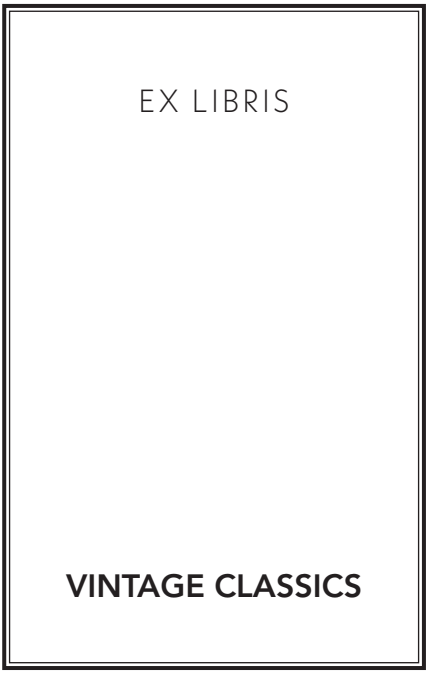
VINTAGE CLASSICS

ANDREY PLATONOV

CHEVENGUR

'Platonov is an extraordinary writer, perhaps the most brilliant Russian writer of the twentieth century'
New York Review of Books



ALSO BY ANDREY PLATONOV

The Foundation Pit

Soul

Happy Moscow

The Return and Other Stories

Fourteen Little Red Huts

ANDREY PLATONOV

Andrey Platonovich Platonov (1899–1951) began publishing poems and articles in 1918, while studying engineering. Between 1927 and 1932 he wrote his most politically controversial works, some of them first published in Russian only in the 1990s. After reading his story 'For Future Use', Stalin referred to Platonov as 'an agent of our enemies'. From September 1942, after being recommended to the chief editor of *Red Star* by his friend Vasily Grossman, Platonov worked as a war correspondent. He died in 1951, of tuberculosis caught from his son, who had spent three years in the Gulag. *Happy Moscow*, one of his finest novels, was first published in Russia only in 1991; letters, notebook entries and unfinished stories continue to appear.

ROBERT AND ELIZABETH CHANDLER

Robert Chandler's translations from Russian include works by Alexander Pushkin, Andrey Platonov, Vasily Grossman and Hamid Ismailov. He is the editor and main translator of *Russian Short Stories from Pushkin to Buida* and *Russian Magic Tales from Pushkin to Platonov*; together with Boris Dralyuk and Irina Mashinski, he has co-edited *The Penguin Book of Russian Poetry*. He first translated some sample extracts from *Chevengur* well over 40 years ago. His next publications will be another collection of Teffi and a selection of poems by Apollinaire and his Russian comtemporary Velimir Khlebnikov. He has run regular translation workshops in London and worked as a mentor for the British Centre for Literary Translation.

Elizabeth Chandler is a co-translator, with her husband, of Pushkin's *The Captain's Daughter* and of several works by Andrey Platonov and Vasily Grossman.

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ANDREY PLATONOV

CHEVENGUR

TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN BY
Robert Chandler and Elizabeth Chandler

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INTRODUCTION

I

The son of a railway worker who also gilded the cupolas of churches, the writer we now know as Andrey Platonov was born at the turn of a century—on September 1, 1899—and between town and country, on the edge of the Central Russian city of Voronezh. It seems fitting that Platonov should have been born so close to important boundaries in both time and space; in his mature work he seems to delight in eliding every conceivable boundary—between animal and human, between the animate and the inanimate, between souls and machines, between life and death. He writes about spiritual matters in material terms and about the material world in spiritual terms. He was not an Orthodox Christian, yet his work is full of biblical allusions and imbued with deep religious feeling. He was a passionate supporter of the 1917 October Revolution and remained sympathetic to the dream that gave birth to it, yet no one has written more searingly of its consequences. His status in the Soviet literary world was equally borderline. In 1929, *Chevengur* was typeset and a single copy was printed; the editors then decided against publication. In 1939 a selection of his literary criticism met with the same fate. Other stories were published during his lifetime, but many were immediately subjected to harsh official criticism.

The eldest of eleven children, he began work at age thirteen—in an office, then in a factory, then as an assistant engine driver. As a young writer, he adopted the pseudonym Platonov, a shortened form of his patronymic; his father's name was Platon Klimentov. He began

publishing poems and articles in the local press in 1918. Whether he took part in active fighting during the Civil War is unclear; at one point he was attached to the Red Army as a journalist and propaganda worker and sent to the town of Novokhopiorsk, where he witnessed six changes of power in a single month. In 1921 he graduated from Voronezh Polytechnic. From 1922 to 1926 he worked in the province, first as an electrical engineer, then as a land-reclamation expert. In 1926 he and his wife and son moved to Moscow. Except for the war years, when he served as a correspondent for the army newspaper *Red Star*, he remained there until his death from tuberculosis in 1951.

In 1931, Platonov published "For Future Use"—a long story about collectivization and peasant life. This enraged Stalin, who notoriously wrote the word *Bastard* in the margin and severely reprimanded Alexander Fadeyev, the editor of the journal that had published the story. This left Platonov unable to publish for several years. In 1937, however, he published a small selection of stories titled *The River Potudan*. Between 1936 and 1940, he also published a number of unusual literary critical articles.

Between 1942 and 1946, he brought out seven small collections of war stories; with a few exceptions, these are weaker than his other mature work. In 1946, however, he published one of his very finest short stories, "The Return." This account of an army captain's troubled homecoming is tender, witty, and wise—and it probably accurately reflects the experience of millions of families. Nevertheless, since it lacked the then-obligatory tone of triumphant optimism, it evoked particularly vicious criticism. After that, Platonov was unable to publish any more of his own work, though the support of his influential friend Mikhail Sholokhov enabled him to publish two collections of adaptations of traditional folktales. The first—Bashkir folktales—is well written, but it does not greatly differ from other literary versions of similar folktales. The second—comprising seven Russian folktales—is another of Platonov's masterpieces. He makes few changes to the plots, and his stylistic changes are discrete—yet these versions are quintessential Platonov; they embody all his deepest concerns.

Platonov died of tuberculosis in 1951; he had caught the disease while nursing his son, who had been infected in the Gulag, after being convicted on a trumped-up charge of terrorism.

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As a young man, between 1919 and 1921, Platonov published more than a hundred journalistic articles and one small volume of poetry. In 1921, however, shocked by the worst drought and famine for thirty years, he abandoned literature for more practical work. "Being someone technically qualified," he wrote, "I was unable to continue to engage in contemplative work such as literature."[1] During the mid-1920s he supervised the digging of no fewer than 763 ponds and 331 wells, as well as the draining of 2,400 acres of swamps and the building of three small rural power stations.[2]

Platonov's early work is clearly and boldly written. He believed that science and socialism were about to transform the world, and the evident sincerity and passion of his beliefs is touching. Nevertheless, these poems and articles would have been largely forgotten were it not for the stories and novels he wrote after his return to literature in late 1926. The suddenness with which Platonov turned into a major writer is astonishing. In a little over two years, while continuing to do other demanding jobs, he produced a body of work enough to establish him as one of Russia's greatest writers. He composed not only several of his best stories—"The Locks of Epifan" (January 1927), "The Town of Townsville" (March–May 1927), "The Innermost Man" (April–May 1927), and "Inhabitant of the State" (1927, month unknown)—but also his one completed long novel, *Chevengur* (summer 1927–May 1929). *Chevengur* is not only a remarkable novel in its own right, it also contains the seeds of many of Platonov's later works: the short novel *The Foundation Pit* (1930) develops the most confrontational of the exchanges in *Chevengur* between the Bolsheviks and anti-Soviet peasants; *Soul* (1935) is a much-expanded version of the chapters about the lost, orphaned, destitute people Platonov refers

to in *Chevengur* as "others"; and *Happy Moscow* (1933–36) develops the chapter of *Chevengur* set in Moscow.

It is, of course, impossible to establish the deeper reasons for so extraordinary a burst of creativity. We can say a little, however, about some of the external triggers. First, in June 1926, Platonov was appointed deputy responsible secretary to the Central Bureau of Land Reclamation Specialists. This was an important position and it entitled him and his family to a Moscow residence permit and an apartment in the prestigious "House of Specialists," a large building providing accommodation for the Soviet cultural, political, and scientific elite. For a while, it seemed that Platonov's talent and his five years of dedicated work in land reclamation had been recognized. Within two months, however, he had been dismissed from his post and he and his family were threatened with eviction from their apartment. The cause of his conflict with the authorities is obscure; it may well have been his dogged independence of mind. All we know for sure, however, is that Platonov was in despair. He had no way of providing for his wife and young son. He was selling precious textbooks without which he feared he might be unable to work. At times, he contemplated suicide.

Fellow engineers from the Land Management Commissariat lent Platonov money, knowing he would be unable to return the loan, and eventually managed to find him work, in charge of land reclamation in the province of Tambov. He was aware, however, that he would not be welcomed in Tambov. The province had been a center of peasant resistance to the Soviet authorities and—unlike in his home city of Voronezh—he had few friends or allies in the town. Knowing he might be unable to stay long, he moved there alone in early December 1926, leaving his wife and son in Moscow. Life in Tambov proved as difficult as he feared. He felt deeply lonely and met with constant opposition in his work. He even received death threats.

Despite all this—or perhaps, because of it—he was miraculously successful in the creative work to which he suddenly and wholeheartedly returned. In a letter to his wife (January 5–6, 1927), he wrote, somewhat startlingly, "I'll stop now, my work on Peter's Volga–Don

Canal is waiting for me. There's very little historical material, really nothing at all. Once again I must lie on top of my 'muse.' She alone won't betray me. In 'Ethereal Tract' I raped 150 pages out of her. While I have a heart, a brain and this wild, dark will to create, my 'muse' will not betray me. She and I are one. Soulwise, my muse is my sex."[3] And a month later, on his return from ten days of travel, he wrote, "My journey around the province was difficult. In Kozlov I spent the night at the railway station. [. . .] I slept in Third Class, along with the unemployed. I learned much that is cruel and new from them. They have come from the Caucasus and are on their way to Siberia. In the morning I drank tea with them, treated them and listened to their unusual stories. Life is more difficult, my warm little crumb, than one can imagine. Wandering about these back-of-beyond parts, I've seen such sad things that I ceased to believe that luxurious Moscow, art, and suchlike still exist somewhere. But it seems to me that real art and real thought can only be born in such a back of beyond. [. . .] There are such sad places that even the least bit of happiness is shaming."[4]

Natalia Kornienko, the chief editor of the definitive edition of Platonov's work, has compared Platonov's three months in Tambov with Pushkin's famous "Boldino autumn," when he too was isolated for several months in the depths of provincial Russia. The comparison is just; Platonov did not write as many masterpieces in Tambov as Pushkin did in Boldino, but in one respect his "Tambov winter" was more important still. It was in Tambov that Platonov became a great writer; Pushkin, on the other hand, had achieved greatness long before his Boldino autumn.

Kornienko goes on to point out that Platonov consciously turned to Pushkin for inspiration during these months. In his letters to his wife, Platonov alludes several times to Pushkin's letters. On November 4, 1830, Pushkin wrote to his friend Anton Delvig, "I've written an abyss [*propast'*—in English we would more commonly say 'a mass' or 'a mountain'] of polemical articles"; on January 30, 1927, Platonov wrote, "I've written such an abyss [*propast'*] that my hand is now shaking."

Pushkin said that he had written his historical study *A History of*

the Pugachov Rebellion "for himself." And in a letter to his friend Nikolay Pogodin, he wrote, "Literature was once a noble, aristocratic field. Now it is a louse-ridden marketplace."[5] Platonov, who at the time was also planning to write about the eighteenth-century Cossack rebel Yemelian Pugachov, alludes to both these remarks, writing, "In Pugachov I want to work *for myself,* not for the market—may it be damned!"[6]

Platonov's letters from Tambov include many other highly charged mentions of his writing. The most striking is this:

> Two days ago I experienced a great horror. I woke in the night—my bed is hard and uncomfortable. The night was weakly lit by a late moon, and there at the table beside the stove, just where I usually sit, I saw *myself.* This isn't some horror, Masha, this is something more serious. Lying in bed, I saw how I was also sitting at the table, half smiling, and writing swiftly. The I that was writing did not once look up and I couldn't see my tears on his face. When I wanted to jump up or shout, nothing in me would obey. I looked out through the window, but all I saw was the usual dim night sky. Looking again at the earlier place, I found I was not to be seen there.
>
> For the first time I have seen my living self—with an uncertain and ambiguous smile, in the colorless night gloom. I can't shake off this vision and there's no getting away from a terrifying presentiment . . . I once dreamed that I was speaking with Mikhail Kirpichnikov [from Platonov's story "Ethereal Tract"], and a day later I killed him off.[7]

It is hard to know what to make of this account—whether to understand it as a sign of some dangerous psychic split or as Platonov's discovery of his true vocation. It may, however, help us to grasp what so sharply distinguishes Platonov's mature work from his juvenilia. Irony entails the ability to see something from more than one point of view, and this nighttime "vision" shows Platonov looking at him-

self from outside. The early poems and articles entirely lack irony, whereas irony pervades almost every page of the mature work.

In *Chevengur* much of this irony is directed at Platonov's younger self. Sasha Dvanov, the novel's central figure, is clearly a self-portrait, and his surname is derived from the Russian *dva*, meaning "two." The duality suggested by this manifests itself in more than one way. Not only does Sasha have two "external" doubles—Proshka Dvanov, his hardheaded stepbrother, and Simon Serbinov, who represents the more skeptical Platonov of the late 1920s—but he also has two ways of interacting with the world. Sometimes he is an active, determined participant in events; sometimes he is a passive, mediumistic figure, with an insatiable need to enter into other things and beings—people, birds, animals, a locomotive, even a wooden fence—and merge with them.

Platonov's most extended discussion of this duality comes soon after an account of Sasha's narrow escape from being murdered by a band of anarchists:

> But inside every man there also lives a little onlooker—he takes no part in either his actions or suffering and is always dispassionate and always the same. His work is to see and to witness, but he has no say in a man's life and no one knows the reason for his solitary existence.[. . .]
>
> While Dvanov was a long way from himself and on the move, this onlooker saw everything within him, although he never warned or helped him. He lived parallel to Dvanov, but he was not Dvanov.
>
> He existed like a dead brother; everything human seemed to be present in him, but something slight and important was missing.[. . .]
>
> This onlooker is the eunuch of a man's soul. Here is what he witnessed.

The words about "the eunuch of a man's soul" are a far cry from "Soulwise, my muse is my sex." Nevertheless, they too relate to the

act of writing. And the pages of *Chevengur* immediately following this passage can certainly be read as an account of what this eunuch witnessed, even if only in dream.

3

In March 1927 Platonov resigned from his position in Tambov and returned to Moscow, writing, "I preferred to be workless in Moscow than to fail in my Tambov work and so ruin my reputation. [. . .] Once again I was in Moscow without work and almost without hope."[8] As he had feared, he and his family were evicted from the House of Specialists and they had to rent a room privately. They also stayed for several months in a dacha belonging to Boris Pilniak, with whom Platonov collaborated for some time in 1927 and 1928.

Throughout the late 1920s, Platonov was publishing stories in Moscow journals and writing texts for the "radio newspaper" titled *Peasant Radio*. He also published three collections of stories. He was unable, however, to earn a living from writing alone, and in October 1927 he returned to work for the Land Management Commissariat. He also served as a correspondent for the newspaper *Socialist Agriculture*. No notebooks survive from the years 1927–29, but Platonov's earlier experience in land reclamation, together with these later assignments, evidently gave him a deep understanding of the reality of Russian village life.

Other writers who visited collective farms did so as members of Writers' Brigades—and were, of course, shown only a few model collective farms. Platonov, however, saw what was really happening and did not try to close his eyes to it. In August 1931 he was sent by the People's Commissariat of Agriculture to report on the progress of collectivization in the Central Volga and Northern Caucasus regions. The following notebook entry is one of many, all equally direct: "State Farm No. 22 'The Swineherd.' Building work—25% of the plan has been carried out. There are no nails, iron, timber [. . .] milkmaids have been running away, men have been sent after them on horseback

and the women have been forced to work. This has led to cases of suicide . . . Loss of livestock—89–90%."[9] It is astonishing that Platonov dared to write so truthfully, even in a private notebook, when the official press was reporting only ever-greater success. This note was written two years after the completion of *Chevengur*, but many chapters of the novel are clearly informed by similar observations.

Platonov's journeys in the Central Russian steppe provided him with material not only for *Chevengur* but also for several other works: *The Foundation Pit*, the long stories "For Future Use" and "Sea of Youth," two film scripts, and two full-length plays. None of these was published in Platonov's lifetime except "For Future Use." To a reader unversed in Soviet history, these works may seem like the wildest of black fantasy—yet there is barely a page that does not directly relate to some real event from that time.

Some scholars have attended exclusively to Platonov's reflection of historical reality, often creating the impression that this is his only concern. Others have written about his stories' religious and mythological subtexts. Readers coming to Platonov's work for the first time often feel entranced but bewildered, unsure how to orient themselves in his shifting, unfamiliar world. Different layers of the texts flicker in and out of focus. One and the same chapter can at first seem to be a psychological vignette, then to resemble some ancient religious text and then to be evoking a political and historical reality so extraordinary as to be barely credible. The real and the surreal, the factual and the mythological, become hard to tell apart.

Chevengur is also unusually rich in sensory detail; Platonov's ability to evoke the smells, sounds, and atmosphere of a particular place and time is equal to that of D. H. Lawrence. This abundance of detail, along with Platonov's lack of interest in conventional plotting and character development, has led some critics to see the novel as lacking in structure. In terms of themes and symbolism, however, the novel is entirely coherent. Every incident or conversation relates to a few central concerns: the possibility of bringing about true communism, people's longing to overcome death, and a sense of orphanhood that is shared by almost all the characters.

Orphanhood—exile from home and family—is the most fundamental form of exile, and it is those without home or family, those with no stake in the world as it exists, who are most open to the seduction of utopian fantasies. The late critic and scholar Vitaly Shentalinksy once said to me that the true hero of *Chevengur* was the Russian people as a whole—as a collective orphan, deprived by the revolution of both their Mother Earth and their Father in Heaven. This at once brought to my mind a passage from *Chevengur*, a retort made by an angry peasant to one of the Bolsheviks: "All very clever. You give us the land, then confiscate every last grain we grow on it. Well, if that's the way it is, may you choke on that land. The only land left to us peasants now is the horizon. Who do you think you're fooling?" This peasant appears in only a single episode of *Chevengur*, but it is often minor characters who most clearly voice Platonov's own thoughts. There was indeed nothing left to the Russian people but the horizon—nothing but an ever-receding line of light, a shining *no-place* (the literal meaning of the word *utopia*), and the webs of delusion that can be spun from words.

4

Platonov's first plan for what would become *Chevengur* is titled "Maturing Star" and is dated 1927.[10] The first part is set in 1906–14, in a workers' settlement close to a locomotive works. Platonov writes:

> I shall try to show the complexity and depth of the working man, as a being with a muscular brain and a full-blooded heart. I shall oppose schematicness and oversimplification. I knew such workers personally—the so-called masses.
>
> The hero—the young son of a man employed in the locomotive works—is intelligent and impressionable. He reads a lot; he attempts suicide; he gets carried away by religion. For a while, he lives alone in a cave; then he joins a religious sect—"religious anarchists."

Shaken by news of his beloved father's death in an accident at the factory, the hero returns home, forgets religion, and looks for salvation elsewhere. He falls in love and, at the same time, is drawn into terrorist activities. In 1917 he joins the Bolsheviks. Within a few years he becomes an important engineer and throws himself into constructive work. "A new sense of life and the world. Love is transformed into sunny, combative feeling. Excavators are working and canals are being dug on the sites of the battles of the Civil War. The novel's last chapters carry a reborn mankind over a resonant, wise, maturing earth. A world that is almost fantastic. Yet there is nothing unfamiliar to us—it is our years, our earth, seen from a particular point of view."

Platonov incorporated several elements from this first plan into his final version of *Chevengur*. Sasha Dvanov has much in common with the hero of this plan; like him, he is a spiritual searcher and something of an engineer. Several major themes—suicide, anarchy, religious sectarianism, the accidental death of a father figure—remain important, though they are developed in different ways. Nevertheless, the tone of the final version is different. "Maturing Star" was to be written in a major key; *Chevengur* is written in a minor key. There is ambiguity about the ending, but it can certainly be seen as despairing. This is a pattern that Platonov would repeat many times in his career. He often appears to have planned to write upbeat works that would be accepted for publication—and then gone on to write something utterly unpublishable. He was, one might say, betrayed by his own talent, by his clear-minded and often ironic perception of Soviet reality.

The next stage in the composition of *Chevengur* was a draft, nearly two-thirds the length of the finished novel, titled "Builders of the Country." Many passages from this were incorporated verbatim into *Chevengur*. Two of the more obvious changes are that the earlier version is a first-person narrative and that the love story between the hero and his girlfriend, central to the draft, is almost omitted from the finished novel. Platonov was clearly feeling his way. In the course of revision, he omitted a great deal, often with the effect of making

his authorial standpoint more ambiguous. The final version is a richly textured, multilayered patchwork. It is often uncertain whether a particular passage is being told by the narrator, or whether it is a rendition of the thoughts of an individual character. Because of the many flashbacks, it can also be difficult to determine the order of the events narrated. This may be an unintended effect of Platonov's changes of mind, but it is more likely that he consciously chose to imbue the latter chapters with something of the elusiveness of a dream.

The first part of the novel deals with the transition from an agricultural to an industrial society. Zakhar Pavlovich, the main character in these chapters, is a gifted craftsman modeled on Platonov's father. Like Platonov's father, Zakhar Pavlovich moves from traditional village life to the new world of factories and railways. For some time, he is in love with steam locomotives but is eventually disillusioned, realizing that machines do nothing to prevent human misery.

The second part is picaresque and satirical. Sasha Dvanov, Zakhar Pavlovich's adopted son, rides about the province along with Kopionkin, a reincarnation of Don Quixote. Kopionkin's name is derived from the Russian *kopio*, meaning "spear," and his Dulcinea is the German-Polish-Jewish revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg. Dvanov and Kopionkin visit villages and communes, hoping to find evidence of a spontaneous birth of true communism in the depth of the steppe.

The third part is set in Chevengur itself, a fictional town probably modeled on the real town of Boguchar, a center of Russian sectarianism where Platonov spent several months in the mid-1920s, building wells and a small power station. In this fictional steppe town, which appears to belong both to this world and to some other world of dream or legend, a group of fanatical Bolsheviks make a determined attempt to establish communism. They begin by exterminating first the bourgeoisie and then the half-bourgeoisie, believing that this will inevitably bring about communism, since nothing else will be left. They also repeatedly relocate all the town's buildings, so that property will become worn out and cease to oppress people. Eventually, however, Sasha Dvanov—in many respects, a Christ figure—arrives in Chevengur, and a more constructive and democratic communism is

established under his guidance. This gentler regime, however, proves short lived. Chevengur is attacked and destroyed by a cavalry detachment; whether this is the White Guard or the Red Army is left unclear.

5

During the four decades between his death in 1951 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, a great deal of "intelligentsia folklore" sprang up around the image of Platonov. It was widely believed that he had been totally excluded from the literary world and had worked as a yardman. In reality, he remained a member of the Writers' Union until his death, and he and his family lived alongside other professional Soviet writers in an apartment of the Literary Institute. Being a naturally tidy person who enjoyed physical work, he sometimes *chose* to sweep the institute's yard.

There is no doubt that Platonov showed immense courage and determination in staying true to his creative vision, despite being unable to publish much of his best work. Nevertheless, the romantic image of Platonov as solitary hero has led people to underestimate the amount of help he received from more established figures. Not only did he benefit from the support of Vasily Grossman and Mikhail Sholokhov at critical moments during and after the war, but he also had generous mentors and backers at the beginning of his career. One of these was the journalist and editor Georgy Litvin-Molotov (1898–1972). Litvin-Molotov not only published Platonov's first book, the poetry collection *The Blue Depth* (1922), but also wrote a preface to it; and in 1927 and 1928, as chief editor of the monthly *Molodaia Gvardia* ("Young Guard"), he published two short collections of his prose, titled *The Locks of Epifan* and *The Innermost Man*.

Litvin-Molotov admired Platonov and the two men were friends. In a copy of *The Locks of Epifan* that he presented to Litvin-Molotov, Platonov wrote, "To Georgy Zakharovich Litvin-Molotov, to whom I am indebted for what is best and purest in my past and perhaps also

in my future. With a deep love, that nothing will disturb."[11] And at some point, probably in mid-1927, Platonov gave Litvin-Molotov a draft copy of "Builders of the Country." Litvin-Molotov was clearly aware both of Platonov's gifts and of the danger to which these gifts exposed him; he responded with a long list of criticisms, but the sensitivity of these criticisms and the care with which he expresses them is moving. Litvin-Molotov begins by comparing the "healthy" feeling awoken in the reader by Platonov's earlier "Innermost Man" with the "generally negative" feeling awoken by "Builders of the Country." His central objections are that the criticisms of the revolution made by two anarchists are all too often proved right; that the Communists in the novel are portrayed as eccentric and ineffectual; and that "the author appears to have set himself the goal of demonstrating that the construction of socialism in one country is impossible. This—on the day after the Party has censured the opposition for putting forward exactly this view!" After making constructive suggestions for changes to each chapter, Litvin-Molotov ends, "If this were a bad work, I would not be writing all this. It is a good work, but for entirely comprehensible reasons it cannot be *acceptable* for publication in its present state. I want to warn you now, in order for you to correct it and erase the impression it creates—an impression that you yourself have said you did not in the least intend to evoke in the reader."[12]

In 1928 Platonov published two extracts from *Chevengur* in the literary journal *Krasnaia nov'* ("Red Virgin Soil"); in 1929 the first section, titled "Origin of a Master," came out, along with four other short works, as a small book. Platonov tried doggedly to publish *Chevengur* as a whole, but without success. In August 1929 he appealed to Maxim Gorky, the most authoritative literary figure of the time, writing:

> I ask you to read my manuscript. It is not being published (it has been refused by *Federatsia*). They say that the Revolution is incorrectly portrayed in the novel and that the work as a whole will be seen as counterrevolutionary. But I worked with

> very different feelings and now I don't know what to do. I am turning to you to ask you to read the manuscript and, if you agree, to say that the author is correct and that the novel constitutes an honest attempt to portray the beginning of a communist society.[13]

Like Litvin-Molotov, Gorky recognized Platonov's gifts. He replied in a similar tone:

> That you are talented is beyond doubt. It is also beyond doubt that you are a master of a very distinctive language. Your novel is extremely interesting. Its technical failings are its extreme prolixity, an excess of conversation and the fading away of the novel's "action." All this is especially noticeable in its second half.
>
> But, for all its indisputable worth, I do not think that your work will be published. Your anarchist frame of mind—evidently characteristic of your "spirit"—makes this difficult. Whatever you may have wished, you have portrayed reality in a lyrico-satirical light that is, of course, unacceptable to our censorship. For all the tenderness with which you relate to your characters, they are ironically colored and to the reader they seem simply "eccentrics" and "half-wits," rather than revolutionaries. I am not saying that this has been done intentionally, merely that this is the way it is. That is the reader's impression, i.e., my own impression. I may be mistaken.[14]

This is a thoughtful, sensitive, and evidently sincere response. Shortly afterward, Gorky wrote to Platonov again, suggesting that he adapt part of the novel for the theater: "This thought is inspired by your language. From the stage, from the lips of intelligent actors, it would sound brilliant. The presence in your work of humor—of lyrical humor—makes it clear that you could write a play. [. . .] In your psyche—as I see it—there is a kinship to Gogol. So: try your hand at comedy rather than more serious drama."[15] Platonov had in

fact recently "tried his hand" at comedy. The previous year, in collaboration with Boris Pilniak, he had written a play titled *Fools on the Periphery*. That Gorky did not know this makes his suggestion all the more impressive.

Gorky continued to do what he could to help Platonov. In early 1934 he arranged for Platonov to be included in a "brigade" of writers to be sent to Central Asia with the aim of publishing a collective work in celebration of ten years of Soviet Turkmenistan. The collective work never appeared, but the assignment led to Platonov returning to Central Asia for several months in 1935 and to the composition of *Soul*, another masterpiece published only years after his death.

"Origin of a Master" was republished in several posthumous Soviet selections of Platonov's work, but *Chevengur* as a whole remained unpublished for many years. An incomplete Russian text was published in Paris in 1972; the first Soviet edition was published only in 1988. An initial English translation, marred by serious errors, was published in 1978. The first important Western cultural figure to give Platonov his due was probably the Italian poet and film director Pier Paolo Pasolini. Reviewing *Chevengur* in February 1973, he refers to the first eighty pages as "one of the most beautiful things [*una delle cose più belle*] in Russian literature." He sees Platonov as the equal of Mandelstam and Bulgakov and ends with special praise for the clarity of the narrative voice of this "entrancing poet" (*adorabile poeta*).[16]

—Robert Chandler

2022

CHRONOLOGY

All dates are New Style. That is, they are given in terms of the Gregorian calendar we use today.

1891	Opening of the Moscow–Voronezh–Kyiv railway line.
1891–92	A serious famine, which begins in the Volga valley and spreads as far as the Urals and the Black Sea, causes 375,000 to 400,000 deaths. The effects of a severe drought are compounded by government incompetence—above all, by a delay in banning the export of grain. Widespread public anger may contribute to a rebirth of Russian revolutionary movements.
1899	August 28. Birth of Andrey Platonovich Klimentov—now generally known by his pen name, Andrey Platonov—in Yamskaia Sloboda, on the outskirts of the city of Voronezh, about three hundred miles south of Moscow.
1913	Lavish official celebrations throughout the Russian empire of the tercentenary of the Romanov dynasty.
1914–18	First World War.
1917	March 8–16. The February Revolution—a spontaneous revolution that topples the Romanov monarchy.
1917	November 7. The October Revolution—the Bolshevik Party seizes power in a coup.
1917–22	November–October. Russian Civil War, accompanied by the draconian economic policies known as War Communism. Millions are killed before the Red Army, led by

Leon Trotsky, defeats the main White forces in 1920. Smaller battles continue for the next two years.

1921 After an uprising in March 1921 by sailors at the naval base of Kronstadt, Lenin makes a tactical retreat, introducing the somewhat more liberal New Economic Policy (NEP). Many of the more idealistic Communists see this as a shameful compromise with the forces of capitalism. The NEP, which continues until 1928, is not accompanied by any political liberalization.

This year also sees catastrophic drought and famine, worst of all in the Volga valley. Having published one collection of poems and at least two hundred social, political, and scientific articles, Platonov abandons literature for work as an engineer and land-reclamation expert, organizing the draining of swamps and the digging of ponds and wells.

1924 Death of Lenin. Petrograd is renamed Leningrad. Stalin begins to take over power.

1926 Platonov and his family move to Moscow. Platonov then moves to Tambov.

1929 Publication of Platonov's *Origin of a Master*.

1929–30 Winter. "Total Collectivization" of Soviet agriculture. Platonov evokes this tragic period in *The Foundation Pit*, a short novel first published only long after his death.

1938 May. Platonov's fifteen-year-old son, Platon, is arrested as a "terrorist" and "spy." He is sentenced to ten years in the Gulag, where he contracts tuberculosis.

1940 October. Platon is released from the Gulag.

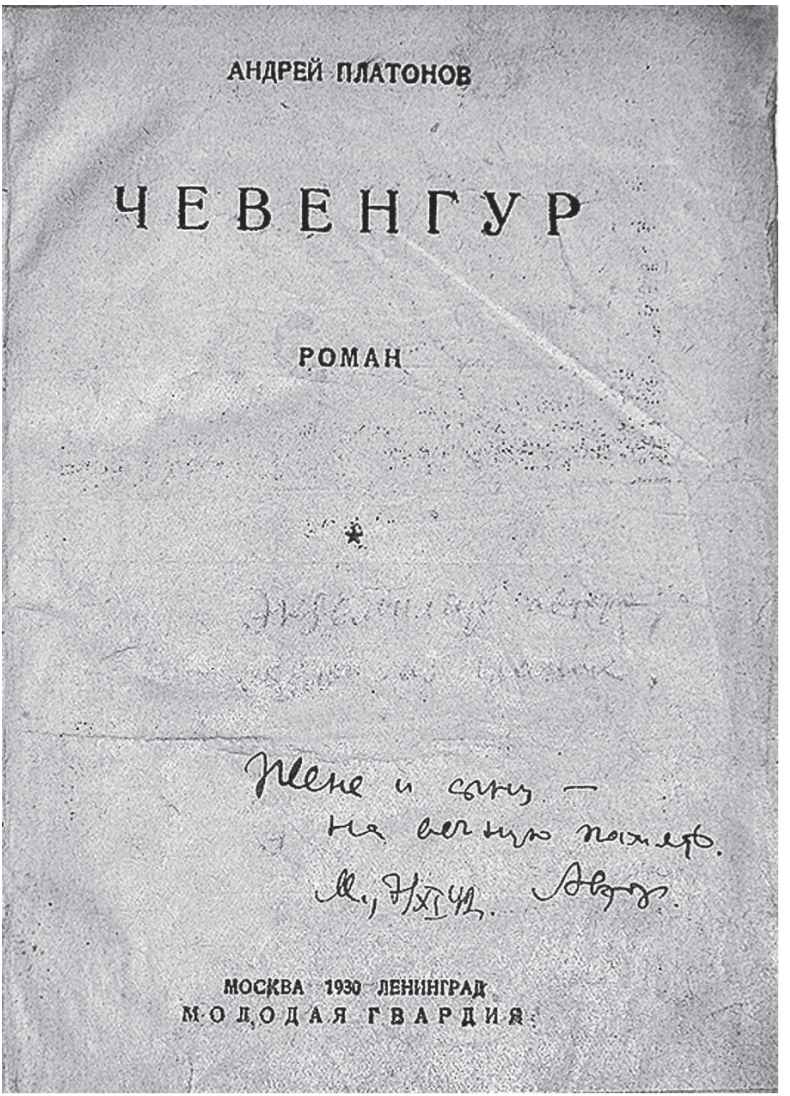
1943 January. Platon dies of tuberculosis.

1951 January. Platonov dies of tuberculosis, having been infected by his son.

1972 First publication of *Chevengur* (Paris: YMCA Press).

1988 First Soviet publication of *Chevengur*, in the journal *Druzhba narodov*.

CHEVENGUR



The title page of the 1930 edition of *Chevengur*, which was typeset but then canceled. A very few copies were even printed, and this one bears Platonov's dedication: "To my wife and son, to remember me by."

I

Old provincial towns have tumbledown outskirts, and people come straight from nature to live there. A man appears, with a keen-eyed face that has been worn to an extreme of sadness, a man who can fix up or equip anything but who has himself lived through life unequipped. There was not one artifact, from a frying pan to an alarm clock, that had not at some time passed through the hands of this man. Nor did he ever refuse to resole shoes, to cast shot for wolf hunting, or to turn out counterfeit medals for sale at old-time village fairs. But he had never made anything for himself—neither a family, nor a dwelling. In summer he simply lived out in nature, keeping his tools in a sack and using the sack as a pillow—more for the tools' safety than for softness. He protected himself from the early sun by placing a burdock leaf over his eyes when he lay down in the evening. In winter he lived on what remained from his summer's earnings, paying the verger for his lodging by ringing the hours through the night. He had no particular interest in people or nature, only in man-made artifacts of every kind. And so he treated people and fields with an indifferent tenderness, not infringing on their interests. During winter evenings he would sometimes make things for which there was no need: towers out of bits of wire, ships from pieces of roofing iron, airships out of paper and glue, and so on—all entirely for his own pleasure. Often he even delayed a chance commission; he might, say, have been asked to rehoop a barrel, but he would be busy fashioning a wooden clock, thinking it should work without a mechanism, from the earth's turning.

The verger didn't like these unpaid activities. "You'll be begging in your old age, Zakhar Pavlovich! That barrel's been sitting there for days, and you just keep stroking the ground with a bit of wood. Goodness knows what you're up to!"

Zakhar Pavlovich said nothing. To him the human word was like the noise of the forest to the forest's inhabitants—something you don't hear. The verger went on calmly watching and smoking—from frequent attendance at services he had lost his faith in God, but he knew for sure that Zakhar Pavlovich wouldn't get anywhere; people had been living in the world for a long time and they had already thought everything up. Zakhar Pavlovich, however, saw things differently: there were a great many things to be thought up, since there was still natural substance living untouched by human hands.

Every fifth year, half the village would go to the mines and cities, and the other half into the nearby forest: the harvest had failed. From time immemorial it has been known that, even in dry years, grasses, roots, and grains do well in forest clearings. The villagers who had stayed behind would rush out to these clearings—to save their vegetables from instant plundering by hordes of greedy wanderers. But this time there was a drought the following year too. The village bolted up its huts and set out onto the highway in two columns. One column set off to Kyiv to beg, the other to Luhans'k in search of work;[1] a few people turned off into the forest and overgrown gullies, where they took to eating raw grass, clay, and bark, and lived wild. The people who left were nearly all adults—the children had either taken care to die in advance or had run off to live as beggars. As for the unweaned babies, their mothers had let them gradually wither away, not allowing them to suck their fill.

There was one old woman, Ignatievna, who cured infants of hunger: she gave them an infusion of mushrooms mixed with sweet herbs, and the children fell peacefully silent with dry foam on their lips. A mother would kiss her child on its now aged, wizened forehead and whisper, "He's done with suffering, the dear. Praise the Lord!"[2]

Ignatievna was standing beside her. "He's passed on. He's at peace

now—better off than the living. He's in paradise, listening to the silver winds."

The mother wondered at her child, believing its sad lot had been eased. "Take my old skirt, Ignatievna, I've nothing else to give you. Thank you!"

Ignatievna would hold the skirt up to the light and say, "You have a little cry, Mitrevna—that's right and proper. But your skirt's in tatters, you must throw in a kerchief too—or how about an iron?"

Zakhar Pavlovich was left alone in the village—he found he liked the absence of people. But he spent most of the time in the forest, sharing a dugout with an old loner and living on a brew of herbs whose uses the loner had studied beforehand.

Zakhar Pavlovich worked all the time, to forget his hunger, and he taught himself to make from wood everything he had previously made from metal. As for the loner—he had been doing nothing all his life, and now all the more so; until the age of fifty he had just looked around him, wondering what was what and waiting for something finally to emerge from the world's turmoil, so he could begin to act after a general calming and clarification; he was not in any way gripped by life and he couldn't bring himself to encroach on a woman in marriage or get up to any generally useful activity. He had felt surprised at birth and had remained surprised, his eyes light blue in his youthful face, until he was an old man. While Zakhar Pavlovich was making an oak frying pan, the loner would say in astonishment that he would never be able to fry anything in it. But Zakhar Pavlovich would pour water into the wooden frying pan and get the water to boil over a slow flame without the pan catching fire. The loner would stand stock-still with surprise. "That's mighty fine! But how, my friend, can a man ever figure out everything?"

These overwhelming universal mysteries made the loner lose heart. Nobody had ever explained to him the simplicity of events—or else the loner was entirely muddleheaded. And indeed, when Zakhar Pavlovich tried to tell him what makes the wind blow rather than stay in one place, the loner expressed still more surprise and was unable

to understand a thing, although he sensed the origin of the wind with precision.

"I don't believe it! Say that again! From the rays of the sun, you say? What a story!"

Zakhar Pavlovich explained that the sun's rays were not a story, but simply heat.

"Heat?" the loner repeated in surprise. "E-e-e-h, the witch!"

The loner's surprise merely shifted from one object to another, changing nothing in his consciousness. What kept him going was not mind, but a sense of trustful respect.

By the end of the summer Zakhar Pavlovich had fashioned from wood every man-made artifact he had ever come across. The dugout and the adjacent space were filled with the products of his technical skills—a whole collection of agricultural tools, machines, instruments, arrangements, enterprises, and everyday appliances, all made entirely of wood. Strangely, there was not one object that repeated nature: a horse, for example, or a pumpkin.

One day in August the loner went into the shade, lay down on his stomach, and said, "Zakhar Pavlovich, I'm dying, yesterday I ate a lizard. I brought you two little mushrooms, but I fried myself a lizard. Wave a burdock leaf up above—I love the wind."

Zakhar Pavlovich waved a burdock leaf over him, fetched some water, and gave it to the dying man. "You're not really going to die. You just think you are."

"I will die, Zakhar Pavlovich, really and truly I will," said the loner, afraid to lie. "My innards don't hold anything, there's a huge worm living inside me, it's sucked up all my blood." The loner turned over onto his back. "What do you think—should I be afraid or not?"

"Don't be afraid," Zakhar Pavlovich answered positively. "I'd die myself, straightaway, but, you know, there's always artifacts keeping me busy…"

The loner was glad of this sympathy and he died toward evening without fear. At the time of his death Zakhar Pavlovich had gone to bathe in the stream and he found the loner already dead, suffocated by his own green vomit. The vomit was compact and dry, it had

settled into a paste around the loner's mouth, and white small-caliber worms were at work in it.

During the night Zakhar Pavlovich woke up listening to rain—the second rain since April. "That would have given the loner a surprise," he thought. But the loner was soaking alone in the torrents pouring evenly down from the sky, and he was quietly swelling up.

Through the sleepy, windless rain something sang out sadly, in a muffled voice, from so far away that it was probably day where it was singing, and with no rain. Zakhar Pavlovich immediately forgot the loner, the rain, and his hunger. He got to his feet. It was the whistle of a distant machine, a living, working steam engine. Zakhar Pavlovich went outside and stood in the moisture of the warm rain that was quietly humming about a peaceful life, about the vastness of the long-lasting earth. The dark trees were dozing, their gnarled trunks embraced by the caress of the calm rain; their pleasure made them almost tremble, and they were rustling their branches without the least wind.

Zakhar Pavlovich paid no attention to the joy of nature; what excited him was the unknown, now-silent locomotive. "Even the rain acts," he said to himself as he lay down again, "while you just sleep and hide away in the forest to no purpose. The loner's died—and you'll die too. The loner never made a single artifact in all his life—all he ever did was watch, and try to get the hang of things. He was surprised by everything, he saw marvels in the simplest matters, and he never lifted a finger lest he encroach or do harm. All he did was pick mushrooms—not that he knew how to find them—and now he's died, without having ever harmed nature in any way."

In the morning there was a big sun and the forest sang with all the density of its voice, letting the morning wind pass beneath its underleaves. What Zakhar Pavlovich noticed was not so much morning as a change of shift. The rain had gone to sleep in the soil and the sun had taken its place; and now, because of the sun, the wind had begun to fuss about; the trees were bristling; bushes and grasses had begun to mutter; and even the rain itself, having hardly had any rest, was getting back onto its feet, aroused by the tickling warmth, and gathering its body into clouds.

Zakhar Pavlovich put his wooden artifacts into his sack—as many as there was room for—and set off into the distance, along the women's mushroom trail. He did not look at the loner: the dead are unprepossessing, although Zakhar Pavlovich had known one man, a fisherman from Lake Mutevo, who had questioned many people about death and whose curiosity had filled him with anguish.[3] This fisherman had loved fish not as food but as a special being that most probably knew the secret of death. He would show the eyes of dead fish to Zakhar Pavlovich and say, "Look—true wisdom! A fish stands between life and death, that's why it's mute and why it stares without expression. Even a calf thinks, but a fish doesn't—it knows everything already." Contemplating the lake for years on end, the fisherman had gone on thinking about one and the same thing: the interest of death. Zakhar Pavlovich had tried to talk him out of it: "It's nothing so very special—just somewhere a bit cramped." A year after that, the fisherman couldn't bear it any longer and threw himself into the lake from a boat, having bound his legs with a rope so as not to start swimming inadvertently. Secretly he simply didn't believe in death. What he really wanted was to have a look and see what was there; it might be a great deal more interesting than life in a village or on the shore of a lake. He saw death as another province, situated beneath the sky, as if at the bottom of the cool water, and it had an attractive pull.[4] A few of the men whom he had told about his intention to live for a while in death and then return had tried to dissuade him, but others had agreed. "Well, Dmitry Ivanich, nothing ventured, nothing gained. Go on, give it a try—then you can tell us about it." Dmitry Ivanich gave death a try; three days later he was dragged out of the lake and buried beside the fence in the village churchyard.

Now Zakhar Pavlovich was walking past the churchyard, and he began to look amid the thicket of crosses for the fisherman's grave. There was no cross standing over it; no lips had prayed for the fisherman, and his death had not distressed a single heart, since he had died not from some illness but because of his own inquisitive mind. The fisherman had not left a wife behind him—he was a widower, and he had a little son who had been living with other people. At the

funeral, Zakhar Pavlovich had taken the boy by the hand. He was an affectionate, intelligent little boy—it was hard to say whether he took more after his mother or after his father. What had become of him? As an orphan, he had probably been among the first to die during these years of famine. The boy had followed his father's coffin with dignity and with no show of grief.

"Uncle Zakhar, did Father really mean to lie down like this?"

"No, it was a foolish whim. And he's not done you any favors, Sasha. It'll be a while before he catches any fish now."

"And why are the aunties all weeping?"

"Because they're humbugs."

When they placed the coffin beside the pit of the grave, no one wished to say goodbye to the dead man. Zakhar Pavlovich knelt down and touched the fisherman's fresh, bristly cheek, which had been washed clean at the bottom of the lake. Then he said to the boy, "Say goodbye to your father now. He's died forever and a day. Have a good look at him—you'll be remembering."

The boy pressed himself against his father's body, against his old shirt, which smelled of living, familiar sweat, because his shirt had been put on him specially for the coffin—it was not the shirt his father had drowned in. The boy felt his father's hands; they gave off a smell of fishy damp, and a tin wedding ring had been put on one finger, in honor of the forgotten mother. The little boy turned his head toward the other people, felt suddenly frightened of all these strangers, and began crying pathetically, gathering his father's shirt into folds as if to defend himself with it. His grief was wordless, lacking any consciousness of the rest of life and therefore inconsolable; the way he sorrowed for his dead father, the dead man might well have felt happy. And all the people by the coffin began crying too, out of pity for the boy and premature compassion for themselves, since each would have to die and be mourned in the same way.

For all his sorrow, Zakhar Pavlovich was able to think about the future. "That's enough of you and your wailing, Nikiforovna!" he said to one woman, who was sobbing and muttering hurried lamentations. "You're not howling with grief—you just want people to cry

when you're dead and gone yourself. Take the boy in. You've got six mouths to feed as it is—you'll hardly notice one more."

Nikiforovna immediately recovered her peasant woman's reason, and her face was dry and fierce; she had been crying without tears, just with her wrinkles. "Hardly notice?" she replied. "I like that! The boy may not need much now, but wait till he starts growing. He'll be guzzling away, his trousers will always need darning . . . Nothing will be enough for him."

The boy was taken in by another of the women, Mavra Fetisovna Dvanova, who had seven children. The boy gave her his hand, and the woman wiped his face with her skirt, blew his nose, and took the orphan off to her hut.

The boy remembered the fishing rod his father had made for him; he had thrown the rod into the lake and forgotten about it. By now it must have caught a fish. He could go and eat the fish, so strangers wouldn't scold him for eating their food. "Auntie," he began, "I've caught a fish in the water. Let me go and look for it. I can eat it—then you won't have to feed me."

Mavra inadvertently puckered her face, blew her nose on the tip of her kerchief, and did not let go of the boy's hand.

Zakhar Pavlovich fell into thought and wanted to become a barefoot wanderer, but he remained in place. He felt deeply moved by grief and orphanhood. Some unknown conscience now apparent in his chest made him wish to walk over the earth without rest, to encounter grief in every village and weep over the coffins of strangers. But he was stopped by the artifacts that kept coming his way; the village elder gave him a clock to repair and the priest asked him to tune his grand piano. Zakhar Pavlovich had never heard real music; once, in the district town, he had seen a gramophone, but men had tormented it and it no longer played. It had stood in a tavern; people had broken the sides of its outer case in order to see through the trickery and find the man singing inside, and a darning needle had been stuck through the diaphragm. Zakhar Pavlovich spent an entire month tuning the piano, testing the plaintive sounds and examining the mechanism that came out with such tenderness. He would strike

a key, and a sad singing would rise up and fly away; he would then look up and wait for the sound to return—it was too good to be squandered without trace. The priest got tired of waiting and said, "Don't waste time, my man, re-sounding tones. Just finish the job and stop trying to figure out what's none of your business." Zakhar Pavlovich took offense to the roots of his craftsman's being and inserted a hidden device that could be removed in one second but that was impossible to find without special knowledge. After that the priest had summoned Zakhar Pavlovich every week. "Come along, my friend, come along—the seraphic power of music has gone missing again." But Zakhar Pavlovich had not made this device for the sake of the priest, nor in order to go and delight in music more often himself. What had moved him was something very different: How, he wanted to know, had this artifact been constructed—an artifact that could touch any heart and make a man better and kinder? This was why he had inserted his secret device that was capable of interfering with euphony and drowning it with howls. After Zakhar Pavlovich had repaired the piano ten times and got to understand the structure of the quivering main board and the secret of the blending of sounds, he removed the device—and from then on sounds ceased to hold any interest for him.

Now, as he walked along, Zakhar Pavlovich recalled his past life and felt no regret. Over the years he had managed on his own to understand many different things and mechanisms, and he could reproduce them in his own artifacts as long as appropriate materials and instruments were to hand. He was walking through the village in order to meet the unknown machines and objects thrumming beyond the line where the mighty sky joined the peasants' unmoving strips of land. He was walking with the same heart as a peasant who makes the pilgrimage to Kyiv, when faith dries up and life becomes just a matter of keeping going to the end.

There was a charred smell on the village streets—from cinders, which were no longer being raked away by hens, because they had all been eaten. The huts stood full of childless silence. Burdocks that had long overgrown their norm were waiting for the huts' owners

beside gates, on paths, and in all the familiar, well-trodden spots where not a single plant had been able to grow before; they were swaying like future trees. In the absence of people, the wattle fences had also begun to flower; hops and bindweed had wound around them, and some of the stakes and switches had taken root, promising to turn into thickets unless people came back. The wells in the yards had dried up; lizards climbed freely over the frames and ran down inside to rest and reproduce, away from the fierce heat. Zakhar Pavlovich was also somewhat surprised by the absurd fact that, even though the corn in the fields had all died long ago, there were green spikes of rye, oats, and millet, as well as rustling goosefoot, on the thatched roofs; they had sprouted from grains in the thatch. Yellowish-green birds from the fields had also moved into the huts and were even occupying the main rooms; dense clouds of sparrows flew up from under his feet, their busy, proprietorial songs carrying over the wind of their wings.

As he left the village, Zakhar Pavlovich caught sight of a bast sandal; it too had come to life without people and discovered its destiny—it had sent out a shoot of silver willow while making shade for the rootlet of the future bush by allowing the rest of its body to rot. The soil beneath the bast sandal must have been moister: a multitude of pale blades of grass were trying to edge their way through. There were no village objects that Zakhar Pavlovich loved more than bast sandals and horseshoes, and no structures he loved more than wells. A swallow was perched on the chimney of the last hut; at the sight of Zakhar Pavlovich it slipped into the chimney and there, in the dark of the flue, embraced its descendants with its wings.

He left the church behind and to his right; beyond it lay an open field, level and smooth, like a wind that has settled down. The small bell, the supporting voice, rang out—twelve times for midday. Bindweed had wrapped around the church and was doing its best to climb up to the cross. Beside the church walls the graves of the priests were covered by tall grass, and their low crosses were lost in its thickets. The verger, his task done, was still standing by the porch, observing the passage of summer; his alarm clock had gotten muddled during

its many years of counting time, while the verger himself, on account of his age, had begun to sense time as keenly and precisely as grief or happiness. Whatever he was doing, even when he was asleep (although in old age life is stronger than sleep, ever vigilant and incessant), the verger would feel some kind of anxiety or longing whenever an hour had passed; he would then ring the hour and calm down again.

"So you're still alive, Grandad!" Zakhar Pavlovich said to the verger. "But who are you counting the hours for?"

The verger chose not to answer. During his seventy years of life he had become convinced that half of his actions had been carried out to no purpose and three-quarters of all his words had been spoken in vain; neither his wife nor his children had stayed alive as a result of his efforts, and his words had been forgotten like an extraneous noise. "I could speak to this man"—the verger took stock of himself—"but I'll be gone from his eternal memory before he's even walked a verst.[5] What am I to him? Neither helper nor protector."[6]

"You're working in vain," Zakhar Pavlovich reproached him.

To this stupidity the verger replied, "What do you mean? In my lifetime, our village has taken to the road ten times—and come back again later. And they'll come back this time too—there's no doing long without people."

"But what use is your ringing?"

The verger knew Zakhar Pavlovich as a man who allowed himself to be only too free with his hands but who did not know the value of time. "What use is my ringing? Huh! With the bell I shorten time and sing songs."[7]

"All right," said Zakhar Pavlovich, "keep on singing your songs." And he left the village.

On the edge of the village crouched a little hut, with no outbuildings; someone must have married in haste, quarreled with his father, and made a new home there. This hut was empty too; going inside was frightening. Only one thing cheered Zakhar Pavlovich as he left: a sunflower had grown up out of the chimney—it had already matured and was leaning its ripening head toward the rising sun.

The road was overgrown with dry grass, dilapidated by dust. When

Zakhar Pavlovich sat down for a smoke, he would see cozy little forests on the ground; each blade of grass was a tree. There was an entire little habitable world, with its own paths and its own warmth, equipped with everything necessary to satisfy the daily needs of small, preoccupied creatures. Zakhar Pavlovich gazed at the ants for some time and kept them in his head for another four versts of his journey before concluding, "Just give us the minds of ants or mosquitoes and we'll set our lives straight in no time at all! When it comes to communal life, these little creatures are master craftsmen. Man's nowhere near as skilled as an ant."

2

And then Zakhar Pavlovich appeared on the outskirts of a city. He found himself somewhere to live—a shed beside the house of a carpenter, a widower with numerous children—then went outside and fell into thought: What should he turn his hand to now?

The carpenter came back from his work and sat down beside Zakhar Pavlovich.

"How much shall I pay you?" asked Zakhar Pavlovich.

The man wheezed with his throat, as if wanting to laugh. There was a hopelessness in his voice, and the particular, seasoned despair characteristic of those whom life has well and truly embittered.

"What do you do for a living? Nothing? Well, live here for free—until my boys rip your head off."

The man was not joking. That very night his sons—who were between ten and twenty years old—drenched the sleeping Zakhar Pavlovich with their urine and jammed the shed door shut with an oven fork. But Zakhar Pavlovich had never been interested in human beings and it was not easy to make him angry. He knew of the existence of machines, of complicated and powerful artifacts, and it was these machines, rather than acts of incidental loutishness, that were his measure of the nobility of man. And in the morning, as it happened, Zakhar Pavlovich noticed how deftly and seriously the eldest son set about making an ax handle; what was important about the boy, then, was not his urine but his skill with his hands.

After a week Zakhar Pavlovich was feeling so anguished from inactivity that he began, without asking, to put the carpenter's house

in order. He repaired some shoddy joints on the roof, rebuilt the steps going up to the entrance room, and cleaned the soot from the chimney flues. In the evenings he fashioned stakes.

"What are you doing?" asked the carpenter, blotting his mustache with a crust of bread. He had just had a meal of potato and gherkins.

"Maybe they'll come in handy," Zakhar Pavlovich answered.

The carpenter chewed his crust and thought for a moment. "They'll do to fence off graves!" he said. "My lads' idea of a Lenten penance was to go and shit on every grave in the cemetery."

Zakhar Pavlovich's anguish was stronger than his sense of the uselessness of his labor, and he carried on cutting stakes until utter nighttime exhaustion. Unless he had a task in hand, the blood would flow from his fingertips into his head, and he would think so deeply about everything at once that his thoughts turned into a mad whirl, while his heart filled with aching fear. As he wandered about the sunlit yard during the day, he was unable to overcome the thought that man had descended from the worm, and that a worm was a simple and ghastly little tube with nothing inside it—just empty stinking darkness. As he observed the houses in the city, Zakhar Pavlovich discovered their precise resemblance to closed coffins, and he began to feel frightened of spending the night in the carpenter's home. His feral appetite for work, finding no outlet, was eating away at his soul; he was no longer in control of himself and he was tormented by all kinds of feelings that had never arisen in him when he was working. He began to have dreams; his father, a miner, was dying, and his mother was pouring milk from her breast over him to revive him, but his father said angrily, "Let me suffer freely, you bitch!" Then Father lay there for a long time, postponing his death. Mother stood over him and asked, "Well? How much longer will you be?" With the bitterness of a martyr, Father spat, turned onto his front, and reminded her, "Bury me in my old trousers. Give these ones to Zakhar."

The only thing that cheered Zakhar Pavlovich was to sit on the roof and look into the distance, at the place two versts from the city where impetuous railway trains sometimes passed by. The rotation of the locomotive's wheels and its fast breathing made Zakhar Pav-

lovich's body buzz with joy, and his sympathy with the engine made his eyes moisten with light tears.

The carpenter kept an eye on his tenant for a while and then began to feed him for free from his table. During the first meal the carpenter's sons put snot in Zakhar Pavlovich's bowl, but their father got up and, without a word, swung a punch that brought up a swelling on his eldest son's cheekbone.

"I'm a man like any other man," the carpenter pronounced calmly as he sat down again, "but I've produced such scum, you know, that one of these days they'll be the death of me. Look at Fedka—he's got the strength of the devil! And where that great mug of his comes from, I've no idea. They've been on cheap rations since the day they were born."

The first autumn rains began—at the wrong time and to no avail. The peasants had long since disappeared in distant lands; many had died on the roads, never reaching the mines or the southern wheat. Zakhar Pavlovich went with the carpenter to look for work at the railway station; the carpenter knew someone there who worked as an engine driver.

They found the driver in the staff room, where the train crews caught up on their sleep. He said there were a lot of people, and no work; the remnants of the nearby villages were all living at the station and doing what little work there was for low pay. The carpenter went out and came back with a ring of sausage and a bottle of vodka. After drinking the vodka, the driver told Zakhar Pavlovich and the carpenter about locomotive engines and Westinghouse brakes. "You know what momentum builds up on a downgrade—with a train of sixty axles!" he said, indignant at his listeners' ignorance and demonstrating the force of momentum with a supple gesture of his hands. "Yes! You turn the brake wheel, a blue flame shoots up from the brake shoes under the tender, you get it in the back of the neck from the trucks, the regulator's closed but the locomotive hurtles on—with the chimney roaring in protest! Oh to hell with it all! Give me more

vodka! You should've bought some gherkins too—sausage is dense stuff. It packs your stomach."

Zakhar Pavlovich sat there in silence; it was clear he wouldn't be taken on—how, after all, could he go straight from wooden frying pans to working with locomotives? The engine driver's stories had made his passion for mechanical artifacts grow sadder and more repressed, like unrequited love.

"Why so down?" said the driver, noticing Zakhar Pavlovich's sorrow. "Come along to the depot tomorrow. I'll have a word with the foreman—maybe they'll take you on as an engine cleaner. You can't afford to hang back, you son of a bitch, if you want to earn your daily—" The engine driver stopped in midsentence; he had begun to belch. "Damn it," he went on, "your sausage has gone into reverse. You can't have paid more than a kopek a pound for it, you skinflint—I'd have done better to eat greasy rags with my vodka." The driver turned to Zakhar Pavlovich again and went on: "But a locomotive must be like a mirror—so spotless it won't spoil the finest of gloves. Not a speck of dust—locomotives don't like dust. An engine, my brother, is a maiden. Not a woman, no—one open hole too many and an engine won't budge."

The driver launched into abstract reflections about various women. Zakhar Pavlovich listened and listened, and understood nothing; he didn't know that you could love women in some special way and from a distance, but he did know that such a man should get married. Talk about the creation of the world or about unknown artifacts could be interesting; but talk about a woman, like talk about men, was boring and made no sense. Zakhar Pavlovich had once had a wife himself; she had loved him and he had not treated her badly, but she had not brought him any particular joy. People are endowed with many attributes; if you devote too much thought to such matters, you can end up hooting with joy just because you keep on breathing from second to second. But where does this get you? It's just a game, it's playing with your own body—not a serious existence outside yourself.

Never in his life had Zakhar Pavlovich had any respect for this kind of talk.

An hour later the driver remembered that it was now his shift. Zakhar Pavlovich and the carpenter accompanied him to his locomotive, which had just taken on coal and water. From a distance, the driver called out to his mate in a deep, authoritative voice, "Pressure?"

"Seven atmospheres," the man answered unsmilingly, leaning out of the window.

"Water level?"

"Normal."

"Firebox?"

"I've opened the blower."

"Excellent."

The following morning Zakhar Pavlovich came back to the depot. The foreman, a little old man without much faith in living people, scrutinized him for a long time. He loved locomotives so painfully and jealously that he felt horror whenever he saw them moving. Had it been up to him, he would have granted rest eternal to every locomotive, so that they would not be mutilated by the rough hands of the ignorant. In his view there were few machines but all too many people; people were alive and could stand up for themselves, whereas an engine was a tender, fragile, and defenseless being. To drive it properly, you needed to leave your wife, clear your head of every worry, and dip your bread in machine oil; only then—and after ten years of patient waiting—should a man be allowed near a locomotive![1]

The foreman went through agonies as he studied Zakhar Pavlovich. Where he ought to press with one finger, the brute would take a swing with a sledgehammer; when he should just be stroking the glass on the pressure gauge, he'd bear down so hard he'd snap off the whole apparatus—pipe and all. No, how could it be right to let a plowman approach a mechanism? "My God, my God!" the foreman raged with wordless but heartfelt passion, "where are you, you mechanics of old, you driver's mates, you firemen and engine cleaners? There was a time when men trembled beside a locomotive, but nowadays everyone

thinks he's cleverer than a machine. Swine, sacrilegious bastards, scoundrels, lackeys of the devil! By rights, traffic along the railways ought to be brought to a halt immediately! What are today's mechanics? They're not people—they're a walking disaster! Tramps, circus riders, chancers. You can't trust them with so much as a bolt—and they've already got their hands on the regulator! In my day, if there was the least tapping in a locomotive, if the connecting rods began to sing, I'd sense it in the ends of my fingernails—and without even moving from the spot. I'd feel such distress I'd be trembling all over. I'd find out what was wrong at the very first stop. I'd find it with my lips, I'd lick it out, I'd suck it out, I'd grease it with my own blood—I'd never just drive on blindly! And this fella thinks he can come straight out of the rye and onto a locomotive!

"Run back home now—and wash your face before you go near a locomotive!" said the foreman.

The following day, having washed, Zakhar Pavlovich reappeared. The foreman was lying under a locomotive and cautiously touching the springs, lightly tapping them with a little hammer and pressing his ear to the ringing metal. "Motia," he called out to one of the workers, "tighten this nut a fraction!"

Using a monkey wrench, Motia tightened a nut half a turn. The foreman immediately got so upset that Zakhar Pavlovich began to feel sorry for him.

"Motiushka!" said the foreman with a quiet, oppressed sadness, though he was grinding his teeth. "What have you gone and done now, you bastard? What I said was—tighten the nut! Which nut? The main nut. And what do you do? You send me round the twist by twisting the locknut. And now you're forcing the locknut. And now you're touching the locknut again. What's to be done with you dumb animals? Get lost, cretin!"

"Let me, mister mechanic, loosen the locknut again by one half-turn, and then I'll tighten the main nut by a hair's breadth," said Zakhar Pavlovich.

Grateful that a bystander could recognize his rightness, the foreman replied in a peaceful, heartfelt voice, "Ah, you saw, did you? The

man . . . the man's a lumberjack, not a mechanic! A nut—he doesn't even know the names of the different nuts! Huh? What can you do? He bashes a locomotive about as if it were a woman, as if it were some damned slut! Oh my God! All right then, come over here and adjust the nut like I said!"

Zakhar Pavlovich crawled beneath the locomotive and did everything precisely and delicately. The foreman then busied himself until evening with locomotives and arguments with their drivers. After the lights had been lit, Zakhar Pavlovich reminded the foreman that he was still there. The foreman stopped in front of him again, thinking his thoughts. "An engine's father is the lever, and its mother is the inclined plane," he said tenderly, remembering something close to his heart, which brought peace to him at night. "Tomorrow you can try cleaning fireboxes—mind you're on time! But I don't know, I'm not promising anything—we'll give it a try, we'll see how it goes. It's a serious matter. A firebox—understand? Not just anything, but a firebox! All right then, off you go, off you go."

Zakhar Pavlovich slept one more night in the carpenter's shed; at dawn, three hours before work began, he arrived at the depot. Polished rails stretched out before him; stationary freight trucks bore the names of distant lands: Trans-Caspian, Trans-Caucasian, Ussuriysk. Strange, special people were walking about over the tracks. They were intelligent and thoughtful—switchmen, engine drivers, rolling stock inspectors, and so on. All around were buildings, steam engines, devices, and artifacts.

Before Zakhar Pavlovich lay a new world of appealing ingenuity—a world he had loved for so long it seemed he had always known of it—and he resolved to stand his ground there forever.

3

A YEAR before the failed harvest Mavra Fetisovna had fallen pregnant for the seventeenth time. Her husband, Prokhor Abramovich Dvanov, felt less joy than is expected. As he observed fields, stars, and the vast, flowing air every day, he had often said to himself, "There's enough for everyone." And he had lived at peace in a hut swarming with the small people who were his offspring. His wife had given birth sixteen times; seven of the children had survived, and then there was an eighth, a fosterling—the son of the fisherman who had drowned of his own accord. When his wife had led the orphan in by the hand, Prokhor Abramovich had not objected. "Well, the more little ones swarming about, the more surely the old can die. Feed him, Mavrusha!"

The orphan ate some bread and milk, then turned away and screwed up his eyes against the strange people.

Mavra Fetisovna looked at him and sighed. "A fresh tribulation from the Lord. He'll die before he's grown any. I can see death in his eyes—it'll be a waste of good bread."

But two years later the boy was still alive and he hadn't fallen ill even once. He ate little, and Mavra Fetisovna had made her peace with the orphan. "Eat, my darling, eat!" she would say. "If you don't eat here, you won't eat anywhere else!"

Need and children had long ago subdued Prokhor Abramovich; he paid no deep attention to anything at all—to children being ill or new children being born, to a poor harvest or to a tolerable harvest—and so everyone thought of him as a kind man. Only his wife's almost yearly pregnancies brought him a little joy; the children were his only

sense of the stability of his own life—with their soft little hands they made him plow, look after the household, and generally take care of things. He moved about, labored, and lived through life as if half-asleep, having no surplus energy for inner happiness and not knowing anything at all definitely. Prokhor Abramovich prayed to God, but with no heartfelt inclination toward him; the passions of youth—love for women, yearning for tasty food, and so on—had not endured, because his wife was plain and the food was monotonous and unnourishing year in, year out. The multiplication of children diminished Prokhor Abramovich's interest in himself; somehow it made him feel cooler and lighter. The farther Prokhor Abramovich lived, the more patient and unconscious he grew with regard to events in the village. If all Prokhor Abramovich's children had died in the course of a day, he would have gathered the same number of fosterlings the next day; and if the fosterlings had perished too, he would have immediately walked away from his smallholder's fate, set his wife free, and gone off barefoot who knows where—somewhere, perhaps, where a heart is no less sad but where feet, at least, know joy.

His wife's seventeenth pregnancy disturbed Prokhor Abramovich because of his concerns about the next year's harvest: that autumn fewer children had been born in the village than the year before, and, most important of all, Aunty Marya had not given birth. She had given birth every year for twenty years except during the years preceding a drought, and the whole village was aware of this; if Aunty Marya walked by empty, the men would say, "Marya's like a maiden again—it'll be a hungry summer."

This year too Marya was thin and free.

"Lying fallow, are you, Marya Matveyevna?" men would ask respectfully as they walked by.

"And what of it?" said Marya. Unused as she was to running idle, she felt ashamed.

"Never mind, you'll start a son soon—you're right good at that."

"Life's for living—why live in vain?" said Marya more boldly. "As long as there's bread."

"That's the trouble. A woman can give birth easily enough, but

the wheat doesn't always keep up. You, though—you're a witch. You know your right time."

Prokhor Abramovich said to his wife that she'd chosen a bad time to fall pregnant.

"Ay, Prosha!"[1] she sighed. "It's me, not you, who gives birth to them, and it'll be me who goes out begging for them."

Prokhor Abramovich said no more.

Then it was December, and there was no snow—the winter wheat froze. Mavra Fetisovna gave birth to twins.

"She's laid two at once," Prokhor Abramovich said by her bedside. "Well, praise the Lord—what else can we do? Looks like these two will live—they've got wrinkled foreheads and they're making their little hands into fists."

The fosterling stood there and looked with a distorted, aged face at what he could not understand. In him arose a caustic warmth of shame on behalf of adults; he at once lost his love of them and sensed his loneliness—he wanted to run away and hide in some gully. He had felt just as lonely, bleak, and frightened after seeing two dogs coupling—he had not eaten for the next two days and had disliked all dogs ever since. The new mother's bed gave off a smell of raw meat and of moist, milky calf, but Mavra Fetisovna was too weak to sense anything herself and she felt stifled beneath the motley patchwork blanket. She bared one of her legs; it was plump, wrinkled with age and the fat of motherhood. On it Sasha could see the yellow spots of some kind of deadened sufferings and thick blue veins, full of stiffened blood, that had spread tight beneath her skin and were ready to split it open so as to make their way out. One treelike vein showed how somewhere or other her heart was beating away, forcefully driving her blood through bodily crevices that had collapsed and narrowed.

"Having a good look, are you?" Prokhor Abramovich asked the fosterling, whose strength was now failing him. "You've got two new brothers now, Sasha. Cut yourself a piece of bread and go and run about outside—it's brightened up a bit now."

Sasha went outside, without the bread. Mavra Fetisovna opened

her white and watery eyes and called out to her husband, "Prosha! Counting the orphan, we've got ten now, and you and I make twelve."

Prokhor Abramovich had already worked this out for himself. "Let them live," he said. "An extra mouth brings extra bread."

"They say we're in for a famine—God forbid! Whatever will become of us—with little ones, and babes in arms?"

"There won't be a famine," Prokhor Abramovich decided for peace of mind. "If the winter wheat fails, then the spring wheat will make up for it."

The winter crops did indeed fail; after being nipped by autumn frosts, they suffocated in the spring beneath a crust of ice. The spring wheat brought now fear, now joy; in the end it ripened, but only after a fashion, yielding just a few times more grain than they'd sown. Prokhor Abramovich's eldest son was eleven, and the boy they'd taken in was about the same; one of the two had to go out alone and beg, to bring help to the family in the shape of dry rusks of bread. Prokhor Abramovich said nothing: he would have regretted sending his own son—and he felt ashamed to send out the orphan.

"Why are you sitting there without a word?" Mavra Fetisovna asked angrily. "Agapka's sent her seven-year-old out into the world, Mishka Duvakin's sending his little girl—while you sit there as if carved from stone, without a care in the world. There isn't enough millet to last till Christmas and we haven't seen bread since Bread Savior's Day."[2]

Prokhor Abramovich spent that evening making some old sackcloth into a bag that was roomy and comfortable. Twice he called Sasha over and measured the bag against his shoulders. "All right?" he asked. "Not pulling on you here?"

"It's all right," said Sasha.

Little Proshka was sitting beside his father and rethreading the needle for him each time the stiff thread slipped out, since his father couldn't see clearly.

"Papa, are you packing Sasha off to go begging tomorrow?" he asked.

"Why are you sitting there blathering?" the father snapped. "When you're a bit older, you'll be doing your share of begging too."

"I won't go begging," said Proshka. "I'll go thieving. Remember how you told us about Uncle Grisha's mare being pinched? The thieves did all right for themselves—and Uncle Grisha went and bought himself a gelding. When I grow up, I'll steal that gelding."

In the evening Mavra Fetisovna fed Sasha better than her own children—after they'd eaten, she fed him separately, giving him kasha with butter and all the milk he could drink. Prokhor Abramovich fetched a stick from the threshing barn and, when everyone was asleep, he made it into a little walking staff. But Sasha was not asleep, and he could hear Prokhor Abramovich shaping the stick with a bread knife. As for Proshka, he was quietly snuffling, shrinking away from a cockroach that was wandering across his neck. Sasha removed the cockroach, but he was afraid to kill it and he threw it down onto the floor.

"Still awake, Sasha?" asked Prokhor Abramovich. "Come on, get some sleep now!"

The children always woke early; they would begin fighting in the dark, while the roosters were still dozing. The old folk would have woken up and be scratching their bedsores, but only for the second time during the night. Not a bolt would be creaking in the village, nor were there any cheeps from the fields. It was at this hour that Prokhor Abramovich led the orphan out beyond the village bounds. The boy was half-asleep, trustfully clutching Prokhor Abramovich's hand. It was dank and chilly; the verger was ringing the hour and the bell's resonant sorrow disturbed the boy. Prokhor Abramovich bent down toward the orphan. "Look, Sasha, look over there. The track leaves the village and climbs up a hill, see? Just keep walking along it. After a while you'll see an enormous village and a fire-lookout tower, on a little hill. Don't be scared, just keep going. It's a city, that's all, and there'll be lots of grain in the granaries there. When your bag's full, come home and rest. Well, goodbye, my little son."

Sasha held Prokhor Abramovich's hand and looked into the gray morning bleakness of the steppe autumn.

"Have there been rains there?" Sasha asked, about this distant city.

"Heavy rains!" Prokhor Abramovich confirmed.

Then the boy left the hand he had been holding and, not looking at Prokhor Abramovich, quietly set off on his own, with stick and bag, keeping his eyes on the track where it climbed the hill, so as not to lose his direction. The boy disappeared behind the church and the graveyard and remained out of sight for a long time. Prokhor Abramovich stayed where he was and waited for the boy to reappear on the other side of the dip. Solitary early-morning sparrows were digging about on the road—they looked chilled. "They're orphans too," thought Prokhor Abramovich. "Who's going to throw *them* anything."

Sasha entered the graveyard, not knowing what he wanted. Now, for the first time, he thought about himself. He touched his chest: *This here is me*. Everywhere else, however, was alien and different from him. The home he had lived in, where he had loved Prokhor Abramovich, Mavra Fetisovna, and Proshka, had not been his home at all—he had been taken away from it and out onto a chilly morning road. Clenched in his half-childish sad soul, which had not been diluted by the calming water of consciousness, lay a hurt that was complete and pressing and that he could feel right up to his throat.

The graveyard was covered with dead leaves; their stillness at once made any feet quiet and tread more peacefully. There were peasant crosses everywhere, many without a name and with no memory of the one lying at peace. Sasha was interested in the most decrepit crosses, the ones that were also getting ready to fall down and die in the ground. Graves without crosses were better still—in their depths lay people now orphaned forever: their mothers too had died, and the fathers of some had drowned in rivers and lakes. The mound over the grave of Sasha's father had almost flattened—new coffins were carried deep into the cemetery along a path that led straight across it.

Patient and close by lay his father, not complaining how awful it was for him to be left alone all winter. What is there down there? It's bad there, it's quiet and cramped there; a boy with a stick and a beggar's bag can't be seen from down there.

"Father, they've driven me out to go begging. Soon I'll come down

and be dead with you—you must be lonely there on your own, and I'm lonely too."

The boy placed his staff on the grave and heaped leaves over it, so it would keep safe and wait for him.

Sasha decided to hurry back from the city as soon as he had collected a full bag of rusks; then he would hollow out a dugout beside his father's grave and live there, since he had no home.

Prokhor Abramovich had gotten tired of waiting and was about to make his way back. But Sasha had crossed the dried-up streams in the gully and was now climbing the clay slope. His gait was slow and tired—though it was a joy to know that he would soon have a home and a father of his own. So what if his father was dead and not saying anything—he would always be lying close by, with warm sweat on his shirt and arms that had embraced Sasha during their shared sleep by the shore of the lake. His father might be dead, but he was whole and unchanging, always the same.

"What's happened to his stick?" wondered Prokhor Abramovich.

The morning had turned damp. The boy was struggling up the slippery slope, dropping now and then onto his hands and knees. The bag was swinging about, free and loose, like someone else's clothes that don't fit.

"A right mess I've made of that. It's not a beggar's bag, it's a bag for a greedy-guts," said Prokhor Abramovich, tardily reproaching himself. "How's he going to manage it when it's full of bread? But it's too late now… Goodness knows…"

High up, where the path turned toward the invisible other side of the steppe, the boy stopped. In the dawn of the day to come, on the line of the village horizon, he was standing above what seemed a deep chasm, on the shore of the sky's lake. Sasha looked fearfully into the emptiness of the steppe; the height, the distance, and the dead earth were damp and vast, and so everything seemed alien and terrible. But Sasha needed to stay whole and then return to the lowlands of the village and the cemetery—his father was there, it was cramped there, and everything was small, sad, and protected by earth and trees from the wind. And so he went on toward the town, to find rusks of bread.

Prokhor Abramovich began to pity the orphan, who was now disappearing over the top of the hill. "The wind will exhaust the boy's strength, he'll lie down in the boundary ditch and that'll be the end of him. The wide world is no wooden hut."

Prokhor Abramovich wanted to catch up with the orphan and bring him back so that they could all die in a heap and in peace—but he had children of his own back at home, along with a wife and the last remnants of the spring wheat.

"We're all of us good-for-nothing swine!" thought Prokhor Abramovich, this self-definition bringing him a degree of relief. All through the day, though, he was silently miserable in the hut, keeping himself busy with the useless activity of wood carving. At times of misfortune he always distracted himself by carving pines or imaginary trees—his knife was blunt and so his art had developed no further. Mavra Fetisovna wept intermittently over the adopted child who had left. Eight of her children had died—and she had sat by the stove and wept intermittently over each of them for three days. This was for her what wood carving was for her husband. He, for his part, already knew how much longer Mavra Fetisovna would weep while he himself carried on with his rough carvings: a day and a half.

Proshka watched and watched; in the end he began to feel jealous. "What are you two weeping about? Sasha will come back all right. And what you should be doing, Father, is making me some felt boots. Sasha's not your son—he's an orphan. All you're doing, old man, is sitting there blunting your knife."

"Heavens!" said Mavra Fetisovna. In her astonishment she had stopped crying. "He talks just like an adult. Only a little louse—and he's already scolding his father."

But Proshka was right: after two weeks the orphan came back. He brought so many rusks and dry buns that it seemed he could hardly have eaten anything himself. Nor did Sasha get a chance to eat anything back at home, because toward evening he lay down on the stove and couldn't get warm—all his warmth had been blown out of him by the winds of the road. In his delirium he mumbled about a stick hidden in the leaves and about his father: his father should take care

of the stick and wait for Sasha to come to the lakeside dugout where crosses grow and fall.

Three weeks later, when the orphan had recovered, Prokhor Abramovich took his whip and walked to the city to stand in the market squares until he found work.

Twice Proshka followed Sasha to the cemetery. He saw that the orphan was digging himself a grave with his hands and that he couldn't dig deep. He brought the orphan his father's spade and said that it was easier to dig with a spade—that was how everyone dug.

"You'll be thrown out anyway," he informed Sasha. "Father hasn't sown anything since autumn, and come summer Mama will be laying again—let's hope it's not triplets. Yes, you'll be thrown out all right!"

Sasha kept trying to use the spade, but it was too big for him and the work soon exhausted him.

The occasional drops of sharp late rain chilled Proshka as he stood there and proffered advice: "Don't dig too wide—we can't afford a coffin, you'll be lying in the earth. And you'd better get on with it—Mama will be having her baby soon, we won't be wanting an extra mouth to feed."

"I'm digging a dugout," said Sasha. "I'm going to live here."

"Without any of our food?" inquired Proshka.

"Without anything at all. I'll pick chervil in the summer and live on that."

"All right then," said Proshka, now reassured. "But don't think you can come begging from us. We won't have anything to give away."

After earning enough for five forty-pound bags of flour, Prokhor Abramovich came back from the city on someone else's cart and lay down on the stove.

By the time they had eaten half of the flour, Proshka was wondering what they would do next. "Lazybones," he accused his father, who was looking down from his place on the stove at the identically screaming twins. "We'll get through the last of the flour—then starve to death. You brought us into the world—it's your job to feed us."

"A true splinter off the devil you are!" Prokhor Abramovich cursed

from up above. "You try being father then, you little brat—take my place!"

Proshka sat there with perplexity on his face, wondering how to become Father. He already knew that children came out of Mother's belly—her belly was all scarred and wrinkled—but then where do orphans come from? Proshka had twice woken up in the night and seen that Mama's belly was being kneaded by Father—and then her belly had swollen and more hangers-on had been born, wanting more bread. He reminded his father about this: "Don't go lying on top of Mother, lie beside her and sleep. Look at Parashka. She hasn't got any little ones at all—Grandpa Fedot hasn't been kneading her belly."

Prokhor Abramovich got down from the stove, put on his felt boots, and looked around for something. There was nothing superfluous in the hut, so Prokhor Abramovich took a twig broom and struck Proshka across the face with it. Proshka didn't cry out—he simply lay facedown on the bench. Prokhor Abramovich silently began beating him, trying to accumulate rage inside himself.

"Doesn't hurt, doesn't hurt, still doesn't hurt," said Proshka, not showing his face.

After this beating, Proshka got up and said, without pausing for breath, "And send Sasha packing. We don't want any extra mouths here."

Prokhor Abramovich felt more beaten than Proshka and was sitting gloomily by the cradle with the now-silent twins. He had beaten Proshka because Proshka was right: Mavra Fetisovna was getting big again and there was no winter wheat to sow. Prokhor Abramovich's life was like the life of the grasses in the bottom of a hollow. In spring, floodwaters from melting snow rush down on them; in summer—downpours of rain; when it's windy—sand and dust; and in winter they're stifled by close, heavy snow. All the time, every minute, they live beneath blows and burdens—and this is why grasses in gullies grow hunchbacked, ready to bow down and let misfortune pass through them. What tumbled down on Prokhor Abramovich was children—they came more often than harvests and brought more

trouble than being born oneself. Had the fields been as productive as his wife, and his wife in less of a hurry with her fertility, Prokhor Abramovich would long have been a well-fed and contented man. But all his life children had streamed down on him, and his soul had been buried, as a gully is buried by silt, beneath clayey accumulations of cares—which had led to Prokhor Abramovich having almost no sense of his own life and personal concerns. Those who were childless and free interpreted this state of oblivion as laziness.

"Proshka, Proshka, my boy!" called Prokhor Abramovich.

"What is it?" Proshka asked sullenly. "First you beat me, then you call me 'My boy.'"

"Proshka, run along to Auntie Marya and see what her belly's doing—is it big or small? Seems I haven't seen her for a long time. She isn't ill, is she?"

Proshka seldom felt resentful for long and he was businesslike when it came to family needs.

"I should be Father and you should be Proshka," he said in a matter-of-fact tone. "What's the good of looking at her belly? You haven't sown any winter wheat, so we'll be going hungry anyway."

Proshka put on his mother's jerkin, then went on grumbling away as if he were head of the household. "People talk a lot of nonsense. There were rains last summer, but Marya stayed empty. She could have given birth to another bread eater, but she missed her chance."

"The winter wheat froze," his father said quietly. "She was right."

"A baby sucks its mother, it doesn't eat bread," Proshka retorted. "And the mother can eat the spring wheat. I'm not running along to look at that Marya of yours. If her belly's big, then you'll just stay there on top of the stove. You'll say there'll be plenty of wheat and wild grains in the spring. But we lot don't want to starve—and it's you and Mama who brought us into this world."

Prokhor Abramovich said nothing. He and Sasha were similar, both speaking only when asked a question. In his dealings with Proshka, Prokhor Abramovich—though he was in his own house—was sometimes like an orphan himself. Nevertheless, he still didn't really know what to make of Sasha. Was he a good soul or not? Fear

may have prompted him to go out begging, but there was no knowing what other thoughts went through his head. In reality, Sasha had few thoughts because he considered all adults and other children to be cleverer than him, and he was afraid of them. But he was less afraid of Prokhor Abramovich than of Proshka, who counted every crumb and who had no love for outsiders.

4

Walking through the village, his bottom sticking out and his long, destructive hands brushing the grass, was a hunchbacked cripple: Piotr Fyodorovich Kondaev. It was a long time since he had had any pains in the small of his back—a sign that the weather was not going to change.

That year the sun had ripened early up in the sky; it was burning as fiercely by the end of April as it usually did deep in July. The men fell silent, their feet sensing dry soil and the rest of their bodies sensing a space of deathly heat that was now here to stay. The children observed the horizons, so as not to miss the appearance of a rain cloud. But from the dirt roads rose whirling columns of dust, and carts from other villages continued to pass through this dust.

Kondaev was now walking down the middle of the street toward the other end of the village—toward the home of fifteen-year-old Nastya, the wench who was his soul's constant concern. He loved her with a part of himself that was often painful and that was as sensitive as the heart of someone more upright—the place where his hump broke out from his lower back. To Kondaev the drought was a pleasure and he had high hopes of it. His hands were always all yellow and green—as he walked along, he destroyed grasses and rubbed them between his fingers. He was glad of the famine, which would drive every good-looking man far away in search of work—and many of them would die, freeing the women for Kondaev. Under the taut sun, which made the soil burn and smoke with dust, Kondaev smiled. Every morning he washed in the pond and caressed his hump with strong, sure hands that were fit for inexhaustible embraces of his future wife.