

OUR HOME AND THE SOUL OF EUROPE ARE AT THE CENTRE OF EUROPE

If the countries of Western Europe do not keep faith with their spiritual and moral values, they have no future. European society is marked by an aggressive secular ideology, the cult of consumption and the worship of the reason. If freedom does not go hand in hand with a sense of responsibility and humility, then mankind and society enter on a path of self-destruction.

His Holiness Alexis, Patriarch of Moscow and All Rus, addressing Western Europe through the pages of the French newspaper Le Monde on 2 October 2007

Dear brothers and sisters, if you are still living in some corner of modern Europe, where your heart and mind have not yet turned to stone, then remember that there is another Europe. There the daily greeting is not a mere 'Good Morning', but 'Glory to Jesus Christ!' and the response 'Glory for ever!' There you will find mountain after mountain, forest after forest, village after village, church after church, tradition after tradition, song after song, and, above all, you will find the very soul of Europe, our spiritual home. For the geographical centre of Europe, stretching from the Atlantic to the Urals, is not, as some imagine, in a clean and orderly but spiritually empty Switzerland. It is where its soul is, by the village of Dilove in Carpatho-Russia.

This little country, some 5,000 square miles in area and unheard of by most, is hidden away in the rugged solitude of the Central Carpathians. From ancient times until the present day it has been the Cinderella of European countries. Still relatively remote and poor, it cannot boast of a well-established name, for it has gone under various names imposed on it by foreign conquerors. These were names such as Hungarian Ruthenia, Carpatho-Ukraine and, most recently, Transcarpathia. We give it the name of Carpatho-Russia, close to the even more exact Subcarpathian Rus, for there they speak the most ancient of languages, the origin of both Ukrainian and Russian.

Now we look back on it, as it was seven decades ago, just before the second dreadful European conflagration brought about by the pagans of Nazi Germany, which was followed by the pagan rule of the Soviet Communists. For what is below we are indebted to edited extracts from: Under the Carpathians, Home of a Forgotten People by J. B. Heisler and J. E. Mellon, Sidders and Son Ltd., London, 1946.



Fr Andrew

Although almost unknown, isolated and neglected, this small land beneath the Carpathians has a beauty of its own. Thick forests, some still uncharted and untouched by human hand, cover much of Carpatho-Russia. Above them, on the upper slopes of the mountains which cross the country from east to west, rising to a height of well over 6,000 feet, are Alpine pastures, where cattle, sheep and horses graze as soon as the snow is gone. These virgin mountains of breath-taking beauty are only sparsely peopled. Its inhabitants live in long, straggling villages which line the steep and narrow valleys or in lonely cottages scattered over the lower slopes. They work in the forests, felling trees or floating rafts down the swift torrents; they tend their livestock which, for part of the year, roams freely over the mountain pastures; and in the valleys they till what scanty soil there is, reaping a meagre crop of potatoes and oats.

As soon as the snow melts, some of them begin a trek back to the upland pastures. Led by their guardians, the flocks and herds trample along the mountain tracks. It is a long way to the highland meadows which, in the warm months of the year, are sprinkled with gentians, buttercups, heartsease and wild geraniums. Here, at a height of four thousand feet or more, above the vast forests, these sheep, cattle and horses roam about freely, as freely as the clouds which

sail in the sky before the fresh breeze. The lonely mountain slopes are their home until the first



snow falls.

Life is strangely quiet in these upland pastures, and it is an event when someone arrives from the village to fetch the milk. They come on foot or on horseback, carrying wooden vessels for the milk, and their coming makes quite a stir among the shepherds; for everybody is eager to hear the news from their native village. The regular visitors, who have come a long way, often stay the night in the shepherds' huts, simple and frail structures with a slanting roof made of twigs and a fence round the open sides to keep out the animals. Before night begins to fall the shepherds blow their huge horns to round up the scattered herd for milking, and afterwards large fires are lit in the meadows to keep off beasts of prey. Then the shepherds sit down outside the huts by a fire and eat their simple supper of bread, cheese and onions and rest after the day's work.



To the south-east of the hilly Uplands, the mountains are higher and wilder, the forests more vast and dense. The further eastward one goes the more impenetrable become the woods; there are great expanses which are almost completely uninhabited and thickly covered with trees. Some parts of these forests are indeed primeval. Many of the oaks and spruces, beeches and pines, ashes and firs are true giants with the steady growth of ages. They die only when uprooted by gales or struck by lightning, or when their mighty roots can feed them no longer; and they lie where they have fallen, while upon their rotting bodies young trees, ferns and mosses thrive unconcerned. Leaves form a canopy so thick that in places the sun cannot penetrate. In these virgin forests the bear has his home; they are the hunting ground of the lynx and the wild-cat, of the boar and the wolf.

But there are other parts where beneath the mysterious rustling of the swaying tree-tops can be heard the stroke of the woodman's axe or the rhythmic rasp of his saw. You may hear the shouts of the men preparing for the moment when the tree will fall, or the tearing sound before an age-old giant comes crashing to the ground. Many thousands of the men work full-time in the forests; there are villages, all of whose menfolk earn their living in this way. Those who can live come back home every night, but others spend the whole week in the woods, living in rough, wooden cabins. These are half sunk in the ground, and there is a hole in the middle of the roof to allow the smoke to escape. All along the walls are several layers of pine boughs, serving as bed, table and benches. Here the men stay from Monday to Saturday; they go home to their families at the weekend and then return to their makeshift shelter to carry on the weekly round.

There are many jobs to be done in the woods. The branches of the felled trees which are to be cut into shape must be lopped off; and then comes the heaving and dragging of the mighty logs to get them ready for their eventful journey into the valley. The distance the logs have to travel is often very great and the means of transport are varied. In some places they are loaded on special ox-carts which take them to a local saw-mill or to the nearest forest railway. For this purpose many roads had to be cut through the vast woods, many bridges were built and hundreds of miles of narrow-gauge railway tracks were laid.

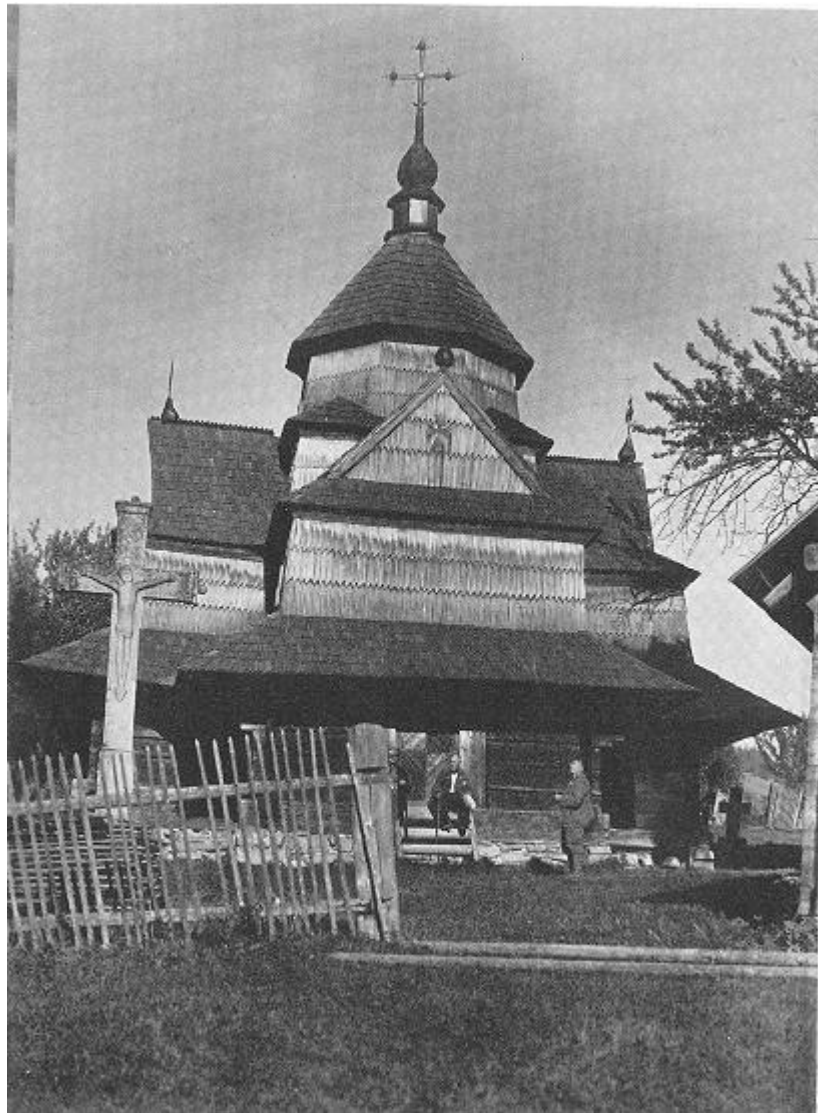
The traditional journey made by the logs from their native surroundings is, however, down the slopes and along the rushing streams. First they have to be dragged from the spot, where they were felled, to one of the chutes. Once there, their own weight carries them down. It is thrilling to see them slide, at a rapidly increasing speed, down the track made of tree-trunks and banked up at the edges. The ground along which they glide is sometimes steep, some times only slightly inclined. Where the gradient is mild, the trunks require a flow of water to help them on their way. At places where they might get stuck men are posted to move them on. At the bottom of the chute hundreds of logs pile up and await further despatch. Where the streams are broad enough, the trunks are lashed together into rafts. But the rushing mountain torrents are mostly shallow, and the rafts would not be carried far.

Native know-how overcame this difficulty. In various parts of the Carpathian forests there are wooden dams which hold up the water trickling down from the mountain-sides into the narrow valleys. When the rafts are ready for their journey, the dam is opened and the water freed keeps the stream in flood for one day. Down shoot the rafts in the swirling stream, steered by skilful oarsmen. Past treacherous snags and boulders, swiftly they sail between the winding banks, where every bend is perilous. The eyes of the steering raftsmen are fixed on their course and every muscle is tense. Extreme vigilance is needed. A little slip, a slight error of judgement, and the wooden float might founder in the treacherous rapids. The native raftsmen are skilled and tough. Many youngsters in this land of forests are eager to grapple with the perils of the rushing streams. Steering the rafts is an adventure; there is none of the toil and drudgery which is the lot of the lumberman, no dragging of giant trees, no heaving sweating.

The people of Carpatho-Russia are skilled in a number of handicrafts, and not a few of their lonely settlements are storehouses of peasant art. The women are deft with their homely spinning-wheels of looms, and the neat patterns and lovely colour effects of their embroideries testify to their natural sense of beauty. Both the men and the women still wear their traditional costumes and a gathering of the villagers in their Sunday best is a delightful spectacle.



Ornamented pottery is also popular. Many a hut has a shelf of decorated puts, jugs, plates and cups, and in the towns, on market days, the peasant craftsman who sells the earthenware he has made and decorated with his own hands is a familiar sight. Carving is a craft in this land of endless woods and in some villages you can still find carved household utensils and farming tools, while carved figures and ornamental patterns decorate wayside shrines and churches. The old wooden crosses in Orthodox style are among the finest samples of this craft. The wooden churches in the mountainous areas show that the native craftsmen, skilled with the axe, have handled their material with good taste. Most of these places of worship are extremely picturesque and delightful, revealing their resemblance to some of the churches of other parts of Russia. And then there are the quaint wooden cottages, with their steep span-roofs of straw or shingles, which



nestle in the valleys or perch on the mountain-sides. They are often dilapidated, and in some parts of the country many thatched huts provide bare shelter for man and beast. Yet whatever their condition, there is something lovely about these humble dwellings

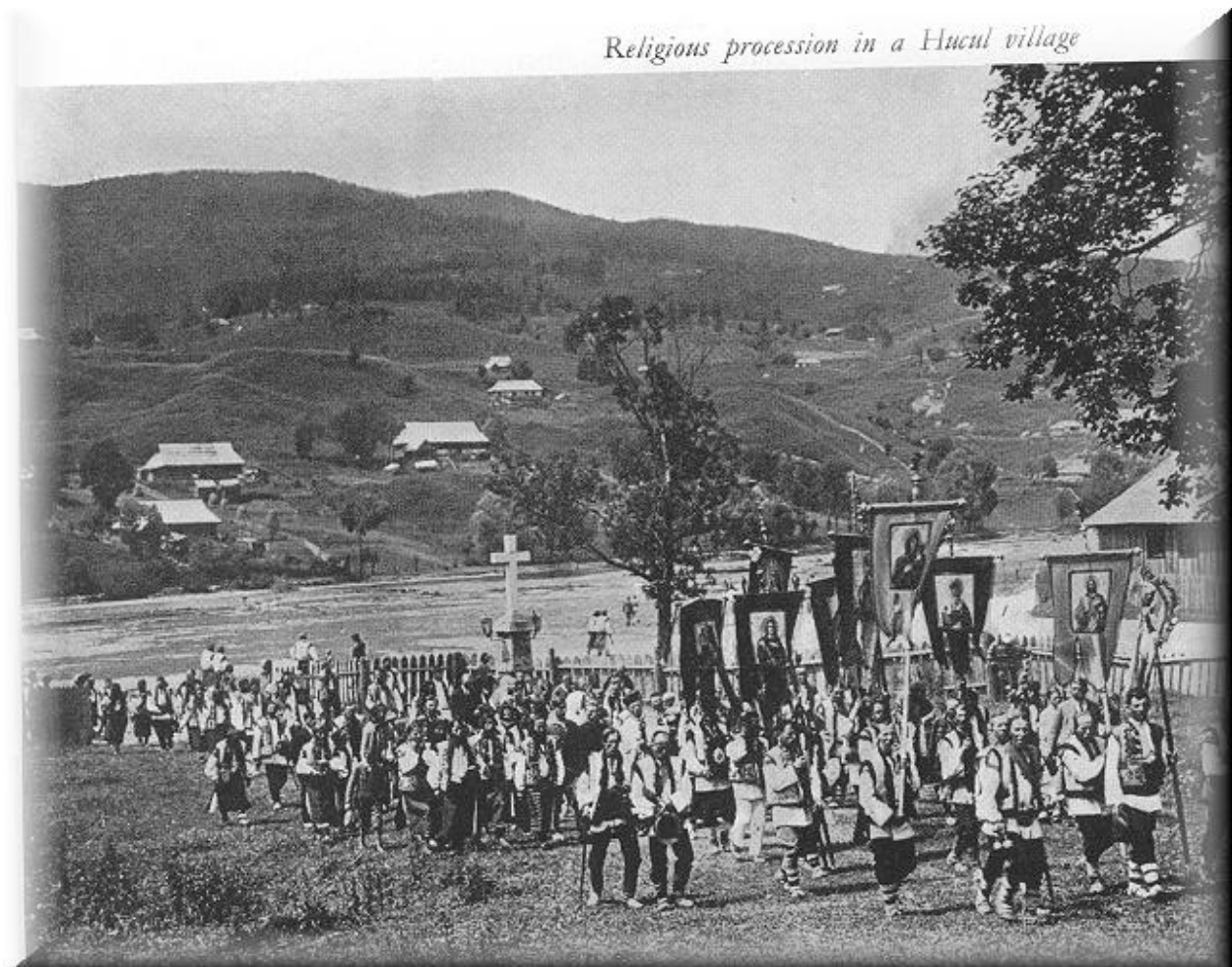
These remote mountainous districts of Carpatho-Russia are cut off from the busier regions. Round peaks and broad ridges rise above this mixture of beauty and poverty in self-contained detachment. The many springs which trickle down the slopes, the lively brooks and the impatient streams which rush through rocky gorges and narrow valleys do not care. And the vast forests,

with their brooding depths in which trees felled by the storm lie dead where they have fallen, enfold this remote world in a cloak of mysterious silence To the south-west the landscape is different. True, one also finds here barren and almost uninhabited masses of rock, covered with woods and topped with upland grazing lands.

But these southern mountains also have broad and sheltered valleys, in which crops thrive. The fertile soil of these basins supports a denser population. Their lush meadows, their fields of maize and rye, and the luxuriant vines on the slopes of the foothills, give this part of the country an air of prosperity. The people who live here are naturally better off than the highlanders. In some of these valleys the villagers have preserved their traditional costumes, but these have a style of their own and their colours show greater variety This is even more applicable to the population in the fertile plain of the River Tisa further south. Apart from maize, which is the staple crop, the fields are yellow with golden wheat and the trees are heavy with fruit. Owing to the favourable climate, the tobacco plant grows in the sheltered fields. Tobacco is one of the country's few industries, of which the timber industry, the distilling of alcohol, the making of bricks and the mining of salt, are the most important.

What industry there is can mostly be found in the sunny south, where, near the main railway line and its branches, most of the major towns are to be found. Of these, only a few can be called towns in the true sense of the word. Among them the pride of place is held by Uzhorod, the capital, which, since the First World War has become almost a city. Most of the other towns are little more than large localities.

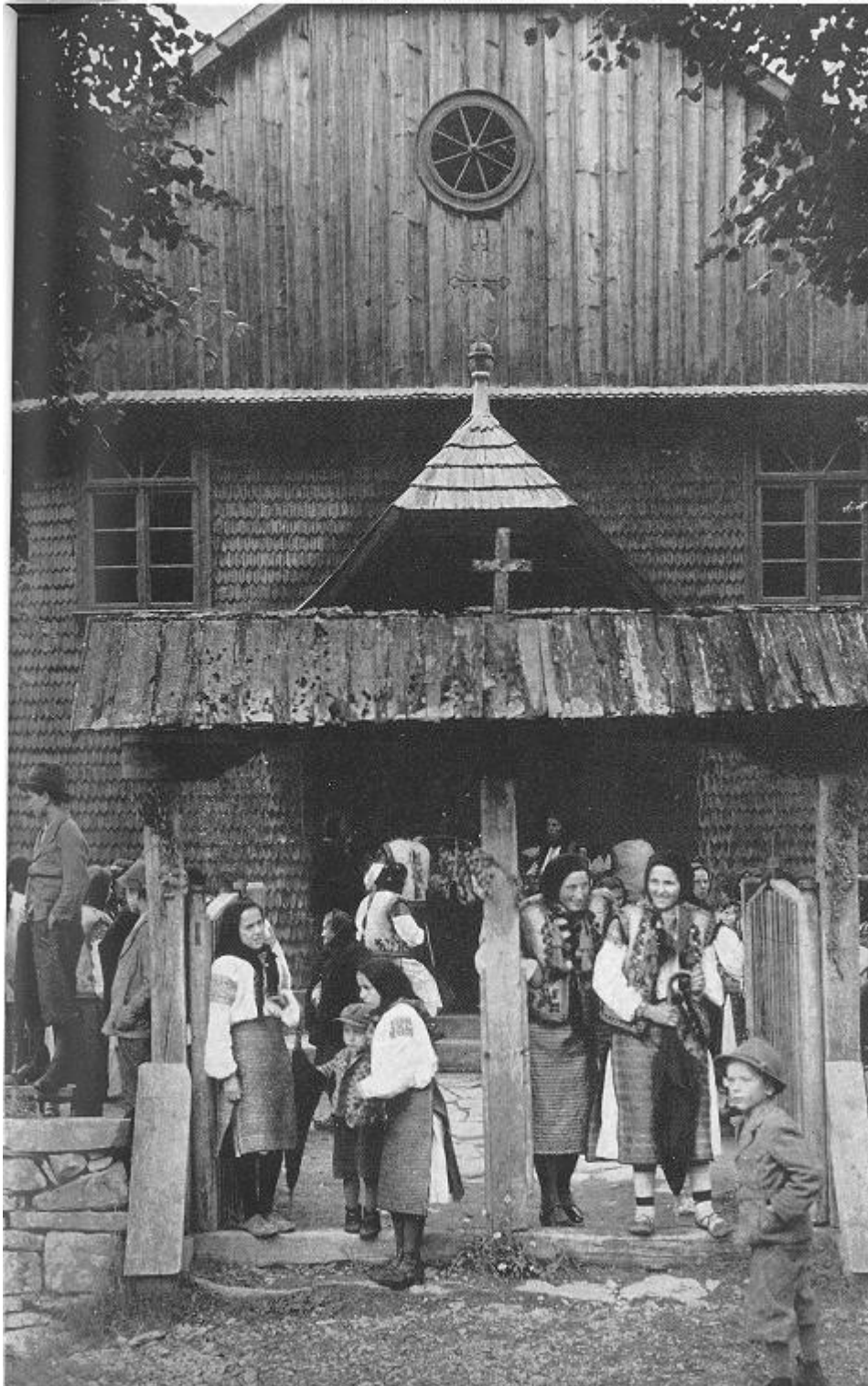
This is the story of a young Carpatho-Russian, called Ivan.



Ivan felt happy as he climbed the rough and narrow track up the slope of a rounded hill on his way home. He strode along with the firm tread of the highlander who is sure of his ground, but his walk was a little heavy. He may have been a little tired; for he had been up with the lark, had made his way over hills and dales to the farm some miles down in a valley, where he had toiled all day long helping to gather in the harvest, and now he was trudging back to the cottage in the mountains where he lived.

His limbs may have been weary, but his heart was joyful. Tomorrow being Sunday, he would see Marijka again. Lithe, slender, graceful Marijka! There was something mellow and gentle about her features quite unlike the set expression of the other girls of the neighbourhood. This and the twinkle in her hazel eyes had cast a spell on him. And her engaging smile! It had the freshness of a sunny day in spring, reflecting all the gladness of a simple, cheerful heart. Yet, for all her brightness and joy of life, there was a restraint about her that made Ivan's heart leap. Even at lively gatherings - and in Carpatho-Russia people make merry in a noisy fashion, she would retain her gentle manner without keeping aloof. Surely, there was no girl like Marijka in the whole of the Uplands.

Tomorrow Ivan would see Marijka at church. He liked those picturesque gatherings of people dressed in their Sunday best - so colourful and homely. He himself would put on his respectable Sunday best: a clean shirt ornamented on the collar, breast and cuffs with embroidered patterns of red and blue crosses; a pair of white summer trousers of homespun material; a greyish jacket, decorated with black cloth, which on hot days he would sling over his shoulder; sandals drawn together by a strap and fastened to the feet by black threads of goat's hair; a brimmed felt hat. True, his outfit could not compete with that of the better-off, for his clothes were made of roughly worked hemp, the embroideries were simple and the hat, he had inherited it from his father. But he felt quite proud of himself in front of the church and mixing with the lively crowd.



He did not feel so sure of himself after having fallen in love with Marijka. She looked so elegant - smarter than most of the other girls. Instead of the usual skirt of coarse homespun hemp ornamented at the hem with red or dark blue threads of home-made lace, Marijka's skirt was made of fine material and so was her lovely black apron fastened above it. Then the embroideries on her blouse - they were of a particularly delicate design. But most beautiful, he thought were the sparkling glass beads sewn on thick and heavy plush. She was the only one in the village *who* had them. A happy smile brightened Ivan's face. He felt in his pocket yes, there it was, the ruby-coloured necklace he had bought in the village where he worked. It had taken him some time to save up from his meagre wages the few crowns the necklace cost, but it was worth it. The

large rubies should look fine on the gathered front of Marijka's blouse. He took the necklace out of his pocket and fondled it with his eyes. He thought of the smile which might light up her charming face.

Lost in thought he reached the brow of the hill. There he paused and his eyes stopped at the scene before him. On the right and left two huge ridges stretched ahead in the direction of the Polish frontier. Practically no tracks crossed either hillside and no vehicle, not even a peasant's cart, could reach the wooden huts scattered over them. Hemmed in between the two slopes, a deep valley wound its way towards in more distant hills and crests which rose skyward as far as he could see. This was his native land - hill upon hill, with narrow strips of fields and grassland thrown in between, some straggling villages far apart, and all this engulfed in endless dark woods.

Overhead the sky was almost cloudless. For some distance the hills, mostly rounded in shape, stood out clearly, their tops free of the rolling clouds which so often enfold them. Only the far-off peaks and crests were veiled by fringed clouds. The sun, though very near the horizon, had not yet set its rays, penetrating slantwise were breaking against the sky-line of the western ridge, splitting into countless sparks. The top of the hillside opposite was still bathed in light, but a dark shadow, deepened by the sombre tone of the tall firs lay over the valley. Down below was the village was a long row of low wooden huts with steep roofs of weather beaten thatch, strung out along a narrow road and clinging to the ground like mushrooms. Built of brown tree trunks, these humble dwellings looked quite attractive from the spot where Ivan stood, for at that distance one could not see how neglected and dilapidated many of them were. A wooden church, a quaint barn-like structure sheltered on three sides by an arch of tall lime trees stood in their midst on a little mound, as if to watch and guard the scattered flock.

Not far from the church was the cottage where Marijka lived. From the hill Ivan could not see that it was much different from the other huts, but he knew that at close quarters it stood out by its snug and tidy appearance. The thatched roof, coming down almost to the ground, was in good repair; the walls were of a delightful pattern, for the joints between the beams were painted a bright blue which was renewed every other year. The touch of a loving feminine hand had left its mark everywhere. The low verandah along the front of the cottage was always well swept, the patch of golden sunflowers was neatly arranged, and the wooden fence of simple upright sticks was whole.

Marijka! Would she marry him? What had he to offer her? His people were very poor, and their cottage was a desolate place. A few years back they had lived in better circumstances. True, life was hard enough even then, when he was still a boy; but earnings were not too bad as earnings go in the Uplands and they did not starve. Every spring, after the thaw had begun in the mountains, his father would sling his axe over his shoulder and would go with a party of other men to work in the forests. He would come back in July with money in his pocket and, having cut the grass, he would leave again, this time to help gather in the crops on some farm in the rich



plain. After the harvest he would return with a few sacks of corn, maize or meal which were his wages paid in kind. Then, in the autumn, there was some money to be earned in the woods or in a saw-mill. And so they were able to shift for themselves during the long winter, and sometimes there was money left to buy a few of those little things which brighten up life.

No, he could not possibly ask Marijka to live in his poor cottage. A few months ago he had not realised quite how wretched it really was. There were several ramshackle cottages in the neighbourhood; and, besides, one gets used to everything. But ever since he started working, at Mikita Porovkin's farm he had become unhappy. What a fine house Mikita had! A proper house, built of solid, smoothly planed tree-trunks, a house with a wooden roof which did not leak and with a chimney. It had no fewer than four rooms. One of them Ivan knew very well. It had a proper white-washed stove of baked earth on which stood large pots full of tasty food; and there were chairs and benches, a large table and a dresser with shelves for plates and dishes. Everything was neat, and the room was very bright because sunlight reached the furthest corners through the large window, which had glass panes. Ivan was often allowed to sit in this room, while being treated to a cup of coffee and fine coffee it was too.

But the other rooms were more beautiful still. Sometimes, when the door was open, he was able to catch a glimpse of the room across the hall, the guestroom, with two large windows. It was simply lovely. And the furniture! There was a large table, an imposing chest and several chairs, all beautifully carved, and there were pictures and carvings on the clean, white-washed walls. Then the two rooms at the back! One of them had a stove which was so large that a whole family could easily sleep on top of it in comfort and warmth. But there were beds too, grand beds, full of feather-stuffed pillows and quilts. And the carved chest contained, it was said, a wealth of richly embroidered clothes.

Yes, to have a mansion like this, that would be divine. If you had all this, you would also be sure to have enough to drink and there would be pots of meat, potatoes and cabbage soup and other good things—all cooked with proper salt. Then, having eaten and drunk your fill, you might

stretch out on a soft feather-bed or on the warm stove. How easy it would be to forget all about this hard world where one has to toil and sweat and starve. Thoughts such as these passed through Ivan's mind as he descended into the valley with quickened, yet measured, pace.

The light was already fading when he reached the road. His footsteps, resounding as they crunched on the pebbles strewn over the road, contrasted strangely with the stillness which was settling on the valley. There were other odd sounds too - the ceaseless rushing of the stream, the sudden curt bark of a dog as if defying and backing away from the falling night, a word here and there, a greeting perhaps or a sudden shout, a peal of laughter ringing out and broken off, the bang of a door somewhere, a short-lived stir in the leaves, the screech of an owl, the flapping of wings by an invisible bird - all fading into the pervading lullaby of the night.

Little flames started leaping up in the valley, lighting the tiny windows of the cottages as Ivan went by. The steep roofs stood out dark against the evening sky. Only a faint haze of smoke now trickled through whatever openings it could find in the roots and lingered over them softening their sombre contours. Passing the church with its three square domes, which loomed impressively in the gathering dusk, Ivan headed for the wood, a few hundred yards beyond the village, which he had to cross in order to reach the cottage where he lived on the hillside.

The sheltering darkness of the wood inspired a new feeling in him. There was no sound here but the gentle whisper of the swaying tree-tops or the occasional cracking of a twig when he stepped on it. From this softly rustling melody, pulsating with subdued, but irrepressible life, he drew fresh confidence and strength. He was a man of the woods, he was born in them, and now that the war was over they would enable him to make a decent living. He knew that they were engaging men for forest work, and there was a rumour that a forest railway was to be built to get the felled trees down to the lowland. Several lads from his village were already earning fair wages as woodcutters. After the harvest he was going to join them or apply for work in a saw-mill. Then he should be able to marry all right. And should all go well he might later on become a regular forest-keeper with a fixed salary and the right to a pension.

Inspired by the hope of such wealth Ivan quickened his pace as he walked homeward up the slope. After a while he reached the humble dwelling and stepped into the yellow light of the living room. It was little more than a potting shed. In the corner by the door an open log fire burnt brightly, and over it a large pot was simmering. Along the walls a few pieces of makeshift furniture were placed here and there - a sort of plank-bed with a heap of rugs on it, some straw on the bare earth, a rough wooden bench under the window with a table of plain, unstained pine, and a large chest, which was used as a wardrobe. Such was the room which he shared with his mother, his brother and his two sisters who were still at home. With a pile of wood by the fire and a heap of potatoes next to it, the place was kitchen, living room, larder and bedroom in one. Before supper he pottered about in the adjoining room which served as shed, store-room and hen-coop. Then he joined the family at the meal, a simple affair of potatoes dipped in salt water, of sour milk and oatcake.

For hours through the night he could not sleep. He tossed about on his straw, thinking of Marijka. Should he propose to her tomorrow when he took her home after the dance? Anyway, he might tell her that he was going to build himself a brand-new house, a fine house of solid logs, the joints made wind-proof with moss and clay and painted bright blue, and a verandah running all along the front, with little carved pillars supporting the overhanging roof. Marijka, who knew how to use paint and brush, might decorate the walls with a regular pattern of circles and crosses he had seen a cottage like that in another village, many miles away, where his father had once taken him as a boy. His new house would have two rooms, a guestroom, which would

be kept clean like the one in Mikita's house, to be used on special occasions only, and a living room with a proper stove. He was not yet sure, though, how he would get all the furniture, but they would manage. A few pieces he might make himself: a table a bench and a bed. Marijka might get a nicely carved chest, a rack with wooden spoons, a spinning wheel and, perhaps, a chair or two as her dowry, and he would buy others later on when he had saved up a little.

Yes, it would be lovely to come back from work to such a home, to Marijka who would greet him with her sweet smile Then he would watch her bending over the pots her lovely hair hanging down her back in two neat plaits with strands of coloured wool worked in them. After supper she might sit by the spinning-wheel, caressed the thread with her deft fingers. And in a year or so there might be a cradle in the room and Marijka would sing the baby to sleep humming a soft tune. It sent a thrill through him as he thought of taking her by the hand, stroking her smooth hair and embracing her. Outside, rain began to fall softly. He listened to the soothing rhythm which lulled him back to the happy mood of his dream, and he heard again the whirring and tapping of Marijka's spinning-wheel and her soft humming....

