

TAMMSAARE
TRUTH AND JUSTICE
Andres & Pearu



Truth and Justice

Andres and Pearu

A.H. Tammsaare

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Foreword

A. H. TAMMSAARE AND HIS TRUTH AND JUSTICE

The five volumes of *Truth and Justice* comprise the major work of Anton Hansen Tammsaare (1878–1940), Estonia’s most eminent classic literary author. You now hold in your hands the first and most renowned volume of the pentalogy. Volume I has been translated into many languages, including German, French, and Russian, but this edition represents its first English publication. So it seems appropriate to provide here, for the English-language reader, an overview of the most essential aspects of Tammsaare’s life and work.

Tammsaare is not just an author, but a national icon. In Estonia, two museums and two monuments are dedicated to him, one of which was inaugurated during the author’s lifetime. A park in the center of Estonia’s capital city bears his name, as do streets in towns across the country. There is a school named for him, as well as a theatre and a business center. Tammsaare’s portrait adorned postage stamps and even currency used from 1992–2011. A national poll resulted in Tammsaare’s inclusion on a list of 20th century Estonia’s greatest minds.

How did this author become such a phenomenon? No doubt he lived through a very unique time in Estonia's history, a time that, one might say, demanded outstanding citizens emerge onto the national stage. Tammsaare was born in 1878, during the height of Estonia's nationalist movement, and he entered his prime just as the sovereign Republic of Estonia was born. His death in March 1940 heralded the end of an epoch: during the same year, Estonia was annexed to the Soviet Union and lost the independence it had maintained for 50 years. Tammsaare's funeral was burned into the national memory, for it seemed as if the Republic was buried along with him. The author's birth and death can be seen as bookends to some of the country's best years.

The history of Estonia goes back millennia, but Estonians have only had an independent state for a short time. Christianity arrived from Europe in the 13th century and Estonians would likely have accepted the faith gradually if the Christian flag had not led the conquest of Estonia's territory by alien nations. Estonians battled fiercely against the invaders during a period now known as "The Ancient Fight for Freedom," but the small country finally ran out of resources and succumbed to German crusaders in 1227. The Estonian people then became lower class laborers in their own country, entering a social structure that endured for nearly 700 years. For centuries, the Estonians lived as serfs, owned by whoever acquired the land on which they lived. In 1710, the territory of Estonia was absorbed into Russia's czarist empire, but the Baltic Germans who owned the land retained essential feudal rights and enjoyed the so-called "Baltic Special Order." Miraculously, through this dark time of oppression, when the Estonian people suffered unending humiliation and degradation, they still retained their own language, traditions, and a very rich folklore heritage.

In the mid-19th century, a powerful movement known as “The National Awakening” began to take shape, and its leaders extolled the value of the Estonian language and culture. During the second half of the 19th century, Estonian literature was born and began to grow and flourish. Paradoxically, this cultural shift was fueled by the Christian faith. The translation of Lutheran hymnals, The Bible (1739), and other sacred literature into the Estonian language compelled common people to learn to read and taught them the significance of education so they aspired to higher goals. Though Estonians are not considered fervent in religious matters, the nation has deep roots in the Lutheran tradition. This should be borne in mind while reading *Truth and Justice*.

The aftermath of “The National Awakening” affected Tammsaare. In the 1880s, Czar Alexander III promoted an aggressive Russification agenda in Estonia and the entire Baltic territory. Tammsaare was forced to acquire his education mostly in Russian. However, his teachers, who came of age during “The National Awakening” and shared the convictions of the movement, instilled nationalist ideals in their students.

The ultimate result of Russification was a prevalent anti-imperialist sentiment among Estonians that created suitable ground for liberal and socialist ideas to take root within the country. A new national movement, born at the beginning of the 20th century, led the country to independent statehood in 1918. During that same period, urbanization and industrial development began to gather momentum, though the Estonian economy would remain primarily agrarian (supported by a large peasantry) for quite some time. In 1940, there were nearly 140,000 farms in Estonia, each averaging 57 acres. The deportation of farmers and the forced creation of collective farms during the later Soviet occupation would thoroughly

destroy private property and traditional country life. Tammsaare's work could be considered a monument to a lost era of thriving farm culture.

The future author, Anton Hansen was born on a farm. For the boy, the patterns of life reflected the customs and routines of a farming family. Unsurprisingly, Anton Hansen took his pseudonym from his birthplace in central Estonia (the Northern Tammsaare).

Anton was the fourth-born in a family with 12 children, two of whom died in infancy. His father, Peeter Hansen, was a very industrious and earnest man. He built furniture and made household items with his own hands; he constructed new buildings on the farm and even made all the footwear for his family. Peeter was among the most educated men in the neighborhood, for he could read and write, and he took pleasure in discussing worldly matters with other men of his village. While teaching them practical skills, Peeter also endeavored to shape the spiritual worldview of his children. He passed on to them his ethical standards and underscored the importance of independent thinking.

Tammsaare's mother, Ann Hansen ran the household and took care of the animals, as well as her numerous children. Ann had a gentle nature. In her spare moments, she played with the children and taught them to sing and play the zither. She read newspapers and simple stories to her children when they were quite young and taught them how to read and discuss what they were reading.

The Northern Tammsaare was not a prosperous farm. Its fields were stony and its grasslands marshy, but it was still a great thing for an Estonian farmer to own his farm. Serfdom had been abolished (1816–1819) and Peeter belonged to a generation of men who could buy land into the permanent possession of their families and become true masters. This was a highly valued position for men of

the time, as it allowed them to work for the sake of their children, instead of toiling for foreign landlords.

The Hansen children were raised to be industrious. The youngest tended cattle and little Anton was a herder. We can only imagine what the young boy might have felt as he stood in the large empty pasture with only birdsong, insects, and animals for company. For a boy with philosophical inclinations, nature offered a rich world of contemplation. In one of his later articles, the author notes that reflection on the life of an insect leads a man to ponder the most profound questions of existence.

In primary school, young Anton was one of the brightest students. One of his teachers at the Väike-Maarja parish school, Jakob Tamm—a poet who embraced the spirit of “The National Awakening”—encouraged the boy to write poetry. In an interview, Tammsaare said, “Jakob Tamm always insisted on the clarity of expression and the simplicity and naturalness of his students’ written compositions. All my life I have tried to satisfy these requirements.”

Tammsaare excelled in his studies and was recommended for further education, but he worked on his father’s farm for several more years before his parents could afford to send him to secondary school. By this time, he was too old for the public school. So, at the beginning of 1898, Tammsaare traveled to Tartu, the cradle of Estonian culture, on top of a local farmer’s cartload. In Tartu, a private secondary school owned by Hugo Treffner admitted the 20-year-old.

Hugo Treffner’s school occupies a legendary place in Estonia’s cultural history, as it was attended by many important cultural figures of the time. The Principal, Hugo Treffner, was himself an influential individual. Known by the nickname “Estonian Hugo,” Treffner was an active and powerful man, remembered by his contemporaries

for his exalted and sometimes paradoxical behavior. When establishing his school, he sought to extend opportunities to students (only boys, of course) who couldn't afford to matriculate elsewhere. The Principal was lenient with tuition fees and sometimes allowed students to work in the kitchen or the boarding house in exchange for their schooling. Tammsaare was tasked with sounding a large sleigh bell each morning to wake the boarders. He also served as a doorman for the house, set the table for meals, and served as a substitute teacher for the younger students from time to time.

Moving to Tartu was a great change in Tammsaare's life. From the empty fields and natural surroundings of his family home, where firm principles ruled, the young man was suddenly thrust into a cultural Mecca, where modern ideas circulated and heated debates over worldviews raged, where he could go to the theatre, attend concerts, and read an endless variety of books. The time he spent at the Treffner School was formative for Tammsaare. On his father's farm, he had watched insects and pondered existential questions, but the Treffner School was an all-out "school of life," where he could observe the diverse range of human behavior up close. He became involved in literary circles and mixed with the founders of the modernist movement *Noor-Eesti* (Young Estonia). During this time, Tammsaare published his first short stories as serials in the leading newspaper *Postimees*. In 1903, after graduating from school and garnering some attention as a budding literary figure, Tammsaare was offered a job at the editorial office of the Tallinn newspaper *Teataja*. From 1903–1907, Tammsaare edited local news articles, translated stories for publication as serials, and wrote reviews of cultural events.

There in Tallinn, Tammsaare witnessed the revolution of 1905. For Estonians, socialism brought the opportunity to shed the

influence of their historical oppressors—the Russian Empire and the Baltic Germans—and many young intellectuals supported the idea of revolution. Several well-known Estonian writers, such as Eduard Vilde and Friedebert Tuglas, participated in demonstrations and spent years in hiding as exiles. Tammsaare’s attitude, however, was reserved. In the socialist ideology, he discerned too many religious elements that misled the people. He also stood against the violence he saw on both sides of the revolutionary movement, be it the shooting of demonstrators in the Tallinn market or the burning of manor houses by raging crowds. During those shootings, Tammsaare happened to be walking along a street adjacent to the market when he heard the cries of the wounded and saw them with his own eyes. Because he was critical of the revolution, the publication of Tammsaare’s work was a questionable matter in foreign-occupied Estonia for some time.

Tammsaare did not find journalism especially interesting. He did not enjoy reporting and he was unsatisfied with the meager salary paid for this time-consuming work. In 1908, the author was admitted to the law department of Tartu University and returned to his studies.

University life was extremely exciting for Tammsaare. He eagerly attended all his lectures, and even joined additional lectures outside the curriculum. At University, he formed close and enduring friendships with his fellow students, friendships that would last until the end of his life. During his final examinations, Tammsaare was unexpectedly forced to halt his studies when he was diagnosed with tuberculosis, which was often fatal at that time. Yielding to doctors’ recommendations, he put off his studies and concentrated on recovering his health. Following medical practices of the time, Tammsaare tried to treat the disease at his brother’s home in the

small forest village of Koitjärve, but neither the healing pine air nor any other measures proved effective. With great difficulty, Tammsaare managed to borrow money for a trip to the Caucasus Mountains, his last attempt at a cure.

The year and a half he spent in Caucasus was Tammsaare's only trip outside Estonia during his lifetime. In the city of Sochi, doctors attended to his worsening condition. For the first time, Tammsaare faced death and confronted the idea that his life might be cut short at an early age. The spiritual crisis brought on by his weakening body was intensified by the mighty landscapes of Caucasus: rushing rivers, waterfalls, immense mountains, and meadows filled with flowers. Tammsaare captured his experience in the short story *Shades of Color* (1917), one of his most personal works, as well as several other vividly rendered short pieces infused with existential and philosophic themes.

Tammsaare's health began to improve in the summer of 1912 when he went to live in the tiny village of Eesti aiake (Little Estonian Garden), located in the mountains outside Sochi. The area, called Krasnaya Polyana, was home to a community of Estonian expatriates who'd settled there some 100 years before. His long stay in the mountains finally allowed Tammsaare to recover. In the house of the Vaarman family, where Tammsaare enjoyed warm, personal care, a small museum dedicated to the author's life and work is now open for visitors.

Back in Estonia, Tammsaare moved into his brother Jüri's house at Koitjärve. Unfortunately, another serious affliction—an intestinal ulcer—interrupted his peaceful existence. In a later interview, when asked about the most poignant moments of his life, Tammsaare recalled the surgeon telling him shortly before his surgery, "Only two percent of patients make it through this."

Having barely survived consumption, the young man—then in his thirties—once again faced probable death, but another miracle materialized: Tammsaare was among the lucky two percent who made it through the risky surgery.

During the years spent at his brother's house in Koitjärve, Tammsaare matured into a man and the seeds of *Truth and Justice* took root in his mind. Because he couldn't perform much physical labor, Tammsaare dedicated most of his time to the study of foreign languages and literary translation work. He mastered English, French, Finnish, and Swedish. Leeni Ploompuu, the daughter of a neighboring farmer, gave him some instruction in Finnish and Swedish, and she became his helpful companion. The many hours they spent learning, reading, and walking together brought the two very close, but their relationship never flourished into a love affair. Tammsaare hinted that his delicate health prevented him from wooing Leeni, and she, rather than marrying, was eager to find employment worthy of her good education. Eventually, Leeni left Estonia for Finland and married a Finnish gentleman. Although she continued to spend time with Tammsaare during her first visits to Estonia (so much time, in fact, that Leeni's husband found it appropriate to make jealous remarks), the relationship gradually abated. Nevertheless, Leeni has been regarded as the love of Tammsaare's life. Their love story (with some tragic augmentations) is captured in the author's first novel, *The Master of Kõrboja*.

During World War I, Tammsaare wrote ardent anti-war articles and he continued to criticize Russian and European militarism and dictatorships long after the war was over. However, when the Estonian War of Independence broke out, he supported its course enthusiastically and celebrated the proclamation of the Republic of Estonia in 1918. In his later work, he portrays the War of

Independence as a heroic feat that was never since repeated. The small Estonian nation managed to fight back the attacks of the Russian Bolsheviks and the German Landeswehr.

Tammsaare might have continued walking the Koitjärve woods, writing articles, and translating the work of other authors if he had not met Miss Käthe Veltman during his visits to Tallinn.

Tammsaare and Käthe were drawn together by their common love of music and their encounters at concerts became more and more frequent. Yet Tammsaare did not hasten to make a marriage proposal to Miss Käthe. After each visit to Tallinn, he retired to his brother's farmhouse at Koitjärve. So he was very surprised when, one fine day in June, Käthe came to visit, carrying the latest issue of the newspaper *Sotsiaaldemokraat*. The announcement was printed on the first page: "Anton Hansen and Käthe Hansen, née Weltman, were married on June 7, 1919." Tammsaare could not believe his eyes. He had gotten married without the slightest idea of the fact! Käthe later recalled the following days at Koitjärve as rather painful, for Anton was truly annoyed by the joke.

The marriage became a reality nearly a year later. Anton and Käthe were married (without a ceremony) on March 13, 1920. Tammsaare then moved to Tallinn, where he lived permanently until the end of his life. In February 1921, the couple's first child, their daughter Riita was born. In the same year, Tammsaare published his play, *Judith*, which is considered the initial text of the author's peak years. The play is based on a well-known biblical fable and follows the storyline of the Bible, yet Judith's motives are quite different. She doesn't go to the enemy camp to save her hometown, but rather to offer herself as a wife to the famous army leader Holofernes. Judith wants to reign over her hometown with this mighty man. Holofernes isn't interested in Judith's ambitions and

he rejects the beautiful woman who seemed so enchanting initially. Offended, the vengeful Judith beheads Holofernes and, by doing so, becomes the savior of her hometown, though she is bound to regret her deed and mourn Holofernes for the rest of her life. The play was heralded as a modern interpretation of the biblical story and its relation to Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* were pointed out. Tammsaare's play was soon produced on stage.

His next work, the novel *The Master of Kõrboja* (1922) is set in an Estonian village and centers on the relations between two farms. The focal point of the novel, however, is a love affair and the central question addresses the vitality of farming. Tammsaare has said that the main theme of the novel is the farmer's responsibility as master of his land. The recently established Republic of Estonia needed men and women who acted as masters and mistresses, not mere laborers like farmhands or maids. Yet the novel is mostly remembered as a beautiful and tragic love story, which plays out against a romantic and fateful backdrop resembling the Koitjärve landscape. *The Master of Kõrboja* has been compared to Knut Hamsun's work (e.g. *Pan*) mostly due to the mysterious atmosphere evoked in the novel.



In 1926, Volume I of *Truth and Justice* was published and immediately became a literary classic. It's not clear whether Tammsaare always planned for *Truth and Justice* to be a five-volume *opus magnum*. The first edition did not include a volume number in the title and some have speculated that Tammsaare originally planned to write only one book about his childhood, but was inspired by the immense popularity of the novel to continue writing the sequels.

Whatever the case, Volume I of *Truth and Justice* was like no other work written by an Estonian author before. Although it depicts rural life, the novel is first and foremost a philosophical work. One must always bear this in mind to fully understand Tammsaare. Andres' struggles with the land and with God, as well as the existential anguish and soul-searching of so many characters in the book, serve to elevate Estonia and present an intellectual and spiritual nation, on a par with other nations of the world. Suddenly, readers saw an Estonian farmer searching for the meaning of life, demanding justice, and establishing his own principles. Andres' life is affected by unexpected events and irrational forces that imbue the novel with a cosmic dimension and a feeling of grandeur.

Andres and Krõõt have been compared to the original couple, arriving at Vargamäe after expulsion from paradise like Adam and Eve. They must sweat and toil to create order in the chaos that surrounds them. Their new neighbor, Pearu embodies a devilish force and continually places hurdles in their way.

Andres' endless work symbolizes the essential diligence and persistence of the Estonian people. In recent studies, Pearu's playful attitude towards life has also been attributed some positive value. Whatever the assessment, "the two toughs" of Estonian literary history are mythical characters of equal status.

Andres is the archetype of the ethical and moral farmer. He is the farmer who acts as master, the farmer Tammsaare first searched for in *The Master of Kõrboja*. Dedicated to his land, Andres focuses on his goals as opposed to the strenuous effort required to reach them. When he first shows his wife their new home, he speaks mainly of things he intends to accomplish in the future. The actual landscape is not important to him, for the ideal landscape hovers just above it, in his imagination. To attain his dream, Andres spares neither

himself nor his loved ones. He is willing to sacrifice his own life and the lives of others in order to build a prosperous farm to bequeath his children. Yet, nearly all his children leave Vargamäe, for they are not willing to live solely for the sake of work and the future.

Andres ascribes little value to love. His God is not a God of love, but rather a God of justice. Andres surely embodies the Old Testament ideal that abstinence and hard work brings blessings for the land and happiness for the family. He relates to God in a categorical manner: his idea of justice comes from the Bible, yet when God fails to behave according to his expectations, he finally curses God.

Andres and Pearu have been compared to Faust and Mephistopheles, as Andres ceaselessly strives towards the unattainable and Pearu serves as his adversary and tempter, continually setting up traps. Without a doubt, Goethe's *Faust* greatly influenced Tammsaare, as did Fyodor Dostoyevsky, though allusions to his work are perhaps more easily noted in the subsequent volumes of *Truth and Justice*.

There are many fights and debates between the characters in the novel. These conflicts serve to highlight basic truths about the human condition, as well as the challenges of leading a righteous life. A recurring question in Tammsaare's work is, "How should one live in order to minimize evil?" His characters seem to feel that it's always possible to turn good into evil, but next to impossible to turn evil into good. So the theme of sacrifice is also frequent in Tammsaare's work: characters must sometimes offer a sacrifice in order to turn evil into good or bring a dream into reality.

The title of the novel—*Truth and Justice*—refers to jurisprudence. For this reason, the word '*Justice*' in the English title is not quite precise. Rather than referring to the ideal of justice, Tammsaare

refers to the term of law. Of course, we know that Tammsaare studied law and indeed, lawsuits are prevalent in the novel. Yet, along with legal justice, the reader always perceives divine justice, and legal rights are always juxtaposed with divine laws. In fact, all of Tammsaare's work tackles theological issues. Andres' final conclusions concerning divine and earthly justice are presented to the reader in Volume V.

After the first volume was published, Andres and Pearu became archetypes. In addition to the philosophical themes, the characters' struggle for their rights was very significant for Estonian readers, who responded to both the earnest and comical aspects of their fight. The issues and principles close to hearts of ordinary Estonians were reflected by these two farmers, and so readers identified with them. In addition, the novel portrayed pursuits that were important at the time of its publication, such as draining swamps, dredging riverbeds, and growing potatoes (a new crop in Estonia at the end of the 19th century). And everyone could get behind criticism of the *nouveau riche*, like Kassiaru Jaska.

Andres and Pearu became iconic figures in Estonia's national consciousness. They are even known to those who've never read Tammsaare's novel. Other characters also have great significance in Estonian culture, such as Andres' first wife, Krõõt. In her we can see aspects of Tammsaare's mother, just as we can see in Andres some features of the author's father. Krõõt's "ringing voice" and womanly stature add a bright dimension to the novel, which echoes through the book even after Krõõt's death.

Tammsaare is celebrated for his masterful depictions of female characters. Krõõt is one of the best known women in Estonian literature, even though her part in *Truth and Justice* is relatively brief. Readers find Krõõt poignant and captivating; she is an archetypal

mother figure whose lovable nature can even break through Pearu's Mephistopheles-like spitefulness.

Andres' second wife, Mari, the widow of a former farmhand, is also an important character. Her great tragedy is one of the most significant themes in all five volumes of *Truth and Justice*. Mari never escapes her great burden of guilt and a crucial scene depicts Indrek, Andres and Mari's firstborn son, throwing a stone at his mother. This scene, essentially depicting a fallen woman stoned, is one of Tammsaare's typical allusions to the Bible. Mari is more complicated than Krõõt; her tragedy is deeper and her guilt is inexplicably tied to her son Indrek.

Indrek appears in the second part of Volume I. Nothing predicts that he will become the protagonist of the four subsequent volumes of *Truth and Justice*, but his special relationship with Mari and his deep sensitivity nevertheless mark him as different from the other characters. Through Indrek, Tammsaare conveys his characteristic poetry and insights. Indrek is quite clearly Tammsaare's *alter ego* and his journey through the volumes of *Truth and Justice* is thrilling both intellectually and with regard to the plot of the novels.

There is one more important character in Volume I of *Truth and Justice*, and that is Vargamäe itself.

The Vargamäe landscape is based on the author's birthplace, the Northern Tammsaare farm that now hosts a museum dedicated to his life and work. Readers began visiting the farm immediately after Volume I was published, in order to see the setting of the novel firsthand. The characters and events born in Tammsaare's imagination were assumed to be real and tales circulated as if the novel was a true story. The real Northern Tammsaare farm and the fictional Vargamäe farm were muddled together and the author's birthplace

became a sort of sacred destination for literary pilgrimages, where the fictional characters of the novel lived eternally.

Tammsaare himself characterized the main conflict of Volume I as “man vs. the land,” which implies that Vargamäe embodies, among other things, an adversarial force. Andres’ fight with the rising water and stony fields is certainly a fight with Vargamäe, and beyond that, a struggle with larger forces that influence the lives of all people. In this way, Vargamäe is a playground where Tammsaare has free range to explore various conflicts. Andres’ Sisyphean bondage to his land clearly depicts man’s position within the universe and addresses essential existential questions, yet, at the same time, the work remains heavily grounded in the specific location of Estonia and draws heavily on provincial details.

Vargamäe is a symbolic homeland for Estonia, one that is loved and obliged, though the labor’s fruit may only be seen by the next generation. Perhaps readers felt so close to Vargamäe and its fictional characters precisely because they identified with this idea of a homeland.



After Volume I of *Truth and Justice* was published, Tammsaare became the most widely read and appreciated author of Estonian literature, and his income certainly improved accordingly. At the start of his marriage, Tammsaare chose the life of a freelance writer, which meant uninterrupted work: translations, articles, and deep attention to varied reading material. It was mainly the summer months that he could dedicate to his own writing. The family lived on his meager salary until the publication of *Truth and Justice*. The great popularity of Volume I allowed the author to

rest and contemplate his subsequent work. In 1928, Tammsaare's second child was born, a son named Eerik, and a couple of years later he embarked on the most prolific period of his life. Subsequent volumes of *Truth and Justice* were published one after the other (Volume II in 1929, Volume III in 1931, Volume IV in 1932, and Volume V in 1933), followed by the novels *Life and Love* (1934) and *I Loved a German* (1935), as well as a play, *The King is Cold* (1936). It was only in 1937 that Tammsaare took a proper summer holiday with his family to a beautiful seaside resort at Narva-Jõesuu. Up until that time, he'd spent every summer at his living-room desk in the family's Kadriorg apartment in Tallinn (which is now a museum).

Tammsaare wrote intensively without much preparatory work. No rough drafts of his novels exist; he put everything on paper immediately, as he created it. The author said he'd only start writing when a story became so vivid in his mind that he could barely resist the urge to write. Perhaps this is why his characters are so true and gripping.

In 1939 Tammsaare was very excited about an idea for a new novel. His children remember the last summer they spent with their father as one of the most enjoyable: he organized races, joked around, and swam with them in the sea. After spending some days with his family in Narva-Jõesuu, Tammsaare returned to town and started the novel that was to be his last, *The Misadventures of a New Satan* (1939). This was to be Tammsaare's own *Faust*. The central character of the novel is Vanapagan (the Satan), who must prove to a skeptical God that a human being will be blessed if he wishes for it ardently enough. In search of proof, the Satan goes to earth and lives as a man. From that point, a story of reverse redemption unfolds (as in *Truth and Justice*) and profound theological and

existential questions are raised within a seemingly realistic setting. The novel has been translated into English twice (1964 and 2009), so interested readers of *Truth and Justice* can read that, as well. It's possible that Tammsaare planned to write a sequel to this novel, but on March 1, 1940 the author suffered a heart attack at his desk and died.

As mentioned before, hard times befell Estonia after the day of mourning that marked Tammsaare's funeral, times of foreign occupation, deportations, and imprisonments. When Tammsaare's work was once again published in Estonia, it felt like a secret victory over Soviet ideology. Despite Marxist interpretations forced into the forewords that were added to his works, Tammsaare's novels possessed real Estonian spirit, for he was one of the most important architects of Estonian culture prior to World War II. Tammsaare has always been widely read; his works are still read today and numerous theatrical performances and feature films have been based on his work. He is a great creative mind of a small nation and hopefully he will find his way into the hearts of a new audience with this English edition.

Maarja Vaino,
Director of the Tammsaare Museum,
Tallinn, Estonia, 2014.



Chapter 1

It was the end of the third quarter of the last century. The setting sun neared the horizon as the horse pulled a wooden-axled wagon up a hill. A young woman sat atop the wagon and her husband, nearly thirty years old, walked beside them.

When they topped the rise, the last of the sun's rays lit the man's broad face, with its firm jaw, steely eyes, and short, thick, black beard. It lit the woman's sad eyes, too, and the yoked head of the horse, with its ears pricked up.

"There it is—Vargamäe," said the man, pointing across the marsh to a group of low houses on the next hill. "The buildings you can see are ours. The next farm is behind the hill, in the valley. The Manor Register lists them as Front Family and Back Family, but people call them Hill Farm and Valley Farm. That little grove of pines up there on the hill is ours, too—those old twisted trees. Some of them are half dead."

He said nothing more and the wagon rumbled on in deepening silence.

The woman looked around. Here was a hill, there another; further on, a third; on the left, a fourth; on the right, a fifth; and behind them, a sixth and seventh and more. Fields and houses covered those hills and the marshland around and between was punctuated by peat bogs covered with scraggly brush.

One of these hills was to be her home. There she would probably spend the rest of her days. The young woman's heart twisted tightly in her breast. The pain spread lower, through her bowels, squeezing them and clenching at her navel.

She never imagined living in a place like this. To her, home had always been fields and forest—a great forest, which, in the evenings, echoed shouts of joy and the herdsman's horns. What could you hear in this place, if you got the notion to sing out like a lark? Would the bogs respond? Would the marshes answer back?

The woman looked at the man striding alongside her, then glanced at the horse she'd seen foaled and watched grow on her father's farm. Eagerly, the man and the horse moved forward, as if anticipating happiness.

Everyone—her parents, brothers, and sisters—had agreed she should accept this man's proposal, for he knew how to provide for a wife. She felt it strange to hear them talk of someone "providing for her" as a necessity. Could she not work and provide for herself, like any able-bodied person?

But as she looked again at the man and the horse, and felt the swiftness of their movements, her mood quieted and her heart was emboldened. Her father had offered the mare as a dowry, and it served as their greatest asset and source of support. Its confident gait gave the young wife even more hope.

"Get on," the man said to the horse, as if reading his wife's thoughts. "We might be home by sundown."

"Will we?" murmured the woman. She had considered saying "home," but the word stuck in her throat.

Soon the road grew smoother and the man climbed up next to his wife. He took the reins and pulled them tightly, urging the horse into a trot. The mare brightened and whinnied.

“She knows we’re close,” said the man.

“Well she’s come this way quite a few times,” commented the woman, hurt that the mare thought of this strange place as home, as if its happy snorting wiped away a piece of her past.

Further up the road, a woman stood in a farmyard with a bucket in her hand, watching the passers-by. To the young mistress of Vargamäe, the woman seemed familiar. It was as if she’d seen her standing there often, over many years. Moreover, she had a sense that she, herself, had stood in a similar pose, in a similar farmyard, in the light of the setting sun, watching people go by, and that she would be doing so for countless years to come.

“What’s the name of this farm?” the woman asked.

“This is Aaseme,” the man answered. “On the right, we just passed Völla, and a little further, behind a hill, is Aiu. You can’t see it from the road. The hill is called Metsakandi. There are three farms on it.”

The horse pulled the rattling wagon across the field, and again they descended into wet ground. They were about to navigate a second marsh, but the road forked at Aaseme Farm and, without guidance, the horse veered right.

“Where does that other road lead?” the woman asked.

“To Soovälja,” said the man. “You’ll see it when we reach home. There are three more farms there, and two cottages.”

They came to the marsh. Clogged ditches lined both sides of the road and peat had been piled in the middle. The road’s surface was topped with brushwood and logs. In places, the horse’s hooves sank through the rotting surface into soft mud, and the mare struggled to keep its footing. Beyond the ditches there were bare bushes of stunted willow and an occasional marsh birch with spreading branches and buds bursting into leaf. A little further away, between

the marsh and dry land, the tender green of springtime was about to show its glad face. Here and there the ground gleamed yellow with marsh marigold.

“You could drown here,” the woman cried, watching the horse labor. “The wagon will break, and so will the horse’s legs.”

“They can make it,” said the man, who was walking again, this time holding the reins to better lead the horse, since he knew the road well. “Sit firmly, right in the middle, or you’ll be tossed out,” he instructed. When they were past the worst, he said consolingly, “It won’t be like this forever. We’ll dig the ditches deeper and build a higher and smoother road. We’ll fill it with spruce branches and junipers and cover them with fieldstones and clay rubble. We have lots of that, under the pines on the rise—just take as much as you need. In a few years you’ll be able to drive carriages here behind a pair of horses.”

“I’ll be happy just to get through in a wagon,” said the woman.

They had reached the edge of their own field and the road began to rise again.

“The last of the sun is gone,” said the woman as they crested the hill and the horizon opened before them.

“Well, it did set before we got home,” said the man.

The master and mistress finally arrived at the house, where they found the boy herder in tears. He blubbered to them that the cow, Maasik, had gotten stuck in the mud under the alders. She’d tried to pull out her legs, but could not get them free. She’d die there if someone didn’t come to help.

Maasik, another valuable part of the woman’s dowry, was not an old crippled cow. She’d birthed only five or six calves and she was in her prime. When the mistress tended cattle at home, she’d never heard of any cow getting stuck like that. It was hard for her to understand what happened, even though she’d witnessed firsthand

the tricky footwork her mare performed on what passed as a developed road in these hills.

An old woman and man, nearby cottagers who'd been watching after the farm, explained the situation to the new mistress. Their account made her realize she still felt like a girl tending cattle on her father's farm, and not a self-sufficient farm mistress. A mistress must think differently than a girl herding cows.

"Good heavens," she exclaimed. "Why on earth did you drive her into the marsh if the ground is so soft there? Wasn't Maasik on her way home to be milked?"

"I didn't drive her anywhere," the boy cried. "She just went there all by herself. She didn't want to fall behind the others."

"There's some new grass on the hummocks in the marsh. That's why," Mari, the cottager, explained. "The upland meadow is bare. The animals can't get hold of anything with their teeth. They can only lick the ground with their tongues. Animals aren't stupid—they know where to go."

"But what now?" the mistress asked, at a loss.

"We have to go help her. What else?" Madis, the other cottager, replied. Turning to the boy, he asked, "Where is she? Somewhere in the big marsh?"

"No, in the small one," Eedi answered. "She got through the big one, leaving a trail behind her. She was belly-deep, but she kept on going, mooing once in a while."

"Well, I'll be damned," cursed Madis. "To get through the big one and then get stuck in the smaller!" He added, "But if it's the small marsh, that's not so bad. We can get her out by ourselves."

Quickly they emptied the wagon and loaded it with planks and ropes. When the men and the boy climbed on, the mistress tried to join them, but Madis stopped her.

“No, Mistress. Pulling a cow out of the marsh isn’t women’s work.” Turning to the others, he added, “We better take flint and steel and some straw in case we need to build a fire to warm her. The marsh is still cold and that stiffens an animal’s legs. Not long ago the ground was frozen hard.”

The wagon started moving.

“Don’t hurt her,” the mistress pleaded as they left.

“Now why would we want to do that?” Madis asked in response.

They drove to the alder grove, where they tethered the horse and tied a feedbag onto her. Carrying planks, axes, and a rope, the men approached the cow, jumping from mound to hummock, with the boy scrambling ahead.

“The master is going to rescue a cow in his church clothes,” Madis remarked.

“I forgot. Can’t be helped,” said the master, pulling off his jacket and draping it over a bush on a hummock. “I’ll have to leave the pants on, but they don’t cost the price of a cow, especially one that’s big with calf.”

“Especially one that’s big with calf,” Madis echoed. “Look at her, she’s trembling.”

“What do we do first?” the master asked unsurely.

Madis, being a local, knew well how to begin.

“First, we pile brushwood in front of her forelegs—the softer spruce branches and junipers,” he said. “When her front legs get a foothold, we’ll try it with her hind legs.”

Soon the cow’s forelegs were on the brushwood and she could have pulled her hind legs out of the mud, but she wouldn’t do it, no matter how they urged her with anger or praise, and when they beat her she only moored.

“I knew her legs would be stiff from the cold,” said Madis.

Now there was no choice but for the men to roll up their sleeves and trouser legs (the master pulled his new trousers off completely, and his boots, as well) and go into the mud themselves to lift the cow's back legs onto the brush. Next, they quickly built a brushwood bridge to the nearest hummock. Only then did they try to shove the cow up onto her feet. She wouldn't move, though. She just lay there, her legs spread out.

"Well, what we do now is build a fire in front of her," said Madis. "I guess she'll stand up then."

They gathered brush and pine stumps and built a fire on the closest hummock. The boy was left to tend the fire and the men went to cut more brushwood. While the cow's limbs and joints warmed up, they laid down the planks to help the animal reach firmer ground.

Soon the boy shouted excitedly, "She's stirring her legs already! She's up...and moving! She's moving!"

The men hurried back to see the cow walk across the branches, as if she'd never been trapped. There was a bridge of brushwood between the next two hummocks and the cow crossed fearlessly, but the third mud-hole was bridged with planks that frightened her. She mooed at the bridge, but finally managed to step onto a plank. As she crossed, they collected the planks to set down in front of her, repeating the process until she was finally clear of the hole and the job was done. The cow headed home briskly.

It was a little while before the men could leave, because the master wanted to wash himself in a pool before pulling his trousers back on. The boy went to fetch his jacket, which was still on the bush, and noticed the fire they'd built to warm the cow still smoldered. He considered smothering it in the mud, but instead left it to burn in the darkness. The flickering light glinted off the surrounding shrubs and made the mud gleam.

As the boy moved into the distance, he looked back at the fire and it seemed some living creature remained there, warming its limbs and joints, as if someone lived among the bushes in the mud. For even after it was pitch dark, the thick wood stumps would still be burning.

The mistress of the house felt lonely waiting for the men to return, so she went out to meet them on the pasture road. On her way, she ran into the cow. The animal recognized her and began to low. Tears welled in the woman's eyes and she almost threw her arms around the cow's neck in a tender embrace. At least she had one old friend, one kindred soul in this utterly strange home.

As they walked back home together, the mistress laid her hand on the cow's back. The men, who were still far behind, did not notice, but Eedi, the herder, did. She looked back and caught the boy's eye at once.

"It would be terrible if every evening was like this," said the mistress, when the men finally returned.

"Well, not every evening, but sometimes it happens in the spring," commented Madis. "In the fall, this sort of excitement happens pretty seldom. This cow is too heavy, not right for the Vargamäe pastures. It's not our kind of animal, coming as it does from open fields. Here cows should be like goats."

"But those cows don't give milk or butter," argued the mistress.

"Well, you just have to get along with less," said Madis.

"I'm pretty sure we'll be building a causeway across the worst mud," said the master consolingly. "It's firmer on the other side."

"Old Mart, who lived here before you, always kept some long planks under the alders, right at hand in case they were needed. He never bothered to build a causeway," Madis explained. "Of course, it's firmer back there. It's actually pretty dry at Jõessaare," he added.

That evening, before settling down to sleep in their new home, the young mistress of Vargamäe posed a question to her husband.

“Why did you choose this place to buy?”

“What should I have bought then?” the master asked.

“You couldn’t find a better farm?” the mistress persisted.

“The better ones were already sold, and the others were not for sale. I looked around in Soovälja, but those were worse still, and harder to get to than Vargamäe. There were a couple of larger ones, Paluka and Sõõrussaare, but those were more than I could bite off. I didn’t have that kind of money. It isn’t that bad here really. Just wait until we get used to it. It’s only scary at first.”

Andres, the new master of Vargamäe, answered her question, but his words brought little comfort to his young wife, whose christened name was Krõõt.

She said, “The two of us are going to have hard times here.”

“Poor folks have hard times everywhere,” said Andres.

They said nothing more and the two fell asleep on the first night in their new home.



Chapter 2

The next day they surveyed the new property. While they were out, the cottager's wife looked after the house, as she'd done before the young mistress arrived. Madis showed the family around, since he knew the farm well and could answer their questions.

The new master and mistress had planned to visit their next-door neighbors first thing in the morning, but the cottagers told them that Pearu of the Valley Farm was away, probably at the tavern, where he sometimes spent the night in the first-class salon. So they postponed their visit and inspected the borders of the property instead.

Andres had inspected the farm previously, of course, but then the ground was frozen beneath a cover of snow, so he'd depended mostly on indirect indications to judge the land. For the mistress, naturally, everything was brand-new and quite unfamiliar.

For the tour, she pulled on old stockings and a brand new pair of homemade, birch-bark shoes she'd brought from her father's house. The master wrapped his feet with rags and pulled on rough moccasins. Madis accompanied them on bare feet, since the sun was already bright and high in the spring sky.

The day was wonderfully light and clear along the meadow rise, and in every direction other rises were bathed in the same wonderfully light, clear air, standing above endless marshes and bogs. Above them, snow-white clouds flew like frightened geese that made no sound. Beneath that sky, all was still lest one noticed a lark's song or a wagtail atop a roof or fence pole.

Hour after hour, they waded through marsh and water that sometimes rippled beneath their feet and sometimes squirted between Madis' toes. Only the small Hallikivi area and the Jõessaare were really dry. The island had once been farmed, but Madis didn't know when.

All he could say was, "It must've been very long ago, because that field is going to be forest again soon."

The last little field, on a distant island in the marsh, had a fairy-tale feeling. It felt strangely familiar and homey and even without a word of explanation, everyone immediately understood that some person had once dwelt there—living, working, and thinking. Someone's joys and sorrows had once depended on that fallow patch of land.

They sat down to rest and the men lit their pipes.

Judging by the land they'd already crossed, the property was certainly big enough, almost too big, measuring over four hundred acres. But most of it was grassy marsh or peat bog with stunted pines. Even the hayfields lay mostly at the edge of a bog, the overgrown marsh, a dwarf-birch swamp, or an unstable riverbank, where water still flowed freely, leaving part of the grassland out of reach. During spring floods and autumn rains it would become a lake. On the entire farm there was only one small patch of dry hayfield.

"Just big enough for a horse to roll over in," Madis had quipped.

At a distance of six miles or more, there was a larger wooded grassland belonging to Vargamäe, which Andres had yet to see. Supposedly it contained a section of good forest. Andres had bought this piece as a pig in a poke, thinking that, whatever it might be, it was still worth something. Even without this extra grassland, he would've bought Vargamäe at the given price and conditions. He thought he might sell the extra land for the first decent offer and reallocate the money toward the farm.

In truth, when buying the Vargamäe farm, Andres hadn't given much thought to its existing worth. Instead, he envisioned what he could do with the land, how much value he could add to it. That's why the young master, during the day's tour, thought only about his ideas and plans, imagining what the land or the scraggly little birches, pines, and spruces might look like if they dug ditches here and there, of this or that length. Would the tops of the birches straighten out in a few years? Would spruce and pine show new life and shoot up, as if stung by a wasp?

When he'd traveled around his home county looking for a suitable property, he was shown a marshland laced with large and small drainage ditches. The ditches had been left to clog and the land between them was now wet and marshy, but once fields of grain had stretched between those ditches and peasant women and serfs had planted and harvested potatoes there. The old people swore this all was true, using the same words.

According to the story, some sort of mad baron resided in the manor, an old fool who wanted to turn the marshes into fields. He was the one who ordered the ditches dug and the land between them plowed and seeded. They said he was never seen in the fields, but he did spend endless hours in the marshland with the overseer,

watching the workers, poking his cane into the draining soil and the peaty sod.

Andres wondered whether the baron who ordered the ditches dug was quite as mad as everyone assumed. Well, how could anyone doubt that? For the baron had not only wanted to turn the marshes into dry land, he also wanted to turn the grassy areas into irrigated hayfields that could be flooded with water whenever he had the urge to do so. It seemed he was really trying to remake everything contrary to God's will. Where there was a hill, there was to be a valley, and where there was a valley, there was to be a hill—that's what he wanted: marshes into fields; grassy rises into haylands; new beds for rivers, even if they had to cut through stony patches or into hillsides, mile after mile; forest on empty borderland, either planted or seeded—trees in rows like plants in a garden. Anyone could see that the baron was out of his mind.

But Andres recognized the man's vision: converting a marsh into fields of grain. In his mind's eye he could see it. Of course he couldn't turn the marshes of Vargamäe into fields right away, for he was no baron with use of the parish and its people. Managing the marsh to support his animals and grow good brushwood—that's all the young master of Vargamäe had money and time for, and the mad baron provided a template for his future. Perhaps he was the only person who'd ever thought this way about the patch of fallow land there on Jõessaare, in the springtime sunshine.

While Andres shared his thoughts with Madis, the man drew harder and harder on his slurping pipe and began spitting through his teeth, further and further away, as if practicing for distance. When he interjected, he spoke of the couple of new masters he'd seen there before—not owners, just tenants. Neither one ever tried

to improve the land, because it just wasn't worth it. They all went to look for something better.

"And we just live on here, like flies on a pile of shit," he said finally.

"Well, that's just it. You only live like a fly," said Andres.

"In fact, you can live pretty well like that. The last master even made some money and bought a place with open fields."

"And there, too, he lives like a fly, if you call that living," the master replied.

Madis wanted to say, "You're a fly too. We're all only flies," but all he did was spit. Andres was the master and there was no point in pushing him, thought Madis.

"Are you ready to dig ditches for me?" the master asked a little later.

"Why not?" asked Madis. "Work is work and bread is bread; I don't sneer at either one. I've dug 'em before."

"Good enough. We'll start right away—this year," Andres said. "Around that place where we hauled out old Maasik."

"But where will the water go?"

"At first, nowhere," Andres answered. "But later, probably, yes—we'll run it right into the river."

"A couple of miles."

"So what if it's even three?" said the master.

The cottager spat a long arc. After a while he commented, "Somebody else's land is in between; you can't go straight to the river."

"I think we'll be able to go through another man's land."

"If only..."

"Well, we'll see."

There was nothing to do but agree with the master. If he thought he could get through, let him try. To the cottager it was all the same;

it wasn't his land and it wasn't his water. Let him cut the ditch to the river; for Madis, it would be a good thing, since he'd have an easy path along the bank when he went fishing, and also, in the autumn, to bring back a bagful of hay for his cow and sheep from the edge of the thicket.

"Maybe we can dig it together with the neighbor, to make it cheaper," the master figured.

"It'll cost more," the cottager replied. "Whatever you do with Pearu, it costs more."

"Why's that?" asked Andres. "What kind of a man is he?"

"Like all men," Madis replied.

While the two of them puffed on their pipes and talked, the mistress walked about the fallow of the marsh island, picking early flowers. She felt as happy and at ease as on a Sunday, so much so that she wanted to sing like the birds chirping in the nearby woods, or even shout, as once she'd shouted on her father's farm, but instead she kept quiet and picked flowers.

When they reached home, they had something to eat, then went out again to look at the fields and valleys. They wanted to see the earth and feel the soil, to look at the field lines and the boundary stones, just as in the marshland they'd looked at the paths and their property marks.

"If only those field lines and boundary stones would stay put," Madis said, half to himself.

"What do you mean, 'stay put'?" the master asked.

"It's said that sometimes they move," Madis smirked. "I heard the last master complain about it. If not, he might've bought the place himself. That's what he said: he left because of Pearu. The fellow is still bragging about it."

"Oh, so Pearu is that kind of bastard! Is he strong?" Andres asked.

“I’m sure you’ll find out soon enough,” Madis replied. “He goes in for that kind of thing.”

“He likes to fight?”

“He likes to test his strength against other people. What kind of men wouldn’t stand up to each other and go at it, toe to toe? Really go at it? So far, the Valley Farm’s been beating the Hill Farm. Now we’ll have to see what happens.”

“Can you beat him?” Andres asked, interested.

“Maybe I could if I were an owner, but being a cottager...well, it’s different,” said Madis.

Andres grinned. “You want to give it a try with me?” he asked. “Just man to man, not cottager against master.”

“Might try it,” said the cottager, spitting again and sizing up the master.

“Now don’t start something foolish,” the mistress interjected. “Stop it, before somebody sees you. It’s a workday. Don’t you have anything better to do than fight, as if you were at some party?”

“It’s nobody’s business what I do here on our land,” the master replied.

“We could try lifting stones. Then we’ll know right away,” said the cottager, reacting to the mistress’s worry. That satisfied the master and Madis led the way to a pile of stones near the fence. It was a good place for a contest of strength.

“You begin,” said the master. “You’re the local.”

“It’s all the same to me,” said Madis. “You’ll soon be a local here as well.”

Madis picked out a stone and just managed to lift it off the ground, but then the master took hold of the same stone and lifted it over the fence.

The cottager watched and said, “He must eat something special from God.”

Now Andres found a stone of his own, which he could just barely lift. Madis kept trying, but showed no sign of budging the stone from the ground.

“You’re the right kind of neighbor for Pearu,” said Madis, and he let the stone go.

“Am I stronger than him?”

“A lot tougher than I expected. I thought I was pretty strong, and not too old, but you’ve got it over me. There’s nothing I can do about it.”

They walked on, and after a while Madis said, “You’ll still have to deal with him; it’s not enough to be strong.”

“Well, so what? A man is a man, and a boundary stone is a boundary stone.”

“Yes, you can say that, master. A man is a man and a boundary stone is a boundary stone,” Madis repeated, but he didn’t sound convinced as he spat again through his teeth.



Chapter 3

Then the work began, a lifetime's worth, enough to last through the next generation. Although he'd been married only a few months, Andres was already thinking of family. Marriage, for him, was above all about children. Would Vargamäe have been worthwhile if strangers were to inherit his land? Never. You might go to some other place with such a thought, but not Vargamäe. The land Andres now owned came with responsibilities, which an honorable man could not ignore.

He would've gladly bought all of Vargamäe and lived there like a lord, but another man had beaten him to it. Pearu of the Valley Farm came from Tuhalepa, which was even deeper in the marshes and bogs than Vargamäe. Pearu often said that he'd come from the wolves to live with people. Andres wanted to reply that he'd come from people to live with wolves, since his father's farm was open fields, but he never said it, because he believed people were the same everywhere, whether they lived right next to the highway or back over a causeway through the marshes.

When Andres first visited Vargamäe, a thought had surprised him: What if one day all of it was his, and after that his children's? Perhaps it was the strength of that vision that led Andres, when searching for a farm, to settle on Vargamäe. There was also the

influence of Hundipalu Tiit, who lived past the far marshes, across the river, alone on his high meadow, doing whatever his heart desired. Andres came to know him, and the man could talk; he convinced Andres to settle on Vargamäe.

But, for the time being, Andres had to postpone thoughts of the future for dull, gray, everyday work. The long-neglected farm buildings needed repairs, the farmhouse as much as the cattle barns. Worst of all were the bedrooms, which were uninhabitable except in summer. Winter's cold forced them to squeeze into the main room, with a hooded stove dominating one corner like an elephant. The hearth had hooks for hanging pots and a holder for a splinter torch.

All the fields had gone unplowed in the fall because the farm was up for sale; the previous owner didn't know how long he'd have it. No sense in doing work for someone else. The new master had to cope with it all, and the work ahead seemed overwhelming. Only at mealtimes, when the horse was resting, did Andres have time for odd jobs. The fences around the yard and along the road were barely standing, and the gates hardly opened. The front yard had been taken over by the pigs to root. If the door was left ajar, they quickly invaded the main room and even the bedrooms. The only thing to do was nail some boards across the threshold, raising it up to keep the pigs out.

When the mistress complained, the master said, "Well, we don't have children yet, and any grown person can step over it."

"But what about the water buckets and the watering tubs? Who will lift those?" asked Krõõt.

"You could fix the watering tubs in the yard, and a bucket of water is not so heavy that you can't lift it over," said Andres. So the boards stayed nailed to the doorposts. Krõõt never mentioned them

to her husband again, although she struggled with those boards all day long, either stepping or lifting things over them.

Of course, Andres could've fixed it so the pigs never got near the door, but that meant repairing all the fences around the yard, even the part along the road. At first he'd planned to do that, but when he realized there were neither posts nor pickets nor, for that matter, time, he left it alone until the house was ready. That became another reason to build new rooms—to keep the pigs out on the road and away from the door, so the boards could be removed.

Around the outside of the house it was very bare; only a rowan tree stood next to the gate and a scraggly birch grew among hop vines by the bedroom window. Birds could've planted the seeds, or the wind brought them there, if not a human hand. Andres could not keep the yard as it was, and thought he should do something about it, but that year he left it alone, concentrating first on the new rooms. There were more urgent things to think about than decorative touches. There were only three of them—Andres, Krõõt, and Eedi, the young cowherd. They still needed to hire a farmhand and a maid.

The very first day of plowing didn't start well. Andres hitched the young mare to the plow because he hated the way the old one dragged along, but the young horse was skittish and careless, especially among stones, which here and there lurked like a pack of gray wolves ready to leap. It wasn't so bad if he saw them, but when they hid under the soil, the plow could hit one and break. The hidden stones made the master apprehensive, because he couldn't guard against them, and one did eventually ensnare the plow. The following day, he fitted a new, stronger blade, but the stones also threatened to break the shaft bindings and snap the harness straps. On the third day, the yoke broke and the halves went flying

skyward. The master lost his temper and gave the horse a few sharp lashes, but this made her even more temperamental. As he repaired the gear, he cursed the horse and grumbled to his wife for bringing such an unmanageable animal as her dowry.

“But when we first came here, all you had was praise for her,” said Krōōt. “You said she had hooves like a champion and she walked more briskly than another horse could trot.”

“I don’t need a racehorse pulling my plow,” said Andres. “She dashes along as if she were on the high road.”

After a few days it became clear that, whatever else they did, they couldn’t put off dealing with those lurking stones—prying out the smaller ones and building a fire atop the large ones.

Soon another problem proved equal to the stones—the problem of water.

In the lower parts of the fields, the ground was so soft it couldn’t support the horse. These areas seeped water like a spring, and there could be no thought of plowing or sowing for who knows how long. He talked it over with Madis.

“Well, even if you did plow and sow there, what do you think you’d actually get? Weeds, that’s all. Thistle and pigweed.”

“Wouldn’t flax grow there?” asked Andres.

“You could try. The last fellow wasn’t interested,” said Madis, skirting the question.

By Saturday evening the new master of Vargamäe was bored and tired. He looked forward to the next day, when he could stop for a breath and unwind. He sat on a log end beside a pile of kindling, musing on this, while his wife walked briskly between house and barn and house and cowshed. Every time she went in or out of the house, carrying a heavy or light load, she had to step over the boards nailed across the doorposts. Her husband didn’t notice, even

though he sat facing the door. Nor did she, or nearly so. In just a week's time she'd gotten used to Vargamäe.

"Listen to how many birds are in this marsh," said the master to his wife as she passed by. "They're always chattering in the fields."

"I listen to them in the morning, when I go to milk the cows," she said and, coming back out of the house, added, "but nothing compares to the cranes. They really sing out!"

"A grouse is surely loud too, for its size," said the master.

"Yes, a pretty bird, but an ugly voice," finished Krõõt, "as if it wasn't a bird's."

The mistress walked toward the shed and Andres listened alone to all the cranes, grouse, snipe, and ducks, which must've flown in from the river and gathered by some ditch or puddle near the fields. Down by the cattle run, a cuckoo was calling.

On Sunday morning the master and mistress drove to the church, and for this the young mare was once again hitched up. They could've gone on foot those four or five miles, but that would've been indecent; farmhands and maids walked, not masters and mistresses, except when the road was too poor for the wagon.

The new masters of Vargamäe went to church for more than just the service. They also needed to hire a farmhand and a maid. This was usually done in front of the tavern, or better yet, inside. That's where Andres of Vargamäe went while Krõõt waited in the wagon.

She sat there for some time, huddled, nibbling at the two-penny French bun her husband had bought for her. She looked at the faces of strangers and they looked at her. The elderly farm wife curled up on the wagon next to her was as much a stranger to Krõõt as the other farmers' wives. The old woman gazed at the young one for a long time before she worked up to speaking.

“I’ve been looking and looking and guessing and guessing, and still I don’t know. Have my eyes grown dim and dull? You must be the new mistress of Vargamäe. I heard new people were coming there.”

“That’s right, I’m the mistress at Vargamäe,” Krōöt replied.

“Yes, of course,” the woman said. “I kept turning it around in my head. Who else could they be but the people from Vargamäe? There haven’t been any other strangers around, only local people. You’re quite a young one; any children yet?”

“No, not yet,” said the young wife, blushing up to her ears as the old woman’s eyes studied her body. “It’s only a few months since we made our vows.”

“Well, that’s what I thought—not yet. But they’ll come, they’ll come; you can be sure of it. There have to be children, for what’s life without them? I’m the old mistress from Aaseme. My son August brought a wife home, so she’s the young mistress. At least that’s what they call her. But she isn’t really, just hoping to become one when me and my old man are gone. As long as we’re still here, Vuadu keeps a tight rein on everything. He just won’t let go. And even from his grave he’d like to run things, that’s how my old man is. Aaseme is the last place before the Vargamäe causeway, on the left at the edge of the marsh.”

“Somebody was standing outside the house there when we passed by the other day, just before sunset,” said the young woman, more animatedly.

“That’s right,” the old woman nodded. “The sun was just setting when you passed. I was over by the threshing barn, so you didn’t see me, but Leena was in the middle of the yard, coming from the barn with a bucket of flour.”

“Yes, she had something in her hand. I saw it,” said the young woman, feeling good to have already met someone with whom she could share a remembrance.

And so the young wife from Vargamäe made her first acquaintance, while sitting in a wagon in front of the tavern waiting for her husband. The old mistress of Aaseme did most of the talking, telling of her life and her doings, and those of her family, and of the whole neighborhood. She spoke of places and people that Krõõt didn’t know, so she couldn’t always get the meaning of everything, but still Krõõt listened happily, since it helped pass the time.

Soon other farmers’ wives joined them, curious to know whom the old Aaseme woman was talking to. They quickly learned that the young mistress of Vargamäe needed a housemaid, and everyone had a suggestion. Before long the girls themselves began showing up, and from among them the mistress chose one to her liking and they agreed on terms. Only the master’s approval was needed.

At that moment Andres was sitting in the tavern with a quarter-pint of vodka. He was no great drinker, but a drink helped him get to know people, like the new farmhand he’d just hired. The vodka loosened the lad’s tongue, for he was still young, a couple of years shy of twenty. He’d been confirmed in church, and so was considered a full-grown man, and he drank the way a man drinks. He was short but sturdy, strong enough to guide a plow.

Andres had also hoped to meet his next-door neighbor at the tavern, but that hope was evaporating. In fact Pearu was in the tavern, but he never came out of the first-class salon, where he walked about in shirtsleeves, a sheepskin vest, and woolen socks without boots. He was with Kassiaru Jaska, owner of a large farm, horse dealer, buyer of oxen for the manor, and man of other useful talents. Today they were sitting with the parish officer, the chief

justice, and the manor overseer—all men of quality and importance. Later, a field watchman from the manor sidled in and joined them. He had some old business, left over since last autumn, to settle with Pearu.

Just as Andres was about to head off, Pearu emerged from the salon, still in his shirtsleeves, but now wearing high Russian boots over his socks. He was on the skinny side, not tall, over thirty, fair-haired, with a thin beard on his chin and squinting eyes—that's how the man from Valley Farm at Vargamäe looked. With wide, swaying steps, he strode to the counter, expecting everyone to respectfully get out of the way, since he was coming from the first-class salon.

“What can I get the master of Vargamäe?” the innkeeper asked, so all could hear.

But the master of Vargamäe did not want anything. He'd come out to show himself off and look over the others.

“Well hello, neighbor,” the new master of Vargamäe ventured to the old master who stood sizing him up.

“Who wants your hello, you insect?” Pearu said. “So you're the...”

“I'm the man,” the new master interjected.

“A man!” Pearu said mockingly. “Hah! What kind of man would buy a place I already drove two owners from? And now I'll drive you out, too.”

“Third time's the charm. I'll be staying,” Andres said.

“Oh, so third time's the charm!” Pearu taunted him. “I'll be staying too. I was there before you came and I'll be there when you're gone. There I am and I'm not leaving. Nobody gets the better of me, and that means you, too. My name is Pearu Murakas.”

“My name is Andres Paas and the only one who can get the better of me is the devil.”

Pearu acted as if he hadn't heard his new neighbor's name. Disdainfully, he turned his back on Andres and ordered two baskets of beer at the top of his voice. Pearu had only planned to order one basket, but now he asked for two to show his new neighbor who he was dealing with. Heading back to the salon, he turned to Andres.

"Come on, I'll buy you a beer."

"Sorry, neighbor, not today. Some other time," Andres resisted.

"What other time? Come on, I could buy out that whole tavern without giving it a thought."

He took Andres by the arm and tried to drag him into the first-class salon.

But Andres dug in his heels and said, "Let it go this time, neighbor. My wife is waiting outside in the wagon."

"Your wife!" exclaimed Pearu. "Bring her in! Let her have a drink, as well. She gets as dry as anybody. It's on me! Landlord, a bottle of women's wine!"

The women's wine, in a long-necked bottle, was produced and Vargamäe's old hand dragged the newcomer outside. He wanted to see his neighbor's young wife. The two men went outside and others came out, too, to watch Pearu carry on; he was always good for a laugh. Others watched through the window.

But Krõõt wouldn't hear of going into the tavern, nor would she climb down from the wagon, and she wouldn't drink from the long-necked bottle until her husband and their neighbor practically forced her. Finally she took the bottle from Pearu, but she didn't drink, just touched her lips to it without swallowing.

This annoyed Pearu. Was his wine not good enough for his neighbor's wife? He took back his bottle and passed it around to the old women standing there. When the bottle was half empty, he again started pulling Andres into the salon. When the man

resisted, Pearu grabbed him by the front of his jacket, as if to force his neighbor to come with him.

“My new neighbor wants to try out his strength with me, but he doesn’t even have a jacket on,” laughed Andres.

“Hey fellas, who’ll bring me my jacket from the salon?” shouted Pearu, without letting go, but no one wanted to go get his jacket. So he shouted again, still holding on to Andres. “Who will lend me his jacket? A basket of beer to whoever lets me wear his jacket! Two baskets!”

The men stood around laughing, but nobody took off his jacket.

“Listen neighbor,” said Andres, “our test of strength is off, since you have no jacket.” This just made his neighbor mad. Pearu’s eyes lit up, flashing white. Then he let go of Andres’s jacket and shouted, “Who wants some wine? Who wants women’s wine?”

But before anyone could reach for the bottle, it flew against the tavern wall and smashed to pieces. Pearu went back into the tavern, his steps swaying.



Chapter 4

At Vargamäe Valley Farm, Pearu's wife and children were waiting impatiently for the master to return home. The mistress had expected him by Monday night, but he hadn't come. It was already noon on Tuesday and still they'd seen neither hide nor hair of him. For the mistress, this was too much. Pearu had left on Friday in a horse-drawn wagon, and he still hadn't returned.

To be sure, she'd heard all that she needed from the churchgoers, including an account of her husband's faceoff with the new master, which occurred in front of the tavern on Sunday. Going to the tavern to bring Pearu home was asking for trouble, for he was there "on business."

Yet she'd also be in trouble when the master finally returned. Whichever way it went, there would be trouble, but she was used to trouble, for she'd slaved for the manor and for a farm owner, and she'd resigned herself to it all, never objecting, not even when the man who was now her husband had wanted her for his wife. She knew all about him even then—his vile nature, his drinking and fighting. But so what? All men were rotten, in one way or another; very few were reasonable. You're a slave wherever you go, for God made you a slave. Still, slavery through marriage was perhaps better than other kinds of slavery, for she'd become a farmer's wife even

though she'd only been a cottager's daughter, and she was a rich farmer's wife at that, with slaves of her own to order around and many animals to look after—pigs, sheep, and cows. It was better to be a rich farmer's wife with troubles than a poor cottager with troubles, if she was going to have troubles either way.

By Tuesday at noon, the woman's patience was gone. Come what may, she'd go after her husband and bring him home from the tavern. He might lose his temper and hit her. She could bear that. He might pull her by the hair, and she could put up with that too. But she wouldn't leave that tavern without her man.

God had made her healthy, with a short, stocky body and legs like pillars, and she feared neither fist nor stick. Of course, she'd have bruises, but they'd go away and so would the pain.

After all, what kind of woman would she be if she couldn't take a beating from her husband? How could she bear children? Did childbirth hurt any less? Lord, anyone who could say that had never given birth. Compared to childbirth, what's a little hair pulling? Nothing. Especially if all you have for hair is a rat's tail.

So ran the feelings of the Valley Farm mistress as she dressed in the barn, and it was what many other farmers' wives likely felt. Otherwise, how could they resign themselves to their lives? Standing there in only her undershirt, she could just then hear the loud rattle of a wagon and rowdy singing coming from the rise. She recognized that singing and rattling immediately, for only her old man sang like that and only their own wagon rattled that way when coming from the tavern with the blustering master.

The mistress knew what was required of her; even in her undershirt she should run to the gate and open it for him, but she thought she'd at least throw on a skirt and tie the strings as she ran. This slowed her down, though, enough so that she only got as far as the

middle of the yard before the horse reached the gate. So, what had happened before happened again. Coming down the slope at full speed, the horse crashed headlong into the gate, sending it flying in pieces.

“You old hag! You sheepface!” yelled the master, climbing off the wagon.

As his trembling wife approached, he threw the reins into her hands, grabbed hold of his buddy, Villem of Ämmasoo, who was staggering toward the mistress to say hello, his beard dripping, and hauled him toward the house.

“What the hell do you want with my old hag when you got one of your own at home?” he asked, lurching inside with his arm around his pal’s neck.

The farmhand, who’d been eating lunch, came to help the mistress unharness the horse. She could hear the master shouting and the children crying inside the house. The mistress knew what she had to do: Go inside and take her husband’s fury on herself, to spare the children and the hired help.

Pearu was in a rage. He couldn’t get over the broken gate. How many times had he crashed into that gate and then beaten his wife and children? And now he was forced to do it again. It seemed the purpose of his trip home, though he hadn’t thought about it and certainly hadn’t wished for it to happen. After all, had he not come home with a roaring song and a rattling wagon, so that everyone could hear? Had he not returned at lunchtime when everyone was around? Still, no one ran to the gate for him and the Hill Farm people would see what reception the master of the Valley Farm received. Hadn’t he bought a bag of holiday buns, which the whole family could’ve enjoyed for several days, if only they’d shown him how much he was missed?

Pearu was very angry because it had all gone wrong again; the neighbors hadn't seen his grandeur, the gate lay broken on the ground, and the meaningless bag of buns remained in the wagon. He might feed those costly buns to the pigs, for now there was no one Pearu wanted to share them with.

The mistress came inside.

"Why don't you come when I call you?" Pearu screamed at her.

"But the horse..." she tried to answer.

"What horse?" Pearu bellowed. "So the horse is more important to you than I am?"

He lunged at her, paying no attention to her protests.

"My dear friend," said Villem, staggering over to Pearu, "leave the woman alone. What do you want from her anyway? Didn't she..."

Pearu, hot with anger, cut Villem off. "What's it to you? What business of yours is my old lady?"

He let go of his wife and grabbed his guest by the hair. Villem tried to resist and soon they were rolling on the ground. Villem was drunker and not as strong as Pearu, but even stone sober he hardly could've whipped his friend. He was a quiet fellow who never made trouble for anybody. When he drank, he turned into a clown and loved to laugh, play stupid tricks, and sing bawdy songs.

At first, the men pounded each other on the floor with muffled grunts, but suddenly Villem let out a scream of pain. Pearu had thrust his thumbs into the man's eyes—his famous move. Along with the visitor, the children cried. The mistress also protested, while Pearu snorted and cursed.

The mistress felt she had to rescue the visitor, even though she knew what would happen to her if she interfered. Pearu tried to handle the two of them, but he didn't have the strength. The sharp

pain in his eyeballs had almost sobered Villem and, with the mistress's help, he tore loose from Pearu's grip. Without giving a thought to the fate of his kind rescuer—that was between husband and wife—he dashed out of the house, forgetting his hat, and escaped home, which was visible across the marsh, atop the next rise.

Pearu kept hold of his wife and now accused her of having an affair with Villem, for why else would she have helped him, and why would Villem have helped her? His wife's swearing and pleading didn't help, and Pearu went on in a rage, beating her. She bore it in silence, but the children, watching it all, kept crying. Her chintz blouse was torn to pieces and fell to the floor. Pearu ripped her undershirt, too, so that her bare flesh showed.

Pearu's eyes lit up with animal lust. He wanted to rip the skirt from his wife's hips. She saw his desire and, with an abrupt push, got loose, but the skirt band broke and she escaped the house in a torn undershirt and a skirt that was about to fall off. Pearu tried to catch her at the door, but his drunken feet and arms made him clumsy. Holding her skirt, the woman ran to the barn. Pearu was at her heels, but she was quicker and dashed into the barn, shut the door, and locked it, and, to be certain, fastened the hook.

"Open this door!" Pearu shouted.

"No!" the woman yelled from inside.

"I'll break it down!" threatened Pearu.

"Go ahead," gasped the woman, pulling on a new blouse and skirt.

"I'll do it!"

"So do it!"

Pearu glanced around, looking for a suitable tool, but then he was struck with a new idea, and said to his wife, "All right, you just go on sitting behind this door, and we'll see how long you stay there. You'll soon come out by yourself!"

“No, I won’t!”

“Yes, you will!”

“Go ahead and wait!”

“You come out when I tell you!”

“Go away!” said the woman from behind the door.

This drove the man into a rage. He took a running start and smashed his body against the door, his fists pounding it with all his strength. “If you don’t come out now, just wait and see what I do!” he shouted.

“Do what you want,” his wife answered defiantly.

“Then I’ll do it!” he shouted again and walked away from the barn door.

Moments later, the woman opened the door to see what Pearu was up to. He walked toward the well and, as he reached it, began to unbutton his fly. His wife realized that he had some new trick up his sleeve. Sure enough, Pearu dropped his trousers and sat on the edge of the well, as if he were planning to answer nature’s call.

“Holy Mother of God!” cried the wife and dashed out to the well as fast as her feet could carry her. She dropped to her knees, her hands crossed, and, weeping, she begged him, “My dear husband, do anything, but don’t go mad and foul our well. Where will we get water? Get up from the well. Look, the neighbors are staring.”

Pearu said nothing, just snorted and remained sitting.

Scared to death, his wife moaned and cried, knowing full well that her husband would never give in. He’d do any foolish, reckless thing, regardless of the consequences.

“Joosep! Karla!” she called. “Joosep and Karla! Where are you? Come quick, help me plead with your father!”

The boys came out from around the corner. Upon seeing their father on the well edge, and their mother kneeling in front of him,

they realized the situation was very serious. They began to sob. Four-year-old Joosep took his younger brother by the hand and, weeping together, they approached their father and mother at the well. The three pitiful creatures crouched before Pearu, who pretended not to see them.

“Miina! Miina!” the mistress called to the maid. “You come, too, and help us beg the master!”

Miina came and stood behind the mistress with her head down. The farmhand also came out from behind the house to see what was going on at the well, and when he realized what was happening, he stepped forward and said earnestly, “Hell, master, be reasonable. Get up from the well, button your fly, and stop fooling around like this.”

At this, Pearu did get up, but he wouldn’t pull up his pants or button his fly; the mistress had to do this for him, and she was happy to, feeling that the day’s uproar was now over. Everyone felt relieved and wanted to go back to work. Then, in a changed voice, the master said to the farmhand, “Kaarel, go bring that bag from the wagon.”

Kaarel knew the bag he was talking about, for he’d already been groping around the wagon. The mistress and the children also had a sense that the master must be speaking of something good, and so he was. Kaarel brought the bag inside and opened it, revealing a host of holiday buns. There were enough for everyone, the mistress and the children, of course, and even Kaarel and Miina.

They all stuffed themselves, even though they’d just had lunch. There was always room in their bellies for holiday bread, especially if the master wished it so. Now that his anger had cooled, his spirits were up and he wanted to be a good fellow and see happy faces.

Soon two bottles appeared, one for the men and boys and the other for the women and girls. The men took swallows of vodka first, then spat and took some bread; the women and children ate the bread first and then sipped the wine, without spitting at all. That was the difference between the men's bottle and the women's.

So, with that big bag of holiday buns and the two bottles, joy reigned at Vargamäe Valley Farm. Everyone began singing. Only the mistress was glum and heavy of heart. She saw the things her old man wasted money on, while he skimmed on the most basic necessities. Whenever she needed a penny, there was nothing to do but slip something out of the house under her apron and sell it.

But she kept quiet and continued munching on the bread with the children, even though every bite burned in her mouth. There was no point in saying anything, for her husband would just call her a cottager's daughter who didn't understand how a landowner lived.

Later that day, she faced her husband again, when he announced that he was going to pay their neighbors a visit, saying he had something to settle with them.

"Don't go today, dear," she begged. "Better go to bed. You must be tired. The neighbor folk are probably out working. If nobody's home, why go there for nothing?"

But Pearu insisted on going, for he had worked up a head of steam and there was some vodka left in the bottle.

"Let them come and see us; why should you be the first to go?" the mistress suggested. "We were at Vargamäe before them, so they should show us respect and come here first."

That worked. Pearu bought it at once. Right! One must stand proud. Let them come here first; why should he take the lead? What's more, coming from the Hill Farm meant walking downhill,

while he'd have to walk uphill if he went there—the one with the easier trip should go first.

So, his mind at peace, the master of Vargamäe Valley Farm heaved himself into his bed behind the stove, its joints groaning under the load. Even the bedbugs, if any survived the Saturday cleaning with boiling water, had to know that the master himself had come to bed.

Meanwhile, the mistress quickly called in the farmhand from the fields to repair the broken gate. By morning there would be no sign of the day's events. She forgot about the holiday buns, though the children munched on them for several days. After a night's sleep, the master forgot all about them, too.



Chapter 5

That evening, the cottager's wife came to see the family—came up the hill, as it were. She didn't really come on any business, but acted as if she had. Her real purpose was to find out whether the Valley Farm master had visited the Hill Farm, and when she was told he hadn't, it surprised her, because Pearu always made his visits to the last master of Hill Farm when he was half-loaded.

Her trip wasn't wasted, however, for she learned some things they hadn't yet heard down at the cottage. She rushed home eagerly to report to her old man. When she told him about Pearu sitting on the edge of the well, Madis was astonished.

He said, "Well, that's a trick he never pulled before! I suppose he did it just for the new neighbors!"

Later, when he discussed it with the new farmer, Madis speculated, "He wanted to show his power, make it clear what kind of a man he is. When the last master was here, Pearu once beat his farmhand as if he'd committed a crime, but the man hadn't done anything and Pearu beat him for nothing, just to show off what he could do. He would've grabbed his farmhand by the collar today, too, but this one happens to be stronger than he is."

"So that's why he went after the wife and children," said Andres.

Madis confirmed it, "Yes, the wife and children."

"Well, on his own land a man can do what he wants," Andres said after awhile.

"Right," the old man agreed. "Who could tell him no? Your land, your law. Your well, your water."

As the Hill Farm master and mistress climbed into bed that evening, they talked about Pearu's prank. The master had much to say, deploring the man's actions. Krõõt said nothing in response and Andres felt that she didn't take it too seriously. It seemed to amuse her and she couldn't help giggling.

"Why don't you say anything?" Andres asked.

"What's there to say? Maybe he didn't really mean to do it."

"Then why was his old lady kneeling in front of him?" Andres asked. "And all the rest of them? Do you think they took it for a joke?"

"How would I know?" Krõõt replied.

They said nothing more.

After that, things got busy and they didn't give much thought to Pearu. The farmhand and housemaid moved in, and there was twice as much for the master and mistress to worry over.

When the farmhand first arrived, Andres thought he'd have time to put the garden in order, repair the gates or build some new ones, and attend to other pressing tasks, but as soon as the heavy field-work started, he kept driving himself and the horse, so the work would be done in time. The farmhand got his lunch hour, but the master often went without one, so he could do the sowing. The old mare's ears were starting to droop, despite the water fortified with flour and chaff with oats. The harness pained her back and bloodied her flanks where her bones stuck out. The young mare's back was injured already, even though the master looked after her himself.

Besides the usual work, they had one special task before spreading the manure; they collected several dozen wagonloads of stones from the fallow field and piled them near the fence. Everyone pitched in—the master and mistress, the farmhand and the maid, even the young cowherd helped out while the cattle were grazing in the field.

“Wait until we’ve gone over all our fields like this three times,” the master said, “and then it’ll be very different to hold the plow.”

“Three times,” the mistress repeated. “That will take at least ten years.”

“And what’s ten years?” asked the master. “With all the work we have, you hardly notice the days go by.”

“I’ll be thirty by then, and you’ll be nearly forty,” mused the mistress.

All the time, stones flew, one after another, into the wagon as it rolled toward the pile at the edge of the field.

“Too bad we don’t have bundles of spruce branches or junipers at hand,” regretted the master. “We could bridge the slough to make it easier for the cattle. We could cover the bundles with these stones and fill them in with clay. It would make a path that would last a lifetime.”

“If only we could!” the mistress sighed. “Even the sheep’s flanks are all muddy in the evening and there’s no bending down to the cows, the way they drip mud. You can’t milk them until you wash them down.”

The master completed one more urgent task in the early spring: he dug a section of ditch in a hollow. It was only a start, and they’d have to extend it over time, but the short stretch made a difference.

Never had Andres felt such joy from his work as when he dug that first ditch and picked up those first stones in his own field,

and he'd hardly ever feel anything like it again. It was like first love, with a happy trembling and rapture, and could only be understood by someone who experienced it himself. The stones he scooped from the field and rolled onto planks into the wagon were no ordinary stones, and the earth he dug with his shovel was no ordinary earth. This earth was not simply shoveled for a day's pay or year's pay. This earth was different. These stones were special. Tumbling down from the wagon, they made a different noise and, at sunset, the alders echoed their tumbling with a different sound.

The young master of Vargamäe didn't fully understand this until years later, when he happened to pass that original drainage ditch and the first stones he'd piled by the fence. He felt something warm and happy in his breast. These were a farmer's memories of that honeymoon period.

Once they'd started working, there was simply no time to indulge a feeling for anything. The only way to accomplish it all was to get up a full head of steam and toil away. Intentions turned to simple work, and thoughts gave way to everyday jobs.

All the while, there was one idea Andres could not put out of his head: nothing could be accomplished at Vargamäe without a ditch to drain water into the river, and that ditch would have to cross his neighbor's land. He thought it would be good to dig this ditch together with Pearu, but everyone said the same thing—it was a bad idea. Whenever Andres mentioned it to Madis the cottager, the man just puffed more vigorously on his pipe and spat through his teeth, just as he'd done the first time they talked about it.

But Andres wouldn't give up. Obstinate he pursued this notion and on his first visit with his neighbor, he immediately brought up the idea of draining the marsh and digging the main ditch together.

It seemed like a new idea for Pearu, and at first he said nothing, neither agreed nor disagreed. He filled his pipe, struck a steel to light it, puffed, and spat. Following his example, Andres did the same—filled his pipe, lit it, then puffed and spat, the only difference being that he rubbed the spit into the clay floor with his foot, while Pearu didn't bother. That was the only difference between the two Vargamäe neighbors as they smoked and spat.

"Let me think about it," said Pearu at last. "I could dig it alone if I wanted to let the water drain."

"Of course, you could, but it's cheaper to do it together," said Andres.

"So the ditch would run straight along the property line?" Pearu pondered.

"Straight along the line would be best, piling the sod up equally on either side," said Andres.

"The property line would follow the ditch along the bottom, half would be mine and half yours."

"Exactly. Half would be yours and the other half mine," Andres confirmed.

"And you would pay half the cost and I the other half?"

"I would pay one half and you the other."

"And the water? How about that? Shouldn't we divide it as well, so each drains as much as the other?" Pearu asked.

"Well, water we can't measure," Andres smiled. "Each would drain as much as he pleased, one more, the other less."

"But then you'll get more use out of the ditch than I," calculated Pearu. "You have more water than I do."

"That's right," Andres agreed, quickly adding, "but the ditch would protect your land more than mine, for it's my water that tends to flood your fields and not the other way around. I have the

same trouble with Aaseme; his water floods my land, but mine wouldn't flow into his if I pushed it."

Pearu remained unsatisfied. He didn't like the idea of the ditch carrying more water from his neighbor's and less from his land. It would've been better if the water, too, was made to flow equally.

The whole subject would've dropped, but then Andres decided to tease his neighbor a little and see if that would help. He remarked casually, "I was thinking of starting this year, regardless. I spoke to Madis the cottager and he's ready to put his hand to it right away."

"That's what I heard, too," Pearu said, "but I thought it was a joke, and Madis was just talking nonsense."

"No, I did talk to him. Of course, if I do it myself, I won't dig along the property line, but down the middle of my land, so the ditch runs to the right of Jõessaare. And the borderline ditch would go between the two islands. The ditch would have to be deeper there, but only for a short stretch. Behind the islands the water would collect even better."

"And then what would you do with the other half of your water, the half that will flood my land if you dig your ditch in the middle?" asked Pearu.

"What can I do about it?" said Andres. "It will go as God allows it, through your land and into the river. I'd catch the water that's coming from Aaseme in my ditch, but I can't do much about the rest."

Pearu thought a while and then said, "Madis won't be able to finish the ditch this year. It's nearly hay time."

"If he can't do it this year, he'll finish next year," Andres said calmly. "But I won't leave it the way it is. How long can I let my animals struggle in that marsh?"

“Yes, that’s right,” said Pearu thoughtfully, without making up his mind one way or the other. He wanted to think the thing through alone, and then he might somehow go along with it.

Their talk drifted to other topics; after all, they certainly had more to discuss than just the water and the ditch. There were horses and other animals, fields and grasslands.

Pearu had much more to say than Andres. He’d plowed and harrowed, mowed and raked hay for so many years that he knew how many kernels should be in an ear of rye, barley, or oat. What Andres heard was encouraging, even surprising. Pearu made it clear that he yielded the best crops from his fields and grasslands, because he was an expert at plowing and sowing, and only he had such good luck, but Andres felt that he could do anything his neighbor could, for in hard work and ability there was no one better than he. As for luck? You made your own luck.

Later, Andres chatted with Madis about Pearu’s great crops. Madis dismissed them with a wave of the hand. “Oh, his great crops grow in the fields of the manor; his grain and hay are in the manor barns.”

“What do you mean when you say they’re in the manor fields and barns?” asked Andres.

“What do you think—that his own fields grow so much? Wait until autumn when the nights get dark and you’ll probably be picking up sheaths of grain on the causeway. Why else does he sit in the first-class salon at the tavern with the field guard and the barn manager of the manor?”

“So that’s how it is,” said the master of Hill Farm.

“That’s what they say,” said Madis, “but in the autumn you can see and decide for yourself.”

Andres told Madis to sharpen the shovels, for he planned to start digging the ditch soon, whatever his neighbor decided. At first, Andres had only one objective, to annoy Pearu, because he could see that Pearu was concerned about the matter.

So there was Madis, sharpening the sod shovel one Sunday afternoon when Pearu happened to pass by on his way back from the alder brush, where he'd been looking over the whole water drainage situation. He stopped and asked Madis why he was sharpening the shovel and when Madis explained, Pearu felt compelled to visit his neighbor to discuss the ditch once again.

Now he was worked up—worked up about the ditch and worked up about the water that would run through it. Pearu wanted the ditch dug on his land, entirely within his property, with soil piled on one side only, his side. The other side of the ditch could run straight along the property line. That was fine with him.

“And why should it be like that?” Andres asked. “Why should the whole ditch be on your land?”

“You’ve got more water, so I should have more ditch. That’s all there is to it. Just let it all be on my land,” Pearu explained. “I want the dirt on my side, because I’ve got to shield my land from your water, but you don’t have to shield your land from mine. It’s for your own good that your side has no bank, so the water goes straight into the ditch. And besides, the dirt is mine and must stay on my land. Of course, the digger won’t like piling the dirt on just one side, but I’ll talk to Madis about that myself. So if you’re all right with it, we’ll dig the ditch together; you’ll pay half and I’ll pay half.”

Now it was Andres’s turn to think about it, but it didn’t take long, for one thing was clear as daylight: whether the property line ran along the bottom of the ditch or along its edge, the land would drain and the water would run off. If his neighbor wanted the ditch

on his land, all for his own, so to speak, what difference did it make? Let him have his way. The important thing was not who owned the ditch, but whether the land drained and dried. As to the sod and the soil, Pearu was exactly right; it was his and should stay on his land, not on Andres', where it would only be an obstruction and a bother.

"Let's do it!" Andres exclaimed. "The way you want: the ditch on your land and the sod on your side. If Madis asks more for doing it this way, you'll have to pay; it's not my problem."

"I'll talk to him," said Pearu.

So it was settled, and Madis could begin digging the next day.

But after Pearu left the Hill Farm, Andres felt vaguely apprehensive. He could only calm himself with the thought that, however the ditch digging went, the main thing was settled—the water would start to drain—and what else was there to worry about?

Pearu went home feeling like he'd won at poker or pinochle. He was in high spirits and his family noticed it right away.



Chapter 6

By Whitsun, all the grain had been sown, except the barley, which was left until after the holiday. Everyone at the Hill Farm could rest with an easy conscience.

It was the first big holiday in their new home. On Saturday evening, birch branches were brought into the bedrooms and even the main room, because everyone liked to have greenery around as they enjoyed the holidays and there were still no trees in the yard. The greenery made sleeping and eating more enjoyable. The farmhand and the maid even brought some sweet-smelling birch branches into their sleeping quarters in the barn. The mistress put a birch branch in the hall, and when the master saw that, he put two saplings outside, on either side of the door, saying, "As long as it's a holiday, let's do it right." But those trees did not stand for long, because the pigs toppled them and munched on the fresh leaves, as if they, too, wanted to be a part of Whitsuntide.

The mistress and the maid even took the time to sweep the yard and shove the trash over to the woodpile. The grass and the patches of wild chamomile looked so fresh and tender that they thought of plucking tufts to smell, but no one actually did; they knew the pigs' snouts had often snorted among them.

“If ever we could just keep the yard clean!” Krōöt bemoaned. “If we could just keep people and animals separated.”

“We should be able to,” said the master comfortingly. “This autumn we’ll see what our fields yield, and if next spring we’re able to build new bedrooms, we’ll draw the line for good between people and animals.”

The master’s plans went far beyond this. He wanted to do things like Hundipalu Tiit, who had a garden. The master didn’t want a bare yard; all his life he’d lived among trees. They made better friends than open fields with the sky high above. Deep in thought, Andres of Vargamäe walked out into the sunshine in his shirtsleeves on the first day of the holiday, to see if the Valley Farm churchgoers were starting out. One thought fixed in his mind: new bedrooms first and foremost, then the rest.

The Hill Farm master and mistress were also going to church that day, the first day of the holidays, since they were young and childless. Older folks loved the second day—that’s just how it was. The farmhand and the maid also went to church, and the cottager’s wife came to look after the house. At midday she’d milk the cows and strain the milk into wooden tubs, which the mistress herself had scrubbed clean with sand and heated with red-hot stones, so that no evil eye would spoil it in the warm weather. The maid might carelessly spill some fresh milk on the ground and tread it inside, but Vargamäe milk kept well and did not cause a foul odor.

Eedi, the boy herder, wanted to go to church, too, since the old cottager had taken the cattle down to the marsh, but how could he go with nothing to wear on his feet? He had a pair of raw leather moccasins, but they were long worn out, with large holes at the toes and heels, and lacing holes so brittle the twine could pull out at any time, with no room for stretching. His other clothes were

just as bad, so there was no choice for him but to stay home and watch as the others dressed up and walked barefoot, with moccasins or shoes and socks in hand, since it was easier to walk that way. Besides, who'd wear out their shoes on the long road to church?

The Vargamäe farmhand and the maid proceeded to the church, and other churchgoers came, too, from Ämmasoo, Võõsiku, Hundipalu, Rava, Kukessaare, and heaven knows where else. People from Soovälja and even more distant places hurried past the gate, trudging along the marsh causeway.

Every now and then the dog ran out and barked at the yard gate, as if wishing the churchgoers happy holidays and precious peace with a great outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

When his master and mistress started out, Eedi opened the gate for them. He had a thought in his mind and the mistress understood and asked, "Do you want a ride?"

The boy was dumbstruck by her kind offer and his heart soared. All he could do was stand there, smiling sheepishly.

"Hurry, jump on! Quick!" the master added, stopping the horse.

So Eedi got onto the master and mistress's wagon, which rumbled down the hill, as if it carried only churchgoers. But Eedi didn't look like a churchgoer. Yes, he wore his new jacket and a bit of clean white shirt showed, but his homemade trousers were old and patched on the seat and knees. On his head sat a brimless cap. He'd once tried to sew the black brim back on, but the white thread he used soon came loose, letting the brim droop so it was more of a bother than an improvement. The battered and cracked brim might've lingered somewhere, but Eedi could do without it. It didn't matter much while herding; after all, the Aaseme boy wore a brimless cap too. But you couldn't go to church like that, for there all the caps had brims and they weren't sewn on with homespun white thread.

So, because of his missing cap brim, raw leather moccasins, and rough pants, Eedi climbed off the wagon when they reached the end of the fields, and walked back home alone. There was no point in riding any further, for he couldn't enter the church, and the marsh causeway was hard going. Even the master came down off the wagon and handed the reins to his wife, who rode up there alone, suffering the logs and potholes they bumped over.

"You'll have the cottager's wife for company," the mistress comforted the boy. "There's some holiday bread in the barn chest. Take it and eat all you want. It's in there so the mice can't get it. And don't eat it plain—put some butter on it. This is a holiday."

The master and mistress went on as the boy walked back. It wouldn't have mattered so much had the mistress not spoken so kindly to him. It might've been better if they hadn't taken him at all, for then he never would've known the feeling of going to church with other people on that first day of Whitsuntide, with the church steeple beckoning from far, far away across the marshes as it did that day, shimmering in the blue haze of the sun-warmed air. Eedi was sure it looked that way only on big holidays.

Reaching home, the boy went no further than the yard gate, where he could still see the church steeple. He pressed his face against the closely set poles of the gate and stared, without knowing at what, exactly. He probably wouldn't have noticed the churchgoers pass by if the dog beside him didn't greet each one with a bark. This woke the boy from his reverie, but soon he stared blankly again, as if the dog hadn't barked.

He stood like that until the church bells started to ring, sounding deep and gentle. Never before had the boy noticed that on the first day of Whitsuntide, the bells possessed such a sound. He'd heard the strange tolling at six in the morning, when the bells announced

that the church doors were open; they woke him in his loft with a yearning pain in his chest. To the boy staring through the gate, it sounded as if the bells were mourning someone who'd died.

A bell had tolled for his mother, but only one bell, for they couldn't afford two. Today, two bells tolled, as if two mothers had died and each was commemorated. A few years earlier, when only one bell rang, Eedi had gone to the church, but today, with two bells ringing, he didn't go. Today his mistress went instead, and she instructed him to take holiday bread from the chest and spread butter on it. Yet Eedi just stood and listened at the gate to the bells tolling for the dead.

Ah! In church they rang bells only for the dead, didn't they? And there was always some boy in torn pants, with a brimless cap on his head, standing at a gate, listening and gazing through the poles, without knowing what he listened to or what he gazed at so intently.

As the last churchgoers hurried past the Hill Farm gate, they saw a boy sitting behind it in a brimless cap, crying. The dog sitting next to him sometimes barked, but the boy paid no attention. Nor did he see a stunted rowan tree in bloom near the gate, with bees buzzing around its blossoms. He saw nothing at all as he sat under the flowering tree with tears rolling down his cheeks, because this was the best thing to do: sit under a rowan tree in bloom, behind the gate while, far away, the bells tolled as if someone's mother was being buried.

When the churchgoers returned and the mistress started serving, she said, "Eedi, you didn't take any holiday bread!"

"I forgot."

"Then come and eat now," she ordered.

The food tasted good, but the master ended Eedi's appetite by saying, in the middle of the meal, "Eat up, and then take the young mare out to the old one, so you can ride her."

At this, the boy's appetite was gone and the food in his mouth became hard to swallow. For what is food compared to the joy of mounting and riding a young mare? It's like sitting on warm cushions, being gently rocked. There's no hint of the shock or pain you get on the old mare, whose back is like a knife and whose hooves hit the ground hard.

When he came back from riding the horse, the boy was in high spirits. Now it really felt like the first day of Whitsuntide, with the cottager looking after the cattle for him. If the sexton had happened to ring the church bells right then, they would've sounded quite different than they did that morning when he sat at the gate. They would've rung out with great joy, as if he were still on the young mare, riding swiftly, swiftly.



On the last day of Whitsuntide, the Hill Farm was full of noise and commotion. Many of the young men from the neighboring farms, and some of the girls too, had come over to say hello. Even some farm owners came to meet the new master and mistress in their home. There were many that Andres and Krööt had never met before. It felt good that people wanted to know them and came to visit.

It wasn't just by chance that a crowd gathered at Vargamäe. The master and mistress had said people were welcome to come by during the holidays, adding that they'd enjoy seeing all, young and old, so they could at last meet everyone in the area. And that's just what happened.

The young couple proved to be good hosts. The farm owners and their wives were even offered food in the front room; the farmhands

and maids settled for a swallow of beer from the stein out in the yard by the barn.

The golden brew wasn't overflowing, but everyone got some, and what it lacked in quantity it made up for in quality. Anyone who drank enough to quench his thirst couldn't help bursting into song. Andres planned to save some of the beer for the cooperative manure spreading, to make a success of that too, so he restrained himself from tapping the barrel too often. More might've been too much, for dancing couples were already flying about the clean-swept yard, as if blown by a windstorm. Girls were giggling in boys' arms, their skirts swirling up like sails on a windmill.

There was no avoiding a strongman competition, for everyone wanted to see the raw strength of the young master of Vargamäe. Of course it wouldn't do to grab the likeable host by his lapels right away, and no one would offer a stick to a stranger to test his strength. It had to come about in a relaxed, natural way.

At first, some of the young lads had a go at each other. They horsed around until the men couldn't resist joining in. Still, the competition was only between farmhands and farm owners' sons. The farm owners themselves took their time, standing around and looking on, but at last, when it looked like no man around was stronger than Kaarel, the farmhand from next door, and Pearu started bragging that no one could best his man, the farmers felt they had to step forward if they wanted to be thought of as real men.

"Anybody want to go at it?" Pearu's worker showed off. "Any real men around here?"

Kaarel raised his right hand with his middle finger bent into a hook. No one had ever been strong enough to pull it straight.

"Let Kingu Priidu try it!" some men shouted, but Priidu was a quiet man who would've rather strummed his zither than hook

fingers, even though his size and strength seemed more suited to finger wrestling than playing an instrument.

“If Priidu doesn’t dare, how about the master of Võõsiku?” asked Kaarel.

But Võõsiku Mihkel wouldn’t go for it either. He was not a tall man, but he was known for having hands like iron, and when he was drunk, he would show them off, making dents in the wood by striking a table with his knuckles.

Hundipalu Tiit, although a man of mighty build, was not brought into the game, since everyone knew he’d rather show off his mind than his strength. He was the smartest man among the neighborhood farmers, and whenever he opened his mouth, everyone listened, as if he were a churchwarden, almost a pastor. He’d gone to a parish school where he’d even learned to read German. He was different from the others in his manners and language, and he spoke a different dialect, so he seemed a little foreign and people made fun of his speech. One of his brothers was a schoolteacher somewhere, another had inherited the family farm, and yet another was a shopkeeper in a town. Tiit was the only man in the area who read a newspaper. He certainly wouldn’t be the one to hook fingers with Pearu’s farmhand.

So it came down to Rava Kustas. He was a bull of a man, red-headed and solidly built, and he wasn’t retiring. He was also a loudmouth; one could hardly get a serious word out of him. His talk was all empty boasts and coarse jokes, as if he always stood at a bar with a glass of vodka, and that’s probably where he picked up his ways, for he was so used to drinking that a double shot of spirits didn’t even make him spit; he just smacked his lips and went on with his manly talk.

“You hook that finger good,” shouted the farmers.

“I can’t hook it too good; I still have to unhook it at the end,” Kustas answered.

“Give it all you got, Kaarel,” said Pearu to his farmhand.

“You just watch me, boss,” the worker answered.

The two men hooked their fingers together and strained and thrashed around in the yard. Others tried to help by pulling at their arms, but neither man would allow that. At last, they crashed into the hops fence and when they grabbed at it to steady themselves, Kaarel came out the winner.

“Christ,” Kustas cursed. “The damned thing came unhooked.”

He hooked his finger with Kaarel’s once more, but the same thing happened; Kaarel was stronger.

“No, my finger won’t stay hooked to Kaarel’s,” Kustas finally said. “Try somebody else.”

Pearu grinned, for he’d finally hired the right farmhand—a good man to take along for a tavern brawl.

There was nobody left who wanted to take on Kaarel. Now all eyes turned to the new master of Vargamäe. Here was a man who looked well-trying and tough. Even the girls threw glances in his direction as he sat, pipe in mouth, on a bench next to Krõõt.

Suddenly Kaarel said, “Hey, master neighbor, how about you?” The crowd shouted approval.

“Woman, what do you think?” Andres asked in a conversational tone.

“Now, what should I think?” his wife replied. “Just don’t get into a fight.”

“Who wants a fight?” somebody shouted. “We’re just having some holiday fun.”

“Who knows what will happen when two tough fellows face each other,” the mistress said with mistrust.

Andres took the pipe out of his mouth, pressed the lid on firmly, and put it in his pocket.

The two men hooked their fingers.

“Foot against foot!” the new master of Vargamäe called.

So, with their right feet pressed together in the middle of the yard, the men started to strain. The crowd was silent, but not for long, for soon the two men fell apart, reeling in opposite directions.

“Who won?” everyone shouted.

“Ask Kaarel,” said the master.

But Kaarel had nothing to say; he just came back to Andres with a flushed face and wanted to try again. So everyone knew that it was he who’d lost, not his opponent.

“Let’s go against the fence for better support,” said Kaarel.

“That’s fine with me,” Andres replied.

Again the contest ended quickly, and again there was no explanation of the outcome, except for the fact that Kaarel wanted to try a third time.

“It’s a waste of time,” the new Vargamäe master replied, a little irritated.

“Hell, what are you afraid of?” shouted Kaarel, exasperated, as he walked over to the woodpile to find a stick for a pulling contest.

Everybody could see that Kaarel didn’t want to give up. Excitedly, they waited.

The two opponents sat down on the grass facing each other, the stick set where their toes met, and started to pull. There’s no telling how that first trial would have ended, for before anything could happen, the master’s hand suddenly slipped off the stick and Kaarel, who’d been pulling with full strength, somersaulted backwards. Everyone laughed. Kaarel got up and indignantly asked, “Are you making fun of me?”

“My hands gave way accidentally, that’s all,” Andres replied. “I forgot to spit on my palms.”

“Then spit,” Kaarel said, “and stop fooling around.”

“I’m not fooling around,” said Andres, but everyone noticed he did not spit this time either before grasping the stick. However, as he pulled, Kaarel’s bottom rose up so easily it was as if he hadn’t been on the grass at all. The onlookers were startled. Even Kaarel was more surprised than mad. Everyone believed that Andres had let go of the stick deliberately the first time, to make a laughing-stock of Kaarel.

They went at it again and again, and each time the laborer was lifted off the grass, never once the farm owner. Finally, Andres went so far as to offer to lift Kaarel off the grass with just one hand, but Kaarel avoided this embarrassment; he wouldn’t allow Andres to show off.

Kaarel couldn’t resist starting in with what he did best and tried to grab the master by his belt. At first Andres didn’t want a fight—and neither did Krõõt, because the master had his new clothes on—but in the end he had to do it; it became a point of honor.

They went at each other. Kaarel was shorter and he immediately got under Andres’s chest and spread his legs. The master tried this way and that, but couldn’t move him. He tried to lift the man up, but how can you lift someone who’s under your chest unless you lift yourself up as well? Nobody can do that. They tossed and pulled, but suddenly the master’s legs flew into the air and the next moment he was flat on the grass, with Kaarel lying across him.

What an uproar among the farmhands! Even the girls shrieked, as if their own feet had gone flying. Pearu, too, shouted with joy. Kaarel’s face was glowing, but the mistress of the Hill Farm was

silent and so was the master as he got up from the ground. Now he was the one who wanted to try again.

The next round lasted longer, because the master was on his guard and as soon as Kaarel tried to repeat his trick, they both fell to the ground and got up again without any progress. From that moment on, it all changed. Andres grasped Kaarel's tricks and no longer feared them. He started to attack and soon had Kaarel on the ground. They went at each other again and again, but Andres did not lose once. So, finally, Kaarel was forced to yield to him in grappling as well.

"The first time he tricked me," said Andres as he sat down next to his wife and wiped his forehead.

"Here on this grass anybody can fool around," Kaarel bragged to the other fellows, "but watch out when I face real men in the tavern. Then you'll see who's better. When I'm tanked up, nobody can beat me. I'll whip everybody in the place, all by myself."

So it wasn't really settled who was better, the Hill Farm master or the Valley Farm laborer, because the final decision would have required a trip to the tavern, tanking both up properly, and pushing them into a quarrel.



Chapter 7

Whitsuntide was important for the residents of Vargamäe Hill Farm because they met the people of the area, who now considered them locals.

While passing around the beer stein, the men asked Andres when he'd be spreading manure in the fields, and if he was going to do it on his own. When it came out that Valley Farm, Aaseme, and Hundipalu were all planning to spread manure before Andres, he agreed to send his man and girl, along with one or two horses, to the neighbors for a few days of work, and when his turn came, workers and horses would be sent over to his farm in return. This turned the hardest, dirtiest job into an enjoyable day, where work and sweat led to a party, with bawdy jokes and dancing in the evening while everyone drank.

Andres didn't expect to get much out of the arrangement; in fact, he'd actually lose out, since he had less manure in his sheds than any of his neighbors. The last master didn't have much stock and during his final winter, instead of spreading enough straw under the animals' feet, he'd taken it to his new farm to improve its fields.

On the morning of the agreed-upon day, six horses showed up at the Hill Farm, making eight with the two horses of their own. By mid-morning, it was clear that if they worked straight through, all

the manure would be spread shortly after lunchtime. To make best use of this workforce, Andres set three horses to plow after lunch, working the freshly spread fertilizer into the soil.

The master himself was out spreading. He worked as carefully as possible with his hoe, making small piles and leaving gaps as wide as he could, but still, parts of the fallow would get nothing. Their only hope was to spread more in autumn if they had it; otherwise there would be no point to sowing the unfertilized areas.

It saddened Andres to look at the empty fallow land. It made him feel as if he'd wronged or cheated someone. He consoled himself with the thought that the sheds of Vargamæ would provide more manure in the future. This lifted his spirits a little so that he, too, could share in the good cheer of the crowd.

Spirits soared during the day, for besides beer there was no shortage of the harder stuff. By lunch break, the neighbor's man, Kaarel, had already broken his pitchfork handle, which told Andres there was enough booze, maybe too much, in fact. Any more and other pitchfork handles could break, leaving the work limping along.

The shed was full of men's rough shouts, urging the horses on. Their echoing voices reached the ears of those spreading manure in the fields and, perhaps because the men encouraged the horses so noisily, the women got caught up in the mood too, as if they were gathering flowers or berries in the woods, and their shrieks of laughter rang out, mixing with the sounds of the men.

The closer it got to evening, the louder the men's voices became, and the more the women's voices rang out. One can only imagine how loud it would've gotten if they had a bigger supply of manure.

With their last loads, the men came into the fields to see for themselves what all the shrieking was about, but the girls hushed up when one of the strong men came by with a load. Instead, they

swung their pitchforks so swiftly that anyone glancing up risked being hit in the face by a flying lump.

Kaarel brought the last load into the field. Here was a man so strong and full of spirit that he made the girls drool. He hadn't been able to beat Andres during Whitsun, but that didn't matter to the girls.

"Mine is the last load, neighbor," Kaarel announced cheerfully.

"Not much there for sure, but if that's it, then that's it," Andres replied.

"I'd like to bring more," the farmhand said, "if only for the good beer and hard vodka, but that's it. There's no more manure. If anybody wants more, they're going to have to make it themselves."

"The beer and vodka also ran out," said Andres.

"Bet you can still find a drop on the side of the barrel or the bottom of the bottle," said Kaarel.

At this, the girls spoke up. "Haven't you had enough?"

"I bet they can hear all this noise down at the church," said Mai, the Hill Farm maid, reproachfully.

"And whose shouting made my ears ring in the shed?" Kaarel asked. "The dog started yelping in the yard and the horses kept pricking up their ears."

Mai bent down, hiding her sweet smile; her bright laughter had caught Kaarel's attention. He might've suspected why she laughed so much.

"Kaarel, are you going to take me home?" asked Miina, the Valley Farm maid.

"What do I call home," he answered derisively, "if I'm still living under somebody else's roof?"

"Will you give me a lift?" The girl rephrased her question.

"The horse is tired and the wagon is dirty," the farmhand replied.

“I’ll come anyway,” said Miina.

“Well, you can’t go if I’m not going,” Kaarel taunted her, giving Mai a furtive wink. Then, when the timing was right, he jumped into his wagon and, standing up, shouted, “Now! Who’s coming first?”

“Me!” shouted Mai, and leaped right behind the young man, hanging on to his shirt to keep from falling. The horse broke into a trot, leaving the others standing there.

“They left the hoe behind,” the master commented.

“What’s a hoe when there’s a girl to pick up,” said the cottager’s wife, who’d come to help with the work.

Once they were out of sight, Kaarel didn’t keep the horse at a trot, but let it walk slowly, and instead of standing, he sat himself down, letting the girl rest on his knee, which was a little cleaner and neater for her.

All this was part of Kaarel’s plan. He’d worked it out while carrying his last load of manure. He was going to tell Mai that she was prettier than the Valley Farm maid, Miina, even though Miina was younger. In fact, he wanted to tell her that he liked her better than all the girls in the neighborhood put together.

Yet he couldn’t manage to get any of this out. He just let Mai sit on his knee, so she’d feel as good and clean as possible in a manure wagon. He put his arm around her waist and led the horse with his left hand. They were nearly to the farmyard and Kaarel still hadn’t said anything, because he just wasn’t drunk enough for romantic talk. Finally, at the last moment, he managed to get out a question.

“Where are you sleeping, Mai?”

“In the woods, Kaarel, on top of a spruce,” the girl answered mischievously.

“In the barn?” asked the boy.

“No, in the pigsty,” laughed the girl.

“Or in the loft?”

“But it’s not soft enough,” she teased.

“Tell me already,” Kaarel pleaded.

“Just look already,” Mai suggested.

“I’ll come tonight.”

“Best come tomorrow.”

“Tonight is better.”

“The day after tomorrow is even better.”

“I’m serious, Mai.”

“You have me in tears, Kaarel,” laughed the girl, sitting on his lap.

“You want to know something, Mai?” the farmhand asked.

“No. I don’t know and I don’t want to know,” answered the girl, her heart jumping.

“What if we got married?”

“And ride to the church in a manure wagon?” laughed Mai, but she was holding back her tears, for she suddenly remembered someone asking to marry her once before. She jumped from Kaarel’s knee and yanked the reins with all her might. Soon they arrived back at the farmyard, shouting and arguing, as if nothing but jokes had passed between them.

At the Hill Farm house, while everyone was washing up, a ruckus broke out. Someone said the master ought to be rinsed off, since this was his first day spreading manure. At first they just tossed water with their hands, but then Andres lifted the water tub and dumped it over those throwing water at him. Nobody had expected him to take the joke so seriously. Suddenly the whole yard was full of shrieks and shouts, and everyone began tossing water, warm or cold, onto their neighbors. People ran and chased each other. Soon some of the boys and girls were soaked through, but no one got more soaked than the Hill Farm’s maid, Mai, because she herself

was so eager to soak the others. They all noticed, though, that the water she tossed behaved strangely. No matter where she threw it, it always landed on Kaarel's back, and the same odd thing happened with Kaarel's water. Even if he tossed it skywards, it somehow left only Mai's clothes dripping.

Everyone who witnessed this amazing sight—and everyone did see it—recognized that something was happening, or was about to happen, between Mai and Kaarel; there was no denying it. So when Mai yanked at the horse's reins and headed off amid noise and shouting, nobody was fooled; the way they'd splashed water on each other said it all.

It was no surprise. Kaarel was one of the strongest men and Mai one of the sturdiest women. Moreover, Mai had fair hair and blue eyes so gentle they drove the boys wild. It seemed that Mai's eyes couldn't belong to any earthly being.

After she changed into dry clothes in the barn, her eyes seemed even more gentle and blue to Kaarel. He hardly looked at his dumpling soup and meat as he ate, because he kept stealing glances at Mai. He stuffed himself, paying no attention to how much he put in his stomach.

Mai, on the other hand, couldn't swallow a bit of food. She kept dipping her spoon in the soup, but didn't touch the meat. She would've left the soup untouched if her spoon didn't reach into the same bowl as Kaarel's; his spoon kept hers hurrying back to that bowl. It also happened that Kaarel's spoon stole a dumpling from Mai, but that was nothing. Mai would've gladly placed every dumpling in the bowl on his spoon—for no other reason than all that cold water Kaarel had splashed on her in the yard, with everyone watching.

After the meal, when Kaarel again asked her where she slept, she couldn't help but answer.

“I’ll come today,” said Kaarel.

“Oh, not today, Kaarel,” begged the girl, for she was scared of him and, even more, she was scared of herself. He replied with firmness.

“I’ll come tonight when everyone’s gone to bed.”

It made Mai feel happy to be scared. The boy would come, like a thief in the night, but the barn door would be locked from the inside, with a strong hook and staple. Mai would leave the door locked all night. She’d let him come so she could see what he might do. Mai was so happy to be scared of Kaarel, and happy that the hook and staple were so strong.

The master and mistress were also happy as they went to bed that night. It had been a lot of trouble and expense, but now the manure was spread and most of it was plowed as well. It was a pity there wasn’t enough, a great pity indeed, but next year they’d have enough to keep eight horses busy for a whole day, at least that much. Dreaming of manure, Andres went to sleep. For just as Mai hoped for a happy life to spring from the cold water Kaarel had thrown over her, so Andres dreamed of a better future for Vargamäe, with more manure.

Only Krõõt, the young mistress, had no dreams that night as she lay next to her husband. She felt only that she was now truly a farmer’s wife, with heavy duties to bear. If only she’d fall asleep so she might rise on time the next morning. Oh, just to sleep!



Chapter 8

They had to prepare for haying. Other necessary work went undone, but it couldn't be helped. Each day, Andres put off some work, just as the previous owner had done.

They had scythe blades and whetstones, but no handles for the scythes and rakes.

"Juss," Andres asked his farmhand, "do you want me to make a handle for your scythe, or can you manage it yourself?"

"Come now, master," the boy replied. "I'm pretty sure I can do it."

So the farmhand tended to his own gear, but Andres took care of the rest and made some spares in case something broke.

For the rake teeth, Eedi collected spindle trees in the marsh, but he didn't have enough, so some had to be made from rowan. As for the handles, Andres had brought some spruces from his old home, afraid he might not find anything suitable on this marshy land. He'd cut them down at the best time, when the bark was loose, so they'd be soft as silk on the hands.

They started haying a few days before midsummer. It wasn't really haying weather—there were occasional drizzles—but the grass was tall and hot, and dry weather was predicted. So said the calendar and such had been the winter signs, to which old people paid attention. As they said, mow in the rain or you'll have nothing to rake when it's dry.

They tested their scythes and their own strength on the lower field. Both seemed satisfactory to the master. Worst at the job was perhaps the mistress, because lately she had no appetite and felt sick if she ate.

When she heard about the problem, the cottager's wife said cryptically, "Things aren't right just now with our young mistress."

"God only knows," smiled the mistress shyly.

"It's probably a girl," said the cottager's wife. "It's the damned girls that make you sick. I was the same way, sometimes throwing up in the bushes. And food wouldn't stay down at all, no matter what I did."

"So you've had children, as well?" Krõõt asked, surprised.

"I had two, a son and a daughter," the woman replied. "They're both in the graveyard now. That's why I go walking there every Sunday."

"And you've had no more?" the mistress asked.

"No more," the old woman said. "We could've had some, but the years went by and, whether it was me or my old man, it just didn't happen. So that's that. We're getting old now."

"You could've had one," said the mistress.

"Well, yes, an heir," the old woman said, "a reason for our work. Now we're like two rotting old tree stumps without any fresh shoots, only waiting to join our children. I don't think the mistress even knows where our graveyard is."

"And I don't want to know," said Krõõt.

"I didn't either, but I wasn't given a choice," the old woman said, resignedly.

"Yes, no one chooses when he must find it," the mistress repeated.

This was how Krõõt discovered why food made her feel so sick, but it didn't mean she could shirk her duties. As before, she had

to take care of the household chores and then hurry outside to help with the haying, for it took more than three people to mow the meadows of Vargamäe. Even four weren't quite enough. Over at the Valley Farm, six or seven people could be seen at work some days.

Hay time, as Krõõt saw it, was what being a mistress was all about. She rose with the sun, milked the cows, sent the cattle out, let the pigs into the run, tidied the house, scrubbed the milk buckets, made food for everyone and took it out to the hayfields, and all of this on the run, as if she had more than one pair of feet. Then she slaved away with the others in the hayfields, and when everyone started thinking of lunch and a nap, she rushed back to the house to find the cows mooing, waiting to be milked, and the cow herder waiting to be sent out again. After hustling about the house some more, she scurried back to the hayfields, to help out for a few more hours until the end of the day. Time flew by as they worked, and soon the sun was setting. The mistress then raced back to the house, as if running from a fire, to prepare food for the family. Without much in the pen, the pigs roamed the road, their stomachs as empty as a bellows. At the sight of the mistress, they squealed loudly, like bewitched children, and that's how the mistress treated them, since she had no children yet of her own.

She also had to think of the cows, for how could she milk them when she had nothing to give them as they came in from the soft marsh, mooing as soon as they saw her. Already they couldn't provide enough milk for the family and Krõõt had to stretch it by making gruel and pouring it into a bowl, or mixing it with kvass beer. So, while the soup was simmering, she'd go out to the kitchen garden and potato patch with a sickle or an old scythe blade—she wouldn't take a good one for this—to trim, gather, and weed

whatever she could find in the plots or at the edges of the fields for the cows, because that's the duty of a mistress.

She was on the run from morning until night, but there was no pile of work to show for it. What she started with in the morning was what she ended up with in the evening. Her routine repeated over and over, as if she were a caged squirrel running on a wheel.

In the evening, the men went to bed, and on most days, so did the maid, for she, too, worked in the fields. The mistress's work never received any notice, not even from her husband. It was as if she worked in the meadows and hayfields only for amusement, to pass the time. She was always the last one awake in the evening, bustling about the house, always busy and rushed, as if she wouldn't have the chance to continue working tomorrow.

She finally slipped into bed, beside her snoring husband, who nursed a deep weariness in his bones and flesh, because he, too, drove himself mercilessly, attacking the work as if it were his deadliest enemy. Every night, the farmhand cursed and spat, saying that Andres was killing him with work; he couldn't lag behind with his rake as long as the master kept ahead of everyone.

"He feeds us damned good, but he's even better at working us to death," said Juss to Mai.

"Oh, stop moaning; it's not so bad," she replied, for at that moment she had the feeling that work and all of life's other problems were no more important than the clouds in the sky.

"If only it would rain so we'd have a chance to catch our breath," sighed the boy.

"Rain wouldn't get you a break," the girl replied.

"Sure it would," Juss contended.

"No, it wouldn't," the girl insisted.

"And why not?" the boy asked.

“You’ll see. Just wait,” said Mai.

Sure enough, it didn’t help. Rainy weather came, but still there wasn’t time for the farmhand to even wipe his brow.

Andres soon discovered that their hay meadows were badly overgrown. Everywhere, willows, shrubs and thickets, stunted birches, and even junipers were spreading wildly. Tussock after tussock got in the way of the scythe as it split the grass that grew between them. He could hardly get a full cut; he couldn’t even swing the scythe freely. Andres wanted to grab an axe and simply chop them out, or better yet, tear them up by the roots so that next year neither shoot nor stump would threaten him in the grass, ready to bite off his scythe blade.

When the rains started, life got even worse for the farmhand. He had to chop tussocks and shrubs, which meant getting soaked to the skin. By evening, neither the master nor his man had a dry spot on their bodies, but the master didn’t notice as he sat next to the fire, his shirt steaming. His face revealed honest work and, indeed, an honest life.

Black piles of sticks and tussocks lay along the edges of the meadows. “Let them dry,” said the master. “We’ll burn them next summer, or put them under the cattle in the winter. There’ll be lots of cleared land. The grass will have a chance to grow and we’ll have room to swing a scythe.”

The master’s words got no response, because his farmhand had already decided he wouldn’t stay another summer to mow the meadows of Vargamäe, not at any price. Mai had yet to decide whether she’d stay or find another master, but she wasn’t interested in tussock chopping, at least not then. She had her own concerns, and they were much more important than the master’s tussocks and shrubs. Her future was tied up with Kaarel, the neighbor’s

farmhand, and so she didn't know where she'd be mowing next year, at Vargamäe or somewhere else.

So no one listened seriously to the master's words, but he went on talking, though he may not have been talking to anybody, or maybe just to the fire or the tussocks and shrubs he'd spent the day chopping apart in his soaked shirt.

The farmhand had only one thought—stretching out on the fresh, crisp, dry hay, warmed by the heat of the furnace, and drying his pants and the shirt on his back. In the morning, his clothes would still smell faintly of fresh hay, the sweetest smell Juss had ever known, and a powerful one, too. Some mornings the smell made him feel a bit dizzy and sick, as if they'd been drinking too much the night before.

Juss had never known a softer bed than fresh hay in a barn. He could lie down atop a great pile of it in the evening, but during the night, as he tossed about in his sleep and woke because it was so warm, he inevitably found himself sunk deep down into it. Like breaking waves, the sweet-smelling hay enveloped him. He'd climb atop again, but by morning he'd be buried so deep that the master would go hoarse shouting for him. The farmhand heard nothing under the thick pile. Even in winter, when pitching the hay and inhaling the smells of summer, he'd think back to those rainy days, his soaking wet shirt and dripping pants, the cool shivers of his weary body, and the warmth of the hay.

May the Lord punish and the pastor rebuke any master who kills his farmhand in the hayfields, but let him forgive all the sins committed by Andres of Vargamäe, for the sake of his warm, sweet-smelling hay, for this was how the boy Juss wanted it every night when he slept in the barn. The Lord may forgive the sins of all, but let him leave Juss out of it, for he wished nothing more than

to dry his shirt and pants. And let no one ask Juss where he'd work next summer, for he might just stay at Vargamäe, if the master kept such warm, sweet hay in his barn.

When the haymakers reached the riverbank, the whole area was swarming with people. Now and then they heard the sound of a whetstone and spotted a shirt in the shrubs or behind the reeds and bulrushes.

Toward evening, fires were lit and soup or potatoes simmered over the flames. When a pan of bacon was put onto the coals, there was nothing anyone could do but breathe in, just breathe in the smell, for neither the meadowsweet nor the wild aroma of river herbs could compete with the smell of pork.

The river was so still that it hardly seemed to move. A little fish made a splash in a quiet pool; a ripple disturbed the grasses and a pike moved in the rushes, chasing his smaller brothers until he was devoured by something larger. Whenever somebody shouted, the still water echoed back, as if from the open mouth of a hay barn.

The swallows circled above, catching gnats to feed the young waiting in nests on the barn beams and roof battens. They sang and, in the evening, people joined in—first one, then another, soon a third, and a fourth, until the whole riverside echoed with songs and shouts.

The farmers found it hard to get their daughters and sons and hands and maids off to the barns to sleep, despite the hard work they'd done in the meadows during the daytime heat. They kept gazing toward the river, where fish splashed and a flat-bottomed boat hid in the reeds. They looked and they listened to the singing and shouting, and even after they went off to the barns, they sneaked out again when sleep shut their parents' or masters' eyes and deafened their ears.

They slipped out and moved as if some sure happiness awaited them across the river or among the bulrushes and reeds. They found giddy joy in the steaming, fragrant river. The wary otter knew what they did, as he splashed here and there, and so did the moose that crunched through the reeds. Only the farmers who sent their young to sleep in the barns didn't know, for, unlike their charges, they didn't believe in happiness or everlasting life.

The next day, come what may, God himself would help the hayers, for was it not He who created all this: the shouts and voices, the ripples and lights? Was it not He who created this darkening night and the blackened marshes and bogs like a heavenly wall framing the river?

Andres of Vargamäe had decided to do battle against this heavenly wall, and year after year he'd push down toward the river. Here the thicket and brush proved to be tougher than that in the water-side meadow. Bushes had killed the grass underneath and advanced bit by bit.

How could he feed his animals if the meadows were full of undergrowth? The thing to do was rip out the snakes' nests and burn the rampant brush, no matter how tough it was, because burning, chopping, and uprooting wouldn't help. Somewhere deep underground a chunk of the stump would survive and produce a green shoot the next year, happy and fresh, as if it fed on the blackest of soil.

It was like a battle against a serpent with a hundred heads, a battle where the hero dies before he can chop them all off. The seed of this serpent sprouted in the meadows, pastures, and fields, and the farmer struggled with it everywhere, until his shirt and those of his workers were soaked through. Such was his dream of happiness in the hayfields and on the plowed land.

By the time haying ended, Andres could see that he wouldn't be able to keep more cows unless the meadows were improved. The chaff they got from the grain crops didn't help much, for there were no leafy stalks and the young shoots were as thin as sticks. The rye field had grown no higher than a frog's armpit, as the saying goes. The former tenant seemed to have deliberately destroyed the field, taking all he could and giving back as little as possible. You can't really cheat a field; do it once and you'll be cheated back nine times. Andres understood that now.

He even spoke with Pearu, his Valley Farm neighbor, but Pearu bragged, "I got no complaints. When I cut hay, the swathes are so thick you need a pole to vault across one. I'll be harvesting more this year than last year for sure. If only it was this good every year."

"I've got nothing to be happy about," Andres said. "I was hoping for more."

"My land is better," Pearu boasted. "Nobody here's got land as good as mine. The grass grows as high as your waist."

It was true enough: The riverside meadow of the Valley Farm was much better than the Hill Farm's. Pearu was there when they surveyed the land and he bribed the surveyor with as much as he could afford, so the man pushed the property lines as far as possible in his favor. Because the river made a large, abrupt turn to the west just beneath the farms, as if pressing its bent knee under Vargamäe's chin, it was possible to position Pearu's farm on top of that knee. A small part of the farm sat on the other side of the river and spread over the whole river bend. All this made for such a favorable land section that neither Pearu nor his father could've wished for anything more at the time.

The Hill Farm land was all on one shore and bordered the water further down the river. While the large, nearly square section of

the Valley Farm land filled the bend of the river, the Hill Farm had no way of reaching it but by going around the Valley Farm lot. The property line between the two farms ran straight along the lower edge of the alder brush, passed between two rises, and turned sharply toward the river. A similar turn occurred in the property line separating the Valley Farm from the Aaseme land, which never reached the river. Its riverside meadow was a separate piece of land, and its cattle could only be herded there through a neighbor's land.

Andres had noted all this when buying the farm. He might not have bought it if he'd compared it only to the Valley Farm, but he also compared it to Aaseme and then it didn't look quite so bad.

Yet it was bad, as Andres only fully realized at haymaking. The Hill Farm couldn't even send its drainage ditches down to the river without going around the Valley Farm land. Pearu, however, could send all his ditches to the river bend, which was only half as far. Moreover, the water in those ditches drained better, while Andres's only got moving after passing Jõessaare, where the ditches turned straight toward the river. If a ditch began at the Valley Farm, it benefited only that farm, but when the Hill Farm dug a ditch, it served to drain both.

The division of the farm fields also favored the Valley Farm. The Hill Farm fields were mostly on higher, stonier areas, while the Valley fields were on lower and more level land, with fewer stones and more earth. The fields of the Valley Farm were older, and those of the Hill Farm were newer. Some people remembered when the high rise, where a few old, knotty pines still topped the Hill Farm fields, had been covered by dark forest, mostly spruce. The whole area had once been called Spruce Island, but little by little, the plows went higher up the slope until they finally arrived at the present border. A dozen old pines still stood at the ridge, a vestige of what once was the pride and glory of Vargamäe.

It was due to the destruction of its forests that Vargamäe got its name. At first there was only one farm at Spruce Island, located on the land where the Valley Farm now sat, and it was called Kuusiku, or Spruce Farm, after the name of the area. There lived a prosperous farmer who owned several teams of draft oxen. In the winter, he used them to carry one big spruce after another to town, to sell for money. The gamekeeper was slipped some moonshine and closed his eyes to it, and the other farmers in the area kept quiet, for they all did the same thing, at least as much as they dared. Everyone chuckled about it, anticipating what would happen if one fine day it was discovered that the best timber of Spruce Island had been cut down to a field of stumps. Even from a distance, an experienced eye could tell that Spruce Island was no longer the mighty forest it had once been, and it was getting sparser each year.

What they'd anticipated finally came to pass. One winter, on his way home from a long hunting trip, the lord of the manor decided to take a route through Spruce Farm and some of the other distant farms, since there was a good, firm road through the area. Coming up to Spruce Island, the riders went astray and instead of approaching the farm, they came upon a secret logging site where the lord saw two pair of oxen dragging out cut logs. The farmer spotted the lord in time and vanished into the forest, leaving his farmhand to take the blame, but it didn't end as everyone expected. When the lord, who was known as a joker, heard what the farmhand had to say, he ordered that one team of oxen be sent to his manor with the timber they were hauling. He then turned his horses around and rode away.

The farmer did as the lord had ordered. He sent the first team of oxen, with its load of logs, to the manor and took the second team to town to sell the rest of the wood. He kept on hauling away logs as if nothing had happened. Some who heard of the encounter had

long yearned to take over Spruce Farm, and now they rushed to the manor and asked the lord for its lease. They thought the tenant's days were numbered, but the landlord, with a surprised look on his face, asked where his tenant, Jüri of Vargamäe, might be going. When reminded of the business with the oxen and the logs, he said only that he wasn't so dumb as to toss out a tenant who had, without giving it a thought, presented him with a team of oxen.

This is how the name Vargamäe, or Robber's Rise, came to be used by the lord of the manor, replacing Kuusiku or Spruce Farm.

The new name must've appealed to the locals, for they abandoned the old one, as the spruce forest yielded to the axe and a team of oxen. Any weak, thin trees that escaped the axe and the oxen were soon uprooted by the wind. Only the pines held out, and those still stood at the top of the rise, fearful only of the hand of man.

Years later, when Jüri of Vargamäe went to the manor to pay his rent, the landlord asked after his renowned spruce forest. When the tenant said the wind had destroyed it, the lord thought it a good idea to use the site for a new farm. So it was done, and Vargamäe became home to another tenant farmer. As the second farm was on the hill while the first lay in the valley, they came to be called Mäe, or "Hill," and Oru, or "Valley." The whole hill was put down in the manor's books as Vargamäe and when the area was surveyed, the farms were put down as Hill Farm and Valley Farm. It had been that way generation after generation and would stay so forever.



Chapter 9

It was a summer of unending toil on the Hill Farm. The workers had no time to wipe their brows between tasks. Haymaking was not yet finished but the rye was starting to drop, and they had to put down the scythes and pick up sickles.

The farm seemed to have enough meadowland to keep them mowing until Michaelmas, but so bare were the fields that they'd end up with only a meager hay crop. It was the same with the rye. Harvesting with sickles meant backstabbing pain but, when threshed, the kernels were small as caraway seeds and mixed with bentgrass. Selling a portion was out of the question; they'd be lucky if they made it to spring without going to the communal granary.

The oats and barley promised a better harvest, perhaps because the master had sown them himself. In the lower fields, potatoes, too, were growing fine tops. By the time they flowered, the master could feel there was a bountiful crop underneath.

Flax did not meet expectations. They knew they'd sown it on difficult soil in the spring, but either the seed was poor or the water had damaged it. The flax came up sparsely, although there wasn't much wrong with the fiber.

"We can't give any away this year," Krōōt told her husband. "I'll need it all for shirts and sacks. And we need sacks even more than shirts."

“We’re going to have to sell a little. Where else can we get some money?” said the master. “There are things we need and new expenses, so we have to have some money, and that’s all there is to it.”

“I suppose so. There are no animals or anything to sell yet,” Krõõt agreed, as her husband listed the expenses to come.

“How much butter have you got?” asked Andres.

“I hope to have three tubs by winter, but no more, since we’ll want some for ourselves from time to time,” Krõõt replied.

“That’s not too bad,” Andres said, pleased. “Just try to be thrifty.”

“And I have been,” his wife explained. “For me, it could all stay in the tub, without a dab for my own bread, but sometimes the family must have some.”

“You should eat a little too. If you get tired and can’t work, then what will we all do?” said Andres.

“I’ll manage somehow,” said the woman encouragingly.

And manage she did. She became quite wan, which everyone noticed, but she never gave in.

Endlessly busy at the house, cowshed, and barn, she nevertheless found time to help in the hay meadows and fields, gathering ears of barley and stooping over potato rows. It was hard work, much harder than anything she’d done before, but she held on, enduring it all because she was the mistress of Vargamäe. The farm had been bought with a mortgage, and only a small deposit. The balance had to be earned through work, and if they couldn’t do it, the debt would fall on their children. The couple did not want their children to toil for their farm. So the mistress worked tirelessly, in both the house and the fields so their children would have a better life. They shouldn’t have to slave for the lord of the manor; it should be enough that their parents did.

By the first snow, which fell early that year, all the outside work was done and only a couple of piles of sheaves remained in the fields. In a few days, those would be brought in, too, as soon as the wind started blowing through the gates of the threshing barn and they could winnow the old heaps of threshed grain.

The bins and sacks in the barn were not as full as the master needed, but still they were more full than he'd dared to hope.

"Not too bad," he said to his wife. "Good enough for the first year."

Of course, he couldn't best Pearu, who was an old hand. To hear Pearu tell it, he had twice as much of everything as the Hill Farm. Nevertheless, Madis the cottager's prediction finally came about when, on his way home one night, Juss the farmhand happened across some sheaves of grain on the marsh causeway. In the morning, seeing the oat sheaves, the master asked, "Where did you steal these?"

"I didn't need to steal them; they were lying beside the road," said the boy.

"Where?" Andres asked.

"Along our own causeway," said Juss.

"And were there any more?" asked the master.

"No," said the boy, "just the two I carried here, one under each arm. I didn't see any point in leaving them."

The master smiled a bit, but said nothing.

"If I could bring back two sheaves every night," said the boy, "then the old mare's coat would soon be shining."

"So you think you'll find some every night?" the master asked.

"Why not, if the old mare is lucky?" joked the boy happily.

Andres also felt good, as if he were going to share in those sheaves himself. The mistress, too, smiled upon hearing Juss's story. It was funny to her, the thought of him coming down the pitch-black road

like a thief, a white oat sheaf under each arm. Juss was no thief; he was a nice, obedient lad who gladly did whatever the young mistress asked of him. He was joking now, more for her sake than the master's; her melancholy eyes seemed more in need of laughter than the cold, gray eyes of the master, which sometimes appeared as sharp as nails.

There was nothing really wrong with Juss, except that he was short and stubby and a little bowlegged, with a short neck and a head that sat down between his high shoulders. When he walked, he waved his arms comically, holding them out stiffly as if his pockets were bulging. When carrying the oat sheaves, his arms stayed put, but this only pushed his shoulders higher still, so high that someone approaching might've wondered if Juss had any head at all.

The only person who didn't seem to enjoy Juss's talk, and who didn't appreciate his endearingly funny bowlegged figure, was the housemaid Mai. She just sat there alone, working at the spinning wheel as if she were mad at it, as if her heart raged against the hurt of the whole world. Yet no one had hurt her, except perhaps Pearu's farmhand Kaarel. Only he could be the devil who blackened Mai's life with a tar brush. Didn't he promise to stay at Vargamäe through the winter? But instead he tucked in his shirt and went off to God knows where. His reason? He just didn't want to live in this wild, wooded place; life was better in the open country, where there were villages and taverns and everything.

"And what about me? You're leaving me behind?" Mai asked.

"Come away, come on away too; why should you slave in this mudhole?" said Kaarel.

It was easy for him to say that and just take off, but for Mai things were different. She'd been hired for a year, he only for the summer. Where could she go and be welcomed? Should she run after Kaarel?

Or go somewhere else? Cut trees in the forest or shovel potatoes in some distillery?

No, there was nowhere for Mai to go; she had to stay at Vargamäe. So she treaded the spinning wheel madly and desperately, as if it were the treadle's fault.

"Are you going to try to get a place at a manor next spring?" ventured Mai, to remind him of his promise to her, but this pointless question annoyed Kaarel, who answered haughtily.

"Not this fellow. I'm not about to work for just room and board, not for ten years yet. I can earn my keep easier than that."

So Mai realized that her blue eyes didn't mean a damned thing to Kaarel anymore—those eyes he'd once thought could not belong to her. It was just another summer romance. In the spring, it had started out so well—Mai sat on Kaarel's knee in the manure wagon and later they tossed so much water at each other that it was obvious enough. Everyone saw that. But it wasn't as it appeared.

Mai's thoughts went on this way as she worked at the spinning wheel, while bowlegged Juss made the others laugh with his sheaves of oats.

When the snow started, Andres had another big problem: he didn't have a second sled with a back rack to haul hay and brushwood. He'd hoped to have time during the long autumn evenings to make the wooden parts for a second sled, but the evenings passed and when the snow fell early, only the curving runners were finished.

He told Pearu about his problem and Pearu immediately offered him a sled, claiming he had an extra. Andres accepted the offer, sure that in a month he'd have his own sled ready, but when he met his neighbor in the tavern a few weeks later, Pearu began shouting to everyone that his shiftless neighbor couldn't even get his own sled and had to borrow one.

“I bet that old nag of yours is pulling my sled right now,” said Pearu, facing down Andres.

“That horse you got hitched up out there doesn’t come close to matching mine,” Andres answered hotly.

Pearu shouted, “Listen, that’s a real stallion I got neighing out there under the tavern roof. Does your mare need a stud? Take him, no charge. Want him?”

“That stallion of yours was gelded twenty years ago,” Andres sneered.

Irritated, Pearu retorted, “But you’re using my sled, aren’t you, you worm?”

“You’re getting it back tonight,” Andres said.

“Ah, go ahead and use it, you poor beggar. I could give it to you for free,” said Pearu arrogantly.

“I could never make such a piece of junk, and I wouldn’t take it as a gift,” Andres replied.

The argument about the sled ended when Pearu went off to the first-class salon.

“You can’t joke around with Pearu,” the old Aaseme man said to Andres. “He’ll throw it back at you as soon as you accept something from him.”

“Madis the cottager warned me,” said Andres, “but I thought, what the hell, it’s between neighbors; next time it might be me helping him out.”

“You could’ve come to me. I’ve got a sled we’re not using. You don’t need to mess with him,” said Aadu of Aaseme. “Now he’ll spread trash around the whole parish.”

But Andres did not take Aadu’s sled. He decided to get along with just one until the new sled was finished.

That evening, Andres sent Juss to return Pearu's sled and tell him they didn't need it anymore. When Pearu got home and heard about this, he got angrier than ever. Pearu thought, "Who does the neighbor think he is? He takes my sled, uses it for a couple of weeks, and doesn't let me talk about it in the tavern? What's the point then of lending my sled out just to become worn and torn by somebody else?"

Pearu paced and pondered, pondered and paced, but in the end he dropped the matter and did nothing. Even in the tavern, he hadn't tried to pick a quarrel with Andres, for in the spring he'd seen Andres's strength. It had been more fun with his previous neighbor, whom he could always corner in the tavern. This neighbor just sat at the bar, pipe in mouth and his quarter-pint of vodka in front of him. He didn't drink, but bought some vodka anyway, as if to show Pearu that he could do as he pleased. And so it was, too, for Pearu could do nothing to him.

Andres didn't worry much about the sled business either, for his mind was on the ditch he and Pearu were digging. It was important that this work not be held up, so that the water could start draining.

Andres thought it strange that Pearu would make such a commotion about the sled, yet say nothing of the ditch digging that was just under way. Didn't he have good reason to boast about that, too? For the ditch was entirely on his land and the sod would be piled on his side—neat and tight, like a dam of sorts.

So close was the project to Andres's heart that he went to look at the ditch while the snow was still on the ground. It was a bright, white ribbon running toward the Jõessaare, along the border between low shrubs. Further down the ribbon, the ditch was cut short. Water collected beneath the ice because it had nowhere to drain, but next summer the ditch would reach the river and the water would run freely.

Andres had planned to haul in materials that first winter and build the new bedrooms the next spring. The mistress had brought up the new bedrooms several times, perhaps prompted by the coming birth of their first child. But for Krõõt this was only a dream. Although she was young, she understood that it would be impossible to finish the new bedrooms in time—the baby was expected too soon for that.

By autumn, when the year's crops were in the barn, it was clear to the master that they wouldn't have new bedrooms, not for their first child's birth, not even for next winter. There was no time and no money. During that first winter, there was so much to haul and building materials had to be postponed. They needed pickets, poles, and logs. If there were none in their own woods, or they chose not to take them from there, the materials would have to be brought from eight or ten miles away, because there was no place closer to buy them.

So the bedrooms didn't materialize as the mistress had dreamed and the master had intended, but it couldn't be helped; it just couldn't be helped.

And, as the cottager's wife had predicted in summer, a daughter was born to Krõõt. The baby was sturdy and strong, and everyone marveled at how big she was; but still, it was only a girl.

"No heir this time," said Andres. "It would seem you need help more than I do."

"Who knows, maybe that's so," said Krõõt from her bed of straw. She had to summon all her strength to say even this much to her husband, who stood disappointed in front of his wife and child.

Before the birth, Krõõt felt love for her child and her heart overflowed with joy. Each tiny garment she'd sewn was made partly of cloth and partly of tenderness and love, but now it was different.

At this moment, there was no tenderness or love for the baby to be found in her body, only apathy, so exhausted was she from the labor of childbirth. Only when she touched the little items made with such tenderness and love did she recall the earlier feeling, and only as a distant memory.

But somehow the voice of the baby captivated Krōōt. It was only a few years earlier that she'd first heard her little sister's voice, but that had passed her by. Now her own child's voice touched her ears the same way the child's lips touched her breasts. As she endured the pain, the cottager's old wife consoled her.

“Bear it happily, young bride, for there is no love without pain.”

Krōōt smiled. She truly felt now as if every touch from the infant awakened love within her, and it was quite different from what she'd felt while making the baby clothes. The new love was made of flesh and blood.



Chapter 10

Their first winter, like their first summer, passed in unceasing toil. Be there rain or snow, they were outside, chopping, sawing, and hauling.

During the long evenings, the master worked at the carpenter's bench, carving and planing, since the household needed all sorts of things. There weren't enough barrels, tubs, dippers, or even milk pails. Whenever possible, the master made these things himself, in order to avoid feeding a stranger or paying him money.

The farmhand also put himself to work, as if Andres's zeal was contagious. He made spoons, braided nets for hay, straps for moc-casins, and a basket the mistress could use to feed the animals. Spoons gave Juss the most trouble. Try as he might, he couldn't get them to look much like the lower jaw of a pig, as the master wanted. A spoon should look like a pig's lower jaw, insisted Andres.

The women were at their spinning wheels every day, working late into the night and beginning again around four or five in the morning. Krōöt never used the baby as an excuse to spare herself. She continued to do the work of any able-bodied woman, for otherwise what kind of a farmer's wife would she be? Her work was measured in only one way; she spun until she fell asleep at the wheel. Spin, spin—her foot danced on the treadle, as she pulled and moistened

the flax or hemp fiber until her fingers could move no more. The spinning wheel whirred on a little longer, as if unable to stop, but when it did, Krōöt would wake at once and begin anew, repeating the whole process.

On seeing this, the maid sometimes remonstrated, "It's really time to go to bed. You're all worn out."

"Oh I could do some more, but sleep overcomes me; the baby keeps me awake at night," Krōöt would say, and when she finally did stand up to go to bed, she would tell the maid, "Don't let me sleep too long; I just need to close my eyes for a little while."

On the farm, they already had their own wool, as well as their own flax to spin. Two spinning wheels weren't enough to make it all into thread, and some was given to the cottager's wife so she, too, could earn her daily bread.

In the spring, Juss stayed on at the farm, even though he'd decided to find a new master at any cost. Whether he stayed because he hadn't found a new master he liked, or because he'd just stopped looking altogether, the farmer and his wife never learned. The mistress was very glad that he stayed, though, and it was she who first brought up the subject.

"Juss, are you going to stay with us for another year?"

At first, the boy looked at the young mistress as if he didn't know what to make of her question, but then he said, "I would, if the master just paid me more."

"Well, how much more would you want?"

"Oh I don't know," said Juss, "just a little more; I sure could use it."

The mistress laughed.

"From me, you would get two pairs of socks, a pair of hemp pants and another pair of half-woolen pants right away," Krōöt said.

“If the mistress gave me all that, I sure would stay another year,” Juss promised.

Later, Juss also asked the master for a pair of leather moccasins. He agreed to that and threw in a second pair, made of untanned leather. So they had a deal.

But Mai went away and they had to find a new maid to replace her. Mai didn’t want a raise or anything. She just wanted to leave. Perhaps her heart still ached for Kaarel, the neighbor’s farmhand, and she was looking for a place closer to him. She couldn’t bear to look at the fields where, last spring, she’d been billing and cooing joyfully, and she didn’t want to spread manure again at Vargamäe if she couldn’t get a ride in the carriage, sitting on Kaarel’s knees. Past joys are dead joys and Mai would not waste time on them.

As she said goodbye, the girl’s eyes filled with tears, and when the mistress asked why she was crying, she said, “I’m sorry to lose my mistress; where will I ever find such a jewel again?”

“Maybe you’ll find someone who’s richer than me and even more of a jewel,” said Krõõt.

“I might find one richer, but better?” the girl replied.

So the conversation ended between mistress and maid, after they’d lived and worked together for a year.

Krõõt talked about it once more with her husband, as if apologizing for the girl’s departure. “I think she still has Kaarel in her heart or she might’ve stayed. I don’t know for sure, but he might’ve dropped her after visiting her bed.”

“Who knows what that fellow might’ve done,” the master replied.

The ground was still frozen in places when Andres and Juss began building a fence along the road. This year, they had what they needed for the job, for they’d procured materials during the winter.

In the yard there was a pile of sharpened poles, along with rough lathing and pickets.

The fields were mostly unfenced, or the fences had fallen down. Their animals, or other farmers' animals, might get out and the pigs might get into the potatoes. It couldn't remain as it was. Andres thought about fencing individual fields where, when they lay fallow, he could pen pigs or sheep. Of course, they couldn't get all that done in a year, but perhaps the good Lord would allow them some spare time the following year, and the year after that.

The fence-building at the Hill Farm caught Pearu's eye. He couldn't ignore all the poles and laths that were hauled during the winter. His first thought was that he could do anything his neighbor could, and just as well. So he hauled home even more fence material than Andres. He did it easily, since he had much more forest than the Hill Farm.

It was obvious to everyone that the two neighboring farms on Vargamäe were competing. The previous summer, they'd competed with fieldwork and haymaking. Pearu wanted to beat his neighbor, whatever the cost. If he couldn't do it another way, he'd hire a day worker, though he already had a hired hand and an extra hand in the summer. But the Hill Farm wouldn't give in. What Pearu did with a day worker and a summer hand, they achieved at the Hill Farm through sheer, untiring effort.

One thing was clear to Andres—he was more resourceful than his neighbor. Pearu needed time to figure things out. So, whether he was mowing the hayfields, prying out stones, digging ditches, or even building fences, Pearu always lagged behind Andres, and Andres had fun bragging about it in the tavern.

“What kind of man are you if you don't know enough to build a fire on top of a stone, or shove a pry bar under it, until you see me do it.”

“Who’s got a bigger pile of stones at the edge of his field, me or you?” Pearu retorted.

“But who hauled out the first wagonload?”

“Mine were taken out way before, when there wasn’t even the smell of you at Vargamäe.”

“You must have hauled the smell of the stones, not the stones themselves, because there weren’t any to be seen around there.”

“I had a good stretch of stone fence before you did.”

“Oh, hell, that fence was there before you even came to Vargamäe.”

So they bragged and swaggered, Pearu with a pint of vodka in front of him, Andres with a half-pint.

“What a pair of toughs, those two fellows from Vargamäe,” said the men in the tavern, siding with one or the other, depending on whose vodka glass was nearest, but even if they had to spend their own money or go dry, it was great fun to be with the men from Vargamäe.

There was one thing Pearu started before Andres—a fruit garden. Andres was thinking of doing the same, but only after the new bedrooms were done. Pearu even invited the gardener from the manor to his house, and, under his guidance, the trees were planted. This was a trump card for the master of the Valley Farm, and no one could take it away from him. If the Hill Farm wanted to start a garden now, he had nothing against it, since he’d done it first.

But when he bragged about it, Andres said, “You did it first, but I thought about it first. You took my idea.”

“If you want to know the truth, listen. I took Hundipalu Tiit’s ideas. I don’t know anything about what you planned,” said Pearu.

He immediately regretted it, for Andres shot back, “So you’re bragging about nothing. It’s Hundipalu Tiit who should do the bragging. He started your garden.”

Despite all this swaggering, the two Vargamäe neighbors lived peaceably, and there was no friction between them except in the matter of the sled. Even their shared ditch would be dug this year, with a start in early spring.

Madis the cottager had gone down to the swamp while there was still some ice between the hummocks. The freezing water numbed his toes, but it wasn't as bad as standing in the water all the time. Whatever it took, the ditch had to reach the river by autumn.

Andres also talked about starting on another smaller ditch along the bottom of the alder grove, where water was a problem and the land was a slough. Every few days someone had to go to the aid of the cows, who seemed to use up more strength coping with the swampy ground than they gained from eating what sparse grass they found there. A hard earth path that was dozens of paces long didn't help much. The cows' hooves soon rendered the end of the path impassable. Only the heifers could get through easily; they just raised their tails in a ladylike way, to keep them out of the mud, and scrambled to the next hillock, where they paused to catch their breath.

Before Andres could start, Pearu began digging a ditch along the bottom of the alder grove. He started at the boundary ditch, leaving some land between the new ditch and solid ground. Someone had once tried to turn this land into a meadow, but there was too little grass to mow, so it was given back to grazing cattle. Now Pearu was going to try to turn it into meadowland again, and while the ditch was dug, Pearu began leveling out the hillocks to drain the water.

Andres didn't think anything would come of all this—he felt the land, after draining, would be better suited to woods than grassland, but it wasn't his business; his neighbor could do as he pleased. Andres had his own problems. He was thinking about how to keep the water off his land on the Aaseme side. He'd discussed the idea of

a joint ditch with Aadu, just as he had with Pearu, but Aadu didn't know yet whether he'd ever own Aaseme. Since the Aaseme water still belonged to the manor, why should he work to get it down to the river?

Andres knew that Aadu was right, but that didn't help him. The manor's water flooded his land and he had to do something about it, if not with Aadu, then by himself. Not this year, though. The main ditch had to reach the river first.

Before all this, Krõõt had an unusual conversation with the cottager's wife. It was about a small thing that Andres and Krõõt had noticed, but hadn't paid much attention. The Valley Farm dog had a habit of relieving himself right under the Hill Farm's windows or in front of their door. On noticing this, the cottager's wife said right away, "It's not a good omen. There's something happening between the two families, or something about to happen."

"But there's nothing going on between us," said the mistress.

"There is, or soon will be," insisted the old woman, "or else the dog wouldn't do it. You can't fool a dog."

The mistress indeed recalled finding dog droppings right in front of their door on a couple of mornings, and she'd scolded and even beaten their own dog because of it.

The old lady blamed the neighbor's dog for this, adding, "It's the Valley Farm's fault. Your dog does it under their windows too. I've seen it. I've wanted to tell you for some time that something's wrong—a dog doesn't do that for no reason—but I kept my mouth shut so I wouldn't look like a know-it-all. I only told my old man, and I said it wasn't a good sign; something must be wrong between the neighbors. After all, the dog could've done it under our window, but he didn't because we're only the cottagers, and it doesn't concern us. It's about the Valley Farm—that's why the two dogs act like

this. When the last master was here, everyone knew that the dogs on Vargamäe left their poop under each other's windows. You could shoot them with a salt gun, but the mutts wouldn't pay any attention. That's what dogs are like when things are not right between two families."

It wasn't long before something did occur, just as the old woman predicted.

It was springtime, a little before manure spreading and plowing the fallow. The pigs and a couple of the larger cows were grazing in the fallow field, which was enclosed by the new Hill Farm fences on three sides and a Valley Farm fence on the fourth. One day, when only the mistress was home with her baby, she suddenly heard loud shouts and screams coming from the fallow fields. She listened to the shouts, but didn't recognize the voice and wondered who it could be. It seemed to come from their own field and she felt a pang of fear that something was wrong with their animals. So she hurried to the cowshed where she could see it was their neighbor shouting, standing next to his field of rye, which waved in the wind. Oddly, a big piece of the fence was knocked down near where her neighbor stood, so the pigs and the cows could wander into his rye field.

Krōöt knew immediately that something was wrong. In a flash, she rushed back into the house, picked up the baby, and went down to the fallow to see what had happened. She found the cows, but the pigs were gone. She was sure they'd gone through the fence and into the neighbor's rye field.

When he saw the neighbor's wife, Pearu stopped shouting and tearing down the fence. He waited and watched as she approached. Then he said, half-jokingly and half-seriously, "Is the neighbor's wife coming herself, with her baby, to herd the pigs?"

“But where are the pigs?” Krõõt asked. “I heard shouting and came down to see if they’d gotten out to make trouble.”

“I don’t know where they are now,” said Pearu, “but a little while ago I saw them heading for the rye field.”

“And why are you taking down the fence?” Krõõt asked.

“I don’t need it here and I could use the pickets someplace else,” said Pearu, looking away, embarrassed.

“If you’d told us before, we wouldn’t have let the animals loose on this fallow. Lord knows there’s nothing much to eat down here anyway. They just wander around,” said the woman.

“But how will the neighbor’s lady get the pigs out of my rye with a baby in her arms?” asked Pearu, expecting her to ask him for help. Instead, she called out in a high, ringing voice.

“Here, sooeey, sooeey, piggy, piggy, piggy.” For a while it was silent, but then they heard oinking.

“They’re coming,” said Krõõt so happily that she might’ve made Pearu’s heart happy as well.

Now she called in an even louder and higher voice, and when the pigs crossed one after another into their own field, Pearu could only say, “Look at those bastards! I can’t believe it. What a fine voice my neighbor’s lady has.”

Krõõt acted as if she hadn’t heard him and, carrying her baby, started across the field, the pigs trailing behind her. When they started to straggle, she called them again, and they hurried along. When the pigs were inside the gate, she went back and herded the cows, all while carrying the child.

All that time, the master of the Valley Farm stood beside his knocked-down fence and watched without moving a limb. He just stood there as Krõõt went by, first with the pigs in tow and then with the cows. She was different, almost a separate breed than his

old lady, tall and slender where his wife was short and stout. He studied her closely.

At the same time, he felt a little disappointed. He'd hoped that Juss or even the master himself would come down to herd the pigs, because with men you could have manly talk. It wasn't even the maid who came, but the mistress herself, with a baby in her arms. What could he say to her? She surely wasn't a person who'd answer back, provoking a war of words. Moreover, the mistress was so young that even when holding a child, it seemed her thoughts could only be of laughter or tears. To a person like this, Pearu could say nothing. If Krōōt had only asked, he'd gladly have gone into the rye field after her pigs, but she asked for nothing and simply called the pigs in a bell-like voice.

"Her husband has a treasure of great worth," Pearu acknowledged. He spat, folded his hands behind his back, and strolled home, leaving the pickets where he'd thrown them—some at the side of the field, some in the edge furrow, and some tossed in the rye field.

He didn't come back that day or the next to continue knocking down the fence or pile the pickets together. On Sunday, he stopped by, as if to continue his work, but he finally left everything as it was. He just didn't feel like removing the fence or carrying away the pickets. Why he'd come up with this prank, even he didn't know. Was he just trying to spite his neighbor, or did he have some plan, which the neighbor's wife had upset when she came with her child and called the pigs in a clear, ringing voice? Of course, he could've rebuilt the fence, but he was too ashamed to do that; how could he knock down a strong fence and then start rebuilding it at once? He'd be a laughingstock. So the fence remained as it was for the rest of that summer.

Andres considered rebuilding the fence himself, so the pigs could once again graze in the fallow without a herdsman, but he gave up the idea after a conversation with Pearu in the tavern, which was just about the only place the two neighbors talked to each other.

“Why did you knock down your rye field fence?” asked Andres. “What kind of stunt is that for a man?”

“It’s my fence, and I can do with it what I please,” the master of Valley Farm responded.

“Did it make you envious to see my animals down in the field alone?”

“Alone?” Pearu said mockingly. “I thought your wife was herding the pigs, wasn’t she?”

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Pearu realized he’d phrased them badly.

“Maybe your wife herds pigs,” said Andres in a quiet and solemn voice, dropping his previous bantering tone. “My wife is a true mistress of the farm; the pigs come running as soon as she opens her mouth. Her voice has more appeal than another man’s rye.”

“Yes, your wife does have a fine voice, and it makes one stop and listen,” agreed Pearu.

For some reason this irritated Andres even more. “What do you know about my wife’s voice anyway? What have you to do with her?” he yelled at his neighbor.

Pearu flinched. They were in the tavern and he didn’t know where Andres’s shouts could lead.

“Well, it’s nothing. I didn’t mean anything at all,” he said, drawing back.

Then Andres turned very serious and quiet. There was now no longer any question of rebuilding the fence. When the cattle were let out before the manure-spreading to graze on whatever grass had

grown, the herder boy sat next to the gap in the fence by the rye field. There was nothing for him to do but sit there. He would've liked to make a rye whistle, but the master had warned him very sharply about that.



Chapter 11

During their second year on the farm, they began to see the results of their hard work. They'd accumulated so much manure that it took eight horses to haul it all, and even then they could hardly finish the job in one day, since this year the fallow field was farther away.

Naturally, these changes hadn't happened by themselves, but resulted from their hard work and effort. As bedding for the animals, they brought in small brush from the alder grove and mixed it with straw. In the spring, though the swamp ground was still frozen, the grass clumps had thawed out and the master gathered moss. The tussocks, which they'd cut from the hayfield and piled up the year before, were brought in to use as well. Those that were still frozen thawed out in the barnyard and dried in the sun and the spring winds.

"The fields are not going to feed us if we leave them to starve," the master remarked.

They hoped to have bread until the new grain crop came in. Flour was short, but they couldn't help that. Early on, the mistress had started adding potatoes to the flour, so they'd get by as long as they had potatoes. Her parents had told her stories of even leaner times in the past.

The rye crop wasn't as good as the year before. It came up sparsely in the spring, without enough shoots, and those that did grow were stunted at the ground by the winter frosts.

"That's how it is," said the master. "I plow it and sow it myself, but it makes no difference. It still doesn't grow."

"But there wasn't enough manure," said his wife, feeling protective of the fields and the grain.

"Must be that," agreed Andres, adding, "Let's give it another spring, to build up the soil. Then we'll see."

The marshes stayed frozen very late. Bitter winds blew and there was little rain. When it did rain, cold weather followed. The new crops were stunted and so were the grasses. In the marshes, you could find only rusty red moss.

Andres walked around, downcast, saying, "If it doesn't get better, there's no point in even picking up a scythe."

Krõõt, too, was depressed watching the animals return hungry from the pasture. The cows mooed when they saw their mistress, as if their full udders ached, but in fact their udders were empty. Krõõt said, "I could pull and pull, but there's nothing. They're just empty, and all you get is wet fingers."

Before the first day of midsummer, the weather changed. The rain came and so did warm days. The grasses seemed to leap out of the ground. It wasn't enough to get the open bogs growing, and they remained mostly bare, but on the firmer ground and between the bushes, there was plenty of grass—perhaps even more than the summer before.

"This year, our only crop is bushes," joked the master at haying time, but he didn't stop cutting them down. Other springs and summers would come, he figured, when the cleared land would yield many times more. Moreover, once he dug the ditches to drain

the land and let water into the hayfields as needed, then he would see what it was worth.

If a year ago Juss had cursed the master for setting a murderous pace of plowing and haying, then this year death seemed even more likely. The master was turning more and more into a work machine. Even meal breaks seemed shorter. Sometimes he stretched out on his back and started snoring, and they'd think he was really asleep. Then, a moment later, he'd be back on his feet again. He was like the tireless old man in the story who, when lying down, would balance his right heel on his left toe. As soon as his eyes closed, his foot slipped down and the man would jump up and go back to work.

"Dammit, he's really after my soul," complained Juss to the new maid. "He acts like we could get everything done in one day."

"Then why did you stay on for another year?" asked Mari.

"I'm a damned fool, that's why."

"Maybe you'll be the same kind of a fool next year, too," laughed Mari, her white teeth gleaming.

"No more; I won't be here a third year," the boy assured her.

"But if you are," Mari wondered.

"Not me."

"I bet you will be," Mari pressed on, her laughter ringing in his ears.

"What's it to you anyway, with all this laughing?" he asked.

"So what if I laugh," teased the girl.

Juss had no answer and lapsed into thought. Rather, he didn't want to answer because they happened to pass the master cutting a swath through the grass and Juss didn't want the master to hear him discussing personal matters.

They mowed away at the grass, the master first, followed by bow-legged Juss, and Mari at the boy's heels, threatening to cut off his feet. Interestingly, the work no longer seemed so hard to the boy, and he didn't think about it. His shirt had been stuck to his back for some time, and his neck and chest were soaked with sweat, but his spirits kept rising. What a girl, this Mari! You wouldn't notice her much, but when she put her hands to a task, you'd better get out of the way.

A few times Juss cursed at her, "For Christ's sake, don't cut off my legs!"

"Out of my way!" said Mari.

"The master's in front of me," Juss answered.

"The master's in front of you?" asked the girl mockingly. "The master's a mile ahead."

So the scythes kept flying. The master couldn't hold back a smile; he now had a maid who made even Juss's feet move faster—and she had a mouth on her.

As she did the year before, the mistress came out to the fields to help. For this, Andres had made a cradle that could be moved easily from place to place. He took a long branch—he'd wanted rowan, but settled for cherry instead—and bent it into a large loop. His wife sewed to it a piece of undershirt material that hung, baglike, so it held the baby inside even if she squirmed.

At first, they hung the cradle from the top of a springy tree or the branch of a larger birch, so it would be rocked by the wind, since the mother couldn't rock it herself. Later, the master found a suitable pole that they'd stick in a bush. This was handy, since they could hang the cradle even in the middle of a field.

If the baby was fretful, she was given a moist piece of rag to suck. To make it more like nature's food, some milk-soaked bread was

tied into the rag. As the infant lay in the swing attached to the pole, sucking on the wet rag, she would fling her little arms about as if trying to make a place for herself in the world.

So Krõõt was able to work alongside the rest of the family as they moved about, and everyone got accustomed to it—the mistress herself, the master, and Juss. Only Mari felt differently, and she would sometimes say to Krõõt, “Leave it now, mistress. You’re doing the work of two, so this time let me go instead of you.”

That gave Krõõt a short break from tending the animals. Mai had never considered the needs of the mistress, but Mari did, and she did her chores so quickly and nimbly, never seeming to tire. She never gave it any thought, but if someone else commented on her nimbleness, she’d say, “This is nothing; the mistress should’ve seen my mother.”

That would never happen, for the woman was long dead and gone. Mari was an orphan; she never had a father.

There was mention of Mari’s late mother several times at Vargamäe. Juss once remarked to Mari, as her laughter rang in his ear, “Even though your mother’s dead and gone, you still can laugh.”

Still laughing, Mari replied, “My mother died and one day so will I; everyone’s days are numbered, so why not laugh?”

“You’re still a filly,” said the boy.

“Older than you, mister man,” the girl teased.

“Of course I’m full grown, what do you think?” said the boy. “It’s three years now since I was confirmed at the church.”

“And you weren’t kept back?” asked the girl, curious.

“Not me,” the boy bragged.

“If I’d been the pastor I would’ve kept you back another year.”

“I knew all the lessons, how could they keep me back?”

“I’d have kept you anyway.”

“Well, that’s you; you’re not the pastor.”

Hearing their banter, the master once intervened, saying, “This Mari never stops squabbling with our Juss!”

“Juss and I are going to marry, that’s why!” the girl shouted, fastening her brown eyes so firmly on the boy that his heart jumped.

“Mari, don’t you hurt our Juss,” the mistress said quietly, but Mari only laughed. Krōōt went on, “Look at Juss, he’s depressed and won’t even eat. He’s starting to believe your jokes.”

“I don’t think he is,” said Mari and turned to the boy. “Juss, you don’t really believe we’d marry, do you?”

Juss said nothing, as if the girl’s words weren’t worth answering.

“Don’t pay any attention to Mari’s nonsense, Juss,” said the mistress. “What kind of a husband would you make? You still have to do your army service.”

“I’m an only son, so I won’t be drafted,” the boy noted. “Just my mother is still alive.”

“But what if she dies?” asked the mistress.

“She’s not going to die,” said the boy.

“Juss is a milksop, mommy’s little boy,” Mari jeered.

“Don’t you make fun of me. I’m just as much a man as anybody,” Juss said seriously.

The master and mistress didn’t mind the banter between maid and laborer, as long as their hands kept busy. Sometimes Juss overdid it, trying to prove to the girl what kind of a man he was, but he never touched her, and she wouldn’t have let him. All she did was mock and tease him.

Once in the hayfield down by the river, her teasing almost took a tragic turn. They were talking about swimming, and Juss began bragging about what a good swimmer he was.

“I bet you can’t swim across the river,” Mari said.

“Sure I could,” the boy replied.

“Here where it’s widest? Right over the deep part?” said the girl, pointing toward the river.

“Right over the deep part,” Juss insisted.

“I don’t believe you,” the girl countered.

“If you want, I’ll show you at morning break,” said Juss.

“Don’t try; you’ll just make yourself a laughingstock in front of everyone.”

“Just watch me swim it. Like a fish.”

“And what about getting back?”

“If you want, I’ll swim back too.”

“If I want?” the girl fastened on his words. “And you don’t? Scared? Like a rabbit?”

“I’m not. You’ll see,” defended Juss.

As soon as mid-morning arrived, Juss went down to the river to show how tough he was, and Mari stayed back a little and looked on. The master also paid attention, because the river was wide there and a strong current by the bank sometimes brought up cold water from the bottom.

Juss swam across the river easily enough, although they could tell that he was out of breath when he shouted to the girl, “Well, do you believe me now that I can swim across?”

“What about coming back?” the girl asked.

“Wait a while! What’s the rush?” Juss called back.

“Wait a while?” Mari teased him. “How long will that be? If it’s tomorrow I’d better go and eat.”

Juss plunged into the water. He headed right across the widest part. He was close to the bank when something strange happened. At first he seemed to stop, then he thrashed around and began screaming as if seized by the fear of death. Mari grabbed a rake

and tried to reach the boy's hands with it, but the rake was too short, even when she waded up to her hips. She looked around for something longer but, seeing nothing she could use, she too started screaming, for Juss seemed to be sinking.

"Master, master! Help! Juss is drowning!" she shrieked at the top of her lungs.

The master had kept his eye on the boy and the girl, afraid that this bragging would not end well. He took his shirt and trousers off in the blink of an eye, waded out to his laborer and pulled him back to the bank by his feet.

When the boy came to, he cursed and spat, saying, "I got a cramp, dammit. How can you swim if you can't move?"

"You act like a fool until you get a mouthful of water," said the master.

"It was pretty close," Juss agreed. "Thanks, master, for pulling me out."

"I really shouldn't give a damn what happens to you," said Andres jokingly, "but you've worked for me for two summers now, and you might stay on for a third. Where could I get a new hayer now; me and Mari can't do the work alone."

That damned Mari! Juss hadn't yet thought about her, even though it was her fault he'd jumped into the river.

He looked around and saw her standing a little way off. He noticed that the girl's eyes were those of a frightened child, and they were fixed on Juss. Mari wasn't laughing anymore. She only stood there, looking quite serious.

"I started to think that you were gone," said the girl as they walked side by side to the barn.

“Not me, not so easily,” bragged Juss, as if he’d managed to get out by himself. After a moment, he added, “And anyway, so what? I’d have been gone and done with, and who would care?”

“You just heard what the master said. Who would’ve helped with the haying?” Mari then continued in a gentler voice, “Cutting those big swathes—who would’ve done that for me?”

“That sounds so good,” thought Juss. “Very good indeed.” Now Mari was his golden girl. If she wanted him to, Juss would swim the river again.

It was a while before Mari teased Juss again, and it was different than before, for there was something new between them. The thought of death was there, and she couldn’t put it out of her mind. The brush with death had turned the boy into more of a man. The master and mistress could not see it, but Mari could, for she knew him better than they did.

There was one thing the master did understand: Juss was becoming a better and better worker. This was to be expected as he got older, stronger, and smarter. The daily work in the fields progressed so well that on rainy days the men even found time to dig ditches. They dug along the hayfield and at the bottom of the fields near the house.

When they took their scythes to the grass, they covered more ground than the year before, reaching places the cottager’s scythe never had. Fitting their scythes with prongs, they got in between the bigger clumps and cut the purplewort and other small grasses.

“If it’s not good enough for feeding the animals, we can use it for bedding,” figured the master.

“It would be good for that,” Juss agreed, and on they went as if beating a snake to death in the bushes.

“If we keep up like this until Michaelmas, all the Vargamäe marshes will have gotten a good going-over,” said Mari.

But soon they could no longer use scythes; it was time to swing sickles instead. At this Juss could never match Mari, as much as he hated for her to beat him. He tried so hard that his wrist swelled, leaving him crippled during most of the rye harvest.

“He just started out trying too hard,” said the mistress, and since Juss couldn’t do anything better, she put him to work weeding the cabbage patch, gathering grass from the potato field for the cows, keeping an eye on the soup pot, and even rocking the baby. The boy felt humiliated in front of the girl, and cursed his hand, but the mistress saw it differently, saying, “Juss will make somebody a great husband! He’ll fatten the pigs, feed the cows, cook the soup, and rock the cradle.”

More and more, Mari found Juss amusing and her interest in him grew. She, too, began to feel that he wasn’t as wretched and pitiful as he appeared.

Around St. James’ Day, Madis the cottager told them the ditch was getting close to the river. For Andres, this was big news. He told Madis to leave a dam in a suitable spot and continue the ditch on the other side, down to the river. The water would flow only after the dam was removed. That was something Andres wanted to see with his own eyes.

Madis did as Andres instructed. He also passed word along to Pearu at Valley Farm. They agreed on a time when all three would go and release the first water.

When that time arrived, Pearu wasn’t home. Andres and Madis went down to the ditch and found that the dam had already been taken out and the first water was running toward the river. With

drawn faces, they stood beside the dam and looked at water trickling along the bottom of the ditch.

“One of Pearu’s damned tricks,” said Madis, pulling on his pipe and spitting in the ditch.

“You don’t know that,” Andres said.

“Who else?” asked Madis. “He’s the only one who’d pull a stunt like this.”

“What does he get out of it?” questioned Andres.

“What does he get?” echoed Madis. “He gets to thumb his nose at us, and that’s what he wants. It’s his ditch, because it’s on his land, and he can let the water run, or dam it up again, just as he pleases.”

That’s what Madis figured, but Andres saw it a little differently. The ditch was Pearu’s, all right, because it was on his land, but at the same time, Andres had the right to see the first run of water, since he’d paid half the cost of the digging and surely more of the water in the ditch had seeped from his land.

Andres immediately put Madis to work on a new ditch under the alders. Starting from the boundary ditch, it headed toward the Aaseme land, so that the water would drain from there as well. This was Andres’s own ditch and he could do whatever he wanted with its water. He could also do as he pleased with the sod, and he ordered Madis to pile it on both sides, which made it easier for the digger.

It appeared Pearu also had a plan. It showed in the way he walked, stood, cleared his throat, and even in the way he spat. He was worried about the hole he’d made in the fence last spring, down alongside his rye field. On his side, there was rye stubble and, on the neighbor’s side, rye sprouts. Pearu needed a fence there more than Andres did, so he could put his sheep out to graze on the stubble. Pearu thought a long time about whether to repair the gap in the fence.

It was embarrassing and he kept putting it off, day after day, until one nice afternoon he discovered that the gap was already closed. Who did it? Not his people or himself. So it must've been the neighbor. But why? Pearu went over to the new fence and saw animal tracks in the soil under the rye sprouts on the other side. Now Pearu understood; his animals had gotten through the gap into the neighbor's new rye field, and to protect his crop Andres had put up a new fence to replace the one Pearu had knocked down. He'd done this without so much as a word to his neighbor, not even considering it worth discussion. Pearu's pride was hurt. The previous neighbor was different. Pearu could talk, argue, and quarrel with him, whereas the present neighbor acted as if Pearu didn't exist.

Not long after that, Juss went to the paddock in the early morning to bring in the horses and found them munching on the neighbor's stack of wheat sheaves.

"Now how did they get out there?" asked Andres.

"I don't know," Juss replied.

"You didn't check the gate?"

He hadn't, because he'd come straight home with the horses.

Andres looked into it himself. He walked the whole length of the paddock fence and found it undamaged, but the gate was ajar and hoof prints showed that the horses had gotten out that way.

"Listen, Juss," Andres told his laborer, "you took the horses to the paddock last night and then you probably didn't put the ring around the gate post."

"No, I fastened the gate with the ring," said the boy.

"You're sure of that?" the master demanded.

Juss was sure.

"Maybe that old mare has figured out how to push the ring off the post," the master said, as if to himself.

They left it at that, but a few days later, something worse happened. Early one morning, while it was still dark, Andres went outside and heard the young mare neighing to him from beyond the yard gate. Once again the horses had gotten out of the paddock and, after wandering around the fields, they'd come home. He checked the fence and found a weak spot where a couple of poles were broken. This was how the horses got into the field.

"These damn animals! What do you do with them when they learn how to break down the fence?" Andres cursed.

"The young mare never did that," the mistress exclaimed, defending her dowry. "Her mother didn't break fences either; she didn't come from that kind of stock."

"Maybe it's the old one, then," Andres guessed. "But why didn't she do it last year when the fences were in worse shape? Why does she only start acting up now?"

There was no alternative; they still had to put the horses in the paddock. Andres walked the whole fence line once more and wherever he found a weak or low spot, he cut a bushy young spruce and filled it in.

It seemed to help. For the next couple of weeks the horses stayed in the paddock. Then, early one morning, there was a call from Valley Farm to Hill Farm for the master to come and fetch his horses from the neighbor's cabbage patch. Instead of going himself, Andres sent Juss, but they wouldn't let him have the horses; the master had to come himself. Andres sent the boy to Valley Farm again with ten rubles, saying, "Pay them whatever they want and bring the horses back."

Again, Juss came back empty-handed. Pearu would not let him have the horses. Now Andres was angry. "What kind of nonsense

is this?" he asked, but he finally took the bridle from Juss and went after his horses.

"What the hell are you up to, not letting my horses go?" Andres demanded.

"I just wanted you to see what they did. That way, if mine happen to do something, you'd know," answered Pearu.

"If there was damage, I'll pay for it," said Andres. "I gave my man ten rubles. Wasn't that enough?"

"I don't want your money; I've already got plenty of that trash," retorted Pearu.

"Then what do you want? To keep the horses in hock?" Andres asked.

"No, I don't," said Pearu. "I just want you to see what damage they did."

"I don't need to see. I'll pay for it, fair and square."

"Come and see what they did in the cabbage field; not to mention the grain sheaves," Pearu insisted.

"No, I won't," said Andres sharply. "When your animals trampled my young shoots, did I pen them up or demand that you look at it? What I did was put up a fence to keep them out, where you had busted it down last spring. It was just for your animals; I didn't need it for mine."

"And now you want me to build a fence to keep your horses out?" asked Pearu.

"I don't want anything from you; just give me my horses back," said Andres.

"We'll go and look at the damage first," Pearu said.

"My horses first," Andres insisted.

"Then you don't get the horses." Pearu was firm.

“And who’s going to keep me from taking them?” demanded Andres.

“Me!” Pearu shouted. “Me, Pearu Murakas!”

“You, shithead!” Andres sneered. “You horse thief! I’d like to see anybody stop me if I want to take my horses home.”

“Listen, mister,” Pearu said menacingly, “I’ll take you to court.”

Andres paid no attention and started toward his horses.

“Take it to the czar, for all I care. I’m taking my horses,” he said.

Pearu began screaming at the top of his lungs; he didn’t dare try anything more with his neighbor. Hearing the noise, all his people ran outside.

“I’ll have my men get you,” Pearu threatened.

“Let them come any closer and I’ll show them who’s going to get who,” said Andres. He bridled the horses in the yard and brought them out to take home.

“Where’s my dog?!” Pearu screamed. “Krants! Go get him! Tear him to pieces!”

“You better keep him from shitting at my door, or I’ll kill him!” Andres shouted back.

“And if your mangy mutt comes under my window again, I’ll shoot him!” Pearu yelled.

“With what, a big fart?” Andres said mockingly.

“Better than that. You’ll see,” Pearu answered.

With this, the first quarrel at Vargamäe ended. Andres took the horses out the Valley Farm gate without being blocked, and closed it carefully behind him, as if to show that he was not in a hurry.

“Good day, neighbors,” he called out mockingly.

“Go to hell!” Pearu wished him in reply.

When Andres told Krõõt about it, she said, “It wouldn’t have hurt you to go see those cabbages, and then leave without a quarrel.”

“If there wasn’t a quarrel today, it would’ve come tomorrow. You can’t avoid it,” Andres replied. “So it might as well be today. And I don’t think it’ll end there.”

“Don’t talk like that,” Krōōt reproached him. “What else do you expect to happen?”

“We’ll see,” said Andres, “but I figure this business with the horses is Pearu’s own doing. He let them out of the paddock himself.”

“What do you mean?” Krōōt asked hesitantly, almost in fear, since Mari had said the same thing. “Why would he?”

“I should go there and lay in wait for him, and if I catch that damn bum, I’ll give him a beating he won’t forget,” Andres exclaimed.

“Why are you acting so tough? What if other folks hear of it?” begged Krōōt.

“I don’t care if he hears it himself,” said Andres. “I’m through joking around.”

The whole thing turned out to be something of a joke. Andres didn’t stand guard and none of the horses—neither Andres’s nor the neighbor’s—ever again damaged the other’s fields, as if they’d forgotten their bad habits as quickly as they’d picked them up.

The farmers avoided each other, so there were no more angry exchanges. Then, one evening a few weeks before Christmas, when thick snow lay on the ground and all of Vargamäe seemed without life, the master of Valley Farm came by. It was hard to tell if he had a reason for coming or if he just stumbled in because he was drunk. Whatever his intent, he made peace with everyone and gave each person a sip from his bottles, women from the red one and men from the white. He even made peace with Juss and the boy herder, giving the latter a two-kopeck bun. He also wanted to make peace with the new baby, but the little girl was asleep. When he offered to make peace with the dog, the animal hid under the bed and growled at him.

“That’s how it is,” Pearu said sadly. “The people make peace, but not the dog.”

He went on talking loudly about everything under the sun and finally sat down near the mistress, who was working at her spinning wheel.

“I just keep watching,” said Pearu. “The wheel turns so fast that you can’t see the spokes—and all with just one foot. My old woman pushes the treadle with both feet and her wheel goes buzz, buzz, buzz, while yours goes whirr, whirr, whirr. What a spinning wheel! And your fingers just keep pulling and drawing so fast. I think sometimes of how you came that day, carrying your baby, how you came and stood there and asked, ‘Hey old man from Valley Farm, why the hell did you knock down the fence?’ Then, neighbor, I couldn’t do any more, couldn’t lay my hands again on that fence. As old Solomon said, ‘Whoever tears down the old fence will be bitten by a snake.’ I just left the poles and pickets where they were on the ground, and they’re still there today. They can rot there for all I care, and nobody else can touch them either. My old lady asked why I don’t pick up that lumber, and I said, ‘It’s none of your business. I have some things to settle with the neighbor’s wife about the fence, so just let it be.’ During the rye harvest, she went and grabbed them, but I jumped on her and asked who is the master of the Valley Farm, her or me. If I say let it be, just let it be. But I’ve got a stubborn wife who lets nothing go. She carried the wood home, one piece at a time, chopped it up and used it for firewood. Then one bright day I go down to have a look and there’s no lumber anywhere. Where is it? Nobody knows. Nobody’s seen it. You saw, mistress, the way I acted after I heard your voice ring out and saw the pigs following you. I would’ve closed the hole in the fence, but I felt ashamed. Honestly, ashamed.”

Pearu stopped talking, but when Krōōt didn't say anything, he started up again.

“Whir, whir, whir! Whir, whir, whir! Whir, whir, whir! If you hadn't come then and called the pigs away, I would've knocked the whole fence down and hauled the wood away. But I didn't do that. If you want, I'll close the gap now, so there'll be two fences, my fence and your husband's. Let them both stand there, side by side between the two fields. Your husband's a tough man, tough as hell. And strong! The strongest in these parts. We dug a ditch together, to let the water drain for both of us. We wanted to go together and let the first water flow through, but my boy knocked the weir out, the damned kid. I wanted to make his butt burn for that, but I let it go; the water was going to run anyway. Water always runs if there's no weir, but the neighbor's pigs run when they hear the mistress's ringing voice.”

“Neighbor,” said Krōōt, “you should go home now. Your wife may be waiting.”

“Just a couple of words more,” entreated Pearu.

He started in again, talking about everything that happened at Vargamäe during the last two summers. He said nothing about the winter, because like all of Vargamäe, Pearu really lived only during the summer. That's how they reckoned time.

Wherever he went on his drunken ramble, he kept coming back to the “ringing voice” of his neighbor's wife, like some mystic flame in the darkness of the Vargamäe marshes.

Andres, planing a piece of wood on the carpenter's bench by the window, paid no attention to his neighbor's wandering words. When finally Pearu decided to go home, he assured Andres, “What a good wife you have! A real treasure!”

Turning to Krõõt, he said, “And what a tough man your husband is, really tough! Never gives in! You could cut his arm off, he still wouldn’t give in!”

With these words, Pearu finally stumbled out the door.

“I wonder what got into him, playing the peacemaker like that?” asked Andres when his neighbor was out the door.

“Maybe he spoke with a pure heart,” said Krõõt.

“More likely just a drunken head,” Andres responded.

“He wasn’t really so drunk, just pretending,” said Mari.

“Then he’s figuring out some plan,” guessed Andres.

It was true. The following Sunday, Pearu and his wife left for church so early that Krõõt said to her husband, “Our neighbors seem to have gone in to take communion.”

“So that’s why he was so eager to make peace,” Andres said.

Surprised, Krõõt added, “You never know what a mad man might do.”



Chapter 12

“**W**ith every year here at Vargamäe, life gets harder,” Krõõt said to Andres, observing the icicles along the roof eaves.

“What do you mean, harder?” asked Andres.

“Well,” said Krõõt, “the first year we had no baby. Then she arrived, and though she’s still at my breast, there’s now another inside me. And work? There’s always more work, children or no children.”

Later, Andres thought about what his wife had said, and he had to admit she was right. It wasn’t just her life, either; his own had gotten harder as well. On top of the regular work that year, they had to haul building materials because, whatever it took, the new bedrooms had to be finished by next spring. The year’s harvest wasn’t all it could’ve been, and no one knew if next year’s would be any better. Andres thought about borrowing money from people he knew. Aaseme and Hundipalu had promised some, and Villem of Ämmasoo offered thatch for the roof. The neighboring farmers offered horses to help haul the logs, but these promises didn’t come from any further away than Aiu Farm on the open land and Rava in the wooded area. Kassiaru Jaska, whose farm was right on the edge of the firm land, had no interest in the marsh areas, aside from drinking with Pearu in the tavern’s first-class salon. Among the

Soovälja men, only Kingu Priidu had befriended Andres. So Vihukse and Lõppe did not haul any logs, though they might've been willing to help. And Kukessaare, beyond Rava, was not friendly with Vargamäe because it was too far away, beyond too many marshes.

Andres had said nothing to his neighbor about the log hauling, but Pearu came anyway with a farmhand, and got a load from the forest as if he'd been invited. In the woods, he only asked Andres, "Is there still a load for my sleds, or do you have it all now?"

"There's probably enough for you to carry," Andres replied.

Even later, after the men from further away had gone off, the Valley Farm team showed up. Whenever the Hill Farm men headed for the woods, the Valley farmhand was on their heels with a horse or two.

"Where are you going?" Juss loudly asked him once or twice.

"The master told me to follow you," the neighbor's farmhand replied.

"We're going to the mill," Juss lied.

"So am I."

"But where are your sacks?"

"Same place as yours."

Overhearing the farmhands' words, the master of Hill Farm almost told the neighbor's man to go back, that his help wasn't needed, but the words stuck in his throat, and so they rode for some hours through the dark night toward the forest, the sleds shrieking on the frozen snow and the horses' nostrils puffing white smoke.

To Andres, Pearu was strange, unlike anyone he'd ever met before. He vexed and attacked Andres, and then acted as if there was no bad blood between them. Krõõt also found him strange, which gave Andres another reason to dislike Pearu's odd behavior.

There would be plenty of time to settle accounts with his neighbor, since their life at Vargamäe was only beginning. Andres was just starting to build the new bedrooms, and he wanted to restore the other buildings as well. He wanted to renew everything at Vargamäe, but he couldn't ignore the fields while he worked on the new buildings; he thought about them constantly. He had the sense that he'd made a lifetime agreement when he came to Vargamäe. He'd taken on great responsibilities, and he'd honor them at any cost. Andres knew the fields were as resolute as rocks and they'd never back out of the agreement, not even for the amount of dirt under a man's nails. They didn't cheat and so Andres couldn't cheat either, but always had to do the right thing, as if he were dealing with God himself. Andres sometimes had a vague feeling that there was some secret link between Vargamäe and God, as if they were one and the same. Improving the soil of Vargamäe was nothing less than an offering to God, who resided there and blessed Andres's sweat and strain.

The young master of Hill Farm felt this when he spread all the dried hummocks and soil from the ditches under the animals in the shed. That same feeling drove him, despite all his other work, to pry out stones and pile them at the edges of the fields or in cairns right in the middle, like monuments to the God of Vargamäe.

At times, Andres could see evidence that God did indeed bless his work. Even though there was so much to do as the new rooms were built, an unanticipated marvel grew in the shed, where the manure built up so quickly that, by spring, the animals had scarcely enough room to stand. Though the cattle had only grown a couple of heads taller, their backs rubbed against the ceiling beams.

Krööt thought life at Vargamäe was getting more difficult that winter, but the hardest season was about to begin. Spring didn't

allow any time for rest, not even a blink of an eye. Juss, who'd complained a year earlier that the master was killing him with labor, learned what it really meant to die behind the plow. He did almost all the fieldwork by himself, changing the tired horses, without any suggestion of a lunch hour, but he no longer complained, for he'd stayed on a third year for Mari. His legs became as stiff as an old wolf's as he trudged from morning to night behind the plow and harrow, but still he was a happy man.

The days weren't any better for Andres than for his field hand, and all that spring he found no time to rest after lunch. When the men who helped build the rooms put down their axes, the master went out to sow the fields, only to return and grab his axe again, rejoining the others to work on the walls. He wanted to be in charge and do it all. During the most crucial days for sowing, he even worked on Sundays, for if he hadn't, they wouldn't have gotten it done. Once, after spending a whole Sunday afternoon sowing, he looked out from the bedroom window on Monday morning and saw three horses in his fields, doing the seeding. While he surely needed the help, he was angry that it came from his neighbor. If the help came from Pearu, he might be ribbed about it, as he'd been about the sled that day in the tavern. Nevertheless, Andres gave in and didn't protest the neighbor's men sowing his field.

Pearu didn't show his face. When passing by, he wished the builders strength in their work and continued on his way, hands behind his back, as if turning something over in his mind.

"Look at that. How strange," said the mistress at mid-morning, as if she'd only just noticed Pearu's workers. "The neighbor's men have come to work here. Who on earth sent them?"

"The master sent us," said the men.

“Well, we’re grateful for the help,” she said and hurried away, afraid to say too much.

For Andres, even this response was too much. If the men were sent without a word, they should’ve been received the same way. What could he say that wouldn’t sound thankful? He didn’t express this, but the mistress guessed what he was thinking.

All through that spring and summer, building the rooms was the number one task. In the master’s mind, it was work done not just for the benefit of today or tomorrow, but a lifetime. Accordingly, the new rooms were much larger than the old ones, with big windows that let in lots of light. Because the windows were so large, everyone thought the rooms would be too cold, but the master stuck to his own ideas. He built the foundation low, with the logs almost on the ground, so that, as he put it, the winds would not sweep under the house. He still had to decide whether to make the floor from clay or wooden boards. Many thought it would be good to have a wooden floor, at least in the back bedroom. Andres decided to lay down boards throughout.

“Will you let us dance on your wooden floor?” asked Mari.

“We’ll see,” Andres replied. “Will you scrub it well?”

“As white as snow,” said Mari.

“Then dance away,” the master allowed.

“This girl Mari doesn’t want to do anything but dance and play,” commented the mistress.

“It’s not just me,” Mari said apologetically. “Juss wants to do it, too.”

“Juss!” said the mistress. “Now that I didn’t expect. Him dancing!”

“Juss, let’s just stay and live here, on the nice white floors,” said the girl to the boy. When he didn’t answer, she added, “Well, Juss, should we or shouldn’t we?”

The boy said nothing, but looked at the girl so reproachfully that she left him alone for a while, but not for long. Her quick, sharp tongue was itching to get at him.

Once it happened that Juss and Mari were both out mowing. It'd been drizzling for two or three days, and there was so much cut grass on the ground that the master chose to work on the walls of his new rooms, rather than mess around in the meadow.

Juss swung his scythe in front and Mari followed behind. It was early evening and they'd nearly completed their work. The girl was following close on the boy's heels, as if there were someone behind her, breathing down her neck.

"You're rushing like it was Judgment Day," said Juss.

"It's Judgment Day eve," replied Mari.

"You just never seem to get tired," swore the boy.

"I'm trying to wear you out and drive you out of Vargamäe."

"You won't get me to leave before you do," said the boy seriously.

"What do you have to do with me?" asked the girl.

"And what do you have to do with me, wanting to drive me out of here?"

"Stop dodging!" Mari went on. "You should leave before I do. Didn't you swear that the master was killing you with work?"

"He's killing me, alright. He's killing himself and me, too."

"So why don't you leave?"

"Well, I won't. He can kill me if he wants. If he doesn't kill me, somebody else will."

"What's it to me if you leave first or not?"

Speaking with sincerity, Juss replied, "You're killing me as much as the master."

Mari laughed, "Juss, little Juss. The puss of the Vargamäe marshes!" Mari laughed. "You poor man. Me and the master are

beating you to death. And Jussi-Pussi can't get away from us; his neck is too short, his legs too bowed."

"Don't make fun of my neck and my legs," said Juss, his lips trembling. "It's not my fault that I'm this way."

"What should I laugh at then? You, yourself?" asked Mari.

"Laugh at anybody you want, but not at me or my legs," said the boy.

Smiling, the girl began to sing:

Juss, little Juss,

The Vargamäe puss!

You have a short little neck,

And your legs don't reach the deck!

At this, Juss abruptly threw his scythe onto the cut grass. He took the whetstone from his pocket and placed it next to the scythe. Then, without looking at the girl, his lips quivering oddly, he said, "Give the scythe and whetstone to the master. I'm through mowing."

"Where are you going?" the girl asked, frightened. She had the same look in her eyes as she'd had down by the river when Juss nearly drowned. If Juss could've seen them, he would've said she looked like a frightened child, but he didn't see them because his back was to her as he walked away.

"Wait, Juss! Where are you going?" Mari cried after him, but Juss didn't respond. He acted as if he didn't hear her and just kept walking, with his bowlegs and arched neck.

"Juss!" Mari called to him again, very frightened, since he was disappearing among the shrubs. When he still didn't answer, she ran after him, dropping her scythe in the meadow. Mari had to know where Juss was going and what he was going to do.

Juss didn't go far—just to a knoll with a couple of wide-branched spruces, surrounded by a thicket of brush. He stopped under a spruce that grew next to a stump, untied the cord that was doubled around his waist, fumbled with it, and tied it to a branch. Then he made a loop at the end of the cord, stepped on top of the stump, and began to put the noose around his neck.

“Juss!” Mari shrieked, running to him. “You’re mad. What are you doing?”

“I’m going to hang myself,” said the boy with determination.

“Darling Juss!” said the girl, taking hold of the noose. Her voice was suddenly filled with such childlike fear and tenderness that Juss couldn’t help looking her in the eye.

“Why should you care?” he said.

“But I do, Juss,” the girl answered.

“You still won’t let me come to your bed in the barn,” growled Juss.

“Make me your wife then, if you want to come into the barn,” said Mari, turning away from him.

“I would, Mari, but you’re just teasing me,” said the boy sincerely.

“Come back to the haying, Juss. I promise not to tease you anymore,” swore the girl.

“No, I won’t. You’ll just start up again,” countered the boy.

“Come on, Juss, and I’ll tell you a secret,” begged Mari.

“Tell me now,” said Juss.

“First take that cord down from the tree,” said the girl.

“I won’t, and I won’t let you either,” he said firmly. “I’m fed up with this life. I’m going to die here at Vargamäe anyway, and the sooner the better. The master is killing me with work, and you...”

“What am I killing you with?” asked Mari anxiously.

“With your laughing,” complained the boy. “You laugh at me, and everyone else does too.”

All at once Juss's strength drained away and he began to cry. Holding the noose in his left hand, he turned toward the girl and wept in quiet resignation.

Mari could not bear this, and she filled with pity for the boy.

"Don't cry, Juss," she pleaded, but could find no more words as tears overcame her. As if shamed by this, she turned away and the two of them stood in the shrubbery beneath the tree, almost back to back, crying.

After a time, Juss said, "I've been tired of this life for a long time now. That's why I've been wearing this cord around my pants since spring."

"Make me your wife, Juss," cried the girl. "Stop being so foolish, trying to hang yourself."

"You won't take me as I am; I'm always your little boy."

"I will take you just as you are; I won't call you names anymore," Mari promised.

"You'll start teasing me again," doubted the boy.

"No. I swear, Juss. No more," promised Mari. "And you know what? We'll never leave Vargamäe; we'll just stay here for good."

"Stay here forever?" he asked. "As Andres's farmhand and maid?"

"No," said the girl. "I know a place we can go."

"Where?" asked the boy.

"To the cottage! The empty room in the cottage! It might be a little cold in the winter, but if we heat it well, I think we can manage," Mari explained.

"Who will let us stay there?"

"They'll probably let us. I've had this plan for a while, and I've even been to see the room. I've talked it over with the cottager's wife, and even hinted a little with the mistress. Why, I'd be as well off as a town girl if I could get myself a husband and live in the

cottage. But there was no husband to be found. There was you, of course, but I didn't know what to make of you—whether or not you'd do. Now I know you'll do fine.”

“Really, Mari?” Juss asked happily.

“Yes really, really,” the girl replied, looking him straight in the eye.

“Mari, you really are...” Juss was going to say something, but left the thought unfinished. Mari waited, but the words wouldn't come to the boy's lips.

“What am I?” she finally asked.

Instead of replying, he took hold of her hand.

When they finally started moving away from the spruce, they almost forgot to take down the cord.

“Juss, take away that cord,” said Mari when she noticed it. “The master might come by and find it here.”

“I'll wear this cord around my pants to the end of my days,” said the boy, untying it from the tree. “It is the cord I'll always love.”

“You made a noose and I walked into it,” said Mari.

“Right!” boasted Juss. “I made it for myself and you went into it feet first.”

“Feet first,” mocked the girl. A little later, she added, “May I now sing ‘Juss, Juss, the Vargamäe puss’?”

“Sing away,” said the boy. “I know now that your songs come from a kind heart. And now the master will see how fast the work flies.”

Hand in hand, they went back to mowing, and soon Mari was saying, “Watch your heels.”

That day, they mowed for longer than usual. When they got home, the mistress said, “It seems like you didn't want to come home at all today.”

“It's all Juss's fault,” replied Mari.

“What?!” asked the boy. “Juss’s fault? It was Mari!”

But of their new plans, they said not a word. They had to go about it slowly and steadily. They had time, since their year wouldn’t be over until the spring, and until then they’d just be Juss and Mari.

“Will you let me come to you in the barn now?” Juss asked her that evening.

“Juss, little Juss, you Vargamäe puss,” the girl sang, smiling at him tenderly, but on seeing his downcast face, she added, “If you’re a good boy...”

“Mari!” said Juss.

Nothing more was said.



Chapter 13

Day after day, they worked. By autumn, the new bedrooms, floored with gleaming white wooden boards, would be ready for them to move in. With cold weather coming, they planned to pile straw around the back room at least, to ward off the frosts and the roaring storms and blizzards of the Vargamæe winter.

The front bedroom still had no floor when Krōōt delivered her second child—another daughter. Both father and mother had been looking forward to a son who could inherit the farm and become the master, but once again it was a girl, who would eventually be taken away by a husband to God knows where and given his name.

As it happened, when Krōōt's labor began no one was at home except their sleeping 18-month-old child. She thought it would be like her first delivery—the contractions would go on for hours, and the others would be home before the baby came. She couldn't have known it would progress so quickly.

When the mistress lay down in the back bedroom, which was so nice, white, and beautifully warm, her second child entered the world so quickly and easily that she could only marvel at it. At first, she just lay with the new baby, but soon she got up to look after the other child, who was crying.

She was very weak, but she had to do it. She had no choice. Getting to the main room and then back to the bedroom was very hard for her to manage alone, because the door was low and the threshold high, but she had to do it. She needed warm water from the pot to wash the baby.

She crawled to the main room, hoisted the little wooden tub through the door, and placed it on a stool. Then she brought water to fill the tub, carrying one cup at a time. Finally, on all fours, she returned to the bedroom, found the linens she'd put away in the closet earlier, as well as some diapers, and began washing the baby. When the tiny one cried, the older girl woke up, climbed out of bed, and watched her mother.

Before washing the baby, Krōöt tried to push the stool and the tub away from the doorway, but she hadn't the strength to do it. So she had to wash her newborn in the front bedroom, where there was no floor.

Only when she leaned back and took the baby to her breast, did she really believe that she'd given birth to her second child. But when she remembered that it was another girl and imagined how Andres's face would drop when he learned, her eyes filled with tears and she cried from deep in her heart. She felt forsaken. She was the most forsaken person, not just at Vargamäe, but in the whole world.

Strangely, even on difficult days, Krōöt no longer thought about her father's home, or at most, she experienced only dim, dark memories. She now had only one place in the world, and that was Vargamäe. Here, she'd pried cows out of the marsh; here, she'd toiled as if it were her life's desire; and here, her two children were born into a hard and bitter world.

It was at Vargamäe that she first experienced Andres's anger, and it stabbed at her head and her heart. Only looking back could the

young mother see it clearly. It was during the first summer, and she'd been carrying their first child inside her. The sky was threatening rain and the two of them had gone out to bring in the rye. They were rushing wildly, so the rain wouldn't wet the sheaves. Andres passed the sheaves to Krõõt, who loaded them into the cart, but she didn't check the horse or the pole behind the cart to check if the load was straight or crooked. The sheaves fell every which way, and almost half the load had to be done over again.

"What did your parents teach you, if you don't even know how to load rye on a cart?" Andres reproached her. "Why did I put the pole behind you and place the horse right next to you? Now it's a mess and the rain'll start before we get the rye in, all because of your carelessness."

Krõõt made no reply because her husband was right, but the rain held off long enough, allowing them to keep the rye dry, and she started feeling sorry for herself. Why did Andres get angry before he knew what would happen with the rain? And why was he so sharp? Didn't he realize that she, Krõõt, was carrying their first child in her womb?

When they got back to the house, she went to the barn and wept bitterly, leaning against her large, white, wooden chest. Andres came looking for her, and when he saw her crying, he remained silent. Then he stepped closer, though he didn't touch her.

"Krõõt, don't cry. I was afraid the rain would soak us and the rye too, or I wouldn't have..."

So they made up, but their first conflict was followed by others, and now, when Krõõt cried, Andres no longer came to comfort her. And Krõõt no longer went to cry against her mother's wooden chest, as she had the first time she needed compassion and tenderness. Besides the chest, she had the old cow, Maasik, and the mare,

which were her dowry, but in her sorrow, she didn't go to them either, unless perhaps she started to cry while milking.

It seemed that Krōōt now cried wherever she found herself. She cried in the hayfield, leaning against the rake or the scythe. She cried while rocking the baby, while feeding the pigs, or weeding the cabbages. She even cried at the table where the farmhand and the maid could see her.

Today, as she nursed her second child, the mistress of Vargamäe felt that she'd started crying that first time only because she was leaning against her mother's wooden chest. If it hadn't happened then, she never would've cried, and it was because of that first time that her tears flowed today as well.

Gradually the new mother stopped crying and, after an hour, her husband arrived home. He saw that there was no food on the table and stepped into the bedroom to find his wife and the baby peacefully asleep.

Andres touched her hand, and when she opened her eyes and saw his questioning look, she said, as if begging forgiveness, "It's a daughter again."

Her mouth trembled and she turned her eyes to the wall.

"Don't cry over that," said Andres. "It can't be helped. We'll live with it."

Krōōt did not answer, unable to stop her tears.

"Where is the cottager's wife?" asked Andres.

"She's not here."

"Then who helped you?"

"Nobody. I washed the baby myself."

"You could have harmed yourself."

"It all happened so fast; I couldn't go anywhere," explained his wife. "It was so hard though."

“Of course it was,” said Andres. “Even animals want help. A person even more...”

“It was always like this for my mother.”

Mari scampered like a rabbit to the cottage, found the cottager’s wife, and brought her to the house. Then she looked for something to feed the family, and the three of them sat down at the table.

Not a word was spoken. The master was deep in thought, so deep that he almost forgot to eat. He sat there just holding a piece of bread, instead of dipping it into the salted fish water and swallowing it with some milk with flour.

There were things to think about. At Valley Farm the first two born were sons, and then the third was a daughter. Why couldn’t his Krõõt’s second have been a boy? Perhaps even her third will be a girl.

Of course, if this was God’s will, it would be so. He wouldn’t resist it. Let them all be girls, like at Aaseme, where there were five daughters and not even one son. Yet it wasn’t right. It wasn’t right that his Krõõt only bore daughters, while Pearu’s wife had mostly sons. Why should he be worse off than Pearu? Hadn’t he been fertilizing his fields, mowing his hay, drying his pastures? Had he been stealing, or cheating, or indulging evil thoughts against anyone? Why would he have daughters, while his neighbor had sons?

Andres would lose half his drive to work hard if he thought his successor at Vargamäe would not be a son, but some stranger son-in-law. It wasn’t worth the stone-splitting, hummock-slash-ing, or bush-pulling. It wasn’t worth the effort, if it was just for his own sake.

He went to the manor to see the old landlord about some fruit trees for the orchard he was planning. The landlord had promised to give him the trees for free, for his pleasure, as a remembrance.

But even on his way to the manor, Andres wished for a son to whom he could leave the orchard.

The dark thoughts in Andres's head did not last long. He was still young and so was Krōōt, and they could expect more children yet, both boys and girls. So he got on with life, as if there were many sons still to be born. In the autumn, he struggled with the stones in the fields, prying them loose and moving them onto pieces of wood that would be hauled out when the first snow came, since the sled was better for hauling stones than the wagon. He brought the fruit trees from the manor and planted them as the gardener instructed him. Since there were more trees than he'd expected, he extended the orchard so it stretched to the wide patch of land behind the bedrooms. Beside the windows and in the corners of the orchard, he planted lilacs, so they'd have flowers in the spring. From the woods, he brought rowan trees and bird cherries and found places for them beside the garden gate and elsewhere around the house.

Andres was becoming aware that nothing he did was ever sufficient, and his urges were never satisfied. One project gave birth to another; one task pulled another behind it.

As the fields, meadows, and pastures improved, he wanted to increase the size of his herd; otherwise there was no point to the improvements. But a larger herd meant bigger sheds; the old ones wouldn't do.

Now that the fields were better fertilized and tilled, they yielded more grain, but the main room was too small to dry it all; it wouldn't get done before Christmas. And a bigger room still wouldn't be enough, since the threshing barn wouldn't do either; the unthreshed sheaves wouldn't fit on the floor. Finally, there'd be so much grain, that there wouldn't be room to store it in the old barn. Even that year, all the bins were filled to the ceiling, all the

chests were filled to their lids, and all the sacks were filled to bursting. Andres considered selling some, if only to free up the space.

All the old buildings would have to be torn down, and bigger ones built in their place, starting with the living quarters and ending with the chaff room and loft. They had to build a new Vargamäe, their own Vargamäe. But where would they get the strength, or the money?

If he thought about it seriously, Andres was frightened by Vargamäe; its demands were as great as those of a God. No mortal could meet them. So he tried to do as little thinking as possible and just keep doing things.

Still, he couldn't help noticing that while he was overwhelmed with work, his neighbor passed his days as carefree as a bird. Pearu sometimes spent half the week in the tavern, even during the busiest time of the year. Yet the Valley Farm appeared to live well, as if ghosts helped them. It seemed his neighbor was differently blessed than Andres, in work and in children. Envy burned in Andres's heart, almost making him angry.

Krõõt felt neither envy nor anger toward the neighbors, only sadness. It seemed to her that the neighbors had some lighter moments, some little holidays from work, whereas in her household there was only endless toil, worry over new tasks, and preparation for new sorrows. But when she tried to broach the subject, Andres replied, "Would you like it if I spent my time hanging around the tavern?"

"No, no, of course not."

"Well, what then?" asked Andres.

His wife didn't know what to say, so she said nothing, but her eyes grew even sadder.

The only person at the Hill Farm who never had any sad thoughts was Mari, the housemaid. She chattered like a magpie on

a fencepost, always cheerful and gay. Sometimes she even got the master to joke about something and drew a smile from the mistress. She even comforted the mistress about having daughters.

“You’re still very young, with time enough to bear many more children, both boys and girls. My aunt’s first four babies were girls, but then the boys started coming, singles and twins, till there were even too many and she wanted to close it up to stop any more from coming. Six boys in a row, all alive. And as they grew up, she had to watch them all go off to the army. As soon as one got old enough to help, he’d be taken away and she’d be left with just her tears. She felt such pity for them; she almost went blind from crying. But no one took away her daughters. They stayed, and they brought her more laughter than tears.”

“Andres wants an heir for the farm. He needs help, and daughters aren’t much use,” Krõõt replied. “He’s always saying that when his sons start working, then we’ll build a new Vargamäe.”

“As for me, I would happily live in the Vargamäe cottage,” said Mari, and when the mistress seemed not to hear her, she added, “If I could live there and have daughters, I wouldn’t want anything else. That would be enough for my lifetime.”

“Is our Mari talking seriously?” asked the mistress.

“Oh, if I only could, mistress. I’ve even been to look at the cottage. The bedroom is standing empty,” said Mari.

“But you wouldn’t be going there alone, would you?” asked the mistress.

“No, not alone,” said Mari. “Juss, too.”

“Juss! Really?” The mistress marveled.

“No one but Juss,” said the girl as she looked at the mistress with tears in her eyes. Krõõt’s eyes filled with tears, too, and they stood

looking at each other, wet-eyed, understanding each other without words.

“So you want to live in the Vargamäe cottage?” asked the mistress.

“We’ve talked about it and planned; maybe we could get a young cow and a lamb; there’s plenty of marsh ground at Vargamäe for them to trample. Then we’d have enough for a bowl of soup and a bit of yarn for stockings, and we’d work for you to pay for the potato patch and pasture for the cow. If you let us grow some flax we’d be able to have some cloth for shirts and pants. Just thinking about it brings tears to my eyes. Juss is an only son, so he won’t be called up. He’s a little young for me, but he’ll grow and become a man.”

“He has a kind heart,” said the mistress. “The little girl just loves him, the way he plays with her.”

Mari’s eyes again moistened as the mistress’s words reached her heart. Now she couldn’t help telling what had happened in the hayfield, and how it all started there. She repeated what Juss had said—that the master killed him with work, and Mari with laughter.

“I know he’s had some hard days here, working with my man,” said Krõõt. “He toils away as if Judgment Day is coming soon. But Juss’s bones were weak when he came here, and, of course, the work and strain have bowed his legs.”

“I was thinking, is it possible that our children...” Mari started.

“The children may not inherit it,” Krõõt reassured her.

The women were so deep in conversation that the spinning wheels had come to a halt. Quietly, Krõõt asked, “You’re not...?”

“No, mistress.” The girl turned away at the question. “He just comes and sleeps next to me sometimes. Like a child.”

“Stay safe,” said the mistress wisely.

“I certainly will,” replied the girl. “The mistress needn’t worry.”

The women's gentle conversation floated through the open door and caught Andres's attention in the front room. He said laughingly to Juss, who sat near the back door, "Listen Juss, the women are sharing secrets in the back room. They're even letting their spinning wheels slow down."

"It's only Juss we're talking about," said the mistress to Andres.

"Aha, only our own Juss," the master pretended surprise. "And what about him then?"

"He's going to get married," the mistress said.

"Mari!" exclaimed Juss.

"It's not me, Juss. It's the mistress," said the girl to the boy.

"Married? Our Juss is going to get married?" said the master, still acting amazed.

"And Mari wants to, as well," added the mistress.

"Then, are they perhaps planning to do it together?" asked the master.

"I think it's together, or so it sounds," the mistress explained.

"Well, that's something!" said the master, acting more and more surprised. Then he added, more soberly, "Are you just teasing each other, or do you really mean it?"

"We really mean it, master," Mari assured him.

"And what do you think of it?" Andres asked Juss.

Juss couldn't seem to get his needle through the thick moccasin leather, no matter how he pulled and pushed. He turned red in the face, maybe because of his effort, or maybe because of the conversation.

The master repeated his question, but Mari had to prompt Juss before he could manage an answer. "She's not lying."

Andres stopped his work, in order to think better. He then said, "Mari and Juss—if you're really going to marry, then I'm going to

give you a real party. If Juss brings the vodka, I'll make beer and the mistress will find enough to fill the table so there's plenty for everybody."

"If that wouldn't be asking too much, master," said Juss, recognizing that he was valued. "We've certainly had a load of work."

"And that's why, of course," agreed the master.

"And the cottage, mistress, please, please," Mari begged.

"Now what's Mari going on about?" asked Andres, hearing the girl's voice.

"She wants me to ask about the cottage," said Krõõt.

"What cottage?" asked the master, not yet understanding.

"Well, our cottage—that empty room," explained the mistress.

"So Mari and Juss want to stay at Vargamäe!" exclaimed Andres.

Mari answered, "To stay here, to live here, and to die here."

"That would be very good, if it was possible," added Juss.

It filled Andres's heart to know that there were other people who wanted to live at Vargamäe! He said, "Jokes aside, I have nothing against that, if you can manage it."

Mari said, "I'm sure we can, if only the master agrees."

"Of course we can do it," added Juss. "If only the master and mistress..."

"Here at Vargamäe we need help or we can't do it all," said Andres. "It would be very good if the help was right here when we needed it. And you're both good workers, ready to take on anything."

Later that evening, when the master and mistress went to bed in the back bedroom, there was so much happiness in the front room—it was amazing that it all fit. The room was big enough, but Mari and Juss's joy was even bigger. Tucked under one blanket, the two of them raved about how happy they were almost until dawn.

Then they fell asleep so soundly that the mistress found them there, still under one blanket, in the morning.

“Juss, you bad boy! What are you doing, hiding like that?” she chided him. “Is it warmer next to Mari? Don’t let the master catch you!”

But the master never did find Juss under Mari’s blanket.



Chapter 14

The summer that followed at the Vargamäe Hill Farm was like the previous summers, since Juss was still the farmhand and Mari was still the maid, at least until winter, when they planned to move to the cottage. Those were their plans, but no one could predict how things would go for a newly married couple.

At first, the young pair had neither cow nor sheep, planning to acquire both in a year's time. Their plan allowed them to live with the family as before, fix up their room in the cottage, and do other things, all without rushing.

Old Madis, although he had nothing against Juss and Mari, decided that he would send his cow, Küüdu, out to graze with the Valley Farm herd as soon as Juss's cow was mooing in the shed. He talked it over with Andres, who didn't object. The cottage was on Andres's land, but Madis could send his cow wherever he thought best, be it Hill Farm or Valley Farm.

When Madis brought the matter up, Pearu was tickled. "So bow-legs and his bride are pushing you out," he laughed.

"It's just that I'd feel more comfortable this way," said Madis.

"It's okay. Come whenever you want," said Pearu. "I've got plenty of brushwood for my stove, and there's no shortage of grass along the marsh edges. Anyway, there's more than Andres has."

“That’s right,” agreed Madis.

Everything went smoothly at Vargamæ for a while, until the Hill Farm cowherd, a boy named Mart, started complaining that the pasture below the alder grove was full of water. The mistress reassured the boy, who’d been hired for the season, telling him it’d been even worse in earlier years, before there was a ditch. The boy, who was big and sensible, replied, “The ditch doesn’t help. All the ditches are full of water because they’ve been dammed up.”

The mistress told the master, and he went down by the alder grove to have a look. The ditches certainly were overflowing, and the pasture was worse than before the ditches were dug. The border ditch was dammed and the water was already higher than the ditch’s banks. The dirt piled on one side stopped the water from flowing onto Pearu’s land, but it flowed unhampered onto the Hill Farm land.

Andres also discovered that the end of the Valley Farm ditch had been diverted toward the upper part of the fields, and this ditch also had a bank of turf on one side. The new meadow between the ditch and the fields was full of rippling water. It was clear that the ditches and dams were stopping all the water that came down from Aaseme.

Andres went to see his neighbor, but the man seemed hurried and unwilling to talk.

“The soil is thin beneath these fields, so I thought flooding it would make the hay grow thicker.”

“But that puts my pasture under water,” said Andres. “My cows would need a boat to go out there.”

“If your cows know how to do that, let them try,” mocked Pearu.

“Listen, neighbor, this is no joke. It’s serious,” said Andres.

“It’s not my problem; I just want to flood my meadows,” said Pearu, turning his back on Andres.

“Are you really telling me that I paid for half the ditch so you could flood my pastures?” asked Andres.

“I’m damming the water into my meadows, not your pastures,” explained Pearu.

“Come see for yourself what’s happening beneath the alders,” said Andres.

Pearu snapped back, “Did you come when your horses trampled my cabbages?”

“What’s that got to do with it?” asked Andres.

“What’ve I got to do with your flooded pastures?” Pearu shot back.

“You’re damming the water.”

“I’m damming it for my meadows.”

“I demand that you destroy your dam.”

“You demand?” Pearu mocked him. “Who are you? A government official? Who’s to stop me from damming my own ditch?”

“Your own ditch,” repeated Andres. “It’s not just your ditch. I paid for half of it. Madis’ll swear to it.”

“But it’s on my land. You don’t need Madis to know that.”

“Oh, so that’s why you wanted it all on your own land,” said Andres.

“I’m not dumb enough to dig a ditch with my money on somebody else’s land,” answered Pearu mockingly.

“So I’m the dumb one?” asked Andres.

“If you say so,” snapped Pearu.

“One more time: Are you going to take down the dam or not?”

“You got nothing to say about it,” replied Pearu, edging away from Andres, who was starting to look threatening. “The ditch is

mine and the dam is mine. Only the water is yours. Don't let your water come into my ditch and I'll have nothing to dam."

"If you won't take down the dam, I'll do it myself and let the water flow," said Andres. "You're not going to flood my pasture. You can file a complaint against me if you want." Then he turned and headed home without looking back.

Pearu called his summer hand in from the pasture and sent him as a witness, in case Andres really pulled down the dam.

Andres didn't even go in the house. He just picked up an axe, put a spade on his shoulder, and dashed down the rise, his pipe in his mouth.

Pearu saw that he had no time to waste and started running toward the problem with his man at his heels. He wanted to reach the dam first, as did Andres, so they both ran as fast as they could.

The two men got to the border ditch at almost the same time, and they stood there together, amazed at what greeted them. There wasn't much dam left. Andres broke into a broad laugh, dropping his pipe into the dirt, while Pearu cursed, "Who in the hell did this?"

"Not hell, but heaven. God couldn't bear to see your injustice, and He let the water take out the dam," answered Andres.

"I'll show you and your God!" Pearu threatened. "You piece of crap."

It looked like the water hadn't been released very long ago, because the current was strong. Pearu tried to build up a new dam with the help of his summer hand, but they couldn't do it; the strong current tore pieces of turf from their hands and carried them downstream toward the river. Pearu wouldn't give in; he rammed in new, strong poles and began piling turf behind them. Little by little, he built a new, stronger dam.

Pearu was afraid that his neighbor would come down on him and he trembled inside as he built the dam. He knew that he and his man together could hardly fight Andres. In his initial fury, Andres nearly succumbed to violence, but after he'd gotten the last laugh and seen the ditches emptied, he calmed down, left his neighbor, and went home. He told himself there wasn't much more water to drain down, unless it started raining hard.

That evening, when the herder Mart came home, Andres asked him with a smile, "Well, was there less water in the ditch tonight than there was this morning?"

"Yes, there was, but now that foul man has built a new dam," the boy replied. "I won't put up with that. I'll tear it down, just like the first one."

"So it was you?" Andres marveled.

"Who else, master? I couldn't stand seeing the animals splashing around."

"You'd better be careful," said Andres seriously. "If he hears about it, he'll come after you in the marsh and give you a thrashing. I can't protect you there."

"Ha, let him try!" said the boy. "He'll never catch me in the marsh. We'll see who has a better pair of legs."

The master told the boy to keep quiet about what he'd done. It would stay between the two of them.

It kept raining, the ditches again filled with water, and the pasture was soon awash. Pearu was there day and night to make sure no one took down his dam. He built up the sides of the ditch to keep water from getting through.

But a moment came when Mart was sure that nothing stirred down there. If anyone had been about, the Hill Farm dog would've

barked. So Mart began tearing apart the dam, throwing the turf to the side.

The new dam was built much better than the old one, and because the boy had no tools other than a sharp pole and his ten fingers, the job took a long time. He'd just gotten the water running when the dog suddenly barked. Pearu, still some distance away, was walking toward the ditch. When he saw the boy at the dam, he started shouting as if someone was trying to kill him. He ran toward Mart, as if to attack. Mart tore at the dam with even more energy, afraid that Pearu would stop up the water again. He managed to take out some good pieces of turf before Pearu got there. By then, the water was rushing so fast that no one could've stopped it.

Mart's bravery might've ended badly, but he threw his pole at Pearu's legs and the dog jumped behind his master. So Mart escaped to his marsh, running as fast as he could, jumping from one hummock to the next. When Pearu tried to chase him, he found the hummocks that supported the boy broke under his weight, throwing him into the mud. Then the dog attacked again, jumping on his back. The boy stood a little ways off on a hummock, jeering.

"One day it'll all be over for you," Pearu threatened the barking dog. "And you, you damned rascal," he said to the boy. "You'll see blood next time you cross my path."

"You have to catch me first," answered the boy. "I've never been afraid of old geezers, and I'm not afraid of you."

"Shut your jaw!" roared Pearu.

"Pigs have jaws!" the boy answered.

Suddenly, Pearu remembered the dam; he'd quite forgotten about it while chasing the boy.

The water had done its job, destroying the dam so thoroughly that there was no point in trying to repair it. He'd have to wait until the current let up, and then start rebuilding from scratch.

Pearu stood cursing, while the boy laughed and jeered from his hummock.

"Hey, stranger, can I come and look at your pretty stream?" he asked nicely.

But the stranger didn't answer. He grabbed a stick from the ground and swung it at the dog, which still barked angrily. The animal dashed toward the boy in fear, splashing water and dirt all around.

"Are you going to build up that dam again?" asked the boy from his hummock. "This time don't make it so tough to take down; my back is still sore."

"Just keep on barking away. One day I'll make your skin burn," Pearu threatened.

"Well, if it happens, so be it, but I'll destroy your dam, no matter how strong you build it," said the boy seriously.

"Do it once more and I'll drown you in the ditch like a kitten."

"You can drown me if you want, but I'll still tear down the dam," said the boy, jumping to another hummock and then another, until he and the dog were out of sight.

"Damned son of a bitch!" Pearu cursed. "Where did they ever find that little bastard?"

He began chopping down poles and sharpening them, so he could build a new dam as soon as the current permitted.

He didn't want to let all the water go to the river, so he started ramming poles into the bottom of the ditch and piling turf behind them. He had to jump in the water and trample down pieces of turf while up to his thighs in water. His shirtsleeves were muddy to the

elbows. It was harder work than the boy had done in destroying it, but Pearu labored on. He didn't mind working hard, as long as he was doing something worthwhile.

Building a new dam used up half the glorious day, but then it was ready and he felt good looking at it. Feeling his strength, Pearu thought it would be fun to hide behind a bush and snicker while the neighbor's boy tried to break it down, but this dam had an even shorter life than its predecessors and Pearu never knew who destroyed it.

The ditches filled with water again and Pearu stood guard, day and night, at his dam. He only dared to go home when the boy herder went home with the animals, or else he couldn't be sure. The boy was such a rascal that he left the animals God knows where to graze and snuck back down to the dam with the dog to see if all was clear. If Pearu was nearby, the dog would smell him and start barking, and the boy would go quietly back to his herd.

Once, on a bright and sunny day, the Hill Farm boy went home with the animals around eleven and the Valley Farm master decided he could go home, as well. A little later, he saw the neighbor's boy walking along the other side of the field, horse bridle in hand. He was whistling merrily, evidently on his way home with the horse.

Pearu relaxed and lay down, stretched out in the sun, and gave orders that he should be awakened as soon as the boy returned with the horse. But he never did come back, so Pearu enjoyed a lengthy nap. Only when it was time to take the herd out again did the boy appear, carrying the bridle, but without the horse.

"But where've the horses gone that he didn't get them?" wondered Pearu when he saw the boy.

After lunch, he went down to the ditch again and knew right away that the dam was torn down, because the meadow was dry

and there was only a trickle of water at the bottom of the ditch. When he got to the dam, he found it more thoroughly destroyed than before.

“That damned devil!” cursed Pearu. “What the hell can you do with a boy like that? When on earth did that bastard get down here?”

As Pearu stood by his destroyed dam, cursing, the Hill Farm boy came down to the marsh with his animals.

“Well, hello, Valley Farm master,” Mart called from a distance. “How’s your nice little dam?”

The master pretended not to hear what the boy said above the dog’s barking.

“There’s not enough water for a cat to drink in your ditches now. How will you drown me?”

“I’ll string you up from a tree branch, and don’t think I won’t,” snapped Pearu.

“You’ll have to catch me first,” the boy grinned.

“Don’t worry, I will,” said Pearu. He started toward the boy, who’d already taken to his heels. Pearu didn’t go after him; instead he chased the animals that were floundering in the mud.

“But these aren’t your animals. Why are you going after them?” the boy cried.

“I’m trying to catch you,” replied Pearu.

“Leave the animals alone!” shouted the boy.

“You come here and I’ll leave them alone. Otherwise I’ll drive them away.”

“You shithead! You want to chase my animals away? I’ll show you how to chase animals,” the boy shouted angrily. He ran to the cattle bridge, picked up some stones, and approached Pearu, who was still driving off the animals with a stick.

“Are you going to leave them alone or not?” asked the boy.

“Ha!” the man laughed. “Lost your guts?”

The boy threw his first stone at the man, and shouted to his dog, “Go for him! Get that man!”

The dog attacked the man with renewed fury, so the boy could edge nearer, into good stone-throwing range. The third stone hit the man’s left elbow.

“You bastard!” cried Pearu, grabbing his elbow with his right hand.

“That’s what you get for beating our animals,” the boy shouted, aiming another stone. After some tries, he hit Pearu’s bare leg.

“Serves you right!” shouted the boy, laughing, as he broke into a run, but it was no longer a joke. Pearu left the animals and took off after the boy. He kept coming after Mart, but he never got close because the boy was quicker in the marsh and deliberately went through the muddier, softer places. Choosing his moments, he turned to throw a stone now and then, and a couple of times he hit his target. Pearu finally tired of chasing the boy and turned toward the ditch, the dog barking behind him.

“Hey master, where are you going so early? The sun is still high,” the boy panted from a hummock, “and I still have some stones left. How would you like one to the head? Come on back!”

Pearu pretended not to hear him; he jumped over the ditch and stood on the bank, his hands clasped behind him. The dog kept snapping and barking at him from the other side of the ditch. More than anything, the master wished he could deliver a thrashing, at least to the dog, who’d gotten hold of his leg a couple of times when he was close to the boy. The damned dog used its teeth to save the scamp, and for that Pearu wanted to break its back. It could live on, if it wanted to, but broken-backed.

Pearu stood and rested, thinking. The dog finally dared to take a drink; it had been panting for some time, its tongue hanging

out. The man seized the moment and flung a piece of wood at the animal. He managed a partial hit, and the dog yelped.

“You felt that, didn’t you, you devil?” Pearu cursed. “Just try lapping water from my ditch.”

A stone flew from the boy’s hand and sailed across the ditch as revenge for the dog.

“What a shit you are!” cursed the boy. “Going after a dog when it goes for a drink ‘cause it’s hot.”

“Stop throwing stones!” Pearu yelled.

“Not until you get out of here,” said the boy.

Another stone flew. Soon one hit the master, and then another, as the boy moved closer. Pearu was about to jump the ditch and thrash the boy, when his bare leg was struck. The stone wasn’t big, but it hurt and he didn’t jump across the ditch.

“If you don’t stop throwing stones, I’ll get a gun and shoot you!” Pearu yelled.

“Sorry, Pops, but I’m out of stones. That was the last one—no more to throw,” laughed the boy.

Pearu started for home.

The boy called after him, “Hey master, didn’t you forget to build your dam? I’ve got nothing to do!”

Pearu walked away without answering. He was more sad than angry. Hopes he’d held for years had come to nothing. From the start, he’d looked for a chance to lock horns with Andres, but he wound up jumping through hoops with the boy herder instead.

His desire wasn’t born of bitterness or anger; he just wanted to take the measure of his neighbor. Could Andres go toe-to-toe with another man? Did he have any brains, or did he bullshit his way through life? Pearu considered this just as he did horse races or dogfights, oxen goring the ground, or rams battling each other. He

asked simply, who's better? This world, and especially Vargamäe, would be so dull if there was no fighting or bragging. Winter would be dull, autumn would be dull, and it would be especially dull in the spring and summer, when Vargamäe came to life.

Well, he could toil from dawn until dusk like his neighbor Andres, but he was not inclined to do so. Pearu's father had worked like that, but he always said he did it to give his children an easier life. So Pearu figured his life ought to be easier than his father's. He preferred to drive to fairs, drink with Kassiaru Jaska, or even trade horses with gypsies, rather than kill himself with work from morning to night. He also liked hanging around the first-class salon of the tavern with village officials, or the barn manager of the manor, or other big, important men who had big, important ideas. Pearu wanted to learn from them, to study the way they thought about things, so he'd know how best to "do business" in his own life.

One example of his "business" was the border ditch and the ditch beside the alder grove, both of which were badly needed to drain the water. Andres didn't really understand the situation, so busy was he with all his work. Even a gypsy is smarter than that when he trades horses. If you manage to cheat him, he doesn't get mad, he gets even. Andres just got mad when Pearu cheated him. A real man would retaliate, but Andres always flexed his muscles, ready to fight, or he sent his boy herder in his place. Was that the act of a real man? What kind of master was that for Vargamäe?

These were Pearu's thoughts as he limped home. He felt a little disappointed. There wasn't any point in building up the dam again, since the weather was dry and there wasn't enough water. If only he could catch that damned boy and his damned dog! On Saturday night, in the sauna, his disappointment was even more keen when

his wife asked, "What are these blue marks on your body?" as she scrubbed and whisked him.

"I don't know anything about them," said Pearu.

"Don't they hurt?" asked the woman, touching the marks.

"I don't feel them," said the man.

"That's funny," said the surprised woman. "You have blue marks all over, but they don't hurt."

"A man has a man's body," boasted Pearu. His blue marks were not explained any further.



Chapter 15

Had the Valley Farm mistress gone and asked the neighbors about her husband's bruises, she would've gotten an explanation. Even three-year-old Liisi could've told her about them. But the Valley Farm mistress didn't talk to her neighbors anymore, and they didn't talk to the Valley Farm people. They were all living on one and the same Vargamäe, but it was as if they didn't speak the same language, or if they did, the only words they knew were curses and threats. They'd forgotten everything else. This standoff began in the spring, when Pearu dammed the water to flood his meadows by the alders.

At the Hill Farm, Mart the boy herder was a hero. He would've been a hero to all of Vargamäe if everyone knew he was responsible for the Valley Farm master's bruises. Surely something had happened by the alder grove, but the details were unimportant since the ditches were now all dry. The pasture was also drier, Krõõt noticed while milking the cows.

At first, she didn't approve of what the boy had done. It simply wasn't acceptable for a child to tease an adult and throw stones at him, as he said he'd done, but her attitude changed when he told her how Pearu had chased their cows into the muddy pasture and beaten them. Why beat a cow? These weren't young steers or heifers.

Well, if that's what happened in the marsh, Mart had done the right thing. From then on, the mistress always called the boy Matu, and soon everyone else did too—first Mari, then Juss, and then even the master. There was no more Mart. Only Matu lived at Vargamäe. Later, when Mart became a farmhand there, no one called him anything but Matu. The name would've stuck for the rest of his days had he not left Vargamäe for a better position.

The story of Pearu beating the cows and running from the stones had a remarkable effect on the mistress.

Andres had a more serious thought and said to the boy, "He may have stopped building his dams, but I think he's going to keep after you, and he won't let you get away again."

"Please, Matu, be on your guard," the mistress begged. "He'll tan your hide good if he catches you."

"He won't catch me, even if he uses a net," said the boy. "I always keep some good stones in my pocket, so let's see what happens. I'll whop him from the front with stones, and Valtu will come from behind and sink his teeth in. So let him come for me."

"He might sneak up on you," worried the mistress.

"Don't worry. Valtu will smell him coming," the boy promised.

For a few days, it was quiet and nothing out of the ordinary happened. They heard shots fired down in the yard of the Valley Farm, but they didn't give it much thought. It was the master shooting, perhaps testing his guns.

The gunfire stopped and Pearu strolled around his property. He went down to the ditch, as if he might start on the dam again, but he didn't. He just stood there, lost in thought.

Then one evening, he showed up on the Hill Farm pasture, near the border of the Aaseme farm. He was looking for Matu and the land there was drier and better for running. He had a long stick

to chase away the dog, or swing at the boy if he couldn't quite catch him.

The boy had too much faith in his quick legs, the stones in his pocket, and the teeth of the dog, and so Pearu was able to get perilously close to him. The boy managed to save his skin by dodging between the bushes. Pearu could never quite grab him by the collar, and his stick mostly hit the birches, but, still, he was able to strike Matu's back a few times and cause the boy pain. This didn't scare the boy; it only made him mad. Pearu was mad, too, and Valtu was in a rage. Matu had one last stone in his pocket—the largest one—and he'd been saving it until he was in a good position to hit Pearu on the head. He hadn't thrown a stone for a while, so Pearu thought he'd run out and the moment was ripe to catch him. Pearu started running after Matu so fast that the boy could almost feel fingers on his collar. Finally Matu grabbed that last stone and hit Pearu square on the forehead, just as Valtu got ahold of his calf. So, Matu got away again.

Pearu seethed with anger and his eyes flashed with fury. The dog barked and bared its teeth before him, and he pulled out a pistol, pointed it at the animal, and fired. The bullet hit the dog in the head and Valtu fell silent, like cut grass, his legs and tail hardly moving.

Matu froze with fright and, had Pearu tried to catch him just then, he wouldn't have run. He might've surrendered, had Pearu ordered him to. Pearu could've done whatever he wanted, but killing the dog had affected him almost as much as the boy. Pearu stood dumbly in front of the twitching animal, which he hadn't really wanted to kill. A sudden fury had overtaken him and pushed him further than he wished.

This gave the boy a moment to recover. When Pearu finally moved again, Matu snapped out of his trance and ran as fast as he could. He went straight home, without a thought of the herd

or what might happen to it. Crying, he told the mistress what had happened in the forest.

“What do we do now?” she asked helplessly, wiping her eyes because blood had been shed, even if it was only a dog’s.

The boy ran down to the field where the master was building a fence.

“So that’s what all the shooting was about,” said Andres. “He was practicing.”

At first, he didn’t know what to do either, but then he took the boy to the field near the alders where Juss was plowing manure. He asked Juss to leave the horse at the field’s edge and come to the marsh as a witness.

When they arrived at the spot where Matu left the herd with Pearu and the dead dog, no one was there. There was nothing but a brown stain on the grass and moss where Matu said the dead dog had lain.

They could hear the bells of the animals. The boy pointed toward the border ditch and they went to round up the herd. They stopped at the ditch to talk about it all and Pearu shouted to them from the other side.

“Come and take your corpse off my land!”

“That bastard dragged the dog over there!” said Matu.

“Stop lying, you little rascal!” shouted Pearu. “He says I dragged it here, but who do you suppose was on my land, chasing grouse with his dog? And guess who set the dog on me? There’s still blood on my legs.”

Andres jumped across the ditch, followed by Matu and Juss. They found the dog between the hummocks and examined the ground there, but saw no bloodstains. The three of them stood around the body, wondering what to do. Should they take it away or not?

“I’ll bring it back to our land,” said the boy, reaching for the dog’s hind legs.

“Leave it,” said the master. “He brought it over here and he can do with it what he wants. Why should we dirty our hands?”

Pearu, standing nearby, shouted, “Clean up my land! This isn’t your slaughterhouse!”

“It’s you who turned it into a slaughterhouse,” said Andres, “but this is one corpse you’ll have to pay for.”

“Pay you?” called Pearu. “Take it away; I don’t need it. I’m giving it to you for nothing. And just try sending it to me again.”

“You leave my herder alone, and my dog won’t come after you, you shit,” Andres shot back.

“I’m a shit? Your dog is a shit, your herder is a shit, and you, too, are a shit,” Pearu yelled.

The argument got more heated and their voices got louder, until, finally, no one could hear anything. They all shouted and, as evening approached, the voices of the two Vargamäe masters echoed back from Jõessaare, as if they were arguing about a dead dog over there as well.

So it all ended in shouting, because Pearu kept his distance and Andres dared not approach him, knowing he had a gun.

This incident led to the first lawsuit between the two neighbors. Andres wanted damages for the dog and punishment for its killer. Pearu wanted compensation for the grouse chicks that the dog had killed and damages for the bites he’d sustained, and he wanted Matu punished for sending the dog after him and the birds in the first place. The dam that had started it all was forgotten. The honorable court probably never heard how Pearu flooded Andres’s meadow, or how pleased he was with himself for doing it.

The two men each went to court several times, and the whole case was thoroughly examined to get at the truth. Andres's only objective was to present the truth, in order for the court to reach a just decision. Together with the farmhand and the boy herder, he affirmed that they'd gone together to the marsh and found the dead dog lying on Pearu's land.

Pearu also confirmed this, but insisted that the dog had died there. He claimed he'd brought the firearm only to protect himself against the vicious animal Matu had set upon him. However, Matu refuted that the dog had been killed on the Valley Farm land. When Matu ran home, frightened, Pearu had chased the Hill Farm animals to the border of his property and carried the dead dog across the ditch, the boy said.

It was on this point—how and where the dog was killed—that Pearu and Matu contradicted each other. Andres and Juss could not testify to it. So, the court was in the difficult position of having to decide whether to trust the master or the boy. If the court had consisted of respected herdsmen, they probably would've treated Matu's words as the truth, but because the judgment was made by honorable masters, all of them property owners, they were inclined to believe Pearu. Wealth is closer to truth than poverty. The masters found it hard to believe that another master would go into the marsh to drag off his neighbor's dead dog. An established property owner wouldn't behave like that.

When the court case didn't come out one way or the other, Andres thought about it calmly and sadly. He recognized that justice couldn't be obtained simply with the truth. If he, Juss, and Matu had all insisted that they'd found the dead dog on Pearu's land, far from the edge, then the court would've gotten an entirely different impression and Pearu would've had to pay for the dog, but, as it

happened, the court figured that Andres's dog and Pearu's grouse chicks had about the same worth.

Andres felt defeated. He couldn't establish the truth and he didn't get justice. Meanwhile, Pearu seemed to grow in stature, though during the whole of haymaking, he didn't build another dam and he didn't chase Matu. The boy got a new dog, much larger and as vicious and angry as the old one. By the second or third day, the dog went out herding with Matu, and soon he squatted under the Valley Farm windows, as if he knew what had happened before.

Andres was plotting to get back at Pearu. Each family was careful that their animals didn't get on the other's land, for that would surely lead to a fine. This time, it was Pearu who got in trouble. His herdsman let the animals cross onto the Hill Farm grassland below the fields, which had been mowed early for a nice second growth they could've cut as hay. Andres rounded up the animals, but didn't give them back until Pearu came in person to settle the matter.

"We'll settle it in court," said Andres. "We'll straighten it all out before the imperial seal, or I might get too much, or you might give too little."

In his frustration, Pearu beat his herder and the boy's cries could be heard at the Hill Farm. But this only calmed the master a little, since he'd still have to go to court and pay compensation, because the damage was obvious. The second hay crop had been eaten and trampled by the herd.

Damming of the water under the alder grove started up anew and Matu began to break down the dams once more, but even so, the Hill Farm pasture was sometimes awash. Andres finally tired of this nonsense and went to court to ask for justice and protection, but, as in the first trial against Pearu, Andres felt the difficulty of portraying the truth clearly, so court could pass fair judgment.

Finally, he got the chief justice to come down and see for himself, but it so happened that the justice came by shortly after Matu had destroyed a dam and the ditches were dry. Andres was angry with the boy, while Pearu went around snickering. On top of that, the chief justice didn't go home after his visit to the Hill Farm, but went over to the Valley Farm where he talked with Pearu for much longer than he had with Andres. Then he finally went to see the famous flooded meadow.

So Andres gained nothing from the court official's visit to Vargamäe, at least nothing that was reflected in the decision. The lawsuits between the two neighbors went on and on, one leading to another. Andres wouldn't have believed this was possible until it happened. The two men were endlessly coming and going. Pearu spent more and more time in the first-class salon at the tavern, since these affairs were complicated and required "management."

Andres felt like he was unraveling at both ends. Work was using up his body and his neighbor was burning up his soul, so at meal-times, he couldn't eat and at night, he couldn't sleep.

"Why do you bother with that good-for-nothing?" Krõõt asked her husband. "Leave him be. You're not going to make him any better or any smarter. My mother always said that the grave is the only thing that improves a person."

"So what should I do? Give up?" asked Andres.

"Maybe you should," said Krõõt. "Perhaps then his heart will find some peace."

"And what about my heart? What happens to it? Or does only Pearu have a heart?"

"It's the wiser one who gives in," said Krõõt.

"Should I let truth and justice be trampled underfoot, just because I'm the wiser?" asked Andres.

“Well, where is your truth and justice getting you anyway?” said Krõõt. “He shot your dog like it was nothing.”

Andres went and talked it over with Aaseme Aadu, who said, “Why are you wasting your time in court with this son of a bitch? Just beat the hell out of him. You’re the man who can do it. Make your own justice; don’t look for others to give it to you. He chases your herder, you chase him. Let the boy tease him at the dam. Then, when he steps on your land, grab him and give him something he won’t forget. Throw him in the ditch and let him have it again. In the court, your dog never got justice. Pearu’s more afraid of this kind of justice than any the courts can order.”

Andres couldn’t take the advice of Krõõt or the old man at Aaseme. He wanted to act with honesty and fairness, even when facing a man like Pearu.

“Should I lie and perjure myself because of this bastard?” he said. “Is there really so little justice in this world that we must live without it at Vargamäe?”

In order to free himself from the damned border ditch, a perpetual thorn in his side, Andres put Madis the cottager to work digging another ditch, which would lead all his water down to the river. This would end Pearu’s attempts to dam the water in the Hill Farm ditches. Certainly the new ditch was a big expense, but it would be worth it, because Andres ran it down the middle of his land, where he hoped to grow a fine forest, and around Jõessaare to turn all that land hard and dry.

That first summer, Madis’s work went slowly, but the following spring, Juss put his hand to it as well. Although he was no longer their farmhand, Juss still pitched in whenever the work piled up. Then the ditch really started coming along and, early in the fall, it reached the river.

“This is the ditch we should’ve dug in the first place,” said Madis to Andres as they let the first water flow. “Didn’t I tell you it would be cheaper to dig the ditch alone than with Pearu? But you didn’t believe me then.”

“Well, the money we spent on the border ditch wasn’t wasted. It’s still drying the land,” said Andres. “Now he won’t be able to dam the water below the alder grove. This ditch will drain the water off.”

“Maybe not below the alder grove, but...” said Madis, without finishing.

“Where, then?”

“Below Jõessaare,” answered Madis finally.

“But how? The water will flood his own pasture too,” said Andres.

“If he dug a new stretch of ditch there, couldn’t he flood the meadow between it and the border ditch?” asked Madis of Andres.

“Of course, in that case,” Andres agreed. “He could build a dam by a hill that would hold back the water and then we’d have a real lake below Jõessaare.”

“That’s what I thought,” said Madis.

“But then,” said Andres, “I’ll dig across, from the border ditch to the new one, or dig another ditch between the high spots.”

“That’s different. Then there’d be no point in building a dam at Jõessaare.”

The long new ditch was brimming with water when Madis started to take down the peat that blocked the end. The water was impatient and broke through, tearing a piece of turf from his spade as it gushed and foamed toward the river.

“I think the marsh will look different pretty soon,” noted Madis.

“It’s still filling up with water from Aaseme,” said Andres. “We should dig another ditch like this one on that border, but I can’t do

it now. I still owe you for this work. If the prices of flax and grain hold steady, maybe then...”

“The master shouldn’t worry himself about my pay. I can wait. I know you’ll pay me,” said Madis. “The money won’t go anywhere.”

“Of course not.”

A little later, Andres broached another subject. “You could’ve stayed on with me, and shared the cottage with Juss.”

“Don’t worry about that. I’ll stay where I am; both Juss and I have more room this way. It’s not as if we’re cross with each other or anything.”

“Not cross, but...”

“At the Valley Farm, I don’t think they looked too happily on me digging this ditch,” Madis went on. “Last year, he asked if I’d do some digging for him. I thought I’d see what he’d do if I said no. So far, there’s been nothing.”

Madis was trying to ease Andres’s mind. He was a cottager with the Valley Farm, but he also worked for the Hill Farm. Of course, he explained it differently to Pearu. Between two strong masters, he hoped to live a good life with no shortage of work or bread.



Chapter 16

As the second year of Juss and Mari's marriage began, a son was born.

Mari was full of joy, but Juss was even happier and fussed around his wife and baby on his bowlegs from morning to night. Juss wanted to do everything. He felt that Mari's only duty and pleasure should be holding and rocking the infant, but Mari soon saw that it was not such a great joy to be tied to the child all day and night. She wanted to do things and go places.

Initially, Mari had one worry about the boy. Would he take after her or Juss? Her greatest fear was that he might inherit Juss's bowlegs. When he was born, the first thing she asked wasn't his sex, but what kind of legs he had, as if they could tell so early. A girl with bowlegs, Mari thought, would not be so bad, because they'd be hidden under her skirt, but a bowlegged boy—God preserve them all!

That same spring, Juss had his hands full building a cowshed out of the timber left over from the Hill Farm bedrooms. Since he couldn't work as a summer hand full time, he only went to help Andres as he was needed. He had his own work to do and his own household with a wife, child, heifer, and piglet. He didn't know how to put a roof on his cowshed, but Madis was an expert and together

they built the roof, thatching it with clean reeds gathered from the river the previous summer.

The family had hired a new maid, named Kaie. She was about thirty, with a stolid face and ash-gray hair. Krōōt hadn't liked her very much but they took her on because she had a reputation as a workhorse. The mistress wanted someone like Mari around the house again, with a cheerful face, jokes, and laughter to brighten the daily routine. Moreover, the mistress was expecting her third child around barley-sowing time, and it would've been nice to have someone around the house who treated the older children as friends.

Long before the baby was born, Krōōt's third child caused her heart to ache. She had a terrible feeling it would be another girl. She thought, "Once you have girls, you'll keep having girls."

And it happened just as she feared. When her second daughter was born, Krōōt wept, but this time she just accepted the blow. How could she cry over the will of the Lord, as incontestable as cold in the winter or heat in the summer? When Andres came home from the fields and got the news, his expression was the same as it had been at the last birth. Meanwhile the cottager's wife paced the back bedroom. When she went down to the cottage and told Mari of the new daughter, Mari was close to tears.

"My poor mistress!" she cried out. "Why does God punish her so?"

How could she show her face in the mistress's house or look her in the eye and comfort her, as she'd done after the birth of the second daughter? Now Mari herself had a son. If only it was possible, she might've traded her boy for one of the mistress's daughters. She was particularly saddened when she thought of the shirts, belts, blankets, caps, and other small things the mistress had given her

son. And the baby shower! She'd brought so much egg porridge and cake that Mari ate herself full and so did Juss. Even the old cottager and his wife had some.

Andres discovered something remarkable. When his second daughter was born, he'd promised himself that he would lead a totally different life if his third child also turned out to be a girl. He'd stop trying so hard and he wouldn't take Vargamäe so seriously. Now that he had that third daughter, though, he saw that his drive to work didn't lessen at all, as if he had no control over it. He wasn't making decisions about his life; there was an invisible force pushing and pulling him, and Andres had no choice but to go where he was led.

With Juss and Mari, Andres now had more manpower at his disposal than ever before and he quickly moved to make use of it. Between the fields, along the farm borders, and by the hayfields and horse runs, new fences were going up or old ones were replaced. They battled fiercely with stones, treating them as invaders. The poor master resisted the stones with all his strength, using crow-bars, levers, a sledgehammer, and fire.

Whenever his duties allowed, Madis took his shovel down to the marsh. Along the older ditches, the birches thrived, showing more color and greater growth. Andres found joy in this and walked along the ditches nearly every Sunday, always coming home in high spirits. When Krõõt brought his daughters to mind, Andres replied jokingly, "My sons are down along the marsh ditch. They are tall, strong, and handsome. I might die, but not my sons. They'll keep growing here at Vargamäe long after I'm gone."

"Until some stranger comes along to chop them down," said Krõõt.

"Then you'll see the stumps send up new shoots. We have tough roots here at Vargamäe," said Andres.

Pearu was also showing off and acting tough by picking fights. This year he stayed on peaceful terms with Andres, not because he was tired or bored, but because he had so much to do at home. He'd hired a new farmhand. As always, he chose the strongest man he could find to help him against his neighbor, but this time Pearu ended up fighting with his own man. One night, Pearu rushed home from the tavern and knocked down the gate again. As always, he blamed his wife and children, but when their wails and cries got too loud, Jaagup couldn't stand it and stepped between his master and mistress. He roughed up his angry master and took him over to his bed to sleep. Pearu tried to dig his nails into the man's face and throat, but Jaagup shrugged him off. Finally, the master managed to bite into Jaagup's thumb, but the man pulled out his jackknife and stuck it between Pearu's teeth, saving his damaged thumb. As soon as Jaagup let go, the master grabbed an ax from under his bed. He probably would've put an end to Jaagup's life if the farmhand hadn't managed to grab a chair and lay Pearu out with a blow. Jaagup took a belt and tied his master's hands behind his back. Pearu thrashed about, cursing, until he fell asleep. Then his wife untied his hands.

When Pearu woke, he seemed to have no memory of the previous night. He had no harsh words, not even for the farmhand, but from that moment on, he waged a campaign of persecution. He woke the man early in the morning, and made him work later in the evening. In the past, it'd been the Hill Farm men who rose first and finished last, but this year it was the other way around.

In the autumn, a cold rain fell for days and the Valley Farm's Jaagup was seen bundling sticks in the alder grove, where twice as much rain drenched him, or digging a ditch below the fields, standing in cold marsh water, with rain on his back. For him, the hardest days came during the potato harvest and grain threshing, when no

distinction was made between night and day. Pearu would've happily arranged all of Jaagup's duties to make his life harder, keeping the man inside in dry weather and sending him outdoors on rainy days. In weather so bad a good master wouldn't let his dog outside, Jaagup was sent to the potato field.

When winter came and all the important outdoor work was done, Pearu even stopped feeding the man. After starving for a couple of days, Jaagup tried to speak to his master, but Pearu wouldn't talk to him. Jaagup didn't know what to do, so he went over to the Hill Farm to seek advice from Andres. This infuriated Pearu further and he collected the man's things from the house and barn. When Jaagup returned, Pearu told him to clear out—he was no longer needed. Jaagup demanded his wages, for at least the time he'd worked.

“What wages?” screamed Pearu. “You've done me more damage than your wages amount to.”

There was nothing he could do. Jaagup gathered his things and went over to the Hill Farm where he stayed with Andres's permission, since he had nowhere else to go. He went to court to claim his wages, but Pearu insisted that Jaagup's statements were false. For instance, Pearu said he'd never denied the man food. He brought in the maid as a witness, and she confirmed her master's story. Pearu declared the farmhand lazy, careless with the horses and the tools, so foul-mouthed that the children had to be kept away, bad-mannered, a drunkard, and disobedient, so his work was often badly done. Pearu claimed that he told Jaagup to dig a ditch, and the man did it backwards; he asked Jaagup to collect sticks, and the man cut down leafy branches and even whole trees against orders, as the cottager Madis could confirm. As a result, Pearu claimed the man had done more damage than the wages he demanded could cover.

The court ordered the master and the farmhand to settle the quarrel between themselves. The chairman felt that a donkey should not kick up when it feels the goad, but also that a man should not tie up an ox's mouth when he feeds it. Pearu was prepared to pay the man his wages right there in front of the court, if the farmhand would just admit his guilt and say a word of apology, but the man stood in front of the masters' court like an angry bull, saying nothing and breathing hard. The court thought the two adversaries might want to discuss the matter privately and put the decision off until the next court session.

Pearu and Jaagup went to the tavern, where the master said again that he'd pay the man his wages as soon as he apologized. The farmhand wasn't ready to do that and he wouldn't drink Pearu's vodka.

"The master can pour my drink on his trees," he said, spitting as if he'd already taken a drink from the glass.

"Well, you're still full of fight!" shouted Pearu. "I'll stretch that neck of yours!"

"We'll see who does what to who," answered Jaagup.

"Are you threatening me?" asked Pearu.

"How can I threaten you?" Jaagup asked. "A farmhand can't threaten a master."

"Come on, have some vodka!" offered Pearu. "Let's put an end to it. Bartender! A basket of beer!"

Pearu kept offering drinks, but Jaagup acted as if he didn't hear. "Take just one sip from my glass," Pearu pestered him, "and I'll put your wages right on the counter."

It seemed he wanted to make up with his man at any cost.

"Listen, you young squirt," shouted the tavern keeper. "Take the drink when your master offers it!" The other customers echoed his

sentiment, but the farmhand stuck to his guns and wouldn't touch the glass.

"Up your ass then!" Pearu finally yelled at Jaagup. "From now on, you're not my farmhand! You took your things up to Hill Farm, so you can go there, too. What's not good enough for me is good enough for him. How much money do you have coming? I'll pay you off, like paying for a gypsy's horse, and then you can go to hell!"

Jaagup named a sum and Pearu put it on the counter, asking the tavern keeper to witness it.

"Now get out of my sight!" yelled Pearu.

"You're not at Vargamäe now, where you can shout as you like," said the young man, putting the money in his pocket.

"Will you have a drink now?" Pearu asked Jaagup.

"Pay me my whole year's wages first," said the farmhand. "I'll lose my temper if you don't."

"Take a drink first," Pearu insisted.

"No, my year's wages first. You can keep the clothing," said the man.

The tavern keeper stepped between them to make peace, saying, "Do it both at once. The master hands over the money, the farmhand takes a drink."

"I'm fine with that," said Jaagup.

Pearu thought for a moment. "It's alright with me," he finally said. "This farmhand is no man anyway."

So Pearu made up with his man, Jaagup, and many glasses and bottles were emptied to celebrate the reconciliation. It was late at night when the master and his man headed home from the tavern.

But after Pearu slept off the liquor and thought about what he'd done, he regretted his actions. Why did he pay the man and take

him back, though Jaagup had gone to Andres for advice and even taken his things over to Andres's house?

The persecution started anew. Pearu racked his brain to come up with a way to trap Jaagup and play a trick on him. Finally, he thought of the right scheme. He went to the tavern and came home to kick up a mighty ruckus. Soon the whole farm was filled with shouts and cries, and people running to and fro. The mistress asked Jaagup to quiet down the master and tie him up if necessary. Pearu started to scream for help, as if he were being attacked, and when the farmhand let go of him, he rushed out the door, hatless and in shirtsleeves, and headed for the Hill Farm.

It was around eleven at night when Pearu rushed into his neighbor's house, making a terrible commotion, and fell into a chair, panting. The people at Hill Farm were still awake and shocked to see Pearu in such a state.

"What's happened, neighbor?" asked Andres.

"Jaagup wants to kill me," Pearu panted.

"What's gotten into him? Why does he want to do you in?" asked Andres, surprised.

"He's a man of evil, and he's meddling in my personal business," Pearu replied. He asked Andres to come back to his house, because he didn't dare go home alone. While he was talking to Andres, his wife showed up. She'd come after her old man, carrying his fur coat and his hat.

At first, Andres was ready to go see what was happening at the Valley Farm, but Krõõt was very much against it, so he stayed home. Finally, Pearu left with his wife.

"Don't you go sticking your nose into his affairs," said Krõõt when they were gone. "You've got enough of your own dealings with him."

Andres had a feeling that Pearu was cooking up some trick, and indeed he was. Soon they heard that Pearu had sued his farmhand again. They went to court a few times and Jaagup was sentenced to fifteen strokes with the switch. After that, he left Vargamäe.

So Pearu got what he wanted, but his pleasure was short-lived. Late one evening, on his way home from the tavern in a snowstorm, he was attacked and beaten nearly to death.

The muggers were never identified. Pearu didn't recognize them. He only said it was Jaagup's doing for sure, his payback. Pearu hazily remembered the muggers saying, viciously, "This is for stick-gathering in the rain! This is for potato-picking! This is for ditch-digging, and this is for the missed meals!"

Pearu didn't know whether he'd really heard his attackers say those things or if he'd just been delirious.

During the beating, Pearu lost consciousness several times, but his attackers shoved snow into his collar and down his pants. When he came to, they started thrashing him again, ignoring his cries for mercy like snowflakes in the wind.

"Now you're begging, scum," said the muggers. "You animal!"

"Go ahead and beat me, but let me live! I have a wife and children!"

"Don't worry. We won't kill you, we'll just beat you within an inch of your life," said the unforgiving muggers.

They might well have beaten him to death if Andres of the Hill Farm hadn't come along. Pearu's worst enemy picked him up and took him home, so the cold wouldn't snuff out his last breath.

They had to summon a doctor to Vargamäe from twenty or thirty miles away. "You won't go so easily, old man," said the doctor. "Somebody else would've been long dead from such a beating."

"Am I going to live?" asked Pearu.

"If you made it this far, you'll live," said the doctor.

That was all Pearu wanted to know. He wasn't going to die; his soul was spared.

There was an investigation, but the muggers weren't caught. It seemed likely that Jaagup had arranged the attack, but he hadn't been there himself. He could prove that he was six miles away on the night of the mugging. By morning, the snowstorm had wiped out any trace of the attackers. At the scene of the crime there was a deep snowdrift, but traces of blood under the snow testified to what had happened there.

All through that winter, the following spring, and half of the next summer, Pearu's condition wavered before he was finally able to stand on his feet again. He seldom emerged from his chamber, just lay there like an injured animal licking its wounds. So, at the Valley Farm, there was peace on earth and God rejoiced for his children. The Hill Farm, too, could breathe easier, with no reason to fear Pearu's pranks. Andres almost regretted his own intervention. He could've ridded himself of Pearu's vexations for good if, instead of picking him up from the side of the road, he'd left Pearu lying there on the night of the mugging.

Andres recognized that such thoughts were evil and should never be indulged. He'd always pick up his neighbor from the roadside. These devilish thoughts didn't start in his own head; they came from Aaseme Aadu and Hundipalu Tiit. For when they heard what had happened, they told Andres, "You should've left him there! Why do you care about him? Do you think he'll repay you? You wait and see."

"It doesn't matter whether he repays me or not," Andres answered. "You can't leave a man to die, so long as his soul is still in his body."

By autumn, Pearu had recovered and was again seen in the first-class salon at the tavern. One night before Christmas, he came

home to raise a ruckus, as if making up for everything he hadn't been able to do for the past year. It ended with the Valley Farm mistress running to hide at the Hill Farm, because her husband wanted to kill her. She needed to discuss some matters that had gotten confused when Pearu was sick.

A while later, Pearu came to fetch his wife. He didn't come into the house, but stood in the road, calling to her. Andres went out and asked why his neighbor shouted and didn't come in.

"Where is that sheepface of mine?" asked Pearu.

"Why would I know?" Andres replied.

"She came in your gate."

"I didn't see her," Andres said firmly. "But your wife's here alright. Why don't you come in, too?"

Pearu accepted the invitation, but as soon as he entered the front room he shouted, "Well, where are you, sheepface?"

"Your wife's in the back bedroom, with my wife," said Andres.

"So, the bitch is messing around in the classy folks' crappy bedroom!" cried Pearu, lurching toward the back. As soon as he entered the bedroom, he shouted at his wife, "What are you doing here, bitch? Get on home! Get goin' now!"

He grabbed her by the hair, but Andres stepped between them, taking Pearu by the arm and speaking to him calmly, "Neighbor, let your woman be. She'll go home by herself. She's just talking things over with my wife."

"That sheepface has nothing to talk to your wife about. She better get back to our animals!" Pearu yelled, pulling and punching his wife.

"Neighbor," Andres pleaded, "be reasonable and leave her alone. The way you're shouting, you'll wake our children." He tried to pull Pearu away.

“Take your hands off me!” Pearu snapped. “I’m not messing with your wife.”

“What do you mean?” said Andres, still speaking quietly.

“She’s my old lady, and I’ll do with her what I want!” roared Pearu, reaching again for his wife’s hair, his eyes glinting.

“Please, don’t let him get me!” the woman implored.

“Shut your dirty mouth! Don’t ask him for help!” thundered Pearu.

No one knew what would happen next. Andres grabbed Pearu by the hands, saying, “Not in my house! Go fight somewhere else. This isn’t a tavern.”

“I want my wife,” answered Pearu. “Why are you hiding her?”

“I’m not hiding her. She came by herself,” Andres said.

“What right have you to stop me from taking my wife?” asked Pearu.

“This, here, is my house.”

“But this, here, is my old lady! I can do with her what I want.”

“Give it a try and see what happens.”

Pearu tried to grab his wife’s hair again, but Andres stepped between them. Pearu lost his temper and kicked his neighbor. Andres then picked him up like a bundle of sticks and threw him first into the front room, then down the hallway, and, finally, out of the house. A cold, bright moon was shining in the sky.

“Damn bum, kicking me in my own house!” Andres cursed, as he came back inside. “He could’ve hit me, but he kicked me? Dammit!”

“What’s going to happen to me now?” wept the mistress of Valley Farm. “Me and the children? He’s been lying in bed wailing for such a long time, I started to think he might never get up again, but...”

Some time later they heard shouting outside.

“That’s him,” the Valley Farm woman said, fearfully. “Nobody else yells like that.”

Andres went out to see why his neighbor was shouting.

Pearu stood in the middle of the road, outside the gate, in the moonlight. In his hand was a long, sharpened pig-slaughtering knife.

“Come on out here!” he shouted. “Let’s draw some blood, you coward. You’re hiding behind your wife’s skirt! Hanging on two women’s skirts with both hands! Come and face a man! Come out to the road and we’ll rip each other’s guts out!”

Krõõt, too, had come to the doorway to hear what their neighbor was shouting so loudly. She spoke to Andres, who stood in the yard. “Come on inside. Stay away from him. Get inside and let him shout. In this cold, he won’t be shouting for long. He’ll go away.”

“He’s got a knife in his hand and he’s ready to use it,” said Andres. “It’s a sharp pig-sticker.”

This frightened Krõõt even more.

“Don’t let that windbag frighten you,” said Andres. “Watch me grab a pole and show him how we sharpen knives around here.”

“Please, dear, leave him alone,” Krõõt begged. “Come inside, quick!”

“I won’t really go after him,” said Andres. “I said I might grab a pole, but I wasn’t really going to do it.”

He stepped forward a little, so Pearu could see him.

“You’re nothing but a girl!” Pearu roared at the sight of him. “Try yourself against a real man. Let’s see who’s got the longer knife! But bring a bucket to catch the blood and an oar to stir it!”

“Husband, don’t just stand there. What if he lunges at you with that knife?” said Krõõt, hearing Pearu’s threats.

“If only Matu was here with his stones,” said Andres, moving toward the house. “Matu would drive him away.”

They heard a clackety-clack at the gate. Pearu was dragging his knife along the pickets, shouting, “Hey, yokel! Listen, you son of a bitch, I’m here to cut off heads! Rinse out the blood bucket, if you’ve got any blood in your veins and not just piss in your pants. I’m out for blood!”

“Let’s go inside,” said Andres. Krõõt agreed at once.

Inside, Andres began to saw a thick piece of wood, making enough noise to cover Pearu’s shouts. After half an hour, he went outside. All was quiet and a full moon was shining high over Vargamäe.



Chapter 17

Since their last quarrel, the relationship between the two men had once again become very tense, but there were few opportunities for that tension to reveal itself because deep snow covered Vargamäe. Only in springtime would the activities of real life begin again.

There was one place where the two neighbors did have to face each other during the winter: on the road they both used to haul hay, sticks, firewood, and other materials. A long stretch of that road crossed the Valley Farm land. One day, carting home a load of hay, Andres discovered a fence at the spot where the common road turned onto his property. He thought about it for a moment and then, taking an axe from his rope belt, he chopped down the fence and threw it to the side.

From that day on, the Hill Farm men no longer used the same road as the Valley Farm men. Instead, they built a road across their own land. It took a great deal of unnecessary work, but Andres said, "Otherwise, I'd be tearing down my neighbor's fence every night, and where will that get us?"

So they ended the quarrel by making another sled road. All winter, the two neighbors lived in peace and quiet, as if they had only friendly feelings between them.

That spring, Hill Farm began to resemble the Vargamäe of Andres's dreams, with ten apple trees, as well as cherries and plums, all white with flowers. There were berry bushes, bird cherries, and rowans. Insects buzzed around the trees and birds they'd never seen before came in from the fields.

Among his young trees, Andres was filled with joy and wanted to share his happiness, but he felt alone, because Krööt was overcome with trouble and worry. She was carrying her fourth child and the three others trailed behind her. The sadness in her eyes had spread through her whole being. She seemed not to look forward to this fourth child, and so Andres took no notice of its impending arrival.

The cottager's wife came by often to help on the farm, because Krööt's health was poor this time. Mari was expecting her second child, but for her, childbirth was like water slipping off a duck's back—no toil or worry, as far as anyone could see. She bore her burden happily, as if it didn't weigh her down but instead gave her pleasure.

Once, the mistress said to her, "Mari, if something should happen to me, would you still come and look in on my children once in a while?"

"Good heavens, what could happen to our mistress?" said Mari. "It's always been just fine, and it'll be fine this time as well. I'm expecting too and something could just as well happen to me."

"Not to you, Mari," said the mistress. "I haven't been afraid before, but I am this time. I have a strange feeling."

"Don't be frightened, mistress," Mari pleaded. "Fear isn't good for you. It's best to get lots of rest and build up your strength. I'll do the work."

So Mari busied herself down at the cottage and also up at the farm. Her boy, Juku, happily spent the days with his mother and Krööt's children, and soon everyone got used to the new routine.

Then, something unexpected happened. Though the mistress was supposed to give birth first, Mari delivered a girl while the mistress still waited. To Krõõt, this seemed like a bad omen and frightened her even more.

“I’m getting too big, bigger than a horse,” she complained to Mari.

Even as she calmed and encouraged the mistress, Mari, too, began to worry.

One day, the mistress said to Mari, “I’ve been thinking...” She had tears in her eyes. “If I were no longer around, how good it would be if you became the mother of my children. It would give me peace to know they were in your hands.”

“Good God!” exclaimed Mari. “Mistress, what are you saying? I’ve got my Juss to look after.”

“Oh, I don’t mean anything. I’m just talking,” the mistress said, but the idea took root in her mind.

Finally, Krõõt’s time came. The two cottagers’ wives were there, but they could do little to help the mistress through a long and difficult labor. When the torturous pain passed and she finally heard the baby’s voice, her large pale mouth broke into a smile. It was the voice of a boy—an heir, the future master of Vargamäe. Her smile remained and she did not ask whether it was a daughter or a son. On hearing the cries, Andres, who’d been waiting in the front room, quickly came to the back bedroom.

“Finally, it’s a boy. Isn’t it?” he asked.

The cottager’s wives cried out together, “A new master!”

“What a master!” continued the older cottager’s wife. “A boy like a tree, big and strong!”

The new mother didn’t say a word, as if all this had nothing to do with her, and, when Andres came to ask Krõõt how she was feeling, she answered simply, “I don’t believe I will ever get out of this bed.”

“Don’t talk madness,” said Andres.

“It’s not madness,” said Krōōt.

When he looked at her and saw the blissful smile that wreathed her face, he thought there might be some truth in her words. Krōōt had worn a sad expression all these years, and it was strange to see a spark of laughter in her eyes. Could this be a sign that death was coming?

Andres sat silently at the foot of the bed, his back hunched away from his wife. He thought, perhaps for the first time in his life, about the destiny of his wife and children. The thoughts surprised him.

It had never occurred to him that his Krōōt might die or that her strength—to bear children, to work hard all day and half the night—might run out. Why had he never seen this possibility behind her sad eyes and moans? Why had he never made allowances for her slender build and thinner bones? He could do it for any old horse he bought for hauling. He took the measure of every mare and heifer, but not his wife. With her, he did as any master did, thinking, “She’s a person, not a farm animal.”

“Should we see a doctor, or maybe bring him here?” asked Andres.

“It won’t help, not any more. I can feel it,” she answered. “That boy used up all my soul.”

For the first time in his marriage, his wife’s words cut him deeply. The boy had used up her soul. Andres had wanted a boy so badly and looked at his wife so reproachfully after each daughter was born. Now, if old man God himself had come into the back bedroom of the farmhouse and asked, “Would you agree to change this boy into a girl so that Krōōt might live?” Andres would’ve agreed without a murmur.

Moreover, he would’ve told old man God, “You can change this boy, and any other boys you might’ve given me, into girls, if only

you'll let Krõõt live. From this day on, I'll lighten her burden if, through your will, she gives birth to girls, girls that I, myself, conceived. I won't nail a high plank to the doorjambs to keep the pigs outside. I'd rather share my house with pigs, so Krõõt won't have to raise pails over the plank. I won't let her raise heavy barrels or pull up water from the deep well, which makes even me strain at the hips. I'll build a light walking gate at the end of the yard, so Krõõt doesn't have to lift the big heavy gate off its post."

After speaking thusly to old man God, Andres got up and went outside. He wanted to sow the last oats in the field, because he might not have time for it later, but when he'd filled up his sowing tray and fixed it on his carrying belt, his eyes and ears seemed suddenly to open wide. He saw the bright sunlight and felt the warm spring air. He heard the lark singing and the soft, merry chirp of a white wagtail in its burrow. He contrasted all this with the image of Krõõt lying in bed at home, and he recalled the words he'd exchanged with old man God while sitting at her bedside.

He couldn't go back to sowing. He needed to do something different, so he took the tray from his belt, put it on a nearby stone, and sat down with his back to the sun, as if he had something serious to think over. But before any thought came to his mind, his mouth started twitching and his eyes filled with bitter tears.

Andres talked to his God again, repeating his vows and adding new ones. He did not end his pleading for a long time.

To see the master in such a state surprised Juss, who'd come to help with the sowing. Andres had come out to sow, filled his tray, and attached it to his belt, but now he just sat there in the sun, as if warming his back and listening to the larks. Nobody had ever seen him do anything like that before.

When Andres finished his promises to old man God and confirmed them with the bitter tears in his eyes, he felt he'd done all that any mortal could do and he must leave it at that. Now he could only wait and take up the cross he'd be given to carry.

With new strength and an eased heart, he began to sow, but he'd spent so much time sitting in the sun that he didn't finish by the time they called him home. Krõõt was waiting to talk to him. Old man God had paid no heed to Andres's vows, as if they were just empty words, and he'd sent his envoy to Vargamäe.

"Well, old man," said his wife, "I think my time has come."

"If it must be, let His will be done," said Andres in a resigned voice.

"But what about the children?" asked Krõõt.

"Well, I'll raise them," Andres said.

"You'll have to take a new wife," said Krõõt, "but find one who is not wicked...to be their mother."

This was all Krõõt said to Andres. She called out to Mari the cottager, but when Mari came to the bed, the mistress had nothing to say and simply gazed at her. Mari could see Krõõt's eyes were sad again. The brief spark of joy had faded.

Krõõt raised her right hand, reaching out to Mari. The young woman took her mistress's hand and continued looking into her eyes, waiting for her words. The mistress's lips started to move, but no sound came out. From the movement of her lips, Mari could tell that Krõõt was repeating her name, over and over.

Krõõt and Mari held each other's gaze until the light in Krõõt's eyes dimmed and went out. Even then, the cottager's wife kept hold of her mistress's hand, trying to imagine what it was she'd wanted to say when her tongue no longer moved. Mari had an idea of what it was.

Andres closed Krõõt's eyes and her mouth, which tried to fall open again, as if there were still words left unsaid, or a blissful smile unbroken.

The sound of weeping filled the large, bright rooms of Vargamäe. Mari wept; the old cottager's wife wept; and, seeing all this grief, the children, big and small, started crying, too. First, the farmhouse children, and then the cottage children began to wail. They were all at the house since there was no one to look after them down at the cottage.

Only Andres did not weep. He stood in front of Krõõt's body, staring down at her but hardly seeing anything, for his eyes were focused far in the distance.

A little later, the mistress of the Valley Farm came to look in on her neighbors.

"My old man told me to come ask after the mistress. The master was called in from the fields in such a rush," the Valley Farm wife said. "He wanted to come himself, but I wouldn't let him, because he'd just start to quarrel again."

"The mistress is no longer with us," said Andres to the neighbor's wife.

For a long time, the woman said nothing, but stared ahead as if she didn't understand. Then her eyes grew wet.

"I haven't seen her for several days now."

"A boy was born," said Andres.

"Alive?" the neighbor's wife asked.

"Yes, he's alive. But Krõõt..." He couldn't get out the words. Something painful closed his throat.

"Lord help us!" cried the neighbor's wife. "What will you do? Four little ones..."

Now her throat, too, was pained and she couldn't speak.

"Yes, four little ones," Andres said.

The two neighbors stood in the middle of the room, their faces turned away from one another.

“Mistress,” Andres asked, “do you have a little time to stay and help the cottage women? The body needs to be washed and the children... I have to sow the last of the oats, or soon there will be nothing for the men to plow.”

“That’s what my old man said,” replied the Valley Farm mistress. “He said to me, ‘Go and have a look, the neighbors might be needing some help. Hard days may be at hand for their mistress.’”

So the Valley Farm mistress stayed to help the cottagers. Andres hurried to the field. He worked and worked, without halting, tears flowing as if the spring wind blew bitter dust into his eyes. His heart didn’t ache. It was just empty and heavy. Down by the stone, he’d said everything he could say and promised everything he could promise. Since it hadn’t helped, he could only go on working until the day his own hands were crossed on his chest.

“Just as Krõõt’s are now,” he said to himself.

When Andres came in from the field, Krõõt was already in the barn, covered with a sheet.

“Perhaps you want to go in and see her,” Mari the cottager said to Andres, “but don’t forget to plug up the cat hole with a brush.”

Of course Andres wanted to go to the barn, but since Mari suggested it, he didn’t go right away. Instead, he climbed up to the barn loft and brought down some planks, thinking of making the coffin himself, but in the end he told the maid to change into cleaner clothes and go fetch Ants the coffin maker.

By evening, Ants arrived at Vargamäe. Andres showed him the planks and said, “I thought I could do it myself, but of course you’re better at it, so I sent for you.”

“Well, this is something I can do,” said Ants the coffin maker. He was a tubby, old fellow with a stooped back and a pug nose that was too red for his face. “I’ve done them before and no one has ever complained, so your wife won’t either. These are sound spruce planks, good and dry, and they’ll last for years. I’ll make it strong and tight, so even if it gets drenched, not a drop will seep through.”

“That’s good. Those graves are like wells in the springtime,” Andres said.

“That’s it—the water,” agreed Ants.

At sunrise the next morning, they began sawing and planing the planks. Krõõt would be leaving Vargamäe and they were making her final home.

Ants the coffin maker had brought along some bits and pieces of metal, silvery fringes and winged, chubby-cheeked angel faces. The children were awestruck. These were like nothing they’d seen before. The cottagers’ wives, too, looked at them in wonder.

The winged angel faces reminded them of decorations they’d seen on the church pulpit, and seemed very holy. When the children recited the Lord’s Prayer, standing by Krõõt in her coffin, they weren’t sure whether they were reading it for the blessed Krõõt or for the chubby-cheeked angel faces.

There were three days to go until Sunday, and for Andres they passed like a dark dream. He didn’t know whether he was awake or asleep. Things seemed to happen by themselves, for Mari the cottager did everything, as if she’d only left the day before and returned to carry on. She fed the newborn boy at one breast and her own daughter at the other, and both had enough milk, for the time being.

“Mari, would you be able to look after them for a while?” asked Andres when he came back from the shop with the things for the funeral. “You’re practically a member of the family.”

So, it began. Mari was everywhere. She saw and heard everything, with a baby at each breast. The others, seeing that the master trusted her, followed her requests as if she were now the mistress. They might've done so anyway, as she was the only one Krõõt had called to her bedside. All Andres had done was close his dead wife's eyes and mouth as Mari watched.

On the day of the funeral, the whole neighborhood was invited to Vargamäe to see Krõõt off. A strange, saintly silence reigned over the rooms of the house. Everyone walked and talked very quietly, as if they might disturb Krõõt's peace. Never in her life had she been given such attention. The women went out to the barn where she rested with white wood peelings under her head.

"How short were her days," said the mistress of Hundipalu, wiping her eyes.

"The burden must've been too much," the Ämmasoo mistress said.

"She didn't have the bones or the strength," said the Valley Farm mistress.

"Too tall and too thin for this place," remarked the old Aaseme woman with wisdom, "and so young! Not yet thirty, and four little ones already."

At the mention of the children, all the women wiped their eyes.

"Well, all the toil is over now, but the children..." said the Hundipalu woman.

"Yes, she's at rest now," the other women agreed.

When it was time to eat, the coffin was carried into the house, as if to give the mistress her last meal with the people she'd known, before taking leave of the Vargamäe buildings. Even as Mari ran about, taking care of everything, Krõõt had a few final moments as the mistress of Vargamäe.

Andres read from the Bible and sang for Krõõt. Although his voice caught in his throat, he did everything as it was supposed to be done. Everywhere at Vargamäe, there was weeping. Words froze inside mouths and only tears flowed. Even the men wiped their eyes—Pearu, too. He found it hard to bear this sadness and went outside before the others, as if it were somehow better to wipe his tears in the sunlight.

As they walked out of the farmyard, the neighbors noticed that the deep ruts in the road had been filled and the larger stones had been removed.

“You even managed to fix up the road,” commented Hundipalu Tiit to Andres.

“It wasn’t me,” Andres replied.

“Must’ve been Pearu, then.”

“Must’ve been. Who else?”

A lot of work had been done on the causeway before the funeral, so they crossed at an easy trot. Rava Kustas, always the joker, said to his wife, “There should be more funerals at Vargamäe. Then we’d have a really smooth road.”

“It’s nothing to joke about,” the woman said reproachfully, adding, “Vargamäe men smooth the road for their dead. Other men don’t even do that.”

The improved road irritated Andres. Yes, it was better to ride on, but it still made him angry. He’d never thought of doing it himself, but Pearu and his men had gone at it all day Saturday and half the night.

Andres remembered his conversation with Krõõt as they crossed the causeway for the first time, on their way to Vargamäe, but she never saw an improved road, not while she was alive. Only now, riding in her coffin, could she feel the smoothed causeway. Well,

maybe that counted for something. But what about Andres? In his lifetime, would he see a better causeway? Or would he feel it only as he rode in his coffin? Had he not promised Krōöt that they'd ride in a coach with two horses?

That evening, as they made their way back to Vargamäe, the men were in good spirits. Even Andres was a bit drunk, for, in his grief, he'd tossed down more from the bottle than usual. The funeral party entered the yard noisily, surprising Mari. The loudest voice was Pearu's. Again and again, his drunken talk turned to the late Krōöt. He sat at the table where food and drinks were being served, and every once in a while he shouted to Andres, "Hey, neighbor! You had a treasure of a wife. They don't make 'em like that anymore. We'll never see the likes of her around here again. Hallelujah. Here's to your late wife! And Lord have mercy on us all."

Talking like that, he finished off glass after glass, and the more he drank, the more often he'd bellow her name. Finally, he went and sat down next to Andres.

"My dear neighbor," he started, "you had a treasure of a wife; that's what I came to tell you. Now your days are filled with sadness, because your wife is no more and there's no other like her. I, too, grieve, and I'm helping you grieve, dear neighbor. All day yesterday and through the night, my men and I prepared the road for her. During the night, the men began to grumble. They didn't want to work on the road for your wife, so I continued on my own. I was fixing the road, yes, and I was thinking—this is what my neighbor's life comes to. Once he had a wife, a worthy wife, and now he has none. And I remembered how I once knocked down the fence around the rye field, and your pigs got in. I wanted to see what you'd do, but it wasn't you who came, it was your wife—Lord be with her, we just bore her away—and she spoke so softly, 'Dear neighbor, why

have you knocked down the fence? Now our pigs will go into your rye field.' What a worthy wife. She knew how to manage things. The pigs went into my own rye field. I told my dear neighbor's wife that I needed the fence somewhere else—that's why I knocked it down and let the pigs in—and she—Lord be with her—she knew what to do and said, 'Listen neighbor, that's a fib. You're not being truthful.'

"That's what she said, 'You're fibbing,' but really I was just plain lying. I smashed the fence out of spite. Your wife said one more thing, 'If you wanted to knock down the fence, why didn't you let us know, so we could've kept the animals away?'" Dear neighbor, I felt so ashamed in front of your wife, standing beside the smashed fence, because she'd come with a baby in her arms to drive the pigs back! I wanted to go into the field after the pigs myself, but your wife began calling them with her gentle voice, 'Here, piggy, piggy...'" Pearu tried hard to imitate the late Krõõt's voice as best he could. "And the pigs raised their ears, listened, and started to trot toward her ringing voice. There's no longer a hole in the fence where your wife was standing. You repaired it and so may it always be. I won't touch it. Let it stand there, as a memorial to your wife calling the pigs from my rye field. When all the pigs came out of the rye and ran after her, I wanted to run, too, even if I ended up in the pigsty with them. Now, dear neighbor, here we are, us two, observing your wife's funeral. At night, while I worked on the causeway, I started wondering what would become of us. When your wife was alive, she always got the two of us to make up, because she was better than either of us. She was better than my sheepfaced old lady. My wife was not equal to her. Even when I beat her, she was not as good as your wife without a beating. And now your wife's dead. I was working on the causeway in the marsh and, as the sun was rising, I thought, 'Well, here we are—two poor, old men at Vargamäe.' If

we quarrel, and quarrel we will, there's no one to make peace now, no one to speak with good words and see with good eyes. Your wife had good eyes. There on the causeway, I got scared for us both, here at Vargamäe like two flies on a pile of shit. All our schemes mean nothing. As long as your wife was alive, our lives were good. We fought a lot, but that didn't mean our lives were bad. We were just two tough fellows—one who wouldn't listen and one who wouldn't give in! But now your worthy wife is dead and we are celebrating her funeral and remembering our sins, and there's no one now to listen to us, or look after us..."

Pearu's thoughts kept circling around and around the death of Andres's "worthy wife." His eyes were swimming with tears that dripped down his beard, onto his jacket, the table, and into his vodka glass. Toward the end of the night, he was so moved that he threw his arms around his "dear neighbor." What had so softened Pearu's heart—Krööt's death, the paving of the road, the quarrels with his neighbor, or just the drink in his head—he didn't know, and neither did anyone else.

Rava Kustas, hoping to sober him up a little, asked, "What sort of causeway are you going to build for your wife?"

"What? Now, what's that Rava man ranting about?" asked Pearu.

"I asked, what sort of causeway are you going to build for your wife?" Kustas repeated.

"Well, let me tell you. My wife will be around to bury me, and you, too. She won't need any causeway we might make," said Pearu. "And how is your wife?"

The guests laughed, because Kustas, despite his big mouth, was very much under his wife's thumb.

"Better leave Pearu alone. He punches right back," said Aaseme Aadu.

“Aha, I hear Aaseme Aadu,” exclaimed Pearu and turned back to his neighbor, as though they were the only ones in the room.

Andres was tired of Pearu’s drunken rambling, and said seriously, “Neighbor, haven’t you talked enough nonsense? Can’t you leave my wife alone in her grave?”

“Nonsense? What nonsense?” asked Pearu, offended. When Andres gave no answer, Pearu picked up his glass of vodka and sat down in a corner. Everyone could see that tears dripped from his beard onto his jacket, down to the floor, and into his glass.



Chapter 18

After Krõõt's death, the days were difficult for Andres. He scarcely imagined that anyone could live through such times. He was consoled only by the thought that things could be even worse. At least he had Mari the cottager, who had taken on the role of house mistress and mother to the orphaned baby. Without her, what would he have done?

Now, as he watched her feed little Andres at her breast, the baby sucking greedily, a strange idea crossed his mind. If Mari stayed at the farmhouse and became mistress there, she could raise little Andres and Krõõt's other children along with her own. Krõõt would've liked that. Andres remembered the way Krõõt had reached for Mari's hand. But Mari had her own husband and lived with him in one room of the cottage. If Andres could have foreseen the future, he never would've allowed Juss to move into the cottage and Mari would still be unmarried. She might have become mistress of the Hill Farm on Vargamäe. Now Andres didn't know what to do.

He should've been looking for a new wife already, for the Lord only knew how long Mari could stay on, but he watched the days pass without searching for a new mistress. Week after week, Mari remained at the farm, caring for the master's children as well as her

own. Juss ate so often at the family table that he no longer seemed like a cottager.

As autumn came and the nights grew longer and darker, Juss began to yearn for Mari. Once, at the farmhouse, he said to her, "It seems you don't want to come back to the cottage. You're becoming the mistress of Andres's household."

"The master and I haven't spoken of it. I don't know anything about a new mistress," said Mari.

"You have to talk to him," said Juss.

"How can I do that?" asked Mari, deeply shaken. "I was there as Krõõt lay dying. How can I speak of a new mistress?"

"Then what will we do?" asked Juss. "How long will I live alone in that cottage like an old wolf? The old lady is teasing me, saying, 'Juss is gonna lose Mari. She'll be the new mistress and Juss's brood will inherit the farm.'"

"Juss, stop that!" said Mari.

"It's not me. It's the others," said Juss. "They go on and on about it."

"Well, don't listen to other people's blather," Mari answered sharply. "Wait till there's a sleigh road. Then the master will bring home a new mistress and we'll go back to the cottage. Anyway, I couldn't come now. Think of little Andres. I have to feed him till he's off the breast. That's what I promised the mistress on her deathbed. She was holding my hand so tightly, even as she died."

Juss was silent for a moment and then asked, "Tell me, Mari, have you ever been sorry you married me?"

"No, Juss," Mari replied, without a thought. "Why would you ask me that? We have two children."

"Nothing I can point to," said Juss. "It's just that, when I'm alone in bed, these thoughts come into my head. I don't want to think this way, but I can't help it."

“Why do you torture yourself?” Mari reproached him. “It’s not so easy for me either—two babies at my breasts, a whole gang of children to watch after, and, on top of that, all the tasks of running a big household.”

“All the children and housework really suit you,” said Juss, “and if you hadn’t married me, you could’ve gotten it all.”

“Juss, you’re losing your mind alone in that cottage,” Mari replied, “or that old lady’s talk is driving you mad.”

The weather turned colder and there was snow, but Mari was still busy at Andres’s house. She didn’t even have time to go down and milk her cow at the cottage, so the old lady had to do it. Then one day Juss took the pail and sat down next to the cow. It was just a joke at first, but he didn’t have much else to do and it saved him from the old lady’s speeches. He would’ve scrubbed the tubs down at the sand pit, too, but she did such a good job that he decided to let her go on with it.

Juss watched for signs that Andres was planning to marry again. He waited to see Andres walk and talk like a bachelor, but the master of Hill Farm just kept at his work from morning to night, as if trying to block out any thoughts that might come into his head.

The neighbors often brought up the subject of a new mistress, both obliquely and directly, asking how he’d run a farm without a proper partner at home to keep the house in order? Andres usually pretended not to understand. If they went on about it, he simply said, “I suppose that’s true, but so far Mari has been getting it all done.”

“She can’t do that forever,” they would answer, “not with her own husband and two children to look after. You need someone of your own.”

“You’re right,” agreed Andres. “Your own is your own, but a new mistress of my own might not be able to feed the boy.” That’s how those discussions usually ended.

Christmas was coming. Before it arrived, Andres took a trip back to his old home. Everyone thought the time had come; he was looking for a new mistress. Mari, too, had this thought and she felt as if someone came toward her in broad daylight and stuck a knife into her heart. The feeling passed and she was calmed by the notion that she’d now go back to the cottage and to her Juss. When she looked at little Andres, smiling contentedly at her breast, her eyes filled with tears. Her heart overflowed with tenderness.

After a few days, Andres returned to Vargamäe, saying nothing and doing nothing that invited any presumptions. He went back to work as vigorously as before, sparing neither himself nor the others.

On the first day of Christmas, Juss went to church. He begged Mari to come with him, but she wouldn’t, for there was nowhere she could leave the two little babies. So Juss went alone, on foot, though the master had offered his horse.

On the morning of the second day of Christmas, Andres readied himself to go to church, but there was no one to bring in his clothes from the barn and warm them in the house, no one to find him a clean pair of socks or help with his necktie and scarf. There was no one but Mari to do it, as if she really was the mistress of Vargamäe. As she helped him, Andres said, “You know, you could come as well. You’ve been chained here day and night; you could get away for a little while to catch your breath and relax.”

“What? Me?” Mari protested. “What about the children?”

Mari’s heart began to pound strongly, perhaps out of fear, or perhaps out of joy.

“We could ask the old cottager to come up. I’m sure she can cope for a few hours,” suggested Andres.

Mari didn’t say anything. The thought of dressing for church and sitting next to Andres in the sleigh painted with beautiful large roses, which she’d so often admired, left Mari completely speechless.

“Would you like to come?” Andres asked. “It’s pleasant and mild today.”

“If the master wishes...” stammered Mari.

With that, it was decided. The master sent for the old cottager to come mind the children and bring along Mari’s church clothes so the young woman could accompany him.

Upon hearing this, Juss collapsed on the closest stool, strength draining from his body. When the old lady left for the farmhouse with Mari’s clothes, he quickly pulled on his sheepskin jacket and ran through the soft snow, over the high field to the other side of the marsh, and hid among the dense spruce trees. There, he waited until the farm horse came into sight, then the high harness bow and the sleigh carrying two people—Andres and Mari. From between the spruces, Juss stared at the two. They had no idea he was there, but the mare turned her head toward the thicket, sensing his presence.

Andres noticed the horse’s movement and spoke loudly enough for Juss to hear. “I don’t know what the horse sees over there—maybe a fox.”

Juss was so taken aback, he could hardly stop himself from shouting back. He wanted the churchgoers to know it was not a fox in the woods, but Juss of Vargamäe, watching his Mari ride to church with the master on the second day of Christmas, as though

they were already husband and wife. Yesterday, Juss had gone alone, but today, Mari was going with the master.

That's how it was at Vargamäe.

After they passed, Juss came out from the spruces and watched the sleigh carrying Mari and the master until the painted roses disappeared behind the bushes. Perhaps he'd come only for the sake of those flowers.

Juss started slowly back toward home, crossing the high field and wading through deep snow so he wouldn't have to go through the farmyard. His legs had never seemed so crooked nor his neck so short as on this Christmas day. He arrived at the cottage with snow to his knees and when Madis asked where he'd been, he said he was looking for rabbit tracks.

"If only we had a gun," said Madis.

"Yeah, if only we had a gun," agreed Juss.

Mari had requested that Juss come to the farmhouse and visit the children while she was away, but he didn't go. It wasn't that he didn't want to go—he simply forgot. His mind was plagued with other thoughts. Even when he lay down for his midday nap, he couldn't stop thinking.

Andres and Mari got home quite early, as if they'd only taken an ordinary trip to church. On one thing, Mari commented proudly: the young mare had ran so fast on the open marsh of the manor. He sped past the other churchgoers, giving Mari a chill of excitement.

"Riding with the master is not like riding with a cottager," said the old lady.

"That's so," agreed Mari.

Andres didn't hear the old lady's remarks and neither did Juss, at first, but when she got back, the old cottager went right after him. "The mare was dripping sweat when the churchgoers got back."

She expected Juss to respond. When he didn't, she continued, "They say it was like a race across the manor marsh. Andres passed the other churchgoers until Mari was cold with fright from the way the young mare dashed."

Juss still said nothing, so she went on, "She stayed there to feed the babies from her full breasts... They say that the master bought her some wine at the tavern, but he had it brought out to her. He didn't ask her to come in."

Juss remained silent, which surprised the woman.

"Why don't you say anything, Juss?" she asked.

"What's there to say?"

"Well, that's the way things are," she said with resignation. "How can a cottager match a master? But he's not ready to take a new wife. I don't know how he gets along, a strong young man like him with all his urges and needs."

Juss couldn't listen anymore. He got dressed and started out the door.

"Are you going to the farmhouse?" asked the old lady.

"I'm just going to have a look," grunted Juss.

"Of course," said the woman. "The children are there."

When Madis came back from the Valley Farm, his wife said, "Poor Juss. He sure has it hard right now."

"What's wrong?" Madis asked, as if he knew nothing about it, or perhaps to show it was none of his business.

"He doesn't have a wife anymore," the woman went on, sounding very sorry for Juss.

"Stop it! Who's taken away his wife?"

"Well, hasn't she been staying at the farmhouse since spring?" asked the woman. "If Juss wants to be with his wife, he has to go up

there secretly, as if they're still dating. But he's a married man. He's got children."

"Don't you stick your nose into other people's affairs, old woman," Madis told her. "What happens up at the farmhouse is their business. As far as the farm goes, the cottage is deaf and dumb. Is that clear?"

"But Juss isn't from the farm. He lives here," argued the woman.

"I tell you woman, don't mess with Andres. He's worse than Pearu if you get him angry. Let him do what he will, and you stay out of it. If he doesn't bother you, just stay away from him, the farther the better."

"I'm just talking to you, old man, and to Juss. He looks so miserable," she explained.

"Juss is a man and must look after himself," said Madis. "Let him bring his wife back if he wants to, or let him leave Vargamäe. He's not married to this place."

"You call Juss a man?" jeered the woman. "What man sits down at a cow's udder when his wife is away? Would Andres? Have you ever done it? You'd wake me from the dead if the cow needed milking."

"Well, maybe so. But what's it to us?" the old man asked.

"Oh, I'm just talking, since he's one of us."

"Keep your mouth shut, whether you have something to say or not. That's what's best for us," said Madis, summing up his opinion on the Andres and Mari affair.

Juss felt differently. He asked himself how could Mari go to church with the master on the second day of Christmas when she wouldn't go with him on the first? He wanted to ask Mari, but everyone in the farmhouse was at home for the holiday and a few guests were visiting as well. So Mari was busier than usual and Juss couldn't find a moment to talk with her. As if in passing, Mari said

to Juss, for all to hear, “You didn’t come see the children while I was away today.”

“I forgot,” said Juss honestly.

“Well, that’s how much you care about them.” Mari smiled with reproval, and he didn’t know what to say.

Juss sat with the family, looking for a moment to put his question to Mari, but the moment never came. He wanted to leave but he remained seated. Mari offered him food but he couldn’t swallow it—it was food from the farm. He lifted his mug but found he was unable to swallow the beer, too.

It was late in the evening when Mari asked Juss, “Did you want to talk to me?”

“Yes,” he replied.

He went outside and Mari followed. Here, Juss could talk to her. “Why did you go to church with the master today when you wouldn’t come with me yesterday? I could’ve taken the horse as well.”

“The master invited me,” said Mari.

“Yesterday I invited you, too,” said Juss.

“But the children...” Mari tried to dodge the question.

“Weren’t the children here today?” asked Juss, who’d played out the whole discussion in his head.

“The old cottager’s wife came up today,” countered Mari.

“She could’ve come yesterday, too.”

“But the master asked her today.”

“Yesterday, I would’ve asked her.”

“You’re not the master. You can’t just ask people to do things. And it wasn’t just our children, but the farmhouse children as well.”

Juss hadn’t thought of that. Mari had a point.

“But if you’d asked the master...” ventured Juss.

“I wouldn’t have dared, because the master’s son was here, and who knows...” answered Mari.

Juss and Mari stood at the end of the house, so close to each other that their clothes touched. Suddenly, Juss felt bewildered. He’d expected to pose a simple question to Mari and get a clear and honest answer, which would tell him where things stood. Now his one question had turned into many questions, and Mari wouldn’t give a definitive answer to any of them. Everything was still up in the air.

“You didn’t want me to go?” asked Mari when Juss fell silent.

“I’ve been thinking all day about why you didn’t come with me,” said Juss. He didn’t tell her how he’d dashed across the high field that morning and hid among the snow-covered spruces, staring at the painted roses on the back of the sleigh.

“I won’t go with the master again if you don’t want me to,” said Mari in apology.

The two cottagers stood at the end of the house under the starry sky and said nothing more. Juss headed down the hill toward the cottage and Mari ran inside, shivering from the cold. She’d gone out in just her light clothes to see her husband off.

“What did Juss want?” asked the master. “Did he have some business to settle with you?”

“No, there was no business,” said Mari. “He came to spend time with me, since it’s the holidays.”

The master looked at her dubiously. “I thought he might’ve come because we went to church together,” he said. “He had such an expression on his face, sitting there, and he couldn’t eat or drink anything.”

“What difference does it make?” said Mari. Then she added, “Well, he did mention it while we were outside...”

“I thought so, when you stayed outside so long,” said Andres. “I was already thinking about it when we were in the sleigh together this morning. I was thinking, if only we could ride together like this always.”

Mari acted as if she hadn’t heard his last words, so the master went on. “Mari, you’d make a good mistress for Vargamæ. You’re smart and you’re quick, and you’re so good with the children.”

“Why does the master talk so sinfully? And in the holy season!” answered Mari. “I have my own children and Juss.”

“It’s no sin to say that you’d be good here,” argued Andres. “It’s simply the truth. If things were different, we’d have a good, hard-working mistress and everything would work out fine. Poor, departed Krōöt wouldn’t have any objections. She loved you so much. The children love you, too, even the bigger ones. And the boy—he’s more your baby than Krōöt’s.”

Mari was crying. The master hadn’t said anything bad, but she couldn’t hold back her tears. She remembered her dear, departed mistress saying that she’d die with a peaceful heart if she knew Mari would raise the children. Now the master said the same thing, as if they’d agreed upon it. What could Mari do? She had Juss and two children—a girl and a boy. She couldn’t possibly leave Juss, just as she couldn’t be his wife and the mistress of Vargamæ, too. The master knew that. Yet he was suggesting, as did the late mistress, that Mari start a new life.

“The master shouldn’t talk about such things,” Mari said at last, wiping her eyes with a corner of her apron.

“But why shouldn’t I?” Andres asked. “If you didn’t have Juss, you could become the mistress of Vargamæ this very day. That shouldn’t make you cry.”

“The mistress talked about it, too, because of the children,” said Mari, beginning to weep again.

“So, you see, it’s not just me. Krõõt said it, too.” The master was encouraged. “You were born to be a mistress, Mari. You have the hands for it. Down at the cottage, there’s not enough to keep them busy.”

They were talking behind the closed door of the back bedroom. They had talked here before and no one had given it a thought. They discussed things, and that was all. Today it was different. When Mari came out of the bedroom, everyone—the farmhand, the maid, the older children—could see that their talk had not been ordinary. Mari had been crying. She was silent and her face had a somber cast, as if a sudden worry had overtaken her.

The holidays passed at the Hill Farm and nothing unusual happened. New Year’s and Epiphany came and went, and ordinary working days followed. Mari continued to fill the role of mistress, feeding Andres’s son beside her own daughter as if they were twins. The master no longer talked to Mari unless it was absolutely necessary.

No one heard anything more about a new mistress. The old women continued to gossip but it never reached Andres’s ears. And perhaps everything at Vargamäe would’ve gone on uneventfully right up until spring, but it happened that Andres and his farmhand took the horses out one day to help with the community hauling. Pearu and his farmhand were there also and they all met at the bar in the tavern that evening. They drank and cracked jokes until Pearu was quite drunk. Then the two neighbors started in on each other and Pearu blurted, “Hey, neighbor, you sure got a lot to say, but why did you steal away Juss’s wife? Now the poor fellow just looks on hungrily when you and her...”

No one found out what Pearu was about to say because, before he could end the sentence, Andres landed his fist on Pearu's chin and sent him sprawling backward to the tavern floor. Pearu rose to his feet and faced down his neighbor.

"Now why did you hit me? Everybody is talking about you and cottage Mari..."

Once again, Pearu found himself on the floor.

"If you don't knock off this talk about Mari, I'll crush you like an ant!" roared Andres.

"You can't crush everybody who's talking," Pearu shouted from the floor.

"I'm hearing it for the first time, from you," said Andres.

Pearu got back on his feet and began looking for witnesses to the attack.

"I'm suing you!" he shouted. "The court'll straighten you out!"

Andres tossed down the last drops of vodka in his glass, paid his bill, and walked out of the tavern with his farmhand. Pearu stayed on, lining up witnesses.

By the next day, everyone knew that the Vargamäe men had fought in the tavern, and that Andres had promised to crush Pearu like an ant if he mentioned Mari again. The old cottager's wife made sure that Juss heard about it, too. His first impulse was to go talk to Andres but, after a little thought, he dropped the idea. What happened to Pearu might also happen to him if he brought up the subject. And what could he say? The master had hit Pearu. So what?

Juss kept thinking and thinking. He sometimes stopped his work while his thoughts drifted. The only thing he could do was talk to Mari again and listen to what she had to say. Maybe she'd know how to straighten it all out.

But it seemed Mari had lost her sharpness and her ability to express herself. Juss saw that her role as mistress had also dulled her judgment. He knew one thing for sure, even if she didn't. Juss knew that Mari should come away from the farm immediately.

"My God, how could I leave right now?" Mari asked. "With the children, the animals, and all?"

Juss didn't back off and demanded his full rights as a man, just as the old cottager's wife had been pushing him to. Mari didn't know what to do except talk to the master, because she couldn't go on as she had been. That evening she found a suitable moment, but Andres wouldn't hear of Mari leaving.

"Is it because of what happened at the tavern?" asked Andres.

"Well, Juss heard about it and so he came here," Mari replied.

"It's nothing to worry about," said the master. "It could've been anybody, but it was Pearu. I hit him in the face a few times so, of course, he threatened to sue."

"It's just about all anyone can talk about," added Mari.

"If you went back down to the cottage, do you think they'd stop? They'd talk even more. There's nothing to do now but put up with it. They can gossip behind my back all they want, but if they say it to my face, I'll stop them with my fist."

"But Juss won't put up with it anymore. He wants me back at the cottage."

"That's absurd," said Andres. "How am I to find a new mistress overnight? Who'll watch the children? Who'll feed the boy? No, Mari, it won't work now. You stay put and if Juss comes around again, send him to me and I'll talk to him myself. I've helped him in the past, so he must help me now. It's not that I'm angry..."

"No, no, of course not," agreed Mari.

The next day, Juss came back to get his wife, but she sent him to see the master. The two men talked for some time in the back room, their voices sometimes quiet, sometimes loud, but neither the master nor the cottager would give in. Juss agreed only that Mari could stay on at the farm while Andres quickly found a substitute, and so it was left for the time being.

The farmhouse fell silent. Andres said nothing and neither did Mari, as if there were deep, dark secrets between them. Then, the day of the court trial arrived. Pearu had spent an entire week in the first-class salon of the tavern. Andres might've gotten away with paying damages only to Pearu, but he wouldn't shut up in court, promising to smash the face of anyone who tried to provoke him the way Pearu had. This didn't please the court, which warned him not to take such arbitrary actions in either the tavern or the church, since both were recognized by the government and authorized by God. By talking arrogantly, Andres was resisting the order of things. So, in addition to the fine, he was put on bread and water for two days.

Pearu's face glowed. Andres wanted to smash him again right in front of the court, but he couldn't do that. He had to back off.

Pretty soon, everyone in the parish—and, of course, at Vargamäe—knew about the court order. When the day came for Andres to serve his sentence at the county government building, Juss came to the farmhouse. He demanded that Mari return to the cottage before Andres returned. Mari refused and when Juss insisted, she said, "Are you Pearu's partner? How can you ask for such a thing? I should run off while he's away and leave the house a mess? I'm not coming today, and what's more, I'm not coming tomorrow either."

"If you won't come with me today, when he's not around, then you'll never come," said Juss. "That's why it must be today. With

Andres gone, you might finally come home. Mari, please! Let's take our children and go."

As he spoke, he had a odd expression on his face, as if he was trying to save her from grave danger. He took his son on his lap and began dressing the boy, mindlessly.

"Juss, stop acting strange," said Mari. "Leave the boy alone. What's gotten into you?"

Juss said with trembling lips, "You're never coming back to the cottage, Mari."

"Trust me, Juss. I will. Only it can't be today," Mari explained. "You know that yourself."

"No, you're never coming back if you don't come today."

"Where did you get the idea that I won't come?" asked Mari.

"You won't," insisted Juss.

"I will. Believe me."

"Come with me now, before the master gets back. I won't go to the cottage alone again."

"Just once more, Juss. Tomorrow, I'll talk to the master again. If you want, I'll talk to him tonight. Just wait until he gets home."

Juss pleaded, "Don't wait for him. Come home. Don't talk to him anymore."

"No, Juss," said Mari firmly. "Do what you want, but I won't go before the master gets back."

Juss slouched lower and lower. Finally, he seemed to make a decision. He stood up and asked hollowly, "So, you won't come today?"

"Not now," Mari answered. "I can't leave the children in the house on their own."

Juss stumbled out the door. After a few moments, Mari went out to see if he was heading toward the cottage. There he was, crossing

the high field, a black figure against the early spring darkness. With an eased heart, Mari went back inside.

It was late when Andres got home and he was a little drunk. He held his right thigh, as if it pained him, and walked straight to the back bedroom, asking Mari to come with him. He told her to pull off his right boot carefully.

“Oh my God!” Mari cried in fright as she pulled off the boot. “The master’s leg is soaked in blood! The rag is red with blood.”

“I fell on the causeway and a sharp splinter went into my leg, above my knee. My damn head isn’t too clear, that’s why,” Andres explained. “Get the bottle of spirits from the closet. Look on the left side at the bottom. I’ll put some on the wound to help it heal.”

Mari found the bottle and a clean rag to bandage the master’s leg. When he rolled up his bloodstained pants to wash the wound, Mari was surprised.

“It looks like it was cut with a knife!”

“Yeah,” agreed Andres, smiling. “Christ only knows what I fell on. The sun’s been melting the snow around the brush stubble. Good thing it didn’t hit me in the eye or I’d be blinded for life... It’s nothing. The alcohol will soon fix it up. Accidents happen to men, not stones or stumps. I’m not used to the damned vodka. They say God watches over small children and drunks, but it didn’t work out that way this time.”

When the wound was bandaged, Andres asked Mari to hand him his coat and he took buns and candies from the pockets.

“These are for the children,” he said, “and this is for you, to thank you for looking after them. Who’d have believed that I’d be locked up and cut my leg open because of you? Even so, you won’t come and be my mistress.”

“Don’t talk like that, master. It’s sinful,” pleaded Mari.

“If it’s sinful, then it’s sinful,” said Andres, “but I still want you for a mistress. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have gone to jail. And on top of everything—this leg.”

Not knowing what to do, Mari began to cry. She couldn’t swallow the white bread in her mouth. She thought of saving it for Juss and putting it in his hand when he came the next day. Then they’d talk to the master because things couldn’t go on this way. It had to end one way or another. Mari began to feel overwhelmed.



Chapter 19

Juss was already overwhelmed. It was happening faster than he'd expected. Even though the old cottager's wife didn't know what was going on exactly, her words assailed Juss like red-hot poker.

That evening, coming down from the farm, Juss told himself that tomorrow would be the last day. If Mari wouldn't come away with him then, that would be the end. He wasn't sure what he meant by "the end," or perhaps he couldn't put it into words.

When he got home, he lay down in the dark, and evil feelings began to gnaw at him, the same feelings about Mari that had vexed him before. It was as if she was the source of that evil. Just as he'd thoughtlessly lain down in his overcoat, now he couldn't stop himself from getting up. He took a hunting knife from the wall, put it in his pocket with the blade bared, and headed out the door.

"That poor boy. There's no peace for him anywhere," said the old cottager's wife.

"Let him go and walk it off. It's no business of yours," said Madis.

The old woman couldn't calm down. Soon she spoke again, "Where on earth could he be going now? To see Mari?"

The old man didn't answer.

The cottager's wife had it wrong. Juss was not going to see Mari—he'd just come from there. He headed across the fields toward the same spot he'd raced to on the second day of Christmas, when he hid among the snowy spruces and watched Mari ride to church with Andres in the rose-painted sleigh, with a red-striped blanket covering them and the master holding the bow high above the young mare's head.

Now, in the dark, he was in just as much of a hurry as he'd been that day. His lungs pumped like a forge bellows and he clutched the handle of the knife, at first holding it inside his coat, as if hiding it from someone in that high, dark field, and later pulling it out and waving it in the air to keep his balance. Juss ran until he came to the spruces. He was panting and held his breath in order to listen. Creeping closer to the road, he dropped between two thick, low spruces, but after a while he stood up again, seeing no one around. He stood there between the spruces for a long time before he heard the sound of someone approaching and a dark figure at last came into sight.

Juss squatted, clutching the handle of the knife tighter. He couldn't stop his heart from pounding. He prayed that the man on the road wouldn't hear it. If he did, it would all be over. But the man heard nothing and continued to approach, step by step, one foot after the other, in no rush.

Juss, hidden among the trees, had given no thought to what he'd do with the knife. He suddenly had a vision of himself standing under some spruce trees, a noose hanging from one of the branches, his own hand and Mari's both grasping the rope. Juss needed more time to think, but the man on the road was passing by. The moment had come. Without thinking, Juss leapt from the trees. His foot caught on a low branch and he tripped, but he quickly regained his

balance and ran forward, the knife raised high. The man saw Juss trip and, lacking any protection, he kicked at Juss, who managed to stab him in the thigh. Juss realized immediately that it had all gone wrong. He tossed the knife away, jumped over the ditch into the deep snow, and disappeared among the thick spruces. Andres continued home.

Juss waded through the snow to the edge of the field and headed over the hill, straight to the cottage. In the open field, the snow near the fences was hard enough to carry his weight, but even if it hadn't been, he probably would've scrambled through the drifts without much thought. He moved like a sleepwalker. When he reached home, he went to the cowshed, stood in front of it for a while, then opened the door and looked in, as if he wanted to ask the cow for advice or seek consolation, but she was sleeping peacefully and wasn't about to get to her feet, since it was midnight and she knew there was nothing to eat or drink. Juss watched the sleeping cow and listened to the sounds she made. Then he closed the door, climbed the fence at the end of the shed, and walked to a nearby spruce with a low branch he could reach on tiptoe. Then he took the rope from around his trousers. It still had a noose tied at one end and he mused, "Good thing I left it, so I don't have to make another." As those thoughts passed through his mind, he tied the end of the rope to the tree branch, stuck his head in the noose, and lifted his feet, and that was how Madis found him at dawn, when the old cottager rose and went to the spruce woods to think about God and His ways.

Later, everyone was astonished by what happened, and confused, since Juss's feet touched the ground as he hung. How did the noose close around his neck?

"The old Devil sees to it that a noose closes around a neck," explained the old cottager's wife, "even if the rope is tied to a fence

post. And it's he who puts the rope around that neck in the first place. Nobody can do that to himself, especially not a man like Juss, who never hurt a fly."

When Madis first saw Juss's body hanging against the dawn's reddish sky, his mouth fell open and his pipe dropped out as he cried, "Juss!" Then he spun on his heel and rushed back to the house, leaving his pipe on the ground. The cottager's wife had looked in the bedroom and seen that Juss was missing. She could tell from her husband's behaviour that something had happened, and she also cried out, "Juss!"

Madis went to the farmhouse at once. At first, his wife wanted to go, but Madis stopped her. "You'll scare them to death with your screaming. I better go by myself."

So the woman stayed behind, alone. She'd never locked up the cottage before, but now she pushed the bolt shut on the door and pressed her back hard against it, as if someone was trying to get in. Juss's hanging had overwhelmed her with fear, even though no one had given him much thought while he was alive. There was an old folk saying that one shouldn't fear the living, but rather the dead, and in the cottage that day it seemed evermore true.

Just as it had at the cottage, Juss's hanging created a fright at the farm. At first everyone was silent, but finally the master spoke out. "So now the maniac has hanged himself."

This snapped the household out of its trance. Everyone ran out the door, past the hill, and down to the cottage, with Mari, who was only half dressed, in the lead. Andres thought he ought to go as well, but when he tried to move his leg, he decided it was better to stay still, lest the wound open and start to fester. So he stayed in the back bedroom and let the others go.

When Mari saw Juss, she cried out, “It’s the same rope he had in the hayfield!”

The others didn’t understand and Mari didn’t explain. Her words were meant only for herself and the dead Juss.

Juss’s death was a big event not just at Vargamäe but also throughout the area. It cast a dark cloud between Andres and Pearu for many years, perhaps even for the rest of their lives. When they next met, in the company of others, Andres said to Pearu, “Well, that’s what your teasing and mocking came to—Juss hanged himself.”

Pearu didn’t know how to answer, so he said nothing.

Mari was like a woman slain. The milk in her breasts dried up and the children were fed cow’s milk instead. Luckily, two of their cows were giving milk, so there was enough for all the children.

Mari wished to put her head into the same noose that Juss had used. If it could only be tied to the same spruce branch, then it would all be over. But the tears of the children pulled her away from such thoughts. It didn’t matter whether the cries came from her children or the master’s, whenever she heard a tiny voice or felt a child’s touch, the blank look disappeared from her eyes. The children’s tears brought her a bit of relief.

Andres did not speak. He just lay in bed stretching his injured leg, or sat in a chair tinkering with something. If Mari left something undone, he had the maid do it for her. Mari noticed this and wondered if it was a signal for her to leave, but now she had nowhere to go. Juss was lying in the cold bedroom at the cottage waiting for his coffin.

Once again, Ants the coffin maker came to Vargamäe. This time, the master did not climb up to the barn loft for the boards, but let Ants and the farmhand do it themselves.

“I fell and hurt this damned leg, so I have to be careful, or who knows what might happen,” he said to Ants.

This time there was no discussion about what kind of coffin Juss might like or whether it should be watertight. The coffin was made without any thought of the one who would lie in it. Ants brought along no silvery fringes or glittering winged angels. No sausages were stuffed and no dough for white bread was kneaded. No chunks of pork were roasted in the oven, as if no one had remembered to prepare them. It was a depressing funeral without a trace of joy.

On Saturday, Juss was buried. Aside from his own people, only Hundipalu Tiit and Aaseme Aadu attended to help lift the coffin and fill the grave, since Andres’s leg wasn’t yet healed. He’d been walking around the house with a limp, but on the morning of the funeral he got dressed and went along to the interment.

Juss was buried on a Saturday, so there were no prying strangers lurking about. In light of his great sin, he was to be buried under the trees outside the graveyard. The bell would not toll and neither the pastor, nor even the parson, would sing or speak. That was the saddest part of all. Juss was Mari’s husband and the father of her children, and they would bury him like an animal. The greater misfortune is not to die but to die without being honored.

Mari pleaded with the pastor. She finally accepted his denials but made one last request: that a single bell toll for Juss. The pastor, cold as ice, refused.

So Juss went very quietly on his last journey to his final resting place. They travelled on a sled road, and even the wooden axles of the wagon did not rattle. When they reached the spot in the manor fields where funeral parties usually halted to signal the sexton in the church tower with a white cloth, they continued on without stopping. The sexton was not there to see them wave. There was no

reason to go to the church at all, so the party went straight to the graveyard. Even this last sign of God's grace, a burial in sanctified ground, was denied to Juss.

Yet there was one person who showed mercy—Andres of Vargamäe. When the coffin had been lowered into the grave, the ropes pulled up, and the men had picked up shovels to start filling the grave, Andres took a prayer book from his pocket, bared his head, and recited the verses of a hymn as the others sang. Mari had always loved to sing and she knew all the hymns from church, but now she could not bring herself to voice a single note, so sharp was the sudden pain in her throat. It was a pain caused by joy. She never imagined that Andres might read and sing at Juss's grave. It had been his own idea. So surprised was Mari that her legs felt weak and wobbly and she was overwhelmed with a feeling of comfort. It felt so good to cry as the men sang and Andres read the verses. Finally, Mari joined them in song. Her voice was so loud that the others couldn't tell whether she was crying or singing.

Everyone thought Mari was shedding tears of grief for her husband at his grave, but it wasn't so. She wanted to sing out in joy, yet the tears kept coming. At Juss's grave, a few men were singing, but just one woman—Mari. The old cottager's wife had wanted very much to come and see where Juss was put to rest, but she had to stay with the children.

Thanks to Andres, Juss received a proper burial, and if a stranger had passed by and heard the singing, he might've only wondered why there was a burial on a Saturday. He wouldn't have noticed that the song came from outside the graveyard gates.

Mari expected to leave the farm as soon as she'd surrendered Juss to the earth. In fact, she planned to leave Vargamäe altogether, as soon as she could find another roof to cover her head, but as

Andres read and sang over Juss's grave, she changed her mind. She rode back to Vargamäe with the master and never again thought of leaving. A kind of numbing stupor overcame her and, a few days later, when the master asked her if she wanted to stay or leave, Mari began to cry.

"Don't think I'm trying to drive you out," Andres told her. "I'm better off if you stay. I can go out without worry if I know you're here to look after things. I just thought that, maybe, you might, perhaps..."

Mari didn't know what to make of anything anymore. She was frightened of the cottage and its bedroom, but she had nowhere else to go with her two children.

"Well, let's go on living as we have. It will all work out with time," said the master. To seal the matter, Mari's cow was brought up from the cottage and put in the farm's shed.



Chapter 20

Time went by and the household settled back into a normal routine. The storm passed and Vargamäe was quiet, as if all that mattered was tending the animals, working around the house, whirring the spinning wheels, reeling and winding the yarn, and weaving the cloth. They worked well into the night and started again each morning.

Andres and Mari's only break came when they went to church. They rode in complete silence, as if sitting back to back in the sleigh. In truth, they went not for the church but for the graveyard and the ground just beyond it. Krõõt rested in one and Juss in the other. Church was a secondary duty they just accepted. Andres had never been a frequent churchgoer, and Mari felt estranged from the church since Juss's funeral.

Andres drove the horse to the graveyard and tied a feedbag over its muzzle. They walked up to the gate and Andres entered the graveyard, but Mari walked along the fence to the trees. The deep snow rose to her knees with each step, but she wore two pairs of woollen stockings and was not bothered.

Some time passed before they both returned. Andres untied the feedbag and they climbed back into the sleigh, heading home

wordlessly, just as they'd come. Andres rarely drove by the tavern or went inside anymore.

There'd never been many people at Vargamäe, and now there were even fewer, especially during the winter since their roads crossed swamps and marshes. It seemed that everyone deliberately avoided the place, save for the occasional calico trader passing by in his sleigh or a rag merchant with a pile of earthenware bowls to exchange.

Since Juss's death, Andres's relationship with his neighbor had become even tenser. Despite that, Pearu came by the house one night, drunk as usual. He clambered through the door noisily and entered the main room. Everyone was at home.

"Hello, neighbor!" Pearu called out to Andres. "You never come to see me anymore, so I came to see you. How've you been? Haven't seen you in ages. You don't come by the tavern and I have no business at the graveyard. I thought you might invite me to help bury Juss, but you went ahead, singing and praying without your neighbor."

"It wasn't my place to invite anybody. It was hers," said Andres, pointing to Mari.

"You're right, neighbor. It wasn't up to you," agreed Pearu. Turning to Mari, he exclaimed, "Hello, Mari! You used to be a wonder—always a smile on your face and a song on your lips—but now...now you're barely with us, neither tits nor ass—and all because of Juss. He was a worthy fellow. Yes, Juss the cottager—there was nothing wrong with him. My good neighbor Andres doesn't give in, not him, not ever—not to the parson, not to the pastor, and not to me, Pearu. That's why I love him, because he never gives in. You can plead with the parson, you can plead with the pastor, but those assholes won't bend. So Andres pulled a book out of his pocket and got everybody singing. He's a tough fellow and a worthy

man! I came here to make up with him. I'm a little loaded, but that's nothing between neighbors. If I weren't, I wouldn't have the guts to come. Mari, you're Mari of the farm once again. You even brought your pet cow with you. Well, that's the way your life turned out. Once you had a husband and he built a shed for your cow and you lived in the cottage, but what's a life anyway? Just a blade of grass before the scythe. And you have children—your own and the farm's. One, two, three," he counted on his fingers, "four, five, six children. Two of your own and four of Krõõt's, so six altogether. Yes, the mistress of the farm was a fine person, except that her blood was weak and she died—just couldn't make it at Vargamäe. Now, my old lady, she can make it. She'll survive, but the blessed mistress died, leaving the girls and the boy for you to look after. The boy will become master of Vargamäe, and a tough one, too. I feel so sorry about the mistress, and I feel sorry for you, too. You know, when I think about what I said to Andres in the tavern...and then Juss, God rest his soul...that he could...I can't help but wipe my eyes. At home I go into the back room to wipe them." Pearu wiped them then, for there were tears in his eyes, "and I tell my old lady, the sheepface, that my neighbor Andres is a real man. He knocked me down twice in the tavern, but he was right to do it. I had no reason to go after you and Juss. When I heard that my tough neighbor read from the good book and sang at Juss's grave—Hundipalu Tiit praised his reading and his singing—it made me cry out loud. I threw my arms around Tiit's neck and asked him why I wasn't invited to read and sing at Juss's grave. Am I not worthy? If the pastor was a bastard and the clerk was a jerk, then Pearu would've opened his mouth and sang out with such a roar that even Juss would've heard it in his grave. My neighbor is a worthy man, so I came to make up with him. I want to make up with you, too, Mari, over my words in the tavern.

Just let Juss rest peacefully there beyond the graveyard! When the spring comes and the snow melts, I'll go visit his grave. Mari, you can take me by the hand and lead me there. Hand in hand, we'll go see Juss, and I will read the Lord's Prayer standing next to you. 'Be ready for salvation, come it late or soon.' Give me your little hand, Mari."

"Don't touch me!" screamed Mari when Pearu approached her. "Speak with your mouth, not your hands."

When Mari refused to give him her hand, Pearu kept on talking, but no one could quite follow his rant. He kept coming back to his desire to make peace. He made up with everyone several times. He even made up with the children.

When he got to little Andres, he said, "Well, young master of Vargamäe, how are you? Are you going to be as tough a fellow as your father, my neighbor? Your father is a worthy man, so you must grow up to be a worthy man, too, you tiny speck, you little lump. My Joosep will also be a worthy man, and then there'll be two worthy masters at Vargamäe, both as tough as their fathers, Andres and me. You'll dig a ditch, split the cost, and go to court over it. You've got no mother, poor boy, and you fed at a stranger's breast like an orphan piglet under an ewe. You had a worthy mother with a ringing voice. When you're big I'll tell you all about your worthy mother, and about me, your neighbor Pearu."

Pearu was overcome once more and tears dripped from his eyes. When the baby started crying, Pearu turned to Andres and made a long speech about reconciliation and forgiveness. To Andres, Pearu's words were nothing more than the buzzing of a gnat and he didn't bother to answer. Pearu started to say goodbye, but interrupted his departure with more talk. Then he said goodbye again

and shook hands with everyone, but after he walked out the door, he thought of something more to say and came back.

“Juss’s soul must be weighing on Pearu,” Mari told Andres later when they were alone.

“Who knows what’s weighing on him,” answered Andres.

“His eyes were full of tears when he spoke.”

“That’s the vodka,” said Andres.

“I’m not sure it was just the vodka,” said Mari. “He must have a tender heart.”

“Drink makes your heart pitiful—nasty and pitiful. Did you look at his eyes? Like the eyes of a snake. And his ears? Like a wild animal. He had something in mind when he came here today. It wasn’t for the sake of Juss or Krõõt.”

“I don’t know.”

“What’s there to know?” asked Andres. “He came to look us over, to see how we were getting along. Was there anything to notice?”

Mari didn’t answer and Andres went on, “He came here to find out how things stand between us. Did you see how he glanced back at me after he tried to paw you? He wanted to see what I’d do.”

Mari’s heart began to pound because Andres was talking about things that frightened her. If only she could’ve remained Mari the cottager until the end of her days, doing the chores of the mistress and nothing more. She would’ve born the burden without complaint, even without pay, if only she were allowed to raise her children until they could stand up for themselves. She wanted nothing more.

But Andres did. He wanted a mistress for Vargamäe and a wife for himself. He also wanted more children. He wanted many more children, sons and daughters who would make Vargamäe into his own vision.

“You know,” continued Andres after a while, “everybody is waiting to see what we’ll do now, because Juss is no more and I need a mistress. Maybe we should go see the pastor. No one believes we’re just living here side by side. Even before Juss’s death, they thought we were living, you know, differently.”

“How can they think such a thing so soon after Krõõt and Juss...” mumbled Mari.

“Who cares?” Andres replied. “Here, in this world, who has time to think of the dead? The dead look after themselves, and we live for ourselves.”

Mari didn’t answer and the master said nothing more. The graves were still too fresh, as were the wounds in their hearts, and Andres’s leg had barely started to heal.

Spring arrived and with it came new troubles and new worries. Andres seemed to forget about settling a new mistress for the farm. Spring brought new conflict with Pearu. When he came to make up with Andres in the winter, he’d done it only so he could take communion at the church. By the following Monday, his thoughts had turned to tougher questions—how to flood his neighbor’s land, dig holes next to the causeway, roll stones into the road that led to the fields, smash down the border fences, plow the edges of the fields, harry the neighbor’s cowherd, and quarrel with his farmhand. He thought only of dirty tricks he could use to harass his neighbor and drag him into court.

Soon there were lawsuits over ditches, animals, roads, and field edges. One of the men would go to court, then the other. Only God could tell who was right and who was wrong, certainly not any earthly court. During the rye harvest, though, it became clear to everyone, whether they liked it or not, that Pearu had defrauded his neighbour or, at the very least, caused damage to his property. One

night, when Andres returned home from some communal work, he came across Pearu, dead drunk and asleep in his wagon in the middle of Andres's rye field. Andres hurried home, woke the farmhand and the maid, and fetched Madis from the cottage, and the four of them went to have a look. There was no debating it—Pearu had deliberately led the horse off the road and through the barley to the rye field. His horse and cart hadn't trampled much of the unmowed rye, but rather crushed the standing shocks of harvested grain. When Andres and his witnesses arrived, the horse was standing dejectedly in the middle of the rye field, the reins were tangled around a wheel, and Pearu was sleeping like a baby.

Andres sent for his neighbor's wife so she could see with her own eyes who was in the wrong and take her old man away. She tried to wake him up but he was like a lump of lead, so she took the wagon back to the road, through Andres's rye and barley, and headed home. Her eyes were full of tears, as if she marched in a funeral procession.

Andres did not discuss damages with the wife nor with Pearu, because the two neighbors no longer spoke to each other except in public places like the court or the tavern. At Vargamäe, they only cursed or yelled at each other.

As usual, Pearu had an excuse. He'd been drunk and the horse had trampled through the field on its own while he slept. The court gave credence to this excuse. Liquor was not just allowed but advocated by the authorities as a gift from God to cheer up the sorrowful. So there could be nothing criminal about sleeping off a binge.

However, Andres showed with the testimony of his witnesses that Pearu must've been awake when he drove through the barley and into his rye field, crushing the shocks of grain they'd put up just one day before. Pearu had certainly been awake and led the horse

by the reins. Only after the shocks were pushed down had the reins been placed under the cart's wheel. It must've been Pearu, since there was nobody else who could've done it. If the horse had walked on its own, the reins would've gotten tangled in the wheel much sooner. The grain wouldn't have been destroyed and there wouldn't have been much damage.

As to the endorsement of liquor by the authorities, who were considered God's representatives on earth, Andres could not argue, but he humbly submitted that Pearu had mistreated God's dear gift to the injury of his neighbor. What would happen if he, Andres of Vargamäe, and all the other farmers in the parish acted like Pearu and drove drunk through each other's ripe rye fields, destroying the crops? This was unacceptable to Andres, even if each man trampled his own grain and crushed his own rye shocks in a drunken stupor. This behavior could never be in accord with God's grace or His merciful intention.

In the end, the honorable court agreed that a general drunken trampling of rye fields could not be God's merciful intention because, as it says in scripture, "Whosoever hath, to him shall be given," and trampling rye and destroying shocks of grain was not giving but taking. So Pearu was punished more severely than expected. Still, in Andres's opinion, the punishment wasn't severe enough. The damages he received were too little, but there was nothing to do about it. He had to obey the court.

After the case was decided, the two neighbors went to the tavern where they could freely voice everything they were forced to keep silent in court. With glasses of vodka in their hands, the conversation unfolded more easily than it had before the court. In the tavern, neither man had to listen to the other. Both could shout at the same

time, at the top of their lungs, so the whole business became much clearer as each heard only his opinion.

There was one thing, though, that Pearu did not understand. How on earth had he managed to drive through the barley and into the rye field where he smashed down the shocks? Pearu couldn't believe that the horse would stray from the road and start wandering around the grain without being guided. Pearu often fell asleep in his cart, and the horse always headed home, grazing along the edge of the road. Quite drunk, Pearu asked his neighbor for an explanation, but Andres had no answer. He'd found Pearu in the middle of his rye field and that's all he knew.

"Then you're as stupid as I am," said Pearu, though he didn't believe Andres. He thought his neighbor knew more about what happened that night.

Pearu's words warmed Andres's heart and he said, smiling slyly, "Now why would anybody give out information like that for free?"

"Then you know how I got into your rye field?" asked Pearu.

"Whether I know it or not, I won't spell it out for you," said Andres craftily.

"How much do you want?" asked Pearu. "Here, take ten rubles! Twenty-five! Tell me!"

"Not enough," said Andres. "My information doesn't come so cheap."

"Well, how about thirty?" Pearu shouted.

The innkeeper leaned across the bar. The whole tavern looked on intently.

"Those two Vargamäe men—what a pair of toughs," said the innkeeper, spitting over the bar and onto the floor right in front of the two men.

"Take the money!" Pearu yelled.

“Alright,” said Andres. “For thirty, I’ll tell you, but you can’t tell anybody else, not even in court.”

“Wait a minute!” Pearu cried, trying to think. His head was woozy. “No, I don’t agree to that. You can do what you want with my money, and I’ll do what I want with your words. I’ll have them announced from the church pulpit or nailed to the cottonwood next to the church door, so that everybody knows what Pearu of the Valley Farm paid thirty rubles for.”

“Fine, I don’t really give a damn,” Andres shouted. “Do what you want. Print it in the prayer book, for all I care.”

“Did everybody hear that? You too, innkeeper! Andres of the Hill Farm is going to tell me right here how I got into his rye field, and I can do what I want with his story.”

“Give the money to the innkeeper, so you don’t cheat me,” said Andres. “You can’t be trusted.”

Pearu produced the money and the innkeeper took it. Everyone waited for Andres to reveal what he knew, but he walked over to Pearu, put his mouth to the man’s ear, cupped his hand, and whispered his explanation so no one else could hear it. Pearu was not at all prepared to hear Andres’s secret so quickly. He shouted, “You have to say it out loud so everyone can hear!”

“That wasn’t part of the deal,” Andres replied. “In front of the bar, with everybody here—that was the deal, and that’s what I did. Everybody heard that.”

There was an uproar. Everyone had expected Andres to speak for all to hear, but they also admitted that the deal did not require it. Pearu demanded his money back from the innkeeper, but Andres wouldn’t allow it since he’d revealed his secret.

The innkeeper grinned and repeated, “Those two Vargamäe men—what a pair of toughs.” He whistled through his teeth and

spat on the floor between his legs—with all the commotion, there was no other place to spit.

“I kept my part of the bargain,” Andres insisted. “If Pearu wants me to, I can tell him again, and he can put it in the prayer book, or on the cottonwood, or have it announced from the pulpit. But I’ll tell you this, Pearu: If you start slandering me publicly, with no witnesses to back up your claims, I’ll take you to court. Remember that.”

The patrons in the tavern roared. Some said, “Well, Pearu lost that one!”

It wasn’t over though. The innkeeper still held the money and Pearu threatened to sue if he gave it to Andres.

“Pearu, be a man,” said the innkeeper. “The tavern has one set of rules and the court has another. You started this in the tavern and you have to finish it here, in front of the bar. You can’t sneak off to the court. If you and Andres can’t agree, then let the people here decide. Let’s say the bar is the court’s desk and I’m the emblem. Men, have a look. Am I good enough to be the official court emblem?”

The men laughed. “Good enough, innkeeper.”

So a trial began to settle the Vargamäe neighbors’ quarrel, with the innkeeper standing behind the bar as the symbol of the court.

Andres started shrewdly, “Innkeeper and patrons, I don’t really want Pearu’s money. I’ve got enough. If you judge that this money is mine, I’ll leave it with the innkeeper and everybody can drink on the house. You can drink yourselves senseless as long as the money lasts.”

That settled it. Everybody quickly agreed with the innkeeper that Andres had kept up his side of the deal. Pearu had no one to blame but himself. Why had he struck the deal so poorly?

“Pearu gets a drink, too,” said Andres. “It’s his money.”

That drew a laugh from everyone.

"I'm not coming to your pig trough," muttered Pearu. He tried to order a drink on his account, but the innkeeper was too busy with the rest of the crowd to serve him.

Everyone drank happily. Only Pearu drank to drown his sadness. He hadn't lived through such a disastrous day in a long time. Andres beat him in court and then made him a laughingstock at the tavern. Pearu always counted on Andres to be honest and truthful, but now he realized that Andres had a few tricks up his sleeve, too.

This infuriated Pearu. He thought that a man should be consistent. He shouldn't act one way, then another, depending on the situation. If Andres had been tricky from the start, Pearu would've known to be on his guard, but because he considered Andres to be honest, everything happened as it did that day.

Pearu got angrier and angrier as he watched the others drink up his money and make fun of him. He wanted to bite off Andres's nose but, knowing the man's strength, he limited himself to verbal attacks.

Andres's spirits were so high that nothing got under his skin. He countered each jibe with a silly joke. Even when Pearu brought up Juss, Mari, and Krõõt, Andres paid no attention. Pearu became more and more annoyed until suddenly, without knowing why, he found himself yanking on Andres's beard.

"Men, pull 'em apart!" ordered the innkeeper, but before anyone could get to them, the two men were on the ground, Pearu on top of Andres. Both men shouted, Andres in a deep voice, Pearu in a shallower voice that turned at times almost to a squeal.

The innkeeper rushed from behind the bar with a whip, ready to lash Pearu, but someone grabbed him by the arm. "Dammit man, forget the whip. Let 'em fight it out."

The innkeeper stopped and watched the two men. Andres was faking but Pearu was in pain. He let go of Andres's beard and tried to get up, but Andres grabbed him in a tender area and squeezed until Pearu's eyes rolled around in their sockets.

"Those two Vargamäe men—what a pair of toughs," sneered the innkeeper again, stepping back behind the bar. "I've never seen such a pair of animals before."

When Andres and Pearu had yelled and thrashed around for long enough, the others shouted, "Knock it off. It's not just your floor." So the Vargamäe men got up, or more accurately, Andres got up. Pearu had to be helped up, because he was too drunk to stand on his own.

"That son of a bitch wanted to kill me!" Andres cursed. "He ruined my beard and bloodied my face."

His beard had in fact suffered. On the floor lay a shock of hair, which Andres picked up to hold as evidence for the court, because he didn't plan to drop the matter. Everyone could see that his face was bleeding.

There was nothing wrong with Pearu. His beard was intact and his face was fine. Pearu was the kind of man who, even drunk, could mess the other fellow up pretty badly. No one would've believed it if they hadn't seen it with their own eyes.

Pearu sat down on a bench by the wall. It didn't look as if the fight brought him any joy. In fact, he looked as if he'd barely escaped with his life. When Andres jokingly said that they'd quarreled in court and fought in the tavern, but now they could go home together, Pearu shouted, "Not with you, you damned devil. You'll kill me on the way!"

"Now why should I kill you, you pipsqueak? You'll die anyway when the time is right," said Andres.

The innkeeper said, "There's still some money left. What should I do with it?"

"You hold on to it," replied Andres. "When Pearu and I come back to the tavern, we'll drink it up and treat anyone who's here," and with that, he left the tavern.

"That bastard wanted to cripple me," Pearu cursed, taking a swallow from his glass and trying to pull himself together. "Then what would my old lady do?"

The drunken crowd roared with laughter until the tavern shook.

Andres wandered home alone. He'd had more to drink than he liked, but his day had been sort of lucky. For once, he'd managed to get back at Pearu, so his heart was glad. If Pearu had offered his hand in reconciliation right then, out of decency Andres probably would've taken it.



Chapter 21

Everyone at Vargamäe was asleep when Andres returned home. Even Mari slept with her clothes on, lying in a bed she'd made on the chairs next to the window. She'd been sleeping there for some time already, so she could hear the children when they cried or called.

Nobody felt there was anything improper about Mari sleeping in the back bedroom because of the children. Besides, since Krõõt's death, the door between the two bedrooms was always opened at night, so the farmhand and the maid could see and hear everything from their beds out front.

In the summer, of course, it was different. The farmhand and the maid slept outside with the cowherd, and only Mari and the children slept in the house with the master. It didn't matter whether Mari slept in the front or back bedroom—anyone who wanted to gossip would say what he wished.

When the master was out, Mari always slept lightly. Any little sound or rustle brought her to her feet. That night, she woke up when she heard the yard gate creak and she went out to meet Andres.

"Put some hay in the wagon for the horse," said Andres. "I'll let her eat right here and not take her to the woods tonight."

While Mari fetched hay, Andres unfastened the horse from her harness and tied her to the cart. He usually didn't wake his farmhand for this, though sometimes the man woke on his own and came out to help.

In the house, Mari asked, "Would the master like something to eat?"

"Not now. I'll eat in the morning," Andres replied. "Here, have a sip from this bottle. Tell me if it's sweet."

Andres's tone made Mari think of Juss standing under the spruce in the hayfield, holding a rope with a noose tied at the end.

Timidly, Mari approached Andres and reached for the bottle, but then said, "It's late. This can wait till morning, too."

"Late? It's not late," said Andres.

When Mari finally took the bottle and raised it to her lips, Andres grabbed her around the waist, surprising her so she nearly dropped the bottle to the floor.

"Master, let go. Don't fool around!" Mari begged.

"I'm serious, Mari. I'm not fooling around. I've always been serious about you, even when Juss was alive, and I've been waiting a long time. Today I'm on top of the world and I want you to feel the same. Be the mistress of this farm and mother to the children. Going on alone is no good."

"Let me go, master," Mari begged.

"I can't let you go, Mari, no matter what happens. Not anymore," answered Andres.

"The children will wake up and see," said Mari.

"One day they're going to see it anyway," said Andres. "You know they need a mother."

"Not now. Some other time..." Mari pleaded.

"Now is as good as any other time," Andres answered.

“You came back tonight with a bottle in your pocket...”

“You think I’m drunk?” Andres asked. “I may have been, a little, when I left the tavern, but I walked it off. I’m sober now and happy that for once I showed Pearu a thing or two.”

To distract Andres, she asked about the trial and let him tell her all about his tricks in the tavern. When he came to the part about the deal, Mari asked, “Did you really have a secret?”

“Sure,” Andres replied. “I whispered it into his ear. I told him exactly what happened, so he’d realize that he’s not the only one who can play tricks.”

Andres wanted to see if Mari was curious to know more. She stayed silent, but waited for him to continue, so he told her everything, just as he used to do with Krōöt. Occasionally his revelations led to arguments and protests, but sometimes Andres just had to get it all out.

“It was I who took Pearu into my rye field and left him among the shocks of grain,” said Andres with a sneaky grin. “That night, on my way home, I was nodding off when the horse suddenly stopped. I looked up and Pearu’s horse and wagon were sitting right in the middle of the road, blocking the way. I shouted. No answer. I shouted louder. Not a sound. I shouted at the top of my lungs. The night was as quiet as a grave. So I climbed down from the wagon and went over to take a look. Sure enough, it was Pearu, drunk as a lord and sound asleep, snoring away. The horse’s reins were stuck under the wagon wheel so it couldn’t move. I got the reins loose and started to tie them to the cart to send the horse on home, past my gate, but then I had an idea. I said, ‘Aha, now I’ve got you right in the palm of my hand.’ I sent my horse toward home and turned Pearu’s flaxen-maned horse around. Then I climbed up in the wagon, so as not to leave any traces, and drove through the barley and into the

rye field where the shocks stood. There I dropped the reins under the wheel so the horse couldn't move forward or back, and ran along the edge of the field to our gate, where the mare was whinnying and waiting for me. That's what happened. I'm telling only you and you can't breathe a word to anyone. I told Pearu how I fooled him, but he has no witnesses. Rascal that he is, I had to let him know."

"So it was you!" said Mari, surprised. "That's why I heard the rumble of a cart but not the creak of the gate. I thought it was just someone passing by."

"The mare came alone with the cart. I got here a little later and opened the gate," Andres said with a satisfied smile.

"But was it right?" Mari asked. "And why did you tell Pearu? Now he's going to hold a grudge against you."

"He'd hold a grudge anyway, but this gives him a real reason. Now that he knows the man he's dealing with, he might back off. It's only fair that I explained it to him. I'd be willing to explain it all to God. After all, when Pearu and I dug that ditch together and split the costs, he dammed up the water and flooded my pasture. Was that fair? He got away with that trick, so I had the right to take him into my rye field."

Andres held Mari tightly and said, "Mari, that was one of my secrets, but I have another. It's much bigger and it concerns you or, more exactly, Juss."

"Andres!" Mari cried, startled. "Your leg! You didn't fall—it was Juss!"

"Yes, it was that damned Juss. How could I have fallen so hard with all that snow?" answered Andres. "How did you know? Did Juss tell you?"

"No, I heard nothing from Juss. I didn't see him after it happened," said Mari.

“Who told you, then?” asked Andres. “Nobody knew about it but me and Juss.”

“Nobody told me,” said Mari. “Do you remember in the spring, the farmhand found a hunting knife there beside the road. Everybody wondered who could’ve lost it. I looked at the knife, too, and I said it sure looked like Juss’s knife. I started wondering how the knife got there, and suddenly it dawned on me that Juss went to meet you on the road that night. I wanted to ask you about it many times, but I wasn’t brave enough. Then, when you said you had another secret, I knew right away.”

“It was him, alright!” confirmed Andres. “If he hadn’t gotten tangled in the spruce branches and stumbled, who knows how it might’ve ended. He could’ve gone for my back since I was a little tight, but when he stumbled, I turned around and kicked him—or maybe I put my leg in front of him. I’m not sure, but that’s why he stabbed me by the knee.”

As she listened to Andres’s story, Mari’s eyes filled with tears. There was more to Juss than she’d ever imagined. Mari almost wished he hadn’t stumbled. No matter what happened afterward, at least Juss could’ve shown what was really inside him.

“He might’ve finished me off,” Andres went on. “I had nothing to fight with and he had that long hunting knife. I had a nearly full bottle of vodka in my pocket, but I didn’t think of it. My head wasn’t clear. I could’ve gotten myself killed because I didn’t think of hitting him on the head with that bottle. It could’ve been the end of me, but he didn’t have the heart of a real man. When he couldn’t stab me from behind, he jumped back across the ditch and ran into the woods. I didn’t see him throw the knife away. I wasn’t in a shape to notice anything just then.”

“Maybe it’s good that things happened as they did,” said Mari. “I guess Juss was just being Juss and nothing more.”

Mari’s heart felt empty and pained. Her empty, painful heart started shivering, and the shiver seemed to spread throughout her body.

“Now you know everything, Mari,” said Andres, his soul lighter. “So have a drink, to your health and mine.”

Andres sat down and pulled Mari onto his knee. She still clutched the bottle in her hand.

“I might’ve stayed out later tonight, but I kept thinking of you and I couldn’t stay away any longer,” said the master.

Mari didn’t drink from the bottle. She just sat on Andres’s knee as if she were about to cry.

“Why are you so unwilling?” asked Andres. “Don’t you want to marry me?”

“I don’t know what’s the matter, master,” Mari answered.

“Still weighed down by Juss’s death?”

“It could be—Juss and all the rest. It’s so strange, spooky somehow, and it frightens me,” Mari explained.

“Don’t be afraid,” Andres assured her. “Juss can’t do anything to you or me anymore. Whatever will be will be. My Krõõt is gone and you’ve lost Juss, but we two are still here.”

“But the children...?” asked Mari.

“The children,” said Andres thoughtfully. “What about them? We both have children, so they’ll be our children, raised together. There’s enough bread for everyone here at Vargamäe. They’ll all be the same, mine and yours, with the same rights.”

Mari’s eyes filled with tears again. Her children would be raised as the master’s!

“Don’t cry, Mari,” said Andres soothingly, pressing her to his chest. Mari’s tears touched his heart, even though he’d never thought much of the late Krõõt’s frequent tears. He’d always considered tears a normal part of the lives of women.

Andres took the vodka bottle from Mari’s hand and tucked it under the bench. Then he picked the woman up, rose to his feet, and carried her toward the bedroom.

“No, master!” Mari pleaded tearfully. “Not today! Stop!”

But Andres wouldn’t listen. He said, “You will be the farmer’s wife at Vargamäe and your children will be the children of the farm.”

No one else heard these words, spoken in a whisper, and no one saw Andres take Mari the cottager across the threshold into his bedroom. The next morning, there was no sign of the event other than the vodka bottle sitting under the bench in the front bedroom. Mari put the bottle in the back closet before waking the hired help.

Yet she had the feeling that everyone—the farmhand and the maid as well as the children and stepchildren—could see that something had changed between her and the master. Mari was highly aware of the glances and words and actions that would’ve been unthinkable earlier.

All this would’ve had less import if her late Juss hadn’t stayed on her mind so persistently. It was the same way before, but since Andres told her what happened the night he was stabbed, Juss had gained new ground in her heart. She couldn’t shake the image of him on that last evening, as he went out with a knife to attack Andres at the side of the road.

The next Sunday, Mari hastened to Juss’s grave and, where previously she said one paternoster, this time she said two, and then a third as she left. This calmed her a little and for the next few

months she continued to visit the place outside the cemetery to calm her soul.

One night, she said to Andres, "Now I'm in that way."

"Well," said Andres, "we better go see the pastor."

"I think so," agreed Mari.

So Andres harnessed the horse, Mari sat in the wagon, and they drove down the hill. It was clear to everyone how things stood between them. The old cottager's wife had long wondered why they didn't go to the pastor, but now she said, "They couldn't even wait a year. Juss is still warm in his grave. He only died at the end of February, but those two are moving fast. I don't understand it. Maybe she's in a family way."

"That's their business," muttered her old husband. "They're both young and they'll do as they please."

"Well, that's how it is for farm owners. If you're just a cottager, you don't count," said the old lady.



Chapter 22

At the parsonage, a surprise awaited Andres and Mari. As soon as the pastor heard Andres Paas's name, he said, "So you're the master of the Vargamäe Hill Farm?"

"That's right, Reverend," Andres replied.

"And this is your Mari, the cottager? Her husband hanged himself and you read and sang hymns over his grave?"

"Yes, Reverend," Andres confirmed.

"Why did you do it, dear soul, if your Reverend Pastor and the Parson wouldn't?" he asked.

"I did it for the poor woman. She grieved so for her husband," Andres explained.

"That woman was a nail in his coffin. Your Mari is a sinner, as are you, yourself. You, Andres of Vargamäe, are the rich man who covets the poor man's lamb."

"When Juss died, our hearts were pure," said Andres.

"And do you come to the altar now with pure hearts?" the pastor asked.

Andres dropped his gaze to the ground. Mari stood beside him, her eyes cast down, and wiped away tears.

The pastor turned to Mari. "Now hear me, Vargamäe cottager Mari: Do you come to your pastor and to the altar of the church

with a pure heart and a clean body, as behooves an upstanding widow?”

Mari almost cried out in a loud voice but didn't answer.

“And you, master of the Vargamäe Hill Farm, are a sinner. You drink and carouse in the tavern and quarrel with your neighbor, and you've sometimes gone in front of the court.”

“Reverend Pastor,” Andres replied, “every person has a right to ask for justice.”

“Dear soul, you should ask for the blessing of God's grace, not justice. You're a stubborn man and you've hardened your heart. You put your trust in the strength of your body, but God has resolved to try you. You just recently buried your wife. You didn't recognize that she was the weaker vessel and now your children are orphans. You want them to have a new mother, but I can't announce your marriage from the pulpit before you've both repented for your sins—you for your wife Krõõt and you, Mari, for the death of Juss and for the sinful life you've been leading at Vargamäe.”

“Reverend Pastor, this isn't possible,” said Andres. “We can't wait any longer.”

“No, dear Reverend Pastor, this is not possible,” Mari said, sobbing.

The pastor looked at them quizzically and said, “Between you there are two deaths to account for, dear souls. You must mourn and repent your sins.”

“We can repent later if we have to,” said Andres, “but please, Reverend Pastor, inscribe our names today so that everything will be right when the child is born.”

The pastor thought for a moment and then, with some emotion, said, “Well, then, dear souls, so be it. I will do it, so that your child has a rightful father and mother when it is born. I do not wish to

visit the sins of the parents on the child, for we no longer live under God's wrath, but under His grace. Be aware, though, master of Vargamäe Hill Farm, that what I'm doing is not entirely righteous. So you shouldn't always claim righteousness over your neighbor. Instead, think more of God's grace. The search for justice hardens your heart and embitters you. Justice demands an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. As your shepherd, I'm not giving you justice today, but God's grace. Why do you always insist on justice? Ask for God's grace instead, which is beyond all understanding, and let that be your justice and your righteousness."

With those words, the old, gray-haired pastor let Andres and Mari take their leave. They were told to return in two weeks when he'd admonish them once more before the wedding.

As they drove home, Andres and Mari wondered how the pastor knew so much about their doings. Neither could imagine how he'd found out. Only later, when Andres spoke with Aaseme Aadu, who was the churchwarden, did he get a clue.

The gossip came from the old cottager's wife, who went to church every Sunday and sometimes during the week as well. She always dropped in at the parsonage after her worship, entering through the back door as everyone did.

The cottager's wife liked to chat with the pastor's wife, who enjoyed the old lady's tales of girls getting married and men taking wives. The pastor's wife listened with great interest, for she had nine children and eight were daughters who'd be difficult to marry off because their dowries were scant and eligible men were hard to come by. She always asked how many children the parish women had, and how many of them were girls. She could almost share the joy of some farmer's wife who managed to marry off all her daughters, one after the other. She would sigh and say that these women

had it easier than the wife of a pastor, with daughters no one wished to woo.

So naturally all the cottagers' wives were warmly received at the parsonage and they seldom left without some gift from the pastor's wife. Thanks to the old ladies, the pastor's wife knew half the parish by name and kept up to date on their lives. She passed all the information she gathered onto the pastor and, if they thought some bit important, the pastor's wife asked the old women to tell her more. So the pastor kept his sheep, with all their sins and virtues, in the palm of his hand. The cottagers' wives and the parsonage were more interested in sin, even though virtue was a much less common trait, so the old women talked of sin as if there were nothing but sin in the whole parish. Clearly, neither the parsonage nor the parish were interested in the uncommon.

"But what on earth does it have to do with her?" asked Mari when Andres told her what Aaseme Aadu had said.

"She's envious that you will become a mistress," concluded Andres.

"But she couldn't have known about this before," countered Mari.

"Why not?" Andres asked. "Everyone did. Otherwise Pearu wouldn't have taunted me in the tavern until I had to bash him."

Two weeks later, Andres and Mari visited the pastor again. He repeated everything he'd said before in even greater detail. Once again, Mari had to wipe her eyes from time to time.

Andres said, "The Reverend shouldn't pay so much attention to the chatter of old women."

"My dear soul, that's no way to talk to your pastor!" he exclaimed.

"Forgive me, Reverend, but we're talking straight, man to man," Andres replied. "You think that me and Mari killed poor Juss, but if that's true, how come we're still free and not behind bars?"

“I’m speaking of a crime not in the eyes of man, but in the eyes of God,” the pastor explained. “Man’s laws may acquit you, but are you righteous and blameless in front of your Lord? Can you look at yourself and honestly say, ‘Juss would have died even if I let his wife return to the cottage at the right time.’ Can you, Mari, dear soul, swear on the holy Bible that you listened to your late husband as a pious wife should? Did you not secretly and sinfully covet another man and his property, even while your own husband was alive? That’s what I ask, not what’s just according to Man’s laws.”

“Reverend Pastor,” said Andres, “my heart is pure. I never stood in the way when Mari and Juss wanted to be together, by day or night, but when Juss asked Mari to return to the cottage she couldn’t go. I had no mistress in the house and no one to feed my child. Along with her own child, Mari breastfed my son, who was orphaned when Krõõt died. That’s how it was, Reverend, and it was not Mari’s whim. She followed the wishes of blessed Krõõt, who begged her to do this on her deathbed, because she knew the kindness of Mari’s heart and thought her orphans would be fed and looked after with Mari to care for them.”

Mari finally spoke. “I stand here, in front of our Revered Pastor, because the blessed mistress said to me more than once, ‘If only you could take my place when I’m gone.’ I cried and told her, ‘Mistress, what you’re saying is sinful. I have my Juss and his child, and another on the way. How can I possibly take your place when you’re gone?’ I told the mistress not to fear, that she wouldn’t leave us unless it was God’s will. The mistress replied, ‘Mari, of course you have your Juss and his child, and another one coming, but if there were no Juss...’ Then the mistress died and her children were left behind and, because of what happened, Juss was buried outside the graveyard under the trees, with nobody to toll the bell or read or

sing hymns. The master took a prayer book from his pocket and sang and read. We all sang along so Juss's soul wouldn't leave this world without the word and the grace of God. Tell me, Reverend, what could I do but feed and care for the master's son as if he were my own? If I have a sin in my heart, it's that I loved the master's son more than my own child. That's my sin and I don't know of any other."

Mari stood before the pastor and said all this through her own tears. Andres felt that Mari spoke well, better than he could've.

Mari wasn't completely satisfied with her speech. She'd spoken the truth, but she hadn't revealed everything to the pastor. There were worries in her heart that tortured her. Had she been alone with the pastor, she might've given voice to them all, but as she stood before him that day, she was fearful of Andres and spoke to please him.

Had she stood alone before the pastor, she would've told him that she'd truly sinned against Juss and she might rightfully be blamed for his death. She would've admitted that the idea of replacing the mistress had grown within her once it was spoken, and she'd even begun to regret moving to the cottage with Juss. The master was a very different man than Juss. His head sat tall on his shoulders and his legs were not bowed. Her love for the master's son was sinful. She might've loved him so much because she'd loved the master a little, even while Juss was alive. Perhaps she loved not just the master himself, but also his farmhouse and possessions. She loved his sow that bore piglets in the spring, his ewes that had lambs with crisp wool—sometimes singles or twins and sometimes triplets, his cows that gave so much milk and butter, and his horses, which pulled her to the church in a sleigh with painted roses and a high bow.

Mari might've said all this if she'd stood alone before the pastor, and she would've rather said all this than what she did say for Andres's benefit. She didn't know how the pastor would've reacted to those unspoken words, but to the words she did speak, he responded in an expiatory tone.

“Dear soul, if you did it out of love, God will forgive you; for love is above obedience. Go in peace.”

With this, they left the pastor. Andres was at peace, but Mari's heart was troubled. For a moment, she thought of returning secretly to confess everything that weighed on her. If the pastor forgave her and wedded her to Andres, then all would be pure and clear in her heart.

But Mari didn't return and she went to the altar with Andres without revealing the secret burden of her heart to the pastor.

The wedding party would've gone well if there hadn't been so many uninvited guests. People would've eaten and drank, made noise, and talked about silly things, danced and horsed around, and nothing more, but some village lads came and joined the celebration. They played “Patch the Bride's Apron” and gave money to the newlyweds, so their presence was accepted. One of the lads was a local joker named Lullu the Song Maker, who could eat glass as if it were ice, chomp on grass like a sheep, and pour a bottle of beer straight down his gullet without swallowing. He was full of jokes, tricks, and stories, and he could sing all through the night without running out of songs.

Lullu made everyone laugh, but toward the end of the party he started singing in a low voice so only his pals could hear. When the song got quieter, the boys laughed louder. Andres was suspicious and went over to listen. Lullu stopped when he saw Andres

and said, "This is not a song for masters to hear, and definitely not bridegrooms."

Andres wanted to know why the boys were hooting, so he cleverly sent someone to listen without frightening the boys. After listening for awhile, the spy reported back to Andres, who became enraged. The boys' sneering manner had irritated him from the beginning. Now he jumped up without a word and rushed into the crowd of young men. Before anyone realized what was happening, Lullu was doubled over on the ground, after receiving a powerful blow to the chin.

"Get this little bastard out of here!" shouted Andres. "All of you, get lost!" He didn't say what would happen if they refused.

The boys were stunned. No one said a word in protest, since they knew Andres's strength and they were at his house. The boys hadn't sorted out who was on Lullu's side and who wasn't, or who was neither on one side nor the other, but they all scrambled away without a word.

"Out the gate!" Andres shouted after them.

Shocked, the boys did what they were told. They walked in the light rain, discussing what had happened. No one was angry with Andres. After all, what else could he have done? The question was, who told Andres about Lullu's song? They hadn't been laughing that hard, and he didn't hear it himself.

The boys couldn't imagine who told him. Everyone was having such a great time and the song was so funny. No one was keeping a look out for anyone besides Andres.

Plus, Lullu's song wasn't so awful, they thought. It just amazed them how easily he turned old maids' gossip into verses that made their sides split.

“That bastard sure has a mean fist,” cursed Lullu, “but he won’t get away with it. I’m making a new song, and this time it won’t be for Pearu, but because I want to. It’s going to be longer and uglier, and I’m going to stick it on the cottonwood by the church so the whole parish can read it. And I’ll find the man who squealed to Andres and skin him alive.”

“He ought to be skinned alive. We can’t let him get away with this,” agreed another boy. “What do we do now? Do we stay or do we go?”

“Let’s go back in and beat the hell out of them all,” said Lullu. “Let’s have a brawl like nobody’s seen before at Vargamäe—a brawl like they’ll never see again.”

The boys who were a bit more sober thought they should leave and let the thing stew. Time wasn’t a rabbit that would run away, and a fight wasn’t a wild bird that would vanish in the sunlight. Besides, there were better places than Vargamäe for a brawl. There, the master had the right to do what he wanted, like swing an ax or shoot a gun.

This argument won out, but some of the tougher boys couldn’t leave without throwing a few stones. One smashed through a window.

“What are you doing, throwing stones, you bunch of cowerds?” rebuked Lullu. “If we’re men, we go in there with knives and fence pickets. If not, we get the hell out of here.”

As they walked down the hill, the boys asked Lullu to sing some more, but he wouldn’t.

“You take one on the chin from Andres, and see what kind of song you can sing,” he said. “I’ll make up a better one and then you can come around and listen.”

The wedding guests were worried a big fight would break out and they'd all be dragged into it if they didn't want to abandon the master to the intruders. The flying stone was like a spark to a flint-lock, but everyone calmed down as they heard the boys heading down the hill.

Only Mari remained agitated. Again and again, she asked Andres what had made him so angry at the boys, but Andres dodged the question.

"Lullu was singing dirty songs," he said. "What a bunch of pigs! They come here, stuff themselves at my table, and then start singing right under my nose."

"But what was he singing that made you so angry?" Mari asked.

"It's not for women to know about songs like that," said Andres evasively.

"Was it something about you and me?" asked Mari uneasily.

"Of course it was about me. Who else?" said Andres.

"And me? And Juss? There was something about Juss, too, wasn't there? Tell me, Andres!"

"All three of us," said Andres finally.

"That's what I thought. Otherwise you wouldn't have gone after him like that," said Mari, her heart trembling. "At first, I was afraid you'd kill Lullu. What was he singing?"

"Who can remember the words? It was crap. Nobody does that right under my nose," declared Andres.

This didn't comfort Mari. Depressed and curious, she wondered about Lullu's song long after the wedding party. Who knows how long it would've tormented her if something unexpected hadn't happened. One morning in the barn, she found a sheet of paper stuck inside an old hymnal in the chest. Written on the sheet were several dozen verses, each composed of four lines.

As soon as she read the first lines, her knees began to tremble and she grabbed hold of the chest so she wouldn't fall down. She steadied herself and crept like a thief to the barn door to make sure no one was coming. She then began reading the verses slowly, word by word, because the handwriting was hard to make out. She kept glancing toward the house, as if she were committing a crime and frightened of getting caught.

When she finally finished reading the song, her body was soaked with sweat. Even so, she reread it, repeating some verses until she knew them by heart and the whole song droned in her head. It started off a bit more decently, but became so smutty toward the end that, even alone, she didn't want to read it. The smutty ending must've been written after the wedding party, because it wasn't really about Andres and Mari, but Andres and Pearu. Namely, it said that Andres had taken Pearu into the rye field among the shocks of grain because he'd mistaken Pearu for a young girl.

This is how the song began:

All the local la-di-da-di's
 Came to Andres' wedding party,
 But Krõõt was not around
 To keep him nice and neatly bound.

Li'l Mari from down the hill
 Hung her garter from a sill.
 She left it hanging nice and long.
 She's a show-off, right or wrong.

But bow-leg Juss the cottager
 Jumped up to play a trick on her.

He took that garter in a sec
And went to put it 'round his neck.

She said, "Juss, to do it right
You need some grease to slide it tight.
Goose fat's good, and out in back,
A spruce tree for the maniac."

Juss was hanging like a wreck,
Bent of leg and short of neck,
Like an apple on a tree,
While Andres ran off with Mari.

Mari said it's Juss's fault.
That boy was never worth his salt.
Now he's vanished with my garter.
I wish he were a little smarter.

Mari buried Juss one day.
We didn't hear the church bell play.
The pastor said it wouldn't do,
"You've no roubles, so off with you."

Andres sang out at the grave
And Mari never could behave.
She danced on Juss's coffin top.
"Stay in there you lollipop."

Juss got tired of the noise,
The screechy singing of the boys.

Even if it meant the noose,
'Twas better hanging from that spruce.

So Juss was dropped into the earth
And no one thought he had much worth.
Behind the graveyard covered by loam
And everyone just trotted home.

Mari was a piece of ass,
as good in front as when she passed.
Moved from cottage up to farm,
In the bedroom—what's the harm?

Pearu went a step too far,
Made fun of Andres at the bar.
Andres took a swing and hit
Till Pearu crumbled like a shit.

Like a pair of dogs in heat
They're on the floor and won't retreat,
But Mari is the one who swells.
In her head are wedding bells.

Andres wonders, 'What is this?
That Mari's swelling fast as piss.
It wasn't Mari that I hit.
It was Pearu, that ugly shit.'

He climbed into her bed that night.
He climbed on top of her alright.

Mari gave herself for free,
Then yelled at Andres “Marry me!”

The wedding was a lot of smoke
To quiet down the local folk.
A garter trapped a horny male.
A baby is what ends the tale.

Mari read the song over and over, unable to stop. Strangely, she felt no anger toward the songwriter, only a terrible fright.

Once again, she felt very sorry that she hadn't gone back to the pastor before her wedding to unburden her heart. Perhaps the song wouldn't have been so painful to read if the pastor had said her sin was not so grievous or, even if it were, that God would forgive her if only she repented from the bottom of her heart. Without the pastor, she was defenseless against the detestable words. They gnawed at her heart and hollowed her insides, causing unfathomable torment. She only found solace in the realization that her deep suffering over Juss proved she was not as bad as the song depicted. She, Mari, was a better person than that.

One thing was immediately clear to Mari: she could not show this song to Andres or say one word about it. Yet she couldn't bring herself to burn it. She had to keep it for her own sake, so she'd never cease to repent for her sins. She wondered where she could hide it, so neither Andres nor anyone else would ever lay their hands on it.

As she looked for a hiding place, she suddenly asked herself how it got there in the first place. Who could've put it there, in the chest drawer, between the pages of a book? And when? Was it someone from the farm, like the farmhand or the maid, or was it a stranger?

It could've been either. No one feared thieves at Vargamäe and they often left the key in the barn door at night, but from the day Mari the mistress found that song in the book in the chest, she never again left the key in the door. It was as if she really did worry about thieves. Fetching the key each evening became a grave matter for her.

“Why are you so bothered about the key?” Andres once asked her. “Who'd come to Vargamäe anyway? There aren't any strangers close by, and our own people wouldn't touch anything. Krõõt never worried about the key. The barn doors were always unlocked, just like the bedrooms are now, and anyone could come in.”

“What fancy reason do they have for putting a lock on the door if it's never to be used?” Mari replied, and never again left the key in the barn door at night. No one knew that the mistress was more frightened of someone bringing something into the barn than taking something from it.



Chapter 23

Mari of Vargamäe hid her secret from Andres and the rest of the world under rolls of cloth in the chest, and now her heart ached. Everyone thought she should be happy, for what more could she want? Still, Mari went through her days with a sad expression, as if every mistress of Vargamäe was destined for sadness. The late mistress had always looked sad, and so did the neighbor's wife, so why should Mari be different? She'd been happy when she lived as a maid. Then her songs and laughter had echoed through the fields of Vargamäe, so even the people of the Valley Farm and the cottagers heard it.

"How strange that no one feels happy here," said Andres once, noticing his wife's somber expression. "Krööt was always sad, as if I were to blame for everything, and you, Mari, are the same. Is life so hard here?"

"Well, yes. It's hard and there are worries. Being a mistress is not the same as being a cottager," Mari replied.

"This summer we could hire another maid to help you," said Andres.

"Another maid?" Mari said. "That won't lessen my worries. I can manage the work."

“Well, then, I don’t know what to do to make you happy,” said Andres, feeling futile. “You should try to sing when the children are about so they don’t grow up dumber than others.”

But Mari wouldn’t sing. It was as if she’d never known how and, when she tried, her throat seemed to tie in knots so no sound came out.

Andres had forgotten about Lullu’s dirty song. He never gave it a thought, unaware that it lay at the bottom of Mari’s chest, sowing gloom all over Vargamäe, but then Pearu brought it up one evening in the tavern and the song was revived. The two men sat at the bar and the innkeeper said to them, “Listen, you Vargamäe toughs, how long do I have to hold your money? Pretty soon you’ll start asking for interest. Drink it up or take it back.”

“How much is left?”

“About half,” replied the innkeeper. “Can I pour some drinks?”

“Do it,” said Andres. “Drinks for everyone—Pearu of the Valley Farm is buying.”

Pearu shot back, “Pearu of the Valley Farm is not drinking this swill. I’ll pay from my own pocket.”

The free drinks made for a party in the tavern.

“Happy to get rid of somebody else’s money,” said the innkeeper, as he poured vodka for the men.

Everyone was in high spirits and the whole place was abuzz with the sounds of men baring their souls to one another. Pearu said to a fairly sober Andres, “Hey neighbor, how come you didn’t invite me to your wedding party?”

“You don’t act like my neighbor, that’s why,” said Andres.

“How about Lullu, with his song?” Pearu asked, sneering. “Was he more of a neighbor?”

“I took care of Lullu then and there,” said Andres, adding threateningly, “but if anybody else needs some straightening out, I can do that, too.”

“Oh, you want to climb on top of me again?” mocked Pearu.

“What?” asked Andres. “Oh, yes!” he remembered. “Did that feel good? We can do it again if you want some more. Come on, let’s give it a go.”

Pearu backed off, but talk in the tavern had turned to Andres’s wedding party and Lullu’s song. It seemed that everyone had either read the song or heard about it. Andres learned that the song hadn’t been Lullu’s idea. Pearu was behind the whole thing. After the beatings he’d taken from Andres in the court and in the tavern, Pearu sought revenge and found Lullu at the bar. He offered to buy the boy all he could drink in the first-class salon and pay any price he named, if he’d make up a real man’s song about Andres and Mari—a song that everyone would remember and sing, even if it wasn’t proclaimed from the pulpit or nailed to the cottonwood at the church door. Indeed, everyone now seemed to know the verses the boy had written.

Andres heard more from old Aadu, the master of Aaseme, a pious churchgoer who was always in the know. Aadu told him that the dirty song had been delivered to Mari, but he didn’t know by whom, he claimed, perhaps out of reserve or maybe because he really didn’t know.

“Didn’t Mari tell you about it?” Aadu asked Andres.

“I haven’t heard a thing,” said Andres openly, but he later regretted his honesty. It would’ve been better to act as if he knew all about it.

“Well, sure. No woman would tell a thing like that to her husband,” said Aadu.

His words were like poison in Andres's gut. He'd bared himself to Mari and stood naked before her, body and soul. And how had she repaid him? Andres felt like someone had poured a bucket of manure on his head, and that someone wasn't Pearu or Lullu. It was Mari.

That explained why Mari acted as if some evil had been done to her, even though she'd managed to move from the cottage to the farm and should've been happy.

To Andres, Mari was like a stranger, for she went about her life on the farm and Andres went about his own. With Krõõt, he'd never felt that way. Krõõt kept no secrets that he might hear from a drunk in the tavern, but with Mari it'd come to this within months of their marriage.

As the details poured off Aadu's drunken tongue it became clear that the old cottager's wife had played a central role in it all—the pastor's reproval, Lullu's dirty song, even the sheet of verse left for Mari. At the very least, the old woman had spread what she knew about them. When others were unclear about some detail, she clarified it for them with precision.

While driving home, Andres decided that he had to take action with all three: Pearu, Mari, and the old cottager's wife. He would've settled accounts with Pearu right away, but the man had disappeared into the first-class salon and didn't show his face again that evening.

He planned to punish Mari the next morning, but she saw Andres's anger during the night. He turned his back to her and wrapped the blanket around himself so she was forced to cover herself with a coat. Mari had a bad dream, which never boded well, and after she woke, she waited to see what would happen next.

"Where is that song?" Andres suddenly asked.

Mari felt her whole body grow weak. She stared at Andres with wide eyes but didn't say a word.

"I'll ask you once more: where's that dirty song the old cottager's wife brought?" asked Andres.

"So, it was her!" Mari exclaimed, and immediately realized that she'd just confessed. She had intended to deny it all, come what may.

"It doesn't matter if it was her or not. Where's the song?" demanded Andres.

"I don't have it," said Mari, regretful that she hadn't burned it so she could answer Andres with a clear conscience.

"Don't lie to me!" Andres shouted. "Where did you hide it?"

"In the barn," she said.

"Bring it here. Put it in my hands," ordered Andres.

Mari felt neither dead nor alive. She walked to the barn slowly and lifelessly, as if headed to the butchering block. If only she could've lived a minute longer and seen God's green earth for a few moments more. Out loud, she said, "What can I do? What can I do?"

She took the sheet of paper from under the fabric rolls and suddenly had an idea. She'd tell Andres that the song was gone, that it was nowhere to be found. Just as it was left there in secret, it'd now been taken away in secret. She unfolded the sheet and slipped it under the large, heavy butchering bench that stood in the corner of the barn. Andres could come and search if he wanted to. She felt so good that she almost laughed.

"Well, where is it?" asked Andres as Mari stepped into the room.

"It's not there," said Mari.

"Where is it, then?"

"I don't know. Someone's taken it!"

"You're lying!" Andres yelled. "Bring me that paper, or..."

“You have to believe me, Andres. It isn’t there,” Mari said again. She described how she’d found the song in the church hymnal and hidden it under the fabric rolls. She told him that it’d disappeared as mysteriously as it’d appeared.

Andres began to believe her, but then he had a thought. “When did you find the song?” he asked.

“Not long ago. A few days,” answered Mari, evasively.

“And you read it?”

“I looked at it, just glanced at it, really. The handwriting was very hard to make out,” Mari said.

“So you hid the song without reading it?” asked Andres. “You’re lying. Tell me what it said.”

“I don’t remember.”

“You remember. Let me hear it.”

“I don’t remember it,” Mari insisted stubbornly.

“You do remember and you’ll tell me what it said. You’ve been reading it for some time. What else could’ve caused all your worries, ‘the worries of a mistress,’ except that dirty song? Let’s hear it,” Andres ordered sharply. But Mari stayed silent. As if talking to a small child, he said, “Will you start now? I’m waiting.”

“I can’t do it. I can’t remember,” pleaded Mari.

“I’ll make you remember,” threatened Andres, almost viciously. His voice was cruel and merciless. He took his belt in his right hand and stood in front of Mari. “Are you going to read it or not? Yes or no?”

“I won’t!” Mari shouted back through tears. “I’ll not read that trash in front of you or the children. You can kill me if you want!”

Andres raised the doubled belt toward the ceiling, but before he could bring it down, all the children, Krōōt’s and Mari’s, started shrieking with one voice and huddled around Mari to shield her

from the blows. Even little Andres crawled to his stepmother as if he, too, could somehow protect her. Mari turned her attention from Andres and bent down to the children. The master's only son was the first into her arms.

As Mari stooped over, her haunches were exposed to the belt, but Andres still didn't bring it down. He just stood in front of his wife, watching as she busied herself with the children. Then he lowered his hand, threw the belt on the hook, and stomped into the back bedroom.

Mari was strangely affected by this. It was somehow worse than if Andres had actually hit her. Without knowing why, she stood up, went to the barn, and took the sheet of paper from under the butchering block. She brought it to Andres in the back bedroom and handed it over, without a word.

"Now, where did you get this?" asked Andres. Mari only cried in response. "Why must I threaten you to make you listen?"

"It wasn't your threats. It's only that I didn't want you to beat me in front of the little ones," sobbed Mari, and she went back to the children in the front bedroom.

Andres wanted to look his wife in the eyes, but instead he watched her back as she left the room and he kept staring after she'd gone. Finally, he unfolded the sheet of paper and began reading it carefully, as if it were a new prayer book. When he finished reading the song, he tore the paper into little pieces.

Andres went into the front bedroom and asked Mari, "When you found it, why didn't you show it to me right away?"

"I didn't dare. I was afraid," said Mari, wiping her eyes. "I didn't know what you'd do."

"Well, why were you so stubborn just now?" Andres persisted.

“I was even more frightened. It said such awful things about me.” Her voice was suffocated by tears.

“Hush, now,” Andres said. “Why do you carry on over a dirty song? If you’d shown it to me right away, we probably would’ve laughed about it.”

So it ended but Mari was not at peace. As they rested in bed that night, she told Andres everything she’d done, down to the smallest detail, as if she were trying to reconcile with him. She confessed how and where she’d hidden the song and told Andres how she’d slipped it under the butchering bench that day.

Andres wasn’t pleased with her confession. He told her, “You act like you’re still Mari the cottager. You torture yourself over the least little thing, and play hide and seek with me. Krōöt wasn’t like that.”

Those were hard words and Mari couldn’t put them out of her head. She always thought of herself as Mari the cottager, and tried to imagine what Krōöt would’ve done or said in every situation. Feeling her inferiority, she went around Vargamæe with the same somber face, as if it were really harder to live as a mistress than as a maid or a cottager.



Chapter 24

The life of a cottager's wife at Vargamäe wasn't easy either, as one could see by watching the old woman make her daily rounds. She dashed around the cottage endlessly, and when she had some free time, she went to gossip with the local women, for gossip was the only thing that really interested her and brought excitement to this mortal life. She prattled on about Mari, Juss, and Andres, but all her stories led back to the master.

When Andres finished reprimanding Mari, he summoned the old cottager's wife to the farm where he gave her such a tongue-lashing that she could barely remember her name—but it didn't end there. When the old lady turned to leave, her eyes red from crying, the master said, "Now send Madis up."

"Madis? What do you want with him?"

"Mind your own business," Andres answered. "Just tell him to get up here."

The old lady was frightened. "The master isn't going to tell him what I've done?"

"What else?" answered Andres harshly.

The cottager's wife started crying so loudly that the children joined in.

“Oh, master,” pleaded the woman, “do what you must—add workdays if you want, but don’t tell my old man. If he hears about this, he’ll beat me to death. He’ll kill me and my soul will weigh on your conscience.”

Andres was ruthless. “What of it? You say that I hanged Juss, which means I could kill you, too. What’s another life to a murderer?”

Her pleas and tears did no good. Andres insisted that the old woman go home and send her husband up to the farm.

Outside, she ran into Mari—the woman she’d been gossiping about at every opportunity, filling the ears of anyone who’d listen with tales of “Mari the Husband Killer” and “Mari the Adulteress.” Now she asked Mari to intercede on her behalf. Perhaps she could ask Andres to be gentler and more forgiving, so that Madis might come back down to the cottage in a tolerant mood.

Standing before Mari, the old lady cried, “I haven’t said anything bad about you, just ordinary talk. You might disagree with a few words I’ve said about Juss, but I’ve said nothing nasty about him or about you. A few things just came out—he lived at our cottage and he went and did that wild thing. Now that place behind the cowshed is evil, and you’ve got to take great care when passing that way. Our dear master took out the spruce tree, roots and all, and planted a rowan tree, but there are other spruces with low branches that need replacing, too. The master is angry with me, as if I was to blame for Juss’s death, but I’m sorry about it. He was such a good worker. I never said anything bad to Juss. We just chatted sometimes, but the mad fellow went and did what he did. He couldn’t tell when I was joking. He always took everything so seriously. He was such a quiet little fellow, not like a man at all. He even learned to milk the cow. I went once to see what he was doing at the shed, and

there he was, squatting under the cow, pulling and milking. I said to myself, 'What's the world coming to with a man squatting under a cow?' It was not a good sign. He looked so funny that I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Even now, thinking about him, my eyes start to water."

The old cottager wiped her eyes. Mari's eyes were wet, too, but she couldn't help the old lady. She didn't dare say anything to Andres. So Madis came to the farm and Andres lambasted the man, demanding that he shut his wife's prattling mouth.

Madis made excuses. "I didn't know about it. I'm hearing this for the first time."

"If it happens again, you and your old hag will be tossed out. I'd rather see that cottage stand empty than listen to any more gossip. I can't go to the church or the tavern, celebrate my marriage, or see my child born without hearing the dirty stories your wife is spreading."

"Just wait till I get home. She'll never open her mouth again, master," said Madis. "Please don't burn down the cottage. Let us go on living at Vargamäe. And don't give the ditch-digging to someone else. I've done it all so far, so let me go on with it."

"Well, alright," said Andres less severely. "Just shut your old lady up."

"I'll do that, master," Madis promised, and he left Andres's house. It'd been a long time since anybody saw Madis travel home with such speed, as if he were running from a fire. His wife saw him, too, through the window.

"You old hag, what've you been saying about the master and his family?" Madis asked as he stepped into the cottage.

"What've I been saying?" his wife cried. "Good God! Me?"

"The things you said about Juss..." shouted Madis. "Now the master wants to throw us out of the cottage!"

“Out of the cottage! Just like that?” cried the old woman, adding resignedly, “These masters, what can you do with them? They drive one man up a spruce and another to live beneath it, and all we can do is patiently watch.”

She knew right away this'd been the wrong thing to say, but it was too late to take the words back. Madis calmly took his belt from his trousers, doubled it, and, without a word, lashed his wife.

“Even now you can't stop your tongue. Who was driven up that spruce tree by the master? You're sure it wasn't you who killed poor Juss, blathering away about Mari and Andres until he dropped dead like a mad dog, his tail between his legs and his eyes gray with sadness? You'll shut up now and stay that way!”

The old lady mumbled prayers as her husband beat her. She swore that she'd forget all about the subject. “May my tongue be ripped from my mouth,” she said.

The names Juss, Mari, and Andres would never again pass her lips. She wanted to live out her life in the Vargamæe cottage.

“We might be able to die peacefully in this place,” said Madis, “because Andres has so many ditches to dig. It could take my whole lifetime to dig all those ditches. You're a fool, gossiping to the pastor about such a master. Are you now pals with Lullu, who eats glass and munches on grass? Are you missing some brains? Andres isn't Pearu; he doesn't forget about things. Andres suffers, and goes on suffering, and then he does something about it, like beating you or burning your house. He doesn't care. He told me how Pearu dammed up his ditch and flooded his pastures. He could've beaten Pearu, of course, but he might've accidentally killed the man and landed himself in Siberia. Andres is that sort of man. So save your own skin and don't go off repeating what I say,” Madis threatened, “or next time you'll get the buckle.”

“You already hit me with the buckle,” cried his old wife.

“That’s because I can’t get through your old hide with just the belt,” answered the old man matter-of-factly.

The old lady moaned and lamented, “That’s the way it is for a cottager’s wife. You can’t even mutter the names of your farmer’s family or you’ll feel the belt on your bottom. That damned Juss! He belongs in hell! Why did he have to go and hang himself? And I helped clean and dress the body! I’d spit on his grave. Ptooy! That little son of a bitch fouled our house!”

“Listen woman, you leave Juss alone in his grave. Here in the cottage, you were a mother hen sitting on her egg,” said the old man.

“I’ll curse him till the end of my days,” replied the woman. “Because of him I got a beating—and with the buckle.”

“It’s not the first time you’ve been beaten, and it’s always because of your endless yapping,” said Madis.

“Why did God give me a mouth if I’m not allowed to use it?”

“Enough! Keep quiet or I’ll come back with the buckle end,” threatened her husband. “I’d rather beat you raw than try to put a new roof over my head.”

The old lady said no more, but in her mind she continued cursing Juss, Andres, and Mari. “God in heaven,” she thought. “Such evil hides inside people.” What did they want from a poor old lady? They could hang themselves or go up to the farm, as long as they left her to live her own life. Had she ever wished harm on anyone? Had she harbored ill will toward anyone in her heart? Was it her fault that she could no longer stand Mari, from the day that woman put the master’s son to her breast? Was there any cottager’s wife who could put up with that? No! God in heaven—she’d watched with her own eyes as the boy first took Mari’s breast, on that day, her friendship with Mari ended.

Her opinion of Andres had also dropped when he took Mari as a wife. If he'd kept her at the farm for a while and then sent her back to the cottage, the old woman could've understood, but he made a mistress of Mari, married her, took her to the pastor, and walked her to the altar. The old woman couldn't forgive this. Couldn't he find a better mistress for Vargamäe than Mari? Anyone would've been better.

That was how the old cottager's wife felt and she was sure she was right, but there was no chance her old man would agree. He feared Andres, though the old woman couldn't understand why. If she were in her husband's shoes, she might've feared any man, but not Andres, not under any circumstances, even if he drove them out of the cottage. How could she fear a man who couldn't get a better wife than Mari? After all, who was Mari? If she dared, she would've called Mari an animal to her face, but she didn't dare because she was afraid of her husband, and he was afraid of Andres. So, against her own instincts, she feared him, too. Even worse, she sometimes felt as if she must feign fear for Mari as well, if they were to get along. Her life seemed hard and her future dark.

The old lady's life was bleak, but things were much the same on the hill. Andres and Mari barely spoke to each other. Their grim faces betrayed dissatisfaction with their lives. The farmhand, an old bachelor, stumbled dumbly here and there, rarely saying a kind word to anybody. He just pattered around the house, mending moc-casins, or harnessed the horse and slouched in the sleigh without a song or a smile as he went to fetch faggots or hay. It seemed that even his whistle had dried up on him. Only the young maid, her eyes black as currants, sometimes played with the dog, squeaking into his ear until he growled ominously, but even the girl's playfulness seemed somehow sinister to the people of Vargamäe.

Things remained gloomy at the farm until the spring, when the maid agreed to stay on for another year and a new hand was hired, a tall and slender young boy. This brought new life to Vargamäe and everyone's spirits were lifted. Shrieks of laughter and cheerful whistling could be heard once again.

The family had something else to dispel the gloom—a baby. Mari and Andres's first child was a boy. Mari could see in his eyes that Andres was happy to have another son. Though he said nothing, the woman understood that she'd risen in her husband's esteem, but it concerned her that the baby was puny and weak. One wondered why Juss's children were stronger, for what kind of a man was Juss compared to Andres? It wasn't until the baby was a few months old that Mari broached the subject with Andres. He responded calmly.

"It doesn't matter. The new master is growing up healthy and strong, so little Indrek doesn't have to. And look what large, bright eyes he has. He's going to be a smart boy—maybe a school teacher or a pastor."

Mari laughed with joy to hear such big talk about their son, and it wasn't just Andres who talked this way. The boy's godfather, Hundipalu Tiit, agreed. He never passed Vargamäe without stopping in to see his godchild, even if only for a minute. Mari loved these visits because Tiit was one of the wisest and most respected men in the whole neighborhood. Talking with him separated Mari from the cottagers and made her part of the community of farm owners.

"Take good care of him," Tiit told Mari. "You don't need wisdom if you have strength, but the world needs wisdom more than strength. If he becomes an educated man, he'll lift us all up, the strong among us, as well as the weak. Vargamäe should be able to educate at least one son and send him to the great university in Tartu."

Mari beamed as she listened to Tiit. She may not have understood everything he said, but she did grasp something big and beautiful, something almost impossible, which would lift them all out of the humdrum life at Vargamäe.

“If there’s not enough room in this big skull for knowledge,” said Tiit, pointing to the boy’s large head, “where would it fit?”

“I wish his neck would get stronger, so he could hold up his head,” Mari remarked, managing to get a word in between Tiit’s lofty speeches.

“It will grow stronger if the boy gets enough to eat,” Tiit reassured her. “It won’t stay so thin.”

“Who’s ever seen such a skinny neck? He still looks as if he were just born,” Andres added.

During little Indrek’s christening party, Tiit was already talking about his schooling, but Pearu of the Valley Farm argued with Tiit and later took the child’s mother aside and drunkenly lectured her.

“Dear Mari, my neighbor’s wife, and Lord rest Juss’s soul, Amen! Now, don’t you pay any attention to Hundipalu Tiit. The Holy Scripture says, ‘Do not pray to the wolf, but guard your son to keep him from temptation.’ Tiit is placing temptation in front of you and Andres, your strong husband. He wants to make a robber out of your son, a horse thief who’ll wind up in Siberia. Yes, the flesh is willing, but the spirit is weak, as it’s written from my mouth right into Holy Scripture. Alright, I’m a little drunk. Our Father, forgive us our trespasses! What I’m trying to say, dear Mari, dearest wife of my neighbor, is take great care of the boy and protect him from Tiit and Andres, because they covet his soul. Hallelujah! Amen!”



Chapter 25

The birth of his first child with Mari felt like the beginning of a new life for Andres, but everything at Vargamäe was getting old. No one stopped by anymore, curious to see the new bedrooms, since other farms nearby had newer, bigger, brighter rooms than those at the Hill Farm. Time moved on and life kept changing.

In addition to the baby, six children now ran around the farm: Krõõt's three daughters, Liisi, Maret and Anna, and her son, Andres, as well as Juss's children, Juku and Kata. Andres felt content. He'd always wanted lots of children and now, God be blessed, there was no shortage.

All the children, both Krõõt's and Mari's, were sturdy and healthy. Sometimes there was illness, as there was bound to be in a family with many children, but they shook it off quickly like a bad dream. Only a nasty cough persisted, and it sounded as if someone chopped wood incessantly at Vargamäe. Andres and Mari worried mainly about putting enough food on the table for all the children, whose mouths seemed always to be chewing. Even in the middle of the night, a child might open his eyes and beg his mother for something to eat.

Little Indrek in his cradle seemed to be cut from a different cloth, but Mari was feeding him well and they hoped he'd soon be able to

hold up his head. Since he was the smallest, it sometimes seemed that Mari cared only for him and ignored the other children. He was indeed more trouble than the others had been at his age. He cried often, as if he were missing something or something plagued him. Day and night he allowed Mari no peace.

Liisi, who had the job of rocking and minding Indrek, and Maret, her assistant, were bored to death with him because he was never happy, no matter what they did. The girls preferred it when he cried out noisily instead of making tiny whines and whimpers because then his mother would come to check on him. The only way to get away from him for a few minutes was to pinch him a little, but not so hard that it left a mark. From time to time they had to do it. Having become experts in child care, Liisi and Maret knew that Indrek couldn't stand being pinched. They could bounce him, shush him, or swing the cradle on its pole until it almost reached the ceiling, but none of it helped. He still yelped if they so much as touched him with a finger.

Whenever the baby yowled, his mother appeared and took the child into her arms. Then the babysitters quickly disappeared as if chased by the devil.

"Don't you run far. I'll be needing you soon," shouted Mari, but the girls barely heard her. Later, Mari had to call out their names over and over before they returned to their posts.

Meanwhile, Liisi and Maret had lots of important things to do. First, they ran down the road as fast as they could to the playhouse by the cattle pen. All the children played there and sometimes Atu the cowherd joined their games. There on the grass they'd constructed a miniature Vargamäe with fields, pastures, highlands, marshes, and bogs. A deep river meandered by and the children would pretend to chase the farm animals away from its soft, slippery banks.

The cattle pens and roads were represented in this replica, as were the property lines, cairns, border markings, ditches, and causeways. The two families living there hated each other and fought endlessly. Woe would come to any hoofed or horned creature that ventured across the property line and onto the neighbor's land. That would result in an immediate arrest and trial. Fines would be levied and paid with birch bark money—round and rectangular pieces marked with numbers.

The two families owned many animals that sometimes knocked down fences or leapt ditches. The big mottled bull was most likely to smash a fence. He mooed through the mouth of Atu, Liisi, or Maret and pressed his body against the fence until it collapsed, as if it was made of alder shoots. The damned cottage ox leapt ditches as if he were a goat instead of a herd animal. Even the river couldn't hold him back. He could swim across with his nose above the water, breathing hard.

Atu the cowherd would spin tall tales about it all. He was the master of this little Vargamäe, the neighbor's farm as well as their own laid out on the grass around the big stone. He'd built the houses (which looked like summer kitchens), the roads, the cattle pens, the trees and shrubs inside the pens, and the birches in the pasture. His masterpieces were the hooved livestock that mooed, baaed, and whinnied in the sheds, pens, stables, roads, and woods, thanks to the vocal talents of Atu, Maret, and Liisi. One of the horses and the big bull even had legs and flaxen tails. These animals were the pride and glory of the Vargamäe farmyard, but they only stood if pressed into the ground. This had to be done in just the right way or their legs would come off when they were pulled out. Only Atu did it perfectly and Liisi could do it sometimes, but Maret shoved them down too far so their legs stayed in the ground when she tried to move them.

Just about every day, when Atu brought the cattle home, new animals jiggled in his pockets and his bread bag—grand bulls like those at the manor and elegant riding horses meant for regal stables. These were built during lunchtime when the herd was at home. The mistress told him to get more sleep because he was so hard to wake in the morning, but he couldn't do as she asked. The boy had no time to waste on sleep. The whole Vargamäe farmyard needed management, construction, and design work. Liisi, Maret, and Anni couldn't help much, because girls lacked an understanding of serious “business,” and Juku was still too little. So it all fell on Atu's shoulders. Sometimes a great storm would sweep through Vargamäe in the form of a naughty Liisi or Maret, or perhaps a rooting ring-nosed pig. Then everything had to be reconstructed and only Atu could do it.

It was there that the babysitters dashed, eager to see Atu's new creations. Lord above, if only they could've sat around the farmyard, herded the animals, milked the cows, watched the bulls lock horns, trotted the horses, and put up hay for the winter. But before they could start working, their mother called out, louder and louder, more insistent and angrier, and they were forced to leave the whole enterprise in God's hands and get back to the baby.

The girls thought it terrible how little the others cared about the worries and joys of the Vargamäe farmyard. They paid no attention to it, thinking only of their own affairs, as if only their own labors were serious. Liisi and Maret consoled themselves with the thought that one day they, too, would be big and do whatever pleased them. Then they would play for days on end in the Vargamäe farmyard, and let no one interrupt them, even if the real Vargamäe went to pieces. They'd build a great big Vargamäe that covered half the cattle yard, and put a strong fence around it with Atu's help, of

course. That way the pigs, sheep, and cows couldn't get in. They'd plant trees, too, roots and all, though they'd be very small, much smaller than ordinary trees.

But now they had to go when mother called, though their hearts ached. Sometimes, even in the middle of the night, Liisi and Maret's hearts burned with concern for their Vargamäe farmyard, and this made the task of minding little, weepy Innu so dreary.

Mari, too, felt that Indrek was harder than the others had been. Andres, Kata, and the older children were so tired by evening that they fell dead asleep and stayed that way until they opened their eyes in the morning, ready for new mischief.

Indrek slept lightly. Waking often, he woke Mari as well, since she, too, slept very lightly. The child needed only to stir slightly and his mother heard it at once, though she had to be awake and on her feet in the morning to let out the herd and start the housework—and the housework kept growing. Krõõt had only three children underfoot; the fourth one proved too much. Mari tended to seven children and kept them clean. The two oldest were beginning to help, offering their mother some relief and saving her a few steps around the house.

By evening, Mari sometimes felt as if her arms and legs were no longer her own, but the next morning she took possession of them again, got out of bed and back in the harness, walking from barn to shed, cellar to well, and potato patch to kitchen garden.

For Andres as well the workload had grown. Ten years of toil had made him weaker, not stronger. If Krõõt were to rise from her grave and have a look at him, she'd probably say that he wasn't as bent at the waist as when they first came to Vargamäe.

The number of mouths in the house and the shed had multiplied, and each living creature needed shelter and food. There was

no choice but to clear brush from the grasslands and make a new field or else there'd be nothing to feed hungry mouths and nourish weak bodies. Andres managed it all, just as he had since coming to Vargamäe.

In the beginning he'd worked to attain a dream, but now he worked out of habit, an inevitable necessity from which there was no escape. He went around and around endlessly like a squirrel on a wheel.

When the harvest in the fields and meadows grew, they needed more working stock, and once they got more, they needed an even bigger harvest. So the cycle went on without end. The harvest could grow ten- or a hundred-fold, but they'd still be trapped in the same vicious circle. As soon as Andres put his hand to the soil, new possibilities sprang up, but it took work and more work to make anything happen.

Andres realized after ten years of toil that he couldn't do everything Vargamäe demanded. Even his son, were he to follow in his father's footsteps, couldn't get it all done, but there was still one thing Andres wanted to accomplish: he'd fill in the marshes to support the weight of the livestock. He hadn't done it yet and the cows still clambered through the mud, pulling their legs out with difficulty, as if some marsh spirit clung to their hooves, holding them back.

Andres still believed in the future and in his strength. The economy was surging, prices for farmed goods were rising, and demand was soaring. Every year, the distilleries needed more potatoes, a crop they could grow easily. The farmers who weren't afraid of wearing out their soil earned so much money that they lost their senses and urged others down the same path.

So far Andres had been cautious about growing potatoes because they sucked the fields barren and gave nothing back, but, bit by bit, the money tempted him.

“What if we tried potatoes for a few years?” he said to Mari. “We’d get a lot of money and we could pay off the mortgage to the manor. Then I’d really be master of my farm.”

Many of the farmers filled their pockets with crackling bills and forgot about the debt on their farms. They believed the money would flow forever because the lord of the manor would always distil vodka and the fields would always grow potatoes. All they had to do was deliver their crops to the vodka cellar and collect their money at the manor.

The men felt like they’d sprouted wings. They couldn’t just stay at home anymore, working or resting. They went to the local fairs, since these were the only big holiday events. They spent their days in the tavern, since that was the only place to have fun. They played cards and boasted about the money they had to play with.

On Sundays, outside the church gate, horses stood late into the night. Some of them wore feedbags and some chewed on the hitching post to pass the time. In nearly every wagon, a young or old woman huddled, waiting for her husband, who was inside the tavern tending to important public business—shouting at the bar or standing in the middle of the floor, a glass of vodka in his hand.

The whole tavern echoed with shouts and jokes and boasts. The men couldn’t see across the room through all the smoke, which was as harsh and strong as the vodka. During the cold winter, the women tried to come inside, too, but their lungs couldn’t tolerate the pipe smoke for very long. They began to cough and hurried back outside, their eyes watering.

The most celebratory days at the tavern were in early spring, when the manor paid cash for the potatoes. Then, God help the farmhand, cottager, or poor farmer who found himself at the bar, standing next to a rich man!

“What are you talking for? You’ve got no money,” he’d be told first thing, and pretty soon a wallet would be pulled out and tossed onto the bar.

Pearu of the Valley Farm was among the men who planted a lot of potatoes and collected a lot of money from the manor. If he happened to run into other men in the same position, they’d drive to nearby taverns for days, drinking, bragging, and arguing, trying to get the better of one another. His reputation grew and he reached a higher social rank, so to speak. In this regard, Andres could not measure up to Pearu because he seldom went to the tavern and he didn’t drink much. That was a sure sign of poverty, since every man drank if he had the money for it.

When Andres and Pearu found themselves at the bar together, they started right in, making jokes and teasing each other. They both had a knack for insults and so it was great fun for everyone. Because Pearu’s standing had risen among the men, he talked down to Andres, as he had when Andres first moved to Vargamäe.

“Listen, you fool, would you like me to pay you to move away?” Pearu once asked Andres.

“You got enough money to do that?” Andres replied.

“More than you think, you ass,” Pearu bragged. “Put it out there, if you’re a real man.”

“For someone like you, I can’t be bothered,” Andres retorted.

“You pipsqueak!” shouted Pearu arrogantly. “You won’t take me on? You think you walk on water? You think just because you’re stronger, you’re also richer?”

"I've already said I won't bother with you if there's anybody better around," Andres repeated calmly, as if he had a thick wallet in his pocket. Quietly, Andres signalled Hundipalu Tiit to collect money from his friends and pass it to him secretly. As soon as Tiit had it done, Andres changed his tone.

"If there's extra bills trying to get out of your pocket, then come on. Let's see who's stronger, the Hill or the Valley Farm," Andres finally responded angrily.

"Extra bills!" shouted Pearu. Onto the bar, he tossed a hundred ruble note adorned with a portrait of Catherine II. "Now let's see you put one down beside it," he demanded.

Andres pulled a note from his wallet. Pearu flung a second Catherine on top. Andres matched it, and with that his supply of hundreds was gone. Pearu slapped a third bill onto the bar and when Andres couldn't match it, Pearu laughed, "So you really are just a pipsqueak, not a real man, and the whole tavern can see it."

"Wait, now," said Andres calmly. "I must have more."

"Well, let's go, if you're a man," shouted Pearu.

Andres started to sweat as he searched. The men standing closest to him laughed, figuring that he was just kidding Pearu. Finally, Andres took a wallet from his pocket and pulled out a third hundred, which he laid on top of the others. Pearu pulled out a fourth, and Andres matched it. Now it was getting exciting for everyone. Pearu's eyes narrowed because he only had one more hundred left. Andres didn't know how much he had left, because the wallet wasn't his.

"Come on. What are you waiting for?" he shouted at Pearu, who hesitated before flinging his last hundred onto the bar. "Wetting your pants? Sneaking some more grain out of the granary this spring?"

Pearu stacked his fifth Catherine on top of the others and Andres did the same, saying, “One more, if you’re a real man.”

This time, Pearu put down twenty-five.

“Pipsqueak!” cried Andres, putting down his sixth note.

Pearu put down two more twenty-fives.

“Pipsqueak!” shouted Andres again, putting a seventh note on the bar.

Pearu searched for tens.

“Pipsqueak!” shouted Andres for a third time, as he put down an eighth hundred ruble note.

The whole tavern hooted in amazement, except for Hundipalu Tiit and a few others who laughed to themselves.

Pearu was devastated. Andres started bragging as Pearu picked up his money from the bar, but just then the doors of the first-class salon swung open. There stood Kassiaru Jaska—owner of two farms, horse dealer, buyer of oxen and grain for the manor, and a man who demanded his wife be addressed as madam and refused to eat at the same table as the help. He was a good friend of Pearu’s and they’d been sitting together in the first-class salon earlier that evening.

Everyone turned toward Jaska. He didn’t say a word. He stood in his shirtsleeves at the first-class salon door with crisp, new Catherine bills stuffed between the toes of his bare feet. His hands were filled with bills of every denomination.

Once everyone had a good opportunity to admire him, he stepped slowly and triumphantly into the barroom. A heavy silence fell over the tavern and the men respectfully cleared a path. Some even pulled the pipes from their mouths, as if they were entering the church or the priest were entering the tavern to check on them.

Jaska stopped at the threshold to the main room, as if to show himself off there as well, but he didn't go in, perhaps because of the very muddy floor. Then, he turned around and headed back toward the first-class salon, dragging his feet and swinging his arms so that the crisp money rustled.

Long after Jaska disappeared into the first class salon, the tavern remained silent. No one gave another thought to the Vargamäe men and both felt dejected standing at the bar like a pair of pipsqueaks.

Pearu left one ten ruble note on the bar, which he used to light his pipe, and stuffed the rest of his money back into his wallet. He held the bill to the lamp's flame and brought it to his pipe, sucking until the whole bill was burned up. Then he followed Jaska into the first-class salon, ignoring the other men in the tavern as if they were dust.

Andres put his own money away and shoved his wallet into his pocket. He put everyone else's money into another wallet and announced loudly, "Here Tiit, take your money. Give it back to the men—you know who they are."

Only then did everyone realize that Andres had been joking, while Pearu had been earnest. They couldn't decide who should get more respect, Pearu for lighting his pipe with a ten ruble note, or Andres for pulling off such a great trick, but all the men in the tavern agreed with the innkeeper when he spit across the bar and mumbled through clenched teeth, "Those two toughs from Vargamäe! What a pair!"

Nobody said a word about Kassiaru Jaska. Not even the innkeeper spoke of him, as if Jaska was an untouchable saint who could sanctify the tavern and make it worthy of God's praise.

Suddenly, the door to the first-class salon flew open again and there stood Pearu. Now he, too, was in his shirtsleeves and socks.

“Innkeeper!” he roared.

The innkeeper jumped up and hurried to the door of the first-class salon.

Jaska’s voice could be heard from inside, “A mug of vodka for the tavern!”

“And half a mug on me!” shouted Pearu.

The innkeeper returned to the bar and announced with a straight face, “The master of Kassiaru has ordered a mug of vodka for everyone, and Pearu of the Valley Farm has ordered half a mug.”

The stunned men took the pipes from their mouths and wiped their lips.

The innkeeper poured the vodka and men crowded around the bar. Very few passed up the free drinks, but among them were Andres of Vargamäe and Tiit of Hundipalu.

The innkeeper was still pouring vodka when Pearu appeared in the doorway once again. From inside the room came another order, “A mug of vodka for the tavern!”

“Half a mug on me!”

The innkeeper poured the drinks more quickly and the men threw them back.

After awhile, a third order was barked out from the first-class salon, “A mug of vodka for the tavern!”

“Half a mug on me!”

Vodka flowed like a river and the tavern got noisier and noisier.

Again the door to the first-class salon opened. Jaska and Pearu came into the barroom, both in their shirtsleeves, hands in their pockets, and shirts unbuttoned to expose Jaska’s pink flesh and Pearu’s hairy body. The two lords of the first-class salon had decided to get some air. They sauntered around together, eyes cast downward and ears deaf to the noise, as if they were alone in the

crowded tavern. Between themselves, they discussed the purchase of horses and oxen, horse racing, and other “important business matters.”

“What a pair of toughs,” the men said admiringly when Jaska and Pearu retreated back into the first-class salon. Only great and elegant men sat in the first-class salon: the artisans from the manor and others, like the municipal clerk and the chief judge, who held the reins of power and justice.

It was around half past eleven when the innkeeper was called back to the first-class salon. He came out and shouted for the maid, but the farmhand came instead.

“Where’s Maali?” asked the innkeeper. “She has to bring the straw now. The gentlemen want to get some rest.” He spoke loudly so everyone could hear.

“Couldn’t I bring it?” asked the hand.

“If they say Maali should bring it, then Maali it must be,” the innkeeper answered, annoyed. “Go unharness the gentlemen’s horses and give them as much hay and oats as they want.”

Of course the men in the first-class salon were not yet thinking of sleep. They asked for the straw out of propriety, and everyone in the whole noisy and boisterous tavern thought it respectable, especially when the innkeeper told them to pipe down so the gentlemen could get to sleep. Everyone began to whisper, but even their whispers made the whole room echo. It didn’t matter, though, since the gentlemen couldn’t hear what the other men said.

Pearu didn’t return home until Monday evening, making a huge commotion, as if he’d dragged the whole tavern back to Vargamäe. Nobody was there, save for his old woman and their children, who soon sought refuge in the attic. The farmhand went up to the Hill Farm, where he stayed until his master fell asleep.

The next morning, Pearu downed a few more drinks to cure his headache and then began shouting, “Woman, my socks!”

His wife found a pair of socks stuck in a chink in the warm wall and gave them to her husband, but he threw them back at her and shouted, “My socks!”

The woman picked up the socks and handed them to her husband again. Pearu became furious and threw his wife out of the bedroom, along with the socks, shouting, “My socks, you sheepface!”

The woman thought her old man had gone mad, but the farmhand understood. He’d seen the maid at the tavern bring socks to Jaska. He asked the mistress for a white plate. When she brought it, he put the socks on top and handed it back to her, saying, “Carry it this way!”

Pearu was pleased. He took his socks and said to his wife, “Dear old lady, a blessing on your offspring, for you respect and revere your husband, and you shall thrive in this life and live long upon this earth.”

But soon there was another problem in the back bedroom. Pearu began to roar like a wild animal and finally threw his old lady and the socks out of the room again because she didn’t know how to pull them onto her husband’s feet.

The farmhand again came to her aid. He knew from watching Jaska how refined masters must be served.

“Mistress, put on your church-going gloves and go back in,” he instructed her.

She rushed to the barn and got her red-patterned gloves so she could pull the socks onto her dear husband’s feet, which reeked of Russian shoe salve and grease. Then she had only to take a swig from the red bottle of women’s wine and she’d be as refined as her old man. Soon her family would be eating at a different table than

the farmhand and the maid, so they wouldn't have to dip their fingers into the same pan or bowl of fish, or put their soup spoons on the same plate.

Her old man's new refined ways worried the woman. She couldn't really grasp the purpose, since she was a cottager's daughter with the soul of a slave, as her husband occasionally reminded her. Furthermore, she didn't know what to serve the farmhand and maid other than the food she served her husband and children. She could arrange it so the help got the two-week-old bread and she, herself, ate the week-old loaves, because the fresh bread was too good even for her. She'd eat the fish along with the farmhand and maid, and the gravy was only something to help swallow potatoes. She couldn't start making greasy flour sauce as well. There wasn't enough pork lard to put in the pan every day. If she did, the farmhand and maid wouldn't get any. In the winter, milk was scarce and they sometimes had to go without it. They had only sour kvass to sip with their food.



Chapter 26

Yet another winter went by for Andres. Days and nights passed without respite. He hauled materials to build a new bedroom and a threshing barn. They started from home very early in the morning, ignoring the freezing cold rain. It was dawn when they reached the forest. There they loaded the horses, and it was late in the evening when they returned home. The next day they did it all over again and if the farm ran out of hay, they brought in another load. The horses' ears hung lifelessly and their necks drooped as if bloodsuckers feasted under their manes. Andres tried to organize community hauling, but his attempt was unsuccessful because there was a snowstorm and the horses could only pull half their normal loads.

Back when the first bedrooms were built, men from the Valley Farm came with horses to lend a hand, even though they hadn't been asked. This time no one came, even when help was requested. The relationship between the neighbors had changed over the years. There wasn't an ongoing quarrel, but rather a grudge that burned like glowing embers deep in the ashes of a hearth. There had been so much trickery and so many snide remarks that forgiveness was out of the question. Andres and Pearu kept their distance from each other and only dared to start a conversation when they were

away from the farms, in the presence of others, where there was no chance the embers would burst into flames.

When Krõõt was alive, the two mistresses could exchange a few words. Though they were far from friends, they at least spoke to one another amicably and without hostility. Now, even this fragile connection between the farms was gone. The older mistress of the Valley Farm, who was the daughter of a well-off cottager, considered herself superior to the young, new mistress of the Hill Farm, whose mother had been nothing but a poor landless cottager. There was a vast difference between growing up in your own room, even if it was in a cottage, and huddling under another person's roof, where everyone pushes you around. The Valley Farm mistress could never overlook this difference in status.

Only the children of the two farms consorted, albeit in secret. Although Pearu's two elder sons, Joosep and Karla, were a few years older than Liisi and Maret, they played together well.

In the spring, when the Hill Farm began construction, the Valley Farm boys were overwhelmed with curiosity. From morn-
ing to night they heard men chopping wood, talking, and laughing up at the Hill Farm. They could see the sawhorses used for cutting lumber, and they barely made out a man's figure perched high on a ladder, waving his arms up and down. Joosep and Karla knew there had to be piles of fresh wood shavings and fine sawdust under the sawhorses, like flour in a chest, and they could imagine the clear smell of tree resin.

The boys longed to go and see it for themselves, but they dared not disobey their father and they feared Andres. So Liisi and Maret filled their skirts with sawdust and shavings to slip through the slats of the border fence for the boys. Of course, they had to do this during lunch when the men weren't looking. They ducked behind

stacks of firewood outside the house so their father wouldn't see them through the windows and tan their bottoms.

They never feared punishment from their mother because she never laid a hand on the girls, since they were not her own. She was afraid of hurting them, so she took it up with Andres when the girls' transgressions became too serious. Mari had a soft and pitying heart, so if they spoke to her politely, called her mother, and let tears slip down their cheeks, she always forgave them and forgot to tell their father. She even helped the children hide their tricks from Andres.

Andres was very strict with the children. He spanked them when they misbehaved, so the girls knew that bringing the sawdust to the Valley Farm boys, who laid on their stomachs behind the border fence, was a dangerous business—but the boys were very demanding. They never had enough.

"When our father starts building new bedrooms, we'll bring you some," offered Joosep, the older boy.

"When will he start?" asked Liisi.

"I don't know exactly, but he'll start soon," Joosep asserted.

"Will the sawdust you bring us be just as good?" Maret asked. "Just as dry and white? We gather it up where the sun is shining, so it feels warm. You can't get any better than this."

"We'll bring you the best, too. I promise," said Karla.

"That's for sure—only the best," confirmed Joosep.

"Do you also need shavings?" Liisi asked.

"We sure do," the boys replied almost in unison.

So the girls brought shavings as well, and shoved them through the fence slats one by one.

As they walked up the hill, side by side, Liisi asked her sister, "Do you think they'll really bring us sawdust and shavings?"

“You mean when their father builds the new bedrooms?” asked Maret.

“Yes.”

“Why wouldn’t they? They promised, so they have to,” figured Maret.

“But remember last summer, when we brought them wheat bread during the rye harvest? They promised to bring us some bread when they harvested their rye, but they never did,” recalled Liisi.

“That was just wheat bread. This is sawdust and shavings,” said Maret, defending the boys.

“Okay,” said Liisi, “but I don’t think they’ll bring us anything. They’re just trying to get us to act silly and bring them things. I won’t bring them anything more.”

“But you promised,” said Maret.

“I don’t care. I just won’t.”

Maret didn’t understand how Liisi could break a promise. She, too, had made a promise, and she planned to carry on.

“Why doesn’t Liisi come anymore?” asked Joosep.

“She doesn’t want to,” Maret replied.

“Why not? She promised,” said Joosep.

“Liisi doesn’t think you’ll bring us sawdust and shavings when your father starts building the bedrooms. That’s why,” Maret explained.

“Sure we will,” said Karla. “We have to.”

“But last summer we took some wheat bread when mother wasn’t looking and brought it to you, and you never brought any for us. You promised, but you didn’t bring it,” explained Maret.

“Is that why Liisi didn’t come?” Joosep asked.

“Yes,” said Maret.

The boys began whispering to each other and Maret watched them through the slats. Finally Joosep said, “Our mother just made some barley bread with fresh sour milk. She kneaded it herself. Do you want us to sneak you some?”

This was important. Maret had to tell Liisi. “Just wait!” she cried to the boys and dashed home to Liisi, who was busy playing with the shavings and sawdust.

“Joosep said he would give us some barley bread to make up for the wheat bread,” Maret told Liisi. She panted, trying to catch her breath. “It’s made with fresh sour milk and their mother kneaded the dough herself.”

Liisi and Maret ran back down to the fence together. There they made a final barley bread agreement with the boys.

“Now are you going to bring us some more sawdust?” Joosep asked Liisi.

“Yes, I am,” said Liisi.

“And do you believe that we’ll bring some for you when our father starts building the bedrooms?” Joosep continued.

“Yes, I do now,” Liisi confirmed.

The Valley Farm boys ran home to take some barley bread without asking their mother.

Liisi and Maret went home, too, their fears and worries gone. The girls sat happily in the sun by the woodpile, so they could see the Valley Farm boys return with the barley bread.

“I hope the men don’t come back from lunch too soon!” Maret sighed.

“They won’t,” Liisi assured her. “Those boys run fast.”

The girls kept watching for the boys, but there was no sign of them. Lunch ended and Liisi and Maret went inside to eat and take up their usual duty—looking after Indrek, who was climbing all

over the house and pulling things down on top of himself so everything rattled. Maret might've run to the fence every so often, but her father was working high on a wall where he'd see her.

By evening, Liisi thought Joosep and Karla had cheated them again, just like last summer. After the men finished working for the day, Liisi and Maret hurried outside to check the new heaps of sawdust and shavings. Suddenly, they heard a whistle. Like bolts of lightning, the girls dashed to the fence. On the other side, Karla sat on the cold ground.

"Here's the bread," said the boy, reaching through the fence. "Joosep couldn't come and I have to get right back." Then he ran home as fast as his feet could carry him.

"You see?" said Maret, feeling that Liisi never should've doubted the boys.

"So they brought it!" replied Liisi, breaking the bread in half.

"Mmm, good. Try it!" said Maret, chewing contentedly.

"Our wheat bread was good, too," Liisi responded.

The bread crunched between their teeth as they chewed, because Karla's hands were dirty and the bread had also scraped the ground as he passed it through the hole in the fence.

"Should we save some for the others?" Maret asked, thinking of Anni, Annu, Juku, and Kata—Indrek didn't count yet.

"They'd just tell mother," objected Liisi, adding, "and they didn't carry any sawdust or shavings."

Maret agreed, so they ate all the bread themselves.

When it was gone, Liisi and Maret carried more sawdust and shavings down to the fence. They wanted to make at least a couple of trips with full skirts that evening. The field had hardened in the evening chill, and the thorny stubbles were sharp and painful on the children's bare feet.

“We can stand it,” Liisi said encouragingly, and the girls bore the pain together.

Just then, Mari came outside and asked the maid, who was tending to the animals,

“Madli, have you seen the children? I can’t find Liisi and Maret.”

“There they are!” said Madli, pointing.

Mari took a few steps around the woodpile and saw Liisi and Maret, on their knees and up to something down by the fence. It was getting dark and she couldn’t quite see what they were doing.

Mari called, “Liisi! Maret!”

The children jumped up and started beating their jackets with their hands.

“Come on home!” shouted Mari. “You’ll get a chill. It’s gotten cold.”

The children approached their stepmother like criminals, assuming she’d seen it all.

“What were you doing down there?” Mari asked the red-faced pair.

“Nothing,” Maret replied.

“That’s right,” said Liisi.

“What are you hiding down there? Some kind of secret?” Mari asked.

“Nothing—just a hole in the fence,” Liisi said. Maret kept silent and stared at the ground.

“The way you talk about that hole makes me think I should go see it for myself.”

The children said nothing.

“Well, now, are you going to tell me what’s down there?” asked Mari. “Or do I have to go see for myself?”

The children began to cry—first Maret, then Liisi.

“Now, what kind of bad, bad hole do you have down there?” asked Mari, becoming more curious. She approached the sobbing children, patting their backs and hugging them.

The girls told her about the sawdust and the shavings, the barley bread, and even the wheat bread they’d taken for the boys during the rye harvest.

“Why did you take it secretly?” Mari asked.

“We were afraid,” Liisi answered.

“You silly girls!” Mari said. “You, Liisi, should’ve been smarter, big girl that you are. I wouldn’t have said no.”

“But you aren’t our mother. That’s the reason,” Maret explained, and the two girls began to cry again.

“Who says that?” asked Mari.

“Joosep,” Maret answered. “Their mother says you’re not our real mother.”

Mari didn’t know what to say. She felt like joining the girls in their tears, for they demanded an explanation and she had to give them an answer. She thought this moment might come, but she hadn’t expected it so soon. She thought there’d be more time, but now the moment had arrived, and because of such a little thing.

Mari took the children into her arms and caressed their tangled hair. For a long time they stood together, silently huddled behind the woodpile, where no one could see them. Only Madli the housemaid, who still moved between the house and the cowshed, wondered why the mistress stood with the children behind the woodpile in the twilight.

“Liisi,” Mari said in a motherly but serious tone, “you’re bigger and brighter, so I’m going to talk to you. Joosep is right. I’m your stepmother, but that’s no reason to hide things from me. Think

what would've happened if your father had seen you there today, or if I'd told him."

"Mother, don't tell father!" the children pleaded.

"Alright, I won't," Mari said, "but from now on you can't do anything without telling me. Do you promise?"

"We promise," the children replied.

"And you won't take any wheat bread during the harvest?"

"No, we'll ask you."

"And when the neighbor's children bring you barley bread, you'll tell me?"

"We will," promised Liisi.

"We'll bring some to you, too," promised Maret.

"Do you know what will happen if you behave like that?" Mari asked. The children waited expectantly for her to continue. "I'll be as good to you as if I were your real mother. When your father gets angry, I'll protect you like my own children. I won't love Juku or Kata any more than I love you, or Anni, or Annu. Is that alright with you girls?"

The children didn't understand very much of what she said, but her voice comforted them and they nestled closer to her.

"And we can go on bringing sawdust and shavings to the boys?" Liisi asked.

"Of course," Mari answered, "but don't take too much. Tell Joosep and Karla that we need sawdust and shavings, too."

"Mother," Maret asked, "will they bring us sawdust when their father builds new bedrooms?"

"Did they promise?" asked Mari.

"Yes, they did."

"Then they will," Mari answered. "Let's go inside now. It's cold. Can you feel it? Look, the ground is all frosty."

“You won’t tell father?”

“No, child,” Mari answered.

“Never, ever?”

“Never, ever, if you’re good and don’t do anything without first telling me,” explained Mari.

“We’ll be good,” they both promised.

The three of them felt happy with this secret agreement, almost as if they were conspiring together against Andres. That evening could’ve been one of the best in the lives of Liisi and Maret, but then Mari ruined it. She wanted to wash their feet with soap and warm water before they went to bed.

“If we don’t, the cranes might sow their turnips there,” said Mari, trying to convince the girls.

Foot washing was bothersome and painful. When the girls were in bed, under the blanket, Maret asked Liisi, “Would our real mother have washed our feet if it hurt so much?”

Liisi didn’t know for sure, but she didn’t think so.

Starting in early spring, all the children, big and small, ran around barefoot, first in the yard as soon as bare ground appeared, and later in the fields when they emerged from the snow. The children sloshed around in water and slush that almost reached their knees. When their feet got cold, they’d run around on the harder ground in the sun and let the spring wind dry their legs. Then they went back in the water and mud because that was much more interesting. They alternated between wet and dry ground until the skin of their feet, ankles, and legs looked like the cracked bark of a spruce. Sometimes drops of blood dried in the cracks of their skin, but they didn’t care. The spring wind blew across Vargamäe and a bright sun shone through snow-white clouds in the blue sky. Cranes cried and skylarks sang. They paid no attention to the drops of

blood until evening, when their feet were washed and smeared with pork fat. A piece of fat was warmed over the fire until it was soft enough to smear on their feet. “The crane’s turnip field” was treated so that nothing would grow there, but the crane still sowed his turnips with the help of the spring wind, the sun, the little brooks, and the birdsong. The children’s feet had to be washed and treated every evening, and just as the yards and fields were full of laughter and joyous shouts during the day, so each evening the house was filled with children’s cries at Vargamäe, as at Hundipalu, Kingu, Rava, or even snobbish Kassiaru. All children loved the spring wind and the mud, the sun, and the songs of the birds.

The next day at lunchtime, Liisi and Maret stood at the opening in the fence once again. They felt bolder, for they had only to be wary of father, not mother, and even father was not as frightening since mother had promised to stick up for them.

Of the Valley Farm boys, only Karla showed up, saying that Joosep couldn’t come. So Liisi and Maret told Karla they could only bring a few more loads, and then they’d have to stop because their family also needed the sawdust.

“What will you do with it?” wondered Karla.

“Mother says we’ll need it,” said Liisi.

“So your mother already knows?” Karla asked.

“Yes, she knows, but she won’t say anything,” said Maret.

“Does your father know, too?”

“No, he doesn’t.”

“But what if your mother tells him?”

“She won’t,” said Liisi and Maret together.

“But we’ll tell her everything,” Liisi continued, “and she’ll be good to us just like our real mother. Tell that to Joosep so he knows, and if your mother says again that our mother is not our real mother,

you can tell her, too. Our mother is our real mother and she loves us as much as Juku and Kata, so long as we're good and tell her everything."

"And we'll tell her everything," said Maret. "We already told her about your barley bread and the wheat bread we stole during the rye harvest."

"We don't tell everything," said Karla.

"Why not?" asked Liisi.

"Because we're boys, not girls," answered Karla.

"Why don't boys tell?" asked Liisi.

"I don't know," Karla answered. "Joosep knows, and he says so."

The three of them stood there, contemplating one of life's big mysteries. They stared at each other through the slats, two pairs of blue eyes on one side and a single pair on the other.

"Why won't you bring us sawdust anymore?" Karla asked again.

"Because we need it ourselves," said Liisi seriously, "but if you want, we can bring you some spruce bark from the sunlit side. It peels off like fur coats, slippery and smooth. Do you want us to bring you some?"

"Oh, yes! Why not?" Karla was all for it. Of course they needed spruce bark that peeled off like a fur coat.

"You know something else?" Liisi continued. "Our old house was built without a saw, only an axe. Our father said so and the other men said so, too, and everybody was amazed. There aren't any houses like that anymore. We had the last one. Nobody knows how old it was, or who made it. Just imagine—nothing but an axe! Would you like some pieces from the old house? Maybe some log ends? They're all black and shining, and the insides are brown all the way through. That's from the smoke. It's so hard and all this time it hasn't rotted, and it never will."

Karla wanted those log ends, too. The more they could bring, the better, because he and Joosep knew exactly what to do with them. He told Liisi and Maret to bring as many as they could carry to the fence and the boys would use them in just the right way.

So Liisi and Maret continued bringing treasures for the boys, but only so many, since they needed to save some for the family. The pile of materials grew on the other side of the fence and soon structures began to appear, but these were so intricate that Liisi and Maret couldn't make heads or tails of them, no matter how long they stared through the fence, their noses pressed flat against the slats.

They longed to climb over the fence and have a look, but they wouldn't risk a birching, so they had to be content peeking between the slats and listening to Joosep and Karla's explanations. The boys played out the war between Turkey and Russia. Their Uncle Priidu served in that war and he knew everything about it. Based on his recollections, the boys built forts and sculpted mountains. A shack made of wood shavings and one made of spruce bark were forts with black log ends as cannons. The boys cried out, "Bang!" when the cannons were fired.

As always during wartime, materials were scarce. There weren't enough shavings or spruce bark for the forts, sawdust for the snowy mountains, or log ends for the cannons. There wasn't much point to the war if Turkey had only one cannon and Russia two. If Joosep and Karla had enough sawdust and other materials, they could've taught Liisi and Maret how war was really waged. They could've built forts strong enough to withstand flying stones and snowy mountains so high you couldn't jump over them with a pole.

But Liisi and Maret wouldn't bring as much as Joosep and Karla asked because their own family needed the valuable materials.

Besides, if the girls took too much, their father would've noticed, a consequence they had to prevent at all costs.

Their mother lectured them. "Now, don't bother father or annoy him," she said. "He never has enough time and that makes him angry. He's building a new bedroom and a threshing barn. You can see how many men sit at our table—loaves of bread vanish from the oven like water on sauna stones. You'd think there were thieves at our meat barrel. That's why you've got to be good or else I'll get it, and so will you."

Mari was right. This was the first spring they hired an extra summer hand at the Hill Farm. Madis the cottager worked at the farm, too, since he was just as good with an axe as he was with a shovel. Working for the family seemed natural to him after Juss's death. He became the Hill Farm cottager once again, adding his cow to the family herd, putting his potatoes down with theirs, and mowing his hay along the edges of the farm's grasslands and marshes.

The old cottager's wife, who remained bitter at Andres for marrying Mari, and at Mari for becoming the mistress, had to accept them both. Even the beating she'd suffered at the hands of her old man was slowly fading from her memory. Of course, Lullu's song was very good. There'd never be a better one, but it seemed even Lullu's pranks couldn't trouble Andres and Mari. There was no poison strong enough to work on them. So, like it or not, the cottager's wife had to admit that her old man was right.

"Nobody can get Andres," he said. "Wait and see if one day he doesn't buy Lullu a mug of vodka at the tavern and say, 'You'd be best off sticking to hay eating and glass swallowing. Your songs don't amount to a damned thing.'"

The cottager's wife knew that, alone, Mari would've been an easy target, but now she was nestled under Andres's wing, raising her Juku and Kata and giving her husband more children. She bustled around like any busy mistress and was never stingy, almost always throwing in an extra handful. The cottager's wife recognized all this and that's why she spun yarn and knit socks for Mari all winter.

It seemed to everyone that things were going well for Andres and Mari. There was plenty of work to go around. The others might take a break from time to time, but not the master or the mistress. Even at church they worried over the farm. Only once a year did their concerns fall away, when they approached the altar and the pastor said, "This is my body and my blood..." Even so, they couldn't get everything done.

The soil around the berry bushes in the yard should've been turned and replenished in the autumn, but it wasn't. There was no time and the cold had set in early. In the spring, there were bigger concerns and they never found time to clean the garden, so one Sunday evening Andres finally picked up the rake, telling himself that gardening was not actual work. It was more like helping your neighbor or rescuing a sheep that got stuck in a hole, activities that even the Old Testament allowed on Sunday.

The fields, grasslands, and pastures needed attention as well. There wasn't enough time to do the jobs he planned—the jobs that were necessary everywhere on the farm.

Out in the fields, Andres first tackled the buried stones, prying them from the ground. He noticed a strange thing: in a field that he'd already cleared to protect his plow, a new piece of stone now cracked away. Where had it come from? Did the plow go deeper this year? It was set in the same notch...Were the stones rising from deep within the earth like fish in muddy water, surfacing

with open mouths? Or was Vargamäe itself like the jaw of some monster, always growing new teeth? It seemed to be both things at once. Andres cleared the fields of stones over and over again, but new and bigger stones always rose up to replace them. His spirits fell and he lost heart when he imagined a great heap of large and small granite stones inside this Vargamäe high ground, all eager to reach the sunlight on the surface of the earth, as if they shared something in common with the Vargamäe children. If new stones were always rising from the earth, when would Andres ever get to those on the surface, waiting, he imagined, like a pack of gray wolves? He no longer thought of a cleared field. Instead he obsessed over the stones, which seemed to be one with the Vargamäe cattle, multiplying and growing like the animals in the shed. They flourished through God's mercy. Andres could heave them loose and break them up endlessly, but still the gray herd would stand in the middle of the field, as if some vexatious being replaced each stone he hauled away.

Things were no better in the pastures and grasslands. They dug ditch after ditch, but before they finished a new one, the last one was already clogged, as if the fieldstones walked over secretly each night and smashed down its banks. There was a secret pact between the gray stones and the black earth of the bogs. Both worked to defeat Andres in the fields and marshes, from morning to night, from spring to autumn, from cradle to grave, and from generation to generation. He did not ponder this, for thinking makes a man sad and ages him before his time. Andres of Vargamäe knew it was better to toil. One's back became hunched, but that was easier to bear than sad thoughts.



Chapter 27

Andrek was a few months into his fourth year when Andres and Mari's second son was born. They named him Ants.

"This is a good year for it," said Andres. "If the potatoes turn out as fine as their tops, we'll have to build new barns next spring."

"I was hoping the cattle sheds would come first," said Mari. "Solid doors would protect the animals."

"No one is going to steal them," remarked Andres.

"Not steal them, but..."

She didn't finish the sentence, but Andres knew her meaning. "You keep coming back to that," he said.

"Yes, I do. I found a piece of fat and a shock of hair in the shed again," said Mari.

"Don't be so superstitious," Andres warned. "They can come and do whatever they like. The animals don't care."

"Well, why did that heifer die on us? She was big with calf. It wasn't the wind that did it. She'd have been a great cow, but we had to dump her in a pit. She wasted away until she finally went belly up."

"Who knows what sickness she suffered," offered Andres.

"Sickness..." Mari repeated. "Whatever it was arrived through her mouth. We don't know what those devils might've shoved down

her throat. That must be it. All winter Punik had a fever. She was dripping with sweat every morning. She'd dry up during the day but the next morning I'd walk into the shed and she'd be drenched again. That's how they upset the animals. Try to get into the Valley Farm shed and see what kind of locks and bolts they've put on the door. The mistress herself walks back and forth between the house and the shed with a lantern, keeping guard against God knows who, and all their animals are healthy. Our sheds are open and we have one burial after another. Big or small, we lose one every year."

"Alright, but we need the barns badly. There's no place to store the grain with a harvest so much larger than it used to be. We sell more grain now than we used to harvest altogether," Andres argued.

"Yes, but we have more livestock now as well. I don't know where to put them all. They're sleeping on top of each other. Those Valley Farm people, I just don't trust them. I think they slip into our shed to get at the animals," Mari added in a whisper.

"Stop talking nonsense," Andres objected. "Don't let the children or the servants hear you say such things. All we need is for a story like that to get around. We'd never hear the end of it."

"No one will hear it from me, but I know what I know. Supposedly the old mistress of Aaseme can bewitch animals and she taught me how to cure them with magic. I didn't want to try it without your permission, but now I'm telling you."

"I don't believe in magic and I'm not afraid of anybody," said Andres.

"Well," Mari replied, "one thing is sure: there's something wrong with our animals. We have no luck with them. When I lived here as a maid, it was different. I could understand if somebody else fed and watered them, but it's just me and I can't change what's happening. A sheep's neck starts to droop, and then she's finished. Come

spring, the animals won't stand up, and there are parasites under their tails..."

"We'll build the barns first and then the sheds," said Andres.

"Times are tough," Mari sighed. "Last winter, I thought I might catch the evil-doer if I stood guard in the shed, but I never did. Sometimes I found footprints in the morning and I'd follow them to the valley. There were always two sets, one facing toward the shed and one facing away. Sometimes he was careful to step in the same prints on his way home, but I could still see that the prints were doubled."

Andres and Mari had intended to discuss the christening party for their second son, but the cattle sheds and the barns took precedence. Eventually they decided to hold the christening feast at Whitsun, when everyone had the time. That way they could make preparations for both events at once. If they made enough beer, they might even have enough left over for the community manure spreading.

During the winter, they predicted that more malt than usual was necessary. Sacks of barley were set to soak in the lake well in advance and hung from a rope through a hole in the ice. When they brought the soaked barley home, they spread it in the big, new, well-heated threshing barn and left it to sprout. Soon the sprouts started to form a hummock. Comparatively, the stirring and drying process felt like a party. For Andres, handling the malt in the morning was like putting his hands together to say grace before a meal. He even took the pipe from his mouth and stuck it in his pocket.

The room was filled with the sweet smell of God-given grain. You could even detect the scent in the bedrooms. The master's face softened and he broke into a smile when heating the malt oven and reaching out his hand to check the temperature. He smelled

the malt and had others smell it, too, because the aroma indicated what kind of taste the beer would have. In the spring, when they'd ground the last of the malt at the mill, he went home and opened a bag of meal to smell it. He asked Mari to smell it, too. Whether the hops came from the garden or the store, their quality was always revealed by the smell.

It was important for the beer to be good, so good that anyone who drank heartily would break into song. If they liked the beer, they'd drink less vodka. Some people liked to add juniper for flavor, but Andres preferred the bitter taste of hops. He never used raw rye meal, although this was a common way to skimp when hosting a party. Beer made from raw rye caused a terrible stomach ache. Pearu sometimes made this sort of beer, but the real expert was the wealthy Kassiaru Jaska. It was no secret that anyone who downed a mug of his beer would need to duck around the corner.

Andres thought beer should put a song on your lips, not in your belly. He fermented his beer in oak casks, which built pressure from the gas inside. The plugs in the casks were made from alder, allowing excess gas to hiss through. On occasion, Andres checked his casks. If he saw the end boards bulging, he'd open the hiss plugs for a moment. He had to use all his strength to keep the plugs from flying out of his hand and into the air, leaving the beer to go stale.

The ceremonial task of tapping the first cask was entrusted only to Andres. It was hard and dangerous because the plug could slip from one's hand and beer would gush out. The stop had to be opened just slightly, so more foam ran into the mug than beer, and one's nose filled with the smell, the smell, the smell! The festive first pour was like a cold shower—it got all over Andres's hands and even in his eyes.

A few days before the holiday, Andres broached the first cask. They'd just slaughtered a calf that was raised on fresh milk, with

enough meat on it to make headcheese and roasts. Andres never butchered eagerly and he needed a drink before sharpening the knife.

It was always a horrible job. The worst came in autumn, when the excess sheep were cut up for meat. The children wandered to and fro, staring fearfully at each other with large, dumb eyes. The smaller children didn't understand what was going on and they continued to play and make noise, but their older siblings hushed them until they, too, knew something frightening was about to happen at Vargamäe.

Soon a potato basket filled with heads and feet arrived in the kitchen and mother removed the hair with boiling water and broke off the hooves. The children squatted around the basket, trying to recognize the animals. They'd given names to the sheep and ewes, and considered them good friends and acquaintances. At first, mother tried to chase them away from the basket, but eventually they were allowed to watch and discuss the proceedings among themselves.

Slaughtering the sheep was hard and horrible work, perhaps because it was done so furtively and the sheep was considered a saintly animal. According to songs in the church hymnal, no evil spirit could enter the sheep. The old master of Ämmasoo, an expert at gelding (he would geld anything but a stallion), never put a knife to a ram, young or old, without first baring his bald head. Even after he'd tossed down a mug of spirits and his eyes shot fire, he never left his hat on when gelding a ram because of the animal's saintly nature.

Pigs were another story. They screamed when a ring was put through their nose, and were even louder when they were slaughtered. Their screams somehow eased the children's feelings. Still,

as they listened at a window or a half-opened door to the pig's cries of distress, their limbs went stiff and cold. Usually the pigs were slaughtered early in the morning while the children slept, but if one of them woke to a pig's cries, he quickly called to his brothers and sisters, "Listen, they're killing a pig! It's screaming! Listen!" Eventually, the pig was muzzled, its mouth twisted shut so it could no longer scream. Then, it just whimpered in desperation until it went silent. The children listened and held their breath, as if the cries came from their own ranks.

They felt as if they'd peeked behind a curtain and seen one of life's big secrets. They wanted to see it more closely, but they weren't allowed. Their mother came later with the plugged blood bucket, and the men carried the lifeless pig. The children could see a big slash under its chin. They'd noticed long ago that bloodshed made the grown-ups move and talk in an unusual manner. That's why Andres took a drink from the christening beer before slaughtering the calf that had been raised purely on fresh milk. In fact, it was almost a heifer and good enough to keep as livestock.

Because of the christening, Whitsun at the Vargamäe Hill Farm was going to be especially festive. They baked holiday bread, supplementing their own flour with sacks from the store. They made whole-grain bread and even tried their hand at sweet-and-sour rye bread. They made sausages and more sausages. The sausage-making never seemed to end—there were always more casings in the bowl and more porridge in the pot. So many sausage skewers were needed, they couldn't make enough. Liisi and Maret made skewers and so did young Andres. The farmhand and the master made them as well. Still they were short, so the mistress and the maid put their knives to work on the wood.

Liisi and Maret worried about the feast because this year they had to mind the cattle. Weeks before the holidays, they spoke to mother, “Do we still have to take the cows out during the party?”

“Of course,” said Mari, “The animals need to eat, don’t they?”

After giving it some more thought, Mari figured the children could stay at the house at least for the first day of the holiday, and the animals could graze by the alder grove, but she kept it as a surprise. It turned out even better than Mari had hoped, for Madis the cottager took the animals to pasture on the first day, saving the grass by the alder grove for the second day.

A great many guests were invited to the christening. Recent years had been good and there was food and drink for everyone. From the neighborhood they’d invited Kingu Priidu of Soovälja, a stout bachelor who preferred winking at the girls to finger-wrestling with the men. Even though the weather was warm, he tied a plain white kerchief around his neck, topped it with a silk tie, and covered both with a pink woolen scarf, the ends of which hung from his jacket. Walking or sitting, he huffed and puffed like a clumsy old bear in a sauna.

Vihukse Anton had also been invited, along with his old wife, because he’d been good enough to help Andres haul building materials. He was a quiet little man who fell asleep at the table after a couple of beers, his last bite of food still lodged in his mouth. Years earlier, he’d snored so loudly in church that the parson signaled for his neighbors to wake him. Anton never again sat near the pulpit, but found a pew near the back where his snores wouldn’t reach the parson’s ears. Though he slept easily on Sundays and during the holidays, he could go for weeks with hardly any sleep at all when there was a heavy workload.

Ämmasoo Villem and Võõsiku Mihkel were invited with their wives, and so were Hundipalu Tiit and Rava Kustas. Some men, like Kukessaare Jaan, weren't invited because they lived too far away and didn't know the locals.

From the forest lands of Vällimaa, the masters of Aaseme, Võlla, and Aiu came with their wives. A couple of farm owners from Luiste also brought their wives. Kassiaru Jaska was invited, but he didn't show up because his wife, the daughter of the granary keeper at the manor, spoke a few words of German and they considered themselves above Andres and Mari.

For the past few years, Andres had gotten along peacefully with Pearu and, as a result, he invited Pearu and his whole family, including his farmhand and maid. The cottage people were there, too, of course, because they were practically family, always helping out on the farm.

To complete the guest list, the local tailor was invited. He was a great singer and patriot, an idealist of high principles. He had hundreds of rubles collecting interest in the city bank and he intended to go on saving them until he had a thousand. Then, he'd quit his work as a tailor and dedicate himself to his nationalist ideals, sing and play in a brass band, give rousing speeches, and act as a model for others serving his native land. Taar the tailor believed that one needed a solid financial base in order to show proper love for the fatherland and respect for the nationalist cause. So, the rubles earning interest were a vital part of his patriotic fervor.

In appearance, Taar was short and stocky with a pinkish complexion, a perpetual smile, and the bright blue eyes of a child. He could sing the whole day through, and if the local boys and girls knew any patriotic songs, it was only thanks to Taar. To the boys who tended cattle, the tailor presented a very different ideal: he

could whistle without pursing his lips. The cowherds wouldn't have believed it possible if they hadn't seen it with their own eyes. You couldn't tell by looking at him that the tune came from his lips. The boys and even some of the farmhands struggled to imitate him, but compared to them the tailor whistled like a young god, praising his beloved fatherland.

The parson came to the house to christen the baby because Andres didn't want to bring him to the church. Rattling down bad roads was too much for a tiny child. The parson could only come in the afternoon, so the hour of the party was set.

On the first day of Whitsun, the Vargamäe Hill Farm was alive with chattering guests. They could be heard in the bedrooms, the main room, the threshing barn, and the front yard. Not everyone fit in the bedroom to witness the holy rites, so some stood in the hallway, in the yard near the door, and under the open windows. The song came in waves, as in the church, where the parson, the organist, and the choir pressed ahead, those in the middle of the church picked up after them, and the verse began near the altar just as the organ finished it. Here at Vargamäe, the parson was still the parson, the tailor stood in for the organist, Andres and Hundipalu Tiit served as the choir loft, and the others were churchgoers. At the very end, the song reached the altar—that is, the people under the windows. Many of the men had already helped themselves to the christening beer, so it was clear why the parson and organist raced ahead and the train of guests struggled to keep up. Perhaps the first to appreciate the joy of song was Vihukse Anton, who snored so loudly that his wife had to shake him.

“Stop this snoring, you silly bum,” she said.

“If he did, he wouldn't be worthy of his name,” Rava Kustas whispered in her ear.

Despite all this, the holy ceremony turned out very nicely and the parson, the parents, and all the guests were satisfied. Afterward, everyone sat down at the table with blessed mouths and hearts. When the parson began the Lord's Prayer, the whole crowd droned along.

The parson sat at the head of the table with Andres on his right and Hundipalu Tiit on his left. Tiit was expected to make polite, learned conversation with the minister so he'd feel comfortable.

The long table was as white as chalk and groaned under the weight of bowls and plates heaped with pork, which had been boiled in the cauldron or grilled on hot stones so that everyone could have plenty of whatever he liked best. The guests were welcome to help themselves to as much as their bellies could hold, to eat until they were sick to their stomachs, to become so full that the food was stuck in their throats. Alongside the meat were bowls of headcheese, plates of salted herring, cups full of butter, and stuffed sausages swimming in pure melted fat that begged for finger lickings. The diners had to remind themselves to save room for the last course: cakes with coffee and sugar chunks as hard as stones.

But before anyone dared to touch the food, they waited to see what the parson would do because he certainly wouldn't start eating without some ceremony. He recited a verse for all to sing and finished with a prayer. Everything seemed in order, but when the guests started to eat, the parson stood up once again and delivered a long, secular discourse. He was a nationalist just like the tailor, and he couldn't help preaching what he considered uplifting ideas whenever and wherever he could. He urged the prosperous farmers to buy shares in the Estonian-owned Linda Shipping Society, the Estonian-language Alexander School, the Society of Estonian Literati, and the *Postimees* newspaper, among other patriotic causes. In the same spirit, he now spoke to the wealthy local farm owners.

The tailor was captivated by the parson's speech since it could've come straight from his own heart, but most of the guests didn't know what to make of it. Vihukse Anton strained to pay attention. If the parson had gone on five minutes more, he wouldn't have been able to keep his eyes open.

The only man there who might've commented on the parson's speech was Hundipalu Tiit, but he didn't seem very enthralled with what he heard. He wanted to object while the parson was speaking and everyone noticed this, even Pearu, who sat opposite the fervent tailor and felt uneasy. Pearu couldn't stand the parson or the tailor. He was suspicious of anyone who spoke of the fatherland and patriotism, about which Pearu knew nothing.

If he'd known a little more, he might've said to all patriots, "We aren't some nobles or local jerks. You can't tell us about our fatherland. We're just people of the land. We speak the language of the earth and understand it just fine, whether it's our fatherland or motherland."

Pearu decided that he'd side with Hundipalu Tiit if Tiit disagreed with the clergyman and, sure enough, Tiit started arguing with the parson, who was expressing the moderate political views of Jannsen and Hurt and denouncing those of Jakobson. Tiit couldn't stand that kind of talk, being a faithful reader of the *Sakala* newspaper and a fan of its satirical characters Kalja Pärt and Nalja Märt.

He could've tolerated the parson, who knew where to draw the line and cautiously tacked between the more dangerous rocks. The tailor, however, wasn't so diplomatic and, in his enthusiasm for the speech, brought up issues and names that the parson had carefully avoided. So Tiit went against the tailor and not the parson, who'd started the whole discussion. At first, the parson acted as a mediator, a role appropriate for a servant of the church, but then an

odd thing happened, which often happens when servants of God meddle in secular concerns. The more the parson tried to diffuse the situation, the angrier the men became. The parson's presence made the men feel as if they'd been created by God for the sole purpose of insulting and vilifying each other.

"I can understand that the clergy supports the *Postimees*, but I don't know what to say about a tailor who tags along with them," said Tiit.

"Doesn't a tailor have the right to love his country and fight for truth and justice?" asked Taar, his cheeks blazing and his blue eyes filled with childlike earnestness.

Drunken Pearu decided to add something to the conversation and addressed the tailor, "Now you listen here, neighborhood tailor Taar, whose name in other words is sour kvass, your truth is a coat and your justice is a pair of pants. But where did you get the right to make for me, Pearu the rich farmowner, a pair of pants with a bottom that hangs down to my knees and legs so tight I walk like a rooster? Answer me that, here in our German fatherland, if your cause is really truth and justice, just like my neighbor Andres who celebrates his son's christening today. We are all guests at this feast, except you, dear tailor. You're a foreigner, so give me an answer, because the pastor always says, 'Thou shalt, thou shalt,' but the parson always says, 'Thou shalt not, thou shalt not...'"

Pearu prattled on with no intention of listening to the tailor's answer. The parson used Pearu's interruption as a chance to get away from the topic of patriotism. "And whose orders does Pearu obey," he asked, "the pastor's or the parson's?"

"When I got a clear head, I follow the parson's orders, and when I'm drunk, the pastor's, because then I have to lay out all my points to the tailor," answered Pearu.

“You know, we live in merciful, not fearful times, because we’re living under the wings of the Russian eagle,” Tiit explained. “But the *Postimees* wants us to live in hell under the German whip.”

“My friend,” the parson said, “that’s not what *Postimees* wants. On the contrary, the paper warns us against this and has always done so. Go slowly and wisely, only then do you escape the whip—that’s what the paper says. Jakobson is walking into a storm for himself and his children. He who sows the wind reaps the whirlwind, says the proverb, and I say that whoever sows hostility will reap trouble, and whoever sows war will reap blood.”

“Right you are, Reverend, very right,” cried the tailor.

“Now listen here, sour kvass,” said Pearu from across the table, “if you keep on shouting, you won’t sew for me anymore. You got no right to scream like that when the bottom of my pants hangs down to my knees.”

Nobody paid attention to Pearu, not even the tailor, who was more interested in what the parson had to say. He’d long wanted to work for the parson, but the man always used another tailor. Taar would’ve worked for free if the parson let him. Then all the best clients would be his: the artisans and dandies at the manor, the parish scribes, and the clerk and chief justice. Only the baron himself, the estate overseer, and the pastor would be missing from his client list, but that didn’t bother him as they went to a German tailor anyway.

The tailor had planned to reel in the parson that day. He was on his way to Ämmasoo, where the churchwarden lived, when he heard that all the Ämmasoo folks were at Vargamäe, so he stopped by and was invited to join the christening celebration.

“The threats you’re making are the threats of greed and avarice,” said the tailor to Pearu, who kept repeating that he wouldn’t hire the

tailor again. "Neither my mind nor my body have ever been guided by greed or avarice, only by noble ideals, and by truth and justice."

"What would a poor man do with truth and justice?" Rava Kustas remarked jeeringly. "It's the rich who need those things."

"You're right about that, Kustas!" Pearu cried. "Let the Reverend Parson himself tell us what truth and justice do for me when I'm suing my dear neighbor or when he grabs me by the jewels so hard I nearly black out! And tell me, what do I do if he's a lot bigger than I am?"

The whole room rocked with laughter that spilled through the open windows and onto the yard. Even Andres laughed, though he was sitting with the parson and Hundipalu Tiit, who kept straight faces as if they hadn't heard Pearu.

"Well, the tailor is a rich man. That's why he feels as he does," said Vihukse Anton, who'd nearly fallen asleep during the discussion but perked up when everyone started laughing. "In ten years he'll have a thousand rubles earning interest in the bank."

"Haven't I gotten it justly and through honest labor?" the tailor asked.

"Sure, with just and honest labor," agreed Rava Kustas, "but your 'justice' will soon turn you into one of the German nobles. You'll be sewing German pants."

"Now listen, you kvass-tailor, or Taar in other words. You're nothing but a flunky to the Germans," said Pearu, emptying his glass. "You're not gonna sew for me anymore and I'm not gonna wear your clothes."

"Aren't you right now wearing a pair of pants I made for you?" asked the tailor.

Pearu was infuriated. Hundipalu Tiit signaled to Andres that Pearu and the tailor were turning a pleasant discussion into a sour

conflict. Andres was waiting for a suitable moment to step in but then Pearu did something so brash and unexpected that Andres lost his opportunity—Pearu tore off his pants and pulled them over the tailor's head.

“There! Take your pants! Dress up your noble ideas and let them show off your truth and justice. I don't need them. My ass isn't big enough for them since I don't have noble ideas!”

The whole party roared. The loudest shriek came from the tailor, his head covered by Pearu's pants. It was the wildest thing they'd ever seen: a pair of pants on the tailor's head, the legs dangling over the bowls of meat and headcheese. The guests laughed so hard that tears rolled down their cheeks. Andres couldn't help laughing along with the rest even though he was the host and should've disapproved. The parson and Tiit were both deeply abashed. They couldn't imagine a more foolish situation than a working man pulling his pants over the head of the tailor, a man of ideas. What's more, it happened on a feast day during a christening celebration that had just been blessed by the words of God.

“My dear host, you should tame your guests,” said the parson, turning to Andres. Andres didn't know how to respond so Tiit spoke for him.

“The Reverend Parson doesn't seem to know Pearu very well. Andres didn't have to invite him, since everyone knows how he behaves, but Pearu is his next door neighbor...”

The incident might've ended but Pearu sat at the table in just his shirt and no pants. Something more was bound to happen.

“Hey, old girl!” shouted Pearu to his wife, who sat at the other end of the table. “Go home and bring me those homespun pants you made. How long can I sit with bare thighs at the same table as the

Reverend Parson? And bring the other jacket that's on the hook, the one that wasn't made by sour kvass."

Pearu's wife headed home to fetch another set of clothes for her husband, but since Pearu remained in his night garb and wished to stay on, seeing as he was an honest grain thresher, the guests began to leave and the party broke up earlier than planned. The parson didn't even say a closing prayer because everyone's thoughts were on Pearu's pants rather than Holy Scripture. It all turned into such a mess because the tailor, in his fight for truth and justice, had attached too little importance to the seat of a farm owner's pants.

Pearu rose from the table with the others and walked among the guests with bare legs. He wasn't really indecent. He wore a white linen shirt that hung to his knees and a colorful chintz neckerchief, but he offended the farm mistresses and they decided something must be done. When Pearu stepped into the sunlight, the women appeared with switches, gooseberry branches, and freshly cut nettles and began thrashing him, hitting the bottoms of his bare legs over and over. At first Pearu just bore it, but soon he took flight and the women chased after him shouting. Pearu ran out the gate and along the edge of the rye field, but he was drunk and stumbled and fell. The women were close on his heels and he had no time to pick himself up and run away again, so he squatted down and pulled his shirt over his legs and feet. This didn't stop the women. In a second, the shirt was pulled up over his head and the switches, gooseberry branches, and nettles battered his back, waist, and buttocks until they drew blood. Pearu screamed.

"Beg forgiveness!" demanded the mistress of Hundipalu.

"I beg forgiveness that the women wanted to see my ass," answered Pearu.

"Hit him again!" the women all shouted.

Pearu's shirt was pulled up above his waist and blood trickled down his pink flesh. The men kept their distance, egging the women on. The children watched from the rye field and peeked around fence posts.

"Will you now beg forgiveness?" the women asked Pearu.

"Yes," he answered tamely.

"Then beg!"

Pearu pleaded with the women earnestly and the beating ended. The women went away and left Pearu to look after himself. He squatted next to the rye field for a while and then got to his feet. He was about to head back to the gate when he saw his neighbor's second son, Indrek, sitting at the edge of the rye, staring at him and crying. At a stroke, Pearu's heart softened and tears pricked his eyes. He went over to the child and lifted him up. The boy cried even louder but didn't wiggle away, and Pearu, too, started to wail, walking through the gate with the child in his arms. Mari met them in the middle of the yard.

"He's the only one who takes pity on me," cried Pearu, standing before his neighbor's wife, "and they want to send him to school and make a horse thief of him. All of them: Andres, Tiit, the tailor, and the parson. They're all after his soul. For as it says in Holy Scripture, 'Oh thou lamb of God...' and all the rest that's not in the Scripture."

Just then, the Valley Farm mistress arrived with a pair of homespun pants and a sheepskin jacket. Pearu handed the child to Mari and called to her.

"Old lady of mine, my precious sheepface, at last you've come to my rescue! These women were going to kill me. It doesn't say in Holy Scripture 'thou shall not covet thy neighbor's husband,' it says, 'thy neighbor's wife!'"

“Put your pants on!” the women shouted, but he ignored them and continued speaking to his wife.

“Dear old lady, just look at what they’ve done to me.” He raised his shirt to his armpits.

“Thrash him again!” cried the women, seeing his back beaten red. “Look how he pulls his shirt right up to his neck.”

“If you women can pull up my shirt, why can’t I?” Pearu answered.

He draped the pants over his left arm, put his other arm around his wife’s shoulders, and paraded around the yard in the sunshine.

“Old man, put on your pants,” his wife begged.

“Let the blood dry first,” Pearu answered.

But he pulled on his pants and jacket anyway. Suddenly a new thought occurred to him.

“Where’s that tailor?” he shouted. “Because of him, these women attacked me. Where is mister flatiron and sour kvass?”

The tailor and the parson both left. The parson said he was pressed for time to explain his abrupt departure, but that was clearly an excuse to get away from Pearu and his pranks. The tailor made excuses as well because he knew Pearu and could tell this episode wouldn’t end easily. Besides, he wanted to be alone with the parson to talk about a tailoring order. Although it was the first holy day, and thus improper to bring up work and business, the sun was about to set and Pearu’s foolishness had already marred everything, so the tailor didn’t feel out of line discussing secular matters with the parson. He was, after all, the parson, not the pastor, and not quite so central to the church. When you talked to the pastor, even plowing or spreading manure seemed to violate the Lord’s Prayer and Holy Scripture.

As he handed the reins to the parson, Andres apologized for his neighbor but nothing he said could erase Pearu’s tomfoolery. As

they travelled down the Hill Farm road together, the tailor told the parson how annoyed he was by Pearu.

“It’s sad, very sad indeed, that Pearu cares not about enlightening his soul and rejects patriotic ideas.”

“But those women! They were tough,” the parson chuckled. “I’m sure they’ll manage to enlighten his soul and teach him some patriotism eventually.”

The tailor was a bachelor with a sober life, and he couldn’t understand why the parson was so amused. When they reached the Aaseme fields at the end of the causeway, he repeated his thought.

“No, Reverend, the people don’t want enlightenment.”

Back at the gate, Andres said, “Well, now the air is clear.”

“That damned Pearu chased the parson away,” said the old Aaseme man. As a warden of the church, he was embarrassed that such crude behavior had occurred in his presence.

“Never mind the parson, it’s a pity the tailor left,” said Hundipalu Tiit. “He could’ve sung for us. In church, you hardly hear the parson, but when Taar opens his mouth at the edge of the choir box, his voice rings throughout the church. Even the pastor can hear him at the altar.”

To keep the party going, the men tried growling through a few songs, but Pearu’s contributions threw the others off.

“Let the women sing instead,” suggested Hundipalu Tiit.

“Old ladies and crones, mistresses and young wives!” Pearu called out, staggering toward them. “Let us hear your lovely voices, you who beat me bloody. I’ll just sit here on the grass before you and listen, without a sound, without even raising my eyebrows.”

Pearu gabbed with the women, whose company he enjoyed, and the men stretched out on the fresh grass between the bushes in the orchard. Without Pearu around, they tried to steer the conversation

back to the topic of patriotism, but only Hundipalu Tiit had something to say. The rest knew nothing about such matters, except maybe Andres of Vargamäe. In addition to religious books, Andres had a few secular tomes in his closet, including one as big as the Bible, although no one knew what the book was about because its cover and some of its pages were missing. Hundipalu Tiit had once looked at that book but couldn't make heads or tails of it.

Tiit liked to talk and he was good at it. His speeches always began with a very ordinary sentence, to which he appended, "as 'so-and-so' has said." Nobody knew who 'so-and-so' was, so Tiit went on to explain and his lecture flowed freely, touching on the Estonian national awakening, which was then in full bloom, and addressing the Alexander School, the radical Carl Robert Jakobson's three patriotic speeches, the Linda Shipping Company, Hurt's essays on Estonian history, the life of Joseph Haydn, the Estonian Society of Literati, the comic characters Nalja Märt and Kalja Pärt, Lydia Koidula's *Miller on the Stream*, and the sad tale of Pious Jenoveva. Jakobson was a special favorite because he'd come to live among the forests and marshes only a few years later than Hundipalu Tiit himself, so it was fair to say that Tiit had not followed Jakobson's example, but rather that Jakobson had followed Tiit's. If Tiit had served as the example for Jakobson, then it stood to reason that he was also imitated by the local men in road building, land tilling, ditch digging, orchard planting, and beekeeping. At least that's how Tiit saw it.

Pearu crept closer to listen since he wasn't doing very well with the ladies. At first he cracked jokes but none of them paid any attention. Instead they all listened attentively to Tiit, as if he were the pastor talking about the tortures of hell. So Pearu, too, fixed his

eyes on the orator, taking in every word as Tiit became more and more excited.

“If only the parson could hear this!” sighed Pearu, staring straight at Tiit’s mouth. But he couldn’t pay attention for very long. Soon his tired eyes began to close. He popped them open again, but finally his eyelids closed for good. Lying on the grass beside him, Vihukse Anton began to snore. The old Aaseme man propped his chin on his hand, and the pipe dropped from his mouth. Soon the others began to doze as well, until most of Tiit’s congregation was snoring away. Only Andres, who sat beside Tiit, and Kingu Priidu stayed awake. Priidu still wore his neckerchief and woolen scarf, and his forehead was wet with perspiration.

“Let them sleep,” said Andres quietly.

Tiit agreed, but his speech was in full swing and Pearu woke up instantly when his loud, clear voice suddenly halted.

“What a dirty trick!” Pearu cursed, opening his eyes wide. “I couldn’t keep my eyes open, as if my old lady was reading the Bible or the pastor was giving a sermon. Tiit, you ought to educate your son to be a pastor. You’ve got such a good voice, maybe your son will have the same. Hey Vihukse, what’s all this snoring? And you, Aaseme Aadu, where’s your pipe? You’re setting the grass on fire. Why are all you damned fools sleeping? Can’t you hear Tiit? Wake up or the women will come around with their switches!”

Everyone woke up, but Tiit couldn’t get back to his speech again. Every time he uttered, “as so-and-so said,” one of the other men would interrupt him. Pretty soon, everybody had something important to add and they all shouted over one another.

During supper, there was a general hubbub at the table. Even some of the women joined after a drink of ladies’ wine or a few sips from the men’s mugs. The two Vargamäe farm mistresses kept silent

and Andres' voice was hardly heard, but Pearu shouted enough for all of them. Even when he tried to speak confidentially to the man seated next to him, he couldn't help but shout. His neighbor's ears stood up to it well, and the man didn't even shake his head. If such a secret had been shouted into a dog's ear, the animal would surely have raised its nose skyward and howled.

The party continued after supper and well into the night. Toward morning, the men began to leave, one by one, but long after the sun rose, Pearu still sat there with a beer mug. Next to him, Vihukse Anton snored, his chest on the table. Pearu tried to wake him without success, so he sipped his beer alone and babbled to himself.

"He sleeps...they all sleep...I stand alone...in front of our Lord. Hallelujah! Amen! The birds in the sky toil not, nor do they spin... and all the rest. Amen."

"Let's go home, old man. Everyone's asleep," said his wife for the tenth time.

"Dear old woman," said Pearu, forcing his eyes open, "we stand alone in front of our Lord...as the Scriptures say...uh...our days are a shadow...and all the rest. Here, have a drink, my old lady, my precious sheepface."

His wife didn't want a drink. She only wanted to get her old man home. She put her arms around him and tried to lift him from the table. He struggled to his feet and they started toward their house. The road was very narrow, crooked, and steep but, thankfully, it was downhill.

When the master and mistress of the Valley Farm reached their gate, the church bells began to ring.

"Good bells," babbled Pearu, leaning on his wife as he tottered into the yard. "Very good bells...across the bog...across the marsh..."

across the hayfields...good bells...ding-dong, dong-a-ding, ding-dong, ding-a-dong.”

So the christening party ended on the morning of the second holiday, with the sun high in the heavens.

The skylarks sang above Vargamäe.



Chapter 28

That winter was a time of great sorrow. No one understood what could've brought on such dark times except for the pastor in his pulpit. To him, all was clear. Every Sunday he blamed the people and all their gross sins. They all wanted to live like aristocrats, but God wouldn't be mocked. "Whatsoever a man soweth, so shall he reap." And "He that serves his flesh shall reap of the flesh eternal damnation."

The tragedies began at Kassararu. One day old Jaska returned from a fair and shortly after that his children grew ill, one after the other, as if a witch had sent him home with diseases. The illness quickly turned fatal, swelling the children's throats so they couldn't breathe. Before anyone realized the severity of what was happening, the first child died and then the second, too. There was nothing to do but arrange their funerals.

At the Kassararu farm, the funeral dinner met the high standards of the well-known Jaska. The masters and mistresses of the neighborhood farms were all in attendance. Very few families were missing, but among those were Andres and Mari. Of course they'd been invited, but they couldn't forget the sting of waiting in vain for the Kassararu family at their Whitsun christening party. If Jaska

couldn't be bothered to come to Vargamäe, why should Andres go to Kassiaru? Were funerals more important than christenings?

The funeral dinner was mournful and tinged with fear, for as they honored the two children who rested in their coffins, arms crossed over their chests, three others lay in their beds still struggling for life. So grave was their condition that the mother remained at their sides while her deceased children were taken to their final resting place, and the funeral party returned from the cemetery at dusk to find two more small bodies at Kassiaru. Jaska's twin boys left the world as they'd entered it—together. In deep shock, the guests couldn't think of food or drink. Their minds turned to their own children who waited alone at home. Some skipped dinner and climbed into their sleighs, hurrying home as if they were chased by the devil. They left in silence, their horses snorting and steaming. The very best hot blood sausages, bowls of meat, plates of head-cheese, cumin bread, and white bread sat untouched on the table at Kassiaru.

At the subsequent funeral for the twin boys, held just days later, only a few guests attended. The Kassiaru family, in a despair that brought them close to madness, didn't know who to invite and who not to. The tragedy was too great for the father and mother to bear, even though he was a clever horse trader and she was educated like an aristocrat.

Following their four siblings to the cemetery were yet two more bodies, and they were laid to rest side by side. The last was placed in his grave so quietly that he might've been the child of a simple cottager, not that of Kassiaru Jaska and his wife, Matilde. Only the tolling bells announced the funeral of the master's children. Six-month-old Maali, who'd been the apple of her parents' eyes when first she fed at her mother's breast, was the only one who survived.

The mother sat like a wax statue, indifferent and cold, caring little if the one in her lap lived or joined the others in the graveyard. When the first two lay dying, she cried. When the second pair died, she wrung her hands, her eyes gleaming with sorrow. At the deathbed of the last two children, she turned into a living shadow that wandered the spacious rooms of Kassiaru.

Neither Kassiaru Jaska nor his wife had ever been a frequent churchgoer, but now their hearts weakened and their knees shook. Jaska's wife couldn't endure the pain and she sought comfort from the pastor, hoping he'd explain why they had to bear this cross. The pastor was conflicted during these trying days. What choice did he have but to admonish the rich mistress and her husband so full of swagger? The Lord couldn't look away disinterestedly as Jaska of Kassiaru dashed from fair to fair, trading horses. The Lord didn't like horse trading, nor did He tolerate carousing, said the pastor.

When Matilde returned home and told her husband what the pastor had said, his heart hardened and, as if truth and justice were on his side, he replied, "Horse trading! Just horse trading! As if I've done nothing else in my entire life. For the past ten years, haven't I bought oxen for the landlord, profitably and well? That work should be pleasing to God."

"Yes, it should," the mistress replied meekly. "Maybe that's why we still have Maali as our joy and hope."

"Don't be too proud. You never know when she, too, might be snatched from us," he responded, as if challenging God.

His wife began to sob, "You talk as if it's a pity our Maali was spared."

"No," said the man, "but my soul cries, 'Why us?' Why were we singled out like the worst kind of criminals, as if nobody else ever dealt in horses or took a drink at the tavern? Why, even at the tavern

I bought drinks for everyone. No one else does that. They just drink alone. So why did our children die? Is that justice?”

“The pastor says that you shouldn’t demand justice, but pray for grace. Everything else is evil,” relayed the mistress, wiping her eyes.

“Why should I alone pray for grace and not others?” asked Jaska. “Am I the poorest and most wretched? Others can live with justice but I have to pray for grace, though my farm is bigger and I have more money?”

“Perhaps others will face times of trial as we have,” sighed the mistress, and deep within she almost wished the Lord would bring tribulations to their neighbors. If others had to pray for grace, then perhaps her husband would do it, too. Otherwise his stony heart might lead him to give up his last child rather than face the Almighty.

Not too long after this, it seemed God heard the silent wishes of the lady of Kassiaru. The same terrible illness of the throat, which overtook her children, began to visit the children of those who attended the first funeral at Kassiaru. It was as if God’s wrath had come down on her farm with such fury that anyone who helped bury her children or comforted her family was visited by the same sorrow.

Children from the Valley Farm, and from Hundipalu, Ämmasoo, and Rava all took ill, and soon death reaped its harvest everywhere. Everyone was so busy burying their own children that few guests were available to attend the funerals.

At the Valley Farm, two children died, a daughter and a son. The oldest and youngest children survived. At Hundipalu, they buried two children, and four were left alive and well. Andres and Mari were invited to all the funerals, for their children still ran around the farm happily.

On a cold, clear Sunday morning that felt overwhelming and ominous, everybody set about burying their dead. The birches that edged the fields and the thicket by the bog were covered with white hoarfrost, as if suddenly decked with luminous foliage. The rising sun looked like it was dipped in blood. From a distance, the silhouette of a black grouse stood out against the blazing glow, like burnt embers.

At Hundipalu, they were loading the coffins onto a sleigh when two or three horses came into view down past the bog. Rava Kustas approached, carrying his little son, who was taken by death from his mother's breast. Rava had not yet reached the Hundipalu field when another sleigh appeared further down the road. A tired horse brought the casket of Kukessaare Jaan's daughter, who was old enough to tend cattle. The two funeral parties stopped at Hundipalu, waiting for a third sleigh to join their procession, just as God had placed the farms around the bog at creation.

So the four wooden boxes descended the Hundipalu rise, one after the other, toward the bog. Under the sleigh runners, the snow screeched as if a thousand teeth were being crushed in fury and, from afar, it sounded as if the children still cried in the white plank boxes that rested on piles of straw, though by this time everyone was deaf to suffering.

When the procession approached Ämmasoo, one coffin had already been loaded into a sleigh and another was lifted in beside it. The first carried Anna of Võõsiku, and the other carried her neighbor, Võõsiku Kusti. The children, who'd once played together, would travel to the graveyard in each other's company. Hundipalu Tiit, riding at the head of the procession, stopped his horse long enough for Ämmasoo and Võõsiku to pass, and then he continued on.

The mourners glanced across the bog as they passed the Kingu farm and saw a solitary figure standing like a black post. It might've been Priidu himself, watching the funeral procession from a distance. He was a bachelor with no children to tempt death, and the children of the Soovälja men were all alive and well.

"Priidu gets off easy," remarked the hunchbacked Ämmasoo mistress. "No children to bury."

Her husband said nothing but far behind them, where the others couldn't hear, Rava Kustas spoke to his wife as if in response, "Priidu has no problems. He just strums away on the zither and lets other men's children do the dancing."

"Must you joke even today?" his wife reproved him.

"I'm not joking," Kustas defended himself. "Priidu has no wife or child, just a zither, and a zither never dies, does it?"

Nothing more was said about Priidu, whom they thought they saw standing on the hill. The procession continued in silence. The snow shrieked under the sleigh runners as they ran between the frost-covered birches and in every sleigh the mourners wiped away tears, feeling sorry for Priidu, who stood by himself on the hill. Even Kustas wiped his eyes, though he'd poked fun at Priidu and his zither.

As they neared the Valley Farm, everyone could see several horses harnessed to a sleigh that carried two coffins. The funeral procession might've erupted into sobs at the sight, but the crunch of snow under the runners was the only sound that could be heard.

At the Valley Farm, they'd just finished preparing the sleigh when the procession arrived. They all went on together, first the two coffins from the Valley Farm, followed by the coffin from Ämmasoo, then Võõsiku, the two from Hundipalu, then Rava, and finally Kukessaare. So Kingu Priidu had a great deal to look at from

his perch, and he stared until the grim row of sleighs disappeared behind Vargamäe. After they were gone, he didn't go home to strum his zither for other people's children, as Rava Kustas had sarcastically suggested. Instead, he hurried inside to bundle up. He tied two kerchiefs and a woolen scarf around his neck, pulled on a cloth-covered sheepskin, took his homemade aspen skis and started toward the church, cutting across the bogs and moors. Soon his mother could no longer see him among the frost-covered birches at the lower end of the fields but, being farsighted, she later spotted him on the high open moor, a black dot moving away from Kingu towards the church.

At Aaseme, all was still and peaceful. Death had yet to call. Aadu was a longtime warden of the church, and thus closer than others to the pastor and to God, though some had another explanation. Aadu still rented his land and didn't brag or show off like those who owned their farms. This pleased God and He'd spared Aadu's children. The old wife at the Vargamäe cottage was quick to question this. "Then why have Andres and Mari been spared? Are they tenants? Have they sinned less than others? God almighty, what about Juss? Has everyone forgotten his hanging? Back then everyone was pointing at Mari and Andres."

The master and mistress of Aaseme had gone to help at the Valley Farm that day, and Andres and Mari went to Hundipalu. The hearts of the spared parents trembled with fear. Would this cup pass them by, or had they merely been given more time to reflect and cleanse their hearts and homes of all that was abominable in the eyes of the Lord?

Passing Aaseme, the mourning party approached Võlla Road, where there was nothing more for death to take except Võlla Juhan himself, for his two children and his wife had already been

committed to the earth. His wife, Kai, was the only adult who'd succumbed to the rampant illness and it was perhaps because she'd been childlike, without a grownup's solemnity or common sense. Even her love for her children, in sickness and health, was unlike other mothers'.

The pastor's words of consolation to Juhan were more beautiful than those he spoke to anyone else. He felt that Juhan had been chosen for special favor by God, who loved his wife as much as his children and called them all away together, but the pastor's dulcet words fell on a heart of stone. Juhan didn't want God to love his wife more than other wives. At the same time, he saw a silver lining in her death, for Kai's heart was too tender to bear the loss of her children and now she'd be at peace.

At the highest point in the manor fields, the funeral procession paused to wave a white cloth because the sexton hadn't yet tolled the bells. To proceed without them would've dishonored the dead and their families, according to Holy Scripture.

While they waited, Rava Kustas said, "I bet the sexton went to ask the pastor whether each of us should pay for two bells, or whether we should pay for them together. If we each pay for two bells, he'll have to toll sixteen bells, and he only has two. So, to be fair, all of us together should pay for only two bells."

"Everyone who buries his dead hears two bells with his own ears," commented Kukessaare Jaan.

"It's not the hearing that we're paying for, but the tolling. If we paid for the sound, then Tiit and Pearu would each hear four bells, but they won't. They'll hear only two, since only two will be tolled," Kustas explained and, with that, the discussion ended, because the bells began to toll and the procession moved forward.

The men who farmed the open land had never thought much of those who lived in the forest, but now they paid attention. No one had ever seen such a long funeral procession and it wouldn't be the last. God's wrath and judgment wasn't satisfied so easily.

The following Sunday was Vargamäe Hill Farm and Aaseme's turn to bury their dead. It was clear that the churchwardens wouldn't be spared, nor did it help to demand truth and justice as Andres had done in court. They were all guilty of some sin—the renters and the owners, the pious and the scoundrels, the just and the unjust—and because Kassiaru Jaska was punished first and most cruelly, some blamed him for the widespread evil inflicted upon the land. Many people speculated about and debated this idea.

Years earlier, a neighborhood man named Õssu, a big drunkard and a vicious brawler, died on the road between two taverns on his way to a fair. The matter was investigated and Kassiaru Jaska, Aadu, Pearu, Tiit, Ämmasoo Villem, Rava Kustas, and many other men who attended the fair were questioned, but the drunkard's death was never cleared up. There was, however, a rumor that Kassiaru Jaska had caused Õssu's death, that he'd bribed some men with vodka and money, and that these men had executed the murder so cunningly that nobody could tell for sure if Õssu was killed or if he died by accident. The neighborhood men had walked back from the fair together and perhaps knew more about the incident than they'd admitted to the police. To protect Jaska from the law, they'd kept silent or even twisted the facts.

People believed, because no one was punished for Õssu's death, that God's hand had come down and now there was nowhere to hide. "So Jaska was guilty of Õssu's death after all," everyone said confidently. "He spilled the blood of that drunken, brawling pick-pocket and, for that, God took his six children, for no man shall

spill another man's blood. Only God may do that, for He created man." They surmised that the men who'd walked back from the fair with Jaska must've been guilty as well—for why else would death have visited their homes?—though their guilt was less severe, since fewer of their children died.

There was only one fact that nobody could reocnicle. Andres and Mari's children were dying, too, though Andres was busy hauling hay from the riverbank on the day of the fair. The old cottager's wife had the answer, "Lord above, what about Juss? Who killed Juss? Who drove him to that spruce branch? No man would do that of his own free will. Ask Andres and Mari. They can deny it in front of an earthly court, but let them try to deny it before God. Now they are caught. Just wait and see! It's not going to end here."

She was right. It didn't end. First, Mari's Juku and Kata died, and then Andres's third daughter, Anni. None of Juss's children survived at Vargamäe.

"Juss is taking back all that's his," said the old cottager's wife, "and he won't leave them behind to be ordered around by Andres and Mari. He demands justice. Since they drove him to the grave, he wants his children, either in the graveyard or behind it. It makes no difference. He'll be together with his children."

Mari's ideas about why her children died weren't very different from those of the cottager's wife, but she kept them to herself. Once again, she heard the awful words of Lullu's song in her head and believed that finally she truly understood their meaning. When she was alone, Mari thought of the hymnal in the chest drawer and the sheet sticking out of it, inscribed with verses and more verses, one worse than the other.

When the children started falling ill, Mari kept up hope. Although no child had survived this illness yet, God could still work miracles.

Mari believed this so ardently that a miracle was bound to happen if faith could bring it into being, but God didn't want to save her children, so Mari's faith wasn't enough. She clung to the feeling that she was sheltered in the fold of God's robe, even as Kata lay in state, her slender limbs stretched out stiff and cold. Mari had never noticed her little Kata's limbs, so slender and lovable. She dropped her face into her hands, bent over, and wept for her dead child. Then, on her knees, she crawled to the bed where Juku lay, praying that God in His grace would save the boy and have mercy on his mother. But God was deaf to her pleas. Cruelly, He closed Juku's throat and placed him next to Kata in eternal rest.

"Am I alone to blame?" sobbed Mari. She cried night and day, and could not eat, drink, or sleep. If she'd run out of tears, she might've died with her children like Võlla Kai, who followed her children to the grave after her eyes dried up. Kassiaru Matilde, too, might've followed her children if she hadn't cried and cried, or so everyone believed. At Vargamäe, Mari's eyes became swollen and red. The tears allowed her to endure for the rest of the children.

"Wasn't it blessed Krõõt herself who led me to my first sinful thought?" Mari recalled. "She said I should take her place and be mother to her children. Have I ever wished or done them harm? Haven't I treated all my children the same, whether their father be Juss or Andres? God can see that I have. I never wanted to be the mistress of Vargamäe or take Andres for a husband. I already had Juss. All I wished was that Juss had straighter legs and a longer neck that stuck up between his shoulders like other men's necks. That's all I wanted. Was that such a great sin? What harm have I done in wishing the father of my children to have such legs and such a neck? I never looked down on him—not at all! But Andres wouldn't

leave me alone. Krōōt's words put a spell on us both. I'm no more to blame than Andres."

The question of blame plagued Mari. It's hard to say how she would've reconciled her burning guilt had Andres's youngest daughter, Anni, not fallen ill, proving that Andres, too, was to blame for Juss's death.

Mari hid her tears from the children as much as she could, but they sometimes caught her wiping her eyes. Most of the other children got used to their mother's tears, but not Indrek. He cried along with his mother, pressing his face into her skirts and wailing.

"You were conceived in sin, and that's why you cry," Mari thought, looking at the first son she bore to Andres. "In your blood, there is grave guilt."

Trying to smile, she asked the child, "And why do you cry?"

"Mother is crying," the boy replied.

"Mother won't cry anymore," Mari comforted the child. "Mother won't ever cry again. And Innu should never cry. Crying makes your eyes sore."

"Juku and Kata are going to a bogey hole," said the boy.

"Who told you that?" Mari asked.

"I know it," the boy said firmly. "The others said so."

Once again, tears welled up in Mari's eyes. The boy began to cry as well. On his large head, his face looked more natural puckered up like an old man's than it did when he laughed. His eyes stayed the same though. Whether he laughed, cried, or just sat thinking, his eyes were always calm, thoughtful, and dreamy.

"Innu will always stay with mother," he said comfortingly. "Innu is a good boy. He won't die or get sick, and he won't ever go into the bogey hole."

His mother wept more bitterly and hugged the boy to her chest.

“Juku and Kata were good, too,” she said.

“Will they come back from the bogey hole?” asked Indrek.

“Of course they will, silly,” said Mari, her body shaking with sobs.

“Will they come soon?” he asked.

“Soon,” his mother replied.

“Why are they going there?”

“Because God’s angel is calling them.”

“The angel with wings?”

“Yes, with wings.”

“Will Juku get wings?”

“Yes, he will.”

“And Kata, too?”

“Kata, too.”

“Will they fly?”

“Yes, they will.”

“And that’s how they’ll come back?”

“Yes, they’ll fly back.”

“I want to fly, too. I want to be an angel with wings and...”

“Silly, silly child,” Mari hugged him. “Go play with the others and grow bigger. One day you’ll get your wings.”

“When I’m big?”

“Yes, when you’re big,” his mother said, leaving the child and his questions.

A blinding blizzard arrived on the day Andres and Mari buried Juku and Kata. The Valley Farm people, Hundipalu Tiit and his wife, Võlla Juhan, Kingu Priidu, Vihukse Anton, and the cottagers attended. The Kassiaru people weren’t invited, and children of Aaseme, Ämmasoo, and Rava were severely ill.

Once more, the house at Vargamäe was filled with the sound of weeping. At Krõõt’s funeral, many tears had been shed, but it

couldn't compare to this day, because then only a few of the mourners had real reason to weep. Andres had shed his tears alone, out by the stone in the field, but he restrained himself in front of the others. The children were too small to fully understand what was happening and the rest of the visitors had cried symbolically. The most pitying hearts belonged to Mari, who was then breastfeeding Krõõt's orphaned son, and drunken Pearu, who remembered Krõõt's ringing voice calling her pigs out of his rye field.

The funeral of Juku and Kata was very different. Mari was in a frenzy. She wasn't just burying her two children, she was also saying goodbye to the whole of her past, with all the sins and errors she'd been charged with. She felt as if she were finally taking Juss down from the tree behind the house and bringing him to the graveyard with his children. His ghost had lived on at Vargamäe, but perhaps the funeral would bring peace to his heart and he'd finally leave.

The guests cried not so much for Juku and Kata, but for their own children, those already committed to the earth and those still threatened by God's justice. It appeared as if they mourned Mari's children, who lay in their coffins, dreaming their last dreams, but they'd come to cry for their own.

Andres read and sang hymns over the children's bodies just as he'd read and sang over Juss. He couldn't help crying and wiped his eyes often so his tears wouldn't spoil the hymnal.

Even Kingu Priidu, a lucky bachelor with no children to bury and no wife to worry over, shed tears along with the others. He sat stiffly on a bench by the heated wall, as if he had his zither on his lap, ready to play "Christ Is My Life." As usual, he wore two kerchiefs and a thick woolen scarf, and perspiration blotted his face. No one could tell whether he was crying with sorrow or sweating

from the heat, the two kerchiefs, and the thick woolen scarf. In any case, Priidu joined in the weeping at Vargamäe.

The only one with dry eyes was Vihukse Anton, either because his children had thus far been spared and he didn't share the grief of the other families, or because he'd fallen asleep beside his neighbor, Priidu, before the weeping began. The fact that he was married with several children didn't seem to affect him greatly.

Any deficit of tears created by Vihukse Anton was made up for by the Vargamäe children, who wailed until they gave themselves cramps. One by one, they ran to the back room, first the bigger children, then the smaller ones. Soon they all lay on the bed in a heap and their sobs began to sound more like squeals. No one could hear Andres as he recited hymns for the others to sing. Even Mari, bereft as she was, noticed the children's cries and at last she went to calm them. She encouraged their sobs so they could do their share more quickly. The children stayed in the bed for nearly the whole of prayer time, their faces buried in the blankets.

The guests left in sleighs loaded with coffins, barely making it through the snowdrifts and out the gate, and the weeping at Vargamäe ceased. The children's wails quieted down, and the old cottager's wife, who'd been left to look after the house soon dried her eyes, too. She thought her own tears strange, since she believed no one but Mari should cry over the children, and their death was a right and proper thing. The horrendous deeds that Mari had committed couldn't go unpunished, or else anyone could do whatever his heart desired. Every bad deed must be punished, and the deaths of Mari's children were the wages of her sins. So thought the cottager's wife, in all her righteousness, but she couldn't stop herself from weeping along with the others, with a heart as pure as any human

heart ever was. So strange and righteous and pure was the heart of the Vargamäe cottager's wife.

As soon as the funeral guests departed, the children's attention turned to the great snowstorm raging outside. There couldn't have been anything more beautiful or fascinating. Watching it at the window was nice, walking in it was even better, but best of all was running through it, with tousled hair falling over their eyes.

Liisi and Maret wanted to join the funeral party to find out where and how they would bury Juku and Kata at the graveyard, so that they'd be able to tell the others, but their father and mother wouldn't hear of it, especially given the weather. So they had to settle for watching the swirling snow through a window with the smaller children. Soon, however, they grew bored of merely speculating. In such a storm there were so many more possibilities.

Surreptitiously, Liisi and Maret slipped out to the threshing barn, careful not to let the smaller children see them. They stripped off their clothes like fruit peels, ran out the back door stark naked, and leapt into a big, deep snowdrift that was so white and soft, it was a joy to behold. At full speed, they raced around in the whirling storm, screaming with delight.

Nothing—nothing at Vargamäe or in the whole world—could compare to it! Nothing was so joyous and magnificent as dashing naked through the snow in secret, in the midst of a raging storm.

The girls' jaunt took place in the middle of the day, but, even so, it felt stupefyingly good after all their painful crying. One by one, each of the other children (except for Ants) crept to the threshing barn. Anni left only her shirt on, but little Andres and Indrek rushed into the snowdrift with all their clothes, rolling in it as if it were a bin of flour. The older children felt they should restrain their younger siblings, but everything happened so fast that it was

impossible to hold them back. Only when the boys were covered with snow from head to toe did Liisi shout to Maret, “They’re getting their clothes wet!”

The girls soon began to feel cold and figured they’d better pull on their shirts and go inside before they froze. They grabbed young Andres and the rest of their clothes and ran inside. It was then that the old cottager’s wife saw what was going on. Right away she wiped the snow off Andres and Indrek and dried the girls’ naked bodies so they could dress themselves. Then she sent them all to sit by the heated wall and put their feet against it, as the cottager’s wife believed this was the best remedy for colds.

Soon all the children sat against the wall like a row of baby swallows. Their mother and father would’ve remained oblivious to the tryst if Liisi and Maret hadn’t developed a hacking cough and Anni hadn’t flushed with fever by evening. These clues led to close questioning, and eventually the truth came out. The house was filled with loud admonishments, though it should’ve been a sad, quiet day of grieving at Vargamäe. The cottager’s wife got an earful, as did the maid, for not keeping a better eye on the children. The only consolation was that the boys weren’t coughing. They had jumped into the snow with their clothes on, and that may have saved them.

Mari put the children to sleep. Liisi and Maret lay on their parents’ bed and coughed. The boys rested in a corner closeby and Anni, burning with fever, nestled by the stove flue.

The funeral guests left right after supper. They were afraid to stay in the house too long—someone else from Vargamäe might make the trip to the graveyard and they knew the mourning period could be extended. Andres and Mari shared that fear and lost their appetites.

Before the sun had risen twice more, their fears came to pass and the fluttering flame of Anni's life was extinguished. Andres and Mari worried about the other children as well, but they were persevering. Liisi and Maret suffered a hacking cough for more than a week, but they drank hot milk with honey and warmed their feet against the stove chimney until finally their ticklish throats were cured. The boys managed to avoid the illness entirely.

Strong precautions were taken against further calamity. The rooms were thoroughly cleaned, Andres smoked them two or three times with burning juniper until everyone was coughing. All the clothes were put outside in the cold to air out. The huge stove in the main room was heated with a blazing fire and the family moved in there.

The children found the new accommodations very agreeable and were sorry when they had to move back into the bedroom. The bedroom didn't have a stove roof or crossbars, no warm oven top or hearth to climb onto and poke around, nor were there buckets or tubs or barrels of water to splash around in (though splashing was strictly forbidden).

The main room was a great place to play hide-and-seek or play with the house ghost, whom they named Redu. Redu knew all and was capable of anything. He lived above the crossbars, under the roof, behind the bundled hay and straw, beneath the sooty ceiling, in the dark, low space above the bedrooms where they sometimes heard his footsteps. The children called him down to play, urging him to make noises and whisper on top of the furnace, between the crossbars, in dark corners, behind the tools, beside the door, and even inside the stove.

So when the children moved back into the bedroom, they lost this bit of fantasy. Moreover, their parents became much more

strict. Not only did the children have to be dressed to go out in the snowdrifts or walk the paths leading to the barn and cowshed, they were also required to wear full dress in the main room and the threshing barn. They were ordered to wear warm clothes and socks. Life became so strictly controlled that it no longer seemed worth living and the battle for freedom between the Vargamäe children and their parents began.

Eventually, the children won back the main room, the threshing barn, and the paths to the barn and cowshed. They even regained the right to wallow in drifts on snowy days, but a long time passed before freedom beamed down on Vargamäe like sunshine. The freedom that the children had enjoyed before illness visited the house was gone forever, because the tendency to forbid things had taken root at Vargamäe. Liisi and Maret often consoled their siblings with stories of happier days.

“When I came back inside, I couldn’t feel my feet. They were so numb with cold,” Maret recounted.

“My toes tapped against the floor like frozen potatoes,” added Liisi.

“And then—oh, how they began to ache!” cried Maret, making a face that showed her younger brothers exactly how it had felt.

“I could feel it right to my teeth,” Liisi corroborated. “If you ran back onto the snow, it felt better, not so painful. So we kept running between the stove and the snow. That way it hurt less.”

“Where were mother and father?” asked Andres matter of factly, while Indrek listened to his sisters’ stories with big eyes.

“Oh, anywhere,” Liisi explained. “One time they went to the fair. The farmhand was hauling firewood, and the maid was looking after the animals.”

“That was a great day,” Maret sighed.

“Where were we?” asked Indrek.

“You can’t remember it. You were too small,” Liisi answered.

“After that, did you start coughing?” asked Andres.

“No. Not the least little bit,” Liisi bragged.

“Back then people didn’t get sick the way they do now,” said Maret.

“Nobody was sick and nobody died in our house or the neighbor’s,” Liisi explained. “Sometimes your head ached and you felt dizzy so you couldn’t stand up... Do you remember, Maret?” She turned to her sister. “Remember that Christmas Eve? It was snowing and blowing so you couldn’t even see the barn or the cowshed. It seemed like our neighbor’s house had been wiped off Vargamäe, and when mother went to the barn or the cowshed, she disappeared halfway and you couldn’t see her no matter how hard you looked. Nobody could get to church so we all stayed home. We spread straw on the floor and father started reading and singing. Mother sat near father in the back bedroom, and she sang, too. Mai put a chair beside the front bedroom door, but the farmhand fell asleep as soon as he heard the talking and singing. We were sitting on the straw in the front bedroom and mother tried to get us to move to the back bedroom, because she was afraid we’d start making noise in the straw, but we wouldn’t go. And when everybody was singing the loudest and the farmhand dozed off, we slipped into the main room and tried to keep the door from making a noise.

“The room was nice and warm, with embers on the hearth, meat roasting in the stove, and sausages in the frying pan. We pulled our shirts off—you put yours on the firewood by the stove and I hung mine on a rung of the ladder—and out we went, right into the deepest snow near the fence, where it goes right over your head and you stop breathing. You just want to stay there. We rolled around a few times and then we ran inside and climbed onto the stove roof

where it's nice and warm. We stayed there for a little while and then we ran into the snow again. Back and forth we went, over and over. That time we ran into the snow with you boys when the others were at church—that was nothing compared to this, not even worth mentioning. We would've kept it up even longer, but mother heard the door banging and she came out to see who was there and check the sausages on the stove. We'd just gotten onto the stove, stark naked and wet with snow. She called us down, grabbed a bundle of branches, and started to whip us, but then Maret said, 'Please don't beat us with the branches. We're naked!' and she didn't. She only threatened to tell father, but of course she never did. She just ordered us back onto the stove, saying we'd catch cold, and warned us about the high spot in the middle, because it's so hot we could burn our feet, but we knew that already. We'd been up there before."

"Why doesn't the stove roof get so hot anymore?" asked little Andres.

"They don't heat it as much as they used to," Liisi explained. "It was really different then. When mother took the sausages off the stove, she used to say they were overcooked, even burnt, but now she says they aren't crispy, because the stove isn't hot enough. The firewood was full of snow..."

So the girls' tale of playing in the snow ended on the hot stove roof and the sooty stovetop where the sausages sizzled, filling the main room and bedrooms with their sweet smell. They all had the feeling that the good times had passed at Vargamäe and everywhere in the whole world. Liisi and Maret truly believed this, and they were old enough to have their own thoughts about things. As for little Andres, Indrek, and Ants, they believed their sisters. They believed that once upon a time at Vargamäe there was no illness or death and bodies were not packed into coffins and buried in a bogey

hole, that there was a time when freedom reigned over the farm and joy and happiness were limitless.

Now the doors and windows were closed until springtime, when the warm breeze would blow, the sun would shine, and the snowstorms and freezing cold temperatures would cease. But how could spring winds and sun possibly compare to snowdrifts and storms?

Ah, the better and happier times were gone before Andres and Indrek were born, but Liisi and Maret had arrived at Vargamäe in time to see them. Yes, they did. That's what the boys felt, especially Indrek.



Chapter 29

The deaths of the children crippled the neighborhood. Kassiaru Jaska stopped going to fairs and trading horses, limiting his business to buying oxen, grain, and potatoes for the manor. He hoped that useful work would please God more than dealing horses with gypsies, which satisfied lustful urges like sitting around the tavern and drinking.

Hundipalu Tiit no longer openly suggested that his boys were going to play horns and other instruments because he thought it inappropriate to talk about music while so many throats were still sore from holding back tears.

It had been some time since Pearu was seen at the tavern indulging days-long binges. And he no longer smashed down his yard gates or made a ruckus at home either.

Rava Kustas no longer joked about everything, and when he did say something in jest, his remarks seemed quieter and more modest, as if he were afraid of offending someone.

Aaseme Aadu acted and spoke as one would expect of a very pious man and church official. The younger people at Aaseme were now entirely under the influence of the old couple, and they all went to church and chapel together.

On Sundays there were more visitors at the graveyard than ever before. In the spring, the church warden was busy tending all the gravesites and, every now and then, some coins jingled in his pocket as a result of his hard work. So despite the sorrow and the mournful tears of mothers and fathers, there was a silver lining at least for the pious heart of the church warden.

At the Vargamäe Hill Farm, new wounds opened old ones, doubling the grief and pain. When Andres buried Anni next to her mother and later, when he visited her grave, he remembered Krõõt as she'd been when she first came to Vargamäe, before her eyes grew so sad. She was young, red-cheeked, and smiling but, at the same time, somehow wistful. When he read the Lord's Prayer over Anni's grave, he read it for Krõõt as well. A strange feeling overcame him. The child's death seemed to have resurrected her mother in some small way, giving her new life in Andres's heart.

Mari would've liked to feel as Andres did, but Juku and Kata were buried in the graveyard and Juss was buried outside. Andres wanted Mari to bury her children next to Anni and Krõõt, but Mari refused. She wouldn't tell him why, but she wanted to be alone when she visited the graves, alone with her past and her sins. She wanted to kneel on the ground and pray to God for solace and grace. Andres, on the other hand, would never kneel, even before God. At the same moment he asked for grace, he acted as if he also had a right to justice.

Mari didn't believe in justice, only in grace. She never failed to visit Juss when she was near the graveyard, as if she might finally find repose there. As always, Juss's death reproached and tortured her. He was always at the front of her mind. She even found cause for her children's deaths in the death of her husband. She became preoccupied with the dead and felt as if they had power over the

living. Tears often filled her eyes and she always wore a woeful expression. Only hugs from Indrek, her oldest son, could comfort her and sometimes bring a wistful smile to her face.

Watching Mari and listening to her words of grief, Andres realized that she was punishing herself for her supposed sins. Sometimes he tried to talk with her about Juss's death and show her that the fate of her children didn't have any connection to their father's fate. After all, children had also died in households with two living parents.

"We each have our own sins," said Mari. "Who can look into another person's soul? Each can know only his own heart."

"I'm not arguing that," agreed Andres. "Everyone is a sinner, but should innocent children die for the sins of others? What were our three children guilty of?"

"We are the guilty ones, not they," answered Mari firmly.

"Then we should've died, not they," Andres replied, equally firmly.

Mari didn't answer, but it was clear that she didn't agree.

"Alright," Andres said after a while, "let's say that our children died because of Juss. What now? What more does he want? He took three lives in return for his own. Isn't that enough?"

Andres's words frightened Mari. She raised her hands to her ears to block out his voice. "Don't talk like that!" she pleaded, a pained look on her face.

"But that's it, isn't it?" insisted Andres. "Juss's death has now been repaid three times over. The sinners are punished. So leave the dead with the dead and let the living stay with the living. When Krõõt died, perhaps I was partly to blame—"

"Andres!" Mari cried out.

"Listen!" ordered Andres. "I said 'perhaps,' and I said it only because the pastor reproved me. He said I killed my wife with too

much work and showed her no mercy, though she was the weaker vessel. That's what the pastor said, but I never saw it that way myself. I worked as hard as I could and I allowed Krõõt to work as hard as she could. Did I treat our hired help any differently? You worked for us then. Was it easy? Tell me!"

"It wasn't easy," answered Mari.

"And is it easier for you now?" Andres asked.

"It's harder," said Mari, as if it were her own fault.

"Krõõt had it even harder than you because we were just starting out and we didn't have much. For months, we ate only potatoes, fish water, a little bread, and some sour kvass to wash down the dry food. That's how we lived, working all day and half the night. That's how it was when Krõõt had her children. We never had a day free, never drew an easy breath. And she wasn't like you. She was tall and slender. She wasn't strong enough and she died. Remember when you first took little Andres to your breast? She lay in bed watching and she told me then that she'd never get up. I hadn't noticed before, but suddenly Krõõt looked tired, like an old horse with drooping ears, unable to keep her legs straight or move her joints even if she were beaten with an iron rod or chopped at with an axe. If a horse stopped like that while hitched to a plow, I would've known what to do, but what could I do with Krõõt? I could bring a horse some bread or a handful of oats and, after she'd eaten, she'd pick up her ears and gather her legs beneath her, but I didn't know how to get Krõõt moving again. So I went to the field and sat down by a stone and Krõõt died. I couldn't do for her what I would've done for any workhorse. Of course Krõõt meant more to me than a horse, but I didn't know that she needed care like any animal. I thought a woman could look after herself, but you can see it wasn't so. She died rather than care for herself. She, too, needed tending like the

animals. Krõõt thought, just as I did, that she only needed to look after the animals. Krõõt knew very well that it wouldn't help to beat a horse whose ears drooped and whose legs buckled. That horse needed care and attention. But Krõõt never stopped working, as a horse would, and said, 'I cannot go any further.' Her persistence never failed, Krõõt always went on working, just as I did, and when she could work no longer, it was time for her to die. And what now? Should I spend the rest of my life with my head hung low and my hands idle? Should I let the farm go and stop thinking of the children? Would that be right? Who would gain if I did that? Mari, that's just what you're doing. I can understand that you must visit the children's graves, but you go to Juss's grave more often. You go there anytime you pass the graveyard. You think about Juss on your way to church and when you come home. You think of him when you lie in bed and when you wake up. When you talk to the children, it's as if you're thinking only of Juss. When Juku and Kata were still alive, you didn't treat them any differently than the rest of the children, but now Indrek and Ants are strangers to you. Is this right? I ask you, how much can Juss expect? Haven't we paid our debt, if we even owed him anything? What more does he want?"

As Andres posed these questions, Mari could only cry. Andres was unmoved and bitterness grew in his heart. He was a serious person, more pensive than lighthearted. He didn't want to be surrounded by weepy eyes and sad faces, which only emphasized his failure to make those around him happy. Krõõt's despondency had vexed him and caused him grief. Her tears led to arguments and anger. He'd wanted Mari because she'd filled the Vargamäe house with laughter and song when she was a maid. He sometimes wished that Krõõt would sing and laugh like Mari so life wouldn't be so heavy, but Andres couldn't remember Krõõt ever laughing at

Vargamäe. He blamed her unhappiness on the marshes and bogs since she'd come from a land of woods and forests. With Mari, though, it was even worse. She'd once been so happy at the farm, but as soon as she became Andres's wife and the mistress of Vargamäe, her laughter faded. It was as if he'd forced her to leave Juss, put the noose around his neck, and hung the man from the spruce branch himself.

"Mari," he continued, "our life has turned into a mess and I can't bear it much longer. When Krõõt was alive, I didn't think about anything. I just toiled away. But her death made me think. Then came Juss, and now the children's deaths. My strength is running out. If you wept for your children, that would be right. I feel the loss, deeply. Juku was a fine, able boy, just the kind we needed at Vargamäe, but God needed him more at the graveyard. So be it. But when I see you grieving only for Juss, I don't know where to go or what to do. When you cry for Juss you're Mari the cottager once again, as if you never became mistress at Vargamäe. I think you had it easier back then and you regret becoming the mistress. Then I think, 'What's the point of killing ourselves with work? We're all going to die sooner or later and end up in the grave. The only difference is that they ring one bell for a cottager, and for the mistress of Vargamäe they ring two. That's all, isn't it?'"

"It's not true, Andres," cried Mari. "If there were no Juss and you'd wanted me then, I would've smiled and sung always. Believe me, Andres, even unto death I would've laughed and sung."

"So it's only Juss?" asked Andres.

Mari nodded in tears.

Andres was silent. Then his face turned scornful and angry. "How long, then, will Juss stand between us?" he asked.

"I don't know," Mari answered simply.

“When he was alive, he ran from me even with a knife in his hand, but in death he’s bolder. I would strangle him with my bare hands if I could, just to get free from him,” said Andres.

“Dear God!” cried Mari. “What on earth are you saying, Andres?”

“It’s the truth,” Andres replied. “If I could do it, I would. With my two bare hands! I would’ve done anything to see Krõõt smile, but there was no reason for her tears, at least none that I knew, and so they were easier to bear. With you, it’s different. You have your Juss and there’s nothing I can do about it. I’ve managed to overcome every obstacle and I’ll even beat out Pearu eventually, though he hasn’t bared his teeth for years, but I can’t overcome Juss.”

“Juss is dead, so how could you?” said Mari.

“That’s so,” said Andres. “When he was alive, I could beat him with one hand tied behind my back, but now that he’s dead, two hands aren’t enough.”

“No one can beat the dead,” Mari said firmly.

“Wait and see. I can,” said Andres menacingly.

Mari looked at him fearfully. “What are you going to do?” she asked.

“Well,” said Andres, “it can’t go on like this. Juss can’t rule over Vargamäe Hill Farm from his grave. So I tell you: Watch out! I can’t follow Juss into the grave, but you still walk the earth. I can get to you, whatever kind of trouble comes of it. I won’t fool around in this world, no matter the ruckus I might raise in the next.”

With that, he rushed out, banging the door as if possessed by an evil spirit. Mari didn’t know exactly what Andres meant, but a shudder of fear passed through her body. It didn’t occur to her that Andres might not have known the meaning of his words either. His threat could’ve been devoid of any substance. Or perhaps Andres, feeling that their present situation could not continue much longer,

had the vague sense that bad times were coming to Vargamäe. In life, Juss had been quite a nice young man. Andres didn't deny that, but the dead Juss didn't deserve any respect. "What kind of man hangs himself with his belt?" Andres had once remarked. If he was a man, Juss would've succeeded in killing Andres rather than taking his own life. "After all, a man is not his own lap dog, so how could he put a noose around his own neck?" Now that lap dog was lording over Vargamäe. The thought made Andres's blood boil.

Relations became tense between Andres and Mari and darkness fell over their daily routines. This darkness persisted for months, even years. The children could see that something had happened between their mother and father, but they couldn't say what. As time passed, everyone got used to it. The farmhand and the maid thought this was how things always were between the master and mistress of Vargamäe. Andres and Mari had their own concerns and worries and, though they lived side by side, they went about their own business from morning to night, careful to keep a distance from other souls lest they be frightened away.

Hard work was the best way to fill time and the only true comfort, so they worked as hard as they could. Mari did her best to put the dead out of her thoughts and wholeheartedly embrace her new life, but Juss stayed on her mind day and night. It was worse by night, for Juss entered Mari's dreams and frightened her. She'd wake up in a cold sweat. Either Andres never noticed or he purposely ignored his wife's feelings.

Mari thought it would help if she could talk to Andres about Juss, but she didn't dare utter a word. She would've liked to ask Andres to bear with her for a little longer, perhaps half a year, and then it all might pass, but she didn't have the courage to say even that much.

The young farmhand, the new maid, and the noisy flock of children brightened up the household and kept Juss's somber shadow from overwhelming the farm. The youngest of the children didn't fear him because they didn't know him—and they didn't want to.

The maid, Leena, was a little like Mari, but with more freckles on both sides of her nose and under her gray eyes. The farmhand Jaagup was supposed to enlist in the army in the autumn, but he pledged to get out of it at any cost. No matter what happened, he swore he wouldn't go.

"Would you rather die?" asked Leena.

"I'll die before I'd go," asserted Jaagup.

"But what if they take you anyway?"

"Then I'll find a way out as soon as I can. Belly up or belly down, I'll get out."

Jaagup didn't sit around waiting for his fate. He devised plans to avoid conscription. He was tall and skinny, so he hoped they'd find him unfit to serve in the autumn and put him off a year. To increase the likelihood, he began to starve himself. As autumn approached, he ate nothing but dried peas, which he carried in his pocket and nibbled on only when he felt very hungry.

"I should pay Jaagup something extra, to make up for the food he didn't eat," said Andres. "The peas he takes from the barn cost nothing."

"Nothing extra, Master," said Jaagup, "or you might think of cutting my pay if you don't think I work well on an empty stomach."

Jaagup worked himself to exhaustion and left Andres nothing to grumble about. On Saturdays and Sundays, the boy was just as tireless, going to village dances and parties. He was the best concertina player around, so he was always welcome. In the evenings, he rambled about the village. He knew where all the maids and farmers'

daughters slept, and with whom, but he himself was not involved in the secret games and whispers, not because no one wanted him—even a farmer's daughter wouldn't have refused him—but because he was a dreamer, always yearning for something mysterious and distant.

Often he'd stop for a moment by the gate or in the high field and gaze at the lonely farms scattered among the marshes; the sails of windmills visible here and there; the bright white buildings of the manor; the marshes, bogs, and copses that blended into the blue rim of the sky. His eyes always halted on some gray buildings in the distance, obscured by tall trees.

From where he stood, it would've been impossible to say what kind of buildings they were if he didn't already know, but in fact, it was a farm called Põlluotsa, where a farmer's daughter named Roosi lived. Jaagup thought she was the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen. Two years earlier, he'd worked on that farm and since then he hadn't been able to put Roosi out of his mind. Because of her, he'd bought the concertina and learned to play. He wanted to be special in her eyes.

When people danced to his music, they felt Jaagup played for their pleasure, but he did not. Jaagup thought only of Roosi and played always for her. Even at Vargamäe, sitting on the garden steps, leaning by the gate, walking along the edge of the field, or perched on a stone, his mind was full of Roosi.

For a while, Leena thought he played for her, but one day she learned the truth. Jaagup told her himself, his heart so filled with love that he couldn't contain it anymore. His mistress, Mari, learned about Jaagup's great happiness in the same way. The boy would've told Andres, too, if the master had shown any interest in such things.

All Andres talked about was work and the impossibility of finishing all the work that was needed, for when he died, there'd still be more work to do. Jaagup thought differently: Of course, work was work and there was no escaping it, except perhaps for landlords, but work wasn't something to live for. Work and life were born together and died together, and there was absolutely nothing any man could do about it.

Work alone was not enough for Jaagup. So he wouldn't kill himself working—unless the work killed him. He was motivated by something different, altogether different, and once he got what he needed, he'd cease working, unless it were pleasurable. That was Jaagup's thinking, or rather his feeling, since he never articulated it to Andres or anyone else. He felt his reasoning to be self evident.

When Jaagup played his concertina and thought of Roosi, Leena began to think about her as well. Sometimes the mistress heard his song, too, and her mind turned from her own sadness to happy thoughts of Jaagup's Roosi. But the mistress never thought about Roosi as seriously as the maid, whose eyes would moisten with tears. The mistress of Vargamäe didn't love Põlluotsa Roosi as deeply as Leena. Even Jaagup didn't love her so deeply, for his eyes only shined with love, while hers filled with tears.

"Does she love you just as much?" Leena once asked Jaagup as he stared across the marsh like a wolf, fixated on the two wooded hills where the gray houses stood. "Is she thinking about you?"

"Roosi?" said Jaagup. "No. She doesn't play music and she never thinks about me."

"Then it's just you who's in love?" asked Leena.

"Just me," said Jaagup. "But whenever I visit she always lets me in through the window."

"What happens if you don't go?"

“Then she lets somebody else in,” Jaagup remarked, adding, “She’s so pretty that all the boys go wild for her. You should see the battles fought at Põlluotsa Farm! Her brothers wanted to kill me. That’s why I left. They smashed my concertina and promised to swing Roosi by her neck if she let me in once more. But she isn’t scared of them. She’s not scared of anything. She just looks at them and laughs, ‘Go ahead and do it if you have it in you, but I bet you’ll be sorrier than me,’ and of course none of them really has the guts to go after her. She makes them all jump whenever she pleases. I’m gonna wait till the nights are longer and darker. Then I’ll try it again. Nobody thinks I can make it from this far away, but I’ll get there. I’ll go straight through the bog between the pools. These last couple of Sundays I’ve been marking the path. What’s six or seven miles? I can get through barefoot, on all fours if I have to, in the softer places. Just keep going straight...That’s all there is to it.”

“What if you get lost?” asked Leena.

“Not me. I’ve lived in the bogs since I was a boy.”

“But what if those other fellows get ahold of you?”

“They won’t! They haven’t got me so far, and they never will. Roosi won’t let them in and they’ll never know it’s me.”

“I’ve never had a boyfriend like you,” said Leena.

“Neither has Roosi. She said so.”

“Then why does she let other boys come in to see her?”

“Everyone wants her. That’s why. She doesn’t have the heart to chase them away.”

“If I had a boyfriend like you I wouldn’t let anyone else come in,” said Leena. “I would rather be alone.”

“Well, you’re not so pretty as Roosi.” Jaagup spoke so candidly that tears came to Leena’s eyes. Seeing the effects of his words, Jaagup tried to backpedal. “Well, I don’t mean you’re ugly or

anything. You're the best in the neighborhood. All I said is you're not as beautiful as Põlluotsa Roosi. That's not much of a criticism, since she's the prettiest girl in the whole parish."

Jaagup could see that this was cold comfort for Leena, but it was the best he could come up with. He watched as she wiped her eyes and reached for his concertina. He began to play, but she only cried harder because she thought he played for Roosi, though this time he was really trying to soothe Leena.

"In my whole life I've never seen a fellow like you," Leena said finally, as she wiped away the last of her tears.

Jaagup was quiet. He nodded in agreement, squeezed his concertina, and pulled it apart again as if to say, "This is the kind of fellow I am."

"Even if you tear your concertina apart, they won't hear it in Põlluotsa," said Leena reprovingly.

"I don't care. I'm playing for you now, so you won't cry," said the boy sincerely.

"What do you care whether I cry or laugh?" asked the girl.

"It means a lot to me. Everyone around here is so serious. You're the only one who laughs. But now you might go around crying, too."

"I won't anymore. I'll never cry again when you're around," promised Leena. "You're not worth crying over. You love your concertina more than anyone."

"No, I love Roosi more than the concertina," the boy explained. "I love her the most."

"Is she prettier than the concertina?" mocked Leena.

"She's prettier than anything," said Jaagup.

"The concertina doesn't play when you're not there, but Roosi does play, with other boys. There's always somebody else if you're not there."

“That’s different. A concertina isn’t a person, and it’s not as pretty as Roosi.”

“There you go again. ‘Not as pretty, not as pretty.’ A pretty face doesn’t put food on the table,” exclaimed the girl, desperate and angry.

“You can’t make soup with a concertina either,” argued the boy.

“But you can make music on the concertina. That’s better than just sitting around, sighing for Roosi across the bog.”

“You sure are stupid,” said Jaagup simply. “Don’t you get it? I wouldn’t play at all if it weren’t for Roosi. I bought the concertina because of her. Do you think I’d sit here on this stone and play if I couldn’t gaze across the bog to her? If you could only see the way she opens her window and hushes me. If she told me to smash my concertina—it’s the concertina or her—I’d crush it flat with my foot like a toad. That’s how much Põlluotsa Roosi means to me.”

“You’re a fool,” the girl condemned him.

“I know,” agreed Jaagup. “Everybody tells me so, even Roosi. But I don’t mind being a fool. I’m still smart enough to get out of the draft.”

“You’ll go,” said Leena.

“No, I won’t. No matter what anybody says.”

“I’ll tell the draft board you’re starving yourself on purpose.”

“Do you think I’d start to eat then? No! In the autumn, I’ll start drinking tobacco water, too. Then they can drag my hide into the service if they want.”

“Are you doing this for Roosi?”

“No, she doesn’t care.”

“You’re mad,” cried the girl.

“I guess so, but I’m doing it anyway. We’ll see who’s tougher, me or the government.” With that, he began to play loudly.

The nights grew longer and darker. Many a night, when everyone was asleep, Jaagup slipped outside, ran down the rise at the edge of the field, along the hard ditch, and turned into the marsh that soon became a high bog.

Jaagup hurried to Roosi's. He couldn't stay long, but he had time enough to hold the girl's hand and whisper to her. He would've been happy just to stand under her window for a while, but he couldn't risk being caught by the local toughs. So he had to climb through the girl's window each time.

In the darkened room, she lay under the blanket and he sat at the edge of her bed. They talked quietly, very quietly, not because of the girl's parents sleeping in the next room, but because they were wary of other ears that might be listening outside under the window. The friendly farm dog, Muska, wagged her tail at many of the boys, not just Jaagup, and benefited greatly from Roosi's beauty. The shaggy dog always had a mouthful of treats. This continuing honeymoon led to such a languid existence for the meek and friendly Muska that her master began to question her alertness and reliability and her mistress complained that she'd become a poor eater.

"I wonder what she's eating to get so fat," the mistress wondered.

"She's getting old. She sleeps too much and doesn't bark anymore," said the master, and everyone sensed that a cruel end was in store for Muska.

To Jaagup, nothing in the world was better than sitting in the dark next to Roosi, playing with her fingers and whispering to her. Once his hand found its way to her braid, whether on purpose or by accident Jaagup didn't know. One thing was clear to him, though. Everything that happened in the world happened because of that braid. "Great God in heaven!" Jaagup thought. That such a braid

could exist in the world. And that one might hold it in the dark! What was a concertina compared to that?

Jaagup forgot about time and discretion, and the village toughs lurking under the window soon realized that somebody was inside with Roosi. But who was it? They considered all the local boys before they realized it was that damned Jaagup with his concertina. Of course! That bastard! With their Roosi! The boys were determined to wait for him, until daybreak if they had to.

In the morning, rye threshing began at Põlluotsa. Jaagup had to get away, but the boys were still waiting for him outside. Surely they'd beat him to a pulp, for Jaagup wasn't very strong and he wasn't good at arguing. He was mad with worry. Lord Jesus above, guardian and protector of love, who would save Jaagup of Vargamäe?

Luckily, Roosi knew what to do. She led Jaagup silently through the main room and into the threshing barn, holding his hand as she guided him to a ladder.

"When you get up, go to the right. Keep quiet, because the farmhand and the cowherd are sleeping in the loft. Don't be scared. They're both heavy sleepers. Climb onto the pile of clover and you'll be able to reach the attic window. Make sure the boys don't see you. Father will be up soon. We're threshing the rye today. Come back again! I'll be waiting."

Roosi whispered these instructions into Jaagup's ear and her sweet words had the loveliest ring he'd ever heard.

Jaagup sat on the clover pile, peeping out the attic window for a long while, waiting for his stalkers to leave. They remained even when the threshing started on the farm. Only after dawn broke did he dare climb onto the roof, lower himself from the eave, jump down at the back of the house, and run across the field into the woods.

By autumn, when Jaagup was to be conscripted, he was as thin as a pipe cleaner. He was found unfit for service and released until the following year. Laughing at his victory over the system, he planned to do even better next time, since he'd learned some new tricks. He stayed on at Vargamäe for another year and made himself a pair of skis in the winter so he could whiz across the bog to Põlluotsa. But the wintertime trysts were much less pleasant than they'd been in the summer. After the long trip, Jaagup's only reward was a moment to hold the girl against his breast in the cold outside her house, where she'd meet him when she heard his soft tap on the window. And even this joy was accompanied by great danger.

His final visit occurred as spring approached, when water already pooled under the snow in the lower terrain. On this trip, he was nearly caught and thrashed by his tormentors and only managed to get away by skiing through the young alders where the snow was chest high and wouldn't bear a man on foot. There, his pursuers got stuck, one after the other, as Jaagup dashed through like a woodsman of old. By the time the boys escaped the drifts in the alder brush, Jaagup had already passed the birches and headed across the marsh, which was enormously wet after the heavy snows. The boys had no way of crossing and Jaagup glided over the open bog easily, as if there were no cursing, threatening village boys in pursuit.

They say, "When you let down your guard, you're about to be caught," and so it finally happened to Jaagup. As summer turned to autumn, he met Roosi by the church one Sunday and managed to have a few words with her. The girl wanted him to come again, as he had the summer before. She was sleeping in the front room, not the cramped winter chamber, so their visits would be easier to arrange. The bed was in its old place and he could knock on the window like before.

So off Jaagup went, but he ran into some bad luck while crossing the bog. He lost his way and fell into a pool. Soaked up to his neck, he took off all his clothes except for his undershirt, wrung everything out, and continued on, but he never made it to Roosi's window. The village toughs were waiting and they grabbed him near the alder brush, where he'd evaded them the previous winter. This was the first time Jaagup had planned a visit to Põlluotsa for a certain day, and this was the first time he was caught. He'd never know if Roosi had given him away or the boys had guessed when they saw him talking to her at church.

In the alder brush, the toughs thrashed Jaagup within an inch of his life. When they'd pummeled him so badly they felt sure he'd never again risk such a beating, they left him lying there, nearly unconscious. In the chill dawn, Jaagup opened his eyes and found his body bloodied, battered, and bruised. It was some time before he could get up and stumble home. His progress was halting, as his strength would quickly run out and he'd collapse to the ground again and again.

He staggered and crept for an entire day, skirting the pools in the bog. As his journey wore on, he lost the strength to stand and continued on all fours. Still he refused to die in the bog and kept heading toward Vargamäe, guided by the old pines at the top of the hill. It was late when he reached the foot of the rise and the last of his strength was ebbing. He crept up the rise and, when he finally reached the farm, he climbed under the barn steps and lay there, waiting for Miina to come to bed. Miina was nearing thirty, an old maid with strange, lifeless eyes, a broad nose, and strong feet. Perhaps no one had ever loved her, and perhaps she could never love anyone.

"Miina!" Jaagup called as the girl approached the barn door.

Frightened, she opened the door with a loud creak and jumped inside. Then, holding the door tightly by the inner hook, she opened it a crack and spoke in a scared whisper. "Who's calling? Who's out there?"

She heard a whispered reply. "It's me." Then a figure crept from under the staircase. The door slammed shut and the hook was fastened.

"Dammit, Miina, don't act dumb! What are you afraid of? It's me, Jaagup," the boy said in a faint voice.

The barn door opened again.

"Where were you today?" the girl asked. "The master is angry and the mistress is worried."

"Come help me, Miina," begged the boy, feeling weak again.

At first, Miina couldn't tell if the boy was playing a trick on her or if he was drunk, but when she finally grasped what had happened to Jaagup, she started to cry.

"This is just what the mistress feared," she said, helping him inside.

"The mistress knew those boys would try to get me," said Jaagup.

Miina ran to the house. The master was in bed already, but the mistress was still puttering around. When she heard what'd happened to Jaagup, she gathered a candle, a small tub of warm water, and a towel and went to help the boy.

"What a filthy mess!" said Mari as she took off his jacket and shirt. "Mud all over."

"I was crawling all day long," answered the boy.

"Have you a clean shirt somewhere?" asked the mistress.

"I don't think so," said the boy. "I was wearing the last one."

“We can give him mine for the time being,” said Miina. That night, the boy slept in her shirt and, thanks to the mistress, his own shirt was clean and dry by morning.

They tried to get him to eat something, but his stomach ached and he couldn’t swallow. So the boy went to sleep in the girl’s bed with an empty stomach, and she slept on the floor.

“Good thing they didn’t break any bones,” Andres said the next morning. He came to check the boy’s injuries and brought along a bottle of spirits. “Otherwise, the beating probably served you right. Maybe you’ll be smarter from now on.”

“My bones are still whole,” said the boy.

“When are you going to start thinking like a man?” the master asked his hand, looking him straight in the eyes.

“Maybe I never will,” said the boy, looking back at him.

“Sometimes you act like you have some brains, but the next moment it seems you have none at all. Didn’t you carry a stick in your hand, or at least a handy stone in your pocket, so you could fight back a little?” asked Andres.

“No, nothing,” said Jaagup. “Just my two bare hands, as usual. I’m not much of a fighter.”

“But still, you’re ready to risk it, even if you have to wade through bog pools.”

“I didn’t do so well this time, master, but don’t be mad. I’ll make up the days,” the farmhand said.

“The days don’t matter. I’m more concerned about saving your skin,” said Andres. “I’m sorry about you. You’re a good man, but you have no common sense, with the concertina and the naughty girls. You’d risk your body and soul for them.”

“This time they just got my body,” said the boy. “I was afraid they’d beat me blind. Then I couldn’t have gotten home. I wouldn’t

have been able to see the pines of Vargamäe across the bog. But I've still got my sight."

Andres laughed. "What can you do with such a madman?" he asked kindheartedly. "He's happy just to have kept his eyes in his head."

"Ears, too, for now. Though one hurts something awful and I don't know how it'll turn out. Seems a little better today."

Jaagup continued to convalesce in Miina's bed. She salved his wounds and bruises with goose fat, the way the master and mistress showed her. Now and then Andres dropped by with the bottle of spirits to chase away abscesses and infection.

As she treated him, the girl felt pity for his body, which she found attractive. When he started to heal, she was no longer willing to sleep on the floor by the wall and she climbed into bed with him, under the same blanket, because it was warmer and more comfortable. Gently, she caressed the boy's bruises and wounds, which itched and prickled as they healed.

"How good you are, Miina," Jaagup once said to her. "You even gave me the shirt off your back."

To Miina, these were the sweetest words she'd ever heard from a man, and they made her happy beyond measure. Even the following day, the mistress could see the joy in her eyes.

She replied to the boy, "If only someone was that good to me."

"I will be," he said. "You'll see. It's you who made me well."

"God made you well," the girl corrected him.

"God and you together," said the boy.

"And the mistress, too. She brought the goose fat and the rest to help you heal," the girl pointed out.

"You're right. The mistress, as well. All three: God, you, and the mistress," the boy declared, forgetting all about the master and his

spirits. This was a grave oversight and Jaagup, as he aged and grew in wisdom, revised his gratitude to God, spirits, and women.

Jaagup could not predict how Miina would react to his assertions, but he quickly found out. “Don’t make sinful jokes like that,” she said reproachfully.

“I’m not. I’m telling you the truth,” said Jaagup.

He truly believed that Miina and the mistress, with God’s help, had healed him, but his health never fully returned. He still suffered aches and pains, and heavy lifting left him doubled over, as if something was torn apart inside him. Constriction loomed once again, but Jaagup was sure he’d be in the clear since he was so much weaker than the year before. His situation, however, took an unexpected turn.

“You know, things with our Miina aren’t good,” said the mistress quietly to the master one day.

“What’s the matter?” asked Andres.

“Haven’t you noticed?” asked Mari with surprise. “She’s in a family way.”

“What? Miina?” Now the master was surprised. “Whose is it?”

“I haven’t asked,” said the mistress, “but I guess it’s Jaagup’s.”

“That boy? That child? She could be his mother!”

“That’s true,” the mistress agreed. “It started when Miina was nursing him. She even let him wear her shirt that first evening.”

“You mean she put a spell on him with that shirt?” Andres asked, laughing.

“Perhaps she did,” said Mari seriously. “Last summer, Leena was crazy about him and he wouldn’t give her the time of day. And now he takes up with Miina? What’s Miina compared to Leena?”

They agreed that Mari should talk to Miina. It wasn’t difficult. Miina wasn’t trying to hide her condition and, expecting the

mistress's question, she took it upon herself to speak up as Mari waited for the right time and place.

"By now the mistress has surely noticed the way things are with me."

"Well, yes," Mari replied. "I can see your state, but I don't know who your partner might be."

"Why, our Jaagup. Who else? I don't traipse around anymore, not at my age. Who'd want me?" said Miina.

"But how could it be? Jaagup's heart was full of Roosii and he suffered that beating for her..."

"He still dreams of Roosii, of course. It happened with me and I can't tell you why. He always spoke of Roosii but still it happened. I can't help but wonder..." Miina explained.

"I was thinking, could it have been the shirt you let him wear that first night?" asked the mistress.

"How could I know?" Miina exclaimed and, for the first time, Mari noticed the girl's dull eyes glowing with joy and happiness. "Of course it had to be something. I guess it could've been my shirt. I gave him the linen, you know. It's not coarse at the bottom. I wore it when I was confirmed and I once planned to wear it at my wedding, but lately I saved it only for a burial shroud, since I felt sure no man would ever want me. But then along came Jaagup! The mistress is right. It must've been my shirt. What else could it have been?"

"It sounds like you're happy," said Mari.

"I am, mistress," said Miina.

"Did he promise to marry you?"

"No, we never spoke of it."

"Then this is very shameful, Miina!" the mistress cried.

"That can't be helped. There's no other way to have a child," the girl said seriously, "so it's good, even this way."

Pity for the girl overcame the mistress. Miina reveled in her joy and happiness as a beggar would. “Do you really want it so badly?” Mari asked tenderly.

“If only you knew!” sighed Miina. “The whole truth is Jaagup didn’t come to me. I went to him. I joined him in my own bed. He was so ill and weak and his body was covered in bruises and wounds. There was no one but me to stroke him and pity him. That’s how it started.”

“Does Jaagup know of your condition?”

“No,” the girl replied. “He’s not the kind of fellow who’d think about that. I haven’t dared to tell him. Who knows what he might do.”

After hearing her story, Mari found it impossible to do anything but forgive Miina and take the girl into her heart, but Andres looked at it very differently. He didn’t approve of the actions of his farmhand and his maid. No explanations or excuses would change his mind. He couldn’t put up with such affairs on his farm, especially since he had two daughters old enough to understand these things. Andres felt he had no choice but to deal with the problem head on and confront Jaagup.

“I thought the only thing you wanted to do was race across the marshes to Põlluotsa,” Andres said to the boy, “but suddenly now...”

“It wasn’t my fault, master,” whimpered Jaagup like a child. “She crept into the bed herself, and that’s why it happened.”

“Well, why did you let her? You’re in trouble now,” said Andres.

“I was sick.”

“Ah, so it happened when you were sick?” the master speculated.

“I was beginning to recover and then it started.”

“If that’s what happened, I’m throwing Miina out,” Andres said decisively.

Jaagup thought for a moment and said, "Let Miina stay, master. I'm as guilty as she. Yes, she salved my wounds and caressed me, but I..."

"I can't have this going on right in front of my children!" Andres roared.

For the time being, they left it at that. Jaagup didn't think the master would drive Miina out of Vargamäe right away. There was, however, a sudden, unexplained change. Jaagup began eating like mad, trying to build himself up in a couple of weeks so he'd be strong enough to be drafted. The others didn't notice right away, because he was secretive about it, but the mistress saw food disappearing from the pantry and she guessed where it was going. She also guessed the farmhand's reasons, but she said nothing about it, not even to Andres. Jaagup had decided to join the army. He'd go as a volunteer if that was the only way.

As it turned out, the list was short that year and they took many other weak men along with Jaagup of Vargamäe. Jaagup felt as if a stone had been lifted off his heart. For a few years he could get away from the whole mess. This predicament with Miina had weighed on him so that even Roosi had moved to the back burner.

When Jaagup arrived back at Vargamäe and told everyone he'd been drafted, suspicions were raised.

"Did he do it on purpose? Do you know?" Andres asked Mari.

"Of course he did it on purpose," replied Mari. "He's been eating secretly for weeks."

"What a strange boy! We never had one like him before," Andres said. "Letting himself be drafted to escape an old maid!"

"She didn't scare him off, the child did," Mari said.

Hearing that, Andres called Jaagup such a nasty name that even Mari was shocked.

“You don’t have to put it like that,” she said.

Miina also felt that something was suspicious about Jaagup’s conscription. When she had the chance, she asked him, “Why didn’t you get out of it?”

“Well, I thought I would, but it happened anyway,” he said and made a sad face.

“You know what I think, Jaagup? I think you did it on purpose.”

“What?” the boy exclaimed.

“You let them take you because that’s what you wanted.”

“Ah, that’s a lot of rubbish,” the boy said.

“No, it isn’t,” the girl said firmly. “You put on weight before you were called up. I saw it, but I didn’t want to believe it. Now I do. You were eating in secret.”

Jaagup said nothing.

“You know why?” the girl asked. When he didn’t answer, she continued, “You got yourself drafted because I’m with child. The mistress told you, didn’t she?”

“No, but the master did.”

“So you did it because of me, like I said. Didn’t you?” she insisted.

“No point in lying,” the boy confessed, looking away.

“How dumb,” said Miina in a simple, kind voice. “You were afraid you’d have to marry me and support the child. Weren’t you?”

“Well, yes,” the boy answered.

“I wouldn’t have asked for that,” she said. “I just wanted a child, that’s all. I’d swear it in front of a pastor at the altar. I never thought you’d marry me. And now you’re in the army. If Vargamäe doesn’t want me anymore, I’ll go to my mother’s cottage. You can come and see the child if you want, but if you don’t care, you don’t have to come. I’m not going to force you. If it’s a boy, I’ll name him Jaagup, though. You can’t stop me from doing that, in the army or not.”

"I'll get out of it," the boy said. "I'll do whatever it takes to get out."

"You can get out after one day for all I care. You've got nothing to fear from me or my child."

"Maybe you're lying," said the boy doubtfully.

"I swear by holy Jesus that I'm telling you the truth," the girl said solemnly.

Jaagup just sat there with a troubled and silly expression. Never before had he been in such a stupid situation. He felt as if the scars and bruises he got for Roosie were flaring up again, and the pain penetrated deep into his chest.

"I didn't think you were so empty-headed, so I didn't bring it up before," said Miina. "I was afraid you'd stay away from me if I told you," she sobbed.

There was no way out. Jaagup was drafted and Miina was sent from Vargamäe. Andres wanted to keep the whole ordeal from the children, but Liisi and Maret had already gotten wind of what was going on and they explained it to the other children.

Miina cried as she packed her things and she cried as she said goodbye. Indrek asked his sisters, "Why is Miina leaving if it makes her cry?"

"Father is making her go," replied Maret.

"Why?" asked the boy.

"Because she's going to have a baby. That's why," Maret explained.

"Mother had a baby. Why didn't he make her go?"

"Boy, are you dumb!" Liisi shouted. "Miina isn't married. That's why."

The boy had more questions, such as "Why doesn't she get married?"

"Jaagup is going to be a soldier," Maret replied.

"Couldn't somebody else marry her?"

The sisters laughed.

“The pastor does the marrying, not Jaagup,” Maret explained.

“Then why does it matter if Jaagup’s there? It doesn’t sound like they need him at all,” said the boy.

“Don’t you understand? The pastor has to marry them both, so Jaagup is Miina’s husband and she can have a baby,” Liisi explained.

“But how could she have a baby now if Jaagup is not her husband?” asked Indrek, finding the whole situation very foggy.

“Because she is and that’s a sin. That’s why,” Maret said, with such an expression and tone that Indrek guessed something bad had happened to Miina. What it was, he couldn’t figure out.

After a while, Indrek asked Maret, “Isn’t our mother’s baby a sin?” But she had gotten bored with the whole subject.

“Leave me alone. You don’t know anything. You have to grow up first. If the parents are married, it’s not a sin, and if they aren’t, it is. Now shut up.”

The boy did shut up, and he continued to grow. He forgot his sisters’ explanations, but the word “sin” stayed with him. When he saw baby lambs carried into the house out of the cold, miserable and bleating, he recalled his sister saying the baby was a sin. He remembered it in the springtime, too, when the sow ran around the pen with a sagging belly and drooping teats, followed by a squealing litter of piglets. They seemed like pretty small sins, each one on four little legs.



Chapter 30

Jaagup served in the army for nearly a year and a half, and was then released to improve his health. He came to see his old employers, Andres and Mari, at Vargamäe. Mari's eyes filled with tears at the sight of her former farmhand. He looked so pitiable.

"You had the strength to come?" she asked.

"Each mile took an hour," said Jaagup, coughing quietly.

"Where are you staying now?" asked Mari.

"At Miina's, in the cottage. Her mother just died," the boy replied in a guilty voice. "Where else should I be?"

"Really? At Miina's?" Mari was surprised and glad at the same time. "Is the baby well? I heard it was a boy. I haven't seen Miina myself. We parted on bad terms."

"Well, I didn't go just to see the baby," Jaagup said. "I had no place else to go. I've got no family and no strength to work."

"So it's all on Miina now?"

"For now, yes," the boy admitted.

"Did you do this to yourself?" Mari referred to his wretched state.

"Yes. How else would I come to this?"

"You swallowed something?"

"Swallowed some and smeared some on my skin, all kinds of things," said the boy. "Well, finally it worked. They let me go."

“To the graveyard,” said the mistress.

“Maybe to the graveyard,” said the boy, “but Miina says she’ll cure me. She says, ‘I cured you when you came from Roosii’s and I’ll cure you now that you’re home from the service. I won’t let you die.’ She says she’s smarter than Roosii or the military.”

“Any news of that Roosii now?” Mari asked curiously.

“What news could there be?” said the boy. “I haven’t seen her myself, but they say she’s in a family way.”

“Is it yours?” asked Mari.

“No, it’s not mine,” he said firmly.

“Then whose?” asked Mari, surprised. “Didn’t you keep on crossing the bog?”

“It wasn’t just me! There were others who paid her visits, too. After all, who was it that beat me up?”

“So you only got close to Miina?”

“Just Miina,” confirmed the boy.

“Will you drop Roosii now?”

“Who am I to drop anyone? Or to stay?” commented the boy. “I can’t even dance or play the concertina anymore.”

“Not even the concertina?” said Mari, amazed.

“No longer!” Jaagup said. “What’s more, I don’t feel like playing, but sometimes the little boy likes to listen as I pump it. He sits there like a bump on a log.”

“He takes after his father. You mind him when Miina goes to work?”

“Sure. I’d be bored otherwise. He’s nice. He makes me laugh sometimes.”

“Have you got enough to eat?” the mistress asked quietly, as if in secret.

“So far we’ve gotten by,” he replied. “With three mouths to feed, Miina works day and night.”

“I’ll give you a little something to stuff in your pocket, if you can carry it.”

“I can manage a little something. I’ll just rest along the way.”

Mari went to talk to Andres, who was keeping his distance from Jaagup and avoiding conversation, as if he had no interest in his ex-farmhand’s fate.

“Give him something. Why not?” he told Mari. “But don’t kill him with the load. You can see he’s hanging by a thread.”

Mari went to the barn and cut a big piece of bread. She took a couple cups of peas and a thick chunk of pork fat, which she tied in a separate package.

She said to Jaagup, “I made two bundles with a cord tied between, so you can toss them over your shoulder, one in front and one behind.”

Jaagup started down the hill, stooped over as if the little burden would fold him up like a jackknife.

“That’s supposed to be a man,” said Andres when Jaagup was gone.

“Yes, a man,” said Mari. “He’s got a child and everything.”

“But it’s a woman who’s feeding him, as well as the child,” Andres remarked.

“Well, you can’t say Miina lacks strength,” commented Mari. “She’s happy to have Jaagup back with her. Who knows, they might even get married.”

“You never know what fools might do,” said Andres, feigning contentment. A little later, after some thought, he said, “It’s a strange world, isn’t it? You’re trying for one thing and it goes some

other way. You figure you're doing something good, but it turns out bad, and there isn't a thing you can do about it."

"What's on your mind?" Mari asked.

"I was thinking about Matu. When I hired him back I was hoping for a good worker, for he was strong already when he worked here as a cowherd. But now Pearu's like an angry bull with a red cloth in front of him. It's like Matu put a hex on him. If I'd known that would happen, I wouldn't have hired him. Pearu told me right off that hiring Matu was like sticking a fist in his face and picking a fight. After all, there are other workers who could come work for Vargamäe besides Matu, who used to throw stones at Pearu. That's what he said when we spoke of it."

When Andres hired Matu in the middle of the winter, he had no malicious intentions. It happened by chance. They'd met at the tavern and Andres had jokingly invited Matu to come work for him.

Matu, who'd started going by Mart, replied, "Not me. Why do I need to start fighting with Pearu again?"

"You know, he and I have been good neighbors for years now, just the way we ought to be," Andres replied.

"No kidding?" said Mart, surprised. "Well, that's great! If you're not fighting anymore, I could come."

"Then you're free?"

"As a bird," replied the man.

"Could you come to Vargamäe today?"

"I'm ready," he nodded.

So they got in the sleigh and went to Vargamäe that day. The standing farmhand's year was not yet over, but that was good since Andres planned to build new cowsheds in the spring and would need all the help he could get. He might've put off the cowsheds again, but Mari was insistent. She couldn't shake the feeling that

something plagued their animals. They were sickly and she gave them up to ghosts, one after the other. She lamented to the local clairvoyants and they all said the same thing, as if with one voice: It was a curse and nothing else. Witchcraft! Mari thought up clever ways to thwart the curse, but how could she succeed if her tricks were met by new tricks? She tried submerging nine different knives in the cattle's water on the day she put them out to pasture. She tried reciting magic incantations. She tried burying a dead animal by the doorsill. None of it helped. The animals were still sick.

Mari found the situation quite serious. She finally realized it had nothing to do with evildoers, since her methods would've worked against them. Perhaps the real cause was her old sins—Juss, once again. Ever since he died, things had gone downhill with the Vargamäe animals. These thoughts renewed Mari's misery and, with it, her need to visit the graveyard. She tried as hard as she could to hide her feelings from Andres, but he saw them anyway. When they visited their children at the cemetery, she avoided Juss's grave. To Andres, this only proved that in her heart Mari still dwelled on Juss.

“Stop pretending! As if I didn't know it's Juss more than the children who draws you here. So just go. Visit his grave.”

Mari resisted, looking at her husband with teary eyes, and didn't go to recite the Lord's Prayer over Juss's grave. Her torment and the restraint she demanded of herself placed a great strain on her and turned her old before her time. Andres sensed that Mari was still crushed under the weight of the past, and he could never attain the relaxed and cheerful frame of mind he sometimes used to enjoy. The years took a heavy toll on him as well, even heavier because he tried to dull the edge of his gloom with ceaseless work. The muscles of his neck and around his waist were often tense and swollen,

and Mari rubbed and kneaded them until her hands and fingers went numb. Sometimes Liisi came over and squeezed her father's shoulders, but she really didn't have enough strength. There was one thing she could do, though—tread on her father's back with both feet as he lay flat on the floor or on the grass in the yard.

"The children are starting to be of some use," Andres said to Mari after Liisi walked on his back for a while. "She pummels me. It's like I'm getting beaten with two heavy sticks and it eases my bones and joints. Just wait till she grows up."

"When she grows up she'll squash you into porridge," said Mari.

"Yes, but not quite yet," Andres answered.

More and more often, Andres could be found groaning in a chair and when he got up, he groaned even louder.

"Just like an old workhorse," he'd say of himself. "At first his joints are stiff, but when he warms up he's still able to trot."

"True. The master's not the man I used to know," said the farmhand Mart, whom they still sometimes called Matu at the farm.

"I don't think Pearu could chase you through the swamp anymore either," said Andres.

"Would I still have to run from him?" asked the farmhand.

"We'll have to wait and see," joked Andres. "Pearu has something in mind. He's already knocked down a piece of the boundary fence and that's not a good sign."

"Could I be the reason?" asked Matu.

"I think so. He hasn't pulled anything like this in years."

"If it's me he's after, he'll soon be whistling another tune," Matu threatened.

Pearu wasn't bothered by threats the farmhand made behind his back, since they didn't interfere with his own doings or "business interests." He was a farmer and a landowner and he could do what

he liked on his own property; he could dam up the water, knock down the boundary fences, or move them inside his property line to create an open strip of land as wide as a street and start a tree nursery. Of course, the neighbor had to keep his animals out, so Andres was forced to put up another fence to maintain the boundary. That was Andres's responsibility and served his own "business interests." Andres would build his fence right on the property line and Pearu would knock it down, letting Andres's cattle trample his precious nursery. These were Pearu's true "business interests" in regard to his land and his property lines. He wanted to do whatever caused the most trouble for his neighbor.

When the time came to plow the fallow, something happened that caused Andres to explode with anger. Andres and Pearu's fallows ran side by side along the property line and Pearu, when plowing his first furrow on the edge of the boundary, plowed up nearly the whole strip.

"I just made it a bit narrower. It was on my land anyway," he said when Andres confronted him.

"The boundary strip was mostly on my land," said Andres.

Pearu disagreed. Andres had no choice but to put up poles and stakes with grass tufts to survey the boundary. After studying his poles and tufts, it became clear that Pearu, little by little, had shifted his property line onto Andres's land. Madis's words suddenly came back to him.

"If only the boundary marks and stones stayed in place," Madis had said long ago. Now it seemed they had indeed moved.

Andres asked Pearu to take a look at his survey efforts, but Pearu wouldn't come. In fact, he refused to talk to Andres. So Andres brought in other men. Madis the cottager looked over the property lines along with some of the builders who were there working on

the cowshed, but they only grunted “uh huh” and “oh, yeah” and went back to their jobs.

Andres boiled with rage. He replowed the boundary, marked it with poles, and put down new stones to protect the property line and the new boundary strip, which now ran over his neighbor’s plowed fallow in some places. Pearu came by to look at the work just as Matu was rolling stones into place on the new boundary strip. He started shouting at his neighbor’s farmhand.

“Go ahead and yell,” Matu told him, “but if you put a finger on one of these stones, I’ll skin you alive. I haven’t forgotten that you shot my dog when I was a cowherd.”

“You snot nose! That’s why you came to Vargamäe.”

“You got that right—just so I could beat the hell out of you,” answered Matu. “Andres doesn’t know how to deal with you. He talks about justice, but the only justice you understand is the kind that goes up your rear. We’ll shove justice up your ass till we get enough in there to pay for my dog.”

“Screw you and your damn dog!” said Pearu. “You little twerp!”

“If you’re a man, come over here!”

“You come over here!”

“Okay,” said Matu and started walking toward him.

“You’re on my land!” shouted Pearu.

“You invited me,” said Matu, who kept advancing.

“I’ll shoot you like I shot your dog!” threatened Pearu.

“Go ahead and shoot. You’re still going to get your ass whipped.”

Matu was getting quite close, but Pearu turned and walked away, occasionally glancing over his shoulder as if he feared an attack from behind. Matu didn’t follow. He stood in the middle of the field, pleased that Pearu was walking away and hollered after him, “Looks like you’re pissing your pants, neighbor!”

Pearu didn't answer and Matu went back to work, rolling the last stones into place.

A few days later, Pearu brought in some experts to survey the property line. They didn't find any fault in Andres's work, but since he'd fixed the boundary on his own hook, one of them suggested there were grounds for a lawsuit.

Andres brought in some extra men and worked until all the borders had been re-plowed. Day after day, strangers milled around Vargamäe, talking, arguing, and shouting. In the end, it was clear that the boundary had been moved onto Hill Farm land in many places. Because the property line was marked incorrectly, there were also places where Valley Farm men had cut down good-sized trees for firewood, though the trees actually belonged to the Hill Farm.

Andres demanded damages and a series of lawsuits followed. He wasn't really after the compensation, but simply wanted to show the world that he was on the side of justice and Pearu was in the wrong. He'd once tried to use the truth to prove his case, but he'd since given up that strategy. He lost all belief in the power of truth years before, when his first lawsuits were heard. He did, however, still believe in justice, and he'd use every trick and loophole he could find in its pursuit. Little by little, his notion of justice had changed until it consisted only of tricks and loopholes, and all that mattered was victory in the courtroom. Yet at Vargamäe they still referred to "truth and justice" just as they had a decade earlier. For this reason, Pearu got angrier and angrier as the court cases progressed, whereas he'd previously treated them as light entertainment during which he could swagger and strike deals. Pearu used to know with some certainty that Andres would describe the facts accurately, whether in the tavern or the courtroom. That made it easy for Pearu to twist things in his favor and turn Andres's truth

and justice on its head, as if “truth and justice” were a card game and Pearu, knowing his opponent’s hand, could turn the game one way or the other. There was no point in playing otherwise. When Pearu spoke of justice—and he spoke of it as much as his neighbor, though his notion of truth was different—he was always talking about a card game.

But a cardsharp could also play unfairly, and Pearu felt that Andres had become a cheat, a card hustler, when his opponent slapped down a winning hand. This infuriated Pearu and he struggled to make his case. In court, Andres jabbered on about truth and justice, accusing Pearu of devious and unfair acts, but in reality Andres himself was just as devious and unfair. Andres tried to portray himself as the man he used to be, the man who took things seriously, who didn’t play games and gained the trust of others, but all the while he was playing games—even more than Pearu. He used the old chestnut of “truth and justice” to hide the fact that he was cheating at cards. Pearu had no such cover. Everyone knew he was prone to lying and swaggering.

That was the situation. Pearu could do nothing but bang his head against the wall and curse the injustice. Was it fair that everybody could see his cards, but nobody could see Andres’s? Or, more precisely, was it fair that Andres used tricks to hide his cards? Pearu didn’t think it was fair or just, so his anger kept mounting against his neighbor. Andres might say he didn’t want to play cards at all, but then why did he come to Vargamäe? Why did he look for a card table? Why didn’t he move away?

In addition to the lawsuit over property lines, Andres brought actions on the dammed water, the swamp causeway, the blocked cattle paths, and other issues, so there was always more than one lawsuit in progress. Every case became the basis for another. For

years, the two neighbors did nothing but dispute matters in court and look for new tricks to use against each other. And because the court system was being reorganized at that time, they often had to visit a higher court in the county center.

Neither the lower court nor the appeals court ever placated the adversaries. No matter how the trial turned out, each man left feeling that he was found too guilty or not sufficiently exonerated. If the lawsuit ended with no consequences, both felt that they had to start a new case immediately—a case with consequences, for both felt the other must be “put on notice” about the real state of affairs.

All this pointless litigation and mutual animus led both men to search at home for that which they couldn’t gain in the feud. Justice and victory could still be found with their wives and children. The public charges turned to private ones at home, where the foundation of truth was just as scarce. At home, however, both neighbors found justice and victory much easier to achieve.

Vargamäe had rarely seen such hard days and such a depressing mood as persisted throughout these interminable lawsuits, though life should’ve been getting better since Pearu’s sons were old enough to guide the plow and Andres’s oldest daughter could harrow and roll. The others weren’t accustomed to seeing a girl put to work like that, but Andres didn’t care. He would do as he pleased.

The children of both families now tended the cattle. Both men had eagerly anticipated this time, when they’d no longer need hired labor, but life got more and more miserable nonetheless. Fights and quarrels, both inside their homes and out, became more frequent. Whether they wanted to or not, even the old cottagers were dragged into the fray. When fierce battles raged at the Valley Farm, the women and children moved up to Madis’s cottage, like war

refugees waiting for better times. Neither Pearu nor Andres was happy about it.

“I’m not going to put up with this,” Andres kept telling Madis. “You can’t give shelter to the neighbor’s fugitives.”

“Master,” pleaded Madis, “what can I do if they come?”

“Shut the door on them.”

“They’ll freeze to death. The children are small,” explained the cottager.

“Let them die,” roared Andres. “We’ll finally get rid of that den of snakes.”

“Master,” Madis said, “I can’t leave children out in the cold. You can drive me out of Vargamäe, but those children are still human, no matter who their father is.”

“If you don’t listen, I’ll send you packing,” Andres promised, but he didn’t follow through on his threat, and the neighbor’s wife and children continued to stay at the cottage. Andres pretended to be oblivious, which wasn’t too hard because he was often unaware of what was happening, and the others tried to keep bad news from him at any cost.

Mari never looked for shelter outside the home, though she and the children also faced some unbearable days. Even if Andres struck her, Mari stayed on and wouldn’t move. She followed the example of blessed Krõõt and protected the children from their father’s fury as much as she could, taking beatings herself to spare them. She protected her own children as well as Krõõt’s. This touched a soft spot in Andres’s heart and, in spite of his iron will, he often dropped his lifted hand when he realized that Mari was protecting all the children.

Sometimes he yelled in fury, “Get out of my sight! I don’t even want to see your shadow!”

“Where should I go with them all?” Mari countered. “To the cottage, with the neighbor’s wife?”

“So go to the cottage! That’s where you came from!” shouted Andres.

“The children who came from the cottage are in the graveyard now. These are all yours and I’ll not go to the cottage with them, even if you strike me dead,” Mari countered.

Faced with Mari’s resolve, her husband usually cooled off. Andres admired her courage as a wife and mother but, even so, there were times when he lost all patience and lashed out like a wild man. This usually happened when someone questioned his position of morality and justice with respect to Pearu. It was one of life’s basic questions and there could be only one answer: Andres’s.

One such incident wasn’t resolved for a whole week until Andres, in a fit of anger, beat Mari brutally in the middle of the farmyard. Mari was coming back from the woodpile with an armload of wood when Andres ran toward her from the house. They exchanged looks and senseless words, as sharp as daggers, and then it began.

As it happened, no one was around to see what transpired except for Indrek, who stood beside the door. As Andres rained blows down upon her, his mother hunched under them. She remained standing, calmly and quietly, as if waiting for the final one to erase the thoughts from her mind—of Juss and his children, of her life with Andres and her love for him and his children, of the cottage and the farm at Vargamäe, and of all the misery of their lives. The breathless boy rushed to his mother, threw himself to the ground, and grasped her legs. He sobbed as his mother stood in the middle of the yard with an armload of wood, bent at the waist as if to make it easier for Andres to beat her.

How long this went on Indrek didn't remember, but one detail stayed with him—his mother's bare feet. She'd gone barefoot since spring and her feet were scorched by the sun, hardened by the winds, and stained with every kind of dirt from the barn, the cellar, and the cattle shed. Mother wore a coarse skirt, and the boy could feel her legs flinching beneath the stiff fabric every time a blow fell. The boy would feel echoes of those flinches for long, long afterward, whenever he happened to see his mother's tanned feet and coarse skirt. Even as an adult he couldn't shake the strange, frightening feeling. For a long time, he knew no more pitiful figure than his mother, standing in the middle of the yard, hunched in front of his father, clutching an armload of wood.

Yet that day there was an even more wretched and dejected figure—his father. But the boy didn't know it then and wouldn't for many years. Only Mari understood that Andres was battling both the living and the dead, for she could hear Andres scowling through his teeth with every blow, each word a bloody piece of his heart or his aching soul. "This is for Juss! This is for Pearu's justice!" To the boy, it seemed that his mother didn't mind the beating so much. When father stopped and walked away, looking awful, as if he were the one who'd been abused, she took the wood under one arm, lifted the boy with the other, and took both into the house.

As she put the branches under the pot, she admonished the sobbing child, "Don't cry. Yes, it's hard and painful, but you saw your father. He might come back."

The child, unafraid of his father's violence, kept on crying. Mari had to comfort and soothe him for a long time before his sobs finally ceased, because her voice and her eyes kept setting him off again.

Matu remembered Vargamäe well from his time as a young cowherd, but when he returned there as an adult it felt like a different

place altogether. Before, cheerfulness reigned and joy and happiness pervaded the farm. Even the quarrels seemed mostly for entertainment and amusement, though they sometimes ended sadly, as when Pearu shot Matu's dog. Now one rarely saw the old joy. Whenever Matu felt a glimpse of it, his heart warmed and he recalled what it'd been like so many years before.

Below the alder grove and between the Jõessaare islands was the old boundary ditch that the two neighbors had dug together, sharing the cost, and that Pearu had once dammed. The ditch itself had largely fallen in and no one thought about clearing it out, but the bank, piled on one side, was still high and firm. From the beginning, everyone at Vargamäe, farmers and cottagers alike, used it as a pathway to Jõessaare and the river. The path was used by haymakers, cowherds, hunters, and fishermen, as well as others just rambling in the woods. The animals, too, tried to get their hooves on the high, dry peat whenever they had the chance, but they were strictly forbidden from doing so. Even the dogs knew that rule and, without a command, they'd rush after any animal that tried to step onto the bank.

Along with everyone else, Matu used this path along the ditch. Perhaps he used it even more than the others because he loved to fish. He always went barefoot, for he wouldn't risk soaking his moc-casins in the river and he didn't like wearing anything in the heat. Once, while he was on his way to the river, he stepped on some sharp wooden spikes that left both his feet bleeding. In and of itself, this was no big deal for a man used to going barefoot, especially a cowherd. "Cuts heal and that's all there's to it," thought Matu, as did the others.

But soon others were injured on the bank, too. It was as if the sharp spikes had fallen from the sky or some evil person had put

them there on purpose. Matu spoke with Madis the cottager, who complained that his wife also hurt her foot there and the wound was festering because it'd gotten wet. She was limping, practically walking on one foot.

"What kind of damned spikes could be out there?" wondered Matu.

Madis let some spit fly between his teeth, aiming as far away as he could, as he considered something. He looked at Matu with a shrewd, searching expression.

"Can you keep your mouth shut?" he asked furtively.

"Sure," said Matu.

"Tight like a grave?"

"Like a grave," Matu assured him.

Then Madis said, "Pearu's doing it."

"What? Pearu put down those wooden spikes?"

"It's him. Who else could've done it?"

"Are you sure?"

"I pulled one out. It's the work of a man—both ends sharpened, shoved into the ground. A child couldn't do it, that's for sure. Who else but Pearu?"

After hearing from Madis, Matu went to the path along the ditch that same night. Barefoot, he walked carefully, setting one foot down and placing the other foot next to it so he wouldn't miss any spikes. When he sensed the first prick, he scraped at the ground and found a sharpened wooden stake thrust so deeply into the peat that he could hardly pull it out. So Madis was right. Matu caught sight of Indrek and young Andres tending the animals. He thought of telling them the whole story, but then changed his mind and decided to take care of the matter himself.

The following Sunday, when Pearu went to church, Matu returned to the path and paced it step by step until he found all the hidden stakes. He pulled them out and threw them in the ditch where they'd catch the eye of every passer-by.

For a while, no one bloodied their feet on the bank, but then the sharp points appeared again. Pearu had come back and replanted them. This time, Matu had a better idea. He was learning on the job. Again he located all the hidden spikes and pulled them out, but this time he didn't throw them into the ditch. Instead, he took them to the Valley Farm ditch, which ran through their land and down to the river. Their ditch also had a bank that was used as a path, mostly by the Valley Farm people. Matu thrust all the wooden spikes into the pathway on their bank, threatening the feet of those who walked there. This cost him two nights sleep, but he didn't care. It was a pretty exciting task and, in Matu's opinion, a necessary one.

Time passed. Not a whisper was heard about the spikes until the Valley Farm people began walking to the hayfields along the river. Suddenly, they said, spikes had appeared on the path alongside the big Valley Farm ditch and Pearu himself had stepped on one. Now his foot was festering.

No one could figure out what on earth was going on except for Matu, who grinned privately. They'd all blamed Pearu at first, but who should be blamed now? Pearu certainly wouldn't thrust spikes in his own path and injure himself. Madis the cottager might've had some idea of what happened, but he pretended, even with Matu, that he had no clue.

So things stood, until new spikes appeared on the bank of the boundary ditch and Matu went to find them and pull them out. This time, Pearu hid behind the bushes and caught him in the act. Matu was so surprised that he nearly took flight, like a young cowherd in

the old days, but he overcame the shock and stayed put on the bank, holding in his hand one of the spikes he'd pulled out.

"Why are you breaking down my ditch bank?" Pearu screamed, without coming any closer.

"I'm clearing wooden spikes from the path," Matu replied. "Those damned cowherds have been shoving them into the ground. Look how long and thick they are. Sharp, too. People are hurting their feet."

Matu presented the stake for Pearu to examine, as if it were something new.

"It's not your problem what the cowherds do to my ditch bank," shouted Pearu. "Get the hell out of here!"

"No. I'm going to pull out all the stakes before I go," Matu said.

"Are you going to get off my ditch bank?" shouted Pearu menacingly.

"No, I won't. I told you so already," answered Matu.

"Do as I say or I'll shoot!" roared Pearu.

"What do you think I am? A dog?" Matu asked.

"Get moving!" Pearu shouted, pulling a pistol from his pocket.

"That's for shooting frogs, not men," Matu said scornfully.

"I'll kill you just like a frog!" Pearu yelled, moving toward the ditch.

Matu picked up more spikes from the ground and stepped into the marsh where he could hide amid the bushes and hummocks if Pearu really did start shooting.

"Come on!" Matu shouted angrily. "You think I'm still a cowherd?"

Pearu stopped, thinking it over.

"Pissing in your pants again?" asked Matu.

"You pipsqueak. You're not worth a bullet," Pearu answered.

“But these birch stakes are just your size,” said Matu, advancing toward Pearu, who waited a moment and then began to walk away. Matu ran after him.

“You’re gonna get the beating that’s been coming to you for a long time,” panted Matu as he chased Pearu across the marsh. Matu would’ve caught him at the ditch below the alder brush, but at the crucial moment Pearu turned and fired his gun right into Matu’s face, filling his eyes and mouth with fire and smoke. That saved Pearu, as Matu realized too late that the gun was loaded with grass. Pearu had only wanted to scare him.

“Gutless!” Matu shouted after Pearu as the man ran into the alder brush.

“You still breathing?” Pearu laughed.

There was nothing more to do. Matu had to admit that Pearu got the best of him with the grass-loaded gun. At home, they asked Matu if he’d seen what Pearu was shooting at. “He was going after a frog. That must’ve been the shot you heard.”

So no one ever learned the true story of the blast in the alder brush. Much later, after Matu had long since left Vargamäe, Pearu got drunk and talked about it but, as usual, no one believed his story or, even if they were inclined to believe some of it, they didn’t really know which parts to believe.

Despite the skepticism, Pearu continued to talk.

“That was one damn tough fellow—not afraid of the pistol or anything. Not even being shot. And what a worker! I took a look when he cut the hay. He didn’t give up anything, even to Andres. He cut clean, like with a razor. I offered him a job as my hand, at good pay, but he said, ‘You looking for a thrashing or what?’ He was never going to forgive me till the end of his days for shooting his dog. One tough fellow.”

In the autumn, the tough fellow pulled a trick on Pearu as pay-back for his antics.

In addition to the fences that Pearu built and smashed, he had a lot of “business” with the causeway. Years earlier, for the funeral of Andres’s first wife Krõõt, he’d repaired and smoothed the road much to everyone’s amazement. Nothing was left of that work any longer. The logs supporting the road were rotting away and they’d been replaced by brush with mud shoveled on top. That was good enough in the summer, when it was dry and people could walk on it. But the autumn rains shifted and heaved the whole road, so travelers worried their horses might fall between the shafts and disappear, leaving only the ears sticking out.

Pearu began digging holes on his side of the causeway and shoveling mud up onto the road. His burst of energy resulted in a treacherous path. For a long time, Andres had tried to make an agreement with Pearu so they could repair the road together and fill it with stone and shingle, but nothing came of his efforts. Pearu wasn’t foolish enough to spend good money on a road that’d be used by all the people of the neighborhood and not just him. It was better to break axles and smash wheels, to lose the shoes off his horses and break their legs. None of it mattered. “If others get through,” thought Pearu, “I’ll get through as well. That’s how a man does ‘business.’”

But Pearu wasn’t opposed to filling in the road cheaply. He did it in a way that made everyone grumble and complain—everyone, that is, but Matu, the Hill Farm hand. One pleasant day, when Pearu had gone to the mill, Matu asked the master for leave to go finish the causeway, so Pearu could get back easily that evening. Andres could see that the farmhand wanted to play a trick on his neighbor and let him go.

Matu waited until the evening, when he was pretty sure that no one would be using the road but Pearu. The farmhand was out until it was completely dark, and when he finally returned to the farm, he was running and laughing.

“He’s in! He’s gone in! Master, come and listen to him holler!” cried Matu.

Everyone ran outside and they heard someone crying for help from the causeway.

“Let’s take a lantern and go look,” said Matu.

He and Andres went out and the Valley Farm hand and Pearu’s boys soon followed. When they reached the road, Andres saw what Matu had done: Pearu’s holes had gotten much bigger and the pile of peat on the roadway had gotten so high that no one could pass. Pearu, drunk as he usually was after a trip away from the farm, had driven the horse and wagon straight into the heap of peat, and when the animal could no longer move forward or back, Pearu whipped it mercilessly and the horse tried to find another way through. It went off the road and fell into one of Pearu’s holes, which Matu had enlarged, and got stuck there. Pearu stood at the horse’s head, clutching its bridle for fear it might drown. He couldn’t do anything but shout.

“Exactly as planned,” Matu snickered to his master as they went to help Pearu.

“How the hell did this goddamn mud pile get here?” yelled Pearu when Andres and Matu reached him.

“Neighbor, didn’t you pave this road yourself?” said Andres, as if he didn’t understand. “There seems to be a little too much of a good thing. You could do with a bit less peat. Matu, can you give him a hand?”

“I’m angry as a ram’s horn!” Pearu roared.

“That’s okay, neighbor,” Andres calmed him. “Remember how you once came to my gate with a hunting knife? You got over it and got home alright. Same as today. Only we’ll have to get your horse out first. Luckily your holes aren’t too deep.”

“Go to hell! Don’t touch my animal. I’d rather it drown first. Help! Help!” he shouted toward his home.

“I don’t much feel like getting in that water,” said Andres. “I’ll just watch.”

Soon Pearu’s men arrived and went to work. Andres and Matu stood by silently, laughing to themselves. Matu helped dig some mud out from the sides and front of the wagon, tossing it back into the hole it came from while muttering, “Those toughs at Vargamäe, trying to make a cart road out of mud. They must be mad!”

For quite some time, the Valley Farm men strained and fumbled before finally pulling the horse out of the hole and hitching it to the wagon again. Andres tried to help, but Pearu told him to go to “the hot place nobody comes back from.” So Andres just stood there on the causeway, watching the others struggle until they were ready to head home.

“I won’t give this to you for free,” said Pearu as he passed the Hill Farm gate.

“I wouldn’t take that gift from you,” said Andres.



Chapter 31

That was the last practical joke Matu played on Pearu, and he really enjoyed pulling it off. Matu and his tricks would long be remembered at Vargamäe. Andres had many farmhands before and after, but none quite like Matu. And no one—not even the Vargamäe masters—knew this better than young Andres and Indrek.

To these young cowherds, Matu represented Vargamäe's past, much more interesting and marvelous than the present. The boys thought Matu knew old Vargamäe better than anyone. To others, Vargamäe was merely a place—ditches and woods, solitary trees, hay and grain fields, this road or that one—but the physical world itself didn't interest Matu. For him, reality was connected to feelings and experiences. Frequently he told the boys about the swamp, how animals got through it or became stuck, and—the big story—how the dam was torn down. He thrilled them with tales of his confrontations with Pearu and being chased through the hummocks and mud.

Young Andres thought these stories were wonderful, and he almost wished that Pearu would dam up the water under the alders again so that he could smash the dam himself and throw stones at Pearu. Tirelessly he practiced throwing stones and even carried

some in his pocket when he went down to the swamp, as if the past he dreamed of might resurface.

He couldn't help it if everything interesting happened before he was born. He could only dream about exciting times while whittling with his hunting knife. Matu told a fantastic story about Jõessaare and its birch trees. In his day, the trees were still so slender that he could shimmy up the base and leap from the top, hanging onto a branch so the whole tree bent and he floated down with a cold gust of wind blowing straight through his heart. When he let go, the tree would snap back up like a steel spring, inviting him to climb up again and jump back down. When he was a cowherd, it seemed that all he did was climb the tall, slender birches of Jõessaare and jump back down—whee! Each time he got the same feeling, like a great gust of a cold wind reaching down into his heart.

Now the birches in Jõessaare were bigger and thicker. While Andres and Indrek could climb to the very top, the trees wouldn't bend under their weight. The smaller trees were stunted and the boys didn't get that cold whoosh through their hearts when they jumped to the ground. They kept trying but Andres never experienced that feeling. Indrek did once or twice, but he was usually too nervous to climb as high as Andres. He always let go of the tree when he reached a certain height, no matter how determined he was to hold on. Andres began to wonder if Matu had lied about jumping down from the birch branch, and if Indrek ever really felt the cold wind in his heart as he claimed.

Once they had their fill, the boys sat and looked at the tree branches rustling in the wind.

"If you could ride the tallest one down, you'd feel it," Andres ventured.

"You bet," Indrek agreed.

“But you couldn’t climb that high,” said Andres.

“That’s for sure,” agreed the younger brother. “I’d get dizzy.”

“So you’ve got no use for the tall birches anyway. You can’t ride them down.”

“I’d watch you do it.”

“That wouldn’t do any good. You can’t feel the cold wind just from looking.”

“Maybe I would,” said the younger one. “I’m sure I would. I got that feeling a little just now, when you jumped down from the tallest tree. I felt it as soon as you threw yourself into the air.”

“But I didn’t feel anything at all,” Andres said.

“How about when you slide down the branch of a tall spruce tree? Do you feel anything then?” Indrek asked.

“I don’t feel anything at all. I just like to slide,” said Andres.

“When I watch you, I get sort of scared, and I feel the cold wind in my heart. I worry your hands will slip and you’ll crash to the ground. Remember when I fell from the alder in the paddock when the top broke?”

“It’s different with an alder. These are tough birches. How could my hands come loose if I hold on tight and don’t let go?”

“But you let go once on the roof at home,” Indrek reminded Andres. “You went up to get your arrow and you started to slide. You nearly fell off.”

“That was on the roof. It’s as slippery in dry weather as ice. Spruce branches aren’t slippery at all when I slide down.”

“You managed to get hold right at the edge. I was afraid you’d fall on the stones.”

“Not a chance,” bragged Andres.

“Did you feel the cold wind at the bottom of your heart then?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“I did, when I saw you slipping. Right away, I felt it in my heart and all the way down to my feet.”

“Why did you feel it? You weren’t sliding.”

“I felt it anyway and, you know, when I think about it, I feel it again.”

Andres didn’t like this kind of talk. He couldn’t stand it that Indrek felt things differently, especially something that had happened to him. When words failed him with his younger brother, he used his strength instead. But it happened again and again: Indrek had a feeling and Andres could neither understand nor put up with it. Andres began to think that Indrek told him confusing and unbelievable things out of spite. Indrek was just trying to act smarter and superior to Andres. The boys’ relationship steadily worsened and they clashed more frequently. Sometimes it seemed they never felt the same way about anything.

Matu had shown the boys a trick they could do with a snake: he attached a clamp to the snake’s tail and took it to an anthill. Andres loved to imitate Matu’s trick. He pressed a wooden spike on the snake’s neck and Indrek held it down so it couldn’t move its head. Meanwhile, Andres attached the clamp to the snake’s tail.

Andres enjoyed nothing so much as holding the snake by the clamp and watching it devour ants, as if it intended to eat the entire anthill population. After a while, the snake tired of eating, but there was no end to the ants. The little insects marched forward, oblivious to their individual fates. More and more kept coming! The snake swallowed so many of them whole, but the ants refused to go without a fight. Still alive inside the snake, they broke through its skin with the strength of their numbers and poured out from between its ribs. This was the end—the ants had won. In a couple of days there would be nothing left but a long white spine, which would

remain there until autumn, for the ants had neither the strength nor the teeth to do away with it. They simply ignored it and went about their business. But the boys were afraid of the anthill after that, because Matu said the ants became poisonous after ingesting the snake.

The following summer, the boys noticed something strange: all the anthills they'd treated to snakes had been abandoned. They poked each one with a stick, all the way to the bottom, but they didn't find a single ant. Whether they died or migrated to another spot, the boys couldn't say. It didn't particularly interest them and they would've forgotten all about it, but Indrek decided he didn't want to put snakes in anthills anymore. When Andres told him to hold down the snake, he wouldn't do it.

"What are you, afraid?" Andres asked.

"I'm not afraid. I just don't want to," said Indrek.

"Why not?" asked Andres, puzzled by Indrek's refusal.

"Because of the ants," Indrek said.

"Why do you care about them? They eat the snake and get a good meal," said the older brother.

"But then they abandon their hill."

"So?" Andres wondered. "Are you feeling sorry for them?"

"No, but..." Indrek was too embarrassed to admit that he felt sorry for the ants, even when they stung his bare feet.

"But what?" Andres pressed.

"I just don't want to play with the snake. It's disgusting when you put the clamp on with your fingers."

"You want me to do it without using my fingers?"

"No, I don't want you to do it at all."

"Stupid!" Andres cried scornfully. "I don't want your help, you sissy. I'll do it alone!"

So he took the snake and found a new anthill by himself. Later, Indrek went in secret to pull the snake out and bury it. The next day, Andres saw that the snake and the clamp were gone and he blamed Indrek. They fought and Indrek lost, of course. Their parents heard the row and came to investigate, but they couldn't easily mediate because father sided with the older boy and mother with the younger.

Regardless, young Andres stopped taking snakes to anthills and found something else to do with them. He'd stick an empty milk bottle under the nose of a snake lying in the sun. Smelling the milk, the snake crept inside and Andres quickly shoved a cork in the bottle. Putting the snake "under pressure," as he put it, he carried the bottle around for a while, teasing the snake through the glass. Finally, he hung the bottle from a tree branch and left the snake for a day, two days, three...a week, two weeks, part of a third...waiting to see how long it took a snake "under pressure" to die, but in the third week, when the boy's teasing still annoyed the snake enough to make it flick its forked tongue and spread its jaws against the glass, Andres threw the bottle to the dog. After the dog had played with it and barked at it for a while, Andres broke the bottle and killed the snake. He did this over and over again. At home, he said the bottles broke by accident and Indrek corroborated his story, but when their mother complained, almost in tears, that she had no more milk bottles, Indrek confessed what was going on. Andres got a thrashing, but he gave Indrek a worse thrashing for tattling once they were out with the cattle again. The boys' cries could be heard far and wide.

"If you say anything about this at home you'll get it even worse tomorrow," threatened Andres, and Indrek knew he'd keep his word.

“You can do what you want, but I won’t lie anymore,” said Indrek, crying.

“Then why did you lie at first?” Andres asked. “Why didn’t you say right off, ‘It was Andres who put the snake in the bottle?’”

“You told me to lie.”

“So? If you want to tell the truth so badly, you shouldn’t listen to me.”

“You beat me, that’s why,” sobbed Indrek.

“I can keep on beating you, but you can keep on telling the truth anyway,” said Andres mockingly.

“I will now. You’ll see,” said Indrek emphatically.

“And I’ll beat you up,” Andres said.

“Just wait till I’m big. Then I won’t let you.”

“You’ll never be big,” said Andres. “I’ll always be bigger and stronger than you.”

He said this so convincingly that his younger brother believed him. Indrek started crying again, for his own sake and for the sake of truth, which was like a poisonous snake in a tightly corked bottle.

The boys constantly butted heads. Each had his own pattern and rhythm. Even a little thing, like a battle between the crows and the hawks, caused them to quarrel.

Down in Jõessaare, there was a big spruce—or really, two spruces that had grown together—with branches so densely packed that the boys couldn’t climb them. Crows made a nest at the top, where no one could see. The boys suspected a nest was there and they had a good way to find out. When they pounded the tree with a stick, the nesting mother bird would immediately flutter into the air or the chicks would start peeping. So they knew a nest of crows sat at the top of the spruce.

Once, when they were crossing the marsh, they noticed the crows flying around and screaming in distant Jōessaare. Flying among them in the air were some smaller birds. When the boys got closer, they saw that the birds were flying and screaming above the big spruce. It was a conflict between two sparrow hawks and many crows. On the ground below the spruce, the boys found two baby crows. There was another suspended in the branches, hanging between sky and earth. The baby birds were still breathing and they opened their beaks when touched, hoping for food or perhaps trying to defend themselves.

The boys guessed that the sparrow hawks liked the nest so much, especially its location, that they attacked, threw the chicks out, and took over. The crows, of course, screamed to high heaven and called for all their brothers and sisters. The truth-loving crows felt it was their duty to help defend the nest. The fight for the nest and the spruce tree went on for two or three days, as the crows attacked the hawks again and again. But the hawks never gave up or backed off. They sounded their battle cries and dove like the wind, straight onto the backs of the crows, knocking them into the branches below like old rags. Eventually the crows recovered and tried to fly again. One crow was so stunned that it almost fell into the boys' arms.

After watching the battle for some time and contemplating the circumstances, Andres asked Indrek which side he was on.

"Crows," answered Indrek.

"I'm for the hawks," said Andres.

"But it was the crows' nest and tree," Indrek argued.

"So what? There are so many crows, but there's only two hawks," Andres countered.

"Who ever told them to attack the crows anyway? If there's just two of them, they should've stayed away."

“Maybe they liked the spruce.”

“It was the crows’ spruce.”

“It’s our spruce, not the crows’,” Andres countered. “The hawks have just as much right to be there as the crows.”

“But the crows were there first. They have more of a right,” argued Indrek.

“The crows didn’t ask us for the spruce, so they have no more of a right.”

“The hawks didn’t ask us either. They just came.”

“Both came without asking, crows and hawks, so they have equal rights,” figured Andres.

“But the crows came first, that’s why they have more of a right,” argued Indrek.

“Well, the hawks are stronger. It’s two against many.”

“It doesn’t matter who’s stronger. The ones who came first have the right to stay.”

“No, the winners have the right,” insisted the older boy and, because he had no other way to make his younger brother understand, he resorted to force, just like the hawks. Faced with strength, Indrek could do nothing but cry and give in.

The arguments and bickering might’ve gone on indefinitely if the quarrel hadn’t erupted into an ugly clash that shook the boys quite badly.

It happened at lunchtime and the animals were home. Mother was gathering new potatoes in the field and the two boys had followed along to help her. But instead of working, Indrek began playing with the freshly turned earth and Andres started needling him. Andres hated when Indrek ignored him, went off to do something on his own, and stopped paying attention. Andres liked to

shuffle and fool around, not just putter quietly like Indrek, whose thoughts were in a world that Andres couldn't comprehend.

"Why are you just sitting there?" he often asked Indrek. "Let's go do something."

Andres was always eager for some game that let him use his strength or run and jump until his shirt was soaked with sweat. He got bored on his own and forced his brother to come along. Usually, Indrek gave in, but when their mother was around, he was bolder and more self-assured, as if this wiped out all the humiliations he suffered in the woods at the hand of his brother. On this day, Andres became so annoyed with Indrek's confidence that he grabbed the boy's cap, filled it with dirt, and threw it far into the potato field. Indrek lost control. Face twisted and teeth gnashing, he picked up a hefty stone and flung it blindly at Andres, but his strong brother was cool and fearless. As soon as Indrek let go of the stone, Andres flung himself to the ground. The stone flew swiftly past him and hit their mother in the side as she stooped behind him picking potatoes. Andres laughed, not seeing his breathless mother fall to the fresh earth beside her potato basket. For Indrek, all went black. He saw only hot needlelike flashes of lightning.

"Did you hit your target?" mocked Andres.

The question snapped Indrek back to life. He saw his mother sitting up beside her basket and began to scream as he rushed past Andres toward her. She groaned and cried. Indrek threw himself into the soil in front of her face first and thrashed convulsively. He seemed afraid to touch his mother.

"What were you thinking?" his mother finally asked him.

"I was trying to get back at Andres. He wouldn't stop picking on me," sobbed the boy breathlessly.

“And you,” said Mari, turning to Andres, who stood nearby with his head hanging down. “Aren’t you ashamed? Always tormenting your little brother like that. What do you want from him?”

Mari tried to stand but it was too painful. Finally, she managed to get onto her knees and began to pick potatoes that way, for there was no time to waste. Feeling braver, Indrek jumped up and flung his arms around his mother’s neck.

“Ouch!” Mari cried. “You’re hurting me.”

The boy threw himself down again, this time burying his face in his mother’s dirt-stained lap. She couldn’t help tousling her son’s matted hair.

“Where’s your cap?” she asked.

“Andres filled it with dirt and threw it into the field,” sobbed Indrek.

“Is that why you got so upset?” his mother asked. “You poor, poor boy. You have to bear so much,” she said pityingly, stroking his hair. Her eyes were watery, and an onlooker wouldn’t have known if the boy had hurt the mother or the mother had hurt the boy. It was hard to tell whose pain was greater and deeper. While the mother suffered her own physical pain and her son’s humiliation, the son recalled with obsessive detail the sight of his mother stooping before his father in the middle of the yard, holding an armload of wood. Because he threw the stone, the boy felt it was he, and not his father, who had hurt his mother, even though he prostrated himself at her feet. Somehow he connected these two events and it compounded his suffering.

“Now come and help me fill this basket. I can’t waste any more time,” the mother said to Indrek.

Andres watched them from a little ways off and then, without a word, he started walking toward the house, feeling dejected. It

was the first time he had that feeling, but as time went on, he'd never be able to shake it. The image always hovered in his mind, his mother and brother huddled together in the potato field. He lost his inclination to argue with Indrek or torment him. The two still quarreled, but the sharp edge was gone. Now each went his own way. When Indrek wanted to potter around or take a nap, Andres left him alone.

"Let him be," he told himself. "What's it to me?"

Indrek always felt a special tenderness toward his mother but, after what happened in the potato field, his tenderness blossomed into compassion. Mari, too, felt closest to the first son she gave Andres. Indrek was her greatest heartache—his conception and birth were intimately entwined with Juss and his death. Mari sometimes felt that she had conceived Indrek in her mind well before Juss died, and it was the idea of the boy that brought Juss to his death. Her first son with Andres was a source of deep happiness as well as a tormenting reproach.

From his earliest days, the boy seemed to know it. As he nursed at his mother's breast, and even before that, when he was still in her womb, he seemed to know. His experiences as a boy served only to deepen his feeling, almost to the point of morbidity. He couldn't look at his mother's sad face without feeling stabs of pain in his chest and throat.

"Is it still painful?" he asked her several years later, referring to the spot where he'd unintentionally hit her.

"No it doesn't, you silly boy," Mari answered as she usually did. "Mother has other worries."

"You're just saying that because you don't want to tell me the truth," the boy objected.

“No, it’s true. I do have other things to worry about. That spot does sometimes hurt, but I’ve grown used to it,” his mother explained.

“Does it always hurt?”

“No, not always. Only when there’s a change in the weather...”

“You’re not telling the truth again,” the boy ventured sadly. “I know it never stops hurting you because it was such a big, heavy stone. Ever since it happened, I can’t stand Andres at all.”

“Andres is your brother,” said the mother. “You share the same father.”

“Maybe, but even so I can’t stand him. It was because of him I threw that stone.”

“It’s nothing,” Mari comforted him. “Just don’t throw stones my way again.”

“I’ll throw one at Andres, if that’s the only way to get him to listen,” said the boy firmly.

“You could just knock him down,” said the mother.

“I don’t think so,” said Indrek, hesitantly. “He’s bigger than me, and stronger.”

“Darling, don’t talk like that,” his mother cautioned. “Andres might start throwing stones at you. Then what?”

“Well, he’ll hit me with a stick or his fists, anyway,” said the boy.

Mari had no answer for this and just sighed.



Chapter 32

The old people at Vargamäe and around the neighborhood believed the world was governed by some kind of divine balance. If the winter was cold, the summer would be warm, and if the winter was mild, then the summer would be cooler. If the hay or the grain failed one year, you could expect a bumper crop soon after, and if there was a bumper crop, you should be ready for a poor harvest. For the same reason, children were cautioned against laughing too loudly, as tears were sure to follow.

But none of the young people at Vargamäe, Ämmasoo, or Hundipalu believed that. As a matter of fact, it didn't matter where they lived—in the high fields or the empty marshes—no young people shared that belief. On the other hand, as they saw the faces of their elders grow more worried and drawn each year, they felt an increasing obligation to laugh and smile lest the divine balance noted by the elderly be lost. There was a fixed amount of joy and happiness in the world, and if it were lost in one place, it needed to find a home somewhere else. Joy and happiness were like birds that fly south for fear of autumn and hurry toward springtime.

That's what happened at Vargamäe. Little by little, the older folks lost all their joy and happiness and the younger people inherited it.

In the end, almost nothing could make Andres feel happy. Over the years, he'd built long walls and created heaps from stones in his fields. Ten years earlier, his work might've prompted a happy shout and dance under the Vargamäe pines, like David who danced before the Ark of the Covenant. But now the sight only made him sad as he felt his mighty strength and irrepressible capacity for work waning. And since there were still so many stones in the fields, it seemed the walls and piles must've been built with stones from somewhere else.

Ditch digging had ceased almost completely, but sometimes they dredged old ditches that were needed more than new ones. Rain still soaked the marshes each autumn and spring, and it came down even heavier in the summer so the heftier cows had a hard time getting through. Cranes no longer used the pasture as a home, and it wasn't suitable for other animals either.

Over the years, Andres had cleared brush from the hayfields and tried to grade them, but the battle never ceased. Instead of swinging his scythe freely, he still lashed it back and forth as if clubbing a snake between the hummocks and mounds. His sparse swathes were lost on the uneven ground, leaving hardly anything to rake up. His strength waned as the hummocks and brush seemed to increase their hold. Andres used to feel like the leader of the charge, pushing them ever farther back, but now they rose against him. He felt they'd eventually gain back the ground they'd held when he first came to Vargamäe.

When Andres built the new rooms, he'd considered them large and full of light, but now, a couple of decades later, they seemed small and dark. Throughout the neighborhood there were bigger and brighter ones—even at the Valley Farm. It was time for Andres to start building new rooms, separate from the main room and the

threshing barn, but he couldn't afford to and it seemed he might never be able to.

Only the cowsheds were all they should be at Vargamäe. Even so, the health of their livestock hadn't improved, as Mari had hoped. The doors had locks, as did the barn doors, but still the sheep's necks bent by springtime, the cows gored the young heifers with their sharp horns until guts spilled out, and the old sow ate her own piglets or rolled over them, as if she'd lost all reason to go on. In Mari's mind it was clear why this happened. She could feel Juss's hand in everything and it drained the joy from her heart just as the gray stones, overgrown ditches, and unyielding shrubs dissolved joy from Andres's soul.

It seemed there was more of everything at Vargamäe—grain, hay, animals—but what did it matter? Was anyone better off? Could anyone breathe easier? Could Andres, whose limbs stiffened and ached? Was his life less burdened with worry than it'd been fifteen or twenty years before? Andres didn't think so, nor did the others. He still hadn't paid his debt for the purchase of the farm because money was always needed elsewhere. He had yet to become the true master of Vargamäe.

The one real difference at Vargamäe was that Andres now kept a horse for traveling, like so many of the other farm owners. It was fed very well, probably at the expense of the workhorses. But even this beautiful creature, the pride of Vargamäe, brought more trouble than relief and comfort. It was much more pleasant to travel the country roads and causeways with a tired horse than with a young, well-fed horse whose thighs bulged with oats. Andres couldn't hand over the reins of such a horse to his wife or children—no farmer would, with such a well-fed, prancing horse harnessed to his wagon—so he suffered all the banging and bouncing on the

causeways himself. It wasn't as bad in the winter, but the winter didn't last all year. When it was bitter cold, he had to hold the reins so tightly he couldn't even light a pipe. He called, "Whoa, whoa, whoa," all the time, like a coachman for the manor or an elegant farmer's son showing off. But that wasn't Andres. Tired old Andres of Vargamäe, like Tiit of Hundipalu, asked for nothing more on Sunday than a chance to rest his hands for a while.

Even while they sat in church, a young horse was nothing but trouble, especially if it was a stallion. Many a proud farm owner couldn't even manage to get inside the house of God and observe the pastor's sermon. Instead, he had to watch over his show-off stallion and sacrifice the pleasant nap he might've stolen in church, to say nothing of the blessing on his soul. Even men who took a chance and entered the church couldn't pay attention to the word of God. Instead, everyone pricked up his ears to listen for his stallion's neigh in case he needed to run outside in time to calm it. The voice of the pastor might be the lone voice in the desert, but the sound of a man's stallion pierces his heart and makes his soul tremble. It was as if Jehovah blew his trumpet not in the church but outside by the hitching post, with a bridle over his head and a bit in his mouth.

Of course there must've been some satisfaction in this adulation of stallions, but Andres and his fellow farmers were hard put to find it. Ten years earlier they might've, but now it seemed only young people could wrest pleasure and success from their lives.

When Andres and Mari let the excited horse dash wildly across the manor marsh as they traveled home from church, they were often hit in the face by hard chunks of snow thrown by the horse's hoof; fire and water burst from their eyes, but they felt no elation. However, when Liisi or Maret came along on such a ride, the girls could feel the cold wind touch the bottom of their hearts, just as

Matu the cowherd felt when riding a tall, bowing birch down to the ground in Jõessaare. A tickling breeze spread to their elbows and calves from under their hearts, where a little pressure and pain right in the center of their chests brought a happy smile to their lips. To experience this thrill, the children would've spent half their lives racing the horse, feeling no hunger or chill, just pure joy.

That was the difference between the lives of the young and the old, not only while racing the horse to and from church, but in everything they did at Vargamäe. No one could say when this great change occurred, or why, or where; they were simply aware that the change had occurred, right before the eyes of Vargamäe and the whole neighborhood. What some lost forever, others gained anew. But how long would the new owners keep their prize? The happy fools never gave that a thought.

For Andres and Mari, every corner of Vargamäe was filled with work, drudgery, worry, sadness, and resentment, but the young people saw a place hallowed by their joys and dreams (if not always, then at least from time to time). Song could be heard in the meadows and pastures and laughter came from every corner of the house, from every direction. A horn sounded as it hadn't since Matu's time, for it was Matu himself who taught Andres and Indrek how to blow. He'd shown them how to make horns the "right" way, out of smooth alder bark and resonant pine. The tooting of the horns filled the bright spring and summer evenings as it had in the time of Eedi the cowherd, the boy who'd cried by the yard gate as churchgoers passed him on the first day of Whitsun.

Now there was no one who cried like that within sight of the churchgoers. Only Indrek sometimes sat behind the firewood stack or on a marsh hummock as if he'd lost something precious. He was the one who could hoot like Eedi, though he'd never heard the

cowherd. When Andres blew his horn, Indrek started to hoot impulsively, and the dog raised his nose toward the sky and howled along. It was as if Indrek had finger holes in his throat—he was that good with his voice. Andres wasn't impressed since he could drown Indrek out when he propped his long pine horn on a tree branch and blew with all his might. Yet it was Indrek's hoots that caught the attention of neighboring cowherds, not Andres's loud tooting.

They were tough young men, each in his own way, and they knew it. Others knew it, too. In Jõessaare, Andres built himself a house and a cowshed out of alder, with tongue and groove corners like the hay barns he'd seen along the river. It took time and effort, but Andres didn't mind.

At the same time, Indrek built a stove with a chimney, which held a fire and billowed smoke. In front of the stove, he built a range with a "stone iron" top that got hot enough to bake potato slices for the most delicious dish in all of Vargamäe. When he spat on the range, it sizzled.

Andres then took to making pipes—the bowls from alder and the stems from meadowsweet. He made excellent pipes that smoked real tobacco, not just alder leaves or moss. Andres smoked like a man, inhaling deeply and exhaling through his nose. The smoke rarely made him cough.

While Andres worked on his pipes, Indrek made a six-sided box of birch bark to hold a beehive and some moss. When the top was closed, the bees couldn't get out. They kept on buzzing as he carried them anywhere he wished.

The boys competed with each other, working on their projects in the woods, and it made them very happy. Their happiness was compounded during Andres's fourteenth summer, when his father decided they could get along without a hired farmhand. He hadn't

hired a maid for several years since Liisi and Maret had taken over those duties.

Mari worried that young Andres might not be strong enough for all the work of a laborer, but his father disagreed.

“Why should he be a cowherd, just lazing around,” he said, “blowing on that horn and squabbling with the other boys? If only those two got along...but they don’t.”

“Well, that’s true,” Mari said. “I’m only afraid he’ll strain himself with the work.”

“He isn’t some skittish colt you can’t harness before it’s ready,” said Andres. “Everybody has his own common sense. He won’t let himself work beyond his strength.”

“I don’t have too much faith in his common sense just yet,” ventured Mari.

“It’ll grow,” said Andres, and soon he turned over the plow handles to his son.

The boy, of course, was very happy—he’d moved from cowherd to laborer and now had Sundays free. It wasn’t easy at first. He wasn’t strong enough for the work, as Mari had feared. Now three of the children—Liisi, Maret, and Andres—would work alongside their aging father.

“If only you’d hired summer help,” Mari said later. “You’ll all kill yourselves with work—too young and weak or too old and weak.”

“I’ve never killed an animal with work, so why would I kill myself or my children?” Andres replied.

Mari wanted to remind him of Krōõt’s death and add that he was now steering her children toward the same fate, but she didn’t dare.

Instead she said, “Sometimes you take better care of your animals than your children.”

“That’s how it has to be,” Andres replied. “Everybody must work or we won’t make it...We’ll see,” he added after some thought, to comfort Mari. “If we can’t manage, we’ll hire a day laborer.”

Mari knew this wasn’t a solution, since day laborers were scarce during the busiest season. Andres seemed to recognize this, too, and after a while he spoke up in an attempt to make himself, as well as the others, feel better.

“Things aren’t so tough as last year. After all, both Liisi and Maret are a year older.”

That was the only real consolation for any of them, Liisi and Maret included. The girls felt themselves to be quite grownup since they’d been confirmed. There was no neighborhood dance party to which they weren’t invited. On the village green, where people congregated around the swing and concertinas blared from dusk to dawn, Liisi and Maret tripped with joy, dancing and singing and ringing out with laughter. Though they were granted leave from the farm for only a short while and their chances for fun were few, they loved the village green on Sunday evenings.

The death of his first wife had long ago cast a shadow over Andres’s soul, and all that happened since had only darkened it. He had nowhere to turn for solace. His hopes for a new life with Mari had been dashed, for Juss’s death tormented her soul. There was no one else, so Andres turned to Holy Scripture. Even visits from Pearu pressed him toward the Bible. Since he found no justice in this life, he tried to find it in the next. There, Andres’s justice would shine as bright as the sun.

There was another reason he turned to the Bible: doubt. Sometimes Andres had doubts about his own understanding of justice. Seeking true perception, he went to God, whose holy words would enlighten his soul. And it helped. He saw clearly that it was

indeed he, Andres, and not Pearu, who was in the right. Yet, since he hadn't established himself as more righteous than his neighbor, he was left with a feeling of desperation. What was the point of reading the Bible and gaining enlightenment if Pearu remained in darkness and lived just as well, or even better? Could it be true that darkness ruled the world and not enlightenment? Then why study Holy Scripture or pursue spiritual epiphany?

There were many times when Andres suffered defeat and could find no peace of mind, day or night. Mari often woke to discover he was gone from the bed. A lamp burned on the table and Andres sat there, reading the Bible. This was his way of talking to God, for he had no one else to talk to. He was alone in the world, his children too young and his wife's soul walled off. His talks with God often moved Andres to tears and Mari could hear him sobbing quietly. Mari wanted very much to be close to him then, to stand beside her husband and share his sadness.

These nights with God distanced Andres further and further from the happiness, joy, and good cheer of the young people and turned the world of Vargamäe upside down. Back when they still hired laborers, young people came from all over to celebrate, dance, and roughhouse, but when Vargamäe's own children were old enough to seek the same excitement, they weren't allowed to behave like that, not even away from the farm. If their stepmother had followed Andres's orders, the girls would've gone mad and died from desire to frolic and dance. But Mari was on the girls' side and didn't follow those rules.

Since her pact with the girls, she dealt with them herself, often in opposition to Andres's wishes. It wasn't easy, especially as they grew older. Mari could imagine nothing worse than Andres, or the neighbors, or Kröö't in her grave blaming her if the girls became

wild from lack of discipline, but she let them go to village parties from time to time and lied to their father about where they went.

“Look at the sins I commit for you,” she sometimes said to the girls, wiping her eyes with a corner of her apron. “Take good care that nothing happens to you. It’d be different if I was your real mother, but I’m not.”

“Don’t worry, mother,” Liisi and Maret reassured her. “The two of us will stick together so no one can hurt us. And we’ll be with Joosep and Karla from the Valley Farm.”

“Oh God, if your father should ever know that!” Mari prayed.

“He’ll never find out,” the girls insisted. “Not yet. We can keep a secret. By the time he knows, we might already be gone from here.”

“Lord, what will become of me then?” Mari sighed.

“You can’t worry about that, and neither can we,” said the daughters.

“I’ve lied so often to father for your sake,” Mari lamented.

“Please, please don’t stop,” Maret pleaded, stroking her mother’s hand. “We can’t help the way we are.”

“We really can’t,” Liisi agreed, while Mari only cried.

When spring came, Liisi and Maret asked to sleep in the barn, but their father wouldn’t permit it.

“You’re not hired maids. You’re the daughters of the house and you’ll sleep in the house,” he said, justifying his refusal.

Maret and Liisi knew that many farmers’ daughters slept in the barn, but it would not be so at Vargamäe.

“They’ll lock the door with the hook,” said Mari.

“No. They’ll sleep in the house,” said Andres curtly.

“Whatever you say—they’re your children,” Mari replied. “But on hot days it’s airy in the barn, that’s all. And there are no flies.”

“If we can sleep in the house, why can’t the girls?” Andres answered. “They’ll draw the curtains to get rid of the flies.”

And that’s how it was to be. Liisi and Maret slept in the house, even though it was cooler and airier in the barn. It calmed Mari to see Andres assume responsibility for the girls. They wanted to sleep in the barn and Mari couldn’t have resisted their pleas, but she thought it was better this way.

Liisi had the most fervent desire to sleep in the barn, because already that spring Joosep of the Valley Farm had asked where she’d be sleeping. Joosep wanted her in the barn, of course, and so Liisi wanted the same.

“This is my last summer free. Next summer I could be rotting in God knows what Polish marsh,” said Joosep, referring to the threat of conscription.

“Maybe they won’t take you,” said Liisi.

“You don’t get loose from a wolf’s jaws,” Joosep replied. “I’ve got no excuses. I’m pretty healthy. I only have a chance if lots of men show up and I draw a high number. Then I might be left at the starting gate with a red passport.”

“When you draw your lot, do it with the hand I hold,” Liisi proposed.

“With the left one, you mean?”

“Yes, draw with the left,” Liisi told him, “and I just know you’ll get out of it.”

“But what if I don’t?” Joosep asked, looking into her eyes.

“Then we’ll do what we planned,” answered Liisi.

“And you’ll wait till I come back?”

“I’ll wait.”

“And you won’t find new friends in the meantime?”

“Not a chance!” said Liisi. “When I make a promise, I keep it, come what may.”

“Liisi, you’re special. I don’t know what I can say or do...or give you,” Joosep said, deeply moved.

“And the same goes for you. Don’t go making any friends,” replied Liisi.

“Alright,” agreed the boy, “but where can we meet? I can’t bear to wait till Sunday.”

“You must learn patience,” the girl said sagely. “There’s a lot in life you’ve got to bear. Look at what’s happened at Vargamäe.”

“We’re gonna leave Vargamäe. We won’t stay here,” said Joosep. “There’s a curse on this land.”

“It won’t be any easier,” countered Liisi. “Wherever you go, people sue each other and quarrel.”

“I don’t care. Even if it’s worse somewhere else, we have to leave this place,” the boy asserted. “We’ll rent a little farm somewhere if we have to, but we’re leaving this mudhole. What I tell you now is only for your ears—even Karla doesn’t know. I don’t love Vargamäe. I don’t love my father or mother. My sisters and brothers mean almost nothing to me. Every inch of Vargamäe—home and the woods—reminds me of something bad, and when I think of those places, it’s because of those bad things, as if nothing good ever happened here. That’s why I don’t love Vargamäe or anything on this land. I just want to get away, that’s all. Then we’ll see what happens.”

“It’s funny,” said Liisi, “but Maret and I have been saying the same things to each other. We used to sing all day, as if there were nothing but happiness at Vargamäe, but then we started asking—what will we remember fondly once we’re gone?—and, you know, we couldn’t think of anything. It seems we’ve cried over every inch of Vargamäe. Father was mean to us over here, or we worried and

suffered over there. We wondered if the whole world was the same as Vargamäe. Oh God, how life changed when we started working. My body is short and strong, so I could manage, but poor Maret is tall and skinny. Her body twisted and bent from swinging the scythe—it was so hard for her. You know, we used to think that maybe life was like this because our mother was gone, but you’ve got your mother and it’s the same.”

“Yes, it’s just the same,” agreed Joosep. “It doesn’t matter whether you have your mother or a stepmother. That’s why I’ve got to get away, and I don’t care what might happen someplace else.”

“But you’ll inherit the farm. You’re the firstborn,” said Liisi.

“I don’t want it. I want some other place—anything but this,” said Joosep.

“Our Andres already calls himself the master of Vargamäe,” said Liisi.

“When I was his age, I did the same,” Joosep observed. “Let him grow up, then we’ll see.”

“What does your father say?” asked Liisi.

“How would he know about it? I’m not dumb enough to tell him. In his mind, I’ve already inherited the land.”

“My God, what would our father do if Andres talked as you do? Father would probably kill him before letting him leave Vargamäe,” said Liisi.

“By that time, little Andres will be stronger,” said Joosep.

“He could be,” Liisi agreed. “His hands are already like a pair of iron tongs.”

They were quiet for a moment. Then Joosep took Liisi’s hand.

“Where can we meet this summer? You haven’t answered.”

“On the way to church. Where else?” Liisi smiled.

“But you don’t go to church at night,” said the boy.

“Then we won’t meet at night.”

“But I want to,” the boy pleaded.

“You know father won’t let us sleep in the barn, so you’ll have to come to the house.”

“I can’t. There’s that damned dog,” said Joosep.

“Try to befriend him,” the girl suggested.

“I’ve tried but I don’t know the trick. You can’t imagine how many treats I’ve given him, but he still barks a blue streak and comes over to crap under our windows.”

“The dog’s making us pay for the sins of our parents,” speculated Liisi. “Our fathers are always battling and that’s why Pollo is the way he is.”

“My mother says the same thing: If the people are good, so are the dogs; but if the people are wicked, the dogs will never be quiet. Pollo eats what I bring him, but snarls at me anyway.”

“You poor thing,” sympathized the girl.

“It’s true,” said Joosep. “I can handle the girl, but not the dog.”

“Don’t start bragging or I’ll tell you where to go,” the girl warned him. “Like everyone says, I’m my father’s daughter.”

“I’m not bragging,” the boy said forthrightly. “You just agreed that you treat me better than Pollo, even though I’ve done more to please him than I have to please you.”

Now the girl was angry. “Shame on you, talking like that.”

“I can deal with shame. It’s Pollo I can’t handle. It once crossed my mind to...never mind. I better not say.”

“What were you going to say?” asked Liisi. “You thought of shooting him dead?”

“No, not that. I thought of giving him a cookie sprinkled with poison,” said the boy. “I figured if you got a new dog, he wouldn’t

know about the quarrels and arguments around here, so he might be won over. But you can't breathe a word of that to anyone."

"I won't even tell Maret. We'll keep it our secret. You try to shut Pollo up, once and for all. He's not much good anyway, always going after birds' nests and baby chicks. That's why Indrek doesn't take him along to the cow pasture. He'd pretty much wipe out all the birds in the marsh. They beat him again and again, but it doesn't help. He loves those little grouse eggs and baby chicks too much. When father brings home a new dog, we'll work together to win him over, so he'll let you by."

Thus was formed the two-person conspiracy against Pollo, not for his flaws, but his virtues: he wouldn't stay quiet when bribed. Pollo was sacrificed on the altar of Joosep and Liisi's love, for proclaiming that love in the night for everyone to hear. For his allegiance to truth, Pollo lost his eternal, treat-loving soul to a poison cookie.

Within a week or two there was a new dog at Vargamäe. She was also black, but bigger and fuzzier. Right away, Joosep and Liisi tried to bond with Muska in secret, but the dog quickly realized how things were at Vargamäe—all that was happening now and all that had happened in the past. It was as if the whole tale hung in the air, where anyone with a mind could sniff it out. Just like the old dog, Muska crapped under the Valley Farm windows, and she was even nastier to Joosep than Pollo ever was. She refused to take anything from his hand. So nothing changed for Joosep and Liisi—dogs were some of the fiercest enemies of their love.

Indrek, however, was very happy with the new dog. She obeyed, tended cattle with the wits of a man, and left the birds' nests alone. And she hunted snakes among the hummocks and barked at them until they were so angry they practically stood on their tails. Then she'd attack so fiercely that pieces of snake would fly, hitting Indrek

in the eye if he didn't keep his distance. Muska of Vargamäe was one tough dog.

Joosep went around with his head hanging.

"Should I shut her up with a cookie, too?" he griped to Liisi.

"Let her live. Muska's a good dog. We can't kill her just for getting in our way. The next dog could be just as bad. It might turn out that all dogs are the same, as long as Vargamäe stays the same."

"You're right. Maybe it's not the dogs. Maybe it's Vargamäe."

So Muska was spared, and they looked for other solutions. There was a pile of logs left over from the new cowsheds at the Hill Farm, partly hidden under the eave and new roof. Some of those logs might've been as old as the house itself—nobody knew how old they were, but they hadn't been felled with a saw. They were stained brown all the way through from smoke, and hard as steel. These might've been the same logs that provided wood ends for Liisi and Maret to carry, along with sawdust and shavings, to Joosep and Karla by the border fence. On top of the log pile, under the low thatched roof, a place for summer trysting was established. Joosep would climb up noiselessly and wait there until Liisi managed to get away.

Sometimes Joosep waited in vain. Some nights they huddled together during a fierce thunderstorm. When lightning flashed, they could've been discovered, but no one went there, especially at night. So Liisi clung to Joosep and her fear of thunder and lightning slowly drained away.

Under the log pile, there were frogs, mice, and other small creatures. At night they came out onto the tall grass and leaves, jumping around noisily and squeaking as if conversing in an unknown language. This frightened the girl, and sometimes the boy had to take

her into his lap to calm her. Settled there, she lost her fear of all God's creatures that scratched and made noises.

One night later that autumn, as the day of Joosep's drawing approached, they sat on the woodpile. A cold rain had been falling for several days and a piercing wind tore withered leaves from the trees around the house, down by the fields, and on the hillocks in the marshes. The forests and fields were silent. Shocks of grain stood, sadly bowed, beside clusters of soggy red rowanberries. The misty air felt heavy with pain and fog rose from the marshes, climbing toward the buildings of Vargamäe. On a clearer night, they could've heard the sound of migrating birds, their wings beating high above.

"If only we had a better place," said Joosep, turning up the collar of his jacket.

"This is the very best place at Vargamäe, and maybe in the whole world," laughed Liisi.

"That wind cuts right through you," complained the boy.

"Are you cold?" asked the girl. "I'm nice and warm. Give me your hand. Feel here..." She took Joosep's hand and stuck it under her father's fur coat.

"You must be warm in this coat," said Joosep.

"Do I feel warm?" Liisi asked.

"Warm," answered Joosep. "And good."

They sat contentedly, the boy's arm around the girl's waist and his other hand at her bosom.

"Do you remember what we said in the spring, on our way to church? That there's no place at Vargamäe untouched by sadness?" said Liisi.

"I remember," replied Joosep.

"Well, when I go away from Vargamäe, there will be one place I remember that was always good," said Liisi.

“Where?” the boy asked.

“As if you don’t know!”

“Here on top of the woodpile, in the wind and the lightning?”

“Yes, here. Where else? It’s only been good here.”

“That’s true,” the boy agreed. “It’s only been good.” He pressed his hand harder against the girl’s bosom.

“If you’re drafted,” said Liisi, “and go far from me, remember this woodpile.”

“I will,” said the boy.

“I’ll come here alone and sit,” said Liisi.

“I’ll be thinking of the woodpile and you,” promised Joosep.

The girl said sadly, “Yes. When you’re far away, think of me.”

Whether she wished it or not, the whole summer flashed again before her eyes. It seemed as if she’d done nothing all summer but sit on top of those logs. The only real thing was that log pile; all the rest seemed like a dream. Everything started there, with the sounds of grouse, larks, cranes, cuckoos, snipe, and so many other birds. All through the night, their joyous songs filled Vargamäe, joined by the clanging of cowbells from the pen. Soon the droning note of the corncrake sounded and, when he started to tire, the grasshoppers began their song. They stayed the longest, but eventually, in the night frosts and the hoar, the strings on their violins snapped, too. The cranes would start whooping again, but by this time night had passed and daylight had come. Sometimes the quick and restless wing beats of the migrating birds could be heard, but they made no calls, as if they had no time for song as they hurried south.

The last thing heard was the cowbell, still clanging, as if the coming of autumn meant nothing.



Chapter 33

Once young Andres was recruited for farm work, Indrek could enjoy his days as a cowherd. The brothers' malicious nagging and quarrels subsided. In springtime, when it was wet and muddy, and the animals could find nothing to eat but blackened hummock-grass, and the birches started to show their first buds, Indrek found himself alone in the woods. Ants was off in the fields tending pigs and sheep. Eventually he'd bring them by to herd along with the cows.

Then the boys had fun. The bushes were getting thick and already they were difficult to see through. The boys could see the animals if they stayed within a dozen paces, or else they'd have to climb a pine to see a little farther. The sheep were hidden behind some hummocks, but the boys could spot a glimpse of white or black here and there. If the cows had no bells and the sheep no tinklers, one might've closed his eyes and thought the marsh empty of all creatures but the boys themselves, swinging on pines or between the branches of birch trees, blowing their horns, tooting their pennywhistles, shouting and singing, so that in the evening, it seemed that far off islands echoed in the vast marsh.

They knew every corner of the woods, every clearing, every good-sized tree, every hillock and hummock, for in each part of the

woods they'd seen something, or heard something, or done something that gave the spot a special significance. If a certain place was hard to remember, they marked it by bending the top of a smaller birch or twisting the branch of a larger one. In some places, a row of such marks led to a bird's nest, a beehive, or perhaps a wasp's nest.

They knew every bird and animal by its sound, and they knew the meanings of different cries and calls. They could tell from the way a bird flew between the hummocks whether it fled the animals or the boys, whether it left its nest or baby birds hidden in the grass and moss, or if it was just flying around without a purpose. The call of every bird revealed a secret intention.

Nothing was more fun than trying to guess the birds' thoughts: Was it telling the truth when it sat on a tree branch and chirped in a certain way? Was it going to nest on its eggs? Did it really have chicks there or had they already flown off? The boys sat under a bush for a while, neither one saying a word or moving a limb. Finally, the songbird summoned its courage and gave up its secret, flying off to its nest or babies. The most common was the little grey goldcrest. When it had chicks in its nest, it cried, "twit-twit, twit-twit," as it hopped from branch to branch, looking for worms to bring back to the babies. The marsh was full of nests and the boys sometimes competed to see who could find the most.

In the summer, when the water was low in the ditches, the boys chased little pike as sport. They slipped snares around their necks and yanked them out of the water. Sometimes those pike were half a pound, or even bigger. Holding his breath with determination, Indrek crept up on a fish—quietly, quietly—and lowered a snare tied to the end of his short rod. His hands trembled, his heart pounded, and a curious weakness came into his legs. Usually the pike escaped before the boy could secure the noose. He could barely

get it into the water before the pike flashed and swished through muddy water.

“Clever! Dammit!” Indrek cursed mysteriously at Ants, who craned to see from a careful distance.

“Awfully clever,” Ants agreed and then asked, “Would a fish be afraid of an animal?”

“No, it wouldn’t,” Indrek figured.

“Why wouldn’t it be afraid of an animal?” pressed Ants.

“Why should it be? An animal isn’t a person,” Indrek explained.

“Then why is it afraid of a person?” Ants persisted.

“Boy, are you dumb,” said Indrek. “A person carries a rod and a snare. An animal doesn’t even have hands, just a tail in back.”

“So fish aren’t afraid of a tail, only a noose and a rod?”

“Stop it,” ordered Indrek. “Quiet down. Here he comes again, hiding half under that stump. His nose is showing and it’s big...”

Once again, he tried slipping the noose onto the fish. He’d persist until he finally managed to land one, though it was often as big as a canvas needle.

“He can’t get away from me!” bragged the fisherman.

Again and again they stood before the pike with pounding hearts and wobbling legs until a calm overcame their bodies. Then nothing seemed quite so worthwhile as sitting on a hummock and resting. It would’ve been better to lie between the hummocks and the blueberry bushes and stretch their weary legs in the sunshine, but they couldn’t do that, for they’d fall asleep and wake only when they heard the cowbells from the distant ditch bank, the birch groves with new shoots, or the hayfield beside the river, all of which were strictly off limits.

The boys also caught pike at the riverside in the spring, when the hayfield was almost entirely flooded with sun-warmed water

and they waded up to their knees and splashed around. The pike shot like arrows and sometimes dove nose-first into the moss, where a skilled hand and eye could catch them. But this was nothing compared to rod fishing with a float cast directly into the river between the water lilies, where red-eyed roaches and dark-striped perch waited.

When Indrek stared at the float and saw a fish nibbling, he felt like someone bit his heart. It was painful, very painful, but indescribably good, a feeling he wanted to go on day and night. Sometimes after Ants stood between the ditches to block the animals from the river and Indrek had stared at the float bobbing between the water lilies for a couple of hours, his heart would ache for a long time afterward, even into the night, so he couldn't sleep, owing to the pain. He felt as if some insect pecked at him, or a perch, hooked on the line and the float, pressed against his heart.

Ants grew bored fending off the animals alone. It was so boring that even Muska ran away from him and into the river. She found it interesting to paddle and splash around. Sometimes she swam across to investigate the tall grass on the other side.

Almost in tears, Ants called out, "Indrek, let's go! The fish aren't biting anymore!"

Yet Indrek always replied, "Wait just a minute more and I'll pull one of the little bastards out!" He fixed a worm on the hook and spit on it, the way Matu taught him, then dipped the rod tip in the water and dropped the little creature down to try once more. Ants, feeling like the most miserable of earth's creatures, called out again and again until finally Indrek had no choice but to leave the river's edge.

"I was just about to get one, but you never can wait," he said to Ants.

"If you go there again, I'm telling mother," Ants threatened.

“Why are you going to tell mother about that?” Indrek asked in a conciliatory tone. “Tomorrow, if the weather’s good, you can go yourself if you want.”

“With what? Your gear?” Ants asked, still whining.

“Well, you don’t have your own,” Indrek replied.

“And you’ll stay with the animals?” Ants persisted.

“I’ll stay with them,” affirmed Indrek.

“Well, then I sure won’t tell mother,” Ants agreed.

But the next morning Indrek had a dozen reasons why he needed to fish instead of Ants, who finally agreed to stay behind and herd the animals. He gave in with just one condition—that Indrek shouldn’t stay away so long—and his brother promised, even though he was incapable of keeping that promise. After a few days, however, Ants refused to stay with the animals under any condition. He wouldn’t be satisfied unless he could go fishing himself. Indrek had no choice. He had to give in. But Ants didn’t enjoy fishing nearly as much as Indrek. He came back after an hour or so, disappointed and cursing.

“I can’t catch those damned things. They just eat the bait. The fish clean the hook bare before it touches bottom.”

“You just don’t know how to do it, that’s all,” Indrek replied seriously, reminding him of some perch and roach he’d pulled out a few weeks earlier. “Fishing is a great art, with its own spells and tricks. Matu knew that.”

“Would you like to be a fisherman?” asked Ants.

“A fisherman? Why not,” Indrek answered. “Once I start working, I’ll go fishing every Sunday and never go to church. All I’ll do is stand by the riverbank and pull out roach and perch for days on end. I’ll go early in the morning and come back late at night. I’ll be at the river before sunrise, casting from the shore. I’ll walk far,

far along the riverbank—there's lots of fish there. Matu told me there's so many you only have to lift them out and watch out the rod doesn't break, or it'll be gone, along with that load of fish. Matu once brought back a feedbag full of fish from down there, all big boys who went for the bait, and even bigger ones, real perches."

"Take me with you when you go," said Ants.

"First I'll go and see the place for myself. Then we can go together. We'll take along the fishing rods and the good bags, so we'll have a place to put them all. There won't be any time to hang them on a twig," Indrek explained. "But we'll have to start out before day-break, or we'll get there too late."

"...or we'll get there too late," Ants repeated. Like Indrek, he had a magical dream in his eyes, a look of yearning for that faraway, unknown place where he could lift fish out of the water with a potato basket. His only concern was when that day might come. Young Andres was now a working man and had Sundays free, but fishing didn't interest him. He preferred to go to church or to the village, or to wrestle with the other boys.



Riia tended cattle down at the Valley Farm. She was short and chunky, with eyes glinting like steel, a scowl on her face, and shocks of whitish hair that fell in her eyes.

She had a beloved cat, so beloved that she always took it along when she went into the woods. Whenever Riia finished her bread, the cat nestled in her food sack next to the boxes of fish and butter and the bottle of milk. Neither Indrek nor Ants understood how Riia could love her cat so much, for Milli was skinny and scraggly, with a thin neck, an angular head, and a nearly hairless tail. In other

words, she was a complete mess. Riia saved the best morsels of food for her, but it didn't help—the cat stayed thin.

Though he couldn't say why, Indrek considered the cat his worst enemy. Whenever he tried to talk to Riia, the cat climbed between them and Riia took it onto her lap to stroke. Indrek had the urge to yank it from the girl's hands and toss it to Muska, who enjoyed tearing cats apart. Snakes and cats were Muska's specialty. Finally something happened that made Indrek, in spite of himself, completely indignant, and he decided it was either him or the cat—one of them had to go. There was no other choice.

Indrek had found a wagtail's nest by the property line ditch. He loved that bird more than anything. It had a beautiful yellow breast, a long tail, and a delicate song. "Uik-uik," it sang, wagging its tail high in a tree. Indrek swayed to the music.

He showed the nest to Riia from a distance, careful not to scare the mother bird. The nest remained undisturbed until the chicks started hatching—fragile, long-necked creatures with big heads and mouths that opened wide when their mother approached. But a few days later, Indrek discovered that the nest was empty. The chicks were gone. It couldn't have been the dog—she would've toppled the nest but it appeared untouched. A snake could've attacked the nest and swallowed the babies. Indrek once saw a snake eat a mouse, so he knew it was possible.

Indrek called Muska over to the nest and let her smell it. He knew from the dog's reaction that it hadn't been a snake. Muska sniffed the path, hunting for a scent. On the bank of the ditch, Indrek spotted footprints. Someone with bare feet had leapt across the ditch. Muska bounded across and continued to search. Indrek figured that if they followed the footprints, it would lead them to the one who destroyed the nest. He was still mulling it over when Muska started

barking from the Valley Farm land, as if she'd chased a cat or a squirrel up a tree. So Indrek, too, crossed the ditch and caught up to Muska. She sat under a pine tree and stared up at the branches. There sat Milli, Riia's cat.

It all became clear. Milli had eaten the newly hatched birds. The footprints on the ditch bank were probably Riia's. She must've carried the cat to the nest. How else would the cat have found it? While Indrek brooded under the tree, he heard Riia calling her precious cat, as she did whenever Milli got lost in the woods. Hearing Muska barking, she guessed the cat was in trouble and came searching. Indrek met her under the tree.

"Stop Muska from barking or Milli will never come down," Riia said to Indrek.

"But Milli ate all the chicks in the wagtail nest," answered Indrek.

"That can't be," countered Riia. "Milli doesn't eat baby chicks."

"Well, she did this time," said Indrek. "Muska followed her scent from the nest."

"Muska can't smell right."

"You think Muska doesn't know what a cat smells like?" Indrek remarked. "Let me tell you, she does."

"But she can't," Riia insisted. "Milli never eats baby birds. I've offered them to her, but she wouldn't take them in her mouth or even smell them."

"What?" Indrek cried. "You tried to feed her baby birds?"

"I don't give them to her. She takes them herself," said Riia.

"But you just said you offered them to her!"

"I was just trying to see if she'd eat them. That doesn't mean I gave her any."

"Did you come look at my wagtail nest today?" asked Indrek.

"No, I didn't. Not at all," said Riia.

“Well, then whose footprints are on the ditch bank?” asked Indrek. “They’re fresh from today.”

“I haven’t been there and I haven’t jumped across the ditch,” the girl countered.

“Who was it then?”

“How would I know? I was there yesterday.”

“No, these footprints are from today. They’re yours. You came with Milli to tear down my wagtail nest and she gobbled up the babies,” said Indrek.

“It wasn’t her. Muska’s just barking. She doesn’t know anything,” Riia argued.

Indrek couldn’t help but think that Riia was lying and Muska had it right. But the girl kept coming at him with hammer and tongs until finally he called the dog off so she could get her cat out of the tree.

Indrek wanted to expose the truth so Riia could no longer deny it. He remembered when young Andres once suspected Pollo of tearing down a bird’s nest; he showed the dog an intact bird’s nest and then walked away, ordering Pollo to come along. The dog obeyed, but he craved those chicks and soon slipped away from the boys and returned to the nest. Andres went right after him. Just as the dog was about to get the birds, Andres called out in an innocent voice as if unaware of the dog’s intentions. Pollo was goaded away by Andres, and he trotted over nonchalantly. But Andres grabbed the dog by the neck, led him back to the nest, and beat him handily. From then on, the dog was more cautious and cunning. If there was a nest he wanted, he went after it when the boys and their animals were far away. He’d slip off, only to reappear later, licking his lips and hiding his tongue as if trying to conceal his crime. He remained wary of Andres, as if he suffered from a bad conscience.

However, Pollo still trusted Indrek. It was Indrek who put a strong cord around his neck so they could lead him to a destroyed nest. Woe on Pollo if he was accused of eating a grouse's nest. When that happened, Andres was cruel and merciless.

Indrek recalled how Andres tied Pollo to a tree, grabbed his neck, and stuck his muzzle into the destroyed nest. Andres thrashed the dog, trying to shame him into behaving like an honest shepherd. In his distress, the dog tried to bite the boy's hand, but that earned him another blow to the head with a stick, knocking him briefly senseless. More blows to his back and his rear revived him. Again and again, his nose was shoved in the nest and he was beaten until he ceased whimpering and barely breathed. Andres went hoarse with screaming. "Are you going to stay away from grouse nests? Just try it once more! Just try it again!"

One stick after another broke into pieces. Again and again, Andres called to Indrek, "Cut me another one!" He seemed to draw strength from each new stick. Several times, the dog lay senseless on the ground as if he were dead, but when he lifted his head Andres recommenced the beating. When the dog showed nearly no signs of life, they took the cord off his neck and left him lying beside the destroyed grouse's nest.

"Will that help?" Indrek asked Andres.

"If it doesn't, I'll give him some more," Andres answered.

"Then will it help?" Indrek again asked.

"Stupid!" Andres shouted. "I'll beat him till it helps. To death even."

Pollo got thrashed many times more, but he couldn't stop destroying birds' nests. It seemed necessary to eat every single grouse's nest he came across, but his opponent, Andres, was rock solid in his resolve to break Pollo of this habit, even if it cost the dog

his life. Andres just couldn't understand why Pollo was attracted to them, what he got out of stamping out a grouse's nest from under a bush on a hummock. That dog might be at the other end of the world, but if he knew Andres had a grouse's nest, he'd go through hell and high water to find it. This desire blotted out all memories of past beatings. Even if he'd been killed for it, and then somehow miraculously resurrected, even then Pollo would've succumbed to desire and gone to find the nest. It was like someone cast a spell over him. Andres found the dog's attitude totally unacceptable, completely incomprehensible, and verging on madness. To Pollo, saving a grouse's nest meant eating the eggs, and he was ready every day to be crucified for delivering those nests to their fate. There was no greater passion in Pollo's life than being a savior.

Pollo never went straight to the nest to gorge on the eggs. Instead, he waited out the mother bird, which fluttered and flew off, dragging her wings on the ground and the hummocks, trying to distract the dog from the nest. She'd pass right under his nose. Somehow she always managed to slip into a bush or behind a hummock. No matter how hard he tried, the dog never got her, though once Pollo snatched some loose tail feathers, which came right out. He was left with a mouthful as the bird soared out of sight.

After the mother flew away, he'd retrace his steps to the grouse's nest, where the smell was enough to make him wag his tail right off his body. If he had ten tails, he could've wagged them all, so sweet was the smell of the nest on the hummock. The enchanting aroma filled the whole world, which, at the moment, amounted to just one grouse's nest. Eggs, eggs, eggs! Pollo's eyes spun. He couldn't count the brown-mottled eggs, so it seemed like all the Vargamäe marsh was full of them. There was nothing to do but smell them and eat them.

One by one, he'd lift them out of the nest and place them on the edge of the hummock, where he ate them. Some of the heavenly nectar spilled onto the moss and the grass, which he ate up at the end, along with the rest of the hummock, because the smell and taste of that nectar was everywhere—he could smell it with his nose and lick it with his tongue. He would've given up everything, even life itself, for that smell, so long as he could choose, according to his own values, the best way to immortalize a grouse's nest. Pollo probably would've given his life for the grouse's nests, if it hadn't been for the silly love affair between Liisi and Joosep, which led to a poison cookie.

Indrek knew it all perfectly. He understood there was no point in taking out his anger on Riia's cat. The cat surely had the same views and principles regarding a grouse's nest as Pollo, and there was nothing to be done about it. Indrek clearly remembered waking one winter night when he was small—he'd fallen asleep sitting next to the warm flue—to an ugly, stabbing sound, like a horrible human voice penetrating his slumber. When he opened his eyes, he saw it was only their old gray tabby cat, hanging by her tail on the pantry door and screaming hideously like a human as mother beat her. Indrek couldn't keep from crying even before he grasped what was happening, for he suddenly felt as if he, too, were being squeezed by that pantry door, so they could do nothing but scream together. When the cat finally got what was coming to her, though it was less than her persecutor thought she deserved, Indrek's mother came to comfort him.

“Don't cry for that damned cat. She committed a crime. She pushed a big bowl full of dumplings and pork off the upper shelf in the pantry. That was the new bowl—you know, the one with the rose pattern I just got from the peddler—and I have no other big

bowls. I was keeping those dumplings for you. They're good for a cold snack, but the cat ruined them all. This house is full of mice, but that rotten cat is too lazy to go after them. She'd rather go after whatever's in the serving bowl. I beat her so she'll learn."

"Momma, please don't beat her anymore. She cries so horribly, it sounds like a person," said Indrek.

"Well, I won't then," Mari promised, "and I don't think she'll go in the pantry anymore if she remembers that thrashing."

But the cat didn't remember the thrashing for very long. Mari had beaten her so mercilessly so that she might remember. Why else would she have hung the cat by the tail again and beat her so all of Vargamäe was filled with her awful screams? But Indrek knew the cat wouldn't remember. Likewise, it wouldn't have helped if Indrek thrashed Riia's cat. Once she tasted birds and chicks, she'd go on eating them regardless of any punishment. Indrek felt there was only one thing to do: silence the cat permanently. Only then could he be certain she'd never go after another nest. But first he had to know with certainty that Milli had eaten that nest, and others, too.

To discover the truth, Indrek hatched a crafty plot. Near the property line ditch, he found a garden warbler's nest filled with little chicks. He showed it to Riia, as if she were his trusted friend, and went off to drive his herd. Then he asked Ants to mind the cattle while he slipped back to the nest. He hid on his stomach between the hummocks, waiting to ambush Riia and her cat. At some point he grew bored and considered leaving, thinking they might not come. Perhaps the girl hadn't jumped the ditch and destroyed the grouse's nest after all, but then she appeared. There was Riia, peering behind a bush at the property line ditch. Indrek crouched even lower, as if somebody hit him on the head with a wooden club.

Unexpectedly, he felt ashamed and pitiful. He wanted to crawl away and never lay eyes on Riia again, but he stayed put.

After Riia surveyed the site, she stepped onto the ditch bank with her cat in her arms. She seemed to be listening for something—cowbells, Indrek suspected, but he'd stuffed them with moss so they made no sound. Riia jumped across the ditch and, like a thief in the night, she crept between the bushes toward the stunted birch and the warbler's nest.

Indrek's heart began pounding madly, as if it were he who crept toward the bird's nest with a cat under his arm. He wanted to get up but his legs wouldn't move. He thought of crying out, but his voice stuck in his throat and made only a hoarse little whine. So he stayed there, between the hummocks, and when Riia finally reached the stunted birch and squatted down with her cat, Indrek felt such a weight that he began to cry, face down, wetting the grass and moss with his tears. He stayed there for a long while. When he lifted his eyes at last, he saw that Riia had returned to the ditch bank again, the cat in her arms. She looked around before disappearing behind the bushes.

Indrek pushed himself up and sat on a hummock. After a while, he got to his feet and walked to the nest. The baby birds were gone. The mother and father birds flapped around him and screeched as if it were he who'd eaten their chicks. And in a way, he was the killer—if he'd called out in time, the chicks would still be alive and breathing. Indrek squatted by the nest, his heart too heavy to shed more tears. Whether he mourned for the baby birds, for Riia, or himself, he couldn't say. It felt as if he'd lost all three and there was no way to rectify things. The chicks were gone forever; the Riia he'd known was gone; and Indrek was a stranger to himself. He'd never

expected that he'd sacrifice a nest of warblers to Riia's cat to discover the truth.

With a feverish, rigid stare, he walked back to the herd. He didn't say a word to Ants. He wanted to get over the incident by himself. Nor did he say anything to Riia, pretending he knew nothing of the warbler's nest. But the girl's conscience bothered her and when they ran into each other in Jõessaare a few days later, she asked Indrek a question.

"Who could've destroyed the warbler's nest?"

"What warbler's nest?" asked Indrek, pretending not to understand.

"The one you showed me the other day, by the ditch," said Riia. "I went to look at it and the babies were gone."

"So?" said Indrek indifferently. "I've got lots more nests."

"Where?" asked Riia curiously.

"I might show you," said Indrek.

"Why haven't you shown me yet?" Riia pressed.

"I never gave it much thought."

"I'd love to see them," she continued.

"If I show you, will you let me play with your Milli?" asked Indrek.

"You'll just throw her to Muska," feared Riia.

"No, I won't do that," Indrek answered.

"Yes, you will. I know it," insisted Riia.

"I won't. I'll just tease Muska a little."

"You can't even tease her," said Riia. "If that's what you want to do, you can't have her."

"So what," Indrek replied. "I don't need the cat, but I'm not going to show you any bird's nests."

“Oh, alright, go ahead and play with the cat,” said Riia, but when the boy reached out, she felt an instinctive fear. At the last moment, she grabbed Milli at the neck as Indrek pulled on her body.

“Let go of her head,” said Indrek.

“I won’t,” answered Riia, tears welling in her eyes.

“I’ll rip it from you,” threatened the boy.

“Don’t! You’ll hurt Milli,” Riia protested.

“Then why did you promise?” the boy asked, tugging at the cat’s body as it mewed.

“I changed my mind,” said the girl, crying now. “Let go! Let me have the cat.”

“I won’t,” said the boy firmly, as if a clear resolve had taken hold of him.

Riia pulled the cat by the head and Indrek pulled the body. The cat’s neck stretched out long and skinny. She meowed desperately and scratched with her claws. Riia screamed. Ants stood there laughing, as if nothing in the world were funnier than the yowling of Riia’s cat. Kaaru of the Valley Farm and Muska of the Hill Farm barked impatiently, ready at any moment to pounce on the cat—especially Muska. At last, Indrek gave a decisive pull and Milli’s head slipped from Riia’s grasp. Muska grabbed the cat and shook her while Indrek still pulled on her hind legs. Riia shrieked and the cat screamed, too. Ants egged on Muska, “Get her!” Then the dog and the boy let go of the cat at the same time. She fell and her hind legs twitched a couple of times, her long skinny neck stretched out, and she lay prostrate on the ground.

“Didn’t I say you’d throw her to Muska!” Riia cried, collecting the cat from the ground. “Now you see! She’s dead!”

“I didn’t throw her,” Indrek protested. “I was just going to tease Muska. It’s your fault. Why did you hold her head so tight?”

“You wanted to throw her to the dog. That’s why.”

“No, I didn’t. I just wanted to tease Muska.”

“Stop lying! You really wanted to throw her,” insisted Riia.

“If I wanted to, I could’ve thrown her long ago,” Indrek asserted.

“I teased Muska with her before, but I never let go.”

“Today you wanted to. I could see it in your eyes,” Riia repeated, sitting down and taking her dead Milli in her lap. She began to cry and Indrek remembered their own cat, hanging by its tail in the dooway as mother beat it. Riia’s voice was like the voice of their gray tabby and, just as Indrek had pitied the cat, he now felt pity for Riia and tried to soothe and console her.

“Would you like me to make you a nice berry basket out of white roots, with a lid and all, to make up for the cat?” he asked.

No basket would replace Riia’s cat, so Indrek tried again.

“I’ll make you a pretty birch bark box by the fire. It’ll have a door in front and a beehive inside with some moss, so you can take it anywhere you wish—into the kitchen garden, up to the attic—anywhere.”

Riia didn’t want a birch bark box with a beehive either. She just kept on weeping for her Milli.

“I’ll make you a nice wooden box with a grooved lid, where you can put anything your heart desires,” Indrek promised.

Riia didn’t want a wooden box to carry anything her heart desired. She wanted only one thing: the cat’s soul restored to its body. Without that, she’d never feed baby birds to Milli again.

Indrek promised to make her a whistle of aspen bark, as big as a trumpet; he promised to bring the thickest angelica grass back from the river to make liquid fertilizer; he promised her orchids and irises; he promised to pull out long slender rushes and thick reeds for her, to take tall green bottles and white roses, to look for

hawkweed as soft and smooth as fine silk and velvet, and he promised, finally, to worry over and care for Riia all summer, right up until autumn, if only she'd stop crying. But Riia wanted none of it and she wouldn't stop wailing. There was one more thing Indrek had—kittens. The Hill Farm cat had a new litter, but he decided not to offer one to Riia because she'd just feed it more bird babies.

After Riia refused all his offers and promises, Indrek's heart went hard.

"Now stop all this wailing. Nothing you do will raise her from the dead. Let's just give her a decent funeral. I'll help. We'll dig her a nice grave—I'll dig it and we'll line it with moss to make it soft and warm. Would you like that? Let's do it. I'll cut a fine, big alder with my knife and make a spade to dig with."

Riia gave no answer, but she stopped sobbing. A respectful funeral might bring some peace to her aching heart. Satisfied, Indrek went to cut down an alder tree and make the spade. Ants stood around and watched, but Muska stayed with Riia and stared at the recumbent cat in her lap.

When Indrek had his spade ready, he went back to Riia.

"Where should I dig the grave? Under that big birch of yours? That might be the best place, between the roots, where the animals won't trample."

"Yes, dig it there. It'll be easy to remember."

They went to the big birch, Indrek leading with the spade on his shoulder, Riia following with the cat, and Ants at her heels. Muska trotted along with her eyes on the cat. She wouldn't let it out of her sight.

Indrek dug the grave and lined it so nicely with moss that Riia felt some solace after the death of her beloved cat. It was only when Indrek started shoveling dirt on top of Milli that she cried again.

“What if we don’t put the dirt back,” she asked, “and only put moss?”

“No, we can’t do that,” answered Indrek. “It’ll start to stink.”

“It won’t stink with dirt?” Riia asked.

“Not with dirt,” Indrek said.

He continued to fill the hole, Riia kept crying, and Ants looked on gloomily, unhappy that he had to dirty his hands—Indrek had loosened the soil with his shovel and Ants scooped it out. He didn’t want to dirty his hands, but that’s how a homemade shovel worked.

“You want me to put a cross on top?” Indrek asked, trying to placate Riia since she couldn’t stop crying. “I’ll make it out of juniper because that doesn’t rot.”

“Yes, put a cross on it, too,” agreed Riia, wiping her eyes.

“I will, but not today. There’s not enough time,” explained Indrek. “A cross takes time if you want a nice one. I’ll cut a rabbit in the crosspiece and everything. It’s not worth it to make a bad one.”

Riia agreed, “No, it isn’t.”

So they decided to add the cross the following day.

Later, when Indrek was alone with Ants, he regretted his offer to put a cross on the grave, and a juniper one at that. What, after all, was Milli? A bird’s nest robber and nothing more. A rotten cat that was a bother every moment of her life. Why should she have a cross on her grave? If, say, their Muska had died, that would be a different story, for the dog never went after birds’ nests; she only killed snakes. She might’ve sinned dozens, even hundreds of times, but she’d always been forgiven, for everyone knew killing a snake lifted nine sins from the killer’s heart.

No, Indrek would not make a cross for Milli. He remembered the way he’d seen things at the start. He’d promised Riia the cross only to comfort her. Perhaps she’d forget about it. If not, Indrek could

find some excuse for why he hadn't made the cross. Putting it off day after day, perhaps he could avoid doing it altogether.

As he thought it over, Muska came from the direction of the Valley Farm, carrying something messy in her mouth.

"Look what Muska has!" Ants cried.

"Let her come closer," said Indrek.

The dog came straight to Indrek and placed in front of him the corpse of Riia's Milli, which she'd dug up from its grave. The dog stood there, eyes fixed on Indrek as if expecting him to say something, but Indrek was speechless. He just stood there, as if he'd seen a ghostly apparition.

"What do we do now?" he asked, as if they faced a very hard decision.

"We bury her again. What else can we do?" figured Ants.

"But where? Should we take her back to her grave?"

"Let's dig a hole right here and throw her in," said Ants.

"What if Riia finds out?" asked Indrek doubtfully.

"How would she find out? Who would tell her? I won't breathe a word, and don't you, either."

With the plan decided, they set to work and buried Milli again. The boys then went to the big birch at the Valley Farm and smoothed the ground so everything was as it should be.

Indrek thought to himself, "Now I can put a juniper cross under this birch, if Riia wants it so badly, since Milli isn't here."

But that night, he was tormented by bad dreams that turned to nightmares. He heard an awful cat's voice that sounded almost human. He woke up drenched with sweat and trembling with fear. When he fell asleep again, the vision reappeared in a different form. He heard the same voice and saw a pair of frozen eyes, like Milli's

when Muska put her down at his feet. The eyes glared at him just like Riia's when she was angry or sulking.

The next day, Indrek left Ants in the marsh with the animals and ran over to Jõessaare where, panting heavily, he dug Milli up and buried her back in the original grave under the big birch. He told Ants he was going to gather juniper from Jõessaare to make the cross. Of course, he found a piece of juniper wood, but his main purpose was moving the cat.

Feeling calmer, he rejoined Ants and started working on the cross, but his calmness didn't last long. After a few hours, when they reached Jõessaare with the herd, they saw Muska walking toward the Valley Farm, carrying something in her mouth.

"The cat again!" exclaimed Ants, pointing at the dog.

Upon hearing those words, Indrek went mad. Ants ran off, and the dog dropped the cat in front of Indrek, who stared at the corpse with blazing eyes.

Ants ran back from the second grave, shouting, "The hole isn't dug up! It looks like it was piled with fresh dirt today."

Indrek's lips trembled. The unfinished cross dropped from his hand.

"Where the hell did he get that cat? The grave is filled," repeated Ants, approaching his brother.

Indrek answered with a question, "What do we do now?"

"We have to bury it. What else?" Ants replied. "But this might be some other cat, since our hole is intact."

Indrek didn't hear the last sentence.

"Muska will just dig her out again," he said.

"Forget it, then," Ants said, quickly adding, "but it'll stink."

Then Indrek had an idea.

"Let's burn it."

Ants liked that idea, but he wondered whether a cat would burn.

“We’ll make a really hot blaze. It’ll burn,” said Indrek.

So they gathered wood and brush for a fire.

“Not a word to Riia,” said Indrek once the fire got going. “If she finds out the grave’s dug up, we’ll just say we don’t know anything about it. We won’t have any use for this cross. I’ll throw it in the fire.”

“Sure. Why tell her?” Ants agreed.

Just then, they heard Riia screaming and shouting that Milli’s grave had been dug up and she was gone. After piling brush and spruce branches to conceal the cat, they called Riia to the fire. When she appeared, the boys lamented the loss of her cat, poking at the blaze with long sticks.

“What’s that stink?” asked Riia.

“I don’t smell anything,” said Indrek.

“Neither do I,” said Ants, looking at Indrek.

“I do,” said Riia. She walked downwind where the smoke was stronger. “Come over here and sniff. You’ll smell it.”

The boys followed her and smelled the air, pretending everything was normal.

“It’s the spruce,” said Indrek, piling more branches on the fire.

Riia was incredulous, “Ugh! Spruce branches don’t stink like that.”

Trying to change the subject, Indrek said, “I guess there’s no point in making the cross now.”

“Not since Milli’s gone,” said Riia, sounding sad, but not half as sad as she’d sounded the previous day. “I guess it’s Muska’s doing. Who else would’ve known where to look?”

“I’ll toss it on the fire then,” said Indrek, taking the half-finished cross from the ground.

“Oh, you already started on it,” said Riia, surprised. “Let me see.”

Indrek gave her the cross.

“How nice it is. Milli herself wasn’t half as nice. That’s what my mother said, and other people, too.”

Unexpectedly, in a simple, quiet voice, Indrek responded, “And she ate up the baby birds in the nest, too.” He’d wanted to say it for some time but had never found the right moment. Now he seized his chance, though he still wasn’t sure if it was the right moment.

“She didn’t. She never did,” answered Riia vehemently.

“She did,” said Indrek. “I was on my stomach between the hummocks when you lurked at the ditch, peeking from behind a bush to see if anyone was there. You stood up and listened for our cowbells, but I’d stuffed them with moss so you’d think we were far away. Then you picked up Milli, jumped across the ditch, and took her to my wagtail’s nest. You squatted there while Milli ate the chicks. You can deny it all you want, but it’s the truth.”

Ants and Riia stared at Indrek with gaping mouths.

“You’re lying!” screamed Riia, and she started to cry.

“I’m not lying,” said Indrek. “The mother and father birds cried so loudly when Milli ate their babies, and you just stood there watching.”

Riia stood next to the fire, her eyes fixed on the ground. Then she suddenly turned and dashed away, screaming, “Liar, liar, liar! You didn’t see anything. You’re making it up!”

“Why do you run if I’m lying?” Indrek shouted back. “You can’t be afraid of a lie.”

Riia was silent.

“Come back,” Indrek cried after her. “Come burn your cat. That stink you smell is your Milli!”

“You’re lying!” Riia cried again.

“I’m not,” answered Indrek. “Come smell it again. You can see with your own eyes.”

Riia didn’t come back to Indrek and Ants, that day or any other, but once, when the boys were away, she went to Jõessaare and poked at the ashes with a stick. Finding some bones, she confirmed that they’d burned Milli. Why they did it was a mystery to her, and she never forgave them.

That night, Indrek slept like a log. No visions, no voices, and no tremors. Everything was quiet and calm, as if he slept in his mother’s lap.

The next morning, he said to himself, “It’s good I told her everything. She should know. Why should I have bad dreams because of some rotten cat?”



Chapter 34

For years the two farms at Vargamäe lived in separate worlds, throwing parties without inviting their neighbors, as when Kadri and Tiiu were christened at the Hill Farm, and Jüri, the newest son, at the Valley Farm. Each farm pretended to be the sole proprietor of Vargamäe. The old folks were quite used to it, and Madis the cottager also thought it quite normal.

“Who cares about neighbors,” he sometimes joked, “except when you want some salt for your soup?”

By “salt for your soup,” he meant quarrels to while away the time, but when a party echoed at either farm, time flew by so quickly that neither Andres nor Pearu needed any “salt for his soup.” As far as each old man was concerned, his guests could carouse without his neighbor knowing what they ate and drank.

The young people, however, wished it could be different. Andres’s children thought the Valley Farm folks should be included in the Hill Farm’s parties. So when Tiiu was christened, the boys who tended cows at the Hill Farm came down to the Valley Farm with some white bread and cake for the neighbors. The Valley Farm folks were nearly overlooked during Kadri’s christening, since it happened when Indrek and Ants were on the outs with Riia, but Liisi took a decisive step. She stuck a thick slice of white bread in her

blouse and went out to pick flowers. Flower picking often turned her thoughts to Joosep, so she began to sing. Joosep would've missed Liisi's song if the Lord hadn't arranged for Pearu and his sharp ears to be outside just then.

Entering his house, Pearu commented, "How beautifully those Hill Farm girls sing! Seems like poor, departed Krõõt passed along her voice. Now, she had a musical voice when calling her piglets! I was outside just now and heard that voice ringing in the fields."

As soon as he heard this, Joosep ran outside to listen to the song of the Hill Farm girl. Everyone noticed that he stayed outside for a long time.

In fact, Joosep only listened for a moment, for as soon as he recognized Liisi's voice, his legs sprouted wings and he raced along the edge of the field to the meadow, away from the sound of Liisi's voice. But as soon as the alders shielded him from the farms, he ran along the meadow and circled back to the singer.

Just as Joosep reached Liisi, she took a bite of white bread. She'd brought it for Joosep, so when he saw her taking a bite, she felt embarrassed.

"Would you like a bite of bread from our christening party?" she asked. "Only don't bite where I've bitten, or we'll quarrel."

She handed the bread to Joosep.

"If we're going to quarrel, let's quarrel," he said, biting down where she had.

"Is it good?" Liisi asked.

"It sure is," said Joosep.

"I mixed the dough myself, with eggs and butter," Liisi explained, taking another tiny bite, a mouse bite, so Joosep could have more.

"Here, eat some more," she ordered as the boy swallowed his first mouthful. "Finish it!"

“You take some, too,” said the boy.

“I’ll have more later,” the girl replied.

Joosep acquiesced and bit eagerly into the fresh bread. Meanwhile, Liisi strolled around him picking flowers—primroses and globeflowers moist with evening dew.

“You know, I wouldn’t have known you were out here if it wasn’t for my father,” said Joosep, munching away. “He came in from the yard and said someone was singing down by the Hill Farm meadow.”

“Then your father has better ears than you.”

“I was inside,” the boy apologized.

“Why were you in the house?” reproached the girl. “It’s such a nice evening.”

“You know what else my father said?”

“What?” the girl asked, curiously.

“That you have as fine a singing voice as your mother Krõõt. Father always talks about your mother’s glorious voice. Do you remember how he cried at your mother’s funeral?”

Liisi said no. She hadn’t noticed because there was so much crying that day. Everyone had cried.

When Joosep finished the bread, he approached the girl, who was still picking flowers.

“Did you have enough?” Liisi asked, blushing for some reason.

“Yes, I did,” said the boy, laughing, and added, “But I’d love some more.”

“You sweet tooth,” said the girl, sorry she hadn’t brought more. “I’ll bring more next time.” Then she added, “Next time you’ll get all you want.”

So Liisi made a promise to Joosep. Through him she gave the Valley Farm folks a taste of their christening party bread. It was her only chance to do so, and she felt she had to take it. Otherwise,

the neighbors would've been totally estranged, for the court cases started early that spring and harassment had become an everyday activity. Pearu dammed the water in several places, smashed down border fences, and built causeways so badly that he hurt himself and then cursed his neighbor for making him do such foolish things. Yet he had no choice. It was a cross he had to bear because he wouldn't, under any circumstances, leave his neighbor in peace.

Usually, the two neighbors hassled and hounded each other in court only during summer, but that year they kept at it through mid-winter in part because Pearu's oldest son had avoided the draft that autumn. Andres suspected some sort of trick had been committed by his neighbor who, while drunk at the tavern, bragged that his boy escaped military service because he'd gotten the doctor to give him an extra hole to shit out of. Suspicious and annoyed, Andres thought Pearu had made a secret deal with the town clerk and executive, using them to bribe someone even higher. He was tempted to talk to his God again, as he once had, and ask why Pearu's first children were sons while his were daughters.

In actuality, Pearu hadn't made a deal. Joosep did. Ironically, he hadn't listened to the town officials, but instead he followed the advice of Andres's oldest daughter, Liisi. She'd instructed him to draw his lot with his left hand, the one she often held when they were together. Joosep and Liisi told no one of this trick—no one knew anything about it. But it worked. That year, many men drew lots and Joosep's number was so far down the list that he was allowed to stay home with the third group in the reserves. Joosep was pleased that he'd followed Liisi's advice, and Liisi was happy that she'd given him such a cunning suggestion.

That, of course, wasn't the main reason for the lawsuit between the two neighbors that winter. But it did play a role, for if Joosep

hadn't escaped conscription, Liisi might not have gone to church with the others that Christmas Eve and things might've turned out differently.

That Christmas Eve at Vargamäe was going to be very festive. There was no longer any hired help in either household—just all the children. At the Hill Farm, the boys brought piles of straw into the main room to stack against the heated wall and all the children got ready to go to church, for the weather was fine—not too cold, so you could hold the reins with bare hands.

There was no greater joy at Vargamäe than harnessing the horses to the long sleighs filled with bundles of white straw for seats, then piling in as many children as the sleighs could hold and the horses could pull (for there was no lack of children at Vargamäe), and riding down the hill toward the sound of the church bells that rang over the swamps and marshes, the high fields and buildings, and the high trees, which were blanketed in snow and didn't echo the sounds of their sleighs, so only a dull thumping signaled their approach, as if a heavy object hit something soft.

That year, the Hill Farm needed two sleighs to get to church. In order of age, the riders were Liisi, Maret, young Andres, Indrek, Ants, and Liine. Tiiu and Kadri stayed behind to help heat the stove and cook the sausages, for Andres and Mari preferred the sweet smell and sizzling sound of the sausages to the church bells. At least that's how Mari explained to the two little ones why they stayed home on Christmas Eve.

The older children piled into the sleighs—Liisi, Andres, and Liine into one, and Maret, Indrek and Ants in the other. The first sleigh took off, drawn by the young horse, and the old mare struggled behind with the second sleigh, no one pushing or leading it. Liine and Ants were wrapped in heavy old sheepskins and they sat

in the sleigh like two bundles, but it didn't matter—it was exciting just to ride along. They wedged themselves between the bigger children so they wouldn't fall off and get lost in the dark. At the church, they crawled out from under the heavy coverings and went inside to find a spot as close to the altar as possible. They wanted to see the Christmas tree up close and smell the sweet candles.

This was Liine's first time in church and she found so much to admire that she didn't hear a word the pastor uttered, though she could barely tear her eyes away from his face. When the organ began to play, she tried to look up at the choir, but the excessive shawls around her shoulders prevented her from tilting her head back far enough. She tried to shift her body so she could see more, but the church was so crowded and all the parishioners stood side by side like sardines in a can. She might've been stuck like that until the end, with no chance to see the organ or the big man beside it, singing with a booming voice, as if he was blowing a herdsman's horn, but luckily she was standing next to Liisi and Joosep. The three of them shared a book of Christmas carols and Joosep gave Liine a lift at just the right moment so she saw the organ and the rest of the proceedings. In trying to impress Liisi, Joosep forgot about his own little brother, who couldn't see either. But Liisi noticed and gave him a lift, so the boy, too, shared in the spirit of Christmas.

Liine took it all in. The big Christmas tree filled with candles at the altar—nothing was more spectacular. How did they squeeze such a big tree inside the church? And how did they stand it up? Fastening the candles was easier. Small boys could've climbed the tree to do that. Even Ants and Indrek could've done it, although Indrek was perhaps too big. But moving such a big tree and standing it up—the two of them couldn't have managed that. Perhaps young Andres and father could've done it, but no one else.

Later, Liine shared her thoughts with Ants, but he felt differently.

“Oh, this year’s tree was nothing. Once there was a much bigger tree.”

“Even bigger?” gasped Liine. “How big? Like the biggest tree in Jõessaare?”

“Not that big,” said Ants “There’s no tree anywhere as big as that.”

“Could they bring that tree into the church?” asked Liine.

“It wouldn’t fit,” said Ants.

“If they built a bigger church, could they do it then?”

“No, nobody could get the biggest tree in Jõessaare into a church.”

“Not even father?”

“Nobody! That tree is so big, nobody could,” Ants insisted.

“Could you put candles on it?”

“Maybe you could put candles on it if you climbed to the top.”

“Imagine if we put candles on a tree like that!” dreamed Liine.

“We’d light them all at the same time...that big old tree in Jõessaare, full of candles and...Wouldn’t they burn nicely?”

“Where would we get so many candles?” asked Ants.

“Maybe the church would give them to us,” said Liine. “If they gave us enough, we could put them on every tree in Jõessaare and light them all at once in the dark. Wouldn’t it be as bright as the church?”

“Well, it wouldn’t be that bright,” said Ants. “No place is as bright as the church, just like no tree is as tall as the church steeple.”

“Is it taller than our big spruce in Jõessaare?” asked Liine. In the dark, she couldn’t see the church steeple to judge its height.

“A lot taller,” Ants assured her.

“Does it reach to heaven?”

“No, not to heaven.”

“If we put our big tree on top of the church steeple, would it reach then?”

“No, not even then.”

“If we put a table on top of the tree, and a chair on top of the table, and the big ladder on top of the chair, would it reach then?”

“The ladder wouldn’t stand up on the chair, it would fall down,” said Ants.

“But if it did stay, and we put the main room ladder on top, too, and the cowshed ladder on top of that, and the barn ladder on top of the cowshed ladder, would it reach then?”

“It wouldn’t reach heaven. Nothing reaches heaven. Heaven is higher than anything, or else it wouldn’t be heaven and all the people would go there and the world would be empty,” argued Ants.

“Then there’d be nobody to feed the animals, and take them to pasture, and lock the barn door at night, and bring in the key,” figured Liine.

Then Ants said to her, “You sure are stupid,” but Liine didn’t seem to notice and continued to ask more questions.

“But if we piled up all those things, would they reach a cloud?”

“Maybe they’d reach a cloud,” said Ants.

“Then why don’t all the people leave the world and go up in the clouds?” asked Liine. “Couldn’t the animals eat up there?”

“There’s no use talking to you about this. You don’t understand yet,” said Ants, and he stopped answering her questions.

During the whole sermon, Indrek hadn’t been able to take his eyes off the figure of the Savior, barely visible through the branches of the Christmas tree and its burning candles. He’d looked at this figure many times before, but that day it held his attention with special vigor, perhaps because the white cloth around its loins shone through the branches of the tree and brought him a vision.

He didn't know whether the vision was real or an apparition in a dream. It was a sunny day, toward late afternoon. He just barely perceived a crowd of people and the air was filled with uproarious shouts. Among the bleary figures was one clearly seen—a man wearing only a white shirt that hung nearly to his knees—and that man was standing and being beaten by the others. When the man squatted to protect himself, he drew his legs under his shirt, but the others pulled up the shirt and the cloth bunched around his neck like the white loincloth of the Savior. In the sunshine, the man's blood spilled down his back and thighs like the red blood running down the Savior's side. Indrek saw this so clearly, as if he was remembering something he'd seen many times over the years. He remembered being held in the man's arms, but how he got there and what happened after, he didn't know. Envisioning all this in church on Christmas Eve brought to Indrek's mind the words of the Lord, which he'd once read in the Bible, "Let the children come unto me, and do not hinder them."

Meanwhile, Liisi and Joosep were pushed together so tightly by the crowd that they felt the heat of each other's bodies even through their thick clothes. They felt very good, pushed together like that, and their faces glowed as if the church was very warm, though there was no heat except for the candles, and the people sang together, "From heaven above to earth I come..."

When they left the church, an unexpected surprise awaited the children of Vargamäe. Young Andres started to push their horse out from between the others at the railing, and bells began tinkling on the shafts. Andres was startled. Had he taken the wrong horse? Had someone tied bells to the shafts of his sled by mistake?

"What's this?" he asked, surprised.

“Just get in the sleigh and don’t ask questions,” laughed Liisi, who appeared to be in on the secret.

“You know about this?” asked Andres.

“Yes, I do,” said Liisi.

“This is Joosep’s work, isn’t it?” Andres asked.

“Don’t ask questions,” said Liisi. “Just get going. We’re blocking the others.”

Off went the two Hill Farm sleighs with bells ringing. They could hear only one other sleigh with bells: the Valley Farm sleigh behind them.

They traveled home the same way they’d come, with Liisi, Andres, and Liine in the first sleigh, and the others following. What was going to church compared to returning home? They’d have been happy if the road was ten times longer, so beautifully were the bells ringing! It was as if a little parson sat on each shaft, ringing the bells for the children of Vargamäe as they rode in their sleighs filled with soft white straw on Christmas Eve, the little ones bundled up in their father’s and mother’s sheepskins, tucked between their brothers and sisters.

In the middle of the manor marsh, they caught up with a whole procession of sleds and sleighs, which slowed down the ones from Vargamäe.

“Pass them!” shouted Joosep of the Valley Farm to young Andres. “The swamp is hard and the snow isn’t deep.”

Andres quickly pulled the young mare to the side and tightened the reins. The other sleighs from Vargamäe dashed after him and their bells rang out. Another sled might’ve passed the train, but without bells, there was no point. Only the Vargamäe crowd rode across the manor marsh that evening with ringing bells. The others

marveled at the children, riding along with their bells, and some of them remarked, “That’s the troop from Vargamäe.”

They raced home at a good clip but stopped the horses when they reached their fields. Joosep untied the bells and hid them under the straw in his sleigh. Then they let the horses trot quietly up the sloping fields, for there was no longer a reason to go quickly—no bells urged them on.

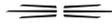
“Now that they’re gone, I know how nice the bells were,” said Liine to the others.

“Children,” said Liisi, “you must keep quiet about this, so father doesn’t hear about the bells. Then we can do it again next Christmas.”

“Can we tell mother?” asked Liine.

“Yes, you can,” answered Liisi.

“Then we’ll tell mother secretly,” said Liine, who couldn’t bear to keep it to herself.



When they stepped inside, the children were surprised to find their parents singing and reading the Bible. How could they read and sing when the sweet smell of pork and blood sausages filled every corner of the house, from the stove through the chimney to the yard outside?

Before anyone could ask why father and mother were conducting their prayers so late, Tiiu whispered to Liine, “Father beat the neighbor’s dog.”

A strange thing had happened to Andres and Mari while the children were at church. The stove had been warm when the children left, and once the wood turned to glowing coals, Mari put the

pork in the oven and the sausages on top, just where they should be. It was a quiet, mild night, so they'd left the hallway door open to the outside. The door of the front bedroom, which had a hole in it, was closed, while the big main room door was held ajar by an oven fork so the smoke could escape.

Mari had arranged everything nicely before taking her two youngest children into the bedroom, where Andres was waiting at the table to recite the words of the hymns. Mari sat down, too, but from time to time, between prayers, she went to check the sizzling meat and sausages, turning them over and shifting them around in the pans. But one time, as she returned to Andres and the children, they heard a strange thud from the main room. They thought perhaps the oven fork had fallen down. Mari hurried back and saw that, indeed, the oven fork had fallen and the door was closed. She went to open the door and wedge the fork back inside because the room smelled of smoke, but before she could bend down and pick it up, she noticed a pair of eyes glowing in the corner between the tubs. She realized the fork hadn't fallen by itself. Something had knocked it down. It couldn't have been their old cat because he was too cautious and Muska had gone with the children to keep watch over the sleighs. What animal dared to come into their house on a blessed Christmas Eve? From nearby the stove, Mari retrieved a little lamp, as dim as a firefly, and went to have a look in the dark corner. She heard a vicious growl. Raising the lamp higher she saw it was the neighbor's dog—Valtu!

"Look at that damned thing," Mari said to herself. "Lured by the smell of the sausages. And now you've trapped yourself. You've already stolen my soap cakes and slurped up my hog feed, haven't you?"

Mari closed the big door firmly so its latch clicked, and rushed back to tell Andres.

“Maybe we should take a break from reading and singing.”

“What’s the matter?” he asked.

“Valtu is in there. He must’ve come right inside and knocked down the fork so the big door closed on him. Now he can’t get out, and he’s just staring with glowing eyes,” Mari explained.

Andres put down the prayer book, threw a short white sheepskin over his shoulders, and went out to find some sturdy sticks in the firewood pile. He knew just where to find the bundles of rowan and cherry wood that came from the hayfields. Groping in the dark with experienced hands, he found all the rowan and cherry he needed.

Once he’d gathered a good supply of stout sticks, they took a big lamp with a glass shade from the table and hung it on a high nail, so it lit up the main room. At first, Mari tried to hold the lamp, but that didn’t work because the dog was growling and darting about so terrifyingly that she might’ve dropped it.

“So you’re still growling, are you?” asked Andres, brandishing his cherry and rowan clubs, whose aromatic scent mixed with the sweet-smelling sausages. He turned to his wife and, after a moment, said, “Here, you take one, too,” and handed her a strong rowan stick.

“Me?” said Mari.

“For protection, if nothing else,” said Andres.

Ignoring the growling and bared teeth of the dog, Andres went right at it. Barking and snarling couldn’t prevent the cherry stick from coming down on the dog’s back with such force and vigor that nothing but howls and outright wails were heard out of him. Abandoning all protest, the dog tried to protect himself from the blows by hiding among the utensils, but Andres kicked them aside and reached the animal with his stick. The dog’s only reprieve came

when a stick broke into pieces and Andres had to get a new one from the stove. But then the blows fell with even greater rage and fury, and it seemed they'd never stop. Finally, the dog could tolerate the pain no longer. It seemed to penetrate his very soul. In desperation, he jumped into a tub full of water that stood against the wall, but Andres grabbed the oven fork and shoved it against the dog's neck, so he flopped headfirst into the water, splashing it all over the floor and onto Andres's face and white Christmas shirt.

"You're wetting the floor," said Mari, trying to tell him it was enough.

Andres didn't seem to hear. Over and over, he let the dog come up for air, only to force him back down again. Then, finally, he let the dog jump out of the tub, shouting, "Stop fouling our horses' drinking water."

The tough dog leapt from the cold water and, when Andres hit him across the back again, he jumped onto the hearth, his fur dripping right on the hearthstone and onto the stovetop. He looked like he wanted to jump onto the hot stovetop and find the delicious smell, but he felt the heat and stayed where he was, dripping and staring down at the man who beat him.

"The damned dog is gonna get on the stovetop!" shouted Mari. She was just as scared as the dog, adding, "He'll ruin the sausages! What will we feed the children when they come home hungry from church?"

"Let it go, if it can walk," said Andres. He took a poker from the wall and pulled the dog down from the stovetop onto the hearth, making the hot ashes smoke. For a moment, it smelled like the ashes they spread in the springtime to fertilize the vegetable garden.

Mari shouted, the dog wailed, and Andres cursed and brandished his rowan stick. The whole room was in a noisy uproar, as if

it were some sort of workers' kvass-drinking party and not a quiet Christmas Eve with sausages cooking.

The dog ran into the back corner and Andres dashed after it. Although he'd thrown off his sheepskin at the start and wore just his shirt, he was soaked with sweat. The wrath and rage of many years steamed on his skin, and he felt a great need to settle the score with Pearu, for everything he'd done.

In the back corner, the dog endured more blows and didn't know where to run, when little Tiiu opened the bedroom door to find out what on earth was going on. The dog seized his chance and dashed like an arrow toward the front bedroom, knocking the little girl off her feet and onto the straw. Andres and Mari both cried, "Shut the door!" but the dog was too quick for the child.

"Dammit!" shouted Andres. "Now he's in the bedroom with his wet fur."

They chased the dog under beds and chairs until he jumped onto the table, as if he planned to break through the double-paned windows. The Bible stood open on the table, waiting for the family to turn their thoughts to the salvation of their souls, but instead the dog trampled across its pages with his wet, sooty, ash-covered paws.

"He's going to jump out the window!" cried Mari, frightened to death.

"For Chrissake!" cursed Andres, hitting the dog again. "His paws all over the Holy Scripture! Get the hell out of here! You're gonna make it even worse!"

Finally, they chased the dog from the bedrooms, but in the main room the beating continued. Andres was just getting started. They slid a broomstick through the handle of the bedroom door so it couldn't be opened.

"Leave him now," Mari pleaded, "or you'll kill him."

“Let him die,” said Andres, as if intoxicated, “and good riddance.”

But the Valley Farm dog was tough and Andres’s clubbing didn’t kill him, though he laid there like he was dead, simply absorbing the blows. At last, Andres picked him up, grabbing the skin of his neck with one hand and his hindquarters with the other, and tossed him back into the cold water. This revived the dog a little, so Andres gave him a few more blows, opened the big door, and said, “Out with you!” The dog tried to leap out the door but, as if overwhelmed by the chance to escape, he didn’t make it and fell back into the room. He sat down, panting, and gathered his strength for another leap that would carry him to freedom.

“Well, you got in, but you can’t get out,” said Andres, taking a cup of hot water from the cauldron and throwing it on the dog. The animal yelped and a moment later, he was gone.

“Now close the outside door,” said Andres to Mari. “The smoke is gone and we don’t need it open.”

When all the doors were closed, Andres grumbled as he picked up pieces of wood and set the utensils back in place, while Mari spread out the puddles of water so they’d dry quicker.

“What a damned beast! He ruined our precious Christmas Eve! Stealing from a neighbor’s house! His feet all over the Holy Scripture!”

“I don’t think he’ll ever come here again,” Mari guessed. “I don’t have to worry about him eating my hog feed or soap cakes anymore.”

“I think you’re right. He won’t come here,” said Andres. “I got so excited, my shirt is soaked through. He won’t be back.”

They took the broomstick from the door, Mari rearranged the meat in the oven and the sausages on the stovetop, Andres washed his hands in warm water, and then they went back to the reading and singing they’d abandoned so abruptly.

“That damned devil left his paw prints on the Christmas passage, right on the name Emmanuel,” said Andres, examining the prayer book.

He tried to wipe away the paw prints, but they wouldn’t come off. Mari tried, too, but she couldn’t clean it either, not without erasing the name Emmanuel. It was as if the dog had indelibly marked the book. And so that Christmas Eve, and all the rest until he died, Andres read the Scripture through a dog’s paw print. Even after the dog and Andres were both dead, the paw print remained on the page as if it were part of the eternal joy celebrated by the prayer.

But after that Christmas Eve, Valtu never again came near the Hill Farm house or the yard gate. He’d go as far as the well, but no further, and he’d sit there or return home with a defeated look on his face.

In contests of strength, between men, oxen, or rams, the Hill Farm had always proved itself stronger than the Valley Farm—that is, except for Muska, who always yielded to Valtu and his vicious, sharp teeth. Valtu tore at anything he got between his teeth and he held on, as if he wanted to carry a piece away in his jaws. Muska feared Valtu, whose terrifying teeth gave him courage. Before the incident on Christmas Eve, he came up to the Hill Farm gate, entered their yard, and cavalierly walked around just as he pleased, as if he didn’t even know the Hill Farm was Muska’s home—Muska, the champion killer of snakes and cats.

However, after Christmas Eve, when Muska went along to the church with Indrek and the others—or more precisely, to the churchyard, where she guarded the sleighs while everyone was inside—and when she shared the excitement of racing across the marsh, past the other sleighs with bells jingling—the situation changed drastically. Muska became the real master of the house.

She'd even venture onto the Valley Farm's land to pursue her affairs without fear of Valtu's sharp teeth. And since she now left her droppings under the Valley Farm's windows, but the Valley Farm dog didn't do the same in return, a stranger might've assumed the Hill Farm was hostile to the Valley Farm, while the Valley Farm answered only with warm friendship and love.



When the children heard what had happened, young Andres said, "If I knew that was going to happen, I wouldn't have gone to church."

"But then you would've missed the organ and the Christmas tree," said Liine.

"So what," said Andres. "I could see them any Christmas, but Valtu doesn't come into our house any Christmas. We've never caught him here before and he'll probably never come again."

It was clear as day—it'd been a big mistake for Andres to go to church, for indeed Valtu would likely never get a beating at Vargamäe again.

But Valtu wasn't going to spoil Christmas Eve for the children, for there was straw on the floor by the heated wall, juicy pork roasting in the oven, and sausages on the stovetop crisping nicely. The boys had made the sausage skewers themselves, each carving a special mark onto his skewers so everyone could tell whose skewer he held. That alone was enough to excite the children and turn sausage eating into an important Christmas event, only no one dared to ask father what mark he'd carved onto his skewers, unless mother herself took on that fearsome task. And after singing with him in the back room and listening to his readings, she did ask him.

Father didn't care for the children's constant jokes, especially on a quiet and holy Christmas Eve. He wore the self-absorbed expression he always did, as if worries plagued his heart and gloom filled his mind. Mother had the same worried face, but the children were not afraid of her. They didn't take her worries seriously.

Though they were used to them, the children found their parents' somber and serious faces harder to bear on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. They could stuff themselves with as much blood sausage, roast pork, and white bread as they wanted, lie on the straw until they fell asleep, and wake up on Christmas morning, but they couldn't romp all over the straw as they would've liked, for it was too sacred a time for such games. They weren't expecting guests on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day, at least not before the church bells rang for that day's service because, as the old people said, any guest arriving earlier would only get an old pair of moccasins. It was too quiet and holy a time for guests. Only after Christmas Day were visitors expected, and from then on the children were permitted to play in the straw. They could leg wrestle all day and night, thrash each other with whips of straw, play "poke the shoemaker's eye" with a broomstick, or simply frolic in the straw. They played so joyfully that father, passing through, commented, "What have you wild children got up to? This room's as hot as a burnt-up field."

But they all knew his words weren't serious and they paid no attention, only stopped for a moment and started their horseplay again, even wilder. They shouted and screamed all at once, so they might've been heard in heaven. There was so much dust in the air by the end of the day, they could hardly see across the room, and there was so much Christmas joy in the air for the Vargamäe children that it might've reached the sky.

Liisi and Maret sat in the straw, but they didn't roll around or wrestle, which made Liine ask of Ants, "Why aren't Liisi and Maret wrestling? If they don't want to wrestle Andres or Indrek, they can wrestle each other."

Sounding very knowledgeable, Ants answered, "Boy, are you dumb! They're not wearing any pants, so how can they wrestle?"

She didn't believe him. "Don't lie! They have pants on, with skirts on top," she replied.

"Those aren't boys' pants," said Ants, and that settled the question.

Liisi and Maret did play "poke the shoemaker's eye" once, even though it was really a boy's game, but no one was around to see except little Tiiu and Kadri. They might've gotten away with it if Tiiu hadn't accidentally told the others, but the girls only blushed, and father teased them a little.

"Liisi is sure strong enough for leg wrestling," he said, "but Maret isn't up to it."

"Let her come try it with me," said young Andres, bragging a little. "I'll show her how to send a pair of shoes flying."

"Don't make empty boasts," said the father to the son, "or I'll come over and wrestle you instead of Liisi."

"Now, don't talk rubbish," said Mari to her husband. "You shouldn't wrestle your children."

But old Andres pretended not to hear Mari and kept on teasing.

"What do you think, Liisi? Should I wrestle Andres for you?"

"Do it, father!" the children shouted. Nothing would be more delightful and amusing than watching father leg wrestle in the straw, especially with Andres, who always bragged of his strength and whose shoes they longed to see flying through the air.

“Fair enough,” said old Andres. “First, let’s eat, then we’ll get to it.”

Full of anticipation, the children all lost their appetites. They couldn’t swallow a single bite of blood sausage, roast pork, or white bread, buttered as thickly as they’d ever dreamed for the holiday. The roast pork stuck in their throats, nearly making them sick. They chewed and chewed the buttered bread, but it couldn’t be swallowed without a little sour kvass.

“Your wrestling match has killed everyone’s appetite,” said Mari. “As soon as we clear the table, I bet they’ll all be sneaking into the pantry.”

No one paid her any attention, because their eyes and ears were fixed on father as they waited to hear what he might say when he finished his meal. But father just went on quietly eating, as if he’d never mentioned leg wrestling. The children’s excitement only grew.

“Eat up, or you won’t have any strength,” father joked when Andres, who’d finished first, stood up from the table.

“I’ve had all I want, so that’ll have to do,” Andres answered his father.

“Who’ll win?” Liine asked Ants.

“We’ll see,” said Ants sagely.

“Andres or father?” said Liine.

“Be quiet,” said Ants. “What do you know about fights between men?”

Finally, father rose from the table. The great moment had arrived. Their excitement was about to peak, but father’s next words fell down on the children like a cold shower.

“After a meal, you must let the food settle. You must do that.”

Everyone stared in shock. Their disappointment was expressed in a single, reproachful word.

“Father!”

“Why do you torment them?” Mari said. “Must they wait till you go to sleep now?”

“Yes, father,” the children said, summoning their courage, “you promised you’d do it after the meal.”

“Well, all right, if you all want it so badly,” father said, and he laid down on the straw. “Come on, Andres, let’s be done with it.”

“Well, what do you know?” said Mari, surprised. “He’s really going to wrestle the children, as if he were a boy.”

Young Andres lay beside his father, head to toe. They adjusted themselves in the straw and raised their legs.

“Let’s go,” said the father.

“All right, let’s go,” replied the boy.

Their legs hooked, but they slipped apart before either could lift his opponent from the straw. On the next try, their hooked legs clung together and the boy went tumbling over backwards. Everyone in the room shouted and even Mari smiled.

“That was for Liisi!” shouted father. “Come back here and I’ll do the same for Maret.”

The children shrieked. Andres lay down beside his father again and they raised their legs, but the results were the same: the boy went flying.

“Do you want one for Liine, Tiiu, and Kadri as well?” asked father. “The boys can fight for themselves.”

Young Andres wanted another go for each of his sisters, but each time he lost, and it was their father who really fought for their honor.

Finally, he said to his son, “Now you see—you shouldn’t brag at home. Do your bragging outside if you must do it at all.”

“Let’s play ‘poke the shoemaker’s eye,’” said Andres to his father, since he couldn’t win at leg wrestling.

“Where are your shoemakers?” father roared. “Bring them out and I’ll show you something.”

They brought out the three-legged shoemaker, made of braided straw. A stick was found and both players had a chance to poke the shoemaker’s eye. The father and son stood back to back, each bending over a broomstick. One looked backward, through his parted legs, and tried to poke the shoemaker’s eye. The other stood just behind the shoemaker and tried to fend off the stick.

They fought over the shoemaker for a long time, but young Andres was the undisputed winner. He evaded his father and ran his stick straight through the shoemaker’s eye, but his father couldn’t manage to do the same. This amazed the onlookers, including Mari, who watched nearby.

“I’m an old man. My arms are stiff and my eyes are dim. I can’t beat young men anymore,” father said at last, giving up. “All the food made me tired, as if I’ve been working hard,” he added, retiring to the back room.

“Let me grow bigger. In a couple of years, we’ll wrestle again,” boasted young Andres.

“Don’t say such things.” Mari hushed him. “Father was just fooling with you because it’s holiday time. You shouldn’t take it so seriously. Of course you’ll be stronger. You’re young and he’s old, and getting older.”

“Why was father in such a good mood today?” asked Liisi, surprised.

“I don’t know why he was so lively today,” said Mari. “Maybe it was the thrashing he gave the neighbor’s dog on Christmas Eve. That may have calmed him.”



Chapter 35

It happened that night because it was Christmas Eve, which was much beloved by the children. Andres understood that very well. On any other Saturday, no one would've left the glowing embers of the warming oven to read and sing in the back room. On another evening, the children would've stayed close to the hot stove—one perched on the chopping block, one leaning by the broom, another squatting on an upturned wooden bowl, and another settled in the doorsill. They would've found important tasks to be done there, like treating warts with salt and magic, or spitting into the fire to see if their lips cracked like their mother warned. They would've thrown salt into the fire and raced to see who got outside before hearing it crackle, or grilled slices of turnip on sticks—the tastiest food at Vargamäe—or watched the soot burn on the stovetop, or seen who could stand longest atop the ladder beside the furnace roof, with eyes wide open in the acrid smoke.

Even if God declared Christmas Eve too stormy and snowy for the children to go to church, they still would've abandoned the stove for the straw in the front room, and Muska would've sat with them or slept under the table, so only the sausages and their tantalizing smell lingered in the main room. Perhaps Valtu, the neighbors' dog, would've burst through the door regardless, knocking the oven fork

from the doorway, so what happened might've happened exactly the same way—though it would've been two Andreses getting hot and riled instead of just one.

So it was—everything that happened had to happen exactly as it did—and one could have no regrets. Andres regretted nothing, although he couldn't be happy about going to court for beating a dog on Christmas Eve.

Pearu filed a complaint, claiming Andres had beaten his “estimable” guarddog until the animal was half blind and half deaf. Further, he alleged that Andres burned the dog's coat until the skin of his back was raw and he'd no longer go outside in the winter. Even if he was able to go out, Pearu ventured, the dog was no longer “estimable” because he'd lost his hearing and sight.

The two masters from Vargamäe went to court several times to settle the matter. The township learned how terribly valuable Pearu's dog had been up until that Christmas Eve, when the Hill Farm people left the glowing embers in the stove unattended and retired to the back room to read and sing.

Andres insisted that he was not responsible for any damages to Pearu and in fact, the opposite was true. He claimed that during the brief time when the children were in church and he was in the bedroom reading and singing with Mari, like any good Christians on a sacred Christmas Eve, Pearu's dog came through the door, ate their sausages off the stovetop, and upset a cauldron of hot headcheese, which apparently scalded his back. So it was not surprising that the dog had lost his hearing, his sight, and a patch of fur from his back, but it couldn't be as bad as Pearu described, Andres insisted, because the headcheese had been cooling for a while and wasn't scorching hot. So Andres argued that the damages he sustained were much worse than Pearu's. However, he valued their good,

neighborly relations more than his Christmas sausages or headcheese, and would thus forgo any compensation. After all, what God had given, God could take away, even by the ravenous mouth of a neighbor's dog, or so Andres told the court.

Andres's argument appealed to the just and pious judges, and so they dismissed the case without ordering any penalties to be paid by either party. Of course, the appetizing smell of Andres's Christmas sausages and the cauldron of hot headcheese had cost Pearu the great value of his dog. However, the court suggested that Andres's loss wasn't small, since his sausages were ruined by Pearu's dog and headcheese was more valuable in a cauldron than on the floor.

Pearu couldn't accept the ruling, sure as he was that his dog's sight and hearing were worth more than Andres's sausages and headcheese. So he found a new reason to sue his neighbor. Thieves had robbed his house, something unheard of in Vargamäe, and he wanted Andres to pay for what he'd lost, since the theft couldn't have happened if his good watchdog still had sight and hearing.

Things went on and on like that and the neighbors returned to court all winter long. Even on the coldest, most bitter days, they didn't halt the feud. Of course, the real court season began in spring because then boundary fences were built or smashed, animals herded, water dammed, roads constructed, and all the necessary tasks undertaken that could make a neighbor boil over. And along with all the usual tricks, something new brought aggravation and vexation to the Hill Farm family.

Only at the tavern could the two neighbors exchange a few gruff words while drinking vodka among the other men. Their words, for the most part, were barbs and jibes but, still, they were only words. When they began trading remarks this time, however, Pearu's aces were much nastier than Andres's trumps. They spoke

of the Christmas Eve dog beating, and of reading prayers and singing psalms.

“Holy Scripture turns your heart into something arrogant and vicious,” Pearu told Andres. “I didn’t do any reading on Christmas Eve, and I didn’t beat your dog.”

“My dog went to church on Christmas Eve and didn’t steal your sausages,” said Andres. “You should’ve sent your dog to church, too. Then he’d still have his hair. His eyes would still see and his ears would still hear.”

“You should’ve gone to church yourself. Then my dog would’ve been fine, even if he did eat your Christmas sausages,” said Pearu.

“I don’t need to go to church. I read the Bible at home. But your dog can’t read, so he’d better go to church and learn the seventh commandment: ‘Thou shalt not steal,’” said Andres.

“Well, what about the commandment that says, ‘Don’t covet thy neighbor’s house?’” asked Pearu.

“What does that have to do with it?” replied Andres.

“Well, well. He asks what that has to do with it,” said Pearu mockingly. “I ask you, here at the bar of the tavern of the church: why do you covet your neighbor’s house?”

“What?” shouted Andres. “Whose house have I coveted?”

“Mine,” answered Pearu.

“What? Your house? You turd!” hissed Andres, pronouncing each word distinctly.

“That’s right, runt. You covet this turd’s house,” answered Pearu calmly.

“Listen, neighbor, the good Lord has sucked out your brains along with your dog’s,” said Andres scornfully.

“Well, why does your daughter sleep with my son, if you don’t covet my house?” asked Pearu.

“What are you babbling on about now?” Andres asked excitedly. “You say my daughter sleeps with your son?”

“That’s right. Your daughter sleeps with my son,” repeated Pearu triumphantly, realizing that Andres was ignorant of the whole matter.

Andres was stunned. “Which daughter with which son?” he asked, his eyes swimming.

“Liisi with Joosep. Who else?” Pearu answered. “Because Joosep will be master of the Valley Farm.”

“Pearu,” Andres said, and everyone, including the innkeeper, noted the threat in his voice. “Pearu, if you prattle on about my daughter without reason today, I’ll beat the hell out of you. You’ll die, if not today, then soon. Even if they send me to jail or Siberia, I’ll thrash you senseless—worse than I beat your dog. You won’t see from your eyes or hear from your ears. I’ll burn your hair off like a pig’s. You got that?”

“You get this,” answered Pearu bravely and righteously. “You’ve got no reason to beat me. I’m not eating your sausages. I wouldn’t even put them in my mouth. Just the smell makes me sick. But you’d better look after your daughter so she stops fooling with my boy.”

Andres tried to jump at him, but Pearu had predicted an assault from the start and rushed behind the innkeeper’s back just as a full vodka glass came flying toward him.

“Come out here!” Andres shouted. “If you’re a man, come out! I’ll show you how my daughter fools around with your son. You ass! Your boy doesn’t have the guts to sleep with my daughter.”

“Maybe not, if she didn’t throw herself at him...” said Pearu.

Andres was tempted to jump over the counter. He shouted in fury, “You haven’t heard the end of this.”

“What if it’s true?” Pearu asked.

“If Pearu’s got it right,” said the innkeeper, “then will you let him go?”

“If he’s right, I’ll kill my daughter or drive her from the gate,” said Andres.

“Then it’s your daughter you’ll kill, not me,” said Pearu, creeping out from behind the counter. Andres turned and walked out of the tavern.

The road home was long and treacherous. As the horse slowly pulled the wagon, Andres had time to calm down and think things through. The little vodka he drank at the tavern had expired, and all that remained were Pearu’s foul words and the thoughts and feelings they brought up inside him.

It never occurred to Andres that his children would consort with Pearu’s, but now it was clear they did and he had no clue about any of it. The idea was so hideous, he couldn’t keep it in his head as he rattled home along the empty road. In the tavern, surrounded by other men, he’d somehow grasped the idea, but now his mind went to pieces and Pearu words seemed simply ridiculous.

Andres was still mulling it over when he recalled what Pearu said about “coveting thy neighbor’s house,” and a stray thought, a little leftover idea from his drunken contemplations, welled up in his mind. What if Liisi did marry Joosep? What if Pearu’s theory came to pass and she stood to become the mistress of the Valley Farm. In that case, might Pearu decide to pass his farm on to Karla instead? But then, what if Karla wanted Maret as the mistress of his farm? Would he disinherit Karla as well, and give the farm to Juljus? But Andres had more daughters—Liine, Tiiu, and Kadri. What if one of them married Juljus? For each of Pearu’s sons, Andres had a daughter who could make him a son-in-law. To whom would Pearu leave his farm then? Would he disinherit all his sons if they married

Andres's daughters? Hell, he wouldn't go that far! He'd have to give his farm to someone—if not a son, then a daughter.

Now Andres was almost happy. Northern lights tinted the sky. If only it turned out to be the good Lord's will, that through his children, Andres would become the master of all of Vargamäe. Well, for that end, he wouldn't oppose his girls marrying Pearu's sons, or his boys marrying Pearu's daughters. Then his blood would flow through all the veins of Vargamäe, and his flesh would walk all the fields and meadows. He could imagine nothing finer as he sat alone in his wagon, its wheels digging deep ruts in the road.

Back home, Andres held his tongue and proceeded carefully. He spoke to Mari, but at first she claimed to have no knowledge of any such thing. Eventually, she admitted that she'd noticed something between Liisi and Joosep, but Andres couldn't get her to say any more, so there was nothing to do but confront Liisi himself. However, Mari had warned her to expect Andres's questions and the girl was prepared. Since Andres had already heard about the matter, she realized there was no point in denial and told him everything.

"Did you really think I'd let you or any child of mine marry Joosep if he's not going to inherit the farm?" Andres finally said.

"Actually, the farm will be offered to him, but he doesn't want it," said Liisi.

"Whether he doesn't want it or it's not offered to him, it doesn't matter. He won't take over the farm and that's what matters," Andres explained.

"But I don't want to be the mistress of the Valley Farm," added Liisi.

"Then what do you want with Joosep, if you don't want to be mistress?" asked her father.

“The Valley Farm isn’t the only place in the world,” she answered.

“It’s the only place on Vargamäe besides our farm,” said her father, “and if neither you nor Joosep want the place, then you’re not going to marry him. That’s what I’m telling you. I don’t need that brood of vipers, you hear?”

“It’s because you call them a ‘brood of vipers’ that I don’t want to be mistress of the Valley Farm,” stated Liisi.

“The Valley Farm is in need of better blood. That’s what must be done,” declared Andres.

“Joosep thinks all of Vargamäe is poisoned,” said Liisi, “and beyond fixing. The only thing to do is leave.”

“Vargamäe must belong to one family. Then it can be fixed, not otherwise,” explained Andres to his daughter.

“Then someone else can have it. Joosep and I don’t want it,” Liisi answered decisively.

“Joosep and I,” repeated Andres contemptuously. “You talk as if you’re already joined as one. Is it true what Pearu told me in the tavern, with everybody listening? Have you been sleeping with him?”

Liisi turned her face away and didn’t answer.

“Is it true?” pressed her father. “Pearu said the two of you were sleeping together. He said that in the tavern.”

“Pearu is lying!” Liisi screamed, as if she’d been slapped in the face.

“Then you haven’t slept with him?” asked the father.

“I’ve not done anything to be ashamed of,” said Liisi, looking straight at him.

“Then everything’s all right,” said Andres, relieved, “and from now on, whatever was between you two is over. If Joosep doesn’t

want the Valley Farm, then I won't have him as a son-in-law. You can tell him that."

"There's no point in telling him that," said Liisi. "He has to choose between me and the Valley Farm. There's no other choice. I won't stay at Vargamäe. I'll go where I have to go, and do what I have to do, but I won't stay here."

"Is that how I raised you?" cried Andres. "Is that why I gave my life and my health to have my firstborn child tell me this?"

"Father, in my heart, I'm not angry. I'm only telling you what I feel, deeply. And Joosep feels the same. Life here at Vargamäe sickens us, and the sooner we can get away from here, the better. Life here is nothing but fights and court battles."

"Is that my fault? Was it I who picked fights and rushed to court? Is it I who twists justice and hides the truth? Tell me. You're a grown-up," said Andres.

"Father, I don't know how to settle things between you and Pearu."

"Well, that says it all!" cried Andres. "You don't answer me. You blame me! You think I'm at fault!"

"I don't blame anyone," said Liisi.

"Then why don't you say who is truly responsible for the trouble, me or Pearu?"

"Father, can I speak freely?" asked Liisi.

"Did I ever teach you to lie?" Andres responded.

"Then can you swear before God, with your hand on your heart, that you've never started a quarrel with Pearu?" asked Liisi.

"Yes. I'll put my hand on the Bible, stand before God, and swear that I never provoked Pearu, or looked for a reason to take him to court, but I also refuse to let him make me a fool or a laughing-stock. I've defended my honor, and the honor of my family and my home. I'll not let him hide the truth and twist justice, since that

would contradict Holy Scripture. If you can't see that, you must be on Pearu's side. It's Joosep who put all this in your head."

"Joosep has never put the blame on you," said Liisi. "He says that neither one of you is to blame; it's all the fault of Vargamäe."

"Vargamäe can't attack anyone," said the father.

"Vargamäe is a place of marshes and bogs, and it makes people attack each other."

"If Joosep is spouting those tricky ideas, he's just whitewashing Pearu's dirty deeds. And you, stupid girl, believe him and blame me. You and Joosep are both on Pearu's side."

"I'm not on Pearu's side," Liisi asserted.

"Then why do you say Vargamäe makes people attack each other? People fight in other places, too. Not everyone in the world lives at Vargamäe. If it's really true that you're not on Pearu's side, as you say, you must break off with Joosep, because he is blood of Pearu's blood and flesh of Pearu's flesh."

"Father, I will never give up Joosep," said Liisi quietly and firmly.

"What!?" Andres cried out. "You dare say, straight to my face, that you won't break off with Joosep?"

"Yes, father. I will never give him up," she said again.

"We'll see about that. Mark my words. It will end, whether you finish it yourself or not," threatened her father. "Tell me, who's the master here, you or me? It's bad enough I must deal with Pearu, but now my own child takes his side."

"I'm on my own side, and Joosep's," said Liisi. "I don't care about Pearu."

"Who's Joosep and who's Pearu?" asked Andres. "To me, they're the same man."

“Not to me,” Liisi answered, growing irritated. “I would never marry Pearu, but I will marry Joosep, even if the whole world is against it.”

“You will not!” thundered Andres.

“I will,” answered Liisi, “and if you try to lock me up, I’ll slip through the keyhole.”

“Then I’ll lock you up and stuff the keyhole,” cried Andres. “Now get out of my sight. I don’t want to see you anymore.”

Liisi, in tears, went away.

Andres called Mari to the back room and told her everything.

When Andres first heard Pearu’s stories in the tavern, he thought that Mari must’ve known about it for some time, and only he, Andres, was left in the dark. He said as much to Mari and demanded to know just when Liisi and Joosep’s relationship began.

“It’s always been,” said Mari.

These words crashed on Andres like a tree falling in a storm.

“What do you mean ‘it’s always been’?” he asked, perplexed.

“It means...since they were children,” explained Mari.

“What’s been since they were children?” Andres demanded.

“Joosep and Liisi have always been friends, of course,” Mari answered. “Back when we were building the new bedrooms, Liisi and Maret took sawdust and log ends down to Joosep and Karla by the border fence, and the boys brought barley bread for the girls in return. And even before that, Liisi and Maret took some bread during the rye sowing and brought it to Joosep and Karla.”

“So it’s not just Liisi and Joosep, but also Maret and Karla?” asked Andres, dismayed.

“No, I never noticed anything between Maret and Karla after that,” said Mari.

“Of course! You never notice anything, until Pearu tells me in the tavern that my daughter sleeps with his son, or even worse,” roared Andres, his lips trembling.

Quick as a bullet, Mari’s eyes filled with tears. “Did he say that?” she asked.

“If you’d been there, you’d have heard him,” said Andres. “Right in front of the whole tavern.”

“Pearu is lying,” said Mari.

“It doesn’t seem as if he’s lying. You said yourself it’s been going on since they were children,” objected Andres. “But why didn’t you tell me, if you knew about it?”

“I didn’t know anything for sure and I figured you knew as much as I did, even if you never paid much attention.”

“Now you’re lying!” shouted Andres. “You knew perfectly well that I was deaf and blind to them, but you helped keep it from me, turning the children against me. You’ve always lied to me and you’re lying now. I didn’t know it before, but when the children died, my eyes opened. In your heart, you’ve never been the mistress of Vargamäe. You’ve always been a cottager. You don’t think of me as your husband. There’s only Juss, who hanged himself from the spruce behind the cowshed. I dug out that spruce, roots and all, and planted a rowan in its place, which has grown tall and gives us red berries every autumn, but still you think only of the spruce where Juss once hung. You never cared about Krõõt’s children. You taught them to lie and plot behind my back. Even the children we had together you never really loved, because you think only of Juss’s children, all in the graveyard. You’ve lived next to me all these years, a complete stranger, and now we’re reaping the fruits of such a life. We’re losing Liisi and Maret won’t be far behind. Oh, why did Krõõt die so early!”

“Andres, you’re being unfair!” exclaimed Mari through her tears.

“Of course, I’m not fair to anyone. Not to you, or Liisi, or even Pearu. Liisi told me I’m not even fair to Pearu.”

“You say I haven’t cared for your children with Krõõt. How can you say that? Can’t you see it isn’t true? Is there anything I’ve done for my own children that I’ve not done for Krõõt’s? Don’t Liisi and Maret have everything they need? I’ve even kept geese, like you asked, to get feathers for their pillows. Don’t they wear nice dresses and clean white linens? They could marry today and take up the role of mistress on any farm. It’s true, I didn’t do it all. They both have hardworking hands. But have I not helped in every way? When I think of my own daughters, tears come to my eyes. Will I be able to do as much for them as they grow up, or will I be too old and feeble? I may not even be here when it’s time for them to take husbands, so a stranger will worry over them, or maybe there won’t be anybody. I’ve tried so hard to care for Krõõt’s children, and I hope God might send someone to look after mine when I’m gone. There are times when my side aches so badly, and my arms and legs feel like they’ve been battered. These last few years, it’s been a little better, but when Liisi and Maret leave, I’ll have to toil again, as before...”

So they talked in the back bedroom, but despite all that was said, Mari didn’t think Andres was so very torn up over Liisi. She thought he might finally give in and let Liisi go to Joosep. What would be wrong in that? So their fathers weren’t on good terms, but the children could still live in peace and be kind to each other. Thinking in such a way, Mari didn’t grasp Andres’s vision for Vargamäe.

Pearu of the Valley Farm was perhaps the only one who understood and appreciated Andres’s ideas. He told his oldest son to put all thoughts of the Valley Farm out of his head if he planned to take Liisi of the Hill Farm as his wife, because he’d rather give his land over to the poor than allow Andres’s daughter to become its

mistress. He didn't have anything in particular against Liisi. He rather liked the girl, as she had the same clear voice as her mother, though only Maret had inherited Krõõt's eyes. For Pearu, it wasn't a question of Liisi, but of Andres's family living at the Valley Farm, which Pearu could not endure.

"You're the master of the Valley Farm," said Joosep to his father. "So how could I become master? I won't sit here and wait for you to die. I'd rather go off somewhere else. I'm sure there's a place to rent, if I can't buy it outright. I talked to Uncle about it and he promised to help, and you, father, I don't think you'll send me off penniless either.

"Well, no. I wouldn't do that," said Pearu. "We'll help you if you prove to be a good worker, but you can forget about the Valley Farm. I'll give it to someone worthier, like Karla. Why must it be like this? Can't you find another girl for a wife?" asked the father. "Why do you go against me like this?"

"Leave it be," said Joosep. "This is the way it must be between us. After all, you took a cottager's daughter against your father's orders, and now I will be Andres's son-in-law."

"Well, it's not me who has to live with your wife," said the father, "but it's not very pleasant to see you marry my enemy's daughter."

The young couple cared no more about their parents' anger than they cared about Vargamäe, which had given birth to that rage. They'd give up one as easily as the other and try their luck elsewhere, even at the end of the earth, if happiness could be found only so far away. From Vargamäe, they took only memories: a hole in the fence where they once played; some scraps of wheat and barley bread; a log pile where they sat at night in good weather or bad; a flower-filled springtime on the village green; a song heard from afar; a birch tree with branches drooping. These were the only

things worth taking, and no one could deny them their memories, since no one else knew of these treasures.

Occasionally, when he was a little drunk, Pearu would say to his son, “You aren’t worthy of your rights as the firstborn son. Andres seduced you with his ‘pottage of lentils.’ That these old eyes should live to see it.”

Joosep was quick to respond. “Father, it says in the Bible, ‘A man shall leave his father and his mother and shall cleave unto his wife.’”

Pearu, in his drunkenness, turned sentimental. “And there’s all the rest about becoming one flesh...”

“You see? The Bible says it’s so,” affirmed Joosep.

From then on, Pearu no longer got angry at his son over his choice of bride, though he still wasn’t pleased. He either kept silent or, if he got drunk and started babbling, he immediately remembered how his son had outwitted him with Holy Scripture and turned soft. Discussing the matter with strangers, Pearu nearly shed a tear.

“Why did these old ears have to hear such a thing? My own child, teaching me with the Holy Scripture.”

Andres’s heart didn’t soften so easily. He was never drunk and could almost always find a Bible verse to contradict any other. Holy Scripture didn’t make much sense to him. He could debate the various verses, but he was left with an empty feeling. Over time, after hours spent poring over the Bible, searching for peace of mind, he’d exhausted its spiritual support and, little by little, began a personal search for justification. How could justice, as he read it in the Bible, help him if he couldn’t put it to use in his own life? Of what value was God’s word if God didn’t keep His promises at Vargamäe? Andres couldn’t even enforce his will onto his own children, though the Bible clearly stated it should be so.

This revelation chipped away at Andres's peace of mind. At night, he snored louder than ever, talked in his sleep, and often woke suddenly, as if he'd only been pretending to slumber.

He kept a watchful eye on Liisi day and night, followed her steps, and tried to fathom her deepest secrets. Over and over, he took her to task, trying to make her change her mind, but the girl was like steel. She cried and went around red-eyed for days, but she never wavered.

"Couldn't you do as he wishes?" Mari asked the girl, with tearful eyes. "Your father wants it so badly. If you just ended it with Joosep, then I wouldn't feel guilty about letting you go down this sinful path, as your father accuses me."

"You never led me down a sinful path," said Liisi. "But no matter what father does, I'll never leave Joosep."

"How can you marry him, when your father is so much against it?" Mari asked.

"Wait. Soon he'll be pushing me into it," said Liisi.

"That's nonsense," said Mari. "Why would he do that?"

"You'll see," the girl assured her.

"Liisi, what are you planning?"

"Don't ask me, mother, or you'll only blame yourself again."

"Beloved child," Mari pleaded, her heart aching, "do as you will, but please don't make a baby with Joosep before you should. Please, in the name of your mother, who begged me to be stepmother to you."

"If that's the only way to get father's permission..." Liisi said openly.

"Oh, Lord. I was afraid that was it," cried Mari. "God in heaven, why are you so stubborn? You're as stubborn as your father! And everyone else, as well, as if Vargamäe turns us all stubborn. What hardships are in store for me here! You must grow as stubborn as

the rest and harden your heart, otherwise you won't survive. You'll get old before your time. When your mother passed, I couldn't understand why she died so early, but now I see she didn't have the stubbornness you need to survive at Vargamäe. She never hardened her heart, and so she died young."

Neither could Andres harden his heart, it seemed, in order to live an easier life. He was no longer aging year by year, but day by day instead, as if he were rotting inside and out. Sometimes, while thoughtfully puffing on his pipe, he speculated about his life.

"Life is something you tear from a wolf's teeth."

Aside from everything else, his last encounter with Pearu in the tavern resulted in yet another lawsuit. Pearu claimed Andres threw a heavy vodka glass at him, leaving a blue bruise the judges could see with their own eyes. Andres was ordered to pay a fine. He could've filed a countersuit against Pearu, since he'd called Liisi a harlot in front of everyone, but Andres didn't have the stomach to do such an ugly and disagreeable thing. And he didn't know what tricks Pearu had up his sleeve to prevail before the court, or how messy it might turn out. So he let the matter drop.

With a heavy heart, Andres returned home from the courthouse and fell into bed early in the evening. He woke at midnight, angry and gravely insulted over the fine he was ordered to pay. So he took the Bible from the closet and began talking to God through the words of Job. But that night, he felt so unbearably wretched and miserable before God that, along with Job, he began to cry. He cried like he hadn't in many years.

From her bed, Mari, who'd been sleeping as lightly as a bird with all the strain of recent events, heard her husband speaking to his God. Her heart, too, went weak and she began to cry under the blankets. Then, unable to control herself, she got up from the bed,

wearing just a coarse linen shirt and a short striped skirt. She dared not approach her husband, but hunched against the bedpost to weep along with him as he sat at the table with the Bible.

Mari thought Andres's heart might grow gentler and that he might say a few words to her, as he'd done when they first married. In truth, she'd have settled for less—if only he looked at her kindly as she cried, that would've been enough. Then, she would've dared to tell him Liisi's plan.

But when Andres noticed her there, he pulled himself together, dried his eyes, and closed the Bible. "What on earth is bothering you now?" he said. "Can't I be alone, even at midnight?"

Her hopes were dashed. Mari's tears were in vain. She gave no answer, but slung her body over the bedpost and continued to cry. She stopped thinking of Liisi's big secret. Even when Andres extinguished the light and returned to bed, she didn't move, regaining her senses only when Andres spoke to her.

"Well, why are you standing there? Go to bed."

Finally, Mari crept into bed next to her husband, but her eyes remained open all night.



Liisi and Joosep's relationship cast a shadow over Vargamäe, and the last days of summer were filled with tension and pain. In everyone's heart—not just father's and mother's, but also the eldest children's—grew the strange notion that happiness had gone. The younger children still shouted, laughed, and sang songs with joy. But something unfathomable had overtaken the older people, and joy was now a stranger to them.

Liisi and Maret no longer played or danced in the village, since all their old haunts were filled with echoes of times past, as if someone stood under the old pines on Vargamäe's highest hill and blew hard and long on a loud horn. The gossip of Vargamäe spread across the marshes, and boys in the area passed a lewd and ugly song back and forth, from hand to hand and mouth to ear. Girls, too, enjoyed reading the song (but only in secret), experiencing intense and sincere pleasure from the yarn about the Vargamäe girls. Up until then, all the boys pursued those girls, enchanted by their ringing, laughing voices and witty words. Let them try to charm a boy now! All the world could see what kind of creatures lived at Vargamäe. So one girl's sorrows watered another's garden of pleasure.

Young Andres didn't care for any of this, and he'd gotten so strong that he could plant a swift fist on anyone who told foolish stories or sang dirty songs. So the forests, meadows, and riverbanks of Vargamäe still echoed with his shouts and happy hoots. If it hadn't been for him, silence would've ruled the farm. Very rarely, Liisi and Maret sang in remembrance of summers past, so quietly and sadly that almost no one could hear them. As happiness left their hearts, the music vanished, too, along with the golden tones of their voices, and no one knew whether they were gone forever. At one time, the golden voice of Krõõt, their mother, rang through the fields and Pearu, who'd been tearing down the border fence to let Andres's hogs into his rye field, had stopped to listen. Where was Krõõt's golden voice now?

As the end of haymaking approached, Vargamäe became very quiet, as if a heavy thunderstorm loomed, or a big secret was concealed. Liisi and Maret talked only to each other, turning inward in the presence of others.

Then, during the rye harvest, it grew loud again. All of Vargamäe was suddenly filled with cries and clamor. Even the cottagers were involved. It all started when old Andres put a quiet question to Mari.

“Have you noticed what’s happening with our Liisi?”

“Yes. I’ve wondered, but...” said Mari.

“But what?” asked Andres.

“I’ve been afraid to ask her,” said Mari.

“What’s there to ask?” Andres shot back. “She’s already so big she can barely bend over.”

Mari trembled silently.

“Call her inside,” said Andres.

“Andres, please keep calm,” Mari begged. “Remember her condition. God knows what might happen.”

“What more could happen?” Andres answered. “It’s all going to hell, and to hell it can go!”

“Andres, my darling,” said Mari, her eyes filled with tears, “I’m afraid to call her home when you say such things.”

“Then I’ll call her myself,” shouted Andres.

“Remember, husband, we were in the same fix ourselves when you and I went to the pastor,” said Mari, guarding the door handle.

“What fix?” asked Andres.

“I’d been carrying Indrek for three months,” said Mari.

“Were we living under our parents’ roof?” asked Andres. “We were grown and able to look after ourselves. The pastor had nothing to do with it.”

“Then let Liisi go and live her own life. Have pity for her, as the pastor had pity for us,” pleaded Mari, still guarding the door and hoping to spare her daughter.

“Did she have pity on me?” asked Andres.

“Let her pity her own children,” said Mari.

“Children! She won’t have children! She’ll have a brood of vipers! Now call her inside! Why do you stand there?”

“Lord God in heaven, have mercy on us!” beseeched Mari, and she went to fetch Liisi, dragging her steps. She didn’t call out to the girl. Instead, she walked all the way to the rye field to have more time with Liisi on the way back.

Everyone in the field knew something was awry. They couldn’t understand why father had gone inside and stayed there so long when the weather was perfect and the rye so ripe that it was dropping grains in the dirt. Before leaving, Liisi threw a meaningful glance at Maret and then followed after her mother.

“If only you weren’t so stubborn,” said Mari to Liisi. “Think of your child...”

“Every day, every hour I think about my child,” said Liisi. “At night, I can’t close my eyes. I just lie awake, thinking of my child.”

“Talk nicely to your father. Plead with him. Admit you’re at fault. It might help,” her stepmother advised. “He’s still your father and you have the right to plead with him. He’s not a stranger.”

“I’ll not plead with him when he lays blame at the feet of everyone else, as if only he is right. He can strike me dead, but I won’t beg him,” said Liisi. “If he’d spoken even one kind word to me, and I still felt like his child, then I might’ve done everything he asked. I’ve often thought things might’ve been different if he’d shown me some kindness. Maybe I would’ve left Joosep. But he only screamed and shouted and ordered me around. So I got angry, too.”

“But you’re younger, so you must yield,” said Mari.

Liisi couldn’t change the fact that she was younger than her father, but she wouldn’t surrender because of it.

“You and your father are like two drops of water,” Mari said a little later. “Only your voice recalls Krõõt.”

“Everyone says I have her voice,” said Liisi.

The voice Liisi used to speak to her father, however, was quite different from Krõõt’s. There was no trace of her mother. So it seemed Liisi had two voices, that of her blessed mother and that of her father, and she could summon either as she needed.

Andres was waiting impatiently and almost went out to see what was taking them so long. As soon as the two women walked through the door, he demanded an answer.

“Liisi, speak for yourself. What’s all this about?”

“You can see for yourself,” Liisi answered without shame.

“Who did this?” asked her father.

“Joosep, of course. Who else?” said Liisi. “I haven’t been all around the village looking for it.”

“Liisi!” begged Mari.

Fists clenched, Andres stormed toward the girl, spewing the most vicious obscenities. He might’ve beaten his own child black and blue—his fatherly feelings were so deeply offended and so impotent was he in the face of his daughter—but Mari jumped between them and threw up her hands.

“Beat me!” she cried desperately. “Beat me to death, but don’t kill your own child and another man’s!”

Her voice, her eyes, her face, and her entire stance expressed such deep despair that Andres froze, his fist suspended in the air. Liisi was numb and dizzy, seized with shock, and she cared not whether she’d be stroked lovingly or beaten with a stick. She stood there like a post until Mari’s desperate attempt to intercede. Then she relaxed and collapsed on the edge of the bed, her hands covering her eyes. Sobs heaved her body with great spasms, like those she’d suffered when standing in front of her father.

“Leave my house!” shouted Andres. “Must I show you the door? I want no person without shame before God or man in my sight!”

“Andres!” Mari pleaded, as Liisi wept on the bed, barely grasping his words.

“When I come back for lunch, I want you out of this house!” said Andres threateningly, and he barged out the door.

Mari sat on the bed next to Liisi and cried quietly with the girl. They stayed there for some time. When Liisi’s tears began to dry, Mari spoke to her helplessly, “What should we do?”

“What can I do?” Liisi answered, resigned. “I must leave. I can’t stay here.”

“But where, dear child?”

“I discussed it with Maret because we feared it might end this way,” said Liisi. “But we couldn’t think of anything. I can’t go to the Valley Farm.”

“God forbid! Not the Valley Farm,” said Mari. “Who knows what Pearu might do—and imagine what his wife will think.”

“What if we went to Aaseme or Hundipalu?” suggested Liisi.

“You’ll be better off at the cottage,” said Mari. “I don’t think father would throw you out, and later he might forgive you and let you come home. That way, it won’t spread all over the neighborhood.”

Wondering why she and Maret hadn’t thought of this, Liisi agreed it was the best plan. She’d go to the cottage and later they’d see how father reacted.

When Andres came home for lunch, Liisi was gone. He didn’t say a word, acting as if Maret was his and Krõõt’s only daughter. He waited a few days before asking Mari where Liisi had gone.

“Where could she go?” said Mari apologetically. “Why do you ask?”

“The Valley Farm?” asked Andres angrily.

“Why would she go there?” answered Mari. “She went to the cottage. Where else? I suggested it. I thought you might leave her be.”

Andres said nothing and that’s how they left it.



Chapter 36

When she went down to live with the cottagers, Liisi's days took a turn for the better. Since she could no longer work in the fields, she busied her hands making clothes and toys for the baby, which she could then lend to her sisters when their children came. She worked from morning to night. Sometimes she tried to sing, but it didn't cheer her up. Instead, the songs brought tears to her eyes.

Each day the cottager's wife helped at the Hill Farm if they needed her, and when they didn't, she went to the Valley Farm. Liisi milked the cow and fed the piglet herself. As a result, the cottager's wife didn't have to come home in the afternoon, and she had more time in the evening. But since Liisi was doing the job of a cottager, it seemed as if she was becoming a cottager.

Madis's limbs had grown weary from work. For some thirty years he'd been digging ditches for the manor, for the Vargamäe farms, and for other masters, sloshing around in the cold water from early spring through late autumn, but now the years of labor exacted their toll. He still had some strength in his arms and hands, but his legs were stiff, liked they were plagued by rheumatism. To fill his days he braided laces for moccasins, wove baskets for berries and potatoes, and crafted cow yokes, nets for hay bundling, brooms,

spoons, ladles, and other odds and ends. They had to bring him the materials because he could no longer gather them himself.

He really didn't need the money. Through hard work and thrift he'd amassed a couple of hundred rubles, which he'd given to Andres for safekeeping. Madis told Andres several times that he didn't even want the money back, so long as he could live in the cottage until the end of his days, and his widow would be looked after when he was gone. Madis didn't want to leave Vargamäe as a beggar. He wanted decent funerals for himself and his wife, with two bells tolling, since they'd lived and died as honest, respectable people. If Andres would see to all this, he could keep the two hundred rubles without misgivings.

Madis also knew he could talk with Andres man to man, because he never saw Andres go back on his word. Madis respected him for that. He also treated Liisi, Andres's oldest daughter, with respect. When she came to help him, he spoke to her in a croaking voice.

"These rusty old pegs just don't bend anymore. And they're damned painful. It was right here at Vargamäe they got this way. At Vargamäe. No place else. It's done the same to the legs of other men, not just mine. It's done so before and it'll go on doing so... It'll cripple everyone's legs and it still won't be satisfied. Look at that alder grove, the lower end...Haven't I dug enough ditches there? And is the ground any firmer or dryer now? Right! Go see for yourself if it's firm or dry. When did your father last pull out a cow? Spring? And how long has he been trying to dig the ditches and drain the marshes? Twenty years, anyway. You know, I was forty when we lifted stones to see which of us was stronger. We did it because of Pearu. Your father wanted to see who was stronger—him or Pearu—and he used me as a gauge. I swear, your father must've been raised on God's own food, not leftover crumbs and

bread full of chaff. I couldn't come close to matching him when we lifted those stones. And I was a sturdy fellow. I wasn't afraid of anyone and, after a drink or two, I was always ready for a fight. But I couldn't beat your father. Of course, there's not much man left in me anymore. I'm just something for women to look after now. But what's left of Andres? What's left of any man who grows old here? Last year I was looking at his hands. His fingers are stiff and crooked, pointing every which way. His legs and hips are so stiff, he walks like a wooden horse. He stoops at the waist like a hunchback. The veins in his neck bulge out like ropes. You can't see anything of the old Andres anymore. And Krõõt, your blessed mother, the sweetest woman—where is she? If you only knew, child, what a treasure your blessed mother was...And Juss? And his children? And our son, my wife's and mine, where's he? You know Liisi, your father treats you as he does because he's no longer the man he used to be. The old Andres wouldn't have done this! He didn't fear any damned soul, and would've let his child marry the devil himself. He would've said, 'Who can hurt me or my children?' That's really so! Your father just isn't the man he used to be. That's why he acts as he does. He didn't used to read the Bible much, but he does now. My father liked to read the Bible, too, but we children could see that it made him angry and nasty. Because of the Bible, we never felt happy at home. Since then I've always kept away from it. I've never read it, and I think if I had children, I wouldn't be as tough or nasty as my father. That's how I feel about the Bible. I've been sitting here, doing some thinking. How else can I fill these long days? I've been watching you and wondering if it's the Bible that's done this to you and your father. Years ago, he was never so tricky and sly. Pearu was much worse, with his own family and with his neighbors, but now your father is even

trickier. I can't figure out what could've brought this change. So I think it must be the Bible. You're grown now. What do you think?"

"What can I think except that it's awful?" said Liisi, her eyes wet with tears.

"I've been turning this over and over in my head," said Madis, "and there's no explanation except for the Bible. You know, child, the commandment says you shall not take God's name in vain. Well, maybe you shouldn't read God's words too often, either. That's what I've been thinking. God is more powerful than man, so maybe his words are more powerful, too. When a man, even one as tough as your father, reads the eternal words of God too often, his heart is hardened and his good nature destroyed. It's not that God's words are bad, but they turn bad if a man uses them all the time. If God himself read or spoke His own words, they would be good, but in the mouth of a man, or falling on his ears, they're too powerful. Like pure spirits to strong vodka. Once you're used to pure spirits, you won't care for vodka. In the same way, people get used to God's words and they won't accept the words of men anymore. Now tell me, how do you soften a man's heart when words no longer work? I mean the words of men, since you won't get far in this world using only God's mighty words? It was the same with my father. He never listened to us. The powerful words of the Bible numbed him to our voices. What could we say to him when he recited scripture from memory, as if reading from a book? Simply nothing. We couldn't live right—only he could. How can one live in this world and never be right?"

"It's the same for us. We're never right either," added Liisi. "Neither is mother. Only father is."

"Of course," said Madis. "It was the same with our father. He always said he couldn't allow us any rights because that would be

contrary to Holy Scripture—and what kind of man would oppose Scripture and the commandments? We feared him and loved him, and he considered our fear to be the measure of our love. But by that same logic, because he didn't fear us, he didn't love us. He only thrashed us that we might fear him more, as the commandment requires—only then did he feel love for us. As it's written, the harsher the switch, the more loved the child. Fear was the measure of our love, and the harshness of our father's switch was the measure of his. That was our life at the Vihukse Farm of Soovälja, where I'm from. We followed Holy Scripture. Now another family lives there. None of us stayed. We went wherever the wind took us. Father gave us so much love with his switch that we learned to fear not just him, but also Vihukse and all of Soovälja around it, and we thought only of leaving there as soon as possible.”

“We older children all feel the same way. We just want to leave Vargamäe, barefoot and naked if we have to,” said Liisi. “But, you know, we're not afraid of our father. We feel sorry for him and for Vargamäe, because nobody cares for them and nobody loves them. A little child might love them, but as soon as he gets into long pants he'll realize that any place else is better, and he's as good as gone. Young Andres is supposed to inherit the farm, but I don't think he'll stay at Vargamäe. Just watch. When he gets a little older, he'll leave, just like Joosep of the Valley Farm.”

“That's just how it was for us at Soovälja Vihukse Farm, and all because of the Scripture, for our father was a pious man who wanted us to be pious, too. I've been sitting here alone, wondering about your father and his children: is he the same as my father, or is something different? But I see nothing different—your father acts according to Holy Scripture, the commandments, and the teachings of our Lord God Jehovah. But look, child, we're talking as if

we're both old folks, our legs and lungs crippled by the marshes of Vargamäe, but really it's just me who's old, who can't walk or breathe properly, and you're still young. You've got your whole life ahead of you, while mine is nearly over. It's really not life anymore when you depend on women to look after you. So, child, I want you to pay attention to what I, an old man, tell you. And I say nothing out of spitefulness. You don't have to fear me or love me—I'm just an old cottager, after all, with nothing left in me to love. When I'm finally returned to the earth, that piece of earth should be loved, though it's just a patch of dirt beside the cottage...Listen to what I say, my dear, and remember, because one day you'll have to live with it—maybe sooner than you think, as it was for me and my brothers and sisters. What I want to tell you is this: in spite of everything, my father was right, and in spite of all I've said, Andres, your father, is very likely right, too."

Liisi looked up at Madis with a surprised, incredulous expression.

"You don't believe me now, but that doesn't matter. Listen to what I say and remember it," Madis continued. "You've probably heard the saying, 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.' That, child, is how my father confronted his Vihukse Farm at Soovälja, and that's how your father confronts his land at Vargamäe, a tooth for a tooth. The one with the longer, tougher tooth will win. At Soovälja, the Vihukse Farm won. It crippled my father and mother, and it drove us away. At Vargamäe, I don't know. We blamed my father, but really Vihukse itself was at fault. The land turned our father into the man he became. The land followed Scripture and forced our father—forces us all—to live accordingly, whether we read Scripture or not. I've never read it, but when I think about my life, I see that I've lived as my father did...Well, now, what was I going to say?...Ah, yes... As in Scripture, Vihukse went on growing briars and thistles. If my

father hadn't confronted the land, chest to chest, nothing would've grown there but scrub birch and willow, thistles, and stones. Nothing more! And what about Vargamäe? Isn't this land as godly as Vihukse at Soovälja? Does anything grow here but briars and thistles? Hasn't your father fought tooth and nail all these years? Yet what has he gained? His hands are stiff and crooked, his legs are as rigid as a wooden horse's, he's bent at the waist like a hunchback, and his children think only of leaving. But Andres doesn't want to surrender to Vargamäe. If he can't keep up the fight, then he'll drive everyone away, like he drove me away when my strength started fading. And here I sit. Vargamäe beat me, like Vihukse beat my father, and I think Vargamäe will beat Andres just the same. It raises children that learn from Holy Scripture to carry on the fight, for the word of man is weak here, like watered wine when you're used to strong spirits. Vargamäe is a godly place, according to Holy Scripture, and whoever wants to do battle with the land must also live a godly life according to Scripture. He must use the powerful words of God and live by them, and drive others to use them too, and join him in the struggle with godly Vargamäe. That's why we at Vihukse could never be righteous, and why you at Vargamäe can't either. We thought our father possessed all righteousness, as you think your father does. But it's not true in either case. Child, the truth is that our father wasn't righteous, nor is yours. They're just the same as us. Do you know where all righteousness lies? With the land—Vihukse and Vargamäe, these places our fathers fought tooth and nail. And we both struggle against them, too. Vihukse and Vargamäe don't know any Scripture, but still they're righteous, because they're like Scripture, like God's pure word, like God Himself. What the land wants, what it says, what it does will persevere in righteousness, no matter how you fight against it. The

words of mortals have no power over mortals, and God's word has no power over God. What good is God's word against Vargamäe or Vihukse? Vargamäe speaks through its actions. In a couple of years it will sprout a thousand willow bushes to block your scythe—that's its Lord's Prayer. It raises stones in front of your plow like a pack of wolves—those are its Ten Commandments. In a few years it will fill the ditches you only just dug, and that's its lesson and verse. In a couple of dozen years it will cripple your arms and legs and send you off to the cemetery, and that's its Bible story. This is the way Vargamäe speaks, and it's the way Vihukse spoke. It's no different at Hundipalu, Ämmasoo, Rava, Kukessaare, Aaseme, Võlla, Kassiaru, or any other place where people learn their prayers. It's the same everywhere, because it's the way of the land to be righteous. And if your father or mine wanted a piece of that righteousness, they had to be like those willow bushes, those gray stones in the field, or the ditch in the soft ground that fills up again and again—unafraid of the scythe, the plow, or the ditch digger's work. They had to confront everything, eye to eye and chest to chest, or Vihukse and Vargamäe would've swallowed them up. And they had to confront their children as well, chest to chest, so they'd learn to survive. This is the righteousness of Vargamäe, and that's how we share in it."

"So, old man, was father right in what he did to me?" asked Liisi, without wholly understanding lame-legged, croaky-voiced Madis. People said he'd lost some sense when he lost the use of his legs, as if that's where his brains were kept.

"Well, no," Madis replied. "That's not what I mean. When a man talks to his children, he shouldn't use the tough language he'd use with God, or Vargamäe, or Vihukse. Men are weak and children are weaker still, so God's severe commands are too severe for them. A child isn't like Vargamäe or Vihukse, which can answer with a

thousand willow bushes or a pack of gray stones. A child doesn't cripple your legs the way Vargamäe did mine. So why should a child be attacked with God's laws? It's different when Andres attacks Pearu. He should be treated according to God's toughest commandments, because he's a tough man himself, a servant of God. He can be confronted eye to eye and chest to chest, but you can't do that with your own children—a child's teeth are not strong enough. That's what I think."

"But father says we are willful, and he wants to break our wills," said Liisi.

"Why should a father break his child's will when it will be broken eventually? Andres's will was far from broken when he came to Vargamäe. It's the land that'll break him. And what Vargamäe misses, Pearu will finish, because he's just as tough as Vargamäe. He never reads Holy Scripture because he's like Scripture himself. Though he's read none, its teachings live inside him. After all, you need not write, 'This bull is angry,' on an angry bull's head, since anyone who knows the ways of bulls can see it. That's why Pearu's children probably have it easier than we did at Vihukse. Pearu only gets angry with his children when he's drunk. That doesn't matter much, for nobody is drunk all the time. But what can be done with a man who doesn't drink, but is always full of the wrath of God? That's how it was at Vihukse. I tell you, it was hell, just like in the Bible. There were eleven children; three died and eight grew up. Our father expected us all to live according to Scripture. Now what kind of life is that, with eight children forced to follow the Bible? When I think back on it, I'm sure our lives would've been easier without the Bible—our father's life, too, to say nothing of our mother. That damned holy book, so cruel and unforgiving. Once, during a holiday, Easter or Whitsun—I don't remember which, since it was over

fifty years ago, but the weather was warm...Well, during the holiday, we sat down to eat and our father leaned across the table and told me to say grace, since I was the oldest child. But I wouldn't say it. I didn't know why I had to say it that day when he'd always done it himself. Saying grace was like some sort of punishment. I hadn't done anything bad and I didn't want to be punished. When I refused, he ordered my brother, the second son, to say it. He refused, too. The two girls wouldn't do it either, nor would his next son. So our father said, 'You're like a litter of pigs, shoving your feet into the trough without first thanking the Lord. Well, anybody who doesn't say grace at my table doesn't eat. So Madis, Mikk, Leena, Ann, and Priidu will not eat until they've said grace. Kusti, Mann, and Tõnu are still little, so I'll pray for them.' That's what he said and we got up from the table with empty stomachs. Father said grace, and then he, mother, and the smaller children began the meal. But mother couldn't eat. She started to cry and got up from the table. When they saw mother's tears, the little children started crying, too, and ran to the corner. So father ate the sausages, white bread, and pork by himself, while the rest of us went hungry. Later, father accused mother of siding with the stubborn children. Why else would she run from the table? So on that first holy day, his pious heart wasn't content until he beat her. Then he locked the food in the barn, and told mother to put the rest in the pantry, which he sealed shut with two long nails. We ate nothing the entire holiday but some dried peas that weren't locked up, and we went to the village, hoping to find something more. After the holiday, we had to be fed or we wouldn't have been able to work. But the weather was warm and the fat sausages had gone bad. They went to the pigs, though none of them said grace either. Mother cried her eyes out over the sausages, but father told her not to set her heart on earthly goods. That's the

kind of thing that happened at the Soovälja Vihukse Farm when our father turned religious. When I see Pearu after he's been drinking, I always think of my father, who seemed always to be drunk on the Bible and did things even more mad than Pearu when he's drunk on vodka or beer. They'd both turn into wild bulls, bellowing and goring. Sometimes your father gets drunk on the Bible, too, which may destroy reason, just like too much vodka. I've heard that anyone who reads the Bible all the way through three times goes mad. That's why pastors are careful not to read it from beginning to end. They skip some parts, to keep their brains intact. But a farmer is stupid and reads it word for word, like my father did, and it disturbs his mind. Man's weak blood can't endure God's powerful words for very long. It starts to ferment and bubble like newly brewed beer, and then, just like spirits, the power of God takes over everything."

So Madis lectured Liisi when she came to care for him while his wife was out working. But his lecture troubled him in two ways—he wanted to talk and he also wanted to stop talking. Both seemed difficult. In order to talk he needed a listener, and he'd put together so many thoughts while sitting alone that he couldn't stop talking once he began. Happily he solved the first problem by talking to himself, and the second problem was solved by a growing apprehension of words, which led him to elicit assurances from his audience that the discussion was just between them, and none of it would be repeated to anyone else.

He asked Liisi, almost pleadingly, "Don't speak a word of this to your father. Don't breathe it to a soul. If these thoughts should reach Andres's ears, he'll drive me and my old lady from the cottage. He cares nothing for us. He acts according to Holy Scripture and he won't bend. I can only talk like this when my old lady's away,

since she'd spread it all over the place. That old tongue of hers never stops wagging."

Of course, the old man was right about his wife, who couldn't keep anything to herself, even when she was young—so how could she keep quiet now? Especially about Liisi and Joosep. First the cottager's wife wondered whether Joosep would come to the cottage and how often. But when Joosep came the very first night, and every night after that, she felt let down. It would've been very different if he hadn't come, and Liisi had begged her to go to the Valley Farm after him. That would've given her some gossip to spread. But no! There was nothing to gab about when it all happened so simply. Even Juss's story had been more interesting, the old lady thought, because there was some meat in it.

It was a Tuesday when Liisi came to live at the cottage, and by Friday she and Joosep told the pastor about their engagement, seeing no reason to put it off.

On Thursday night, the boys from the Valley Farm played a wonderful trick on Liisi and Madis the cottager. Madis's wife was away in Aaseme, helping with the rye harvest, and she stayed there overnight since Liisi took up her role as mistress of the cottage. But Maret was there for the merriment, for she was in the habit of visiting Liisi at the cottage a couple of times each day, to check on her sister and chat a little.

Liisi and Maret were sitting together in the back room and Madis was moaning in the front room when someone came through the front door. Instead of coming right into the cottage, he stayed in the front hallway, and suddenly the sound of bells rang out, the same sleigh bells that sounded on Christmas Eve when Liisi rode home from church. The bells rang with such joy that Madis called out to Liisi with the same joy in his voice.

“Liisi, Liisi! The engagement party is here! They’re here with bells on!”

Startled by the sound, the girls came to the front room, curious to see what was happening. But it was all a comedy put on by the Valley Farm boys, for Joosep wanted to cheer Liisi, bring her heart a little joy, and drive away the sadness that often reddened her eyes like those of her blessed mother. The evening before, when Joosep was at the cottage and the others were in bed, Karla slipped out to the horse paddock as Joosep had requested. He’d harnessed the young mare, threw a blanket over her, and headed to the tavern to get liquor for the engagement party. So they came to the cottage with two bottles, one for the men and one for the women, both of them sweet and good. To round out the ceremony, Karla, with his silver tongue, played the role of best man to his brother and acted as the engagement party’s horse, for he put the sleigh bells in his pockets and jumped from foot to foot in the dark hallway like a trotting horse. Then he hid the bells, took a sip of the strong liquor, and eagerly entered the front room, followed by the groom.

Old Madis quickly figured out the game and, after a few long draughts of strong spirits, sat on the edge of his bed singing like a lark.

Liisi cried, and Maret, too, wiped her eyes. They never imagined that Joosep would really come propose to Liisi in any formal fashion.

The best man Karla joked with Madis, and then, when their tongues had been loosened by liquor, he spoke matter of factly.

“Well, old man, we haven’t come here just for the hell of it. We’ve got some business to settle.”

“Now what kind of business could bring the villagers here so late at night?” asked Madis with a smile.

“Well, how can I put this?” said Karla. “It seems our young man has misplaced something, let it slip through his fingers. I don’t know what it might be...”

“Perhaps a baby calf?” asked Madis. “Or a lamb? A piglet? Or perhaps a chick?”

“More like a little chick. It’s so dark outside, I couldn’t quite make out its tracks. I saw some footprints by the ditch bank at Vihukse, and they seemed to be headed this way. So we came to the first house to ask if anyone has seen it or heard it.”

“Well, yes. We’ve seen it and heard it, all right,” said the cottager, “but I’m not sure you’ll recognize it as your own. This one is fresh in front and better behind. She doesn’t eat much and she’s ready for work. That about sums her up.”

Karla couldn’t think of a good response, so they both took another drink.

Madis turned to Joosep. “Village boy, there’s talk that you’ve lost a chick. Have you looked over ours, to see if she might be among them? We’ve got a chick that showed up one day, and now she chirps sadly in this old man’s house. I didn’t know what to do with her, but I figured someone might come looking. She seems like such a nice little chick, with a voice like a honeybee and a walk like a bride, not greedy or grasping. If she’s yours, and you take her away from here, the walls will wail and the woodpile will weep. If you take her to a faraway farm, keep her warm with your breath and wrap her up in your coat. Gaze at her gently and hold her in your hands, so she’s never sad that you took her as your wife. Well, village boy, what do you say? Maybe she’s not yours.”

“Oh, she’s mine. That’s certain,” said Joosep, now laughing.

“Well then,” said Madis, “everything seems in order. But you mustn’t take this little chick home at night. She might get lost in the dark, and who knows if you’d find her again.”

“That’s right. If our kind host permits, we’ll leave her here for the time being,” Karla said matter of factly.

And with that, the mock ceremony concluded. The marriage proposal was accepted and they all drank to their heart’s content. But Liisi still was in tears, so amazed was she by the whole display. It was far better than no ceremony at all, as Maret told her over and over.

While Joosep chatted with the girls, Karla sat down with Madis and coaxed him to sing, for the old man was known to make up good songs with a few drinks in him. But today he seemed tongue-tied. He told Karla his songs were for men and shouldn’t be heard by boys and girls. But they finally persuaded him and he began to quietly sing in a croaky voice, with Karla all ears beside him, straining to catch everything, since Madis mumbled the words that were “too rich.” The songs were somehow unusual. They started out nicely and decently, with “Dear ol’ mother...” or “Good ol’ father...” or “Once on a blessed evening...” or “When I was herding cattle...” but soon they took a sharp turn and the singer started swallowing words. The cottager’s songs were like people. As children they’re innocent, but as they grow they turn crude and sinful. Girls, when they’re young, are all so good, and no one but God knows where women get their faults.

For a few hours, the boys romped around the cottage, but then they felt it was time to go. In the hallway Karla took the bells out again and jumped up and down so everyone would hear them ring as the party took its leave. He left the door open so the girls could hear the bells and see the wedding stallion galloping off, and

through it all the old cottager sat on his bed laughing. Feeling the liquor, the best man went wild and dashed out the door and around the yard, his bells sounding gaily. The groom and the bride, the cottager, and the bride's sister could only laugh at the whole spectacle.

"If our father were to hear this," said the bride finally.

"I don't think he will," said the groom softly. "Everyone's asleep at our house, and at yours, too."

But fate would have it that Andres should share in his oldest daughter's marriage proposal. He'd gone to bed at the usual time, but the warmth of the bedroom and nature's call woke him at midnight. He threw on his sheepskin and headed outside to admire God's world, just as the wild wedding stallion was galloping around the cottage. Andres heard the clear sound of bells on a horse's shafts. He thought it came from the cottage, or perhaps from Aaseme, and then again maybe the cottage...But there was no wagon path at the cottage. The bells must be ringing at Aaseme, figured Andres as he went back inside. In that way he enjoyed his daughter's engagement ceremony without realizing that any such participation on his part had taken place.

Andres might've listened longer to the bells, but the skittish stallion returned to the cottage and dashed through the rooms. Finally the groom jumped up, grabbed the reins, and took the bells. So there was nothing more for Andres to hear as he left the chilly night and went back to his warm bedroom. The next morning he couldn't resist telling the rest of the family about the bells in the night, so everyone got to enjoy a little bit of Liisi's engagement ceremony. His story wasn't really needed, though, since Maret brought home a full account. If anyone doubted her story, as they had old Andres's, Maret took them secretly to the barn and gave them a sip of the sweet, red liquor. So they all believed that Liisi's groom had

come to propose with a horse and the bells that Andres heard. The biggest enthusiast was surely Mari, whose eyes filled with tears as she listened to Maret's account. When she sipped from the bottle, her eyes moistened again, as if the red liquor was too strong.

On Friday, Joosep hitched the stallion to his wagon and drove past the Hill Farm. Andres thought he might say something but he let Joosep pass without a word. Maret and Mari knew where he was going but said nothing. Joosep drove to the meadow at Aaseme, where he'd agreed to meet Liisi at the hay barn, as she didn't want to be seen by her family. She walked to the edge of Vargamäe and continued along the bank of the ditch to the edge of Aaseme, where she climbed into Joosep's wagon and sat beside him as a proper bride. She returned to the cottage the same way, so Andres never knew that Liisi and Joosep had been to see the pastor.

They had some difficult moments, when the pastor asked whether their parents approved of their engagement. Liisi wiped her eyes and looked helplessly at Joosep, who explained the situation briefly.

"That's what I thought," said the pastor. "I've heard the two families on Vargamäe have long been enemies. But tell me children, and especially you, young lady, are you acting today out of sheer stubbornness, because your father is against this engagement, or do you love this man so profoundly that you can't give him up?"

"Reverend Pastor, God himself knows—even if Joosep killed me like he was putting down a puppy, I wouldn't have a word of complaint," Liisi replied tearfully.

"Gently, dear child," said the old pastor. "Why would Joosep ever do such a thing? Have you done something unforgivable? Is there some great sin weighing on your heart?"

"The Reverend Pastor can see my sin for himself, but it's also Joosep's sin. It belongs to us both," Liisi sobbed.

“Why didn’t you come earlier?” asked the pastor.

“My father wouldn’t allow it,” said Liisi.

“Yes, Reverend, he refused us,” Joosep added.

“Tell me, young man, do you love her any less for this?” asked the pastor.

“No, not at all,” said Joosep. “We faced our trouble together, or we couldn’t have lasted.”

“It’s good you are of one mind. The pastor and God will surely grant you forgiveness. Now go in peace, and the grace of God, which is beyond all understanding, be with you.”

With these comforting words, the pastor let them go.

When they got away from the dusty town, riding behind their prancing stallion, among the fields of rye that already stood in shocks, where the tips of the barley turned toward the soil and the silvery green oats already turned gold, and a lone grasshopper sang as they traveled toward the evening sun, Joosep asked Liisi a question he could hold back no longer.

“How could you tell the pastor I might kill you like a puppy?”

Something in Joosep’s voice touched Liisi’s heart and her eyes blurred with tears so she couldn’t distinguish the grain in the fields from the young, playful horse between the wagon shafts. Only the sun continued to shine, as if a young woman’s tears meant nothing to it.

“I didn’t mean anything bad,” said Liisi after a moment. “I remembered a time my father came at me, and mother jumped between us, as if she’d die to protect me. I thought of this and told the pastor I’d do for you what my stepmother did for me that day. I was thinking of the rotten life our parents live at Vargamäe. I remember so clearly your mother hiding from your father at our house, and I wanted to tell the pastor I will never live like that. You can beat me

if you want, but I'll still stay at home, by your side, because that's my place, my only place."

Joosep's heart was deeply touched and soon he, too, could no longer see the ripening fields. With teary eyes, he looked straight at Liisi.

"I will never raise my hand against you, and you will never have to run from home to find protection for yourself or our children."

For a time they sat quietly, side by side in the wagon, as if deep in their own thoughts. Who knows how long they might've sat like that, if the stallion hadn't started neighing when it spotted another horse. It was so pleased at the sight that it wanted to charge straight through the grain to get beside the other horse.

The stallion's happiness also cheered Joosep and Liisi, and they suddenly heard the grasshoppers' chirping chorus and saw the bowing barley and the ripening oats.

"It's getting close to harvest time," said Liisi, as if continuing a previous conversation.

"That's right, harvest time," Joosep agreed. "This time next year we'll be harvesting our own fields."

"If only that could be!" sighed Liisi.

"Don't fret. It will be so," assured Joosep. "Whatever father might do, my uncle can help us make a start."

"How far is it from Vargamäe to Sooniste?" asked Liisi.

"Fifteen miles," said Joosep.

"I'd like to go even further," said Liisi with longing. "So far that I'd never hear of Vargamäe again."

That was how their conversation ended. In silence, the wagon rattled on under the evening sun, toward Vargamäe.



Joosep and Liisi's wedding was simple and modest. They acted as if they weren't in the mood to celebrate. Old Andres did not attend. The Friday before the wedding, he hitched the old mare to his wagon and went off to visit some relatives who lived dozens of miles away.

"These are the last good days for travelling, so I must go now," he told Mari as he rolled out of the yard, as if the trip were really urgent. Looking over his shoulder, he added, "Don't expect me back before Monday night. I've got lots to do there."

Andres wanted no part of the wedding, but he also didn't want to spoil it for the others, so he got out of their way. As soon as Andres drove out of sight behind the hill, everyone heaved a sigh of relief. Laughing, the children ran to the cottage, and to the Valley Farm in the evening, as if there were only good relations between the neighbors.

Pearu stood near the beer barrels, smiling smugly and feeling as if he'd won. Andres ran off defeated and Pearu was in charge, as if the whole hill was his.

There were only five pairs of bridesmaids and groomsmen. For the son and daughter of farm owners, no one thought that was enough, but everyone understood a large troop of groomsmen wouldn't be right either, since it wasn't the time for a big wedding procession. If it had been winter, and the road was snowy, that would've been different. They could've dashed along, the bride's sleigh in the lead and the best man and his groomsmen right behind, the horses dripping sweat. But what would they get from a wagon on the Vargamäe causeway and the rutted roads between the fields? Besides, there was something else to consider. On this wedding ride, the bride could not be jolted about.

Rava Kustas, who'd been invited, made a foolish joke, "We could wind up with a wedding and a christening on the same day."

So they rode to the church slowly and carefully, as if the wedding between the two eldest children of the Vargamäe masters had no drivers for the bride or the groomsmen.

To provide music, Joosep had planned to invite Lullu the songwriter, but Liisi reminded him of the dirty song Lullu once made up about them. So instead they invited Kingu Priidu with his zither, thinking him sufficient for five pairs of groomsmen and bridesmaids. A zither wasn't much compared to a concertina, but it might be loud enough if Priidu held his wood chip firmly. And Priidu could be counted on for dance tunes, as well as rheinländers, polkas, mazurkas, gallops, and waltzes. In between he could play "Christ Is My Life" or other pleasant tunes so everyone could sing along.

So Priidu became the Vargamäe children's wedding musician, and everyone was delighted to dance to zither music. The boys' feet pounded the floor in rhythm and the girls' skirts swirled.

The sound of Kingu Priidu's instrument went right to Indrek's soul. He sat beside Priidu during the whole party, waiting for him to play. He admired the talented Priidu more than anyone else at Joosep and Liisi's wedding, and marveled at the music.

After the party was over, Indrek had a lasting feeling that it was the boys' and girls' voices, dancing legs, laughing eyes, and joyful grins, as well as the sound of the zither, which affected him so profoundly. The party was full of wondrous sounds, and it all started with Priidu. Indrek believed everyone must've had this feeling, not just himself, or why else did the girls' bodies, as they danced with the boys, become so soft and yielding, and why did their cheeks flush, and their eyes sparkle and shine so strangely?

It was all so odd that Indrek felt his face flush, too. His eyes shone, and his body went soft. He went outside to cool off and breathe some fresh air, but quiet laughter and whispers echoed all around the dark yard, bringing a fresh flush to his face and a greater gleam to his eyes. His heartbeat grew stronger, as if fear were overcoming him.

Toward morning, before dawn, after the groomsmen and bridesmaids had drifted off in pairs to find a place to sleep—in the hayloft, on the floor or a bench, in a wagon—Pearu and Rava Kustas still stood in the threshing barn, chatting tirelessly, beer mugs in their hands. Eventually they began looking around to see who was sleeping where, and with whom. Of course it wasn't the married couples that interested them, just the boys and girls. When they found a couple sleeping in each other's arms, the two men tied their feet together with a cord, or sewed their clothes together with a bag needle. After doing this to several couples, they came across Karla of the Valley Farm and Maret of the Hill Farm, sleeping in the hayloft. Rava Kustas started to tie them together, but Pearu wouldn't allow it. He was a superstitious man and he was afraid that tying them together might bind his son to Andres's daughter for good.

"Let my boy be," he said to Kustas, pulling the man away.

"Why should I tie the others and not your boy? Is he any better?" protested Kustas, eager to do his job and tie them up. The argument woke Maret, who jumped up from the boy's side, climbed down the ladder, and ran home.

"Let the boy sleep some more," said Pearu, very happy the girl had gone.

"Okay, let him sleep," said Kustas, "but I'm going to tie him up anyway. I'll tie him to that roof batten since he let the girl get away."

He did just as he said and tied Karla's legs to the roof batten, which served as a stand-in for the girl's legs. Most girls' legs were strong and could hold a boy as sturdily as a roof batten, but Maret had inherited her mother's limbs, so there was no point in tying her to Karla anyway, since she wouldn't have held him down.

When the two jokers finished tying and sewing, they made a hellish racket to wake the sleeping couples. As they stirred, the couples found that they couldn't separate from each other. Laughter and dirty jokes erupted, and it was more than the girls' ears could bear. Finally, only Karla and Maret were unaccounted for. The two men went to look for them. Maret was nowhere to be found and Karla was wriggling in the loft, his legs tied to the batten. Among the groomsmen, he was laughed at most, but his father was happy to see him like that. The boys were only sorry that Lullu the lyricist wasn't there to make up a song about Maret and Karla—it would've been a very dirty one for sure.

The young married couple slept down at the cottage. When they returned to the farmhouse the following day, the party was again in full swing. Pearu had not slept. His eyes had turned gray like steel. When he saw Liisi, he went over and took her hand, sat her down beside him, and began talking to her. It was one of his long, rambling, drunken diatribes, with no beginning and no hope of an end, unless Pearu got tired and fell asleep, which did sometimes happen.

"Because you're my dear daughter-in-law, who's like a lamb being led to slaughter, and they don't even let you dance," Pearu began. "And now you're the wife of my first boy, my beloved Joosep's wife, because it's written Joosep left his coat and ran away. Now my dear Joosep is leaving his coat, and his sheepskin, and his shirt, and his pants—what I mean is Vargamäe, that's what my dear Joosep leaves for the first darling daughter of his father's first foe. Amen! For it's

been written...and all them other words. Well then, my dear daughter-in-law, here you are, sitting next to me, an old drunk, talking gently, without demanding any earthly pleasures or joy, because you know it's in my power to prevent and demand, and that's why you will fear me and love me, as it was said of our dear Lord Jehovah. Hallelujah! Let Our Father extend her days and raise up her soul, for when your mother died I made a road for her, lest she dash her foot against a stone, like Jesus Christ says. But Our Father would never talk like that, because he's a hardhearted old man, like our neighbor here at Vargamäe. We're tough old men, too, and that's why Joosep leaves his coat and sheepskin, like he runs from Potiphar's wife in the Scripture, in other words—from Vargamäe. And he cleaves to you and you must be one flesh, and he shall leave his father and mother, like he explained to me, from Holy Scripture. Amen! And I chastised him and told him, in the words of Holy Scripture—you may not treat your wife like we do here at Vargamäe, because this is the first daughter of your father's foe, and she has the ringing voice of her mother Krööt when she called the pigs, and you must cherish her through all the woes of flesh. Kyrieleison! And she wept and said Jaagup hath drawn the sword...and all the rest. And she took me by the hand, just as I, though drunk, take you by the hand, and may there be no evil between us. Me and Andres are the lords of Israel and you and Joosep are God's servants, and you'll mow down our hearts before Vargamäe and Jehovah, from now to forever. And there's nothing we can do to you, which is only right, because we're two tough old men and nobody can break us. But our own children waged war against us. Old Andres escaped from Vargamäe, down the hill, and here I sit, half in the bag, because his darling girl is now my darling son's wife and they sleep together in the cottage, right under the eye of the Lord Jehovah, as spoken through the prophets

and according to God's will. And when I watch my son go there, like a thief in the night, then pity grips my heart, just as I once gripped Andres's chest in the tavern, and I say blessed be the name of the Lord, because my son Joosep goes to the daughter of his father's bitter enemy, because he wants to be flesh with her flesh in the here and now. And I'm happy me and Andres, us two tough old men, can't do anything about it. Because..."

Joosep saw his drunken father bothering Liisi and came to her rescue, inventing a reason to take her away. At first Pearu went on talking to himself, but finally he got up and joined the others. He tried several times during the day to go on with his unfinished speech, as if something important in his heart had to be expressed to Liisi. But he kept starting over, drawing out his words and rambling so much that he never really got to the point. He kept wringing and wringing his besotted brain, trying to squeeze out one drop of life to pass on to the first daughter of his enemy, but he never could do it. That drop of life remained at Vargamäe.

After the wedding, Liisi stayed on at the cottage, as before. Neither Joosep nor Pearu cared very much for that arrangement, but Liisi insisted. She felt more comfortable at the cottage, and it was more to the liking of her father. Pearu didn't want his son sleeping at Andres's cottage, but he finally had to accept it. Joosep felt uneasy about it, too, because it seemed as if he visited his wife secretly. He tried once to go talk to his father-in-law, but Andres cut Joosep off at the first mention of Liisi, saying he had nothing to do with his daughter anymore. So that's how things remained. The only consideration Andres gave the young couple was to refrain from visiting the cottage once Liisi had moved there, though he'd often gone before to chat with Madis.

Liisi and Joosep stayed at the Vargamäe cottage until late autumn, when the fieldwork had to be done. Then, one rainy day, they drove down the hill and away from Vargamäe. In her heart Liisi decided that many years would pass before she set foot on that land again. So she promised herself, with a lump in her throat. But as early as the following spring, with tears in her eyes, she had to break that promise, proving the old cottager right when he prophesized that she'd have to live with the truths of Vargamäe and it would happen sooner than she might think.

Joosep's uncle had a lot of space for them at his house, quite apart from the old main room. He gave the young couple a room to use for the winter. Here Joosep and Liisi's first child was born, in a corner of another man's house, like the son of a poor cottager. As Liisi wished, he was christened Joosep. In the spring, the young couple moved to their own farm. Then Joosep went back to visit Vargamäe and returned with a horse, a couple of horned animals, some sheep, and some useful utensils. Pearu came along to help and to see where his son would be living. As if preordained, a heifer got away and ran into the neighbor's yard when they passed the Hill Farm gate. Joosep went to catch it and met up with his father-in-law. Holding onto the heifer, he greeted Andres respectfully, reaching out his hand to say goodbye, for he was leaving and wishing him a good, prosperous life at Vargamäe. Andres acted indifferent and disinterested, but once Joosep disappeared behind a hill with all his goods, he couldn't help commenting to Mari.

"You should give something to Liisi as well."

To Mari's burdened heart these words felt like a piercing knife, and yet it soared and so much joy filled her soul that it hurt. She well understood what Andres meant when he said Liisi should not leave without a gift from them! Who was Mari, that she should take

responsibility for Liisi's gifts? After all, Mari was an outsider to Liisi. Mari was an outsider to all of Vargamäe but for her marriage to Juss. Perhaps she didn't even have a true mother's possessive love for her own children, because she was an outsider to Vargamäe. And yet Andres turned to her and said they should give Liisi something to take away.

It was clear to Mari that Andres's heart had softened when he saw Joosep leave Vargamäe. But he wouldn't do anything himself, because he'd driven Liisi from under his roof and sworn many times, before many witnesses, that she was no longer his daughter. He insisted on this, and always would, but his heart said something different.

Mari was speechless. She stared at Andres in a daze. Her husband didn't like the way she looked at him and he turned away, as if his words were unimportant.

"Give her Kirjak. She's one of old Maasik's brood, part of Krõõt's dowry when we came to Vargamäe. They'll get milk and butter from her if they feed her properly. She has the best-looking horns and her teats are bigger than any other cow's. She's not really suited to living here among the marshes. Her body is too heavy and getting heavier, so she'll struggle helplessly when she falls in, and she'll get stuck in the muddy pastures. Let her go where she'll have an easier life. And a young bullock and a couple of sheep with lambs, which we can feed here in the summer if they don't have enough pasture. Give her the ones with the best curly wool. We'll have new ones coming for ourselves. Andres can bridle the colt. It can follow a wagon all right. Once it nearly stretched its neck too far. It's not much of a horse for show, with its long shaggy coat, but where might I get a better one? I tried bringing the mare up to the stallion at the manor, but look at the silly colt we got.

It was not a success...Fill up a sack with peas and oats from the barn. They'll use it all. How much white flour have you got in the chest there? Maybe we can share that as well, to make gravy for bread and potatoes in the summer. And what about bread flour? Stow some under the wagon seat. We can get along with what we have. There's a little left, and we'll get seed from the new crop, or borrow it. The meat barrel, I guess, is also full. I don't really like fatty meat when the weather is warm..."

Andres was reflecting as he talked, pausing frequently. When he finally looked at Mari, as if waiting for her response, he saw her standing by the bedpost—just where she'd stood when Andres was talking to his God. Just as she had that night, she was crying. Confusion crossed Andres's face.

"Now why do you cry? Are you sorry to give these things away? I can't talk to you at all, even about the most important matters, without you falling to tears."

"You ask whether I'm sorry to give these things away," said Mari, "but they're not mine to give..."

"Then why do you cry?"

"I'm crying because you have a good heart, Andres," Mari said.

Andres started, as if he'd been struck in the face, but then he went on as if nothing had happened.

"Liisi gets all this by right. She's blessed Krōöt's first child, and Krōöt brought her own possessions when she came to Vargamäe. She didn't arrive the way she left, with bare hands, her head resting on white wood shavings. Besides, Liisi has been a hard worker, the only one we have, unless Andres grows into one. Mowing hay, harvesting rye, or picking potatoes, she was never outdone—and who could match her? She'd make herself sick before she let anyone beat her at work. She has Krōöt's nimble hands and my

strength—that’s Liisi. Because of that, I’ll give her whatever we can spare.”

Those were Andres’s orders and so it was done. Nothing more was said about Mari’s tears, though she’d hoped for a few words, as the spring thawed the ice. They also decided on a date for Liisi to come receive her dowry. But when the day arrived, old Andres went out early in the morning for community hauling. So Mari was left to carry out his wishes when his back was turned away.

Joosep and Liisi arrived together with their son.

“We brought him to see where we were born,” said Liisi.

“Didn’t you vow that you’d never let your children see Vargamäe?” asked Maret.

“Well, he’s still pretty small and he doesn’t know anything,” explained Liisi, aware that she’d have to eat her words about Vargamäe. But at that moment, she didn’t care—and she cared even less when she saw the generous dowry her father had prepared for her. He might’ve spoken of righteousness, but she perceived simply love, and now she’d learned how to love, as well.

When they started down the hill from Vargamäe, her family stood watching her, their eyes brimming with tears, and she burst into tears, too, sobbing as nobody had ever before sobbed. Suddenly she felt as if every nook and cranny of Vargamäe was dearer than any other place ever could be, and she wanted to be just as dear to everyone there, so they’d have only good thoughts about her, just as the old bedridden cottager had promised when he reached out his hand in farewell, his eyes wet with tears. If her father had been home, Liisi might’ve gotten on her knees before him, with her child, and stayed at his feet until everything was put right between them.

But that couldn’t happen because her father had gone far off to haul bricks, and perhaps at that very moment, he walked on stiff

legs, wistful and withdrawn, beside the brick pile. So there was nothing for Liisi to do but walk away from Vargamäe, sobbing deeply and pressing her little boy to her breast.

That was the way of the world.



Chapter 37

After Joosep and Liisi left, Vargamäe began to fracture. Young people, one after another, left their parents' homes. Maret, who'd always hovered in the background when Liisi was at home, now stayed out of sight. No one paid her much attention at home or in town. She had a tall, slim body and leaned forward a little as she walked, her head bent low and her eyes sad for no reason, even when she smiled. Did she mourn someone or harbor some secret worry? No one knew, because Maret didn't talk very much. At work she was diligent and tireless. She never talked back to her father or stepmother and she did what she was told, but she couldn't match Liisi, especially when it came time to work in the yard or the fields, because she hadn't the girl's strength or her able hands. After Liisi was gone, Maret sang almost all the time, and her father sometimes tired of hearing it.

"Your mouth never seems to stop anymore," he told her.

But Mari felt differently than Andres, and once she lightheartedly asked Maret, "All your singing—does it mean you plan to get married?"

Maret looked at her wistfully and said, "Men are not so easy to come by these days."

“I was just having fun,” Mari said, “thinking of when I was young. I also loved to sing, but my songs weren’t as sad as yours. I just sang happily.”

“Liisi also preferred happy songs,” said Maret.

“Well, I’ve sung no happy songs since Andres made me mistress here,” Mari went on. “I haven’t the time or the energy to sing anymore. Things were easier in the old days. I had you and Liisi to order about. You two were always a help. But now Liisi is gone and who knows how much longer we’ll hear your singing around the house.”

“I’ve been thinking...How will you get by if I’m not here?” asked Maret.

“So you have been thinking of it?” asked Mari, her tired eyes brightening. “I know it will mean hard times for me—God only knows how long I’ll keep my health and my strength. Each child took a piece of me, and in this world nobody gives anything back. You know, I sometimes feel hot pains in my sides, but I don’t know what causes it.”

Mari never complained about pain near Indrek because it would upset him. But she could talk to Maret, and tell the girl about the hard lump deep between her ribs, which bothered her when she did housework or worked outside. That year she was often needed in the fields because they had less help than before. Indrek filled in for Liisi, but he had a tall and lanky build like Maret’s, as if they shared the same mother. It was clear from the start that Indrek was not suited to farm work.

Otherwise, life went on peacefully enough at Vargamäe, with no court proceedings or quarrels. The two tough neighbors had been knocked flat by the marriage of their first children. Furthermore, Pearu suffered a severe blow in the autumn—Karla was drafted into the army. That year there were many men on the list but Karla

was unlucky and drew a low number. Pearu had to hire a farmhand because his next son, Toomas, was not yet strong enough to do a man's job. Andres took this as a sign that God's justice did sometimes visit Vargamäe. Pearu, despite all his bragging and boasting, was forced to see that he wasn't the mightiest man in the world. But soon Andres, too, felt the hand of the Almighty. That winter a suitor came for Maret. Once again it was a man Andres disliked. The engagement party arrived with ringing bells and bottles of sweet hard liquor, but it wasn't what Andres had hoped for. The suitor wasn't a farm owner but a craftsman, a carpenter who lived near the church and made furniture to order—cabinets and wardrobes, and coffins when they were needed. Even worse, he had a disability—his right leg was lame, not completely, but enough to give him a noticeable limp, and nothing could be done about it. He was thought well of and the farm owners' daughters liked to say that, despite his infirmity, Sass danced better than many boys with two good legs.

Maret's engagement might've turned out as badly as Liisi's if it weren't for the girl's quieter and gentler disposition, which calmed the situation. When Maret informed her father of her plans through Mari, he had a quick answer.

"Sass is a cripple."

"The children won't inherit that," said Mari. "Their legs will be fine."

"It doesn't matter," said Andres. "I'm not going to marry my daughter to a cripple. Are we the very worst family in town, that we should settle for the last choice?"

"Sass isn't the last choice. He's a craftsman," Mari explained.

Andres disagreed and called for Maret right away. "Couldn't you find anyone better? Must you take this cripple?"

“There’s not been anyone else yet who wanted me,” answered Maret.

“But you can wait. You’re not too old yet,” said her father.

“The years go by quickly,” commented Maret, her head bowed.

“Well, I can’t accept it, your marriage to Sass. It would sicken me to give you away to him,” said the father.

“Then Sass and I can wait,” said Maret humbly and quietly.

Surprised and frightened, Andres exclaimed, “What? You want to wait for him?”

“He’s ready to wait for me, too,” Maret replied. “He’ll wait as long as he has to. Just last Sunday he said, ‘We’ll wait if we must.’ He’s not a child grabbing anything in a skirt. He said if I didn’t marry him, he wouldn’t marry at all. I’m the only one he wants. So he’ll go along with whatever I decide to do. And if you don’t want us to marry now, Sass and I will wait. I’ll tell him, and he won’t come courting unless I agree.”

“You’re just like your mother, the sainted Krōōt,” Andres said to himself, growing a little sad. “She gives up but she won’t give in, do with her what you may.” Andres started to think of days gone by, looking for some clue about the present and a guide to the future.

“Can I go now?” asked Maret. “I have potatoes for the pigs on the fire, and they’ll turn to mush.”

Andres snapped out of his reverie and looked at his daughter. And because her eyes reminded him so much of Krōōt’s, he said, “So you want nobody but him?”

“No,” his daughter replied. “I’ve promised myself to Sass.”

“All right, let him come when you want him. When he proposes, I won’t turn him away,” Andres said with great effort, and he was immediately glad he did.

Maret, too, was glad. She made no response to her father, but a peaceful and happy smile graced her face, the likes of which Andres had only seen on Krõõt as she lay on her deathbed. Andres felt happy that he'd granted his daughter's wish.

So the question was decided, and Maret went to make sure her potatoes didn't boil into mush.

Now the moment Mari always feared had arrived. Like it or not, she'd have to hire a girl to help with the housework. Every sip of her wine at the engagement party was mixed with tears, as was every sausage she'd stuffed through a funnel with a white stick, and every loaf of holiday bread, with and without raisins. She couldn't stuff a bag or tie up a bundle for Maret, or even exchange a word with the girl, without a bitter twitch at the corner of her eye, which she dabbed with her apron or the corner of a towel. At times Mari felt she was again seeing off sainted Krõõt from Vargamäe, not as a corpse, but alive—the daughter evoked this image of her mother.

As she took her leave, Maret's eyes, too, were wet. Whether her tears welled because Mari was crying, or because of all she was leaving behind, one couldn't say.

"I'm not really going far," she told Mari. "From the church hill you can see the old pines of Vargamäe. I can look at them every day if I want to."

"That's right, it's not so far at all," agreed Mari, but still she wiped her eyes.

When all the wedding festivities at the Hill Farm were over and there was calm in the house again, Andres spoke with Mari in the back bedroom.

"Now both daughters are gone."

"Yes, they are," said Mari. "It'll be quite a while before Liine, Tiiu, and Kadri catch up with them."

“That’s right,” agreed Andres.

“I sometimes wonder whether my eyes will still be open to see that day,” lamented Mari. “When it comes time for them to leave home, I wonder who’ll help them and look after them.”

“But you’re younger than I,” Andres replied.

“Younger or older, it makes no difference,” figured Mari.

“I have some hard days ahead, too,” Andres told Mari, as if trying to comfort her. “In a few years, young Andres will be drafted. And it doesn’t look as if Indrek will be a farmer. He doesn’t have the bones for it, and he doesn’t want them either. And Ants won’t be big enough yet.”

“Yes, we really don’t know what Indrek will turn out to be,” sighed Mari. “His godfather, Hundipalu Tiit, insists he get an education...”

“I sent him for lessons with the parson,” said Andres, “who says I should send Indrek to the town school, but I can’t afford that now, say what you will. I’d be mad to take a loan. Don’t even think of it! How would I ever pay it back? I’ve been trying to figure it out every which way, but there’s no answer. Liisi and Maret took their share, and that didn’t help...quite the opposite. The years are not what they used to be. We have no wheat or potato crops, as we used to, and the prices aren’t as good. Let him study for one more winter with the parson. He’ll pick something up.”

And so Indrek worked at Vargamäe during the summer, and in the winter he took lessons with the parson, along with a few other boys whose parents wanted to make something of them, but didn’t know exactly what or how the parson might help.

At that time, a much younger parson had replaced the old patriotic idealist. The old man had died a couple of years earlier, firm in his faith in God and fatherland, and the parish buried him with great deference, as if everyone endorsed his beliefs. Among

the important men of the parish, only one seemed to oppose the blessed pastor's views, and did not grace the final rites with his presence—Taar the tailor. He supported the parson's faith, but his own patriotic ideals were even more important, and for that reason he stayed away from the funeral. As it happened, it was the support of the parson, who'd given the patriotic tailor work since that memorable christening party at the Hill Farm (after the incident with Pearu's pants), that allowed Taar to amass his long-wished-for one thousand rubles and deposit them in an interest-bearing account at the town bank. He'd always planned to stop his work as a tailor when he reached that milestone and dedicate his whole life to his country, but as his account approached the thousand ruble mark, it seemed the interest on that sum was insufficient for his fatherland, and he'd have to at least double it. So Taar worked even harder once he'd saved the thousand rubles, hoping to amass two thousand to earn interest. He made this important decision about a year before the death of the old parson. So when that pious and patriotic servant of God passed on, there was no way Taar could see him off on his final journey, for in his quest for the second thousand rubles, he'd reconciled with Pearu after a long period of hostility and begun to sew again for Valley Farm. What would Pearu have done if Taar put down his work in the middle of the day—the parson was buried on a workday, so as to see how many truly loved him and came to his funeral—and dashed off to the church to inter the remains of a man whose ideals Pearu had opposed so vigorously. No, the tailor, despite his heartfelt wish, continued working while others went to church to bury the parson. At the very last moment, though, Pearu himself harnessed his horse and went to the funeral service. The death had reconciled him to the parson's ideals. But Taar couldn't go along after he'd already decided not to. He could hardly change

his mind so easily at the last minute. Besides, if Pearu had reconciled himself to the ideals of the parson, the tailor figured it was only because he thought those ideals had died with the man. But those ideals are eternal, just as a man's soul is eternal, or else eternal salvation would not be possible. In any case, the fact that Pearu had reconciled himself with the dead parson's ideals didn't mean he'd reconciled with the tailor's ideals, because both the tailor and Pearu were still alive. Therefore, the tailor thought it wiser not to go to the funeral, but to stay behind at the farm with his whirring sewing machine. So as not to leave the parson's final journey completely devoid of his participation, the tailor sang both funeral songs and patriotic songs in a sonorous voice all day long, so anyone who'd ever heard of the fatherland could imagine him burying his fatherland at Vargamäe, as the parish buried its parson at the church. In truth, though, the tailor wasn't burying his fatherland, but working for its benefit, sewing away to amass another thousand rubles in his interest-bearing account as quickly as possible, fearing death might overtake him before he could dedicate all his energy to his fatherland alone. It was only for the benefit of his fatherland that Taar forsook the parson's funeral and, with a peaceful heart, went on pressing and stitching—for a thriving fatherland was surely worth more than a dead parson. Or so thought Taar the tailor.



Had the blessed old parson lived longer, there's no telling what would've become of Andres's son Indrek. Now he spent each winter in the young parson's school. He felt school affect him like a drug—once he started using it, he never could stop because his cravings kept growing. Indrek had already gotten his first taste of the village

school, where he went together with Andres. Like the parson, their teacher was a young man. He had a brother who studied in town and sometimes came to the country for a visit. Once he came during Shrovetide. The weather was snowy and mild. Children slid down the hill in front of the school on sleds, wooden boards, coat flaps, and pants bottoms, until they felt as if they'd been struck by white lightning down where the body divides in two.

But Indrek didn't like to sled, a fact that his brother Andres, as well as the other boys and the teacher, found totally incomprehensible. He sat alone in the classroom, watching the merriment through a window and perhaps enjoying it even more than those out on the hill. Sometimes he didn't watch them at all, but buried himself in a book, perhaps Bible stories, which should've been awful since he was required to learn them by heart. Once, when he was reading, the teacher's brother, whom everyone called "Town School Juljus," came into the classroom.

"What are you doing here?"

"Nothing," said the boy fearfully.

"Why aren't you out sledding?"

"Don't feel like it," Indrek answered simply.

"You don't want to go sledding? What kind of boy are you? Go give it a try. When you fly down that hill, you'll feel a clear, cold wind right to the bottom of your heart."

"I tried it last year."

"And you don't want to go again?"

"No, I don't."

"What book do you have there?" asked Juljus, taking the Bible storybook from his hands. "How would you like me to bring you another book, one you've never read before?"

“I’d sure like that, if you’ve got one I haven’t read,” said Indrek, wondering if there could be a book he hadn’t read already. By that time he’d read such a tremendous amount, it seemed there could hardly be any new books to discover. He’d read about Shock-headed Peter and the Devil’s three hairs of pure gold. He knew the stories of Pious Jenowewa and Count Apollonius by heart. He’d read a pile of old *Virulane* magazines. His father had a big book, entitled *The World and Selected Subjects*, which he knew from cover to cover. His father had another big book, too, which was missing its beginning and end, so no one knew its title. Indrek had read that one, too. From the Valley Farm, he’d borrowed a long, long story, so long it didn’t seem to have an end, and nobody knew where the beginning was either. Indrek read that as well, until its endlessness threatened to drive him out of his mind. He read and read for a year, but the story continued on, and year after year it would continue, for the rest of his life, as if it were born over and over as his own life stretched on.

“Here’s that book,” said Juljus, returning to the classroom and snapping Indrek from his daydream. “Keep it clean and read it when you have time. Maybe I’ll ask you later what you remember.”

With that, he handed Indrek a book wrapped in paper.

The boy opened it and started leafing through the book. He saw right away that it was totally new. He’d never seen it before, and he’d certainly not read it. It seemed to be written in his native language, but some of the letters were so strange—he didn’t recognize them and couldn’t read them at all. Even so, he could’ve stumbled through it somehow if it weren’t for the many terrible foreign names, which he’d never heard before or seen in other books. He couldn’t understand why each time he opened the book, he was greeted by endless lists of foreign names. He took a stab at reading it

in several different places, but it was too hard and he lost the thread of meaning. His reading became a mere muttering or murmuring, from which he retained nothing, as if sounding out some unknown language.

And yet he began to love that wild book. For him it embodied something of life's secrets or blessings. If only he could read it and understand it well enough to tell others about it! If only he could do that, then perhaps some of the mysteries tormenting his brain would become clear.

But that wouldn't happen. Shrovetide came to an end and "Town School Juljus" left his brother and returned to town. Before he departed, he came for his book and asked Indrek how much he'd read and what he remembered. The questions scared Indrek, because he couldn't answer either one. A great pile of foreign words had been twisting and turning in his head, and they kept spinning around his skull, so he could almost make out their spellings, but his tongue balked at uttering any of them.

"Can't you remember anything at all?" asked Juljus, looking at Indrek with sympathy, because the boy felt worthless and tears welled up in his eyes.

"Pope," the boy finally managed to mutter, as if overcoming a huge barrier, and he then began to cry dejectedly.

"Come now, don't cry over that," said Juljus comfortingly, stroking his head. "Next time I'm sure you'll remember more."

That made the boy cry even harder, and he was still crying when Juljus went off with his book, which Indrek would never have the chance to read again. He remained regretful for a long time afterward, even when he studied with the parson and learned to read Russian fluently. It was years before Indrek again came across the strange book, from which he'd only been able to recall the word

“pope.” But by that time all the mystery and fascination were gone. The wondrous volume was like any other book, an unimportant text containing no secrets or blessings.

At the same time Indrek longed for the “pope” book that threw him into a morbid frenzy, he read everything he could lay his hands on. He noted, among other things, that Liisi and Maret kept certain books hidden, as if there were something shameful about them. He began to keep an eye out for these secret books, so he could find them and finally get a look at them. He had the foolish idea that Liisi and Maret had gotten their hands on something like the “pope” book.

Eventually, he managed to find his sisters’ secret books, and he read them while out tending animals, sitting on a hummock with no one else around. He searched them for magic words but found none. Still, they were strange and mysterious books. That was clear from their titles. One cover read *Great Secrets*, another, *Nature’s King*, and a third, *Women’s Mirror*. These titles became fixed in Indrek’s memory as firmly as the word “pope,” though that word evoked in him a longing for something unattainable, while his sister’s secret books only excited him in spite of himself. He would’ve read the “pope” book even in front of father and mother. He would’ve even brought it to church on Christmas Eve and opened it before the Christ figure that reminded him of Pearu’s white shirt, but he was frightened of opening his sisters’ books, even while sitting on a hummock in the marsh. He kept looking around, fearful that someone would catch him.

In his sisters’ books, as well, there was plenty Indrek didn’t understand and could only imagine its meaning. This vague guesswork and hypothesizing held their content mysteriously out of reach and made them wildly fascinating. If those books had been as

clear and understandable as Bible stories or the catechism, which Indrek considered understandable because everyone else did, they wouldn't have excited him in the least, or at least not nearly as much. When he read those books, borrowed several times without his sisters' knowledge, and delved in with ever-increasing eagerness and excitement, he began to look at the whole living world from a perspective that disturbed him. With this feeling, he listened to birds sing in the springtime and watched them play. He looked at brightly colored butterflies and blue dragonflies, particularly when they flew in a tangled crowd from place to place, searching for a quiet, blissful spot in the sun.

The secrets hidden in these books even extended to the animals, the same animals he'd known since he was small and knew as well as his brothers and sisters. The rams butting horns and dashing about, the oxen roaring and goring, the horses neighing and whinnying, the games of geese on the water, the dogs biting and rutting, snakes lying in the sun with bodies intertwined, boars foaming at the mouth, their jaws clacking—they were all part of the same secret, which Indrek didn't really understand, but only guessed was some sort of spectral idea.

He often thought of the "pope" book. He thought that if he'd been able to understand it clearly, every other book would be clear to him as well, including his sisters'. But "Town School Juljus" never returned with that incomprehensible book, so Indrek remained endlessly puzzled.

One summer evening, as he listened to people hoot and holler in the echoing woods, he thought their voices seemed more than just voices, like a cowherd's pine bark horn supported by a birch branch. They seemed to hoot some marvelous secret they dared not express in words, just as Indrek didn't dare to open the secret books in

front of any living soul. He didn't believe that Liisi and Maret could sing as beautifully as they did, if it weren't for the secrets hidden in those books.

That fascinating enigma manifested itself not only in song, but in their conversation, too, which was sometimes secretive. When the girls were around, he couldn't always follow their discussions. Nevertheless, Indrek loved to hear their incomprehensible talk, for it was just as pleasant and exciting as the incomprehensible books. His sisters' eyes shined with luster as they spoke, their faces reflected something wonderful, and their lips moved quite differently than normal. Indrek listened to their puzzling words and saw the strange expressions on their faces, and sometimes felt he understood their mysterious conversations.

Liisi and Maret often talked like that in the barn, and Indrek sat on the steps outside in the sunshine. He pretended not to hear his sisters' conversation, only to bask in the sun. As Mari said, the cranes planted so many turnips on his feet during the spring, they were nearly black from all the pork fat smeared onto them. The warm sun was very pleasant on the cranes' turnip field and Indrek soaked it up with his whole body while listening to his sisters, gently stroking the cranes' furrows on his feet and legs. Sometimes he glanced over at his sisters in a way that embarrassed them, and they chased him away from the barn steps, as if he were being sneaky, sitting there.

"You mean I can't sit here in the sun?" asked Indrek innocently.

"No, you can't," said Liisi. "Go someplace else. This isn't the only sunny spot."

"But why can't I sit here?" asked Indrek. "I'm not bothering anybody."

"Yes, you are," Maret responded.

“Who am I bothering?” countered the boy.

“For once in your life, try to understand—you bother us,” Liisi added. “Maret and I want to tell our secrets, and we don’t want you listening.”

Now everything was clear and Indrek could no longer be obstinate. He responded as if treated very unfairly.

“Well, where must I go then?”

“Go anywhere you want,” said Liisi. “The world is yours. You could sit by the woodpile. It’s just as warm and out of the wind.”

So Indrek moved to the woodpile, where poles, stakes, posts, and logs stood on end, some of them peeled, the bark of others slit open or carved with notches to keep the wood underneath from decaying. There were various smells of green wood, and atop the woodpile a wagtail called, its nest in some crevice there between the firewood. Indrek sat down between the logs and wood stakes so he could peek toward the barn, where the sounds of Liisi and Maret’s voices emanated. He even caught a few words when they got carried away and started to squeal and laugh. The words didn’t really matter much to Indrek, because he understood the laughter better, and he heard that perfectly well from where he sat.

Sometimes he hid among the logs when it wasn’t sunny and Maret was alone in the barn. At first she was very quiet, as if the door to the empty barn were left open by chance, but soon she began to sing, quietly at first, then a bit louder, and Indrek could hear her well from his seat among the logs and posts. Indrek always loved singing, but most of all he loved to hear Maret sing, because her voice held traces of his mother’s, as she’d sung long ago to the whirring of the wheel, the song of a father and his seven sons who try to chop down a huge oak—each with seven axes; every line of the song ended with the nonsense words “sink-sale-proo.”

Those strange syllables, “sink-sale-proo,” stuck in Indrek’s mind, because they reminded him of a certain bird with a green breast that flew every spring from one high treetop to another, proclaiming his mother’s nonsense words—not too clearly, of course, but with a melody Indrek was sure he recognized. And when Maret sang, Indrek believed she, too, sang a sort of “sink-sale-proo,” as if she were a mother, or a nameless bird with a green breast. Maret’s songs had different words, but Indrek still heard in them the sound of his mother and that bird. For instance, one of Maret’s songs began, “Once when sitting on a river bank,” but Indrek’s ears immediately heard “sink-sale-proo,” as if some kind of magical force turned the real words into something fantastic and unfathomable.

Liisi sometimes sang the same song, but she used a different tune that never played the same trick and transformed the words to “sink-sale-proo” in Indrek’s ears. Maret learned the tune from their father, who taught it to her one Whitsun evening at the front of the barn steps, where Indrek now sat. He remembered it vividly. Liisi and Maret were in the barn, singing of a girl weeping pitifully on a riverbank. Their father came over to the barn steps in his white sheepskin jacket, a bent pipe in his mouth, and just stood there listening to his daughters sing. When they’d finished, he asked them to listen to him sing that song, and he sang not from deep in his chest but with a thin voice in his throat, like a woman’s voice.

He sang the first verses twice, then asked, “Which is prettier, your tune or mine?”

“I like ours better,” said Liisi.

“Sing it once more, father,” asked Maret.

And father sang it again twice.

“Your tune is much prettier, father,” Maret now said. “It really sounds like someone crying on a riverbank.”

“So you should learn it,” he said, and he sang it again in the same soft voice. Maret sang along until she knew the new melody by heart.

“I got that tune from a gypsy girl,” father explained. “I was working as a gardener’s helper at the manor when a gypsy came around with his daughter, a monkey, and a barrel organ. The girl sang and danced, the monkey did tricks and drew fortunes, and the old man played the barrel organ. That’s when I heard that tune, and it’s stayed with me ever since.”

From that evening on, Maret sang of the girl crying on the riverbank to the tune she’d learned from her father, and Indrek imagined in the gypsy girl’s mournful and yearning melody, the strange “sink-sale-proof” of his mother’s song. There were times he was overcome by sadness listening to his sister’s song because it brought to his mind God knows what. And in this feeling was a trace of those perplexing books he’d borrowed from his sisters without permission, and certainly something of Juljus’s incomprehensible book, from which he remembered only the word “pope,” knitting together everything inexplicable and beyond understanding.

After Liisi quarreled with her father about her relationship with Joosep, and after she moved down to the cottage as if she weren’t her father’s child, a realization grew in Indrek’s heart.

“That’s it! It’s all the same thing! That’s why Liisi moves to the cottage and why father gets so angry he can’t handle anyone, not just Liisi. And that’s why he roars and lashes out with the first thing he can lay his hands on. And that’s why the bulls lock horns and even gore each other in the gut, and why the rams butt each other till their eyes run with blood. That’s why the boar’s fangs drip white foam, and the neighbor’s roosters fight till both lie dead on the ground covered in blood. And that’s why two wood grouses fought

so desperately last spring that they forgot their fear of man and I caught them bare handed. The same thing causes it all!”

But when Indrek tried to identify the cause, he realized he could not. If he could only understand what it was that really caused everything! But he did not know. Perhaps he could’ve talked about it with his brother, but those matters didn’t interest Andres. He went to the village and danced with the girls, but he’d have just as soon danced with the boys because then there’d be no danger of getting in anyone’s way, and no one would get in his way either.

After Liisi’s wedding party Indrek watched Pearu and Rava Kustas tie the girls and boys together, and stitch together the clothes of couples who slept side by side. Everyone had gone to sleep, but Indrek was wide awake, still under the spell of Kingu Priidu’s zither music and everything he’d seen and heard.

When Pearu and Kustas woke up the groomsmen and bridesmaids, making off-color jokes about their bound legs and clothes, everyone within earshot laughed, even the boys and girls who were the butt of the jokes. But Indrek didn’t laugh. Neither the actions of the two men nor the glee of the others amused him. He just stood among the gathered crowd, looking into their faces and wondering what the joke meant. Their laughter made him sad rather than happy because he had a feeling that, somewhere on a riverbank, the girl from Maret’s song was crying, and that it was this girl everyone laughed at.

During Indrek’s first two years of study, the parson lived in the apartment of an old widowed sexton. His married daughter lived in the county seat nearby and she visited her father from time to time. Once, during Indrek’s second year of school, she brought along her daughter, who was very much a “lady” in Indrek’s eyes because she attended the largest school in her town and spoke German as well as

Russian. She tried to speak Russian with Indrek, but he only managed to mumble a few words in reply, so she didn't even try German, seeing that Indrek was only up to "der, die, das." One thing stuck in Indrek's memory for a long, long time: the young lady from town (who was about Indrek's age and called Milli, as Riia of the Valley Farm had called her cat, the one he'd burned in Jõessaare) heard Indrek's "der, die, das," and said German was terribly difficult to speak if one had to use the "articles" correctly. Indrek didn't know what sort of creatures "articles" were—the word seemed wonderful and made the girl seem wonderful, too. He kept rolling the word "articles" off his tongue, setting it beside "pope," which he would've liked to insert into their conversation to see the town lady's reaction. But a suitable occasion never arose. And before he had the chance to match her wondrous word with his own and ask her what it meant, the lady returned to town and vanished from his life.

Mostly, Indrek and Milli had understood each other very well. It's quite certain that Indrek would've had some difficulty with his studies if Milli had stayed any longer. She would've caused him to lose his way, as he did in the big spruce forest behind the sexton's house and the graveyard, where tracks in the snow under the trees went in every direction, as if the sexton's house were the very heart of the world.

Milli's mother was almost always away, and Milli would peer out the little window of the sexton's house like a bird in a cage when Indrek came from the parson's.

Indrek was hungry and wanted something to eat. Sometimes, when the sexton made soup, he put a piece of meat in the pot for Indrek, and that was just fine. But now, with his granddaughter there, the sexton didn't make soup and Indrek had to prepare

something for himself if he wanted more than a cold, hard chunk of bread.

Once when Indrek came home, the house looked empty, but as he stepped inside he heard the sexton's familiar snores coming from behind a curtain. Indrek thought that'd be a good time to fry some meat for himself, since it embarrassed him to cook in front of Milli. But when he'd made a fire in the hearth and retrieved the overturned pan from the side of the oven, Milli stepped from behind the curtain, quiet as a cat, and stood beside him.

"Can you hear my grandpa sleeping?" she asked.

"He's snoring," said Indrek, chopping some pork fat.

"He whistles in his sleep," said Milli.

"So he does," Indrek agreed, laying the strips of fat in the pan without rinsing it first.

"You men are all the same," smiled Milli.

"Don't women whistle like that?" asked Indrek.

"I don't mean my grandpa," Milli explained, laughing. "I mean you. You put the meat in a dirty pan."

"Your grandfather does it like that, too. We both do it like that," admitted Indrek.

"Well, he's a man, like you," said Milli.

When Milli called him a man, Indrek was deeply shocked and became a little dizzy. He stood there with his fat strips in the pan, unable to do anything.

Milli stepped in. "Let me help. I'm sort of the womenfolk here."

Indrek looked at the girl, his face flushed and eyes wide as she took over. She took the meat out of the pan, poured some water into it, and let it heat on the fire. Then, she washed the pan and afterward she put the strips of meat back in.

“There,” she said when the pan was sizzling on the fire. She didn’t step away until the meat was done. Then she asked for milk and flour and made some gravy, which she smilingly called “potas.”

“Have you got a plate to pour it in?” she asked.

“No,” said Indrek. “We just put the pan on the table on a piece of paper. Saves dish washing.”

“You’ve no soup plate either?” asked Milli.

There was a soup plate, and Milli used it to serve the meat and potas. She set the plate on the table and went with Indrek to the pantry, where he got some bread and cold potatoes, and then she sat down to watch Indrek eat. Actually, she kneeled on the chair, propping her elbows on the table, with her nose almost in Indrek’s gravy plate. It was awfully embarrassing and shameful to eat like that, but Milli didn’t seem to notice. The boy felt just as he did when he sat on a hummock reading the secret books snatched from his sisters.

“Do you know what I was doing behind grandpa’s curtain?” Milli asked Indrek.

“Hiding?” said Indrek.

“I wasn’t hiding from you,” said Milli, and Indrek wished he could sink through the floor when he realized how foolish his answer had been. Why would Milli hide from him?

“I was trying to find out why Grandpa snores and whistles like that. Now I understand. When I go back to town I’ll snore the same way. Would you like to hear me snore?”

“Okay,” mumbled Indrek, making a great effort to swallow his food. His throat felt like it was tied shut with a cord.

Milli snored, hissed, growled, and whistled, as if she really was the old sexton sleeping behind the curtain.

“Isn’t that just like him?” asked Milli.

“Exactly,” said Indrek, managing to swallow his mouthful and eat more, as if Milli’s snores had suddenly opened his throat.

“Would you like me to teach you how to snore and whistle, too?”

Indrek wanted that very much, but first he cleared the table.

Milli said, “Let’s go under the spruces. I’ll teach you out there so no one will hear us.”

They crept from the room, leaving the sleeping sexton.

It was dark under the trees. The wind rustled the treetops but the path was quiet. Only near the graveyard did cold breezes blow, like the breath of the dead. Milli wore a white woolen hat and a soft fur around her neck. The path was so narrow that she had to walk very close to Indrek, and once he thought he felt her soft fur collar.

“You could take my arm, so I don’t fall in the snow and get my stockings all wet,” Milli told Indrek with a sort of tremor in her voice. There was a tremor, too, in the hand that timidly took her arm.

They walked together in the deepening dusk as in some blissful dream. Later, Indrek could recall only an unexplainable feeling and a dizzying scent in the air, the likes of which he’d never experienced before and surely never would again. It smelled a little of yarrow and a little of wormwood. For the sake of that scent, Indrek would’ve done anything on earth, but instead he did nothing, as he knew not what to do in the presence of such an overwhelming aroma.

On the way home they stopped at the corner of the graveyard and Milli asked, “Are you scared of the dead?”

“Not so far,” answered Indrek.

“I’ve been scared before, but today I’m not,” said Milli.

Indrek wanted to ask her why she wasn’t scared that day, but he didn’t dare. He was afraid he’d sound dumb like earlier, when he felt so ashamed. So they stood at the corner of the graveyard, facing each other, saying nothing, each seeking out the other’s eyes in the

darkness. They stood so close that their clothes touched. A strange idea occurred to him—what if somebody secretly tied their feet together? Not Pearu or Rava Kustas, but someone else, someone who couldn't be seen or heard. Only when they tried to move would they realize their feet were tightly bound together, very tightly, tighter than Karla's feet had been tied to the roof batten.

This thought and the feeling it produced in him were so overwhelming and profound that Indrek felt almost as if his legs were indeed tied, and in order to spare himself the disappointment, he stood close to Milli for as long as possible, inhaling her scent.

Then suddenly Milli scooped up a handful of snow, threw it into Indrek's eyes, and ran home as fast as she could, shouting, "Catch me! Catch me if you can!"

Indrek stood there for a while, full of wonder that Milli could run at all, that no one had tied their feet together at the corner of the graveyard.

"Why do you stand there and stare?" shouted Milli.

Finally he managed to move his feet, but he did not pursue Milli. There was no reason to run. He was reluctant to part from the magical scene at the graveyard corner.

"Why are you so sad?" asked Milli.

"I'm not sad," said Indrek.

"Yes, you are," Milli insisted. "Your eyes look sad."

"Women," thought Indrek, looking at this girl who spoke of his sadness. For the first time that day, it seemed to the boy like a strange word.

Early the next morning Milli was to go to the railroad station with her mother. That evening, the sexton went to bed early and told Milli to do the same, lest she not "rise and shine" in the morning. Milli's mother was still away and Indrek began his homework

for the next day. But no matter how hard he tried to concentrate, his thoughts returned to the graveyard corner where he and Milli stood so close together. He was absorbed by the memory for quite some time. Then the sexton began to snore and whistle and, from behind the temporary curtain of Milli's bed, came the same snoring and whistling noises. Surprised, Indrek listened. Then Milli's smiling face emerged from behind the curtain. She tiptoed to the table, pulled up a chair and kneeled on it, her elbows propped on the table and her chin cupped in her hands. She stayed there, gazing straight into Indrek's eyes. Some blonde locks of hair fell into her eyes, and when she tried to blow them away, they touched Indrek's face. The girl saw this and smiled.

"Studying for tomorrow?" Milli asked softly, so softly that only the movement of her lips revealed the words.

"Just started," Indrek replied.

"How can you keep your mind on it?" Milli asked, surprised.

"Well, I can't, actually," Indrek said frankly.

"You don't need to," Milli figured. "Tomorrow I'll leave, and then you'll have plenty of time to study. Now, let's talk."

She pushed her elbows even closer to the boy. Her eyes looked so blue and clear, but mostly clear, like none he'd ever seen before. Liisi and Maret also had blue eyes, but they weren't transparent like Milli's. Hers were like two buckets of clear well water sitting beside the door of his father's house at Vargamäe: you could look into them and see yourself. In the beginning, Indrek never dared to look into her eyes, but once he knew them—as he did when she washed the pan and fried the meat—he found that he only wanted to gaze into those eyes. They were even more seductive than the buckets of reflecting water at home. Gazing into them felt good and painful at the same time. It was good in the gut and painful in the heart.

“Don’t you get bored living here alone?” asked Milli, pulling her blonde braid over her shoulder so it rested on her breast, where she kept fingering it.

“Not so far,” said Indrek, remembering that he’d given the same answer when they were outside earlier that day, “Not so far.”

“What will you do tomorrow when you come home from school?” Milli asked.

“Don’t know yet,” Indrek replied.

“If you fry meat again, will you wash the pan first?”

Indrek blushed and said, “I will now.”

“Really?”

“I promise.”

“Every time?”

“Every time,” Indrek assured her with great seriousness.

“When you wash the pan, think of me,” Milli suggested, and Indrek saw that she, too, was blushing.

Indrek didn’t know how to answer. He felt something crush his chest, and the pain was so stunning that his whole body went hot.

“Will you think of me?” Milli asked, blushing even more.

“If you want me to, I will,” said Indrek.

“Don’t you want to do it yourself?” asked Milli.

Indrek again felt that thing crushing his heart, bringing a hot rush to his face. He lowered his eyes as if confessing to a dreadful crime. “Yes, I do.”

Milli took the end of her braid, which had come loose, and put it under Indrek’s nose.

“Can you smell it?” she asked.

“Yes, I can,” said Indrek.

“That’s my hair,” Milli explained. “It always smells like that, whether I wash it or not.”

“I thought it was your fur collar,” said Indrek.

“No, it’s my hair. If the collar smells, too, it’s because of my hair,” Milli explained, and then asked, “Do you like it?”

“It’s the best thing I’ve ever smelled,” said Indrek confidently.

“Feel how soft it is,” Milli directed.

Indrek moved his hand but, before he could reach her hair, a noise came from the front door. Her mother was home. In a flash Milli was in bed and under the covers. When her mother came into the room, Indrek was sitting alone at the table, his cheek propped on his hand, trying to read, though he couldn’t tell whether the book was right-side up or not.

“Who’s there?” asked Milli from behind the curtain.

“It’s me, dear,” said her mother, and Indrek felt as if he heard the word “dear” for the first time in his life. “Why aren’t you asleep? We have to wake up early tomorrow.”

“I woke up when the door banged,” said Milli.

“I tried to come in quietly, but you know that door...” said the mother apologetically.

“It’s a terrible door,” Milli swore. “I’m glad we’re going back to town.”

Indrek felt as if a block of ice had been thrust into his chest. His heart started beating, thunk, thunk, thunk. What was the truth? Her words and gestures at the table, or what she’d just said to her mother? Were her remarks about the terrible door and her eagerness to go back to town the real truth, or was it in the scent of her hair and her clear eyes?

All night, Indrek couldn’t close his eyes. When the others got up early in the morning, he pretended he was asleep and didn’t hear anything at all. No one gave him a thought. Soon the horse was at the door and Milli’s mother and the sexton carried their things to

the sleigh. Milli quickly used this moment to stand beside Indrek's bed, as if to continue their talk from the night before.

"Are you asleep?" she whispered.

"No," said Indrek, just as secretively. "I haven't slept at all."

"Here, touch my hair now," said Milli, bending over Indrek so he felt her breath as she thrust one of her braids under his blanket. She left it there for a little while so he could hold it.

"Feel how soft it is," she said, rising.

"Terribly soft," said Indrek in praise.

Their talk ended when her mother came back in the room.

"Are you ready?" she asked her daughter.

"Now I am," Milli replied.

Her mother steered her from behind so she had no chance to even glance back.

A few weeks later Indrek received an envelope with a card inside. On one side of the card two pink hands reached from a bed of roses toward each other, and on the other side, in Russian, it said: "For Remembrance." It was signed "M," nothing more.

Studying the card more closely, Indrek noticed a special scent—the scent of Milli's hair. And when he tried to recall its softness, the memory also transformed into the scent surrounding the card.

Indrek now recalled a similar scent from an earlier time, in a different place. But where? He couldn't remember. A few days later, as he washed the pan to fry some meat for himself, he suddenly thought of how mother did it at home, and at that instant he realized where he'd smelled something like Milli's postcard, which might've carried the scent of her hair. His mother's chest in the barn smelled like that. It was a white, decorated chest with a rounded, creaking lid. When he touched it, Milli's hair made the same dry sound as the lid of that fragrant chest.

Indrek could not pursue these thoughts any further because he remembered something hard and hurtful about his mother. In spite of himself, he couldn't hold back his tears and he started to cry. By the time he pulled himself together, the fire had gone out. He built it anew and went on washing the pan and frying his meat. Along with the new fire, an incomprehensible new illumination took over his head, as well as his entire body and soul, and he talked to himself while washing the pan.

“Right! That's it! That's the whole thing! Now I understand. That's how it comes! That's how it begins!”

Suddenly he understood the story of Liisi and Joosep, Liisi's quarrel with father, Liisi and Maret's incomprehensible conversations and the strange expressions on their faces, Maret's songs, the boys and girls whose legs were tied together, and all he'd racked his brains over.

If, however, he'd been called upon to explain his enlightenment to someone else, he couldn't have found the words, just as he'd been unable to find the words to reply to “Town School Juljus.” To explain this big, deep epiphany that filled him from the bottom of his soul, he uttered only one word—“Milli”—and even that was nothing more than the faint scent of his mother's chest on the little card, becoming fainter and fainter with each passing day.

The next day, Indrek had only foolish answers for the parson, and the other boys laughed and ridiculed him, as did the parson, despite his pious position. In the face of so many surly, teasing words he resolved to think of the sexton's terrible door and Milli's longing for town as the truth, rather than the little card and its heady scent, which robbed his brain of all sense. Thus Indrek returned to his old self, a student, and perhaps an even better one, since the experience

had, in some strange way, charged him with fresh energy and better comprehension.



In the spring of Indrek's second school year, Andres came to fetch his son from the parson and settle his accounts, but the parson couldn't let Indrek go without first having a word with his father.

"This boy should be going to the town school. He can only go so far with me."

Andres had considered it every which way, and admitted that the school tuition was more than he could bite off.

"Soon he'll be too old to get in," the parson commented.

"Well, then he'll be too old. There's nothing I can do about that," Andres answered the parson.

In the end they agreed that Indrek would study for one more winter with the parson, who'd give him special attention. Maybe they'd manage to find him a place somewhere as a teacher or teacher's assistant.

But everything turned out differently than either the parson or Andres had imagined. In the spring of Indrek's third school year, the village clerk sought an assistant. Half joking, the clerk asked the parson if he might send one of his older students to work in the office.

The parson answered strangely, "None would be much good, except for Paas, the son of Andres of Vargamäe."

"Are you sure about him?" asked the clerk.

"Quite sure," said the parson. "He'll manage it."

They agreed that the clerk would try Indrek for a few days in the office and see if there was any point in talking to the boy's father.

Indrek passed the first trial well, and they suggested he stay on at the office to help out the clerk instead of working on his father's farm that summer.

"You'll learn new things here and have a chance to better yourself. What would you get from farm work?"

The clerk persuaded Indrek, who was tempted to ask, "Could I then become a clerk myself?" But he didn't ask, for that goal seemed so far above him, it was ridiculous to even dream of it.

At Vargamäe, Andres wasn't too keen on the plan because he badly needed Indrek's help on the farm during the summer. Puffing on his pipe in the back bedroom, he took a long, long time to think through Indrek's arguments. Everything was turning out differently than he'd planned. He expected Vargamäe would come into a great, golden time when his children stood on their own feet. Now they were all fleeing Vargamäe, one after the other, and only the old and decrepit and the small and weak remained.

Finally, Mari interrupted Andres's smoky reverie, "You're still thinking about Indrek?"

"Well, not only about him," said Andres. "About Vargamäe in general."

"It's true we need him at home, but..."

"Of course we need him. That goes without saying," Andres interrupted. "He can certainly guide a plow or walk behind a harrow or a roller."

"Then why did we send him to the parson to begin with?" said Mari. "He could've gone to the village school for three years, like everybody else, and come back to sweat in the fields."

"You're right," said Andres.

It was not an easy decision and Andres thought it over until the following Sunday. Then he went to Hundipalu, not only to discuss

Indrek, but for the chance to chat a little, because Andres considered Tiit the only man in the neighborhood worth talking to and asking advice from.

For a long time, the two farm owners talked of Vargamäe and Hundipalu, the marshes and bogs, the low hills and patches of woods, the hayfields and pastures, projects and works, and their own trials and worries, before Andres found a good moment to mention Indrek.

“You know, things are tough for us now that the girls are married. Mari has so much to do. She’s always hustling. And now Indrek wants to go off on his own, too, instead of helping on the farm this summer. I just don’t know what it’s all coming to.”

“Where does Indrek want to go? To town?”

“Well, the village clerk has offered him a job as his assistant. He wants Indrek to start now since he needs help at the office,” said Andres.

“Can Indrek do work like that?”

“The clerk says he can. He’s already tried the boy out for a week.”

“You know, Andres,” said Tiit persuasively, “it wouldn’t be bad at all if Indrek went to work for the clerk. The boy’s got a good head on his shoulders. You can see it in his eyes. Let him go.”

“I understand it would be a good thing for him, but what about me? What’ll become of Vargamäe if everybody leaves? Young Andres will also go in two or three years,” observed the farmer.

Hundipalu Tiit sighed. After a while he spoke, putting a hand on Andres’s knee.

“Andres, you and I are old men now, but we still think as if we were young. I think about my Hundipalu and you about your Vargamäe. But our children don’t give a thought to Hundipalu or Vargamäe. My Aadu should get out of the army this autumn, but he

wrote to tell me he's not coming back here. I let him learn the trumpet because he showed an interest and picked it up easily. Now he's got an easy life in St. Petersburg with his trumpet, and Hundipalu is the last thing he wants to hear about. What'll I do? What can I do? If he won't come, he won't come, and that's all. Tõnis should get out in two years, but he's in Poland with his own plans. He doesn't think of Hundipalu as anything more than a patch of land in the middle of marshes and bogs. It has nothing to do with him. Jüri will be drafted in a couple of years, but what hope is there here for him once he's seen the big world?"

"But what will it all come to?" asked Andres. "You and I will get old and we'll die."

"I wouldn't say we're dying yet, but we're old—the 'getting old' has already happened," said Tiit.

They sat in silence, two bent figures facing each other, pipes in their mouths, each thinking his own thoughts and worrying his own worries.

"Do you know, Andres, what I've sometimes thought?" Tiit said at last. "Maybe Pearu is right when he says that schools produce nothing but horse thieves."

Andres would've never believed that Tiit could agree with Pearu about anything, so the words hit him like a tree falling on his head. He didn't know what to say and just stared at his friend with wide eyes.

"Believe me, Andres, Pearu is right about this, not you and I," Tiit assured him.

"What kind of nonsense is this?" asked Andres.

"It's not nonsense. It's the talk of a real man," said Tiit.

"How do you figure?" Andres asked incredulously.

“Well, isn’t it?” said Tiit. “Tell me, would my Aadu have written such a letter if I hadn’t let him go to school a little longer and learn the trumpet? Of course not. Where could he have gone? Nowhere! He would’ve come back to Hundipalu like all other sons who go back to their father’s homes. But look, now he’s not coming. He’ll never come.”

“That doesn’t make him a horse thief,” argued Andres.

“He’s worse than a horse thief. He’s robbing me of my Hundipalu, which I’ve given my health and all the strength of my youth. He robs me and leaves the fruits of my work to a stranger who knows nothing of what I’ve done here at Hundipalu or what I still wanted to do.”

“Pearu kept his Joosep out of school, so why did he fly from Vargamäe?”

“True. Joosep ran from Vargamäe, but he didn’t move to town. He got another farm, just as good as Vargamäe or Hundipalu. It’s still good earth, not a city of stone. Maybe leaving Vargamäe wasn’t Joosep’s choice, but your daughter’s. By himself, Joosep might’ve stayed.”

“But Liisi didn’t go more than three years to the village school,” said Andres.

“It doesn’t matter. It was enough to taint her blood,” argued Tiit, “and no one can go against his blood.”

Andres didn’t know how to answer.

After a while Tiit continued, “She has your blood, and you’ve always talked of Vargamäe as if it were much more than you’ve actually managed to make it. You don’t talk about Vargamäe as it really is, but like a piece of land that flows with milk and honey. School and books have made us both talk this way. Don’t you think that’s embedded into the hearts of our children as well?”

“Then why don’t they remake the land into something that isn’t like Vargamäe at all, if it gives them such pain?” asked Andres, sounding as if he wanted to tie Tiit up in a knot.

“That’s the problem. They want to, but they don’t want to do it here. So they leave,” Tiit explained.

“Vargamäe isn’t good enough for them?”

“No, it isn’t. Otherwise they wouldn’t leave,” said Tiit. “Hundipalu was good enough for me and Vargamäe was good enough for you, but neither is good enough for our children. They don’t want to build a town among the marshes and bogs, as we used to brag about doing when we were drunk in the tavern. We wanted it, but we couldn’t manage to do what we dreamed of doing. They don’t want it.”

“Pearu’s children aren’t building anything either,” said Andres, as if to console himself, though he sounded a little envious.

“But they are,” countered Tiit.

“They aren’t doing shit!” Andres roared.

“It won’t be too long before my children and I are gone from Hundipalu, and instead you’ll find Pearu or one of his brood living here,” said Tiit nastily to Andres.

“You know, Tiit, you’re usually the one sensible man around these parts, but today you sound as if you’ve lost your mind,” Andres said in a sad and serious voice.

“No, Andres,” said Tiit in the same tone. “Neither one of us has lost his mind. But I’m nearly ten years older than you, and two of my sons are in the army. You’ve only just married off your two daughters. When young Andres leaves Vargamäe, then you’ll see what kind of feelings grow in your heart and what ideas come to your head. Our problem is there’s not enough room at Hundipalu

or Vargamäe for all our ideas. We've got more ideas than our farms can hold. You don't really need brains here, just hard work."

"That's what we've been doing," said Andres, adding, "Pearu never worked as hard."

"It's true, Pearu hasn't worked as hard," Tiit replied, "but he thinks even less. He doesn't really do any thinking. He only sees what's right under his nose, and because of that, he and his children have it easier than we do. Our fingers have gone stiff and bent from work, and our backs are crooked, but our minds are still straight and upright. When we talk about Vargamäe and Hundipalu, we talk not of how they are, but of how they should be. And this has spoiled our children. They don't suit Vargamäe or Hundipalu. Children at Vargamäe and Hundipalu should never know there are prettier and better places elsewhere. We must keep it a secret from them. Then they'd behave like real children of the land. But they're already spoiled. They want to leave and find something better."

"So I should let Indrek go look for something better as well?" asked Andres, thinking it through.

"Let him go. It's the right thing to do," said Tiit. "Vargamäe won't suit him. His blood, too, has been tainted since childhood. Way back, when you named him Indrek and I became his godfather, I joked that my godson would be an educated man. Pearu told me then we were trying to capture the boy's soul. I remember it so clearly. And I've kept on trying to capture his soul, teasing him about his studies when I'm a little drunk. And the boy hears it. That kind of thing never lets go of you. It becomes part of a child like a pipe becomes part of a man. Just try to shake it. When I first came to Hundipalu, I thought for sure I'd send one of my children to college in Tartu, but now you see how it's turned out. I've got several boys, but I could never educate any of them. It just wasn't possible

no matter what I did. And so I fed my ideas about education to your boy Indrek, because he's my godson. If my own sons couldn't do it, let my godson try."

"There's no way I can send him to Tartu either," said Andres.

"So let him work for the clerk. That's at least something," Tiit declared.

Andres said no more and soon he left Hundipalu deep in thought, trudging through the soft marsh, stepping on the large stones placed atop spruce and juniper branches along the causeway, until he reached the river bridge without getting his feet wet, even during the spring floods. He couldn't help but stop in wonder at what had been done.

On the river bridge Andres halted, as if he were looking for fish swimming in the deep water. But Andres wasn't thinking of fish. Instead, he sat down, filled his pipe, and thought about his talk with Hundipalu Tiit. He let his gaze wander over the bridge and the big stones along the footpath at the river's edge.

It was Tiit who'd done all the work on that path, Andres knew, for he'd seen it all done and had sometimes helped. Before Tiit there'd been no high, arching bridge or big stones to walk on. You had to wade through the water without your pants or paddle across in a flat-bottomed boat. In summer the wagons of Hundipalu and the other farms on the far side of the river sat under the spruce trees by the Ämmasoo fields, and you could only get to them on horseback through the river shallows. But most tried to avoid crossing the river on horseback during the wagon season. All the hauling took place during the sleigh season, when the river and the marshes and bogs hardened, and the horses could go straight across. Even the manor would order men of that neighborhood out for hauling only during the snowy season. But Tiit wouldn't accept things as

they were, and so, with great effort on his part, the bridge was built to cross the river and the boulders were set into the precarious path through the marsh, where many had stayed without sinking for over thirty years.

“Could we ever go back to a time with no bridge and no stones at the edge of the road?” Andres asked himself, and he had to admit that he couldn’t imagine it or, more properly, he found the thought so painful that he gave it up. To imagine this bridge and these big stones vanishing like a phantom—no, it was too hard to picture.

Then another thought crossed his mind and he almost spoke it aloud.

“What if it wasn’t Tiit or his children who lived at Hundipalu, but Pearu with his brood. What if there were no bridge or path then?”

That thought was not so painful, and even made him feel good. He was almost cheerful as he got up from the bridge and stepped from stone to stone across the water with dry feet, heading toward Ämmasoo.

At Hundipalu, they watched Andres sitting on the bridge and staring at the water for such a long time, like a boy herder, and they thought it very strange. Tiit alone, stroking his gray beard, understood.

“Andres now must watch his boy leave home. What I’ve been through, he’s just starting to face.”



Chapter 38

Even though Indrek would've been a great help at Vargamäe, Andres listened to Tiit's advice and let him go. Mari felt the same as Tiit, but her opinion didn't matter to Andres. It took Tiit to convince him that Indrek should not remain at home.

"Men's work is none of your business," Andres said to Mari when discussing the matter, "so stay out of it. Let me take care of this and you manage your housemaid."

Andres spoke gruffly, annoyed that Mari and Tiit held the same opinion. He respected Tiit, but following Tiit's advice meant following Mari's advice as well. That'd be preposterous—for who was the real master at Vargamäe: Andres or Mari? Andres considered keeping Indrek at the farm if only to prove that he was the real master. But finally they sent Indrek off with their good wishes, and their son began to move up in the world.

Andres and his firstborn son—who turned eighteen that spring—were the only men left to work the farm. They also hired a maid because Mari needed help with the two-year-old. In the spring thirteen-year-old Ants pitched in by harrowing and rolling, and in the summer they expected him to rake. The boy wasn't very big, but he made up for his size in toughness and enthusiasm. Tending cattle was the job of eleven-year-old Liine and eight-year-old Tiiu.

Six-year-old Kadri chased after little Sass. They hoped Maret would come to help during haying and harvesting, perhaps with her husband if he could spare the time away from work. Since she left Vargamäe Maret had given birth to a child, but that wouldn't be a problem. They also planned to hire a day laborer during the busiest part of the season. With all this help, Andres figured they'd get everything done.

Mari had opposed putting Ants to work and that resulted in a serious dispute. She thought he was too young to slave in the fields every day and should only perform light duties on occasion. She'd felt the same way when young Andres started working. Just as she did then, Mari said her husband knew how to spare an animal but not his own child. He'd never harness an animal before it grew to full size, but he had no problem putting his own children in the fields prematurely. When the child was needed in the fields, he went to work whether or not his neck and back were strong enough.

Mari's intervention had done no good for young Andres and it did no good for Ants either. Old Andres believed that an animal was different than a person. A person must care for an animal, and give thought to its well-being, but animals never think about people.

Mari replied, "It wouldn't hurt if people looked out for people, nor if the animals sometimes gave them some thought."

While Ants lacked strength because of his age and old Andres had withered a bit, young Andres looked like a real man. He was growing stronger every year and bearish strength could be seen in his waist, shoulders, neck, and gait. In his confirmation class, there was only one boy he found worth grabbing by the belt to wrestle. He could whip the others with one hand. It was the same with contests of strength, like stick pulling or finger wrestling. Apart from that one boy, they were all pipsqueaks, as Andres put it.

Mätliku Eedi from Tõrvaküla didn't like Andres calling him a pipsqueak. Mätliku was taking confirmation class for the third time. The pastor had failed him the first year because he couldn't do the lessons. In his second year, the pastor overlooked that failure and only required him to learn the Lord's Prayer, but since Eedi couldn't even get that into his head, he had to come back for a third year. Even now, no one was sure Eedi could recite "Our Father..." but everyone knew he was an apprentice—"the heavy hammerer," as he was called—and worked under the blacksmith at the manor. So when Andres started taunting the "pipsqueaks," Eedi got up from the podium, stepped between the benches, and made his way to the center of the room to face Andres, who was the only boy who dared to stand there.

He challenged Andres, "Who are you calling a pipsqueak?"

"You and all the other boys in the parish," said Andres.

"I'll show you who's a pipsqueak!" said Eedi, throwing his jacket on the pastor's podium.

"Why don't you keep on coming to class until my half-brother Ants starts, and then you can show him?" taunted Andres. "Don't mess with me or you'll taste your last meal again."

The whole confirmation class laughed in response.

Eedi stamped a spot on the floor. "This is where your skull goes, just like on Calvary." In their last lesson, the pastor had spoken of Calvary, the place of skulls.

"What?" cried Andres. "You're telling me where you'll bash my skull? A giant pipsqueak like you? Open that ragged old catechism of yours to 'Our Father...' and put it down on that spot. I'll bang that prayer into your thick skull until you finally learn it. Otherwise you'll flunk again and have to switch to the Russian church."

Again the boys all laughed with Andres.

“Come over here!” shouted Eedi.

“All right, if that’s the only way to teach you the prayer,” said Andres. “But open your catechism to the right page or it’s not worth it.”

One of the boys brought over a catechism and placed it on the ground, open to the Lord’s Prayer.

“Is that Eedi’s book?” asked Andres.

“No, it’s mine,” said the boy.

“Bring Eedi’s own book. Otherwise, there’s no point.”

“Eedi hasn’t got a catechism!” one boy shouted.

“Eedi’s got worn out!” shouted another.

“All right, leave that one then,” said Andres.

The boys grabbed each other, chest to chest, but Eedi was more than Andres had expected, with all the strength of a full-grown man. The boys fell to the floor together as if equally matched. When they got up Andres’s eyes glinted with fury and he attacked Eedi again with great force, tripping the boy and throwing him against a bookcase so his whole face became streaked with blood.

Eedi, stunned by the blow, managed to get back on his feet. He felt his bloody face.

“I didn’t hit the prayer book,” he said.

“Fix up your face, then. I’ll put you down again,” said Andres.

Eedi disagreed, “Not a chance. Not in my lifetime.”

“I will,” said Andres confidently.

“The only way you’ll put my head on that prayer is by pulling it off my neck,” Eedi bragged. Andres liked this idea so much that he gave Eedi a handkerchief to bandage his head. It was a sign of respect, or even friendship. From then on, he never called thick-headed Eedi a pipsqueak again, and when the pastor wanted to fail him for the third time because he still hadn’t memorized the Lord’s

Prayer, Andres led the other boys in a plea that Eedi be confirmed that year. Eedi wouldn't shed a tear if his head was smashed open, but the Lord's Prayer made him weep in front of the pastor, as might be expected of a proper confirmand. The tears and the pleas of the other boys softened the old pastor's pious heart.

"My dear children, in the eyes of God it's a sin to confirm Eedi, who can't even recite the Lord's Prayer. But because you love him so much, and plead for him, I shall burden my soul and commit this sin before our Lord."

And so all the confirmands, especially Mätliku Eedi, were gladened by their old pastor's sin, and on Sunday Eedi and Andres were the first pair to walk up to the altar and receive the Lord's blessing for the first time.

After his confirmation, young Andres of Vargamäe kept growing stronger, and by the time he was to be drafted there was no man in the neighborhood who could lift his bottom off the ground in a stick-pulling contest. During the summer, on Saturday and Sunday evenings, he'd walk over to Luiste village, bellowing like a bull and roaring like a lion. There wasn't a boy in the village who'd challenge him face to face, nor would any accept a challenge from him that summer because, all through the spring, new farmhands had quickly found themselves smiling up at the sky or lifted into the air in a stick-pulling contest. The only way he could show off his strength was to cut shockingly wide swaths of hay, carry enormous loads on his back, or pitch hay and spread manure with astonishing power. Old Andres felt he had to caution the youth.

"Now don't start showing off. You'll break that pitchfork handle and waste our valuable working hours."

But young Andres loved to show off his strength, and so he often broke handles of rakes, shovels, and pitchforks. Even when

he wasn't showing off, only working hard and fast, they broke. His father swelled with pride when he saw how swiftly his first son tackled the work.

"That's real men's work and that's how a man does it," he sometimes commented. "What did I ever get out of my farmhands? They moved like cooties swimming in the water, and lifted no more than a flea could carry. It took them so long to load their backs, moss could've grown over their feet. Andres lifts more with a rake than they hauled on their backs. You don't see many men like him anymore."

One Sunday afternoon while Andres was off at Otsa farm in Luiste village, he saw the master trying to shoe a horse that stubbornly guarded its legs. When the man struck its foot with the hammer, the horse kicked and sent the man flying. The master's sons and his farmhands all tried to help. They put a strap around the hoof to hold it steady, but each was sent flying into the bushes or wound up sprawled beneath the frightened animal.

"How about you, young master of Vargamäe?" Otsa Tõnu asked Andres, who looked on. "Want to give it a try?"

"I'm wearing my church clothes today," Andres said reluctantly.

"Pull off that new jacket and use my old one," said the master. "I'll give you an apron too."

Andres agreed and grabbed the horse's leg. Surprisingly, the animal made no fuss. It neither kicked nor fell on top of Andres, as if it knew nothing of those stunts.

"Look at that!" said the old man in amazement. "It knows who it's dealing with."

"That's a smart horse," said one onlooker.

So the young sorrel of Otsa farm got shod properly, and from then on it never acted up, no matter who held its leg. It might've

been Andres's powerful build that changed the horse—no one ever figured it out—but the incident brought him honor and reputation.

"It seems that Andres cast a spell," the old man of Otsa repeated when it came time to shoe the horse again.

The girls swarmed around Andres like bees. It seemed he could pet and paw any girl he liked, whether she was a farmer's daughter or a hired maid, and none would protest. But Andres wasn't very interested in girls. He danced with them at parties, but only to pass the time. Though the other boys teased him, he didn't put much value on women. When a boy outmaneuvered him with a girl, he had a usual reply.

"Let him have her. I've got more skirts around than I can handle. He needs her more than I do."

The one girl that managed to upset him was Kassiaru Jaska's daughter Maali, the only child left at Kassiaru after the epidemic took so many children. She was the richest and most refined girl in the neighborhood, and word of her stature had even reached beyond the parish. She'd been to the sewing school in town and her machine often whirred away in the back room of her house. She could even speak a little German, albeit broken. She wasn't called "girl," "miss," or "maiden," but instead "madam" of Kassiaru. She considered herself to be very superior, and this was reflected in the German-ish nickname given to her: "Komm essen, kapoot, vas vilks du, veal leg." Too long for everyday use, it was quickly shortened to "Kapootleg." Hardly an elegant name for a refined lady who sometimes attended church services held in German, but no one cared since she stirred up such resentment and envy. Maali knew what they called her and once mentioned it to Andres.

"Do you want me to shut them up?" Andres asked Maali.

"They won't listen to you," said Maali doubtfully.

“If I tell them, they’ll listen,” Andres assured her.

“It’s all the same to me,” said Maali haughtily, turning away because she didn’t think much of Andres. If he’d at least worn a shirtfront, even without a necktie, or gaiters on his legs, he would’ve shown more class than he did with just a plain neckerchief. To Maali, Andres seemed a mere farmhand, and spending time with him reflected badly upon her.

“Then Kapootleg can live on at Kassiaru,” said Andres, offended.

“And Clumsy Bear at Vargamäe,” replied Maali cleverly, using Andres’s nickname in the village.

After that exchange, Andre and Maali treated each other with hostility, as if each held real anger for the other. But in truth this was an act on Andres’s part. In his heart he felt very differently. Maali, of course, had no clue of that, but when he prepared to enlist that summer, she figured it out. On the way home from a dance one night, they found themselves alone.

“Last summer,” Andres said to her, “you didn’t want me to stop them calling you Kapootleg, but I’m telling you now—if you marry somebody while I’m in the service, I’ll come back and wipe him out, no matter who he is. I’ll thrash your husband even if they send me to Siberia. I absolutely promise you that.”

Then young Andres took his leave and went on his way, though Maali would’ve gladly listened to more, for she adored the idea that he’d destroy her husband and be sent to Siberia. It was already dark when they said goodbye, and she’d quite forgotten about the shirtfront and gaiters. Those accessories, Maali realized, weren’t necessary for pummeling her husband. Andres could manage it very well without them.

Old Andres of Vargamäe didn’t much like it when his son went down the road and into the village hooting and bellowing, but he

could do nothing about it since young Andres didn't give a damn what his father thought. He had his own opinions and attitudes, and the village was just a place to shout them out. If animals could bellow when they liked, then why not men? Especially the young master of Vargamäe, who could best anybody in the neighborhood.

Young Andres had developed his attitude early, while Liisi and Maret still lived at home. The girls might've influenced him, since they told him of Vargamäe's farmhands and maids who knocked about the village at night. If the hired help carried on like that, then surely the farm's own children could too. Why should he be held back if he wanted to go?

As far as Andres was concerned, he had no less right than the help, and should be allowed to go out just as they did. Furthermore, his father always said he did the work of three hired men, so he should have the same freedom in the village as any three workers, to carry on along the roads and in the village green.

When his father admonished his behavior, even citing Holy Scripture, those rebukes rolled off the young man like water off a duck's back. It was clear to old Andres of Vargamäe that the Holy Gospel meant nothing to his strong son. The scripture could've been any piece of printed paper. Old Andres could quote the Bible all he wanted, Old Testament or New, but the boy'd still look at him as if it were all a joke.

At Vargamäe, they believed that one who refused man's word and God's would still obey the rod, as if it carried all the commandments and all the prophets. But who could teach those commandments and prophecies to young Andres? A few years earlier at Christmas, his father had leg wrestled him and won, but if they tried it again now, the match would surely go the other way. With the endless worries and toil of the last few years, old Andres's

body had weakened while his son's had only gotten stronger, for he had no worries and he thrived on the work as if it were fertilizer and his muscles were fields. So young Andres went to the devil in his father's house, and no one at Vargamäe could teach him right from wrong. Now the weaker man, his father considered it unjust to hit his son, even if young Andres would never hit him back.



As Andres's reputation grew among men, the young herders were paying attention to Ants. He wasn't especially tall or strong, but he had a solid build, an enterprising nature, a resourceful spirit, and he never gave in to anyone. From his mother he'd likely inherited his stocky build and sunny disposition, while his tenacity probably came from his father. Even when things hit rock bottom, Ants didn't mope for very long.

Once before the manure spreading, he'd been tending animals on the fallow and fell asleep in the warm sun. He hadn't planned to. He'd simply lain down among the thistles and daisies to watch the clouds in the spring sky and listen to the wind rustling the birches, and as he lay there, sleep gradually overcame him. It snuck up on him. Otherwise, he wouldn't have yielded.

Just before Ants fell asleep, he'd been focused on a strange sort of cloud that reminded him of a foal from their old mare, running about with its short tail raised, its muzzle stretched forward, and its ears pricked up. But as he examined the cloud more closely, the foal turned into a calf with an upturned tail. Then the calf became a foal again, and soon turned back into a calf. Ants stared and stared at that wild cloud, which switched between calf and foal until the two shapes seemed to merge. Ants strained his eyes so he could

see exactly what this wonderful creature was, but just then sleep weighed down his eyelids and shut them. Ants saw nothing more and heard only the faraway cattle bells and the swish of the foal-calf's upraised tail soaring through the sky.

"That's just the wind in the birch at the edge of the field," he thought, and then it was all gone: the foal-calf in the sky, the birch at the edge of the field, the swaying rye, the thistles, the daisies, and the cowbells. Ants woke up only when his father thwacked his bare legs with a bundle of twigs.

"Where are your animals?" he asked angrily.

Thankfully they were nearby, grazing on fresh clover and rye. It took only a few moments to herd them back to the fallow. Then the father said to the boy, "Let down your pants!"

It was inevitable. After old Andres felt he'd fulfilled his duty, according to his anger and conscience, he walked home from the field. The animals continued grazing on the fallow as if nothing special had happened. The birches continued to rustle alongside the field, and the young rye swayed in the wind as if covered with long, long snakes that twisted and writhed. But neither foal nor calf remained in the sky. Ants kept looking for them, searching so eagerly that he didn't even notice the thistles pricking his bare legs. But what's gone is gone. The only clouds traveling across the sky were quite ordinary, like those he saw every day. He realized the foal-calf had been some sort of trick, and he never again lay among the thistles and daisies in the warm sun to watch the springtime sky. He tried to sit down on a stone, but found that his rear stung badly and his pants stuck painfully to his body. It was much better to stand among the thistles and daisies, with the young rye wafting in the air and tender, new leaves rustling in the meadow.

That evening, down by the cattle pen, Mari asked her son, “Did father whip you bloody?”

“It’s not too painful,” the boy replied.

“Show me,” said his mother. “Let down your pants.”

Her tone was very different than his father’s had been, but the boy wouldn’t unbutton his fly, as if her caring tone was worse, strange as that seemed. Ants wanted to obey his mother but he didn’t, yet he obeyed his father against his own will.

“No point letting them down now. It’ll still hurt either way,” said Ants, refusing to unbutton his fly. He felt his heart harden.

“How did you fall asleep?” his mother asked.

“I didn’t really,” said Ants. “I just dozed off a bit.”

Ants said nothing more to his mother. He hadn’t wanted to say even that much. There was no point. It’d still be painful to sit three days later.

While it hurt, the pain wasn’t nearly as bad as stubbing your toe on a stone or a tree stump, or catching a sharp splinter in the base of your foot. It hurt much more when a toenail or fingernail festered off. Sometimes he had ten different wounds on his feet and found it was difficult to take a step. Yet he’d still chase a lost cow or sheep, or the heifers when they raised their tails and stampeded before a thunderstorm, oblivious to his bruises, broken toes, and bleeding soles. From the heifers’ perspective, buzzing dragonflies and swarming gadflies meant a thunderhead was growing in the distance and they had no choice but to raise up their tails and make a run for it. Ants didn’t blame them—what else could they do? But he was sorry about one thing. Why had his father dug so many ditches in the first place and dried up the marshes so the animals were able to run? If water splattered between the hummocks and the heifers were up to their bellies in mud, how on earth could they

stampede? But those days were gone forever. Ants had started herding a little too late. It was easier in Liisi and Maret's day. Back then the Vargamäe animals never stampeded or roamed for mushrooms, unmoved even if you laid a stick on their backs.

That careless past meant little to Ants since he wasn't one to rack his brains or worry his heart over the unattainable or the trivial. Blowing horns and playing with snakes weren't important to him. He wasn't interested in grabbing a snake behind the head so its cold twisting body wound around his arm, as Andres did when he tended cattle and would do even now if he came across a snake while mowing or raking out in the hayfield. Once a snake bit Ants's foot and he took the hunting knife he'd just sharpened, cut out the bite mark, and squeezed as much blood from the wound as he could. Then he ripped out a good piece of his jacket's torn lining and bandaged his wound. Liine was charged with keeping track of the snake, and when Ants was finished with his foot he broke open the hummock where the villain hid and crushed its head on a birch root.

"Just try and bite me again," he sneered.

His foot festered and pained him for a long time, but he'd managed to keep it from swelling.

The story of Ants cutting himself with a knife appealed to young Andres, and he liked some of his brother's other deeds too. Ants was the first one at the Hill Farm to make snares for catching crayfish and basket traps for catching fish. He sank his traps into ditches, blocking the main current so even the little fish couldn't get past. This kept everyone—young and old—quite busy. Snares alone wouldn't have done the job, since empty snares never caught a crayfish. They dug holes for the special purpose of collecting frogs to bait the snares. These were dealt into bags on Saturday when

everyone, bags in hand, went quickly to the river to sink the snares in the dark.

Those poor frogs! Their agony began when they were caught, since the captors often swung the frogs by their legs. Andres held them that way, and so did Ants and Liine, but Indrek wouldn't. When Tiiu and Kadri got bigger they'd catch frogs that way, too—they already practiced—and when Sass got bigger they'd certainly teach him as well.

The champion frog handler was, of course, Ants, because he didn't just hold them between his palms, but hung them from his fingers, so as he gathered them up, his left hand looked like a wreath of pop-eyed frogs. That was the ideal method of gathering frogs, and everyone tried to do it that way—the copycats of frog hunting, so to speak. Ants was very proud and boasted often.

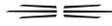
He was even prouder when it came to skinning frogs. Crayfish only liked skinned frogs (that was common knowledge at Vargamäe) and Ants figured out how to skin a live frog and attach it to a snare. To him it was easy. Rava Kustas, the neighborhood's perennial ridiculer, said crap wasn't what a man ate, but what came out behind, and claimed he could eat a live crayfish that kicked its legs as it went down while Ants could only skin live frogs.

Well, skinning a live frog was nothing compared to eating a live crayfish. But everyone was impressed with the boy and said, "Just wait until Ants grows. Then he'll surely outdo Kustas." Only his mother felt differently and, sometimes when he was pulling a frog out of a hole, she casually spoke to him.

"Today, don't torture the frogs and skin them alive. Kill them first. You know how, just take them by the legs and..."

"Mother, don't lecture me," Ants answered. "After all, I am the first and best frog killer at Vargamäe."

So Mari's attempt to stand up for the frogs was not a success.



Once or twice every summer the village clerk came to Vargamäe with Indrek to catch crayfish. It was a great event when he arrived, driving the parson's high-bow horse harness, the only one of its kind in the neighborhood. (The clerk himself owned neither bow harness nor horse.) It wasn't only the Hill Farm that got excited on such an important day; they were thrilled at the Valley Farm and even in the cottage. Here and there, from behind corners and fences, curious eyes stared. In the cottage, old Madis cursed his rheumatic legs, which kept him from going down to the river and showing the others how crayfish are best caught, and where to find them.

For the clerk, vodka was as necessary a tool for catching crayfish as snares baited with frogs, so he never came without a bottle. On each visit he expressed regret that the boys of Vargamäe preferred to catch their crayfish with only frogs and no vodka. He was the sole hunter to use vodka as added bait, hollering songs over the marsh, the islands, and the river fog. When he checked his snares he sang and splashed about so much that the crayfish had to be deaf or drunk to get caught. In fact, his snares were mostly empty, as if his frogs were defective or his snares were cursed. He tried using chicken legs instead of frogs, but his luck didn't improve much. He refused, however, to tone down his singing and splashing, since that was his only reason for coming down to the river at night.

Finally, the clerk found a solution: he got himself a set of snares that went along with his singing and splashing. No one at Vargamäe had ever seen such strange gear. The clerk was very proud and brought the parson along to witness the occasion. He'd invited the

cleric every time he borrowed the man's horse and harness to make these trips, but the parson always refused, deeming night fishing an unsuitable activity for a man of the cloth. But since the clerk had gotten new gear, the parson couldn't resist the trip to the river so he could see how it all worked. There were long cords attached to his new snares, which were thrown into deep water and then pulled up with the cords.

Once they got started, it became clear that the clerk's new snares were cursed just like the old ones. He couldn't catch any crayfish. But the new snares were very nice. Everyone who saw them at Vargamäe said so, and even those who'd only heard about them agreed the clerk's new snares were inexpressibly excellent.

There was only one problem with them. Once the snares were thrown into the deep water, attached to their cords, the clerk had trouble pulling them out again. They got stuck, as if wildly overloaded with crayfish, and when the clerk pulled with all his strength, the cords broke, leaving the snares on the river bottom. That happened three times.

The clerk blew up, swearing, "I'm getting those back no matter what."

No one, not even the parson, understood what he was thinking when he said that, but the clerk started to undress by the fire and they all realized he was planning to dive in and fetch his snares.

"Have you lost your mind, Mr. Luts," asked the parson, "diving to the river bottom at midnight?"

"Don't need light at the river bottom," said the clerk.

"Wait until morning," young Andres proposed.

"Then what will I fish with all night?" replied the clerk as he continued to peel off his clothes.

"Here, take my snares," Indrek offered.

“Then what will you use?” replied the clerk to his assistant. “My father is an old seaman. How can I leave my snares in this little stream?”

“How deep is it here?” asked the parson.

“Must be nearly three fathoms where the snare went in,” guessed Andres.

“You hear that?” said the parson. “Three fathoms. Don’t drown yourself in the middle of the night.”

“Drown? In this little brook?” said the clerk with surprise, and he took some deep breaths.

“Now, listen!” said the parson. “Don’t risk your life for a couple of snares. Leave them where they are.”

“I want to use them again next year,” replied the clerk, “but mostly I want to get them back. No matter what it takes, I will.”

With that, he started toward the river. The others followed.

“Let him go,” whispered Ants to Indrek. “I’d like to see if he gets them.”

Far away, across the river bend, they could see the glimmer of fire between the bushes. The clerk looked at the fire and shouted at the top of his lungs, “Yoo hoo!”

But there was no answer, only the fire flickering in the misty air.

“When I’ve been down at the bottom awhile, shout so I know which way’s up,” said the clerk, jumping in the water. Everyone went silent. The only sound was water rippling in the sunset and occasional bubbles breaking the surface. Moments became minutes, which felt like hours. The first to lose control was the parson, but as soon as he opened his mouth to shout, everyone else shouted with him, as if they all faced one common calamity. The water remained quiet. The spectators shouted again, and would’ve shouted a third time, but at that moment the clerk broke the surface.

“You’re shouting as if I’d already drowned,” he said, climbing onto the shore, adding, “Bring that bottle from my jacket pocket. I need a shot to straighten me out.”

“So what did you find?” asked Andres, full of curiosity.

“What I found,” said the clerk, “was a huge tree stump. The snares must be tangled in its roots, but I’ll find them.”

“A huge stump?” said Ants.

Amazed, Andres asked, “How did it get there?”

“There must’ve been a forest down there,” reasoned the clerk.

“A forest?” the boys wondered.

“Why not?” said the clerk, taking his bottle from Indrek and raising it to his lips. He added, “My heart’s in shape to go again now, but don’t start shouting so soon. Give me a little more time down there. I won’t drown that quick.”

This time the onlookers gave him more time, and when he returned to the surface he had a snare in his hand.

“Glory of God!” exclaimed the parson.

“Work of man,” countered the clerk, and after resting a little he jumped in again. Soon he came up from the river bottom with a second snare, which he found a short distance from the first, also tangled in the roots of a chunky tree stump. He never found the third snare, though he was prepared to search the whole river bottom.

“There was once a huge forest down there,” he said, ending his search at last. Spotting the flickering fire again, he shouted at the top of his lungs, as if through a forest on the riverbank, “Yoo-hoo!”

Again nothing came back except the sound of a moose splashing and rustling in the thicket of reeds across the river bend.

“Build up the fire. I want to warm myself,” said the clerk, and when the boys had done it and the fire heated his body, front and rear, he added happily, “This is real life, not behind some desk.”

“And what if you’d stayed down there, all for a couple of snares?” asked the parson.

“Down there?” countered the clerk, jokingly. “In a week I’d have popped up anyway, looking a lot fatter.”

The boys laughed.

“This is real life, like a poem,” repeated the clerk, after he’d warmed up enough to put on his shirt.

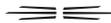
The parson couldn’t see poetry in his adventure, so the clerk asked, “What, then, is poetry? Just some fire flickering in the distance?”

“Why just a fire?” the parson responded. “Let me tell you, Mr. Luts, what I consider poetry. If here, around this fire, where we stand in the darkness, or anywhere else by night or day, we heard a patriotic song from among the bogs and marshes, sung in four-part harmony, as if from the river or the bushes, from the fire, from an island in the bog, or from anywhere...”

“From the river bottom,” joked the clerk.

“Why not the river bottom, where you found those big stumps?” the parson agreed. “If a beautiful song about our land suddenly broke out among these bogs and marshes, that I would call a true poem. And for such poetry I’d take off my hat.”

The clerk couldn’t see why patriotic songs among the bogs and marshes were more poetic than his plunge to the bottom of the river, after which he dried off by the blazing fire. Even on their way home the clerk and the parson kept up the debate, but neither managed to change the other’s mind. The clerk concluded that this parson was the same sort of inevitable romantic as his predecessor, while the parson viewed the clerk’s opinion as that of an egotist who thought only in terms of himself: whatever involved him was poetry and everything else was only nonsense and illusion.



At Vargamäe the story of the clerk's snares and his conflict with the parson interested both young and old. Never had a crayfishing expedition so dramatically affected the participants.

The young people wondered whether it was harder to eat a live crayfish or plunge to the bottom of the river at midnight and search for snares among the roots of old tree stumps. Ants hoped someone might remember how he'd skinned live frogs, but no one mentioned it, not even in passing. So he was shown at an early age that a prophet often lacks honor in his own country, but he didn't grasp it properly and decided his skill didn't amount to much. He never again skinned frogs alive. Instead, he beat them to death before skinning them, as his mother'd begged him to. Skinning live frogs now disgusted him, and he couldn't bear to see anyone else do it either. He resolved that, when he became a man, he'd either eat live crayfish or dive to the bottom of the river at midnight. In fact, the second thing he'd absolutely have to do, no matter what, and thinking about it was all the consolation Ants needed.

The older folks didn't care about the same questions that so concerned the young, or about Ants's plans for the future, because they had their own nut to crack—namely, what were those big stumps doing at the bottom of the river? Where did they come from? Had somebody put them there for a reason? Or had a large forest once grown along the edge of the river? And if so, when?

There was only one man who might tell old Andres about it. That was Madis the cottager, now confined to his bed like the tree stumps stuck at the bottom of the river, where the clerk found them. Madis recalled his father finding stumps like that around Vargamäe, not in

the river, of course, but deep in the ground, under the peat, when he was digging ditches. And further, Madis himself found thick trees buried underground once or twice when he marked out a ditch, trees like no one had ever seen growing in the area. Right where he dug ditches, there must've been a real forest. If a forest grew where now there were bogs and marshes, why couldn't large trees have also grown down by the river at Vargamäe? That seemed very possible, and Madis could even vaguely remember people talking about an alder forest on the riverbank at Soovälja a few miles upstream. He heard about it as a young man, but he had other interests then and didn't pay much attention. But that vision from his youth, of a forest down by the river, had taken root in his mind and now, little by little, it came back. How much his father knew about the forest in Soovälja, Madis could no longer remember. Perhaps for him, too, it existed only in a haze.

Madis's remembrances set Andres to thinking for a long time, and he imagined Madis's childhood home. He also envisioned himself down at the river bottom, sitting on the stump the clerk had found. He was astonished now that he'd ignored Madis's curses when chunks of tree stumps cost him time and energy during the ditch digging. He'd grumbled, "Those damned old stumps." Thinking about it now, Andres was sure Madis had often cursed like that while digging the ditches. At the time, they'd seen the stumps simply as nuisances. But now, long after they'd stopped digging new ditches at Vargamäe, and they hardly had time to clear the old ones, both Andres and Madis began to think about it again.

If there had once been a forest here, why couldn't it grow again? The soil seemed suitable for it, if only they drained the water. The ditches weren't steep enough and the river was too high. How could they fix that? Andres knew the river dropped more sharply further

downstream, and there were even some rapids. He also knew that further upstream the river did not meander lazily. It was only here, for a few dozen miles, that the marshlands lined its banks. What if it were possible to make the river run more swiftly at Vargamäe as well, so the water dropped a couple of feet? Even three or four feet? The idea made Andres's heart tremble. What would happen to the pastures and meadows of Vargamäe? What would happen to the pastures and meadows of the whole neighborhood? To the river bank itself? Or the bogs, if drainage ditches were dug through them? Soon it would all be dry and they'd hear a forest rustling in the wind, as perhaps it rustled in the past. Then men might start working the land again on Jõessaare and all the other bog islands, where once there had been fields. Perhaps the land could be cultivated, even in the bogs and marshes!

Yes, perhaps...but Andres knew it was just a notion in his head, like others before, and amounted to nothing. As Hundipalu Tiit once commented, "You shouldn't think such thoughts at Vargamäe." Tiit had once envisioned such a future for his own meadows, until concluding that he must not entertain such thoughts. If he allowed himself to indulge in such wild thinking, he was dead certain he'd forget the truly important things in life. But old Tiit, over there at Hundipalu, surely didn't know about the huge tree stumps the clerk had found at the bottom of the river. What would he say about them? And how would he answer the clerk and the parson? Andres would've liked to go to Hundipalu right then to chat with Tiit about those stumps, but he hesitated, afraid that Tiit would pull his chair close and pat him on the knee.

"Friend," he might say, "someday the same thing will happen to the big stones at the end of the bridge by the river. The brush beneath them will rot and they'll sink deeper and deeper, until they

reach the bottom. Then someday, when another man builds a new road or bridge, he'll come across those stones by chance, just as the clerk found the stumps on the river bottom."

Andres found it very strange to imagine a day when the big stones at the end of the Hundipalu bridge were gone. But what if the bridge itself were to disappear before the stones? What if you walked down to the river on the stones and needed a boat to get across. It was hard for Andres to think like that, but he consoled himself with a new idea: if such a thing were to happen, there wasn't a chance that Tiit or his children would be living at Hundipalu. Tiit would be gone from Hundipalu, and Andres from Vargamäe. Their families would be gone as well for, as Tiit once explained, their children's blood was tainted and kept them from contentment at home. New people would come live on these rises like flies on a manure pile, with no memories of the past or anticipation of the future.

But what would happen to the stones if the river dropped a few feet and the bank became hard and dry? Wouldn't they be left on dry land, leaving people to wonder why that row of stones was laid at the edge of the road? Was that really so impossible? And was it impossible to make the river run rapidly and clear it of reed and rush thickets? If they cleared the ditches, why couldn't they do the same with the river? The key would be pulling out the old weirs that blocked the water from flowing freely. Every stretch of the river had at least one brush weir, and some had two or three. Andres's sons had even constructed a few along their hayfields. And Madis the cottager had knocked together at least a dozen over the course of his life. Some were so old that nobody knew who built them or when, as if God had placed them on the river at Vargamäe.

But where would they find hands willing to pull out those poles of divine origin and clear the divine brush, which had been there

since the dawn of creation? Andres's eyes fogged over as he asked himself these questions. There were a frightening number of old weirs and poles in the river. He'd spent his days toiling at Vargamäe, but how much had he really accomplished? Only so much that he no longer went out every day in the spring and autumn to get cows from the marsh. But what would happen if he and his sons, and Pearu with his, and Hundipalu Tiit with his, and the men of Ämmasoo and Soovälja with theirs, and other men with no sons but with laborers, and men from further places like Metsakandi, Luiste, Kassiaru, and Urvaküla, and also those men who came from miles around for haying—what if all these men, fathers and sons, farmers and laborers, tenants and cottagers, each starting with his own hayfields, of course, cleared the river and pulled out the weir poles and deadwood? Would they overcome God's handiwork, which stood there since creation? Would the water run more freely, though it countered God's plan?

Andres figured, if everyone with hayfields on either shore began clearing—in the warm days of summer, when it was pleasant to splash in the water—if the whole township came, and the parish, and even the whole county came to clear the river, they could certainly conquer its eternal trash, so the water would run freely, even in that first summer, and the river would drop a couple of feet. And the ditches of Vargamäe could be deeper, too. That's what would happen if the water dropped.

As his thinking developed, Andres slowly sobered, as if vodka evaporated from his head, and realized that all this would happen when pigs could fly, if wishes were horses, and all the rest. It wasn't going to happen. Andres knew that pigs didn't have wings. He knew from experience that things would not happen as he imagined. No men from the parish, or even the neighborhood, would show up to

clean out the river. Andres doubted whether even Tiit and his sons would come to the river for such a purpose. Twenty years earlier he certainly would've come, but these days? Now Tiit preferred listening to his boys play their horns, and if he did go to the river, he took along his fishing tackle, his rod and line, his trolling gear and net, but not his shovel and axe.

And what could Andres do by himself? Ten years earlier, he certainly would've brought his farmhand, and perhaps Madis would've come too, but now the cottager lay in bed moaning, and instead of a farmhand Andres had a son going into the army in the autumn. Was there any point in the boy pulling old weirs from the river when he was about to be drafted? And if there was no sense in him doing it, was there any better reason for old Andres himself to go? What would his work amount to if nobody else showed up? He couldn't do anything with those weirs by himself. He was old now, and would be dead before he saw the results of his effort, so there was no point. Surely, none of the others would come. Pearu of the Valley Farm wouldn't come, the Soovälja men wouldn't, and neither would the men of Ämmasoo, nor Rava Kustas, Kukessaare Jaan, Aaseme Aadu, Võlla Juhan, Aiu Jüri, Kassiaru Jaska, or the farmers of Luiste or Urvaküla villages. So it was quite natural that Andres of Vargamäe stayed home instead of trying to clear the river.



Chapter 39

The summer before young Andres began his army service was stranger than any they'd seen before at the Vargamäe Hill Farm. The weather was nothing out of the ordinary and the meadows and fields didn't yield an exceptional harvest. And while the clover had grown outstandingly well and the lush potato tops promised a rich harvest, those things were hardly noticed, not talked about, and brought no special pleasure, not even to old Andres.

What happened in the natural world interested the folks at Vargamäe far less than the realization that young Andres, the pillar of the farm and its pride and glory, would start his military service that autumn. Old Andres brought it up on every possible occasion, and then young Andres began to talk about it, and finally the rest of the family, too, because everyone, like it or not, knew this event would have special importance for Vargamäe. Toward the end of the summer, when Andres pulled off some bit of mischief, even strangers made excuses for him.

"Just soldier's horseplay! Let him have his fun, because next summer he'll have an army coat on his back and a gun in his hand."

Pearu of the Valley Farm also discovered what young Andres's upcoming conscription would mean. Pearu had a notion to start

damming up the water below Jõessaare. He'd been getting ready for a year, digging a long stretch of new ditch, piling the dirt on one side to hold back the water, and pointing it toward Jõessaare so it would overflow the boundary ditch when he dammed it up.

Pearu bragged to everybody that he'd flood the hayfield. Nobody objected since they all knew there was good grassland there. However, when Pearu finally did dam the boundary ditch and flood his new hayfield, Andres's pasture below Jõessaare also filled with water, and his animals were left to slosh around, nibbling the tops of the grass. Tiiu and Kadri, who'd been tending the cattle together, brought the news home.

"What are we going to do with that troublemaker?" old Andres asked. "Now he's doing what Madis warned me about long ago. Since my ditch reached the river he hasn't been able to flood our pasture by the alder grove, so now he's trying to flood Jõessaare. It's easier for him to pull off that dirty trick there. He need only build a dam at the high point between the islands so the whole ditch fills with water and floods all the best grassland. The land there is high enough to hold the water back. Now we have no choice but to dig another ditch between the islands on our own land and let the water out that way. Then he can dam the boundary ditch all he wants, and he won't put our pastures under water again."

"Not me. I sure won't dig that ditch between the islands," said young Andres.

"But what else can we do?" asked old Andres. "We can't let our best pastures be flooded, and hauling him to court never works. I've fought with him many times."

"You don't have to go to court, father," young Andres said.

"What else can I do? Go and talk to him?"

“First we destroy his dam, and then we go talk to him,” said young Andres.

“Then all the endless fighting and hatred will flare up again. For years now it’s been buried under the ashes and we’ve put up with it,” said Mari.

“Flare up?” said young Andres with sarcasm. “How can it flare up any more? If our pasture is already awash, then it’s ablaze right now.”

He thought about it for a while and then added, “Leave this to me, father. You’ve been fighting Pearu long enough. Let me take him on.”

“Don’t do anything foolish,” cautioned his mother.

“Don’t go too far,” his father added.

“Let’s not talk nonsense,” answered the boy. “No one’s ever gone too far with Pearu, and I won’t either.”

Then young Andres picked up an axe and a shovel and headed to the woods to see Pearu’s dam. Ants ran after him down the lane.

“Are you going to smash the Jõessaare dam?”

“I’m just going to get it out of the way,” said Andres.

“Take me along,” Ants begged. “I want to watch the water rush through when the dam is gone.”

“Don’t you have a fence to build with father?” asked Andres.

“I don’t care,” said Ants. “He can do it alone.”

“And what will happen then?”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Ants. “I want to see you smash that dam and watch the water rush through.”

“Then let’s go fast,” said Andres, handing him the axe.

The boys raced down the lane, their feet flying. At the table Mari had noticed that Pearu’s dam caught Ants’s attention. So she went outside to see why the boys had disappeared from the table so quickly. She came around the corner of the house just as the boys

ran side by side down the lane and into the paddock, one holding the shovel, the other holding the axe.

Mari called out to Ants, shouting his name over and over.

“Mother’s calling,” Andres said to Ants as they ran.

“Let her call,” said Ants. “We’ll pretend we don’t hear.”

So the boys ran down the paddock as if they were deaf, and their mother continued to call out as they disappeared among the alders.

“It’s all right now,” said Ants, panting. They were out of mother’s sight behind the alders. “Now we can walk and catch our breath.”

“Sure. We shouldn’t run all the way to Jõessaare anyway,” guessed Andres, and slowed his pace to a walk. Actually, the boys were so eager to tear down Pearu’s dam that they would’ve run the whole way to get there as quickly as possible.

In Jõessaare, Pearu was busy repairing the dike of his new ditch. At the edge of the island he’d dug a hole and took clay from it to patch the dike. Upon seeing the Hill Farm boys he stopped and leaned on the handle of his shovel.

“Hey there, neighbor!” Andres called out, with an air of confidence. “We’ve come to tear down your dam.”

Pearu didn’t answer. Andres’s statement was so straightforward that Pearu couldn’t tell if it was a joke or a statement of fact.

After Pearu didn’t respond, Andres said, “Come on over here. I’d like to talk to you.”

“It’s easier for a child to move,” said Pearu.

“Fair enough,” said Andres, crossing the ditch at the dam and walking along the rise between the islands until he arrived at the spot where Pearu stood with his shovel.

“Listen, neighbor, you’re flooding our land below the island,” said Andres.

“Build a dike on your side to keep the water out,” proposed Pearu.

“My father wanted to dig a new ditch to drain the water, but I wouldn’t go along with that,” Andres told him. “Why should we dig a new ditch when we already have the old one? After all, it’s our ditch too, since father paid for half the cottager’s work.”

“But the ditch is on my land and I can do with it what I want,” said Pearu.

“You can do what you want with half the ditch, but you can’t touch our half, because it was dug with our money. Dam up half the ditch if you like, but the other half stays open,” said Andres.

“Whoever owns the land owns the ditch,” countered Pearu. “They said so in court many times.”

“Is that your final word?” asked Andres.

“What’s mine is mine, and I’ll not give it up,” Pearu asserted.

“Well, a good day to you then, neighbor,” said Andres, tipping his hat politely and walking away. He turned to Ants, “Let’s push that thing aside and let the water run through.”

“If you touch my dam, I’ll sue you both,” threatened Pearu, picking up his shovel and following the boys.

“We’re only opening our side of the ditch,” answered Andres. “We’ll leave your side untouched.”

And Andres did just as he said. He tore down half the dam. But the water didn’t spare the other half and it soon washed away. Andres quietly watched the games of the water, but the other two couldn’t keep from shouting, Ants out of joy as he raced along with the current, his back streaming with sweat, and Pearu out of overflowing rage, though he was nowhere as loud as he’d been in earlier years, when he fought for his dams near the alder grove with Andres’s cowherd or his laborer. The reason for this change might’ve been Pearu’s advanced years, or perhaps it was young Andres’s strength and polite manner. At any rate, when Andres saw

that the destruction of the dam hadn't caused much of a row, he went further.

"Come closer, neighbor, so you can watch the water wash away the dikes on its way to the river."

But Pearu didn't want to see how well the water ran, or watch his dikes wash away to the river. He stayed at a deferential distance.

"Old Andres used to teach his hired hands tricks like that, but now he's got his own sons doing his dirty work. Tonight, ask him if the Holy Scripture approves of this, as it approved of beating my dog on Christmas Eve, or driving his own daughter from the house and down to the cottage."

Andres became angry and gave Pearu a serious, heartfelt answer.

"Neighbor, if you want to talk man to man, then listen carefully. I have no opinion of your actions or my father's. I'm too young to remember. But understand one thing: I destroyed your dam today, though my father disapproved, and if you want to sue me, go ahead. I won't deny what I did, and you needn't bring witnesses. Remember, though: if you dam this ditch once more and flood our pasture, I won't treat it as a joke. I'm going to the army in the autumn, and by the time I leave, you'll know exactly who I am and what I can do. I give you my word as a man. I've never gone back on my word and I won't this time. That's all I have to say. Goodbye!"

With that, Andres shouldered his shovel and left. Ants trotted after him like a puppy. He thought Andres had spoken so well, like nobody else could, except maybe the pastor. The pastor might be the only one who could put things as clearly.

Pearu stood where he was and watched the boys until they disappeared behind the green bushes. Only then did he look at the water his neighbor's son had said was running so well. But Pearu saw at once there was nothing nice about it, and Andres had praised

it for no reason. Though Pearu stood on the bank for some time with his head bowed, he was not admiring the running water, but thinking things over instead. And he came to one definite conclusion—it was much more appealing to deal with old Andres than his son. More precisely, he couldn't deal with the son at all because the whole thing was over before it got started. If old Andres had been there, Pearu would've had a chance to say he didn't fear the man and no one could stop him from damming the water to flood his hayfield, not even the local or higher courts. But young Andres was gone before Pearu could get everything off his chest. If this was how young Andres behaved, there wasn't much point to damming the ditch. Pearu finally admitted what all of Andres's children knew: the beautiful and exciting days at Vargamäe were gone. It used to be that life itself happened there, but now nothing happened beyond what was necessary to keep body and soul together.

Pearu stood by the ditch for a long while, first facing it and then turning his back to the water. He looked at his new ditch, which started in the distance at the Vargamäe boundary ditch and ran down to Jõessaare, its dikes made watertight partly with clay. Between the new ditch and the boundary ditch lay the so-called flooded hayfield, which he'd mowed and smoothed with his own hands. Some lone birches with their lower branches cut off stood like apple trees in a grassy orchard.

Pearu felt a great sense of self-pity after such wasted work and effort. What was the point of anything if he couldn't flood his neighbor's pasture and leave the animals to slosh in the water? In his heart he reproved God, who blessed the efforts of His servant with such meager rewards. Why had He given Andres a son so feared and respected by the whole community? Why weren't Pearu's sons as strong, or any of his daughters pretty enough to

seduce that mighty bull, as Pearu liked to call him? Why should Pearu fear young Andres, as if he had any say over the Valley Farm?

But Pearu didn't fear him. He never feared the father and he wouldn't fear the son either. So he vowed in his newly flooded hayfield to rebuild the Jõessaare dam and flood the fields just as much as he liked. Having decided this, Pearu started home with a calm heart.

But for the rest of the summer he made no attempt to build a new dam at the Jõessaare boundary ditch. In light of traditional Vargamäe behavior and manners, this was amazing, and old Andres felt compelled to enlighten his son.

"He's getting old. Ten years ago he was a very different man."

"Ten years ago we also had very different men at the Hill Farm," answered the boy proudly.

"So you think he's afraid of you?" asked old Andres.

"Can't say for sure," chuckled the son.

"You must've threatened him," said the father. He kept asking questions, keen to know just what happened when the Jõessaare dam was destroyed. But the boys had agreed not to say anything at home, least of all the final words Andres said to Pearu. If Pearu himself wanted to talk, he could, but the boys would keep their lips sealed or make the whole thing into a joke, just something to be laughed at.

"Oh, I don't know," mumbled young Andres. "I only said wait and see what happens when I go to the army in autumn."

"Well, that's it, of course," said the father, but his son had distracted him from the Jõessaare dam and Pearu. "What if you manage a way out of it?"

“How?” replied the son. “They’re so short of men this year that even single sons tremble that they might have to go. So what chance do I have?”

“That’s the problem. There are so few men,” the father commented. “If it wasn’t for that you might get lucky and draw a high number, like Joosep.”

“I haven’t been lucky so far. Why should I be now?” said the son. “I’ve gotten everything I have because I’m strong, but in this business strength is no help.”

“You’re right. I’ve never been lucky either,” said old Andres. “Everything I have here at Vargamäe I’ve gotten through work and sweat. Think of the many animals I’ve lost one way or the other. How many sheep I’ve buried! Remember that beautiful chestnut foal, killed by a wolf on Midsummer Night? No one ever heard of wolves in these parts before or since, but still one found my chestnut, drove it into the bog, and slashed its throat. Nothing else, just slashed its throat. If I still had all those wasted animals I’d be a rich man, as I’ve often said...Now you’ll be another wasted animal. As soon as you start to help, they take you away to the service. What do you think—or maybe you haven’t thought about it yet—when you’re through with the army, will you come back to Vargamäe, or go off on your own like Hundipalu Tiit’s boys?”

“Who knows,” answered young Andres. “I haven’t been called yet, so how can I say what will happen afterward? Who knows which way the winds will blow.”

While old Andres seemed satisfied with this answer, a painful apprehension stabbed at his heart and he wanted to rebuke his son who spoke as if his home didn’t matter one way or the other and he couldn’t care less about Vargamäe. When it came to his own birthplace, old Andres felt very differently. Even now he’d pull his jacket

around himself and walk down the hill singing if only he could go live at his father's farm again. That's how he felt. But the blood in his son's veins seemed like that of a stranger.

During the summer Andres brought up the subject now and then, hopeful that his son might somehow reveal his love and affection for his home, even in spite of himself. He sought a hint, a little pretext that'd allow him to believe his first son would return to Vargamäe after his service, that he'd plow the same fields, mow the same meadows, and walk the land he'd drained, cleared, and farmed. But the son was immune to those probes, as if no deep feelings tied him to Vargamäe.



It wasn't just his oldest son who posed a problem for Andres. Indrek, too, upset him. As early as the rye harvest, he learned that Indrek intended to leave his job with the village clerk and continue his studies in town. The clerk was trying to keep him, but couldn't because Indrek was eager to leave.

This came as no surprise, for as far as Vargamäe was concerned, Indrek was already gone. Yet Andres wished he'd stay on with the village clerk, at least until his older brother got out of the service.

Mari favored Indrek's plan to live in town, as long as he could find a way to do it. She saw the town quite differently than Andres. She'd once been there, and whenever she thought back on it she felt a little frightened and also awed by its size and splendor. Even the thought of Indrek living in a place she found so scary was very exciting and fascinating. The one time Mari had gone to town, their horse stood in front of a large, tall building with several rows of large windows. Mari sat in the wagon, staring at that building for

a long time, but still she couldn't remember how many stories or windows it had. To this day, she was sure there must've been an awful lot, or else she would've remembered how many. And when she imagined Indrek walking boldly in and out of such a house, she only wished for him to do it, so everyone could see him go in and out without the least bit of fear.

So when Indrek came to Vargamäe one Sunday near the start of autumn and told his father directly that he'd leave the clerk and go to town as he'd long planned, Mari's heart filled with joy while Andres felt bitter. That was no surprise either. It'd always been true at Vargamäe that when joy filled one heart, it drained from another. There was never enough joy to fill every heart, since God had allocated so little among the marshes and bogs. When the old folks were happy, the children cried, and when the children were laughing, the old folks wiped their tears, as if they were sad that their children found joy. When the women squealed with happiness, the men suffered, and when the men tasted good luck, the women groaned, as if begrudging their children's fathers any pleasure. There had been one time when Andres felt entirely happy at Vargamäe—that was when Krõõt gave birth to their son. But then Krõõt died, smiling at death, and Andres sat down beside a stone and cried, regretful that she'd once been able to smile from the bottom of her heart. How strange were the joys and sorrows of the people of Vargamäe.

At that moment, though, Andres was especially hurt that Indrek had not asked his permission, opinion, or advice, but simply stated his intention to leave, as if no one else had any say in the matter. His father wanted to show him how much he still needed an older man's guidance.

“The clerk gave you a raise, didn't he?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Indrek replied as if his father’s words were pointless, making Andres feel as if they were. But he pressed on.

“What does matter then? Have you a better job in town?”

“No,” said the son in the same tone of voice. “I’m not looking for a job. I want to go to school or study more somehow.”

“Do you have enough money for that?” his father asked with growing surprise. “They won’t let you into a school without money.”

“I don’t have much,” the boy answered, “but a little. I was going to ask if you could help me some. Later, when I get a job, I’ll repay you.”

The father was shocked. He never imagined his own son could speak to him so matter-of-factly, as if addressing a stranger. In a few years, Indrek had become quite a different person, as if he’d not been born and raised at Vargamäe.

Mari listened silently to the conversation between father and son, frequently wiping tears from her eyes. Good Lord above! Their own child, the child of their guilt and sorrow, was asking to borrow money!

Finally, she asked Andres, “How are things going this year?”

“How are things going?” replied Andres. “How should they go? You can see for yourself, anyone strong enough to walk goes away from here. They marry, or go to the army, or move to town. Soon it will be just us two old people left behind at Vargamäe, with hired help, and that’s it.”

“Can’t you manage something?” asked Mari.

“Forty, fifty at most, not more,” answered Andres. “And that will be tough enough.”

“That would be a big help,” said Indrek, feeling moved.

“But I’m giving it to you. I don’t want it back,” said Andres.

“Yes. It can’t be any other way,” insisted Mari.

“Maybe next year I can give you more,” said Andres, in a comforting tone.

“And I’ll see how it goes in town,” replied Indrek. “I’ll get by. I have a little of my own. Give me only what you can, and I can borrow if I have to.”

“Who’d lend you money?” the father asked. “What stranger would lend money to a child?”

“There might be somebody who’d lend money to a child like me,” said Indrek resolutely. Mari wiped her eyes again, thinking of how much she’d lent of herself, giving a mother’s love to Krõõt’s children. Why should it surprise her that someone might lend her child money?

If Mari knew who Indrek hoped to borrow money from, she’d have wiped her eyes even more. And, as if she wanted just that, she questioned her son indirectly when they were alone, hoping to find out who it might be. But Indrek only answered vaguely, making his mother feel as his father did, that living among strangers had made a stranger of their own child.

There was a strange story behind Indrek’s plan to borrow money. Before Indrek, the clerk’s assistant was a spinster named Mai, whom the clerk called Maie because of her long, faithful service in the post. She had brown eyes and light brown hair. Her left arm was weak, so she couldn’t do hard work, but she still peeled potatoes and lifted dishes to wash and dry. Aside from that, the clerk’s assistant Maie was a stout, strong woman with a gentle soul that seemed closely related to her left arm.

Maie’s great joy was regaling everyone who cared to listen with the stories of the novels she’d read. She was so good at it that many thought Maie’s stories were better than the actual books. They

always found something foreign about novels, but when they listened to Maie, the stories came alive.

One most fascinated by Maie's story-telling talent was the parson's servant, a gray-eyed, taciturn man a few years her junior, with a straggly white mustache. Maie the clerk and Juhan the servant could sit together for hours, with only the sound of Maie spinning tales of romance, burning passion, and life-long love.

But it happened that Juhan had to leave the parson's employ. He moved to another parish and took over a small farm from his older brother, who'd found better opportunities elsewhere and gave up his birthright to Juhan. Only when Juhan left and she'd lost her one faithful listener, Maie realized that her own soul spoke when she told her tales of endless passion and eternal love, hoping to warm the cold heart of Juhan. In her stories, Maie's own ardent heart was ablaze.

In order to keep that flame lit, Maie began a correspondence with Juhan, but letters didn't come as easily to her as tales, which benefitted from her tone, gestures, tears, and passionate glances. She wrote and wrote, but after reading back what she'd written, she tore each letter up. Her written words had no trace of her burning heart and tumultuous soul, and those, after all, were her only reasons for writing Juhan to begin with.

Finally, Maie began to feel desperate and slipped into a deep sadness. Everyone noticed that faithful Maie, the clerk's assistant, was depressed. Even the old pastor's wife heard about it. But Maie, taking an example from a novel, found a solution: she told Indrek her sad story and asked for his help in writing the letters. She felt she'd earned the right to ask this, since she'd looked after Indrek for years like he was her own child, doing his laundry and mending

his underwear, clothes, and socks. Asking for a little help in return didn't seem like too much.

Luckily, that solved Maie's problem, for although Indrek was young, he had his own small stable of experiences and memories, which were stirred by Maie's sad tale and her request for help. As if driven by an evil spirit, Indrek rummaged through his box of books and papers for a long time until he found a faded postcard with two pink hands grasping each other firmly. On the other side, "In Remembrance" was printed in Russian, and underneath, the single letter "M."

So, through Indrek's heart and his hand, Maie's correspondence with Juhan flourished. Maie told Indrek what she wanted to say to Juhan, and Indrek wrote it down. As time went by he freed himself from Maie's style, and soon wrote of things that Maie never said, but perhaps only felt and dreamed about, so beautiful did Indrek's letters sound to Maie.

The correspondence went on for a year and a half and as Juhan read her letters, he gradually forgot about Maie's advanced years and her weak left arm. One day he came to propose to her properly, with bells, liquor, a best man, and all the rest. The wooing was so splendid and full of joy that the groom burst into song, and so did the bride and the best man, and even the clerk couldn't help but join in. The only one who didn't sing was Indrek. He felt an unexplained pain in his heart. His head was mixed up and his eyes fogged over. Later, Indrek and Maie crossed paths in a dark hallway and the woman put her arms around the boy and kissed him firmly, right on the mouth, several times. Her embrace was so firm, it seemed Maie's left arm had gotten stronger and Indrek felt fire shoot out of his eyes, and by the light of the blaze, he thought he saw the

words, “In Remembrance.” The fire went out before he could see if the letter “M” was written beneath.

When Maie finally let go of Indrek and went out to the well for an icy drink of water, the boy stood in a daze against the wall, as if he’d been drinking the bridegroom’s sweet wine. When Maie returned and found Indrek still standing where she’d left him, she was upset.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” said Indrek.

“Are you feeling sick?” she persisted.

“No,” said the boy, holding his hand to his brow as if his head ached.

“Or is it because I...?” asked the woman.

“I don’t know. Maybe,” said Indrek.

“I’m truly sorry, if that’s why,” said Maie, her eyes filling with tears. “I don’t know what came over me...” She sobbed. “I’m happy, so very happy, and I know it’s all because of your letters. Let me tell you something: I’ve saved over two hundred rubles, and I haven’t mentioned it to Juhan. You always said you wanted to go to school in town, but you didn’t have the money. Would you take half of my money? We won’t tell anyone, not even Juhan. If you’re able, you can pay it back someday, but if not, that’s all right. All right? Take the money and go to town. Leave soon, so when I’m gone, you’re gone. Okay? Give me your hand.”

Indrek offered his hand, which Maie pumped vigorously, but the handshake brought the wine back to her head and she looked as if she might try to kiss him again.

That’s how Indrek came to borrow the money, and he never told anyone, not even his mother. He couldn’t mention it, or his eyes would go up in flames again, illuminating those Russian words.

Maie kept her promise. She would've given him more if Indrek had asked for it, but he asked for nothing and he thought even this money too much. But Maie insisted, and he finally accepted. It was hard to tell who was happier, the lender or the borrower.



After Indrek left, an unusual mood reigned at Vargamäe. There was some joy but often a strange sadness pervaded the farm. Old Andres was incommunicative and Mari wiped her eyes every now and then, though she couldn't say why. She'd wanted Indrek to move to town, and had told Andres, just as Hundipalu Tiit did, that he should let the boy go. Indrek was no longer a baby in need of protection. But now Mari went around Vargamäe wearing a sorrowful look in front of her other children.

No one was surprised, for the days when the mistress of Vargamäe still laughed on her way to the barn or sang while sitting at the spinning wheel were long gone. If they'd been asked, the children would've said that all mothers were unhappy and never laughed based on life with Mari. Mothers were beasts of burden who could hardly bear their loads, groaning and sighing so much that everybody got used to it and stopped paying attention. Mother went around with a mournful face and father looked serious and resigned, as if God himself cast a thrall over Vargamäe. Only the children laughed and chattered cheerily whenever they were together.

Around the neighborhood, Indrek's departure didn't get much attention. Only his godfather, Hundipalu Tiit, came by before Indrek left, so he might talk to the boy and give his blessing. As the

boy's parents looked on, Tiit talked to Indrek as if he were a man, expressing his profound respect for education.

"It's not too much to ask Vargamäe to give the nation one man with a university education," said Tiit to Andres, unearthing his tired but still cherished belief, which he'd repeated for years. Even so, he stated it again as if it were unique, fresh, and bold.

"It wouldn't have been too much to ask Hundipalu either," Andres countered, excusing himself.

"No, it wouldn't," Tiit agreed, stroking his wide, nearly white beard. "When I bought the Hundipalu farm, I thought I'd send one of my boys to the university, but..."

"It didn't happen," said Mari.

"It didn't happen," Tiit repeated, running his hand over his large, bald head and stroking his closed eyes. "It didn't happen," he sighed. "I couldn't manage it and neither could anyone else, not even you, Andres, though I thought you would."

"I'm managing now," said Andres.

"Not really," argued Tiit. "Indrek is too old. He won't be accepted."

"Yes, I will," said Indrek.

"Even to the university?" asked Tiit, smiling with joy.

"If I want to," figured Indrek.

Indrek's words so moved Tiit that tears dripped onto his beard. Andres and Mari noticed the effect Indrek's words had as Tiit took his wallet from his pocket. With trembling hands, he offered two ten-ruble notes to Indrek.

"That's for the trip, from a godfather to his godson." When Indrek hesitated, Tiit said, "Take it. You'll probably need it."

The sight of the money moved Mari deeply, and she lifted her apron to her eyes with both hands.

Before he left, Tiit clasped his godson's hand for a long while.

“Go and make a man of yourself. But don’t do what my boys did. Study harder, then perhaps you’ll stay in your country and make a difference. That’s what your old godfather wishes. You’re starting a bit late, but do your best and maybe you can make it up. Look, your father and mother and I didn’t work hard enough, and that’s why we never got what we wanted.”

These last words mystified Indrek. How could his parents and godfather have possibly worked any harder? They were already old and feeble beyond their years from too much work. But Andres knew what Tiit meant. His words carried a sad message for Andres, Mari, and Tiit himself.

If Tiit had spoken freely and openly, so that Indrek could’ve understood, he would’ve said, “My dearest godson, work hard and be happy! Look at us—me and your father and mother. We’ve worked hard but we were never happy. And now we’re old.”

But Tiit didn’t say that, because this was a happy day and no shadow would fall across it. So, in a happy mood, he left Vargamäe and headed down the road toward Hundipalu, feeling that his life was not spent entirely in vain.

Andres too had a similar feeling, for it suddenly occurred to him that Indrek might become a pastor and preach from a pulpit, maybe even the pulpit of their own church, so everybody, including all the people of Vargamäe, would hear him.

Mari had her own worries, like whether her son would get enough to eat in town. Would his homespun clothes be suitable? Would he wear the linen shirts she’d woven, bleached, and sewn, or would he need something better? With these questions swirling in her mind, she bustled around, preparing food and baking bread, thinking to herself and consulting Indrek about how they should arrange and pack all his things.

Indrek wasn't worried about anything, so enthralled was he with the excitement of leaving. He didn't talk about it, but his happiness flowed over. Even as he rode down from Vargamäe, he felt his soul soar, but when he and young Andres reached the high fields at Völla, habit took over and he looked back at the tall pines on the highest rise of Vargamäe. Suddenly he felt a hot pain in his chest, as if something had torn apart inside him. He'd never felt such heat and pain before—it was the heat and pain of the old pines of Vargamäe, fated to remain there after Indrek had gone, a reminder of all that was cherished and good at Vargamäe.

Along the way the two brothers hardly spoke, just as always. Even if they'd tried, they wouldn't have understood each other, since they were as different on the inside as they were on the outside. One brother was big and strong, a man who charged through life with his mighty chest and powerful arms, while the other was rather tall, thin, and fragile, seemingly weighted down by his heavy head. Both had bluish-gray eyes, but Andres's were lighter and more open, while Indrek's were darker and a little too deeply set under his heavy brows, with thick lids that gave him a pensive, intense look, the reserved appearance of a dreamer. One brother held his head high, almost cocked back, but the other seemed already bent at the waist, with a hollow chest, sharp shoulder blades, and his head hanging down. When they laughed, Indrek's big mouth twisted, as if he might cry, while Andres revealed joy, sincere and un-suppressed. Andres's body was a larger version of his father's, but his soul didn't seem to come from either parent. His happy open-heartedness wasn't found in his father, nor was it typical of his blessed mother. Indrek took after Andres's mother in appearance as well as character, for his frail body and dark spirit came neither from his

father nor his own mother, but perhaps from Mari's mood when she was expecting him.

So the two brothers traveled toward the railroad station in silence, sometimes talking of minor things.

When Indrek had gotten his train ticket, Andres said, "Well, in about a month I'm going into the service, so..."

"Who knows when we'll see each other again," said Indrek.

And that was all they said before goodbye.

At home, old Andres asked his son about Indrek's departure.

"It was nothing. He just got on and sat down, and pretty soon the train was out of sight."

And with that, another child left Vargamäe, and no one thought he'd ever come home.



When young Andres left for the service, it was quite a different story. Everyone knew his absence was supposed to be temporary, but his departure was harder than his brother's because Indrek had been away from the family farm for some time already.

Until he drew his lot, things weren't too bad, but the day Andres was drafted, all the others at Vargamäe, in the farmhouse, barns, fields, and marshes, felt as if they were keeping vigil over a dead man. Old Andres couldn't explain the feeling that came over him. Only once before, when Krõõt rested in her coffin, had he seen Vargamäe's fields and forests in the same light. At that time he worked just as he did now, aimlessly, out of habit, and without any notion of value.

The young recruit wasn't expected to work during his last few days. He wasn't himself as he walked around his father's farm like

a shadow or spirit not made for earthly tasks. But young Andres couldn't sit around doing nothing during his last two or three weeks at the farm, even if he'd wanted to. For a few days he tried, but then went back to work again, even harder than before.

"It's better like this," he said. "If I don't work, I don't sleep. I just toss and turn till my arms and legs hurt."

"There's no better medicine than hard work if you want to sleep well," old Andres agreed.

On Saturday evenings and Sundays, young Andres passed the time in the villages of Luiste and Urvaküla and on some of the isolated farms where he was known. When he went to parties, he danced more than usual, but with boys rather than girls. In Urvaküla he met a couple of other recruits, and with them he danced polkas, waltzes, and fast gallops—the best way to get your blood boiling.

All the girls thought Andres became more conceited after he drew his draft lot, or else why wouldn't he dance with them instead of horsing around with the other boys? But Andres didn't feel that way. If anything, he felt less prideful. Kassiaru Maali was the only girl who knew it and she kept it to herself.

Once, she said to Andres, "Last summer you promised to do in my husband when you got out of the army, even if it meant you'd be sent to Siberia. If you're still interested, I'll do what I can so you don't have to go on my account."

"I wouldn't kill your husband," said Andres. "I was shooting my mouth off last summer, just for the hell of it."

Maali saw that Andres had lost his swagger. The richest and most refined farm-owner's daughter regretted it deeply, and when she went home that night in the dark—and she deliberately went home alone in the dark that night—she felt like crying openly since no one could see her. And even if someone heard her, he'd never

have guessed that Maali cried for the loss of Andres's arrogance. No one knew how deeply Maali would've loved Andres if he pummeled her husband when he got back from the service.

After she'd cried in the autumn darkness, Maali made a rock solid decision. She would arrange it so Andres would absolutely have to do in her husband as soon as he got out of the service, and he'd be sent to Siberia for it, so it'd be very clear to him who Kassiaru Maali was. In Siberia he'd think of her.

At that moment Andres was also walking home alone in the dark like Maali, unaware of her plans. His thoughts were different than Maali's. So long as his blood ran hot from dancing he didn't do much soul searching, but as his body cooled down in the chill autumn air, his thoughts turned serious. A growing sense of emptiness crept into his heart and mind, and in that emptiness was a restlessness that made him anxious and ill. Filled with this emptiness, Andres shuffled home.

Old Andres had brewed some beer and killed a couple of sheep for his son's day of departure. Mari made headcheese, baked holiday bread, and cooked salted and fresh pork on the stovetop, as if it were a big holiday. But there was no holiday, only the day Andres of Vargamäe sent his firstborn son to the army. They'd even bought pickled herring at the shop and borrowed knives, forks, and plates, so the dining table looked like it was set for a party.

The guests began to arrive the evening before, and everyone ate and drank all through the night. It was almost dawn before they stretched out on the straw and closed their eyes. A lot of people came from all over the neighborhood, mostly men, since the army was not women's business.

Hundipalu Tiit had come, for this year he had no son of his own to send to the service. The Aaseme people had come—not the old

folks, who now rested six feet under, but their heirs, who were no longer so young themselves. Aiu Mallu had come with his only son, who'd drawn his lot and managed to get out of it. Kukessaare Jaan and his old wife were there, having sent their son the year before. Rava Kustas wasn't there but he'd promised to come in the morning, for he too had a son drafted. The old bachelor Kingu Priidu didn't show up. He'd given up his farm, moved to town, and set up a butcher shop, where he still played "Christ Is My Life" on his zither. A new master had quickly taken over the Kingu farm, but they'd not yet met him at Vargamäe. Vihukse Anton, Kingu's nextdoor neighbor who was famous in the neighborhood for dozing off, snored by the warm wall, having tossed back too much beer from the keg. No one came from Kassiaru, as if there were a feud between that farm and Vargamäe. But there was no feud, for young Andres put aside the idea of killing any future husband of Jaska's only daughter Maali, to avoid any possible soreness between the two families. Old Andres brought bedridden Madis from the cottage, so the old man could say goodbye to his son with the rest of the family.

"It was you who drained the waters of Vargamäe down to the river, so you should also see my son off to the army," said Andres to Madis.

The old man groaned in reply, "When I drained that water I was still a man. Now, I'm a cripple."

"You don't need health to see off a soldier, if the soldier himself is strong and healthy, and Andres certainly is that," said old Andres.

"That's the truth," said Madis. "You can be proud of your son."

"Then come and say goodbye to my pride and joy," said Andres sadly.

None among the guests had seen or heard anything about Pearu of the Valley Farm. It was as if a black cat had run between the two

neighbors, finally separating them for good. There was no longer enough of a bond to bring someone from the Valley Farm to sample the beer and taste the headcheese and bread. It used to be their friendship extended at least that far. But the younger generation at Vargamäe was different than Pearu and Andres's older children had been. It seemed the younger children were conceived of poisoned blood and raised on bitter milk, which made them shun each other like strangers, as if both sides carried a deadly charge of electricity.

Yet the Valley Farm didn't entirely miss out on the party at the Hill Farm, for the wind was blowing from that direction, carrying the sweet smell of stewing pig heads and legs, pork belly softened with hot stones, simmering headcheese, sizzling sausages, and bread fresh from the oven. That much mercy did old God grant the warring households, preserving the last link between these mortals here on earth, since they would come face to face again in heaven, thanks to the Savior's love.

The Valley Farm accepted the good smells appreciatively, as they were carried on God's graceful wind from the Hill Farm. The children stopped in the middle of the yard like crows or magpies on a fence pole, their open mouths turned toward the Hill Farm. The old people stopped too and drew deep breaths when a new smell reached their noses.

"I wonder if the neighbors are making headcheese for Andres's son," muttered the Valley Farm mistress, as if to herself. "Or is it just the smell of meat soup, which old Andres will only eat with lots of pepper and spices?"

The mistress said nothing more and it was left at that, since no one answered. That was all they could do at the Valley Farm to see off the neighbor's son.

Meanwhile, up at the Hill Farm, the eating and drinking continued all through the night until morning, when Rava Kustas arrived with his son Ants and they headed off to the county seat to reach the assembly point on time. Before they left, old Andres brought out his hymnal and everyone understood what it meant to him to send his oldest son to the army.

It was the same hymnal Andres had read to Krõõt, to his children, and over Juss's open grave. All those solemn occasions were linked by this book, and the assembled guests suddenly felt as if they stood before an unseen coffin. Even that old braggart Rava Kustas felt that way as he looked at his son and sang along with Andres's recitations.

As he began the prayer, Andres couldn't help thinking back on all the times he'd stood in front of family and friends with this book. There must've been something gentle in his voice and face as he read, for everyone began to weep. First the old ladies and the children, then the old men wiped their eyes, and finally the young men and girls began to blow their noses. No one knew why such emotion overcame them all, but everyone acknowledged it. Perhaps it was Holy Scripture. Very possibly.

Mari of Vargamäe, who'd grown distant from her stepson in recent years, now wished with teary eyes to be close to him again. As they said goodbye, she looked so small next to him, and when he slipped his arm around her waist and said comfortingly, "Don't cry, mother. I'm not about to die," she felt inexpressibly good and wished she could stand longer next to him. How wonderful to think that she'd fed Andres from her breast. Though she hadn't brought him into the world, perhaps his powerful arms and legs were due in some small part to her milk.

Old Andres wanted to drive his son to the county seat, but the boy refused, partly because he wished to save his father the trouble and partly because he was more at ease with strangers. It would be simpler to ride the county trains rather than go with his father. So Andres decided to take the boy as far as the local government office.

As they rode down from Vargamäe, young Andres said, "You'll have to hire some help again, father."

"You know, I don't think I will," old Andres replied.

"But Ants is still so young and not strong enough."

"We always managed the work at Vargamäe with boys," said the father.

"But Vargamäe was different back then, and you were a different man, too," said the son.

Old Andres sat for a while in silence, his back bent. "I want to see if I can get by without hired help until you get back."

"If I come back at all," commented the boy.

His father looked frightened. "What are you saying?" he managed to mutter after a pause. "Who have I been working and sweating for all these years? Don't you have any love at all for Vargamäe?"

"Father, even you don't really love Vargamäe. It's just that you don't want your work handed over to strangers, that's all," said the boy.

"On a day like this, how can you say such things?" Andres was pained.

"Didn't you say just this summer that you'd go back to your father's farm if only you could. You'd put your jacket on and walk away from Vargamäe singing. Didn't you say that?"

Hearing his own words from the mouth of his oldest son, old Andres knew they were true, but he couldn't understand why his son threw them back at him so hurtfully. On the day of his

departure, the boy should've had some pity for his father—but sons never pity their fathers.

Old Andres stayed quiet for a long time before he answered. “What if I were to go back to my father’s farm? Vargamäe is your father’s farm, so you should come back here.”

“That’s the way it is,” answered the son. “Did your father love the place his children were born?”

“We all loved it—father, mother, and children.”

“But you don’t love the place where your children were born, and neither did mother, because of all the marshes and bogs. You told me that,” the boy explained.

“Yes, your sainted mother,” said old Andres. “But the marshes can be drained, and the forest would come back. That’s what should happen.”

“Why should we bury ourselves in the marshes, when it’s easier to earn your daily bread elsewhere?” asked the boy, and when his father gave no answer, he added, “Unless it’s for love, of course...”

“Work and sweat, then love will come,” said the father.

“You’ve worked and sweated, and so did mother or she wouldn’t have died so young. But love never came and there’s none at Vargamäe to this day.”

They were sad words, so sad that old Andres didn’t understand how his son could say them. As he drove down the hill from Vargamäe, old Andres stooped over and seemed even older, so his son felt very sorry when he glanced at him.

“But who really knows,” young Andres said. “Man proposes but God disposes.”

“Yes, you can’t go against God,” his father agreed, imagining God as a bottomless vat where all the world’s worries and sorrows were poured. But it never filled up. The vat was a great masterwork,

containing all sorrows and grievances, and old Andres marveled at the thought of it as he sat next to his son in the wagon, driving down to the government office.



After the recruits departed, old Andres didn't feel like going home. So he dropped in at the tavern, where he was likely to find some friends in the crowd.

It wasn't the old tavern from days of yore, only a beer hall now. And the men inside weren't like the old patrons. Most were farmhands, lumbermen, peat cutters, and young servants at the manor—not farm owners. The hellraisers of the past had gotten old or poor, and they'd taken the good old days with them. Times and manners had changed, though no one knew when, why, or how.

However, Pearu of the Valley Farm was at the tavern. But he didn't sit in the first-class salon as he used to. Not even Kassiaru Jaska frequented the first-class salon anymore, nor did he go to country fairs and bargain for horses. Some blamed his age, others guessed that he had less means. The first-class salon was full of youngsters with beer bottles and no notion of the old days. They bragged a lot, but they boasted of childish things, like who was the first to finish his bottle or bun, or who could polish off the most bottles without stepping outside to piss. And their bragging always brought the same result—the stink of the first-class salon gave it away, and there weren't any who liked it.

No one poured his money onto the bar. Everyone complained that they didn't have enough. There was nobody who dared make up songs like Lullu's, those bawdy men's songs, then bite a piece of glass and some hay for a single shot of vodka. Even their fights

weren't real men's fights. No one grabbed a fistful of hair or stuck a thumb into another man's eye—though the former was understandable since the young men kept their hair much shorter these days. They didn't have much for fists either, so they fought with bottles, full or empty, or they pulled out knives, or hit each other with sticks.

The old fellows sat there like the ruins of an earlier time, with nothing left but a bare memory of the good old days.

With just weak beer to drink, it took a long time for throats to dry out and voices to resonate. It even took Pearu a while to approach his neighbor. When Pearu drank vodka, it was a different story.

"So you've sent off your pirate of a son," Pearu finally said to Andres.

His neighbor pretended not to hear, so Pearu moved closer and spoke louder.

"Why don't you answer me? Have you been struck deaf?"

"Don't I have the right to be quiet?" Andres answered.

"There you go again with your justice and rights," said Pearu. "How far have they gotten you?"

"Have you gotten further with crooked tricks?"

"Sure, I saved my eldest son from the army while yours was drafted. And you sent your second son off to town to be a horse thief."

"Who says he'll be a horse thief?" asked Andres.

"What else could Indrek be up to?" retorted Pearu.

"Indrek went to town so he might one day teach truth and justice at Vargamäe," said Andres seriously.

"You'll get along better at Vargamäe without them," said Pearu. "Otherwise you never would've sent your murderous son to Jõessaare last spring."

"I think he put some fear into you," said Andres, smiling.

“Do you think he asked about the justice I won in court?” asked Pearu. “No, he only said he’d do me in if I tried to put a dam on my ditch.”

“Do you in? You don’t deserve any better,” retorted Andres.

“That pirate won’t be any worse off eating army biscuits,” taunted Pearu. “It’ll only improve him, and let others live a little longer.”

“So they’ll live longer and dam up water on other men’s land,” scoffed Andres.

“I’m not afraid of you or your brood,” said Pearu.

“Just keep to yourself then, and keep your damned brats away from mine,” growled Andres, keeping up his end of the conversation. It wasn’t much fun with nothing but weak beer to drink, especially since there was freshly brewed beer at the farm.

As he rode home, Andres recounted the things Pearu had said. His adversary was clearly frightened by young Andres, so much so that he’d abandoned his plans to dam the ditch. Maybe he forgot about his other tricks as well because of young Andres. But now he was sure to start again. Of course, old Andres wasn’t afraid of Pearu. He was just tired of the man’s tricks and bored of quarrelling. He needed some help and support. But where would he find it? Ants was growing bigger but he was nothing like Andres’s firstborn son, and soon he’d go into the service, too. By then young Andres would be back, but would he be back to stay? How strange that he’d said there was no love at Vargamäe.

It had been drizzling for days, but now the wind shifted and the sky cleared. When Andres led his horse up Völlamäe rise, the sun was shining as it had one day long ago. But it’d been spring then and now it was autumn. Between the wagon shafts was a sorrel mare—not the same one, but its offspring. The wagon had wooden axles then, and now they were iron. That spring day Krõõt sat in the

wagon with sad eyes and Andres walked beside, urging the horse on so they'd reach home before sundown. Now Andres sat alone in the wagon, his back bent, and it mattered little whether he reached Vargamäe by sundown or not.

He looked at the pines on the rise at Vargamäe, and they brought to his mind the words he'd spoken to Krõõt. She was long dead now and barely remembered at Vargamäe, and Andres was old, but the pines looked as they always had. Their boughs seemed a little sparser, though possibly it was Andres's eyesight, which grew worse each year.

As he crossed the Vargamäe swamp causeway, Andres remembered their conversation. He found it extremely painful to admit that Krõõt, and not he, himself, had brought about the changes in the causeway. More painful was that Krõõt went away so early, leaving her memory to shine over the causeway forever.

When he got home, Andres said nothing. He just drank beer until his head swam, afraid he wouldn't be able to sleep without it. During the night, perhaps when the beer wore off, he woke up and quietly left the bedroom. He considered drinking more beer, but then he opened the cabinet, took out the Bible, sat down at the table, and started reading the story of Job. It was through the words of Job that he wanted to talk to his Lord. As Andres read Job's story, he thought of his own struggles, which seemed to be written between the lines of Scripture. Andres felt Job's words reflect his own feelings and thoughts, his own worries and sorrows, his own disappointments and despair. He looked away from the Holy Scripture and began reciting his son's words, as if he'd find in them all the wisdom of the commandments and the prophets regarding work and sweat. "You've worked and sweated, and so did mother or she wouldn't have died so young. But love never came and there's none at Vargamäe to this day."

“What is here then?” Andres asked himself. He thought for a while and when he believed he’d found an answer, he rested his face on the Bible and remained like that for a long time.

That was how Andres expressed his innermost thoughts to the Lord in the middle of the night, and Mari understood as she stayed under the bed covers. She wanted so much to lay her head next to Andres on the table, but she didn’t dare. She knew Andres’s heart would lock shut at the sight of her when he was thinking about the Lord, just as it had the night she’d stood by the bedpost, helping her husband cry. So Mari stayed quietly under the covers, as if she didn’t know that Andres was sitting at the table. But later, when he came back to bed, he found their pillow wet from her tears. He realized that Mari had also been talking with God, so humbly that she dared not stick her head out from under the covers.

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