken in. That blacksmith's poison, though he's my son-in-law . . .'

And so they denounced this world together, observing the village, which was clearly visible now through the poplars. By the graveyard, the red skirts of a row of women could be seen from a distance, bent over and wreathed in the delicate mist of smoking fires, and before long the dull monotonous thud of scutchers[28] began to reach them on the breeze rising from the low-lying meadows.

'It's a good time for scutching. I'll get down there, since my Jagna's with them.'

'It's on my way, I'll take you . . .'

'Why Maciej, that's surprising good of you!' She smiled slyly.

They turned off the poplar road along a track by the fields that ran to the cemetery gates. He drove her to the graveyard, where, by a grey stone wall, in the shade of birches and maples and lop-sided crosses leaning from the graves towards the fields, a dozen or so women were doggedly scraping the dry flax with scutchers, until a fog of dust hovered above them and the long fibres caught on the yellow birch leaves and hung from the dark arms of the crosses. Below, on rods stretched over hollows in which fires were burning, the still-damp flax was drying.

The scutchers tapped away smartly until the whole row of women was bent over, making short quick little jerks as they scraped. Now and then one of them would straighten up, shake off the last shives[29] from a handful of flax, wind it into a straw man or capsheaf and toss it on to the sheet spread before her.

Now that the sun had moved over the wood, it shone straight into their faces, but what of it – the work, laughter and merry chatter did not stop, not even for the blink of an eye.

'God bless the work!' Boryna called to Jagna, who was scutching at the very edge; she was in but a smock and a red skirt, a kerchief on her head to keep off the dust.

'God bless!' she called back merrily, raising her great blue eyes towards him, and a smile flitted across her bonny tanned face.

'It's dry, my girl, eh?' the old woman asked, patting the scutched handfuls.

'Dry as pepper – snapping, even.' Jagna glanced again at the old man with a smile, until a shiver ran through him. He flicked his whip and drove off, turning back again and again to look at her, though she was no longer visible, but stood there still, in his mind's eye . . .

'A fine hind of a lass . . . just right,' he reflected.

CHAPTER 4

It was Sunday – a quiet, sunlit, gossamer-strewn September day.

Out on the stubble just behind the barn, all Boryna's livestock was out grazing today, while under the tall bulging hayrick, surrounded by a green brush of young rye, grown from the seed spilled at stacking, lay Kuba, keeping an eye on the livestock and at the same teaching

Witek his prayers – scolding him frequently and even prodding him with his crop, for the boy stumbled often, his eyes darting towards the orchards.

'Mind what I'm saying, it's a prayer,' he admonished him sternly.

'I am, Kuba, I am.'

'Why are you gawking at the orchards, then?'

'Looks like there's apples still at the Kłąbs' . . .'

'Eat 'em, would you! Planted 'em did you, eh? Again: "I believe".'

'Nor did you raise the partridges, but you take a whole flock.'

'Idiot! The apples belong to the Kłąbs, but the birds are the Lord's, see!'

'But you took 'em from the squire's field.'

'The field's the Lord's too. Hark at him, the know-it-all. Again: "I believe".'

The boy recited quickly, his knees aching from kneeling, but he couldn't resist . . .

'Looks like the filly's getting into Michałowa's clover,' he shouted, ready to run.

'Never mind the filly, pay attention to the prayer . . .'

Witek finished at last but could stand it no longer. He sat back on his heels, squirming this way and that, and spying a band of sparrows at the plums, hurled a clod at them and hurriedly beat his breast.

'And the off'ring: swallowed it like a snow pear, have you?'

Witek repeated the prayer of offering and with great relief set about waking Łapa and frolicking with him.

'Ha, he'd be forever romping, like a silly calf,' observed Kuba.

'Are you taking the birds to the priest?'

'I am . . .'

'We could roast 'em outside.'

'Go roast yourself some potatoes. Whatever next!'

'They're off to church already!' Witek called, spying a flash of red aprons on the road through the trees and fences. The sun was pretty warm now, so that all the cottage doors and windows were thrown open on every side: some people were still washing at benches by the walls, or brushing and plaiting their hair. Sunday clothes that had lain crumpled in chests all week were shaken out, and some folk were already on their way, so that here and there – like red poppies, or the yellow dahlias that flowered against the walls, or marigolds or nasturtiums – came the women all dressed up, girls and children, farmers in white capotes, like great sheaves of rye, all heading slowly for church along the road that skirted the great golden bowl of the pond, which reflected the sun until it dazzled the eyes.

And the bells pealed with the joyful voice of Sunday, of rest and prayer.

Kuba had meant to wait for the bells to finish, but in his impatience he stowed the bundle of birds under his capote and said:

'Witek, when the bells are done, herd the cattle into the byre and come to church.'

He set off as fast he could with his bad limp, along the path running beside the orchards, so carpeted with yellow poplar leaves it was like walking over a saffron-coloured kilim.

The presbytery stood opposite the church, separated from it only by the road and set deep in a great garden, still full of green pears and ruddy apples. Kuba stopped helplessly in front of the porch, overgrown with reddening vines, and peeked in timidly through the wide-open windows and hallway. And since he dared not go in, he retreated instead to a great flowerbed full of roses, stock and asters from which there issued a sweet, intoxicating scent; white doves were wandering over the green, mossy roof above him and fluttering down to the porch.

The priest was walking about the garden with his breviary in his hand, but stopped to shake first the pear and then the apple trees, so that the fruit could be heard thudding heavily on to the ground. He was gathering them in the skirts of his cassock to carry them to the house when Kuba waylaid him and humbly clasped his knees.

'What's this? Ah . . . Boryna's Kuba.'

'Aye . . . I've brought you some partridges, Father.'

'God bless you. Come with me.'

Kuba entered the hallway but remained on the threshold, as he dared not go into the room. He merely peered through the open doorway at the pictures hanging on the walls and crossed himself piously and sighed, feeling so bedazzled by all this loveliness that tears came to his eyes and he longed desperately to say a prayer, but feared to kneel on the shining, slippery floor and besmear it.

The priest emerged quickly, however, and handed him a zloty,[1] saying:

'God bless you, Kuba – you're a good man and pious, at church every Sunday.'

Kuba clasped the priest's legs again, but so stunned with joy was he that he scarcely knew how he came to find himself on the road again . . .

'Well, I'll . . . a few little birds and all this money! The dear reverend!' he whispered, gazing at the coin. He had often brought the priest a bird of some kind, or a hare, a few mushrooms, but he'd never been

given so much; a ten-groszy coin at most, or a good word . . . But today! . . . Dear Jesus! A whole zloty and he'd been asked inside, and so many kind words spoken . . . Jesus! Till something caught at his throat and the tears trickled freely from his eyes, and his heart burned as though someone had pushed a brand into his bosom . . .

'Only the priest respects 'un, only him! . . . God bless him, and the Lady of Częstochowa . . . You're a good gentleman, good you are . . . The whole village: hands, farmers, all of 'em, call 'un a cripple, a dolt, a sponger. Not one has a good word, not one has a drop of pity – excepting the horses or dogs maybe – and me born here too . . . son of a farmer . . . no foundling . . . no vagrant, but a true Christian, a Catholic . . .'

Kuba lifted his head higher and prouder with every step, drew himself up as best he could and looked down almost defiantly on the world, at the people entering the graveyard and at the horses standing by the carts at the wall. He pulled his cap on to his matted head and made for the church, slow and dignified, like a proper farmer, hooking his thumbs in his belt and sweeping his crooked leg along and raising a dust cloud behind him.

He did not remain in the porch today, as befitted him, oh no, but firmly pushed his way through the throng and made straight for the high altar – right to where only farmers took their places, where Boryna and the Voyt himself stood, and those who carried the baldachin over the priest, or those who stood holding candles like stanchions by the altar during the Elevation.

They looked at him in astonishment and dismay, and he heard many a harsh word and caught looks such as a dog might earn, squeezing in where it's not been summoned. But Kuba took no notice today; he gripped the coin in his fist and his soul was as full of goodness and sweetness as though he'd just been to confession, at the very least.

The service began. He knelt close to the rail and sang with the rest, gazing devotedly at the altar with God the Father at the top, a stern grey Master, the very image of the squire at Drzazgowa Wola, and right in the middle, the Lady of Częstochowa, arrayed in gold, was looking down at him, and all around were glittering golden, glowing candles and bunches of red paper flowers . . . Gilded halos above austere holy faces leaned from the walls and colourful windows, and streaks of gold, purple and violet fell like a rainbow across his head and face, as though he were completely immersed in the pond before sunset when the sun strikes the water. And he felt as though he were in heaven among this loveliness, so that he dared not move but only knelt, staring into the dark, sweet motherly face of the Lady of

Częstochowa, repeating prayer after prayer with his parched lips and singing so fervently, with all the force of a faithful soul and a heart so full of ecstasy, that his dry grating voice was the most resonant of all.

'Kuba, you're bleating like a Jewish goat!' someone whispered at his side.

'For the Lord Jesus and Our Lady,' he muttered, pausing, for the church had grown silent.

The priest mounted the pulpit and everyone raised their heads and gazed at him in his white surplice as he leaned over the people and read the Gospel. In the light and colours flowing over him from the windows, he looked to them like an angel floating on a rainbow. The priest spoke long and fiercely so that many a soul sighed with a heart full of remorse, many a tear fell, while others lowered their eyes, searching their consciences repentantly and promising to mend their ways ... And Kuba stared at the priest as though at a holy picture until he felt amazed that this was the same good gentleman who had spoken to him and given him a zloty. For now he looked like an archangel in a fiery chariot of light: his face had grown pale, his eyes flashed like lightning when he began to raise his voice and berate the people for their sins, their avarice, their drunkenness, their debauchery, the wrongs they had inflicted, their neglect of the old folk, their godlessness! And he exhorted them in a great voice to come to their senses; he begged, beseeched and pleaded with them, until Kuba could bear it no longer and began to tremble inside with guilt, remorse and contrition for all these sins, and burst into sobs and all the folk after him – women and even farmers – so that the sound of lamenting, snivelling and wiping of noses filled the church, and when the priest turned to the altar with a prayer of penitence and fell to his knees, the whole church groaned as one, like a forest bent by a storm. They fell to the ground on their faces until the dust flew and shrouded those contrite hearts like a cloud as they called on the Lord with sighs and cries for mercy.

And then all was silence, the silence of prayerful and heartfelt communing with the Lord, for the High Mass had begun. The organ boomed in a muffled deep and suppliant voice until Kuba's soul swooned with bliss and untold happiness ...

Then the priest's voice rose suddenly from the altar and a penetrating stream of sacred sounds flowed over the bowed heads. The little bells rang a short salvo and fragrant pillars of incense assailed those kneeling in prayer and enveloped them as though in a cloud, filling Kuba with such delight that he could only sigh and spread his arms, beat his breast and float in sweet helplessness, while the murmur of prayers, sighs, sudden cries and intermittent moans, fervent gasps, the

lights, smoke and the sound of the organ plunged him as though into a holy dream, as though into abandonment.

'Jesus, my dear Jesus!' he whispered, dazzled and stunned, and he gripped the zloty tightly in his fist, for after the Elevation, when Ambrozy began to come round collecting for the candles, rattling the plate to make sure of being heard, Kuba got up, tossed in his coin and then took his time, like the farmers did, picking out his change of six-and-twenty groszy.[2]

'God bless,' he heard with satisfaction.

And when they were distributing candles, for there was Exposition[3] after the service and a procession, Kuba stretched out his hand boldly, and though he longed desperately to take a whole one, he met the severe reproving look of Dominikowa, who was standing close by with Jagna, and he took but the smallest, almost a stub. He lit it quickly, for the priest was already seizing the monstrance and turning to face the people, so that they fell on their faces. Intoning the hymn, the priest slowly descended the altar steps and took the path that had suddenly opened up as the crowd parted, his way lined with faces, resounding with song and droning voices, and glowing with flickering flames and vivid colours. As the procession moved off, the organ boomed, the bells began their rhythmic jangling and the people joined in and sang with a single mighty voice of faith, while, at the head of the throng, in whorls of flickering light, the silver cross glittered, the processional holy paintings bobbed, all decked in tulle and flowers and tinsel crowns, and at the great doors where the sun burst through the clouds of incense, the tilting banners unfurled in the wind, like green-and-purple birds flapping their wings.

The procession circled the church.

Shielding his candle with one hand, Kuba stubbornly edged closer to the priest under the red baldachin carried by Boryna, the blacksmith, the Voyt and Tomasz Kłąb. Beneath it beamed the golden monstrance, all aflame in the sun, so that the pale, transparent sacred Host could be seen through its glass centre . . . So dazed was he that he kept stumbling and treading on feet.

'Watch out, you clod!'

'Oaf, stupid cripple!' they snapped, jostling him repeatedly.

He was deaf to all of it. The people's singing resounded with a mighty voice; rising like a pillar, like a wave, it seemed to flow and break against the pale sun. The bronze mouths of the bells pealed ceaselessly, until the lindens and maples shook and now and again a red leaf would break free and fall upon the people's heads like a startled bird, and high, high above the procession, above the tips of the

stooping trees, above the church tower, wheeled a flock of flustered doves . . .

After the service, folk poured into the graveyard beside the church. Kuba followed the rest, but did not hurry home today, though he knew there would be meat for dinner from the slaughtered cow – no, he stood about, chatted with his cronies, and edged towards his masters, for Antek and his wife were standing in the crowd and conversing, as was the custom after Sunday High Mass.

In another group that had gathered on the road beyond the gates, the blacksmith took the lead. A big fellow, he was dressed entirely in the fashion of the town, with his black capote, spotted with candle wax across the shoulders, and a dark-blue peaked cap. He wore his trousers over his boots and a silver watch-chain on his waistcoat,[4] his face was red and he had ruddy whiskers and curly hair. He talked loudly and laughed till he was guffawing, for he was the village wit and God help anyone who got the sharp end of his tongue. Boryna only glanced at him and pricked up his ears, for he was wary of his talk – the blacksmith would not spare even kin, never mind a father-in-law with whom he was at war over his wife's dowry – but he could make nothing out and in any case his eye was caught by the sight of Dominikowa and Jagna coming out of church. They walked slowly, as there was a sizeable crowd in the graveyard, and were greeting first one neighbour then another, exchanging a word here and there, for though everyone knew each other and were related, kinfolk and from a single village, with often only a baulk and no fence dividing them, still it was always pleasant and proper to exchange a word outside church . . .

Dominikowa held forth about the good father in a low reverential voice while Jagna looked about at the people, and since she matched the tallest of the men in height and was dressed up to the nines today, the farmhands could not tear their eyes away and grinned at her as they stood huddled at the gates, puffing on their cigarettes. She was a beauty all right, and smart, and with a figure unmatched by that of any woman from any manor.

The girls and married women passing by eyed her with envy, or simply stopped to feast their eyes on her sumptuous striped woollen skirt that shimmered so brilliantly, or her black boots laced right up her white stockings with red shoestrings, or at her bodice of green velvet, embroidered so richly in gold that it dazzled the eyes, or the strings of amber encircling her full white neck, and beads too, from which a bunch of many-coloured ribbons hung down her back and, when she moved, streamed after her like a rainbow.

But Jagna did not see the envious glances. Her blue eyes wandered over their heads and meeting Antek's gaze, now fixed upon her, she blushed and, tugging at her mother's sleeve, set off without waiting.

'Jagna, wait!' her mother cried after her, as she said hello to Boryna.

Jagna was forced to pause on the road, as the lads swarmed around her and began to greet her and to nettle Kuba, who was following behind, gazing upon her as at a picture.

Kuba only spat and made for home, for the masters were beginning to leave and it was time to check the horses.

'Pretty as a picture!' he exclaimed unwittingly, sitting on the porch.

'Who, Kuba?' asked Józia, preparing the dinner.[5]

He lowered his eyes, embarrassed and afraid they might guess.

But as the dinner was long and lavish, he soon forgot about it. There was meat and there was cabbage-with-peas, and chicken soup with potatoes and, to round it off, a plentiful bowl of barley groats, roasted with pork fat.

They ate in silence, slowly and gravely, and did not exchange a word nor pause to relish the food until they'd satisfied their initial hunger.

As Józia was cook today, she perched on the edge of the bench from time to time and ate hurriedly, one eye on the emptying bowls and bringing out the pans to add more, so that they couldn't complain the light of day was visible in the basins.

The weather was warm and peaceful, so they were eating on the porch.

Łapa scurried about and yelped, or rubbed against their legs and looked into the bowls, until someone threw him a morsel, which he bore away under the bench, or, overjoyed at the presence of his masters and at hearing them call his name, he'd bark happily and race after the sparrows alighting on the fences, waiting for crumbs.

Passers-by would hail them from the road, to which they'd chorus a reply.

'So you took the priest some birds?' Boryna said.

'I did, I did!' Kuba put down his spoon and began to relate how the priest had ushered him in, how beautiful it was, and so many books.

'Whenever will he read 'em all?' Józia piped up.

'When? In the evenings! He walks about the rooms, sips his tea and is forever reading.'

'Aye . . . likely all godly books,' Kuba put in.

'Well they'll not be ABCs.'

'And the lackey brings a stack o' newspapers every day,'[6] added Hanka.

'Because they write what happens in the world in the papers,' Antek spoke up.

'The blacksmith and miller take a paper[7] too.'

'Eh . . . a paper for the blacksmith's kind!' Boryna said, sneering.

'Exact same as the priest's,' Antek said sharply.

'You know, do you? Read it, have you?' retorted Boryna.

'I do know, and I have, more than once!' said Antek.

'And you're none the wiser for rubbing elbows with the blacksmith.'

'The only wise 'un in Father's eyes is the man with at least fifteen morgen and a *mendel*[8] of cows.'

'Shut your mouth, while my mood's still good! Any excuse to bicker! The bread's swelling your stomach, I see . . . my bread . . .'

'It's sticking in my throat, like a bone . . .'

'Find something better, then. You can eat sweet rolls on Hanka's three morgen.'

'I'll eat potatoes happily enough, and with no one reproaching me.'

'Nor do I reproach you.'

'Who then, if not you? I slave like an ox, and not a good word do I hear.'

'Grass is always greener somewhere else – no need to lift a finger, everything's for free . . .'

'It's better, for sure.'

'Go give it a try, then.'

'I'm not going with empty hands.'

'I'll give you a stick, to chase off the dogs.'

'Father!' yelled Antek, leaping up from the bench, but back down he went at once, as Hanka had caught him about the waist.

The old man glared at him threateningly, crossed himself since the meal was over and, heading for his chamber, declared firmly:

'I'll not be pensioned off to you, oh no!'

They quickly dispersed, with only Antek left on the porch, lost in thought. Kuba led the horses on to the mown clover field behind the barn and stretched out under the hayrick to have a sleep, but sleep wouldn't come, and the food weighed heavily in his belly along with the thought of how many birds he'd shoot if he had a rifle, and a hare maybe, so that every Sunday he'd have something for the good father. The blacksmith could make a shotgun, for hadn't he knocked one together for the miller that the whole village could hear when he fired it in the woods!

'A craftsman, by heck! But he'll want five roubles for one of those!' he pondered. 'And where to get 'em? Winter's coming, there's a sheepskin to buy and my boots won't hold out beyond Yuletide . . . Aye, I'm

owed ten roubles and two garments, breeches and a shirt . . . a sheepskin, that's five – it'll be a short 'un . . . boots, happen three, and a cap'd be handy . . . and a rouble's needed for the priest for a Mass for the dead . . . Dammit, there'll be nothing left!' He spat and began to pick crumbs of tobacco from his waistcoat pockets when he came upon the coins he'd forgotten about during dinner . . .

'Well, here's some cash!' He suddenly felt wide awake; a distant strain of music reached him from the inn and the faint echo of shouts.

'Dancing they are, the villains, and drinking vodka, and puffing cigarettes!' He sighed and lay down on his stomach again and, watching the fettered horses standing in a huddle, nibbling each other's flanks, he wondered if come evening he too should drop by at the inn and get himself some tobacco and take a quick peek at the merrymaking. Turning over the coins again and again, he glanced up at the sun. Still high in the sky, it was moving westward so slowly today, as though it too were taking a wee Sunday rest . . . The inn was beckoning so that he could barely resist; he shifted from side to side and groaned with longing, but didn't set off straight away, for just at that moment Antek and Hanka came out from behind the barn and took the baulk between the fields.

Antek went ahead and Hanka behind him, the boy in her arms. They spoke from time to time and walked slowly, Antek constantly reaching down to the ground to touch the sprouting blades.

'Coming up thick as a brush,' he muttered as he cast his eyes over the morgen that he'd sowed in return for working for his father.

'Thick, but Father's is better, coming up like yon forest!' said Hanka looking at the neighbouring fields.

'Soil's been better manured.'

'Three cows would do to feed the land.'

'And our own horse.'

'And there'd be some over to sell. But this? Father counts every husk, every bit o' peel, and makes a song and dance of it.'

'And throws every little thing in your face!'

They fell silent, for a sense of injustice flooded their hearts with resentment, anger and dull pangs of revolt.

'It'd come to eight morgen no more!' he blurted.

'No more, for sure. There's Józka, after all and the blacksmith and Grzela and us,' she listed.

'Blacksmith could be paid off and we'd stay in the cottage with fifteen morgen . . .'

'Paid off with what?' she wailed, until a growing sense of helplessness made the tears trickle down her face as she cast her eyes over her

father-in-law's fields, land pure as gold and all someone else's . . . not theirs . . .

'Don't blub, stupid, eight morgen of it's ours, anyroad . . .'

'If it were just half, with the house and that cabbage field!' She gestured to the left, towards the meadows where long strips of cabbages showed blue.

They headed in that direction and sat under the bushes at the edge of the meadows. Hanka nursed the child, who had started to cry, and Antek rolled and lit a cigarette, staring gloomily ahead . . . He did not tell his wife what was eating him inside, or weighed on his heart like a burning coal, for he could neither tell it, nor she grasp the telling . . .

It was the usual way with women; they'd neither wit nor resource themselves, but subsisted like the shadow a fellow cast . . .

'Farm, children, friends – that's her whole world. All women are like that, all of 'em,' he thought to himself bitterly until he felt a pang in his heart. 'That bird flying over the wetlands has it better than a man . . . What cares does it have? Flies about singing, the Lord Jesus sows it a field, it's got plenty to gather and eat . . .'

'It's not like he's short of cash, is it?' Hanka began.

'Indeed!'

'He got Józka some beads that could've bought a whole cow and he's forever sending money to Grzela in the army.'

'He is.'

'But it's not fair for the rest of us! And he's got your mother's clothes buried in a chest and won't even give us a peek . . . And such woollen skirts there are, and scarves and caps and beads,' and she set about listing all the wares and her grievances, and injustices, and hopes, and Antek sat in stubborn silence until she tugged at his arm impatiently.

'You sleeping?'

'I'm listening – go on and keep prattling, if it makes you feel better! Tell me when you're done . . .'

Hanka, who was given to weeping and had bottled up much in her soul, burst into tears and started to berate him that he talked to her like some wench and cared nothing for her or the children.

Until Antek leapt to his feet and cried mockingly:

'Bawl away – those there crows'll hear and feel sorry for you!' He threw a glance at the crows flying over the meadows, pulled down his cap and strode off to the village . . .

'Antek! Antek!' she called after him miserably, but he did not turn around.

She wrapped up the little boy and walked, sobbing, along the baulks back to the house: her heart was heavy – no one to talk to, no one to

listen to her woes. And a person had forever to live by their lonesome, couldn't even drop in at a neighbour's and lighten their spirits with a chat. As if Antek would let her have a friend! Nothing, just sit in the house and slave and toil, and not one kind word do you hear! Other girls get to go to the inn or to weddings, but that Antek . . . can you please him? Sometimes he was sweet as pie . . . but then he'd barely grunt a word for whole weeks at a time and not glance at you once, just ponder and ponder . . . True, he had cause! For couldn't Father sign over the land already, wasn't it time for the old man to be pensioned? Why, she'd pamper him better than her own flesh and blood . . .

She wanted to join Kuba, but he just leaned back against the hayrick and pretended to be sleeping, though the sun was shining straight in his eyes. Not until she'd vanished round the corner of the barn did he brush off the straw and meander slowly through the orchards to the inn – the coins were burning a hole in his pocket . . .

The inn stood at the end of the village, beyond the presbytery at the head of the poplar road. There was hardly anyone inside; music struck up from time to time, but no one was dancing yet, it was too early, and the young preferred to romp in the orchard or loiter on the driveway and by the walls where a fair few girls and women were sitting on freshly cut, still-yellow timber. The great chamber with its smoky black ceiling was almost empty; the red light of the setting sun filtered so feebly through the small scorched panes that only a faint streak trailed across the well-trodden floor, while gloom gathered in the corners. There were people sitting at the tables against the walls but who he could not tell.

Only Ambrozy stood by the window with a candle-bearer from the confraternity,[9] a bottle in his hand – they were drinking steadily to each other and chatting . . .

The bass viol hummed like a bumblebee that blunders into a room and buzzes as it flies, while a fiddle would give a sudden high-pitched squeal, like a little decoy bird, and a tabour rattled and jangled . . . but presently the place fell silent.

Kuba went straight to the bar where Jankiel was sitting in just his shirtsleeves and yarmulke,[10] since it was warm, stroking his grey beard and swaying as he read a book, bringing his eyes down close to the pages.

Kuba deliberated, shifting from foot to foot as he counted his money and scratched his matted head. He stood there so long that Jankiel gave him a look and, not ceasing his swaying and praying, clinked the glasses once and twice . . .

'A pint, but a strong one!' Kuba ordered at last.

Jankiel poured a measure into a bottle in silence and stretched out his left hand for the money . . .

'In a glass?'[11] he asked, sweeping the tarnished coppers into a basket.

'Well, not in my boot!'

Kuba removed himself to the very end of the bar, drank his first glass, spat and looked about the inn; he drank another, peered at the little bottle under the light and slammed it down hard.

'Give us another, and some baccy!' he declared more boldly, for a blissful warmth had washed through him after the vodka and a strange energy coursed through his bones.

'Is it pay day, Kuba?'

'As if – not New Year, is it?'

'Maybe some arak?'[12]

'Nay . . . I'm short . . .' he counted the money and glanced mournfully at the flask of arak.

'You'll take it on tick, Kuba, if I know you!'

'I will not; "Who runs on tick will lose his boots quick,"' he retorted sharply.

Jankiel placed the flask of arak before him all the same.

Kuba resisted, and was just about to leave, but damn it if the arak had such a fragrance that it tickled his nose and he gave up the struggle and drank without a second thought.

'You made a grosz or two in the forest?' asked Jankiel patiently.

'Not in the forest . . . the birds what I caught in a snare. I took six of 'em to the good father and he gave me a zloty . . .'

'A zloty for six? I would give Kuba ten groszy apiece.'

'You what? Are partridges kosher, then?' He was astounded.

'Kuba needn't trouble his head over that . . . Just bring me many, and there'll be a ten-groszy piece in the hand for each one. And I'll throw in this liquor to seal it, yes?'

'And Jankiel will pay a whole ten groszy for each?'

'My word is not a gust of wind. For those six . . . Kuba would have not two pints of ordinary vodka,[13] but four of arak with herring, a roll and a packet of baccy . . . Do you hear, Kuba?'

'Aye . . . four pints of arak with herring . . . aye, I'm no fool, I can reckon . . . absolutely true! Four pints of arak . . . and baccy, and rolls . . . and a whole herring . . .' The vodka was already making his head swim.

'You'll bring them, Kuba?'

'Four pints . . . and herring . . . and . . . I will. Hang it, if I had a shotgun . . .' he declared, suddenly alert, and again began to reckon: 'A

sheepskin, fr'instance, about five roubles – shoes would be good – about three . . . nay, *nie chwaci*[14] . . . and blacksmith'd want five or so roubles for a shotgun . . . as much again as Rafał . . . nay,' he thought aloud.

Jankiel made quick calculations with a chalk and whispered quietly in his ear:

'Could Kuba shoot a deer?'

'Ha, well not with my fist, but I'd get the bastard with a shotgun!'

'Kuba knows how to shoot?'

'Jankiel is a Jew, so he's not heard, but everyone in the village knows I used to go about the forest[15] with the squires, and that's how this leg were shot, so aye, I know how.'

'I'll get a shotgun, and powder, and whatever is needed . . . and Kuba will bring what he shoots to me! For a deer, I'll give a whole rouble . . . do you hear? A whole rouble! For the powder, fifteen kopecks apiece – I'll deduct it. Any damage to the shotgun and Kuba will bring a quart[16] of oats . . .'

'A rouble a deer . . . and fifteen from me for the powder . . . a whole rouble! How much again?'

Jankiel listed everything again in detail.

'Oats? I cannot be taking 'em from the horses' mouths.' That much he'd understood.

'Why from the horses! Boryna has oats elsewhere.'

'But that's . . .' he gaped and deliberated.

'Everyone does it! Where does Kuba think the farmhands get their money? Everyone wants baccy and a glass of vodka and a dance come Sunday! How else would they get it?'

'What? Am I a thief or what, you mangy dog?' he thundered suddenly, beating his fist on the table so that the glasses danced.

'Don't you jump down my throat! Pay up and go to the devil!'

But Kuba did not pay and did not go. He had no money left and now he owed the Jew . . . so he leaned heavily on the bar and began calculating sleepily, while Jankiel, mollified, poured him another drink, but pure arak now . . . and said not a word.

Meanwhile, more and more folk began to arrive, for the dusk had deepened, the lamps were lit, the music struck up more briskly and the place grew noisier. People crowded at the bar, against the walls or simply in the middle of the room, debating, chatting, complaining, and toasting each other here and there, though rarely, for they hadn't come to drink, but to mingle with their neighbours, chew the cud, listen to the fiddle and the bass viol, and hear something new. It was Sunday after all, so no sin to rest or satisfy one's curiosity or even to

take a drink with a friend . . . the good father himself did not forbid it, so long as all was decent and there was no offence to God . . . After all, even a beast, for example, is glad to rest, and so it should after work. So the older farmers too sat down at the tables and some of the women, like hollyhocks in bloom in their red woollen skirts and shawls, and since all were talking at once, the inn was humming like a forest, loud with the tapping of feet like the beating of flails on the threshing floor, and the cavorting voice of the fiddle singing: '*And who will come follow me, follow me, follow . . .*'

'*I will . . . oh I will . . . yes, I . . .*' grunted the groaning bass viol while the tabour shook and chuckled, capered and raised a racket with its little cymbals.

Not many were dancing, but people tapped their feet so smartly the floorboards creaked and the tables shook so that flasks jingled and glasses toppled over . . . Yet there was not much enthusiasm, for it was no great occasion, like a wedding or betrothal . . . They danced a little, carelessly, for the fun of it, to stretch their legs and backs. Only the lads destined for the army that autumn revelled more wildly and drank for consolation, which was no surprise, for they were to be driven out into the great wide world, among strangers.[17] The Voyt's brother was the loudest of them, and hard on his heels came Marcin Białek, Tomek Sikora and Paweł Boryna, cousin to Antek. The last-mentioned, too, had turned up at the inn at dusk, except that he did not dance today, but sat in the snug with the blacksmith and others, and there was Franek from the miller's, curly-haired, short and stocky and the greatest blowhard, a lecher and mocker and so voracious for the girls that he often ended up with a scratched and beaten mug. But since today he'd got drunk immediately, like some godless creature, he just stood by the bar with the organist's fat Magda, who was in her sixth month.

The good priest had already rebuked him from the pulpit and urged him to wed, but Franek wasn't listening; he was due to report to the army in the autumn, so what was a lass to him . . . Magda was trying to draw him into a corner, to the fireside, saying something to him in a tearful voice, while he kept replying:

'Silly fool! I never chased after you . . . I'll pay for the christening and toss you a rouble when I feel like it!' Addled with drink, he pushed her so hard she plumped down at the fireside beside Kuba, who was sleeping in the ashes, feet towards the room – and there she sat, sobbing quietly, while Franek went off for another drink and to pull a girl on to the dance floor. But the farmers' daughters would not go, for what was a miller? Little more than a farmhand. Nor would the common girls stand for his soused and swinish ways when dancing, so he

just spat and began to kiss Ambrozy and the farmers drunkenly. Since they had grain waiting at the mill, they ignored it and stood him a drink . . .

'Drink up, Franek, and grind the grain more quickly. My woman's plaguing me that she hasn't a scrap of flour to make the dumplings.'

'And mine is forever rattling on about groats.'

'And bran for the mangers,' put in a third.

Franek drank, reassuring them and boasting loudly that everything in the mill was down to him, that the miller had to mind what he said, else he knew tricks that'd make bugs breed in the bins . . . the water dry up . . . the fish die. He need only puff on the pond and the flour would dwindle so that you'd not make even a pancake . . .

'I'd pluck those ram's curls clean out if you tried that on me!' yelled Jagustynka, who was always to be found where folk were gathering, for though she did not drink as she rarely had a grosz to her name, sometimes a friend would stand her a pint, and a cousin another, for they feared her sharp tongue. So Franek too, though drunk, took fright and fell silent, for she knew a thing or two about him and how he ran the mill. With a drink inside her now, she stood arms akimbo, tapping her feet to the rhythm, and called out:

'They're dancing like flies in tar! Come on, Ewka, move yourself. Up and about at night and now she's asleep on her feet. Tomek! Faster! That hindquarter you sold Jankiel is weighing on you, is it? Never you fear, your father don't know yet. Marysia! You just carry on hanging about with them recruits – go on, and you can ask me to be godmother . . .'

And so she continued, needling each dancer in turn. She knew no limits and was angry at everyone, that her children had wronged her, that she was forced to work in her old age, but since no one answered, she finished unburdening herself and went to the snug, where the blacksmith and Antek and some of the younger farmers were sitting.

A lamp was hanging from the black beams and its dull yellow light lit up the fair tousled heads – they sat around a table, resting heavily on their elbows, all eyes fixed on the blacksmith who, leaning over, red-faced, with his arms spread wide and thumping his fist, was saying in a low voice:

'I'm telling the truth, that's how it stands written in the paper, clear as day. They don't live like we do out in the world, oh no! What have we got? Squire's master here, priest's master here, the government official's master here – and as for us, toil till you drop with hunger, and bow low to everyone so you don't catch it across the head.'

'And not enough land. Before long there'll not be a field each!'

'And squire's got more than two villages together.'

'At court yesterday there were talk of distributing new plots.'

'Which ones?'

'Manor ones o' course!'

'Oh yes? I suppose you gave the land to the squire since you're taking it back! Making free with other's property already,' cried Jagustynka, leaning over them with a laugh.

'And they govern themselves,' the blacksmith continued, ignoring this women's talk, 'and all go to school, and live as gentlemen, in manors.'

'Where's this?' she asked Antek, who had just sat down at the edge of the group.

'In warm countries!'[18] he retorted.

'Well, why hasn't the blacksmith gone if it's that fine, eh? That grimy sod lies like a dog, hoodwinks you all and you fools believe it!' she cried heatedly.

'I'm telling you nicely: take yourself off where you came from, Jagustynka.'

'I will not! The inn's for everyone, and my three groszy are as good as yours! Look at him, Mister Teacher, serving Jews, hobnobbing with officials, stands cap in hand before the squire and they believe him! Loudmouth. Oh, I know . . .' but she did not finish, as the blacksmith seized her firmly under the ribs, pushed open the door with his foot and slung her into the main chamber, where she sprawled right down the middle of the floor.

She did not protest at all, just got up and declared cheerily:

'Strong as a horse, the ruffian; I could do with one like that.'

The people burst out laughing, and she left immediately, railing under her breath.

But the inn was emptying now, the music faded, people were dispersing to their homes. They stood in little groups in front of the inn, for it was a warm, bright evening and the moon shone. Only the recruits were left, drinking themselves into a stupor and clamouring, while Ambrozy, drunk as a beast, staggered into the middle of the road, singing and tottering from side to side.

The rest emerged from the snug, the blacksmith at their head.

Then, when Jankiel began putting out the lights, the recruits tumbled out too, took each other firmly by the arm and set off along the road, singing at the tops of their voices, until the dogs began to howl and someone looked out from a cottage here and there. Only Kuba remained. He went on sleeping in the ashes so soundly that Jankiel had to wake him, but the farmhand didn't want to get up; he kicked