A May Night

Nikolai Gogol

Translated from Russian by Claud Field

Songs were echoing in the village street. It was just the time when the young men and girls, tired with the work and cares of the day, were in the habit of assembling for the dance. In the mild evening light, cheerful songs blended with mild melodies. A mysterious twilight obscured the blue sky and made everything seem indistinct and distant. It was growing dark, but the songs were not hushed.

A young Cossack, Levko by name, the son of the village headman, had stolen away from the singers, guitar in hand. With his embroidered cap set awry on his head, and his hand playing over the strings, he stepped a measure to the music. Then he stopped at the door of a house half hidden by blossoming cherry-trees. Whose house was it? To whom did the door lead? After a little while he played and sang:

“The night is nigh, the sun is down,

Come out to me, my love, my own!”

“No one is there; my bright-eyed beauty is fast asleep,” said the Cossack to himself as he finished the song and approached the window. “Hanna, Hanna, are you asleep, or won’t you come to me? Perhaps you are afraid someone will see us, or will not expose your delicate face to the cold! Fear nothing! The evening is warm, and there is no one near. And if anyone comes I will wrap you in my caftan, fold you in my arms, and no one will see us. And if the wind blows cold, I will press you close to my heart, warm you with my kisses, and lay my cap on your tiny feet, my darling. Only throw me a single glance. No, you are not asleep, you proud thing!” he exclaimed now louder, in a voice which betrayed his annoyance at the humiliation. “You are laughing at me! Good-bye!”

Then he turned away, set his cap jauntily, and, still lightly touching his guitar, stepped back from the window. Just then the wooden handle of the door turned with a grating noise, and a girl who counted hardly seventeen springs looked out timidly through the darkness, and still keeping hold of the handle, stepped over the threshold. In the twilight her bright eyes shone like little stars, her coral necklace gleamed, and the pink flush on her cheeks did not escape the Cossack’s observation.

“How impatient you are!” she said in a whisper. “You get angry so quickly! Why did you choose such a time? There are crowds of people in the street.... I tremble all over.”

“Don’t tremble, my darling! Come close to me!” said the Cossack, putting down his guitar, which hung on a long strap round his neck, and sitting down with her on the door-step. “You know I find it hard to be only an hour without seeing you.”

“Do you know what I am thinking of?” interrupted the young girl, looking at him thoughtfully. “Something whispers to me that we shall not see so much of each other in the future. The people here are not well disposed to you, the girls look so envious, and the young fellows…. I notice also that my mother watches me carefully for some time past. I must confess I was happier when among strangers.” Her face wore a troubled expression as she spoke.

“You are only two months back at home, and are already tired of it!” said the Cossack. “And of me too perhaps?”

“Oh no!” she replied, smiling. “I love you, you black-eyed Cossack! I love you because of your dark eyes, and my heart laughs in my breast when you look at me. I feel so happy when you come down the street stroking your black moustache, and enjoy listening to your song when you play the guitar!”

“Oh my Hanna!” exclaimed the Cossack, kissing the girl and drawing her closer to him.

“Stop, Levko! Tell me whether you have spoken to your father?”

“About what?” he answered absent-mindedly. “About my marrying you? Yes, I did.” But he seemed to speak almost reluctantly.

“Well? What more?”

“What can you make of him? The old curmudgeon pretends to be deaf; he will not listen to anything, and blames me for loafing with fellows, as he says, about the streets. But don’t worry, Hanna! I give you my word as a Cossack, I will break his obstinacy.”

“You only need to say a word, Levko, and it shall be as you wish. I know that of myself. Often I do not wish to obey you, but you speak only a word, and I involuntarily do what you wish. Look, look!” she continued, laying her head on his shoulder and raising her eyes to the sky, the immeasurable heaven of the Ukraine; “there far away are twinkling little stars—one, two, three, four, five. Is it not true that those are angels opening the windows of their bright little homes and looking down on us. Is it not so, Levko? They are looking down on earth. If men had wings like birds, how high they could fly. But ah! not even our oaks reach the sky. Still people say there is in some distant land a tree whose top reaches to heaven, and that God descends by it on the earth, the night before Easter.”

“No, Hanna. God has a long ladder which reaches from heaven to earth. Before Easter Sunday holy angels set it up, and as soon as God puts His foot on the first rung, all evil spirits take to flight and fall in swarms into hell. That is why on Easter Day there are none of them on earth.”

“How gently the water ripples! Like a child in the cradle,” continued Hanna, pointing to the pool begirt by dark maples and weeping-willows, whose melancholy branches drooped in the water. On a hill near the wood slumbered an old house with closed shutters. The roof was covered with moss and weeds; leafy apple-trees had grown high up before the windows; the wood cast deep shadows on it; a grove of nut-trees spread from the foot of the hill as far as the pool.

“I remember as if in a dream,” said Hanna, keeping her eyes fixed on the house, “a long, long time ago, when I was little and lived with mother, someone told a terrible story about this house. You must know it—tell me.”

“God forbid, my dear child! Old women and stupid people talk a lot of nonsense. It would only frighten you and spoil your sleep.”

“Tell me, my darling, my black-eyed Cossack,” she said, pressing her cheek to his. “No, you don’t love me; you have certainly another sweetheart! I will not be frightened, and will sleep quite quietly. If you refuse to tell me, *that* would keep me awake. I would keep on worrying and thinking about it. Tell me, Levko!”

“Certainly it is true what people say, that the devil possesses girls, and stirs up their curiosity. Well then, listen. Long ago there lived in that house an elderly man who had a beautiful daughter white as snow, just like you. His wife had been dead a long time, and he was thinking of marrying again.

“ ‘Will you pet me as before, father, if you take a second wife?’ asked his daughter.

“ ‘Yes, my daughter,’ he answered, ‘I shall love you more than ever, and give you yet more rings and necklaces.’

“So he brought a young wife home, who was beautiful and white and red, but she cast such an evil glance at her stepdaughter that she cried aloud, but not a word did her sulky stepmother speak to her all day long.

“When night came, and her father and his wife had retired, the young girl locked herself up in her room, and feeling melancholy began to weep bitterly. Suddenly she spied a hideous black cat creeping towards her; its fur was aflame and its claws struck on the ground like

iron. In her terror the girl sprang on a chair; the cat followed her. Then she sprang into bed; the cat sprang after her, and seizing her by the throat began to choke her. She tore the creature away, and flung it on the ground, but the terrible cat began to creep towards her again. Rendered desperate with terror, she seized her father's sabre which hung on the wall, and struck at the cat, wounding one of its paws. The animal disappeared, whimpering.

"The next day the young wife did not leave her bedroom; the third day she appeared with her hand bound up.

"The poor girl perceived that her stepmother was a witch, and that she had wounded her hand.

"On the fourth day her father told her to bring water, to sweep the floor like a servant-maid, and not to show herself where he and his wife sat. She obeyed him, though with a heavy heart. On the fifth day he drove her barefooted out of the house, without giving her any food for her journey. Then she began to sob and covered her face with her hands.

" 'You have ruined your own daughter, father!' she cried; 'and the witch has ruined your soul. May God forgive you! He will not allow me to live much longer.'

"And do you see," continued Levko, turning to Hanna and pointing to the house, "do you see that high bank; from that bank she threw herself into the water, and has been no more seen on earth."

"And the witch?" Hanna interrupted, timidly fastening her tearful eyes on him.

"The witch? Old women say that when the moon shines, all those who have been drowned come out to warm themselves in its rays, and that they are led by the witch's stepdaughter. One night she saw her stepmother by the pool, caught hold of her, and dragged her screaming into the water. But this time also the witch played her a trick; she changed herself into one of those who had been drowned, and so escaped the chastisement she would have received at their hands.

"Let anyone who likes believe the old women's stories. They say that the witch's stepdaughter gathers together those who have been drowned every night, and looks in their faces in order to find out which of them is the witch; but has not done so yet. Such are the old wives' tales. It is said to be the intention of the present owner to erect a distillery on the spot. But I hear voices. They are coming home from the dancing. Good-bye, Hanna! Sleep well, and don't think of all that nonsense." So saying he embraced her, kissed her, and departed.

"Good-bye, Levko!" said Hanna, still gazing at the dark pine wood.

The brilliant moon was now rising and filling all the earth with splendour. The pool shone like silver, and the shadows of the trees stood out in strong relief.

“Good-bye, Hanna!” she heard again as she spoke, and felt the light pressure of a kiss.

“You have come back!” she said, looking round, but started on seeing a stranger before her.

There was another “Good-bye, Hanna!” and again she was kissed.

“Has the devil brought a second?” she exclaimed angrily.

“Good-bye, dear Hanna!”

“There is a third!”

“Good-bye, good-bye, good-bye, Hanna!” and kisses rained from all sides.

“Why, there is a whole band of them!” cried Hanna, tearing herself from the youths who had gathered round. “Are they never tired of the eternal kissing? I shall soon not be able to show myself on the street!” So saying, she closed the door and bolted it.

II

THE VILLAGE HEADMAN

Do you know a Ukraine night? No, you do not know a night in the Ukraine. Gaze your full on it. The moon shines in the midst of the sky; the immeasurable vault of heaven seems to have expanded to infinity; the earth is bathed in silver light; the air is warm, voluptuous, and redolent of innumerable sweet scents. Divine night! Magical night! Motionless, but inspired with divine breath, the forests stand, casting enormous shadows and wrapped in complete darkness. Calmly and placidly sleep the lakes surrounded by dark green thickets. The virginal groves of the hawthorns and cherry-trees stretch their roots timidly into the cool water; only now and then their leaves rustle unwillingly when that freebooter, the night-wind, steals up to kiss them. The whole landscape is hushed in slumber; but there is a mysterious breath upon the heights. One falls into a weird and unearthly mood, and silvery apparitions rise from the depths. Divine night! Magical night! Suddenly the woods, lakes, and steppes become alive. The nightingales of the Ukraine are singing, and it seems as though the moon itself were listening to their song. The village sleeps as though under a

magic spell; the cottages shine in the moonlight against the darkness of the woods behind them. The songs grow silent, and all is still. Only here and there is a glimmer of light in some small window. Some families, sitting up late, are finishing their supper at the thresholds of their houses.

“No, the ‘gallop’ is not danced like that! Now I see, it does not go properly! What did my godfather tell me? So then! Hop! tralala! Hop! tralala! Hop! Hop! Hop!” Thus a half-intoxicated, middle-aged Cossack talked to himself as he danced through the street. “By heaven, a ‘gallop’ is not danced like that! What is the use of lying! On with it then! Hop! tralala! Hop! tralala! Hop! Hop! Hop!”

“See that fool there! If he were only a young fellow! But to see a grown man dancing, and the children laughing at him,” exclaimed an old woman who was passing by, carrying a bundle of straw. “Go home! It is quite time to go to sleep!”

“I am going!” said the Cossack, standing still. “I am going. What do I care about the headman? He thinks because he is the eldest, and throws cold water on people, and carries his head high. As to being headman—I myself am a headman. Yes indeed—otherwise———” As he spoke, he stepped up to the door of the first cottage he came to, stood at the window, drumming with his fingers on the glass, and feeling for the door-handle. “Woman, open! Woman, open quickly I tell you! It is time for me to go to sleep!”

“Where are you going, Kalenik? That is the wrong house!” some young girls who were returning from the dance called to him as they passed. “Shall we show you yours?”

“Yes, please, ladies!”

“Ladies! Just listen to him!” one of them exclaimed. “How polite Kalenik is! We will show you the house—but no, first dance before us!”

“Dance before you? Oh, you are clever girls!” said Kalenik in a drawling voice, and laughing. He threatened them with his finger, and stumbled, not being able to stand steadily. “And will you let yourselves be kissed? I will kiss the lot.” With tottering steps he began to run after them.

The girls cried out and ran apart; but they soon plucked up courage and went on the other side of the road, when they saw that Kalenik was not firm on his legs.

“There is your house!” they called to him, pointing to one which was larger than the rest, and which belonged to the village headman.

Kalenik turned towards it, and began again to revile the headman.

But who is this headman to whose disadvantage so much has been said? Oh, he is a very important person in the village. Before Kalenik reaches his house, we shall doubtless find enough time to say something about him. Everyone in the village takes off his cap at the sight of him, and even the smallest girls wish him good morning. Which of the young Cossacks would not like to be a headman? The headman has an entry everywhere, and every stalwart rustic stands respectfully, cap in hand, so long as the headman feels round his snuff-box with his thick, coarse finger. In parish-meetings and other assemblies, although his power may be limited by the votes of the majority, the headman still maintains the upper hand, and sends whom he chooses to make roads or dig ditches. In outward manners he is morose and severe, and not fond of talking. Long ago, when the Empress Catherine of blessed memory journeyed to the Crimea, he was chosen as one of her escort for two whole days, and had the high honour of sitting with the imperial coachman on the box.

Since then the headman has formed the habit of shaking his head solemnly and thoughtfully, of stroking his long, drooping moustache, and of darting hawk-like glances from his eyes. Whatever the topic of conversation may be, he manages to refer to his having accompanied the Empress, and sat on the box of the imperial coach. He often pretends to be hard of hearing, especially when he hears something that he does not like. He has an aversion for dandies, and himself wears under a black caftan of cloth, made at home, a simple, embroidered, woollen waist-band. No one has seen him wear any other dress except, of course, on the occasion of the Czarina's journey to the Crimea, when he wore a blue Cossack's uniform. Hardly anyone in the village remembers that time, and he keeps the uniform packed up in a chest.

The headman is a widower, but his sister-in-law lives with him. She cooks his dinner and supper, keeps the house and furniture clean, weaves linen, and acts as housekeeper generally. The village gossips say that she is not a relation of his; but we must remark that the headman has many enemies who spread all kinds of slanders about him. We have now said what we considered to be necessary about the headman, and the drunken Kalenik is not yet half-way to his house. He continued to abuse the headman in terms which might be expected from one in his condition.

III

AN UNEXPECTED RIVAL—THE CONSPIRACY

"No, you fellows, I won't. What is the good of all those silly goings-on? Aren't you tired of these foolish jokes? People already call us good-for-nothing scapegraces. Better go to bed!" So Levko said one evening to his companions, who were trying to persuade him to take part

with them in further practical jokes. “Farewell, brothers! Good night!” he said, and left them with quick steps.

“Does my bright-eyed Hanna sleep?” he thought as he passed the house shaded by the cherry-trees. Then in the silence he heard the sound of a whispered conversation. Levko stood still. Between the trees there glimmered something white. “What is that?” he thought, as he crept closer and hid himself behind a tree.

By the light of the moon he saw the face of a girl standing opposite him. It was Hanna. But who was the tall man who had his back turned to him? In vain he strained his eyes; the whole figure was hidden in shadow, and the slightest forward step on Levko’s part would expose him to the risk of discovery. He therefore leant quietly against the tree, and determined to remain where he was. Then he heard the girl utter his name distinctly.

“Levko? Levko is a baby,” said the tall man in an undertone. “If I ever find him with you, I will pull his hair.”

“I should like to know what rascal is boasting of pulling my hair,” said Levko to himself, stretching out his head and endeavouring to miss no word. But the stranger continued to speak so low that he was inaudible.

“What, aren’t you ashamed?” said Hanna after he had finished. “You are lying and deceiving me; I will never believe that you love me.”

“I know,” continued the tall man, “that Levko has talked nonsense to you and turned your head.” (Here it seemed to the Cossack as though the stranger’s voice were not quite unknown to him, and that he must have heard it somewhere or other.) “But Levko shall learn to know me,” continued the stranger. “He thinks I don’t notice his rascally tricks; but he will yet feel the weight of my fists, the scoundrel!”

At these words Levko could no longer restrain his wrath. He came three steps nearer, and took a run in order to plant a blow which would have stretched the stranger on the ground in spite of his strength. At that moment, however, a ray of light fell on the latter’s face, and Levko stood transfixed, for he saw it was his father. But he only expressed his surprise by an involuntary shake of the head and a low whistle.

On the other side there was the sound of approaching footsteps. Hanna ran hastily into the house and closed the door behind her.

“Good-bye, Hanna!” cried one of the youths, who had stolen up and embraced the headman, but started back alarmed when he felt a rough moustache.

“Good-bye, my darling!” cried another, but speedily executed a somersault in consequence of a violent blow from the headman.

“Good-bye, good-bye, Hanna!” exclaimed several youths, falling on his neck.

“Go to the deuce, you infernal scoundrels!” shouted the headman, defending himself with both hands and feet. “What kind of Hanna do you take me for? Hang yourselves like your fathers did, you children of the devil! Falling on one like flies on honey! I will show you who Hanna is!”

“The headman! The headman! It is the headman!” cried the youths, running away in all directions.

“Aha, father!” said Levko to himself, recovering from his astonishment and looking after the headman as he departed, cursing and scolding. “Those are the tricks you like to play! Splendid! And I wonder and puzzle my head why he pretends to be deaf when I only touch on the matter! Wait, you old sinner, I will teach you to cajole other people’s sweethearts. Hi! you fellows, come here!” he cried, beckoning to the youths, who gathered round him. “Come nearer! I told you to go to bed, but I am differently minded now, and am ready to go round with you all night.”

“That is reasonable,” exclaimed a broad-shouldered, stout fellow, who was regarded as the chief toper and good-for-nothing in the village. “I always feel uncomfortable if I do not have a good fling, and play some practical jokes. I always feel as though there were something wanting, as though I had lost my cap or my pipe—in a word, I don’t feel like a proper Cossack then!”

“Do you really want to bait the headman?” asked Levko.

“The headman?”

“Yes, the headman. I don’t know for whom he takes himself. He carries on as though he were a duke. It is not only that he treats us as if we were his serfs, but he comes after our girls.”

“Quite right! That is true!” exclaimed all the youths together.

“But are we made of any worse stuff than he? We are, thank God! free Cossacks. Let us show him so.”

“Yes, we will show him!” they shouted. “But when we go for the headman, we must not forget his clerk.”

“The clerk shall have his share, too. Just now a song that suits the headman occurs to me. Go on! I will teach it you!” continued Levko, striking the strings of his guitar. “But listen! Disguise yourselves as well as you can.”

“Hurrah for the Cossacks!” cried the stout reveller, dancing and clapping his hands. “Long live freedom! When one lets the reins go, one thinks of the good old times. It feels as jolly as though one were in paradise. Hurrah, you fellows! Go ahead!”

The youths rushed noisily through the village street, and the pious old women, aroused from their sleep, looked through the windows, crossed themselves drowsily, and thought, “There they go, the wild young fellows!”

IV

WILD PRANKS

Only in one house at the end of the street there still burned a light; it was the headman’s. He had long finished his supper, and would certainly have gone to sleep but that he had a guest with him, the brandy-distiller. The latter had been sent to superintend the building of a distillery for the lords of the manor, who possessed small allotments between the lands of the free Cossacks. At the upper end of the table, in the place of honour, sat the guest—a short, stout man with small, merry eyes. He smoked his short pipe with obvious satisfaction, spitting every moment and constantly pushing the tobacco down in the bowl. The clouds of smoke collected over his head, and veiled him in a bluish mist. It seemed as though the broad chimney of a distillery, which was bored at always being perched up on the roof, had hit upon the idea of taking a little recreation, and had now settled itself comfortably at the headman’s table. Close under his nose bristled his short, thick moustache, which in the dim, smoky atmosphere resembled a mouse which the distiller had caught and held in his mouth, usurping the functions of a dining-room cat. The headman sat there, as master of the house, wearing only his shirt and linen breeches. His eagle eye began to grow dim like the setting sun, and to half close. At the lower end of the table sat, smoking his pipe, one of the village council, of which the headman was superintendent. Out of respect for the latter he had not removed his caftan.

“How soon do you think,” asked the headman, turning to the distiller and putting his hand before his gaping mouth, “will you have the distillery put up?”

“With God’s help we shall be distilling brandy this autumn. On Conception Day I bet the headman will be tracing the figure eight with his feet on his way home.” So saying, the

distiller laughed so heartily that his small eyes disappeared altogether, his body was convulsed, and his twitching lips actually let go of the reeking pipe for a moment.

“God grant it!” said the headman, on whose face the shadow of a smile was visible. “Now, thank heaven, the number of distilleries is increasing a little; but in the old days, when I accompanied the Czarina on the Perejlaslov Road, and the late Besborodko———”

“Yes, my friend, those were bad times. Then from Krementchuk to Romen there were hardly two distilleries. And now—but have you heard what the infernal Germans have invented? They say they will no longer use wood for fuel in the distilleries, but devilish steam.” At these words the distiller stared at the table reflectively, and at his arms resting on it. “But how they can use steam—by heavens! I don’t know.”

“What fools these Germans are!” said the headman. “I should like to give these sons of dogs a good thrashing. Whoever heard of cooking with steam? At this rate one will not be able to get a spoonful of porridge or a bit of bacon into one’s mouth.”

“And you, friend,” broke in the headman’s sister-in-law, who was sitting by the stove; “will you be with us the whole time without your wife?”

“Do I want her then? If she were only passably good-looking———”

“She is not pretty, then?” asked the headman with a questioning glance.

“How should she be; as old as Satan, and with a face as full of wrinkles as an empty purse,” said the distiller, shaking again with laughter.

Then a noise was heard at the door, which opened and a Cossack stepped over the threshold without removing his cap, and remained standing in an absent-minded way in the middle of the room, with open mouth and gazing at the ceiling. It was Kalenik, whose acquaintance we have already made.

“Now I am at home,” he said, taking his seat by the door, without taking any notice of those present. “Ah! to what a length Satan made the road stretch. I went on and on, and there was no end. My legs are quite broken. Woman, bring me my fur blanket to lie down on. There it is in the corner; but mind you don’t upset the little pot of snuff. But no; better not touch it! Leave it alone! You are really quite drunk—I had better get it myself.”

Kalenik tried to rise, but an invincible power fettered him to his seat.

“That’s a nice business!” said the headman. “He comes into a strange house, and behaves as though he were at home! Push him out, in heaven’s name!”

“Let him rest a bit, friend!” said the distiller, seizing the headman’s arm. “The man is very useful; if we had only plenty of this kind, our distillery would get on grandly....” For the rest, it was not good-nature which inspired these words. The distiller was full of superstition, and to turn out a man who had already sat down, seemed to him to be tantamount to invoking the devil.

“That comes of being old,” grumbled Kalenik, stretching himself out along the seat. “People might say I was drunk, but no, I am not! Why should I lie? I am ready to tell the headman to his face! Who is the headman anyway? May he break his neck, the son of a dog! I spit at him! May he be run over by a cart, the one-eyed devil!”

“Ah! the drunken sot has crawled into the house, and now he lays his paws on the table,” said the headman, rising angrily; but at that moment a heavy stone, breaking a window-pane to pieces, fell at his feet. The headman remained standing. “If I knew,” he said, “what jail-bird has thrown it, I would give him something. What devil’s trick is this?” he continued, looking at the stone, which he held in his hand, with burning eyes. “I wish I could choke him with it!”

“Stop! Stop! God preserve you, friend!” broke in the distiller, looking pale. “God keep you in this world and the next, but don’t curse anyone so.”

“Ah! now we have his defender! May he be ruined!”

“Listen, friend! You don’t know what happened to my late mother-in-law.”

“Your mother-in-law?”

“Yes, my mother-in-law. One evening, perhaps rather earlier than this, they were sitting at supper, my late mother-in-law, my father-in-law, their two servants, and five children. My mother-in-law emptied some dumplings from the cooking-pot into a dish in order to cool them. But the others, being hungry after the day’s work, did not wait till they were quite cooled, but stuck their long wooden forks into them and ate them at once. All at once a stranger entered—heaven knows whence!—and asked to be allowed to share their meal. They could not refuse to feed a hungry man, and gave him also a wooden fork. But the guest made as short work with the dumplings as a cow with hay. Before the family had each of them finished his or her dumpling and reached out their forks again for another, the dish had been swept as clean as the floor of a nobleman’s drawing-room. My mother-in-law emptied out some more dumplings; she thought to herself, ‘Now the guest is satisfied, and will not be so greedy.’ But on the contrary, he began to swallow them faster than ever, and emptied the second dish also. ‘May one of them choke you!’ said my mother-in-law under her breath. Suddenly the guest seemed to try to clear his throat, and fell back. They rushed

to his help, but his breath had stopped and he was dead."

"Served him right, the cursed glutton!"

"But it turned out quite otherwise; since that time my mother-in-law has no rest. No sooner is it dark than the dead man approaches the house. He then sits astride the chimney, the scoundrel, holding a dumpling between his teeth. During the day it is quite quiet—one hears and sees nothing; but as soon as it begins to grow dark, and one casts a look at the roof, there he is comfortably perched on the chimney!"

"A wonderful story, friend! I heard something similar from my late———"

Then the headman suddenly stopped. Outside there were noises, and the stamping of dancers' feet. The strings of a guitar were being struck gently, to the accompaniment of a voice. Then the guitar was played more loudly, many voices joined in, and the whole chorus struck up a song in ridicule of the headman.

When it was over, the distiller said, with his head bent a little on one side, to the headman who was almost petrified by the audacity of the serenaders, "A fine song, my friend!"

"Very fine! Only it is a pity that they insult the headman."

He folded his arms with a certain measure of composure on the table, and prepared to listen further, for the singing and noise outside continued. A sharp observer, however, would have seen that it was not mere torpidity which made the headman sit so quietly. In the same way a crafty cat often allows an inexperienced mouse to play about her tail, while she is quickly devising a plan to cut it off from the mouse-hole. The headman's one eye was still fastened on the window, and his hand, after he had given the village councillor a sign, was reaching for the door-handle, when suddenly a loud noise and shouts were heard from the street. The distiller, who beside many other characteristics possessed a keen curiosity, laid down his pipe quickly and ran into the street; but the ne'er-do-wells had all dispersed.

"No, you don't escape me!" cried the headman, dragging someone muffled up in a sheepskin coat with the hair turned outwards, by the arm.

The distiller rapidly seized a favourable moment to look at the face of this disturber of the peace; but he started back when he saw a long beard and a grim, painted face.

"No, you don't escape me!" exclaimed the headman again as he dragged his prisoner into the vestibule.

The latter offered no resistance, and followed him as quietly as though it had been his own

house.

“Karpo, open the store-room!” the headman called to the village councillor. “We will throw him in there! Then we will awake the clerk, call the village council together, catch this impudent rabble, and pass our sentence on them at once.”

The village councillor unlocked the store-room; then in the darkness of the vestibule, the prisoner made a desperate effort to break loose from the headman’s arms.

“Ah! you would, would you?” exclaimed the headman, holding him more firmly by the collar.

“Let me go! It is I!” a half-stifled voice was heard saying.

“It is no good, brother! You may squeal if you choose, like the devil, instead of imitating a woman, but you won’t get round me.” So saying, he thrust the prisoner with such violence into the dark room that he fell on the ground and groaned aloud.

The victorious headman, accompanied by the village councillor, now betook himself to the clerk’s; they were followed by the distiller, who was veiled in clouds of tobacco-smoke, and resembled a steamer.

They were all three walking reflectively with bent heads, when suddenly, turning into a dark side-alley, they uttered a cry and started back in consequence of coming into collision with three other men, who on their side shouted with equal loudness. The headman saw with his one eye, to his no small astonishment, the clerk with two village councillors.

“I was just coming to you, Mr Notary.”

“And I was on my way to your honour.”

“These are strange goings-on, Mr Notary.”

“Indeed they are, your honour.”

“Have you seen them then?” asked the headman, surprised.

“The young fellows are roaming about the streets using vile language. They are abusing your honour in a way—in a word, it is a scandal. A drunken Russian would be ashamed to use such words.”

The lean notary, in his gaily striped breeches and yeast-coloured waistcoat, kept on

stretching forward and drawing back his neck while he talked.

“Hardly had I gone to sleep,” he continued, “than the cursed loafers woke me up with their shameful songs and their noise. I meant to give them a sound rating, but while I was putting on my breeches and vest, they all ran away. But the ringleader has not escaped; for the present he is shut up in the hut which we use as a prison. I was very curious to know who the scapegrace is, but his face is as sooty as the devil’s when he forges nails for sinners.”

“What clothes does he wear, Mr Notary?”

“The son of a dog wears a black sheepskin coat turned inside out, your honour.”

“Aren’t you telling me a lie, Mr Notary? The same good-for-nothing is now shut up in my store-room under lock and key.”

“No, your honour! You have drawn the long bow a little yourself, and should not be vexed at what I say.”

“Bring a light! We will take a look at him at once!”

They returned to the headman’s house; the store-room door was opened, and the headman groaned for sheer amazement as he saw his sister-in-law standing before him.

“Tell me then,” she said, stepping forward, “have you quite lost your senses? Had you a single particle of brains in your one-eyed fish-head when you locked me up in the dark room? It is a mercy I did not break my head against the iron door hinge. Didn’t I shout out that it was I? Then he seized me, the cursed bear, with his iron claws, and pushed me in. May Satan hereafter so push you into hell!” The last words she spoke from the street, having wisely gone out of his reach.

“Yes, now I see that it is you!” said the headman, who had slowly recovered his composure.

“Is he not a scamp and a scoundrel, Mr Clerk?” he continued.

“Yes, certainly, your honour.”

“Isn’t it high time to give all these loose fellows a lesson, that they may at last betake themselves to their work?”

“Yes, it is high time, your honour.”

“The fools have combined in a gang. What the deuce is that? It sounded like my sister-in-law’s voice. The blockheads think that I am like her, an ordinary Cossack.”

Here he coughed and cleared his throat, and a gleam in his eyes showed that he was about to say something very important. “In the year one thousand—I cannot keep these cursed dates in my memory, if I was to be killed for it. Well, never mind when it was, the Commissary Ledatcho was commanded to choose out a Cossack who was cleverer than the rest. Yes,” he added, raising his forefinger, “cleverer than the rest, to accompany the Czar. Then I was———”

“Yes, yes,” the notary interrupted him, “we all know, headman, that you well deserved the imperial favour. But confess now that I was right: you made a mistake when you declared that you had caught the vagabond in the reversed sheepskin.”

“This disguised devil I will have imprisoned to serve as a warning to the rest. They will have to learn what authority means. Who has appointed the headman, if not the Czar? Then we will tackle the other fellows. I don’t forget how the scamps drove a whole herd of swine into my garden, which ate up all the cabbages and cucumbers; I don’t forget how those sons of devils refused to thrash my rye for me. I don’t forget—to the deuce with them! We must first find out who this scoundrel in the sheepskin really is.”

“He is a sly dog anyway,” said the distiller, whose cheeks during the whole conversation had been as full of smoke as a siege-cannon, and whose lips, when he took his pipe out of his mouth, seemed to emit sparks.

Meanwhile they had approached a small ruined hut. Their curiosity had mounted to the highest pitch, and they pressed round the door. The notary produced a key and tried to turn the lock, but it did not fit; it was the key of his trunk. The impatience of the onlookers increased. He plunged his hand into the wide pocket of his gaily striped breeches, bent his back, scraped with his feet, uttered imprecations, and at last cried triumphantly, “I have it!”

At these words the hearts of our heroes beat so loud, that the turning of the key in the lock was almost inaudible. At last the door opened, and the headman turned as white as a sheet. The distiller felt a shiver run down his spine, and his hair stood on end. Terror and apprehension were stamped on the notary’s face; the village councillors almost sank into the ground and could not shut their wide-open mouths. Before them stood the headman’s sister-in-law!

She was not less startled than they, but recovered herself somewhat, and made a movement as if to approach them.

“Stop!” cried the headman in an excited voice, and slammed the door again. “Sirs, Satan is behind this!” he continued. “Bring fire quickly! Never mind the hut! Set it alight and burn it up so that not even the witch’s bones remain.”

“Wait a minute, brother!” exclaimed the distiller. “Your hair is grey, but you are not very intelligent; no ordinary fire will burn a witch. Only the fire of a pipe can do it. I will manage it all right.” So saying, he shook some glowing ashes from his pipe on to a bundle of straw, and began to fan the flame.

Despair gave the unfortunate woman courage; she began to implore them in a loud voice.

“Stop a moment, brother! Perhaps we are incurring guilt needlessly. Perhaps she is really no witch!” said the notary. “If the person sitting in there declares herself ready to make the sign of the cross, then she is not a child of the devil.”

The proposal was accepted. “Look out, Satan!” continued the notary, speaking at a chink in the door. “If you promise not to move, we will open the door.”

The door was opened.

“Cross yourself!” exclaimed the headman, looking round him for a safe place of retreat in case of necessity.

His sister-in-law crossed herself.

“The deuce! It is really you, sister-in-law!”

“What evil spirit dragged you into this hole, friend?” asked the notary.

The headman’s sister related amid sobs how the rioters had seized her on the street, and in spite of her resistance, pushed her through a large window into the hut, on which they had closed the shutters. The notary looked and found that the bolt of the shutter had been wrenched off, and that it was held in its place by a wooden bar placed across it outside.

“You are a nice fellow, you one-eyed Satan!” she now exclaimed, advancing towards the headman, who stepped backwards and continued to contemplate her from head to foot. “I know your thoughts; you were glad of an opportunity to get me shut up in order to run after that petticoat, so that no one could see the grey-haired sinner making a fool of himself. You think I don’t know how you talked this evening with Hanna. Oh, I know everything. You must get up earlier if you want to make a fool of me, you great stupid! I have endured for a long time, but at last don’t take it ill if———”

She made a threatening gesture with her fist, and ran away swiftly, leaving the headman quite taken aback.

“The devil really has something to do with it!” he thought, rubbing his bald head.

“We have him!” now exclaimed the two village councillors as they approached.

“Whom have you?” asked the headman.

“The devil in the sheepskin.”

“Bring him here!” cried the headman, seizing the prisoner by the arm. “Are you mad? This is the drunken Kalenik!”

“It is witchcraft! He was in our hands, your honour!” replied the village councillors. “The rascals were rushing about in the narrow side-streets, dancing and behaving like idiots—the devil take them! How it was we got hold of this fellow instead of him, heaven only knows!”

“In virtue of my authority, and that of the village assembly,” said the headman, “I issue the order to seize these robbers and other young vagabonds which may be met with in the streets, and to bring them before me to be dealt with.”

“Excuse us, your honour,” answered the village councillors, bowing low. “If you could only see the hideous faces they had; may heaven punish us if ever anyone has seen such miscreations since he was born and baptised. These devils might frighten one into an illness.”

“I’ll teach you to be afraid! You won’t obey then? You are certainly in the conspiracy with them! You mutineers! What is the meaning of that? What? You abet robbery and murder! You!—I will inform the Commissary. Go at once, do you hear; fly like birds. I shall—you will ———”

They all dispersed in different directions.

V

THE DROWNED GIRL

Without troubling himself in the least about those who had been sent to pursue him, the originator of all this confusion slowly walked towards the old house and the pool. We hardly

need to say it was Levko. His black fur coat was buttoned up; he carried his cap in his hand, and the perspiration was pouring down his face. The moon poured her light on the gloomy majesty of the dark maple-wood.

The coolness of the air round the motionless pool enticed the weary wanderer to rest by it a while. Universal silence prevailed, only that in the forest thickets the nightingales' songs were heard. An overpowering drowsiness closed his eyes; his tired limbs relaxed, and his head nodded.

"Ah! am I going to sleep?" he said, rising and rubbing his eyes.

He looked round; the night seemed to him still more beautiful. The moonlight seemed to have an intoxicating quality about it, a glamour which he had never perceived before. The landscape was veiled in a silver mist. The air was redolent with the perfume of the apple-blossoms and the night-flowers. Entranced, he gazed on the motionless pool. The old, half-ruined house was clearly reflected without a quiver in the water. But instead of dark shutters, he saw light streaming from brilliantly lit windows. Presently one of them opened. Holding his breath, and without moving a muscle, he fastened his eyes on the pool and seemed to penetrate its depths. What did he see? First he saw at the window a graceful, curly head with shining eyes, propped on a white arm; the head moved and smiled. His heart suddenly began to beat. The water began to break into ripples, and the window closed.

Quietly he withdrew from the pool, and looked towards the house. The dark shutters were flung back; the window-panes gleamed in the moonlight. "How little one can believe what people say!" he thought to himself. "The house is brand-new, and looks as though it had only just been painted. It is certainly inhabited."

He stepped nearer cautiously, but the house was quite silent. The clear song of the nightingales rose powerfully and distinctly on the air, and as they died away one heard the chirping and rustling of the grasshoppers, and the marshbird clapping his slippery beak in the water.

Levko felt enraptured with the sweetness and stillness of the night. He struck the strings of his guitar and sang:

"Oh lovely moon

Thou steepst in light

The house where my darling

Sleeps all night."

A window opened gently, and the same girl whose image he had seen in the pool looked out and listened attentively to the song. Her long-lashed eyelids were partly drooping over her eyes; she was as pale as the moonlight, but wonderfully beautiful. She smiled, and a shiver ran through Levko.

"Sing me a song, young Cossack!" she said gently, bending her head sideways and quite closing her eyes.

"What song shall I sing you, dear girl?"

Tears rolled down her pale cheeks. "Cossack," she said, and there was something inexpressibly touching in her tone, "Cossack, find my stepmother for me. I will do everything for you; I will reward you; I will give you abundant riches. I have armlets embroidered with silk and coral necklaces; I will give you a girdle set with pearls. I have gold. Cossack, seek my stepmother for me. She is a terrible witch; she allowed me no peace in the beautiful world. She tortured me; she made me work like a common maid-servant. Look at my face; she has banished the redness from my cheeks with her unholy magic. Look at my white neck; they cannot be washed away, they cannot be washed away—the blue marks of her iron claws. Look at my white feet; they did not walk on carpets, but on hot sand, on damp ground, on piercing thorns. And my eyes—look at them; they are almost blind with weeping. Seek my stepmother!"

Her voice, which had gradually become louder, stopped, and she wept.

The Cossack felt overpowered by sympathy and grief. "I am ready to do everything to please you, dear lady," he cried with deep emotion; "but where and how can I find her?"

"Look, look!" she said quickly, "she is here! She dances on the lake-shore with my maidens, and warms herself in the moonlight. Yet she is cunning and sly. She has assumed the shape of one who is drowned, yet I know and hear that she is present. I am so afraid of her. Because of her I cannot swim free and light as a fish. I sink and fall to the bottom like a piece of iron. Look for her, Cossack!"

Levko cast a glance at the lake-shore. In a silvery mist there moved, like shadows, girls in white dresses decked with May flowers; gold necklaces and coins gleamed on their necks; but they were very pale, as though formed of transparent clouds. They danced nearer him, and he could hear their voices, somewhat like the sound of reeds stirred in the quiet evening by the breeze.

"Let us play the raven-game! Let us play the raven-game!"

“Who will be the raven?”

Lots were cast, and a girl stepped out of the line of the dancers.

Levko observed her attentively. Her face and clothing resembled those of the others; but she was evidently unwilling to play the part assigned her. The dancers revolved rapidly round her, without her being able to catch one of them.

“No, I won’t be the raven any more,” she said, quite exhausted. “I do not like to rob the poor mother-hen of her chickens.”

“You are not a witch,” thought Levko.

The girls again gathered together in order to cast lots who should be the raven.

“I will be the raven!” called one from the midst.

Levko watched her closely. Boldly and rapidly she ran after the dancers, and made every effort to catch her prey. Levko began to notice that her body was not transparent like the others; there was something black in the midst of it. Suddenly there was a cry; the “raven” had rushed on a girl, embraced her, and it seemed to Levko as though she had stretched out claws, and as though her face shone with malicious joy.

“Witch!” he cried out, pointing at her suddenly with his finger, and turning towards the house.

The girl at the window laughed, and the other girls dragged the “raven” screaming along with them.

“How shall I reward you, Cossack?” said the maiden. “I know you do not need gold; you love Hanna, but her harsh father will not allow you to marry. But give him this note, and he will cease to hinder it.”

She stretched out her white hand, and her face shone wonderfully. With strange shudders and a beating heart, he grasped the paper and—awoke.

VI

THE AWAKENING

“Have I then been really asleep?” Levko asked himself as he stood up. “Everything seemed so real, as though I were awake. Wonderful! Wonderful!” he repeated, looking round him. The position of the moon vertical overhead showed that it was midnight; a waft of coolness came from the pool. The ruined house with the closed shutters stood there with a melancholy aspect; the moss and weeds which grew thickly upon it showed that it had not been entered by any human foot for a long time. Then he suddenly opened his hand, which had been convulsively clenched during his sleep, and cried aloud with astonishment when he saw the note in it. “Ah! if I could only read,” he thought, turning it this way and that. At that moment he heard a noise behind him.

“Fear nothing! Lay hold of him! What are you afraid of? There are ten of us. I wager that he is a man, and not the devil.”

It was the headman encouraging his companions.

Levko felt himself seized by several arms, many of which were trembling with fear.

“Throw off your mask, friend! Cease trying to fool us,” said the headman, taking him by the collar. But he started back when he saw him closely. “Levko! My son!” he exclaimed, letting his arms sink. “It is you, miserable boy! I thought some rascal, or disguised devil, was playing these tricks; but now it seems you have cooked this mess for your own father—placed yourself at the head of a band of robbers, and composed songs to ridicule him. Eh, Levko! What is the meaning of that? It seems your back is itching. Tie him fast!”

“Stop, father! I have been ordered to give you this note,” said Levko.

“Let me see it then! But bind him all the same.”

“Wait, headman,” said the notary, unfolding the note; “it is the Commissary’s handwriting!”

“The Commissary’s?”

“The Commissary’s?” echoed the village councillors mechanically.

“The Commissary’s? Wonderful! Still more incomprehensible!” thought Levko.

“Read! Read!” said the headman. “What does the Commissary write?”

“Let us hear!” exclaimed the distiller, holding his pipe between his teeth, and lighting it.

The notary cleared his throat and began to read.

“ ‘Order to the headman, Javtuk Makohonenko.

“ ‘It has been brought to our knowledge that you, old id———’ ”

“Stop! Stop! That is unnecessary!” exclaimed the headman. “Even if I have not heard it, I know that that is not the chief matter. Read further!”

“ ‘Consequently I order you at once to marry your son, Levko Makohonenko, to the Cossack’s daughter, Hanna Petritchenka, to repair the bridges on the post-road, and to give no horses belonging to the lords of the manor to the county-court magistrates without my knowledge. If on my arrival I do not find these orders carried out, I shall hold you singly responsible.

“ ‘Lieut. Kosma Derkatch-Drischpanowski,

“ ‘*Commissary*.’ ”

“There we have it!” exclaimed the headman, with his mouth open. “Have you heard it? The headman is made responsible for everything, and therefore everyone has to obey him without contradiction! Otherwise, I beg to resign my office. And you,” he continued, turning to Levko, “I will have married, as the Commissary directs, though it seems to me strange how he knows of the affair; but you will get a taste of my knout first—the one, you know, which hangs on the wall at my bed-head. But how did you get hold of the note?”

Levko, in spite of the astonishment which the unexpected turn of affairs caused him, had had the foresight to prepare an answer, and to conceal the way in which the note had come into his possession. “I was in the town last night,” he said, “and met the Commissary just as he was alighting from his droshky. When he heard from which village I was he gave me the note and bid me tell you by word of mouth, father, that he would dine with us on his way back.”

“Did he say that?”

“Yes.”

“Have you heard it?” said the headman, with a solemn air turning to his companions. “The Commissary himself, in his own person, comes to us, that is to me, to dine.” The headman lifted a finger and bent his head as though he were listening to something. “The Commissary, do you hear, the Commissary is coming to dine with me! What do you think, Mr Notary? And what do you think, friend? That is not a little honour, is it?”

“As far as I can recollect,” the notary broke in, “no Commissary has ever dined with a headman.”

“All headmen are not alike,” he answered with a self-satisfied air. Then he uttered a hoarse laugh and said, “What do you think, Mr Notary? Isn’t it right to order that in honour of the distinguished guest, a fowl, linen, and other things should be offered by every cottage?”

“Yes, they should.”

“And when is the wedding to be, father?” asked Levko.

“Wedding! I should like to celebrate your wedding in my way! Well, in honour of the distinguished guest, to-morrow the pope will marry you. Let the Commissary see that you are punctual. Now, children, we will go to bed. Go to your houses. The present occasion reminds me of the time when I———” At these words the headman assumed his customary solemn air.

“Now the headman will relate how he accompanied the Czarina!” said Levko to himself, and hastened quickly, and full of joy, to the cherry-tree-shaded house, which we know. “May God bless you, beloved, and the holy angels smile on you. To no one will I relate the wonders of this night except to you, Hanna; you alone will believe it, and pray with me for the repose of the souls of the poor drowned maidens.”

He approached the house; the window was open; the moonbeams fell on Hanna, who was sleeping by it. Her head was supported on her arm; her cheeks glowed; her lips moved, gently murmuring his name.

“Sleep sweetly, my darling. Dream of everything that is good, and yet the awaking will surpass all.” He made the sign of the cross over her, closed the window, and gently withdrew.

In a few moments the whole village was buried in slumber. Only the moon hung as brilliant and wonderful as before in the immensity of the Ukraine sky. The divine night continued

her reign in solemn stillness, while the earth lay bathed in silvery radiance. The universal silence was only broken here and there by the bark of a dog; only the drunken Kalenik still wandered about the empty streets seeking for his house.