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## The Grave

[After a classical motif — for Daca (Datsa)]

ONE day in March 1943, Edo Sliwnik, Bučko to his friends, surveyor, woke up early in the morning to find himself looking down the barrels of three revolvers. He had just started up from dreams.

His wife stood in the corner of the room, tears trickling down between her fingers with which she had covered her face. He watched those tears and saw them dropping into the sleeves of her nightgown. The room continued to revolve in the dance of dreams which that night had troubled Edo more than usual. An official, straddled between two carabinieri, pressed his left forefinger to his lips and winked; he looked absurdly like the late Kulovec, just as Edo knew him from the newspapers. His wife's tears which she had hidden behind her hands suddenly ceased to flow. Edo understood and knew that this was even worse. Tears are a safety valve, the culvert of distress. Daylight had penetrated to the far corner of the room when Edo shouldered a rug and put on his hat.

Now her arms hung down limply and not even a little finger twitched. Her face was grey, her eyes seemed large and estranged, as if their true nature had left for foreign parts and left a bewildered tenant in its place. The body kept its place and that was a good thing, because the body and the intimacy it invites act as a brake upon the spirit, which is apt to spin giddily in dangerous regions. As she was leaning backwards her gown was drawn tightly over her figure. Edo looked at her long thighs, the rift between, and the rounded body higher up. For five years all these had been his. Never had he known all their mystery. Now she seemed taller to him than ever; in the milky light diffused between the mauve tinted walls of their bedroom, she looked to him like a figure in a dream of mountain fairies which he had not been permitted

to dream to the end. Yes, a strange tenant looked from those eyes. He stepped towards the door.

In that moment, with a cry like an animal she threw herself down blocking the threshold of the door. Her nails tore at the polish of the parquet. A carabinieri stepped across her, then the official, then Edo and lastly the second carabinieri. He knew that he must not stoop, that he might not kiss her. He also knew his own fate, knew what was in store for him. The realization of it gaped suddenly like the hatchway of the staircase. He saw his own death moving towards him, robed in his wife's cry. (Animals scent it before they fall asleep, and some women do so before the dawn and cry out.)

When they were near the prison that cry was still vibrating in the pallid air.

All that was known later on was that the Italians handed Edo over to some of his own people. Such things cannot remain hidden in a small place. People marvelled. Šlajpah's farmhand saw four men dragging him, bound, along a road leading to some lonely farms on Plesnik. They seemed to have struck him on the jaw, because he was spitting as he went, and there were fragments of teeth in the blood-stained saliva. It was evening and the man had not dared to follow them.

That was all that was known.

There was a lot of gossip about the widow, probably precisely because nobody saw anything of her. She shut herself up in her house. An old woman, whom deafness prevented from continuing her profession as a midwife, brought her food and spirits. She drank beetroot brandy. The old wife described a darkened room where the air was terribly stale and only a small paraffin lamp shed a feeble light in the gloom. She spoke of her gown which reached the floor, of her stoutness, and her face without the smallest spot of colour. The old woman had no imagination; other people had all the more. The war passed under the widow's windows. One night there was a German raid above the Mlini wood and on that occasion she was seen for the first time. The night was cloudless, the stars, big as buns lit up the countryside. And the haylofts on the slopes of Robek were on fire and shed their light over the valley. Reports differed. It was said that the first to catch sight of her was the white gard posted with a machine-gun on top of the tower of the fire-brigade station.

»Like a log that's been scorched«, he described the widow.

She had been in mourning — she did not take it off even at night — and with her outstretched hands she was caressing the light in front of her. She was staring at the fire and her shadow followed her as she moved in a semicircle towards the apple-tree in blossom. When she reached the tree, she fell on her knees and shrieked like a wild animal. (The watchman on the tower was familiar with that shriek. That morning he had lurked behind the corner waiting for the carabinieri and their prisoner). Like a log that's been scorched...

It was the only night on which she was seen.

And then the war came to an end.

As she disappeared so she reappeared. A crowd of children and the curious glances of the grown-ups followed her whenever she crossed the

square. When people talked of her madness, they did so with a special, almost respectful note in their speech. She went to the court and lingered in front of the prison. She did not demand that any should be punished; she wanted to know where to find her husband's grave.

»I would only like you to worm this out of them«, said she. She stared through the gratings and over her face flitted the smile of a child in a quandary.

»Help me«, said she to one man, to a second, a third. She went from house to house, until in the end Slajpah's farmhand sent her to Plesnik hill.

After that she was often seen making her way uphill. She always put up at the last of the houses. It was the house of the red-haired Conč, who had given up his profession as an organist seven years ago to bury himself in this lonely place. Even less was known of him than of the widow, although people were curious about him.

Plesnik is a rounded mountain. On its summit stands a belfry scanning the view. It has a wide view, perhaps it can see the town. It is the hand of the clock face of the sky. In gloomy weather the clouds rest upon it. Now noon is past, time moves on across the sunlit scrub like an animal that has been let off the rope. The breeze caresses the hill. It frolics like a cat, and yet it is demoniac. Nettles grow about the sacristy, everything smells of nettles, of dust, of rotting timber; the perfume of incense evaporated long since. (A man might well ask how long the belfry would endure, how long it would keep watch.)

The woman went towards the cottage, her eyes fixed only on the horizon. The nearest house in any direction was a good hour's walk distant. She was not afraid of loneliness, had been familiar with it for three years. She saw how the man started at the sight of her, rose from the threshold and vanished through the door. Nothing put her out, it was probably the hundredth time that she had come. Her lips swayed as she made her way through the tall grass.

When she pushed the door open, she saw nobody, because he was standing by the window leaning against it. She had known that body for a long time, and for a long time it had tormented her: it was a dark mountain of muscle and the summit of it was afire with a shock of red hair the ends of which hung straggling over his collar. She crossed over to the stove and sat down on the bench. The clock was silent. A spider would have made more noise than the objects in the room, which reeked of the stale smell of dry shredded apples, damp ash and rags. She held her breath, because she knew how to efface herself.

At last he turned round. She saw him as he truly was — with the nostrils of a thoroughbred, in his eyes the rains and fog among the pine trees, and always there was the same play of cloud and sunshine mirrored in distant fields of wheat, the dull thud of falling apples on the hillside. And they really were falling below the window at the moment when he turned away and strode across the room. (The window was cross-barred).

He went to the cupboard, opened the doors and took out a bottle of homemade brandy. He poured out a glass for her and for himself. He bent down as if he wanted to inhale the odour of it, and his hand, knotty and calloused clung greedily to the glass. He spilt some of the drink on the table, and at once the room was full of the smell of brandy.

He asked her:

»Have you come back about the same thing?«

She nodded. He made a gesture with his hand and sat down beside her preserving, however, the distance of a foot between them. The solitude with which he had surrounded himself for so many years had endowed his movements with a purposeful calm. She looked straight ahead as he answered him: »You must tell me!«

He looked at her sideways and a smile flitted over his features. It was obvious, it was by no means the first time that they had brought up this matter.

»Indeed...?«

»I must see his grave.«

The man gave no answer; like a fire collapsing upon itself, he sat beside her shuffling his feet on the floor with an air as if he were listening to sounds, no matter whether they rose from below the window or travelled from afar; something fell: it might be apples; it might be clods of soil or even a tap dripping in the kitchen. It all sounded alike.

»I must!« she repeated.

He rolled himself a cigarette and deliberately lit it.

»Tisn't worth bothering to go uphill for that. Tisn't worth it.«

Very lightly she laid her hand on his wrist. He scarcely felt the touch of it, but it sent a shiver through him such as a man feels when he dives into cold water. He turned his head and the look with which he sized her up from top to toe was a wide-eyed and cold, although sparks of smouldering fires were leaping in his blood. Then he leaned forward from his waist, winked at the light and shook with laughter.

»Bučko! Bučko!« he repeated. »Bučko! Lovely name! Bučko!«

Probably he expected the woman to get up and go out. But she did nothing of the sort. She kept her seat. She slid a smoothing finger-nail along the edge of the table: with a ghost of a smile she watched that gliding nail, but some time elapsed before her lips formed the words:

»There's a mystery here...«

She still held the glass in the left hand. He took it from her and set it on the table. Then she turned away from him and asked:

»Did you...? Was it you that killed him?«...

Quite simply, without the slightest inhibition the question slipped from her lips, but anyone watching her closely would have seen that her shoulders shook with weeping and suppressed horror. For a long time he did not answer her, merely mumbling his name. Then he snapped: »No! I didn't! Pity...«

»Would you?«

»Yes!«

»But you weren't one of them?«

»I wasn't.«

For a moment he was silent, then he burst out:

»But he was! They killed him because in his fright he gave something away. You see, that was it.«

The woman laughed a shrill unnatural laugh.

Again they were silent and while he rolled himself another cigarette, it was obvious that he was collecting his thoughts and choosing his words. The sun has moved from the window towards the forest, towards the scrub, the cry of a solitary bird reverberated over the dell and above the blue distance; and the man sitting in the darkened room, observing these details, strung them in order, like beads on a rosary, measuring time by them.

»They led him past my house. As they passed the pump they tightened the rope about his arms because he was straining at his bonds and was set on having a drink. It was very late. I had not yet lit the lamp and so I could see him. There was starlight. I recognized him at once. He looked up the hill, he looked down, perhaps at the town. Nobody knows what are a man's thoughts in such an hour. Then he stamped his feet. »There«, said I, »it will be hard for him, there's too much strength in him still.« Like your father when he forced the vessel with the holy water into my hand and shouted. D'you remember?»

She shook her hand because though hearing his words she was absorbed in her own thoughts. Abruptly she repeated her question: »Will you show it to me? Did he really side with them?»

»Your father was dying and you were in an awful hurry to get married. I visited him during those last days and played for him on that old harmonium, which was in your family. When I was with him, I sometimes saw you although you tried to keep out of my sight. His bedroom stank of putrid flesh, dry rot and hay. You never changed his ben linen. Then I realized that you are a bad woman. I came, sat down, he looked at me. His eyes were quite white — he asked me: »Will she really go off with that fellow? What do they call him?« I said: »Bučko«. But when he heard that, he beat his forehead with his fist. To this day I can see him, just as he was...« The man spoke hurriedly, and yet each sentence was uttered separately. That was odd; it was also a good thing: you had safely got over one image, when the other appeared. They scarcely reached the widow's consciousness. She had eyes only for the vision of her husband, whom they had murdered somewhere near by, while her father's shadow conjured up by these reminders of him skipped like a patch of reflected light on the walls of memory. She kept to her point, never faltering, always coming back to the same point.

»I know that you will show me his grave... Do you want me never to be at peace?... Tell me, how did they? Did they shoot him or did they use a cudgel? I have dreamed of both, one and the other.«

He refilled their glasses with brandy. He handed her the drink without looking at her. It was as if he were about to crush the glass in his overpowerful grip. He continued his tale as if it had never been interrupted by her questions.

»Once, when I went to see him, he begged me to go to the window. I went. You know it was fairly high up. The window overlooked the cemetery. »Look«, said he, »look at the cemetery!« It was just such a day as this. »Look«, said he, »whether they have dug the grave. They can scarcely wait«. I thought you can scarcely wait. Then he bade me come to his bedside. He took my hands. »Why did you let him take her from you«, said he with death rattle in his throat. »I meant her for you. Why did you let him?»

»They surely killed him with a cudgel.«

»The last night you were all grouped in the passage. Your young man stood behind the door. I don't know why I told him. I probably thought he could no longer hear me, and I was talking to myself. »Bučko is in the passage«, said I. I remember exactly how your father sat up in his bed. Those white eyes of his were dimmed with cataract, but they sparkled all the same. He seized the bowl with holy water. The water splashed over the brim. He pressed the bowl into my hand. »Drive him out! Drive him out! The devil! He's a devil! Drive him out!« He shouted to the last. The bowl with holy water slipped from his hand. Then he collapsed. As I went out of the house your young man was still behind the door and you covering him. I couldn't touch him. Soon afterwards I took up my quarters up here.

»Yes, he stood behind the door and you in front of him. He was handsome, but frail...«

Now that he had touched upon a subject that interested her the woman looked up.

»My father hated him because of his family. It was an old story.«

»His father was a devil of a man.«

»No! No, but all the same...«

»He drove your father's sister, your aunt, into the river. When she buried that child, he drove her into the river. You don't remember it, I was only a nipper at the time, but I remember quite clearly how they fished her out of the river.«

The afternoon wore on. The crossbars and the wall on the left were pale yellow. A cockroach appeared on the threshold of the black kitchen. The woman turned to look at the clock which had stopped and then she said: »How late it is... Why won't you show me his grave?»

»I won't. It's from you I hid him. Honestly. I found him in the morning. They left him lying behind a bush. Flies were already at work on him. What if the foxes...? I buried him...«

»Why did you lie to me before?»

»I didn't. Twice I saw him on a raid with them. I know more than you think... But I buried him all the same.«

A shadow darkened the look in her eyes for a moment.

»Was he pale?»

»No, red.«

»With blood?»

»Yes, in a pool of it down to his waist. Have a drink.«

»Yes.«

»That's better.«

»Have another!«

He refilled their glasses. Even while he was pouring the brandy his left hand was busy rolling a cigarette.

»All bad women drink...« he added.

»Did he look handsome?»

She leaned back, as if with her own body she were trying to clasp the shade of her husband's body even as spirit and memory had recalled

him. When the man saw this his grip closed upon the liqueur-glass and crushed it. The splinters and a few drops of blood fell on the table. He started up from the bench.

»Stop it!« he shouted.

He crossed over to the clock and started the pendulum. For a while the silence was so complete, that you could hear the cockroaches running about the kitchen. The woman stretched out her hand.

»Were you ever in love with me?« she asked.

Then more softly:

»Deeply, weren't you...?«

The man, thick-set, red-haired, leaned against the wall beside the clock. The wall was cold, stained with wide streaks of damp. He was breathing deeply, his hands clawing the whitewash from the wall. How much of the past, how many old memories, thoughts, and hopes were embodied in one movement of that calloused claw... There is more pain from a wound that has healed badly than from a fresh injury. Perhaps the woman felt what was the matter and what was likely to happen. She looked at him and never shifted her glance.

»You loved me very much...«

»Never!« he muttered into the wall.

Then he turned. He stood with feet apart and his legs looked like the supports of a stout carpenter's bench.

So far the woman had just seemed absent-minded, but now her face lit up with a flash of realization.

»Why do you look at me like that?« said she.

He was still standing below the clock and the pendulum just about grazed his head.

»Go!«

(His voice brought a smile to the woman's lips like that of an athlete who has overcome the first obstacle. There was also something of the cunning of a person in a quandary.)

The red-haired man detached himself from the wall, went to the window and looked out upon the hill-side. In the vivid orange light of that hour his head looked like a melon suffused with blood. The woman drained the last drop from the glass. She covered her eyes. Then she heard him cross the room and stop at the door. Once more he was breathing naturally.

»You'll be late«, said he. »You must go.«

The widow straightened the folds in her gown, sought the support of the table and stood up. She came up behind him and took him by the shoulders.

»If you will show me his grave, I will spend the night with you.«

His purple face suddenly turned grey with red blotches. He touched his lips — his white lips — and then the frame of the door, like a man in great straits, when he feels the ground fail beneath his feet and loses all sense of past or future. He felt the twitching pressure of her fingers on his shoulder, her breasts a little above his waist, her knees against his thighs. And all this enveloped in the perfume of her hair, mixed with the odour of brandy. A strange, terribly disquieting shiver travelled up his spine and enveloped his brain.

»I'll stay with you. Show me his grave!«

The man passed his hand over his brow, where great drops of sweat were breaking out in long lines. He was staring straight ahead; his legs trembling, he cleared his throat like an excited consumptive. He moved away from her, did not know which way to turn.

»Let's go«, he said at last.

The woman was already in the passage where she caught sight of a spade and a pick.

»Why?« he asked as she pointed her finger at the tools.

»Take them with you!«

He went to the corner and shouldered them. A man might well ask: How shall the birds escape who have their nests up there? The forests in the western horizon were on fire. The clouds rose high in the air, one that was too slow was caught up in the flames. Like indolent monsters of the sea the shadows of the hills slowly invaded the hollows on the eastern side.

They took the usual path. The widow stumbled as she walked; yet was unable to say whether her legs were of lead or without any weight at all. First they went downhill. The man carried the spade on his shoulder and dragged the pick along as he walked.

»This way,« he said and pointed to the forest.

She pushed him away, hurried past him and plunged into the bracken. Her feet caught in the undergrowth and roots, and the curves of her body grew tense with the effort of moving. The black gown vainly sought to conceal her opulent figure. The sun shed gold upon her garment. After a few steps she paused and looked around. She saw that he was looking at her. The slanting rays that pierced the green ceiling failed to reach him; he stood in the shadow, yet from that shadow glared evil eyes, bloodshot and inflamed. Her eyes were the eyes of the forest fay, as her dead love so often had described them, saying: oh, the miracle... When all the blood had gone to her head and her fingers were like ice, nothing was hid from her...

The odour of the bracken was stronger than that of the grass on the level. She raised her hand.

»Come on,« she cried.

When he caught up with her, he again kept his eyes fixed on the ground. In some distant bush two birds chattered together. This gave him an opening to say:

»How noisy they are. In the morning the birds sing complete songs. In the evening they chirp by fits and starts like the disjointed utterance of a tired drunkard...«

»Yes«, said she. »Come on!«

He strode on and was careful not to jostle her with his shoulders. There were still great drops of sweat on his face although by this time it was cool under the foliage. They walked on stubbornly and without a word. The sun winked above them through the branches. After a while she broke the silence:

»You found him in the morning?... Were the birds singing?«

»Probably, I don't know. There were plenty of animals about. I told you about the flies. I saw no foxes; but foxes gather fast enough. They smell corpses and they come. When your old man looked under the

pillow for the will that last night, I heard them barking. The Gorčes used to keep a young fox in a cage.

Thus they, each of them, got back to their subjects, not so much because of obstinacy as because they were genuinely absorbed by them.

»Did you know them?« she asked.

He did not seem inclined to answer her at once. She had to seize him by the sleeve.

»No. They were young chaps and it was evening. And I hadn't been down there for seven years. Not since your wedding. I don't know the newcomers. Though as a matter of fact I think those were the fellows with whom he came up here and persecuted people.«

»You lie! Did you wash his face?«

»No. I knocked four boards together. It wasn't exactly a coffin, but...«

»He always had the air of a prince...«

The man turned to look at her. His own breath scorched his lips. He gripped the handle of the spade and stared. The look in her eyes passed through him, like water through a sieve.

»What a woman you are...« he groaned.

Once more the path was clear between the bracken. It was covered with dead leaves and the low sun flickered over it. The silence of the forest became more intense. At intervals puffs of smoke, which the fire had borne skywards, drifted lazily among the crowns of the trees; and it seemed as if they too exhaled a strange, fateful silence. The man dragged the pick along the ground, tracing a furrow; sometime the point caught and the furrow was interrupted.

»It'll be over there«, he said.

They had come to the edge of the wood. There was a gap between the branches overhead and a circular dell lay before them. Heather grew about its edge, the bottom was covered with lush grass. Over the opposite bank the slanting sunbeams fell into the very centre of the dell. There was a bush there and beside the bush a stone shaped like a pyramid.

»They shot him from up there«, he said.

A large bird flew up from a fir tree and circled above the dell. Its cry drowned the woman's gasps.

»Over there...«

It seemed as if the woman were held in a magic circle. She had lived too long by night to find her way at once in daylight. She caught at a branch which dropped in front of her nose: her wax-like fingers strained convulsively. She had no eyes; those were not eyes, but grey pools in November, something the depth of which we know not. The red-haired man repeated:

»They shot him from up there.«

He noticed that her thighs were beginning to quiver, that the light of the setting sun could not lend brightness to her pale cheeks, that she was stooping forward like a runner before starting on the race. He tried to hold her back, but at this very moment she moved, freed herself from his grasp and ran up the hill. She stumbled among the stones and the tree stumps. She was like a boat with an inexperienced hand at the helm.

»Wait,« he cried. He saw her breaking down beside the stone, and then, he, too, came down the bank.

Her forehead touched the stone, her hands were digging in the earth below while she incessantly repeated his name as though it were some magic formula with which to exorcise the agony of the night and the memory of that white princely body. The man sat a few paces distant from her. He was rolling a cigarette; in doing that he spilt some tobacco on his knees and when he wanted to blow it away, he found that he could not because his lips were cracked and completely dry.

»Edo! Edo! Edo!« she whispered into the stone.

»You may as well call him Bučko. Your father knew him only by that name. One fine day after dinner he told me to kill him. But that was done by others. Two nights before it happened I dreamed how it would be...«

»You are a beast«, said she almost inaudibly. But he heard it and he also heard her take up the old song, repeating that name, endlessly, without stopping.

»You yourself were a beast to your father, woman.«

She stood up. Among a thousand faces he would recognize it by its expression of intense hate and concentrated passion.

»Did you covet our house?«

»No«, said he, »I wanted you.«

It seemed to him that a smile flitted over her face. He threw away his cigarette and stood up. Supporting himself with the pick, he strode up to her. He was so heavy that his feet sunk deep into the damp soil. He stopped just behind her, as she was still kneeling and digging in the earth.

»And I would have killed you, too,« said he.

She stopped her digging. Her restless hands were stilled. Slowly she looked round, but her eyes that had been lifeless so far took on a special colour.

»Is that so?«

Her eyes travelled over his face and over the squat body leaning on the pick. Meantime he laughed.

»That would be funny!« ... he whispered. »If I were to kill you...«

The woman slewed round from the waist. She stretched out her hands and embraced his knees. So little did he expect it that the man scarcely kept his balance.

»You'll dig him up for me!«

He thrust her away, and as he retreated backwards from her hands it seemed to him as if everything strange he had ever experienced was rushing past him in his memory, that all the delirium of a seven year's love was grinning impishly through the lightening flight of those images. Behind those images he was aware of her eyes, of two outstretched hands and the cry of a bird of prey circling in the twilight. He scarcely got out the words:

»I won't.«

She rose and came over to him.

»You will.«

»No!«

As she came nearer and never took her eyes off him, he covered his eyes with his hand.

»What a woman you are!« he groaned as he had done once before that day. She bent down to his ear, because he was squat and shorter than herself; he felt her hair on his hands. She said:

»I will stay with you to-night...«

Slowly he withdrew his hand from his eyes. Again he felt the drops of sweat trickling down his spine; he also felt his voice cracking, that his strength was failing, that he was not equal to the game, that like some wizard's box held all the sorrows of his past. From the bank the shadows crept lower till they enveloped her altogether. With the scent of pine-trees, the evening breeze bore also the perfume of the early dew.

»I am to dig him up...?«

»Yes. You must!«

»But do you realize what manner of man he was for whom you demand all this? He was a weakling. He was afraid of you, he was afraid of them, he was afraid of everybody. That is why he got Lužnik into the concentration camp. And for such a wretch...

The man stared at her forehead so as to avoid looking her into eyes.

»At one moment you are a lunatic, and the next you are as sober as the devil... What is it, woman?«

»I must see him. If not my dreams will destroy me. I dream of him all night. Last night he came together with my father. They stood side by side without seeing each other. There was a hole in his forehead, otherwise he was handsome as ever. Fair. Those dreams will destroy me. I must see him.«

»But do you realize the state he'll be in?« he asked.

She shook her head.

»Black, not fair.«

»My father was dark.«

»Why did you hate your father?«

She hesitated only for a moment.

»D'you know why my father hated Edo? If you knew, you would... D'you know what sort of man my father was only two years before his death?«

Her voice was grim. The man facing her leaned on the handle of his pick.

»Ah!« he breathed, — »that... Then it was that.«

»Get on with it!« said she.

Without a word he strode past her to the stone. He brought his weight to bear upon the projecting edge on the left and at the first thrust the stone began to rock. His muscles showed distinctly all along his spine. As he placed them round the stone it suddenly became obvious that his arms were too long.

»How strong you are!« she suddenly said.

»Shore it up with the pick.«

She helped him. Suddenly she, too, was strong. He took hold of the stone near the ground, tilted it up and turned it over. The earth underneath was damp, full of worms and maggots; he outlined the plot he was going to dig. Then he set to work. He bade the woman stand aside. She moved three steps away and then stood stockstill in the gleam of the last sunbeams. The sky was on fire behind her so that the outline

of her body was golden, while her face was wrapped in warm violet shadow. The forest fairy as the man knew her, as he loved her, and feared her, in life and in his dreams. Her hands moved restlessly in her lap, as if she were playing with a kitten. She looked at the man. He seemed like one half-awake and afraid of the glance of a stranger. The soil was crumbling under the blows of the pick.

»I didn't bury him very deep.« said he. »I buried him near the surface only a little deeper than was needed because of the foxes.«

»Do you know that you are like my father? You might have been his son.«

»I...?«

»Yes. Possibly.«

When he had dug a pit about two feet in depth he stood up and looked at her: »Think it over once more,« said he.

»Go on,« she whispered.

She wanted to come nearer, but he waved her away with his hand, then she knelt down so as to be at least thus much nearer to the pit and to the man who would presently emerge from the dust.

»Why were you so fond of him?« asked the red-haired man.

With her hand she drew a circle in the air — a token that might stand for the protection of her husband or for her own feelings.

»There was nothing to him...« he added. The tremor of his voice betrayed the passion that raged in his blood and never found relief in shrieking; he shovelled away frantically, tossing the earth aside. The woman was in similar plight. Those few years in a dark room and what had gone before, all demanded its due and a place beside that great desire for a decaying corpse; even hatred. In the lapping dusk her eyes shone as she said:

»My boy never searched for a will under other people's pillows.«

The spade grated upon the stone and for a moment it seemed as if the man were on the point of raising the tool and killing the woman with it. But she simply went on talking as if she did not realize in the least what she was saying.

»He was so different from all of you... From my father... From you. His hair never straggled over his collar. He had long hands. He was gentle. He was a clean kindly man... What beasts you were, the rest of you! I was still wearing pigtails when you hit me outside Our Lady's chapel...«

»He beat up Lužnik before sending him to the concentration camp. His own people were afraid of him. That's why they...«

She wasn't listening. Just repeated herself:

»You hit me outside Our Lady's chapel.«

»You would kill the lot of us for his sake.«

»I would.«

»I'd rather kill you.«

»You have said that already.«

High up in the sky the first star was twinkling — but it was still light enough to see the turf and distinguish the small creatures seeking their shelters before nightfall. The red-haired man was digging, digging

with the set purpose of a man in flight. Finally the spade struck wood, a board. He shovelled aside the last layer of soil from the rotting board as carefully as if he were dealing with some inconceivably delicate object which must be carefully preserved. The air began to reek of rotting and he turned his face away for a moment for a breath of fresh air from the forest. There were many things rotting there, too, but in a different fashion, because nature's way is not that of man. The woman stooped. Her hair fell over her face, covering it, all but her eyes.

»He stinks,« said the man. »Move away. You'll see him just as well from distance. He stinks like the plague.«

It was as if she did not hear him. The smell did not trouble her; but when the man raised the pick she took two steps backwards. She lay low and under cover of darkness she resembled an animal on the prowl. He drove the point of the pick under the upper edge of the board.

»You'll see him...«

The board split. He lit a match. The corpse lay exposed and it was insignificantly small, as if someone had thrown a bundle of rotting, blackened ropes into the coffin. The flame flickered against the walls of the grave and above the corpse which was lying in a pool of yellow liquid. Its head was facing upward towards the sky. More stars were visible now and one long streak of cloud casting a grey shadow — a shadow in the shadows.

»Now you've got him.«

He threw down the spade and looked hard at her.

»For that you left your father and me. He stinks like sin. Now you've got him. He's got a mask on...«

The blackened face of the corpse was really covered with a veil of corruption beneath which nobody could discern the features of that handsome man, her prince, as she had called him, the lord and master of her soul. The red-haired man jumped on to the turf. He wiped his face and the nape of his neck with his handkerchief. She got on to her feet like a tired soldier.

»I've done,« said he.

She was swaying slightly, reminding one of a tree on the edge of a precipice. The man's thoughts spanning the years stopped at the threshold of the house where he who was now a corpse stood behind the door with a pale smile on his lips (yes, pale, because he was afraid, afraid of the house, afraid of her who was never absent from his dreams, of her father and again of her and then of his own passion confronted with her body and the look in her eyes.) She saw herself walking down the passage bending over her father's face. Her father was lying in a pool of perspiration and babbled of the girl as if he were the forsaken bridegroom. His tears trickled on to the pillow. Who would give him absolution? Had the boy in the grave paid the full score? For all the sins he committed himself and those of others as well...? Bending over her father he closed his eyes and then he also bent over her, because only thus he could attain her.

Now everything was transparent and smooth as holy water before the Avemaria, all except the blood.

»I'm going.«

He turned and as she failed to hear him, he added:

»If you lose your way I shan't go to look for you. Bučko will see you out of the woods.«

He caught sight of her over his shoulder. Like a sleepwalker she moved to the grave and leaped into it.

»No«, he cried.

In a second he was near her, caught her by the hair and pulled her out. She writhed on the turf so that he was obliged to kneel on her flanks, and as he was thus holding her down, she clawed at his face and cried:

»Edo! Edo! Let me go! Edo! You lie! He wasn't one of them!

»You won't kill the lot, woman! He was!«

He got his hand under her back and with one vigorous effort tipped her over his shoulder.

»You won't.«

Her screams re-echoed all round through the countryside.

»Edo! Bučko!«

With his live burden on his shoulder the red-haired man walked swiftly uphill. When they reached the forest, she stopped screaming, like a child afraid of the dark. He was not afraid of the dark and he was familiar with the forest. Not once did he trip over a root, no branch grazed his face. He walked as intently as he had been digging before. Then he felt her body growing lighter and more yielding.

»You are relaxing, my girl,« he muttered to himself.

She no longer sobbed; she was holding on to him. He felt the roundness of her breasts, the softness of her body, and a savage emotion stirred within him. When they reached the level, on the path below the church, the world was swaying before his eyes like the waves of the ocean.

»Shall I kill you?« he asked.

The night was warm with stars for smiles.

»No«, said she, quite simply. »D'you believe?« he asked. She nodded doubtfully. He set her down, but she clung to his arms. He looked at her, face to face. Even by the faint light of the stars he could see well enough. He saw her eyes. He realized that those eyes — the eyes of the forest fay — were different and more enigmatic than the opalescent sky above them. She looked at him fixedly. Suddenly she whispered:

»You are just like my father. Really even more than I fancied...«

With all his strength he held her close, biting into her neck.

»Will you?«

For a long time she was silent, trembling in every limb. Then she spoke in a cooing voice:

»I told you... He really was a weakling.«

He carried her into the house and the night remained alone outside the door.

Next morning they awoke with the sunrise. The woman was lying on her back. The window was open. A pigeon sat in the window of the belfry. It cooed all gilded by the early light. A breeze blew from the forest, bearing with it the scent of fir trees with a — scarcely noticeable — flavour of the sickly smell of decaying flesh. The woman raised her head. Her nostrils expanded. She turned to the red-haired man and pointed:

»Go along,« said she, »bury him! Bury the corpse!«

Translated by Fanny Copeland