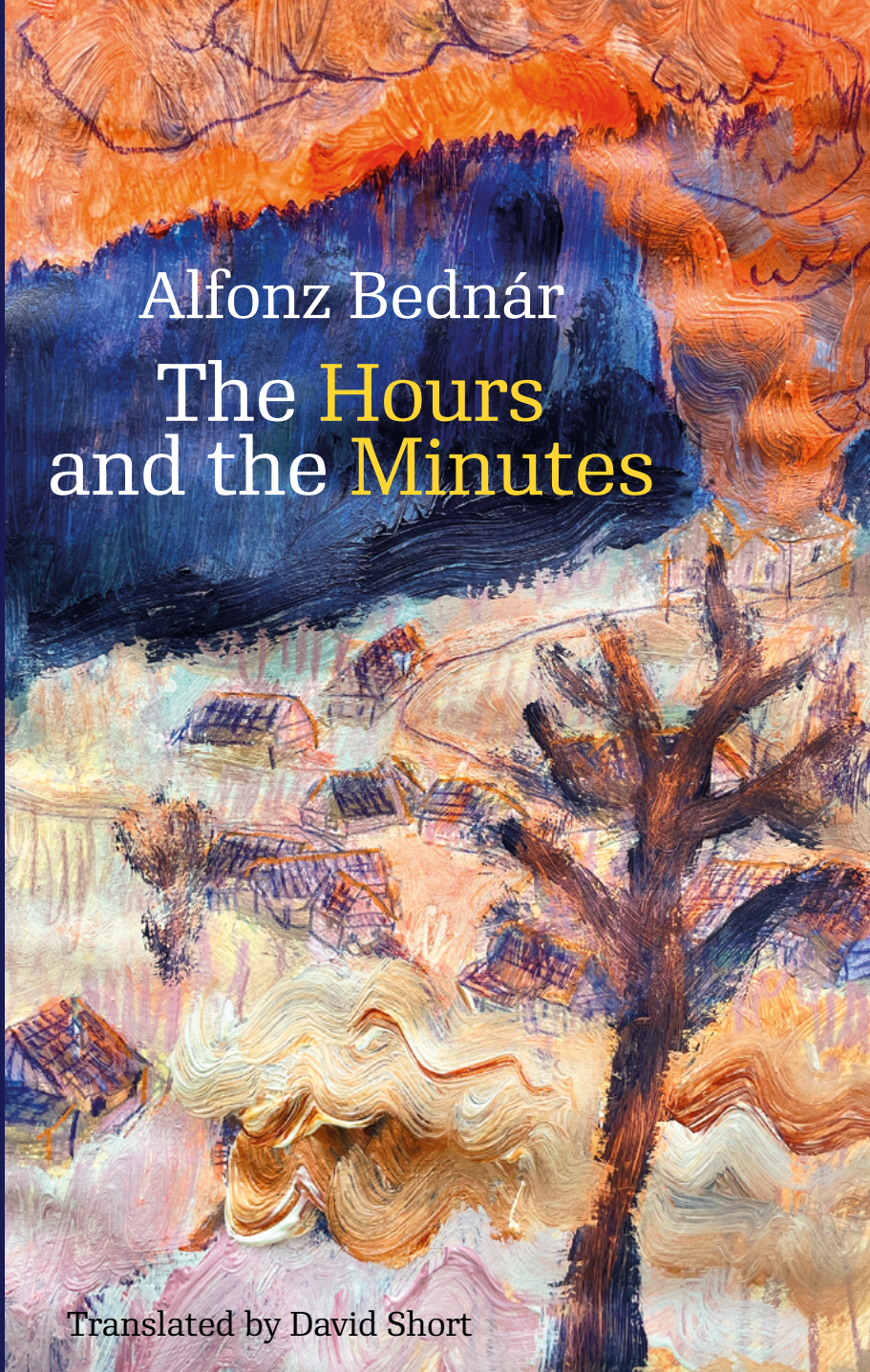
Alfonz Bednár
The Hours and the Minutes
Translated by David Short

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Translated from the Slovak by David Short
Afterword by Rajendra Chitnis

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alfonz Bednár (1914–1989) was a Slovak novelist, screenwriter and translator who used innovative creative methods in depicting the social situation after World War II. His stark, unflinching stories of the Slovak National Uprising were particularly notable. After 1945, he worked at the Information Commission in Bratislava, was a lecturer at the Pravda publishing house and editor of the Slovak Writer publishing house. He went on to work for twenty years as a screenwriter and screenplay editor at Czechoslovak Film in Bratislava. He wrote the screenplay for one of the most acclaimed films of Slovak cinema, *The Sun in a Net* (*Slnko v sieti*).

His entry into the literary world came by way of his translations of English-language prose, including the work of Ernest Hemingway, George Bernard Shaw, Mark Twain and Daniel Defoe. *The Hours and The Minutes* was first published in 1956 and became a vital influence for the Slovak fiction of the more open 1960s as well as writing that burst forth following the fall of Communism in 1989.

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Štefan Tesár, a small but sturdy man of twenty-five, a labourer at the large mill in Lower Brezany, was short of sleep, physically worn out and, for the first time in his life, starting to have misgivings, not yet about himself, but about the group of partisans who'd stayed with him, and about everything around him.

"What can anyone do here?" Tesar's group kept asking, and having drifted into silence they would apply the question mentally to anything and everything. "It's a lost cause!"

The town, where flags were already flying – red flags with a yellow hammer and sickle and tricolours with a blue triangle, bells were ringing and the municipal public address system was blaring out words long only whispered, "To hell with 'em! Death to the German occupiers!", suddenly saw German troops come charging in. The partisans who'd come pouring in on foot or on wagons, singing as they came, had now fled, leaving only Tesár and four others. Tesár was from Závodie, as were four of the others: Hladík, Lánik, Masňák and Šiška. He'd known them from way back, but sensed that he couldn't entirely rely on them, any more than on the two from Lower Brezany and one from Upper Brezany, who'd linked up with the men from Závodie as they fled ahead of the German troops. By now the town was overrun with Krauts, who'd soon be all over the villages as well. Which way to turn? What can anyone do here? It's all over! This line of thinking had beset Tesár's group back in the town and it was still tormenting them, though the group knew full well that taking up arms wasn't a good idea, and abandoning them an even worse one.

There'd been eight of them, and they had submachine guns, cartridges, hand grenades and, in their kitbags, bread, some tinned army rations and cigarettes.

Tesár was biting the nails on his left hand, Hladík, who'd taken some blankets with him when he deserted from the army, was munching on a bitter-tasting bit of wood snapped

off a dead willow twig, Šiška, a young blacksmith from the Lower Brezany estate, was musing on how good it would be to spray the Krauts with submachine gun fire, Masňák, a mechanic from the Lower Brezany brickworks, was thinking of his fiancée, who came from as far away as Nitra, and Lánik, a young lad who'd just done his school-leaving exams, wanted to escape back home, fearful of the disservice he'd done his father, having been to grammar school at the latter's expense only to run out on him to join the partisans. Besides these there were the three others.

They were on foot, going nowhere in particular, and having managed, early that morning, to escape from Lower Brezany, where they'd been hiding in barns and sheds for the last three days, here they were, heading along the road to Závodie.

What can anyone do here? Tesár sensed the question coming from the seven sleep-deprived and physically exhausted men, all poorly clad and ill-shod, except Hladík, who'd escaped from his barracks suited and booted well enough. What's barely begun can't possibly be lost. The Soviets are marching towards the Carpathians, they'll attack Warsaw, there are Soviet partisans in the Slovak mountains, and the Uprising is being joined by deserters – how could all this be a lost cause?

"There's nothing for it!" Tesár suddenly called the silent men to order, turned his back on them and trotted a few yards ahead of them. His thick black eyebrows quivered above his black eyes. "We must get off the road, cut across the Závodie fields, get some proper rest in Grabovec, that small wood over there, and then head off to the Poruba forest! And there join the partisans! On the upland meadows of Kopečné Lazy, beyond Little Poruba, there's a partisan brigade. There's nothing for it but to hit the Krauts hard, because everything they do is evil."

It was Saturday morning, before the second Sunday in September.

Following what Tesár had said, the eight men, unspeaking and grumpy, went another two hundred metres or so along the road before turning off across the fields.

The fields of Závodie were black with freshly ploughed-up stubble, green with the clover patches springing up over any unploughed stubble, yellow with maize and millet and brown with potatoes left to dry out. The air was torpid with a silent autumn mist, grey, delicate and light, the pale-blue sky arching above it and the motionless, blue wavy outline of the mountains rearing up in the far distance.

The eight unspeaking partisans kept looking back down the grey-white road as if it were some gigantic snake that might fill up at any moment with the grey-green venom of the Germans.

The road led out from the town through Lower and Upper Brezany, then Závodie, after which it rose gently and, before vanishing among woods and forests, it also took in Great and Little Poruba. Beyond the areas covered in trees it dipped towards the distant valley where the people of Lower and Upper Brezany, Závodie, and Great and Little Poruba knew lay Kopečné Lazy, a wretchedly poor village that straggled out along the valley and up the hillsides. All it produced was some pretty awful barley. At the end of August '44 they knew there were some partisans there.

The road had always been a busy one, but since late August, when the whole of Závodie had shuddered at whispered reports of the slaughtering, in Turčiansky Svätý Martin, of fifteen high-ranking German officers and even two generals, and the declaration in Banská Bystrica of an uprising against the Germans, the traffic had died away – though that Saturday morning, as Tesár and his men were making for the small wood near Závodie, dust began to rise from the road and settle on every tree, bush and field as German soldiers in trucks and on motor bikes drove into Závodie.

Tesár's partisans froze when they spotted the dark-grey vehicles and watched in fear as they disappeared from sight in Závodie. A good thing that they'd listened to what Tesár had said! Tesár meant no ill. He likely knew what he was about. But what was going to happen in Závodie? In fear, they

scrambled into the wood called Grabovec, standing there as it did in the middle of Závodie's fields and meadows.

"Things In Závodie," said Hladík, spitting out his bit of bitter willow wood, "are going to get lively."

Lánik the school-leaver gave a little shudder.

Three German motorcycles and eleven trucks, with their slanting front ends and looking from the side like little cottages, came to a halt in the centre of Závodie, in sight of the church, school and rectory, in sight of the large inn, the council offices and the fire brigade's storehouse, and at the foot of the tall black pole up which the firemen, after training sessions or fires, would hang their wet hoses to dry, having hauled them up high on a thin steel cable. Scores of German troops alighted from the trucks, all covered in dust and in a foul mood.

They spread out all over Závodie.

In the larger homes, they made people clear out any rooms that had outer walls against the garden or street, but they had to clear them out completely, leaving nothing at all but the stove. The man seeing to that was Sergeant Franz Eulenau, a burly redhead who accompanied his men through the houses, demanding loudly to know if the rooms were "heizbar". His interpreter, a slim, young private, Joseph Hoffmann, whose mouth was all lop-sided, asked the people: "Ken zis rum be heetit?" The people more or less got what he meant and, as they began clearing a room out, were horrified at the prospect of the Krauts staying a long time, doubtless all winter, since they were asking if the rooms could be heated. Whether silently, under their breath or out loud, they cursed the redhead and wry-mouth, but their fears did nothing to prevent them giving both men nicknames that very first Saturday: Sergeant Eulenau they started calling Heatbag and his interpreter Hoffmann Heetit.

At the Bernadič house, where only the youngest daughter, sixteen-year-old Marka, was at home, they checked out both the front and back rooms, after which Sergeant Eulenau yelled

at the bewildered Marka: “Nicht heizbar?”, and the interpreter Hoffmann said: “Zis not heatit!”, because in Mr Bernadič’s new house there was as yet no stove in either room.

Then Eulenau and Hoffmann moved on to Bernadič’s neighbours, the Letanovskýs.

Mr Letanovský himself was at home alone, his wife having gone chasing after her geese, which were forever running away, his son Jožo and his bride Brigita having been out in the fields since first thing, and the grandchildren not being back from school yet. He’d been on the point of chopping down a young walnut tree.

He was gripped with fear and followed the soldiers into the front room. In the back room his fears only got worse, because Eulenau said “Nicht ausräumen!” and the interpreter, Hoffmann, wagged a menacing finger at him and announced: “Leaf efferysink heer! Moof nossink! Zis one hess heetink!”

“Sorry?” Letanovský queried, and with one thumb and forefinger he pushed back his old, greasy and faded brown hat slightly. “What am I supposed to do?”

The slim, young private Hoffmann started waving both arms in the direction of the new tile stove and the two wide beds standing by the wall with their pillows and damask-covered blankets strewn about them and said: “Leef so! No tidy avay! Heer iss Herr Kommandant!”

Letanovský got the drift, was horror-stricken and stopped asking questions.

Filled with fear, he watched through the window as the redhead and wry-mouth left the yard, stood awhile alone in the back room, quite still, because it occurred to him that any move could cause trouble, not only to him, but to many others as well, perhaps to the whole of Závodie, but then he took in the whole room, looked at the two coverlets and the two pale-blue floral-patterned oval shapes not covered by damask pillow cases, and then quickly, as quickly as he could muster, he gathered up four pairs of pyjamas from the bed, the scented soap, toothpaste and tooth-brushes from the metal

basin, along with the sponge, the posh handtowels and eau de cologne, dashed all round the place with them before finally taking them up to the grain loft, where he buried it all under the wheat. Beneath it he also buried the two leather suitcases into which, in the back room, he had crammed their best clothes. Then he sat down on the bench beneath the young walnut tree, sat there for quite some time before going round to his neighbour, Mr Bernadič, for some advice on what to do for the best. Before his eyes he still had the image of the two pale-blue, floral-patterned ovals. He couldn't rid himself of it, couldn't blot them from his mind in any way, because he knew it was all the coverlets' fault. They were the one thing the redhead had noticed, which was why he'd got the idea that the Kommandant would get his best night's sleep in their back room. Good God!

Next door he found sixteen-year-old Marka Bernadič sitting on the threshold, barefoot, with her new canvas shoes tossed under the bench, and shelling beans.

She gave Letanovský just a hint of a smile, because he looked so very scared and wan, looked at him with the puzzled green eyes that were almost hidden behind her relaxed eyelids, and began to speak in her perpetually slightly mocking tone.

"What's wrong, neighbour?" she asked, addressing him the way her mother and father always did. "What's happened?"

"Nothing much, Marka. Where's your mum and dad?"

"They're stacking the clover for seed."

"My lot are out there too, it's a nice day for it – and, tell me, did they come here as well, the redhead and wry-mouth?"

"You mean Heatbag and Heetit?"

"What?"

"Heatbag and Heetit."

"The redhead and the one with the twisty gob?"

"They did."

"And?"

"Nothing. They looked round the house and left. The thin one, the one with the twisted mug, he was funny. He could only open one half of his mouth. Said our place had no heetink."

"And did they say anything else?"

"Not sure. All the first one said was 'heatbag' and the one with the twisted gob 'heetit'. They did say something else, but who on earth could make any sense of it!" Marka grabbed another fistful of dry bean pods in her left hand. "But why should we be bothered! There've been Krauts in Lower Brezany for some days now and nothing's come of it. Fear not, neighbour! Nothing's going to happen to you."

"Marka!" Letanovský began scratching his right arm above the elbow from under his rolled-up sleeve, pondering as he let his gaze roam over the fine figure of Bernadič's daughter, who was wearing a light, red, printed-cotton dress. He stroked his moustache, which he always kept trimmed so that it wouldn't poke out beyond the edges of his straight nose. He'd always trimmed it like that in imitation of a lieutenant-colonel he'd seen in Russia during the Great War and still frequently recalled. "Marka, listen. You've got a fine pair of legs. Would you mind trotting over to Grabovec? Mr Schnitzer's there, and his wife, and the kids with them. For a fortnight now they've been spending their days in the wood so as not to be caught by the Germans if they happened to show up. And now the Germans are here. Go on, run over there and tell them not to come back to Závodie. And you can also tell them that the Kommandant will be sleeping in our back room! And that no beds were to be moved! He'll be sleeping in their bedding. God preserve us!"

Marka Bernadič stopped shelling her beans.

"The Kommandant, Marka," Mr Letanovský repeated. "You won't forget that, will you?"

"Kommandant?" Marka asked. "And what's that mean?"

"Nothing, a commander, a man who gives out orders. Just tell Mr Schnitzer."

"As you wish, neighbour. I'm on my way. I'm honestly not as scared as you are. I'll be right back."

She took her new black canvas shoes from under the bench and put them on, smoothed her bright red dress down over her burgeoning young frame, pulled her white headscarf tighter over her fair hair and ran off towards Grabovec, the little wood amid Závodie's fields and meadows.

The German soldiers showed no regard for anyone or anything and put down their noxious green-grey roots in Závodie.

Wherever no men were at home to remove any beds, tables, cupboards and holy pictures from a room they removed them themselves, then brought in straw and hammered hooked nails into the walls on which to hang their caps and any lighter bits of equipment. At the rectory, in the village priest's office, they set up their command post and fixed a sign on the front wall of the building bearing the legend *Ortskommandantur*, while in the village school they set up their kitchens. In the large school playground they parked those great trucks with their slanting noses, their artillery pieces, trench mortars and motor bikes, and from Upper Brezany to Závodie and all about Závodie itself they installed telephone lines. Their commanding officer, a tall, lanky, forty-five-year-old infantryman, Captain Johann Iffland, a man with blond hair, trimmed right back above his forehead, had had himself welcomed by Father Stachovič right there in front of the rectory, and told him: "Gut, gut, mein Herr!", Stachovič having sought to assure him that the German troops would find Závodie to their satisfaction and, with Hoffman, interrogated the mayor, Janderla, as to the presence of partisans in Závodie. "I don't know, Herr Kommandant," Janderla kept repeating, a thin young man with sunken cheeks, he was. "So far they haven't been here – and I'm sure they won't show up now because they steer clear of anywhere where there's German troops, Herr Kommandant." In his turn, Captain Johann Iffland believed him and ordered Janderla to have it proclaimed that the front door of every house must carry a sign listing all its

residents! Anyone leaving the house to work in field or forest must have their citizen's identity card with them. On pain of being otherwise shot, along with their entire family, everyone had to ensure that their house was blacked out, there would be a six o'clock curfew and no one was to leave their premises before six a.m. On all houses where soldiers were billeted Sergeant Eulenau wrote "X 236" in green chalk, and in front of the houses, the rectory and the school and on the road at both ends of Závodie, from Upper Brezany and from Great Poruba, patrols were instituted, armed with rapid-firing rifles fitted with angled magazines.

Marka Bernadič was running across the fields and meadows to Grabovec as Letanovský had instructed her, running to find Mr Schnitzer, his wife and their two children, running as fast as she could to tell Mr Schnitzer what Letanovský had told her to say. She kept repeating to herself that the Kommandant would be sleeping in Letanovský's back room under the Schnitzers' bedclothes. Running, not along cart tracks or footpaths, but across ploughland, across clover and maize fields, quite unaware of the soil that was getting inside her nice new canvas shoes, just running to get there as fast as possible, because she was fond of both her neighbour, Mr Letanovský, and the Schnitzers. Goodness knows where the latter are now. By the spring, for sure. There they'll also have water to drink. And it's so very hot! Marka wiped her brow with the back of her hand and carried on running.

Mr Letanovský, with heavy boots on his feet and wearing patched trousers, a waistcoat, and a shirt with the sleeves rolled up, and with an old greasy, faded hat on his head, sat there on his garden bench beside the young walnut tree, staring in a state of surly abstraction at the walnut leaves which – yellowed and slightly soggy – had fallen that morning on the dew-covered ground.

He said not a word to his wife as she returned about ten, driving the geese before her, nor she to him, merely fluttering her faded lips inaudibly, and when his son's two lads came

running in from school shouting: “Granddad, Granddad, we won’t be going to school anymore, it’s being turned into a kitchen!” he told them: “Much better if you were!” Then he became even more surly and abstracted.

He stared at the yellowed walnut leaves stuck to the ground. Poor Marka! Why had he sent her there? Really, a chap never knows what he’s doing. Goodness, he could have gone to Grabovec himself. God preserve us!

The Letanovský and Bernadič gardens were both humming with bees. Both men were great beekeepers and great neighbours. They had a honey extractor that they shared as well as other beekeeping paraphernalia. And they frequently sought each other’s advice.

Mr Letanovský couldn’t leave his bench because his son Jožo and his young bride Brigita had come in from the fields lost in thought and grumpy, and they didn’t say a word as they passed.

The entire Letanovský household knew things were going to turn nasty, and no one wanted to bring the bad times forward with idle chatter, arguing or even worse things.

Mr Letanovský was thinking not just of Marka Bernadič, but also of the Schnitzers, two adults and two children, who’d been in hiding at his place since the spring. Závodie had mumbled and grumbled about his harbouring Jews, but gradually forgot about them because the Schnitzers kept well out of sight. Also forgotten was the tittle-tattle about Letanovský getting money and gold from them later. On his bench beneath the walnut tree he now felt that the Schnitzers were no longer his affair alone. The whole village was affected. Someone might betray him to the Germans. Betray? Maybe people would be fearful of doing anything so terrible. Then it occurred to him: which was worth more, his life or the lives of the four Schnitzers? But no, people are wicked and devious. Someone’s bound to betray him? What will the National Guard chaps do? They’ve been making themselves scarce because the Germans would very much like to coerce them

into tackling the partisans. But he's not the only one who matters here. There's the whole family. God preserve us! What do the Germans care about shooting the odd entire family? Two families – ten families? The entire village? They'd shot up more than one already. His life – the four Schnitzers – his own family, many families, Marka, everybody in Závodie... Why did he do it? Why had he let his son, the student, talk him into taking the Schnitzers in? Because – because he's known the Schnitzers for a long time, he'd known the older generation of Schnitzers as well – and helping others is the proper thing to do. Why has this whole thing hit people. He remembered the men who'd left Závodie to join the partisans. He knew about them. Mr Bernadič had whispered it to him. The Schnitzers, Jews – they'd always been cheats and deceivers, disgusting people, filthy, unless someone right-minded cleaned them up... Inside Letanovský his anger against them was rising because he knew they wouldn't give him anything, wouldn't pay him back as promised – they'd bring him at best to rack and ruin. He sat on his bench beneath the walnut tree, staring at the leaves, tunnelled lengthwise by tiny little maggots, quite dinky with their twisting green and brown lines, those leaves stuck to the ground.

After one o'clock, his neighbour Mr Bernadič came in from the fields along with his wife, his son Ondriš and his wife and the three grandchildren, and with two girls, Marka's sisters.

Mr Letanovský rose from his garden bench and went in after Mr Bernadič to tell him what had happened and why he'd sent Marka to Grabovec wood. And to consult him. Should he, Letanovský, include the Schnitzers on the list of people residing at his house? He ought to. After all, they're good people, do no harm to anyone and the Bernadič's have long known about them. And then no one has had any faith in Hitler for a long time now. Not even the National Guard men. They'd have betrayed him by now. They've particularly lost faith in him since that assassination attempt, and Závodie, always such a quiet spot... A quiet spot unless things were to take a

turn for the worse, as long as nothing was going on. But what now –?

"What's this then, neighbour?" Mr Bernadič broke in on Mr Letanovský's ruminating and, filled with rage, he flung his fork down in front of the porch with a clang. His face, pock-marked and with a week's worth of black stubble, filled with rage. "What are you doing here? We've been good neighbours, but don't you darken my door again ever! You're harbouring Jews! Just wait and see, the whole village will pay the price. What got into you, neighbour...? Were you hoping to make some easy money, come by some property...? You'll be getting nothing from Schnitzer now –!"

"Where's your common sense, neighbour?" Mrs Bernadič interrupted her husband as she turned to face Mr Letanovský. "Good God, man! A fine mess you've got us into! And the whole village!"

"Shut it, woman!" her husband snapped under his breath. "Stop waffling!"

She muttered another Dear God and burst into tears.

"Just wait!" said Bernadič, threatening to go for Letanovský, "you'll pay dearly for this if things go bad because of those Jews! I always told you to leave Jews well alone, but you refused to listen."

"You never said any such thing," Letanovský muttered, "not once."

"Since when have you been so clever?" Letanovský's son Jožo shouted across the fence and spat on the ground. "Don't you go threatening people and keep your hands to yourself! There are soldiers around, we just have to keep our mouths shut and it'll all be all right!"

"And where's Marka?" Mrs Bernadič asked weepily, because she'd spotted the bowl on the bench outside the door with a handful of shelled beans in it. "Marka! Maaarkaaa!"

Letanovský turned round. His whole body was numb with fear. His bloodshot eyes were burning with fear. His stomach was gripped with pain.

"Maaarkaaa!"

From a distance the ground boomed as shells fell, it shook, and the window in the Bernadičes' back room rattled.

In vain did Mr Letanovský wait for Marka Bernadič. There was no sign of her returning. Where is she? Where is she? He couldn't stop thinking about her. Whether sitting out on the bench in the garden, or at the kitchen table, whether he was wandering aimlessly around the yard, the byre or the barn, he kept asking himself: Where is she? Where is Marka? And where are the Schnitzers? What's become of them? Are they in the wood, safe, or not? But where else could they be? There's nowhere else to hide in the whole of Závodie. Only in Grabovec. And what if they did return, for God's sake? Christ Almighty! If only Marka came back, one would know what to do –

The troops saw Captain Iffland installed in the Letanovskýs' back room. The whole house reeked of soldiery, eau de Cologne, tobacco, cigarette smoke and clothes, even quite recently mothballed away in a wardrobe, but now stinking of sweat.

Like this, the Letanovskýs could hardly breathe, because with every breath the stench merely magnified their fear.

"Letanoffski?" Iffland inquired, stroking his rugged features and smiling at him. "Alles in Ordnung, alles gut?"

"Gut, gut," Letanovský assured him, "it's fine, Herr Kommandant."

It wasn't at all fine, because Marka still wasn't back, either that afternoon or in the evening.

Night fell, clear, but dark and cold. And silent as the grave.

In Závodie no dogs barked, because people had locked them away in stables and byres. Few slept that night. In the Letanovský house, on whose doorpost hung a sign bearing the names "Ján Letanovský, Anna Letanovský, Jozef Letanovský, Brigita Letanovský, Štefan Letanovský, Benedikt Letanovský", no one slept except Jožo's boys, Štefan and Benedikt, no one, and no one was asleep next door either, except one little girl

and two boys, the Bernadič grandchildren. The Bernadičes waited for Marka until nightfall and when she didn't return, no one dared step outside after six pm to report to Janderla, the mayor, or to the German command post that Marka was missing. Where was she? Where had she gone? Had she run off to get away from the Krauts? Was she too scared to come back?

Mr Letanovský lay huddled up in bed in the front room, not sleeping. His left arm hung down, lifeless, over the edge of the bed. He was thinking about the Bernadičes, Marka and the Schnitzers, and about himself.

During the war he'd seen, in Russia, that the German is a ruthless being, unforgiving and remorseless even to his own. The lieutenant colonel whose moustaches Letanovský had modelled his own on had had a 'lad'. The 'lad' had gone home on furlough, killed his parents and, on his return, was eating the bacon he'd brought back with him. The lieutenant colonel's horse had gone for the bacon and scratched his muzzle on the knife… In vain did the lad plead with the lieutenant colonel, there was no help for him, he had to dig his own grave and then the lieutenant colonel shot him. "But nothing happened to him at home," the soldiers said afterwards, one of whom had been Letanovský, "for killing his mother and father, and now this…" – "It's just divine retribution, fellers," Letanovský had told them. "That's all." – "Yeah, that's it!" – "No horse, however handsome, is worth more than a father and mother!" – "After all, nothing happened to it, just a slight scratch." Although Letanovský had believed it to be divine retribution, he also came to believe that a German is unforgiving and remorseless.

But this Kommandant of ours doesn't look that villainous, Letanovský was thinking about Iffland as he lay there in bed. One might perhaps have a word with him, tell him everything, but everything might –.

Bernadič was lying on his bed in his coat and trousers. His boots were the only thing he'd taken off. He was wondering whether to inform on Letanovský to the Kommandant so as

to be excused for Marka's absence. But how could he do that? Letanovský's a decent chap and the Schnitzers are decent folk. Not even Krauts spot everything, no matter how they snoop about. Fitfully he stroked his stubbly, gnarled, pock-marked face.

The clear, dark, cold night dragged on, then as Sunday morning dawned around six, Závodie was cloaked in a delicate morning mist. The air was dank, the dusty ground damp with the mist and dew.

Bernadič, booted and wearing his patched trousers and an old coat, which was now too tight about his broad shoulders, and in the hat that had a greasy sheen at the back, was the first to be seen walking through the village.

He had been despatched from home to Upper Brezany, to his brother's place, to check whether Marta hadn't run off there.

But why there? There are Krauts there too. If he doesn't find her there, he'll have to try Great Poruba as well. She might have escaped to her aunt's place. The wet dust clung to his boots. Behind him lay grey footprints of dry dust. Where can she have gone? Have they picked her up? But where, and why?

"Halt!" a soldier barked at him at the edge of the village. "Weg, weg!"

Bernadič stopped.

The soldier, a tall green-grey fellow in jackboots, with a helmet that covered his forehead, indicated by brusque, negative hand gestures that he was to turn back.

That morning was the start of one terrible Sunday for Závodie, that damp morning, misty and dewy, terrible not just for the village itself, but also for the German soldiers, because within an hour, around seven, the German troops knew everything: that at the Letanovskýs in Závodie there were Jews in hiding, two adults and two juveniles, and in addition, five young men, Matej Hladík, Ján Šiška, Anton Masňák, Josef Lánik and Štefan Tesár, had left the village to join the partisans.

“Vere are ze Chews?” the slim young private Hoffmann bawled at Letanovský at the command post. “Heff you got zem?”

Pale, Letanovský trembled.

“I know where they are,” he said, “but they’re not in Závodie.”

Captain Iffland was seated at the priest’s desk, nervously twiddling a cigarette. Bits of tobacco fell out of it onto the scrap of paper on which were written out the names of the Schnitzers, the partisans and the latter’s fathers. He licked the cigarette along its length, inspected it and pointed it at the pale Letanovský.

“All four Jews,” he said to the interpreter, Hoffmann, “are to be brought to the command post! If he fails to bring them –” and he again pointed his cigarette at the quaking Letanovský, “– if he fails to bring them, tell him he’ll be shot and his whole family with him! He is to go and bring them in with soldiers in attendance – thirty men!”

Private Hoffmann passed this on in no uncertain terms.

“Solchiers vill go viz you,” he added mockingly with one half of his twisted mouth, “in case enysink heppens to you!”

Letanovský set off for Grabovec wood with the thirty men.

Fear descended on Letanovský’s wife, whose pale lips were still twitching, on his son Jožo and the latter’s young wife Brigita, and on their two sons. It was a leaden fear. It bore down on their breasts grievously, as if their breasts had been driven through by a solid wooden fencepost. Fear descended over the whole of Závodie. Who’d informed on Letanovský for shielding Jews? Who’d given the partisans away? Fear inhibited people’s preparations for Sunday, they couldn’t eat, and some couldn’t even breathe.

Mrs Letanovský kept muttering a prayer with her pale twitching lips, whether she was sitting somewhere or pottering about the house or yard.

“May he be smitten by God!” she said in the hearing of all, with her back to the Bernadič house. “May he be smitten from now till eternity!”

“Do you think,” Letanovský’s pale-faced son Jožo asked, “that he’s the one who betrayed them?”

“Of course it was him!”

In the Bernadič house a row was followed by tears. Mrs Bernadič wept for Marka, for her daughter-in-law and for Marka’s sisters, and the children were also crying.

“Why didn’t you put Marka’s name on the list?” Ondriš Bernadič asked his father. “You should have.”

“How so – when she isn’t even here!”

“And when she comes back?”

“Then I’ll add her!” Then, just to reassure himself, he added: “Nobody’s even checked the lists yet.”

“But you’ll have missed the boat!” said Ondriš mockingly. “By then there’ll be no point adding her name.”

“Shut up!” Bernadič roared back. “You’ve no more sense than a tail-flicking cow. Just put a sock in it! I can see that much for myself: not adding names – bad; adding them – even worse!” He went and got a watercolour pencil and laboriously added at the bottom of his sign: “Mária Bernadič.” He stared long at his clumsy lettering with the frightened green eyes set in his twitching, pockmarked face.

At the rectory, Captain Iffland had completed his interrogation of the mayor, Janderla, and although Janderla’s sunken cheeks had quivered as he repeatedly said: “I couldn’t have known, sir, if anyone from here had gone to join the partisans, honest, nor could I have known that Letanovský was hiding some Jews,” he did believe him for the time being, looked him up and down, and, having let him go, brooding over the sheer folly of it, over collective responsibility, he ran one hand over his rugged, unshaven face, leaned back against the old armchair behind Stachovič’s desk and gazed abstractedly about the rectory office. He should have had it cleared out, he thought, because it struck him that the books, holy pictures, the ancient clock on top of the safe and the brown leather armchairs and long leather sofa sat ill with his soldiers. He should have had the whole lot slung out!

All this old stuff – the priest was also old – it reminded him too much of civvy street. He took a closer look round and the old, hitherto undisturbed cosiness of the place swept over him. Once again he felt that for over a year now his life had been drowning in all things alien: his own soldiers were alien to him, his very nation, so eager for the spoils of war, so eager to make the entire world its own, was alien to him… While here, every quarter of an hour, the ancient clock strikes, quietly, calmly, but now in an alien manner… This parish priest, he lives here, doubtless surrounded by many dear and devoted people – while he, Captain Iffland, has no one, and devotion cannot be exacted at gunpoint.

On the one hand he himself, he mused, around him his men, men alien to him, and even more alien, and more dangerous, the members of the security service, the Sicherheitsdienst, SD… And against all that a defenceless, inferior rabble, defenceless Jews and dangerous partisans. A moment of devotion, any, would mean an awful lot in this life, but… The war desires him to survive it, if he does, amid the alien! So he mused and, resting both arms on Father Stachovič's desk, he perused the names of the Jews and partisans. Hitler's orders were to shoot anyone who so much as glared at a German soldier! No, not that, that only leads to a major action. And major actions have no borders, they just drive the populace to go and join the partisans. War's war, nothing like what goes on inside the heads of the men from the SD. War has its laws, its order, its sense of fair play…

He glanced towards the two pale-eyed, sturdy SD men, Poller and Dosse, who were sitting on the priest's leather sofa.

Poller and Dosse were smoking as they stared in silence out of the windows.

War's war, Iffland was thinking. A soldier commits no crime once he realises that his actions might be criminal, a soldier seeks redress once he has conducted an investigation and caught the actual culprits, a soldier respects human life, the honour and safety of families, private property, freedom

of confession, the observance of rituals – a soldier respects everything –

He glanced at Poller and Dosse.

He thought about collective responsibility. Utter rubbish, crazy: one man does something – and fifty or more others pay for it with their lives –

The field telephone jangled. Iffland had had it placed on Father Stachovič's prie-dieu, which was then moved to alongside the desk.

Soldiers were moving about inside the priest's office, bringing in their kitbags, visors, helmets, submachine guns, blankets, plus two small safes, a green field table and two chairs, and crates of ammunition.

Poller and Dosse were staring mutely out of the windows with their pale eyes and smoking.

Iffland hung up and, having glanced pensively towards Poller and Dosse, ordered brought to him, one by one, the five fathers of the five betrayed partisans.

He questioned them only briefly, because he knew they wouldn't tell him the truth and were not to be believed.

The one-eyed roadmender Hladík said he had no idea where his son Matěj had gone, because he'd enlisted in the spring and hadn't come back yet, though several of his mates were now back, the little sapper, Šiška, who as recently as Saturday had still been working at the Poruba lime works, merely shook his head when Hoffmann as interpreter asked him: "Iss yor son wiz ze partizanss?", and Iffland certainly didn't believe the tall, thin brickmaker Masňák, who claimed that his son was getting married and had gone off to see the parents – his future in-laws, who lived a long way off, out towards Nitra.

"We were supposed to go as well –!"

Iffland had Masňák the brickmaker led back out. "Und du, Lanik?"

"I, begging your pardon, sir, I really don't know." Lánik, whom people had begun mockingly to call Fruity, because he'd planted one of his fields with apple trees and started growing

apples such as had never before been seen in Závodie, was a good man, but he was shaking, twisting his hands down beside his hips and thinking about the beautiful young trees that were about, that very year, to give him his first crop of apples. "My son's a student – and even colleges are being shut down – I don't know where he is because –"

"Ja, Student!" Iffland waved a dismissive hand at Lánik and turned his attention to Tesár, who'd just been brought in: "Und du?"

Tesár, a diminutive local journeyman, said nothing.

"Iss yor son Stefan viz ze partissanss?"

Journeyman Tesár failed to respond.

Iffland nodded to the pale-eyed Poller and Dosse.

They crossed over to Tesár and pushed him up against Father Stachovič's bookshelf.

"Iss yor son Stefan viz ze partissanss?"

Tesár remained silent.

"Are you goin' to say sumssink, or not?"

Journeyman Tesár remained silent.

Poller punched him in the face. Tesár crashed into the priest's bookshelf, and when Poller punched him in the face a second time, he bounced off towards Dosse. Dosse's huge mitt caught Tesár in the face from behind and sent him lurching back into the priest's books. Blood streamed from Tesár's nose and mouth all over the bulky tomes of *Dogmatica*, *Biblia Sacra* and *Codex iuris canonici*.

"That'll do," said Iffland with distaste. "Enough! Take him away!"

Father Stachovič's office reeked with the smell of soldiery, hummed with activity, men talking and giving orders, sentries, clerks and the medic carrying out their duties, and Iffland's men getting ready to take up residence in Závodie.

Závodie itself was quiet, none of the locals was out and about except the old bellringer, Mr Galbavý, whose whiskers were said by the villagers to resemble the tassels on the church banner; he came out of the rectory, grumbling under

his breath the way he'd been grumbling for the last five years: "This war's just never going to end!" He walked through the village with the altar boys in tow.

He'd wanted to ring the bells, but Father Stachovič had said there'd be no bell-ringing. There'd probably be no services. The people of Závodie had forgotten to attend church. No one came from Great or Little Poruba either, and they both fell under the Závodie parish.

People had other things to worry about, because the burly, ginger-haired Sergeant Eulenau, among other NCOs, was carrying out an inspection of the houses. With eleven men he was going from house to house, inspecting the kitchens, sitting rooms, wardrobes, pantries, stables, granaries and barns. He shouted at people, but people didn't understand him, because Private Heetit had stayed behind at the rectory and Sergeant Heatbag left everyone shaking their heads in response to his yelling "Partizan? Partizan?" In four houses, at the Hladíks', Masňáks', Lániks' and Tesárs', he had everything turned upside down and closely scrutinized in a search for weapons.

Old Mrs Šiška, the mother of Ján Šiška, who was with Tesár's group in Grabovec, took fright when she saw the ginger-haired Heatbag and eleven other soldiers come storming into their yard and she fled and hid in the cellar along with her almost two-year-old granddaughter Štefka.

Two grenades went off with a bang. One outside the cellar door and a second, quieter one thrown by Eulenau into the cellar through the window. Then, as if there were nothing to it, he had the Šiška house turned upside down and sacks of beans and flour scattered all over the floor.

The exploding grenades were audible as far away as Grabovec, and throughout its misty surroundings, and Letanovský, who was being hounded towards Grabovec by thirty soldiers, looked back towards the village. All he could see was the thin mist, tinted orange by the sun.

Grabovec was now quite close. The little wood in the middle of Závodie's fields and meadows, grey-blue, veiled in an

orange mist. A little wood. In it, English and Turkey oak trees, though not that many. You could have counted them easily. Different oak trees, young and old, growing all over the uneven ground. In the deepest gully there was a spring. A mere trickle, hardly any water to it, and in dry summers it petered out completely. In the distant past, Grabovec had been much larger, spread over many acres, until the locals cut much of it down and grubbed it out. In the dips and ditches that they couldn't have ploughed they left the different oak trees and any thorny undergrowth untouched.

"This is where they should be," Letanovský told the German soldiers, pointing ahead as they reached the edge of the wood. "This is where –"

The soldiers couldn't understand, but they got the drift. The lanky, swarthy sergeant pointed at the wood and spread out the fingers on both his hands. "Zehn minuten!" and shoved him forward. He and the thirty soldiers spread out round the grove, cut off from the fields by a ring of hazels, blackthorn and the barberry bushes known locally as Christ's thornbush.

Letanovský struggled through the thorny undergrowth into the wood.

Within Grabovec, there were four deep gullies running almost in parallel. He proceeded laboriously along the first of them, his legs aching with fear. Where on earth are they? They must have left. God preserve us! He went slowly along the ditch, looking out for Schnitzer, his wife, their two children and Marka Bernadič. He froze. He didn't find them in the first gully. He'd gone its full length and found no one. He walked the length of the second, and no one was there either. But of course they wouldn't have hidden in such ditches with little coverage, he reassured himself before extending his search to the third ditch. They weren't there either. God preserve us! The fourth gully, the deepest, where the spring was, was densely covered in various dogwoods, hazel, blackthorn and barberry, but it was damp, and Letanovský, having finally got through the prickly undergrowth, shuddered and raised

his arms above his head. Above the tiny spring, from which dribbled a wretched little streamlet, glinting faintly from the orange sky, was Marka Bernadič and the Schnitzers, but also the five men who'd left Závodie to join the partisans. It was immediately clear to Letanovský why Marka hadn't been able to go home. They wouldn't have let her. Partisans! Matej Hladík, Jožo Lánik the school-leaver, Tono Masňák, Števo Tesár and Jano Šiška! And where had those others sprung from? And Grabovec surrounded by Germans! God preserve us!

Letanovský was quaking with fear. Marka Bernadič, in her flimsy red, printed-cotton dress and new black canvas shoes, was shivering with cold, sitting on the grass and staring at the folds in Letanovský's shirt sleeves and his trousers with their patched knees. His features were pale, partly overgrown with black and greying stubble, and wide streaks of sweat, still clouded with Saturday's dust, were streaming down his cheeks.

Letanovský had five gun-barrels levelled at him.

"What's up, Letanovský?" Tesár asked, in a low tone but quite brusquely, his black eyes twitching beneath the tufts of his dark eyebrows as he stared at Marka's quaking neighbour. "Why are you here?"

Letanovský gave Tesár and the others standing above the spring a forced smile, let his arms dangle by his sides and said in a hoarse voice, but loud enough for all to hear: "Shh! You've been given away."

"What's been given away? Who gave us away?"

"Shh! Everything, Števko," Letanovský replied in a shaky whisper. "Here – all round Grabovec, Germans –" he said, gesticulating in a circle with both arms, "– right here – Germans – thirty of 'em, near enough – they're waiting for me." He turned to Mr Schnitzer and his wife and two small daughters, twelve-year-old Lili and nine-year-old Viola. All the Schnitzers were trembling with fear, cold and fatigue, because they hadn't slept all night. "It troubles me, but I have to say it – Mr Schnitzer – you're to come with me – if you don't they'll

shoot me – they'll shoot up my whole house – you must come, Mr Schnitzer! – You, too, Mrs Schnitzer – and the girls – someone's blabbed – Oh, God –!"

Marka Bernadič, wordless, was watching her neighbour, Mr Letanovský, the lids on her green eyes quite still, her always slightly scornful mouth open as if she wished to say something; Schnitzer's hands, clamped to his thighs, twitched, and his wife, who was sitting between Lili and Viola, was trembling as she patted their hands.

"You're going nowhere, Letanovský!" said Tesár. "We won't let you, you'd give us away."

"But I have to, right away!" said Letanovský. He looked into Tesár's angry eyes and turned to the Schnitzers: "I have to go straight back – the wood's surrounded by about thirty soldiers – an' I've got a wife at home – an' a son – an' he's got his wife – an' they've also got kids – two – an' a third any day now – but you know that, Mr Schnitzer – God Almighty! – but then the Kommandant, the one who lives at my place – he seems quite decent – do come, Mr Schnitzer –! It'll be okay. Nothing's going to happen."

"You're going nowhere, Letanovský! You'll give us away – you'll be shot."

"What?"

"They'll shoot you even if you do bring them out of the woods, and they'll shoot them as well, all of 'em." Tesár pointed at the four Schnitzers. "You're staying here!" he said, turning towards the other partisans, who remained stolidly silent as they gripped their levelled submachine guns.

"Even the kids?" Letanovský asked Tesár from behind. "They'd even shoot the kids?"

"Yep!" Tesár replied over his shoulder. "Even the kids!"

The army-clad Hladík spat out the bit of wood he'd been chewing and said: "There's nothing for it, they have to go! This is only going to cost the lives of Letanovský and the Schnitzers. If they stay here, it'll be Letanovský and all of us." He snapped a twig off a blackthorn and stuck it in his mouth.

Tesár looked at Hladík.

"They have to go," said Hladík, removing the twig from his mouth, "and right now!"

Mrs Schnitzer choked back her tears, rose, got the girls up as well, taking them by the hand, kept choking back her tears, but not fast enough, because several teardrops suddenly plopped down her cheeks.

Tesár turned round. "How many Germans are there in Závodie?"

"I don't know," Letanovský replied. "Certainly over a hundred, could be two hundred. There's the captain, the Kommandant who's living at our place, officers, NCOs – they've got trucks, motorbikes, artillery – small cannon – trench mortars."

"Have the Germans also gone to Poruba?"

"No, Števko, they haven't."

"And do they intend to?"

"I don't know." Letanovský shrugged. "I've no means of knowing."

"Have they been looking for us?"

Letanovský shuddered. "You? You? They'll only be looking for people whose names are on the doors."

"On the doors?"

"Every door's got a list of names on it. But –"

"And what was that we heard? Those two explosions?"

"No idea, Števko. I did hear them, but they were already chasing me out here."

"How many did you say there are? Over a hundred, more like two hundred?" Tesár paused for thought, staring Letanovský in the face. "Go, then!" he said. "But the blood of Christ be your protection against letting on that we're here! Got that? You go too, Schnitzer! You can't put Letanovský in a fix by not going. But the blood of Christ be your protection against saying one word!"

Marka Bernadič leapt up from the ground.

"You can't go!" Tesár told her. "You're staying here with us!" He grabbed hold of her, pressing a filthy hand to her mouth

to stop her crying out. He placed her next to the blankets and kitbags on the ground and held her down firmly. “Marka’s staying here,” he said to the Schnitzers and Letanovský, “and if you breathe one word – you’ll have her on your conscience. She can’t go with you, she’s not going, but if you say one word, that’ll be the end of her!” Tesár then pointed a finger at Marka and brandished a fist towards Letanovský and the Schnitzers.

“Mummy!”

“Come on!”

“I won’t go, Mummy, Mummy –”

Mrs Schnitzer dragged Viola by the hand, Viola turned her pale features back to Marka with frightened, reproachful eyes, tripped over a small thorn bush and Marka stared after her, aghast. She was seized with pity as her eyes slipped down to Viola’s utterly helpless legs and those feet in their torn white shoes.

Mr Letanovský and the Schnitzers struggled back through the thick undergrowth of dogwoods, hazel, blackthorn and prickly barberry and disappeared from Marka Bernadič’s tearful gaze,

With her face jammed against a stinking kitbag, and despite Tesár’s firm grip on her, she writhed there, racked by quiet, woeful weeping. With one hand clamped to her mouth, he used the other to keep her firmly on the ground, and he tried to reassure her: “Don’t be afraid! Nothing’s going to happen to you, Marka. You’ll be here with us! You can’t go home, you mustn’t. Don’t be afraid! Your father’s sensible enough not to tell the Krauts where you are. He hasn’t even put your name on the door! And Letanovský won’t split on you either.” Then he tossed a blanket over her, still holding her firmly to the ground, and looked in silence at the unspeaking, reproachful faces of his comrades.

Silent moment dragged by after silent moment, with all manner of things banging away inside the heads of the partisans and Marka until Tesár and the rest began talking over her head.

She listened fitfully. Inside her head was a confused mass of all the things she'd heard on Saturday and through the night coming from the partisans and the Schnitzers, and of her dark fury at Hladík and Tesár, who'd driven the Schnitzers out of Grabovec. What was going to happen? To her the future was like a great, grey, windowless wall.

"What can anyone do here?" Tesár said over her head, picking up his group's repeated question. "Can't you think of anything better to ask? Just that? Everywhere's death and destruction, Lánik? You're wasting your breath. It isn't. We might have had to send the Schnitzers back to Závodie, but then we couldn't have taken 'em with us. The Germans would have shot all the Letanovskýs in Závodie. And we couldn't have taken Letanovský with us either. They'd have come here looking for him. I can't imagine what would have become of us if the Germans had attacked us here! Now, with you talking such rubbish! Risk letting ourselves be captured? Shame on you! I know there's a life at stake, but if it's your own, you don't have to risk those of your father, mother, family. How can you say such stupid things?"

"Stupid! Who's said anything stupid?"

Tesár turned to Šiška.

"You, too," he said. "Your mother's at home, your father, wife and child – for their sakes you can't go back, or let yourself be captured!"

"What are they to you?" Šiška yelled back at him. His fear had begun to evaporate and his eyes shone. He was trembling. "Everything was hanging by a thread – do you think that's easy to take? Mother, father, wife, child – stay out of it, leave them to me! I'm not saying stupid things, but you are! Just you wait! If the worst comes to the worst, you'll be the one to cop it! It'll all come out… It was all your idea! I could have got a job in Brezany – but not the way things are! They'll kill us all in turn, then our families –"

"And how old's your little one?" Marka asked Šiška. "I mean Štefka?"

"She'll be two in October."

"I saw her one late afternoon, she can talk already. She told me 'My tatty's a blatsmiff an' he worts in a smiffy.'"

Šiška smiled.

The Grabovec wood smelled of cold, it smelled of those different kinds of oak leaves rotting and moulding on the brown earth. All the oaks were slender and tall, crowded together, and now their crowns were being slowly swathed in mist, pale orange from the sun and bluish from the sky above, because sun and wind had begun to disperse it. The water in the spring was babbling quietly and spilling across the flat brown stones. Some of the stones below the spring looked as if they were shedding tears. From a distance came the rumble of exploding shells.

"– or, or," Marka heard Tesár again. She was surprised to find herself liking his steady tone of voice. "We can't go home now, Lánik. We'd end up giving ourselves away. The Germans would kill your father and your mother and child, Šiška –"

"And won't Letanovský give us away?" Šiška asked."I don't like the look of him."

"Unlikely. I can't believe that."

"And the Schnitzers?"

"Dunno, but I can't believe that either. Why?"

"To improve their chances. They'll be interrogated."

"Do stop all that! It wouldn't do the Schnitzers any good and Letanovský's scared of us – then there's Marka here –"

"Pity she ever left home! The Jews, Marka, Letanovský… Think about it, Števo! No good's going to come of this! Just shut up! You're talking twaddle! Letanovský will give us away, the Jews will give us away... We could have split up yesterday, the day before!"

Šiška's eyes gleamed.

Marka Bernadič pressed her face into the kitbag. Oh, God! What if the Germans spot she isn't at home? She was overwhelmed with a fear that completely dispelled her fatigue.

"... hold on to what we can!" Now she was hearing Tesár's unfaltering voice as if from afar. "That's all! There's nothing else we can do. Think of home! Imagine those Soviet partisans and soldiers – if they kept thinking about home the way you do! They do think about it, but differently..."

Marka sensed that Tesár's grip on her had loosened. Father, mother, brother, sisters, sister-in-law, the kids! Oh, God! If someone did get away from the wood, give them away... She rolled over.

Tesár pressed her back down.

"Let go, Števo!"

The partisans fell silent.

Hladík spat out the bit of twig he'd snapped from a blackthorn.

"Why are you holding me down?" Marka's eyelids started to quiver over her green eyes. "If I'd wanted to, I could have run away – neither you nor the Germans would have caught me – and you don't have to worry I'd give you away – not now, not ever now – and, anyway, how? – if I gave you away, I'd be giving myself away as well – right, Števo? My name won't be on our door, that's for sure – and – and – shame on you, lads! Whining like puppy dogs. How *can* you go home? Where's your common sense? How stupid can you get! All right, go, go get yourselves killed –!"

"You just shut up!" Šiška yelled back at her. "What do you know about anything!"

"All right, go! Go, Jano!" Marka turned to face Tesár. "Let him go! Eh, Števo?"

She fixed her green eyes on Tesár, her eyelids still flickering. After a moment she turned back to the kitbag.

Tesár covered her with a blanket.

"We'll head for Little Poruba towards evening," said Tesár, "then we'll see."

Masňák was staring blankly at the ground, thinking of his fiancée faraway near Nitra. Hladík was munching away at his latest bit of twig, Šiška was mentally spraying the Ger-

mans with his submachine gun, Lánik the school-leaver was thinking it would be best to run off home. He shouldn't have done that to his parents, getting himself a grammar-school education then going to join the partisans! Tesár was biting the nail of his left index finger.

"Wouldn't it be better to leave now?" Lánik asked. "I mean go to Little Poruba now?

"Now?" Tesár shook his head. "In daylight?"

Lánik looked down at the little spring, his head filled with the sight of German soldiers as he visualised them herding Letanovský and the Schnitzers from Grabovec back to Závodie. "They had an exemption," he said, "from Tiso."

Marka glanced at Lánik, whose handsome, smooth features appealed to her.

"Exemption!" said Hladík, spitting out his chewed bit of wood. "The Krauts don't give a fig for Tiso's exemptions. Even Krauts have their uses. Like cleansing the world of Jews. If only they'd finished the job before this!"

"Idiot!" said Marka, glancing towards Lánik. "Listen to him, Jožo!"

"What?"

"Have you started shaving?"

"Yep." Jánik smiled. "Of course."

"With a sliver of wood?" Hladík asked. "You should hang a kilogram weight on each whisker, then they'd grow!"

"And that dimple on your chin, how d'you –?"

Lánik smiled at Marka and ran a thin grubby finger over what was quite a deep dimple. "This one?"

"Yes."

"Like this." And he stretched the skin on his chin until the dimple was levelled out. "Aren't you hungry, Marka? Do you fancy a tin of something?"

"No, thanks!" she said. "I hate the smell. Oof, I'd much rather a drop of milk –"

"Have a go," he said, "try milking one of the kitbags, you might get a trickle –!"

“What earthly good is this war?” Masňák mused. “What use is it? We’re trying to do for the Krauts, the Krauts will do for us, and the Russians will do for the Krauts. Isn’t it daft?”

“It is indeed,” said Hladík. “A little war inside a big one.”

“Too true,” said Marka, “it *is* daft. It’s like –”

“No, Marka.” Tesár smiled. “It isn’t, because we’re hitting the Krauts from two sides. The Soviets at Dukla and on one great, long front, and us here. Never fear, Marka, the Krauts will feel the loss of every man, every vehicle, every machine gun, every rifle. Goebbels himself is already alleged to have said the Germans are scraping the barrel.”

“And who’s he?”

The partisans burst out laughing. Marka was covered in confusion, blushed and fell silent.

“But why are you laughing at me?” she snapped back shortly. “In our house we never talked about such clever people, we only ever talked about cows, horses, pigs and Hitler.”

High over Závodie and the surrounding area, and above Grabovec, the pale-orange morning mist was beginning to break up. It was rising and turning into little grey-white clouds, they were then borne by the breeze along the brightening horizon, melting away, reforming and adding a little ornament to a nice autumn Sunday and its play of colours – the grey of the earth, the yellow sun, the blue sky, the yellowing maize, the potatoes turning brown, and the fresh green of the clover growing across the stubble fields. Before long, the whole of Závodie and the surrounding area, including Grabovec, was engulfed in the warm September sun. The air gradually turned warm and then hot. The mountains beyond Great and Little Poruba were like dark, billowing waves.

At the Závodie cemetery, Father Stachovič and the parish organist were burying old Mrs Šiška, mother of the Jáno Šiška who was with Tesár’s group in the wood, they buried her along with her granddaughter Štefka, the little girl of whom Šiška had felt that tiny bit proud, having learned from Marka that she could already say “My tatty’s a blatsmiff”.

For the people of Závodie, life was reduced to what they had to do and what they mustn't do.

The Šiška family had to place their mutilated mother and grandmother and her granddaughter in a large, plain coffin, which the local carpenter had had to produce within an hour, and Father Stachovič had to rush through their funeral above a pit that two men, the sexton and his brother-in-law, had just managed to dig out in two hours. That had been on the orders of the commander of the Závodie unit, Captain Iffland, because he wanted to order to reign in Závodie. He had banned people from attending the funeral with the sole exception of the four men who were to carry old Mrs Šiška and her granddaughter's bier.

He had ordered the five fathers of the five partisans, Hladík the one-eyed roadmender, the little sapper Šiška, the tall, thin brickmaker Masňák, Fruity Lánik and Tesár the journeyman, to be removed to the old barn attached to the rectory, which had neither a barn-door nor a half-decent roof, and placed guards round it, and he'd ordered Letanovský, Schnitzer, Schnitzer's wife and their two little girls, Lili and Viola, to be brought before him.

His elbows rested on Father Stachovič's desk and his hands were clasped in front of his mouth, with his chin resting on his forefingers while his thumbs gripped his jaw. He stared hard at Schnitzer, a scrawny man in a balloon-silk smock and brown breeches, stared into his gaunt face with its growth of black stubble, at his angular spectacles in which the windows of the priest's office glinted, reflecting the walnut trees outside people's houses and the tall pole up which the firemen of Závodie would haul their wet hoses, stared at the tall man, Letanovský, until his eyes skipped across to the two children, the two Schnitzer girls, Lili and Viola, pale and tearful, before running once more over Letanovský and Schnitzer. He scrutinized them closely. He gave a slight smile behind his clamped fists. He had deliberately been keeping his eyes off Mrs Schnitzer since his first sight of her, because

she'd come as a surprise. That tall, fine figure, the long neck, bent slightly forward, the smooth head of brown hair, the pale features with just a slight summer tan. Since that moment he'd avoided looking her way. He was keeping her in reserve after the unpleasant sight of the bespectacled Schnitzer and his scrutiny of the tall Letanovský and the lovely little girls, black-haired Lili and brown-haired Viola, dressed in dark-blue slacks. Twelve-year-old Lili had pigtails and a long flat face that seemed not even to have a nose on it, while nine-year-old Viola had a fringe and her face was more round, pensive, with her lips projecting as if she were sucking a sweet. His eyes drifted down to Schnitzer's wife's hips, held fast within a grey skirt, then up slightly towards her bust over which her brown and green coat was parted. Then they skipped to her pretty, pale face and grey eyes, in which he could read supplication, despair, fear and determination, but he also deciphered a willingness to do anything. His eyes slipped back down to her white hands. Their veins were swollen. They were swelling with blood. He looked back at her face. He felt a tremor. His head swam momentarily with a brief passage of faintness. This one was not remotely like the repulsive Jewess he'd left it to Truppenführer Mohn to give the special treatment to. Mohn is a great devotee of race – and he'd had the Jewess, along with her husband and three boys, shot beside a haystack well clear of the town. Such devotees have always gone for murder… But that had been a repulsive Jewess…

Iffland sensed that waging war on partisans would always be difficult and it made his men apprehensive. Which is why – and for no other reason – Iffland approved of Mohn, because he always afforded the men some distraction. "Partisans and Jews," he'd said to Mohn, when he'd come to report that he'd liquidated the Jews, "boost morale as they stand next to a wall, in a quarry, by a haystack or above a pit. They're excellent for that purpose." – "Yes, Herr Hauptmann," Mohn had replied, "and I reckon we shall have plenty of opportunities." – "Just so," Iffland had concurred, if with disgust. It is disgusting, but

after each such execution the men do seem better disciplined and more determined. It also disturbed him, because the discipline and determination of his men sprang from the composure of members of the SD, and the SD's composure could only ever be guaranteed if it was given Jews and partisans to process by its own special treatment. It was vile, ill-judged to lock up men, women and children in bulk… It was unbecoming, unworthy of the Reich and the objectives of a Greater Germany, no – it was ghastly treatment, just as ghastly as shooting defenceless partisans and Jews as they stand next to a wall, in a quarry, by a haystack or above a pit – no…! He was disturbed by it, but he could see no other recourse because to him the SD was a snake that could create a stir among the men and give him a nasty bite.

He propped his chin on his left hand, glanced towards the pale-eyed smokers, Poller and Dosse, who were sitting on the priest's sofa, and pointed his left forefinger at Letanovský.

"Dieser kann gehen!" he said, not to the soldiers, just to Letanovský. "Vorläufig, glaube ich."

A soldier opened the door of the rectory office, nodded to Letanovský and let him go home.

Then Captain Iffland ran his left hand over his blond hair, trimmed right back above his forehead, stroked his grim, shaven face and pointed to Schnitzer and his children.

"Mit denen in die Scheune!"

Two soldiers led them off to the rectory barn to join the five fathers of the five Závodie partisans, Hladík, Šiška, Masňák, Lámik and Tesár, who were standing there, their faces to the wall and their hands tied in front of them. The soldiers bound the hands of Schnitzer and his two little girls likewise and stood them faces to the wall.

At the time, Schnitzer's wife was thirty-five and attractive. Captain Iffland had noticed something about her that he hadn't noticed about any other woman who'd crossed his path during this war, or any whose path he had crossed. Although she was terrified, although Iffland could see her quaking

before him, he had a sudden sense of the powerlessness and futility of the power by which he compelled the presence and compliance, as he himself put it, of wartime women. Can at least some inclination be won by force from a woman like that? He could tell that Schnitzer's wife couldn't be a war wife. She might succumb, or kill. Then he thought of her pretty children. Might they be of use to him? Suppose he had them taken away ostentatiously, and so paralyse Závodie morally and – and thereby morally paralyse also…? He glanced at Schnitzer's wife. With his chin resting pensively on his hands, he looked at her arching back as she knelt down before him.

This was going to require him to treat her with all the magnanimity he could muster, he thought. By being magnanimous, pressure her into a degree of devotion to him, not by gun-toting!

He glanced sheepishly towards Poller and Dosse, keeping Schnitzer's wife still kneeling before the priest's desk.

"I'll question you and the kids later," he told her, "separately."

She straightened from the waist up, opened her somewhat tearful grey eyes at Iffland and stood up.

"To Letanovský's with her!"

Two soldiers led her off to the Letanovský house.

Iffland reached for the phone.

The pale-eyed Poller and Dosse were smoking away.

"Eight men should be enough," Iffland said into the phone. "If you need more later –"

The soldiers and Schnitzer's wife ran into Father Stachovič, who'd spent a long time standing over the grave of Mrs Šiška and her granddaughter, and a long time with the weeping Šiška family in their cottage, thinking of the thirty years he'd spent in Závodie. He had returned to the rectory courtyard still dressed as he had been at the cemetery, in a black cassock and white surplice. In the shed he spotted not just the five men, but also Schnitzer and his two children.

He knocked on his office door.

It was opened by a soldier and at a nod from Iffland he went in. His face flushed red and his lips began to quiver because he had spotted, on the shelf that held his large volumes, the letters in gold of his DOGMATICA, BIBLIA SACRA and CODEX IURIS CANONICI bathed in streaks of blood. Bathed in blood, the dogma and canon are binding on no one! He stiffened at the very thought. He tightened his grip on the black book in his hand. It was hard for him to take the plunge, but he did decide he'd tell Captain Iffland what he'd been thinking about during the funeral of old Mrs Šiška and her granddaughter Štefka.

"What can I do for you, mein Herr?"

"Herr Hauptmann," Father Stachovič began, gripping firmly before him the black book in his white hands. He stood there in front of his desk as if rooted to the spot and looked up at Iffland. "Craving your indulgence –"

"Funeral over then?" Iffland asked with a sneer before licking his cigarette and lighting it with his lighter. "The German armed services are not best pleased with your village, mein Herr. Jews, partisans, bandits, workshy people, so many who are plain antisocial! Well?"

"Craving your indulgence, Herr Hauptmann," the priest began, pausing to glance round the soldiers in his office, taking in also the pale-eyed Poller and Dosse, "there's something I'd like to say –"

The two clerks at the field table set up opposite Father Stachovič's desk bent over their paperwork, having a quiet laugh.

"You can speak quite freely, mein Herr," said Iffland. "It'll be worth your while to trust my men."

"Craving your indulgence," the priest began once more, "let me just say how sorry I am for the innocent living and the innocent dead. I've lived among these people for a long time now, something over thirty years – and please don't mind my saying that the deaths of the old woman and the little girl were both misjudged and damaging. Surely there can be little doubt that these are two terrible things. Simple misjudgement

on the one hand and the damage caused on the other. Those people in the shed aren't partisans, nor are their sons with the partisans. They've long worked elsewhere. They don't live here in Závodie. There must have been some mistake or a false denunciation. There are instances of culpability that can be punished by God and men. Sometimes the two may punish them jointly, at other times separately – but one person acting alone cannot punish anyone – not even a guilty party – and the innocent cannot be punished by either God or men... And, craving your indulgence, jurisdiction over any life is the preserve of God –"

"Come, come, mein Herr!"

Iffland held his cigarette to his lips with the fingers of his left hand, puffed casually away at it and, with a grin on his face, watched the village priest standing motionless before him, his arms drooping and his hands still gripping the black book. Father Stachovič's words struck him as antediluvian, to all intents and purposes dead.

"Can you vouch for that," he asked the other, still standing there motionless, after a pause, and stroked his rugged features, "that someone in Závodie has been guilty of a mistake or a false denunciation?"

"I can vouch for the fact that these are innocent people. I know the local people well – and in the case of the innocent, neither God nor man may –"

"And the other thing?"

"The other thing, Herr Hauptmann," said Stachovič, "is about the harm done. Punishing the innocent, weak and harmless? I've always thought, craving your indulgence, that German armed forces came here to free us from bandits and not to wreak vengeance on the innocent, weak and harmless for the gruesomeness of the age we live in. Such information as I have is that German armed forces do not make mistakes or commit acts that cause harm. Think about it if you will, as regards those people –" Stachovič raised his black book and pointed it towards the barn, "– and those two children –"

“Children, children,” said Iffland, stopping short. A long slug of grey ash fell from his cigarette onto his sleeve. “That’s –”

The priest regretted noticing it, because Captain Iffland’s rugged features became slightly flushed.

“Children, that’s a different matter – but trust me, mein Herr,” said Iffland irritably, “Germany’s armed forces are a mighty power –” He fell silent for a moment at the recollection that by this stage they were a mighty power only on paper and the radio, and that Goebbels himself had conceded that the Germans were now scraping the barrel – “a mighty power whose might will continue to grow – new weapons – the V1, V2, V3 and so on. If Germany is to come out of this war victorious, then until this new weaponry becomes available, mein Herr, we have to keep seeking our enemies out, seeking them even where there are none. Even among the innocent, weak and harmless. Seeking them out and trying to render them harmless. Both for myself and as a representative of Germany’s armed forces I sorely doubt that our armed forces are capable making mistakes and causing harm. Trust me, mein Herr! Any action that I take is taken in the belief that it is in the best interest of Germany’s armed forces.”

He wagged his sleekly plastered head at Father Stachovič to indicate that he would hear no more of the latter’s pointless fine words.

“But craving your indulgence, Herr Hauptmann, are you not, personally and as a representative of Germany’s armed forces, concerned about innocence and guilt?”

“No!” Captain Iffland raised his long face, now animated by anger, and looked straight at this old priest, whose pale features were furrowed with wrinkles. “That’s not my concern, mein Herr. Such talk of guilt and innocence, it’s all claptrap. You, sir, have probably never been a soldier, not even in wartime – you don’t have a clue what war’s about. You’ve no clue about the spirit of the age we live in. You’re wasting your

breath, mein Herr – you'd be better off seeing to it that I'm not put out by your village!"

Iffland wagged his sleekly plastered head again.

"Herr Hauptmann, craving your indulgence, Germany's armed forces are unlikely to breed heroes if they lack people who are righteous –"

"That, mein Herr, is rubbish!"

"But, still craving your indulgence, Herr Hauptmann," said Father Stachovič, "there is one thing I would beg of you. If something else were to happen – Heaven forbid! – do, please, permit me to prepare the condemned for eternal life – under the watchful eyes of your men, obviously."

"Rubbish, mein Herr," came Captain Iffland's caustic reply. "Anyone needing to be got rid of by Germany's armed forces is not even deserving of your goodwill. They'll be going to Hell even without your assistance." He wagged his head at the priest again.

"But craving your indulgence, Herr Hauptmann –"

On the prayer desk next to the office desk the phone jangled.

"Please – out!"

Stachovič, his lower jaw hanging, made a move, glanced one last time at the words DOGMATICA and BIBLIA SACRA, in gold letters and streaked with blood, and left the office.

Outside the Závodie rectory a vehicle drew up.

The bright-eyed Poller and Dosse rose from the priest's leather couch, glanced out into the street and left to join their eight comrades who'd come to Závodie from Lower Brezany to receive Iffland's orders and carry out their major action.

Shortly after, Captain Iffland – with a large tray, his lunch and a bottle of Father Stachovič's wine in front of him – put out his cigarette, sent for the Scharführer and the men from the SD, explained what they were to do with the Schnitzer children – to make a show of taking them away, then not to execute them, but to bring them to the command post! – and had ten men take the five fathers of the five partisans, Schnitzer

and his two children to the wood he'd found on the ordnance map of Závodie and the surrounding area, Grabovec.

The men set off through Závodie with the condemned men, carrying not just rapid-fire guns, but also picks and shovels.

In Závodie silence reigned. Nobody did anything, the women did no cooking, nobody ate, the men didn't bother shaving, children didn't scream, nobody spoke to anyone, unless in a whisper. Can people do such things? Kill for the sake of killing? Why had they let Letanovský go? It's all his fault! If he hadn't had those Jews… But who told on him, and who betrayed the partisans? It's all his fault. People were horror-stricken not only by the German troops, but at their own venom. It was midday, between twelve and one, the sky was blue, just the odd white cloud here and there, the warm September sun shone, in Závodie a heavy silence reigned except for the occasional honk of a goose or quack of a duck. The Letanovský and Bernadič courtyards were abuzz with bees.

Letanovský's wife, muttering away through her blood-drained lips, went into the back room and, wringing her hands, she stood before Schnitzer's wife, who was sitting on the bed. "They've taken the poor things off."

"Who? What are you saying – taken? Who?"

"Try not to be afraid, Mrs Schnitzer –"

Schnitzer's wife stiffened where she sat, fixing her tearful grey eyes on Mrs Letanovský, whose features twisted out of shape as she began to weep.

" – try not to be afraid – they've also taken those men, and your husband – and the little girls, poor dears, so pretty. Oh dear –," Mrs Letanovský, dressed in grubby clothes, a cotton-print skirt, smock and apron, mumbled through her blood-drained lips before bursting into tears, "– what point is there in people living on earth? If at least they'd kill them straight off and not torment them for ages first! Oh, God, oh, God!"

Mr Letanovský was sitting under his young walnut tree, staring into the ground.

Mr Bernadič was gazing pensively, from the bench where Marka had been shelling beans on Saturday, at the well, its moss-covered surround and green bucket, and as Mr Letanovský's son Jožo, a tall lad with his sleeves rolled up, crossed their yard towards the dividing fence, Mr Bernadič's pockmarked face winced and he watched in alarm as Jožo grabbed hold of the angular stakes.

"Neighbour!"

"What's up?" Mr Bernadič asked. "What d'you want?"

"Come over here, neighbour!"

Mr Bernadič got slowly to his feet, took a sip of water at the well and walked over towards Jožo Letanovský.

"You shouldn't have done it!"

"Done what?"

"Inform on them."

Mr Bernadič's pockmarked face went red, his lips parted first on one side then on the other. He took fright and couldn't bring himself to tell Jožo to his pale, elongated, bony face he must be crazy.

"No, Jožo," he said after a pause, in a whisper, I haven't informed on anyone, no one in this house has informed on anyone. It was someone else, not me."

"So if it wasn't you," young Letanovský replied, "it must have been your Marka. They say she's out somewhere. Maybe the Germans have picked her up and have been torturing her –"

Mr Bernadič stepped back from the fence, took a sip of water from the bucket by the well and sat down on the bench by the porch, crushed.

At the rectory, Captain Iffland had had his lunch – beef soup, roast chicken, rice and bell pepper salad, with wine as an accompaniment. He'd pushed the slice of walnut cake to one side. He lit a cigarette and set off for the Letanovskýs' to find Schnitzer's wife.

He walked contemptuously past where Letanovský was sitting on his bench beneath the young walnut tree, staring

down at the fallen leaves and at two walnuts that had been missed by everyone and were now smirking back up at him as he sat there, dressed and unshaven, just like on Saturday.

Iffland entered the back room.

Mrs Letanovský fled, pressing her filthy apron to her eyes, and Schnitzer's wife leapt to her feet.

"What have you done?" she screamed at Captain Iffland. "Where have you had them take my children? I'm no Jew – and I can easily prove it!"

"Why didn't you…?" Iffland's rugged features, clean-shaven, flushed slightly. "I didn't know –"

"So you're not bothered about my children, only about whether I'm Jewish or not. I'm not Jewish, I'm not – only my husband. I'd left with him for his sake and for the sake of the children because living in fear had got so hard, especially since the spring – what have you done with my children? Why didn't you have me taken away with them? Why did you keep me here?"

She became convulsed with tears. She sat down on one of the beds, Iffland on the other. A faint scornful smile played about his rugged features, clean-shaven. Schnitzer's wife wept into the fists that she had pressed firmly to her eyes. Her fingers glistened with teardrops.

"The children," he began, glancing through the window towards the Letanovskýs' yard, which was deserted. "I just had them brought osten- –"

Schnitzer's wife leapt to her feet.

"What have you done with my children?" she shrieked. "How could you have the gall to take my children and keep me here and –"

"I merely had them ostentatiously removed," he replied all too gamely and stridently. "I'll let you have them if you'll –"

"Ostentatiously!" she shrieked, choking on the word. Twitches distorted her tear-soaked fingers. "Ostentatiously you had my children taken from me, ostentatiously you've had them killed – you coward! Ostentatiously is how cowards

commit murder! Why did you have them taken away? Tell me, why…?"

A single spasm ran through her body, causing her neck, which had been slightly bent forward, to straighten. She sank to the floor next to the bed.

Iffland watched her briefly, picked her up off the floor and laid her on the bed. He stood over her, ashamed of himself, because he'd been expecting entreaty, despair, humility, a readiness to do anything, he'd also been expecting Schnitzer's wife to be a little yielding in exchange for her children. He looked down at her face, the white complexion, slightly tanned in summer, the faintest hint of down showing white against her cheeks, her tiny nostrils. He undid her blouse and began to loosen her tight clothing. Pausing briefly, he ran over and opened the window before returning to the bed.

He felt a thrill as she opened her grey eyes wide.

"What – have you done – with my children?"

Her eyes clouded over and her head abruptly detached itself from the pillow.

"You'll get your children back," he said, "I'll take care of them for you –"

"What a sorry wretch you are, Hauptmann," said Schnitzer's wife in an alien, surprisingly deep tone, "a wretch and a coward! You've had my husband led away, and my children, to be shot and killed – and you have the gall to come after me –!"

Iffland stared at Schnitzer's wife, confounded at his own self, at his having been capable, in the sight of the men from the SD, of just that much generosity of spirit, that much magnanimity. Can even so little count as magnanimity – having her husband killed, her children threatened with death, and offering her their lives in exchange for her yielding? He was amazed at himself as he gazed on Schnitzer's wife lying there. She was fading from his sight, which had grown cloudy with such ruminations.

All was quiet in Závodie and the surrounding area. The sun shone down on Grabovec, filling it with the fragrance of