

He was brought here by the despair of a weak man, despair as ordinary as this entire setting. Rumours had also reached him, and he had also guessed, through whose agency he was to be moved from Dzwinsk to “a more remote place”. He refused the offer and left the job. Now he wanted simultaneously to take revenge and offer forgiveness; to kill and to fall at her feet; to impress and humiliate; he wanted to seem ruthless and to howl, to plead for mercy. He had thought this out long ago; several months, almost a year had passed, and he was still racked by inner contradictions, and perhaps this, rather than the cold, is why he was momentarily trembling as in a fever. And then, suddenly, he heard the distant clip-clopping of a horse-drawn cab. He stopped, and, in the whirl of thoughts, there was no definite thought. Does the increasingly distinct clatter of a horse’s hoofs against the frozen cobbles herald an imminent death? Ah, anything, anything is possible in this world and in the other world.

There was just one lantern, fifty steps away, at the junction of two mews. But he has not planned to escape that way, but here, into the abyss of an unpaved road, still full of potholes, a road in the making, barely marked out, unlit of course. So he had a concrete plan after all? Perhaps...

The cab stopped in front of an invisible gate. Tamara, who had got out, was groping for money, holding her purse close to the cab’s lantern. So she was alone. She was standing with her back to him. He then began to walk towards her out of the darkness. She and the cabman simultaneously turned their heads when they heard unexpected steps. He was now so close that she could probably discern his face. He still did not know what he would do or say. Having recognised him, she turned again to look into the purse and sighed with unconcealed disgust: “Ah!... God...”

At this very second fate swept all his hopes away as wind sweeps autumnal leaves. He cried hoarse words, not those which he had prepared:

“For the wrong you’ve done me!...” He shot once, then again! He aimed at her without seeing. And he immediately started to run into the pitch-black passage of the unpaved road. He did not even hear the echo of his shots which had to have resounded loudly in the stillness of the night. Only after he had run a few dozen steps did he hear the cabman shouting:

“Hooold!” And the clangour of the hoofs of the frightened horse. And then the cabman again: “Tprrr!”

A dog barked furiously in the neighbourhood. He did not hear her voice. He tore the cap from his head for some reason and, holding it in his left hand, and the revolver in his right, he was running flat out. A husky

croak was coming from his throat. Nobody was pursuing him. Suddenly... Yes, certainly. He stopped, holding his breath... The distant, agitated voice of a man, probably the cabman, and in the intervals between this and the barking of the dog... the clear, but distinct, laughter of a woman, trembling in a nervous cascade! Yes, it was Tamara laughing.

So, sometimes things end in this way. He knew that the minus sign can appear in any calculation. He forgot that zero can also occur... The sudden awareness of a defeat, of a defeat including his own nothingness, tore every wish out of his soul. He put the cap on his head and the revolver into his coat pocket and trudged along, stumbling in the darkness, knowing that nobody would pursue him because he had already been crushed. He heard his own words in his head: “For the wrong you’ve done me,” and he thought that a housemaid who had been fired might have said these... He had abased himself, wounding his own self-respect. Only Tamara’s laughter was left to him... Should not boundless humility be the last recourse for such people?

Tamara, when the first shock had passed and the cabman’s confused cries had come to an end, took out the forty kopeks which had been agreed for the ride.

“For all this fright, Miss!” the cabman reproached her. So she added another twenty kopeks. “God be with you. And let Him guard you from such madmen. Just think... He could have killed...” He made a clicking sound to the horse and began to reverse slowly along the narrow street, pleased with the tip.

Excerpt translated by Nina Karsov



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**JÓZEF
MACKIEWICZ**
(1902–1985)

Józef Mackiewicz is one of the most important writers of the 20th century. In his prose and journalism, he has dealt with issues related to war and politics, as well as Eastern European society – primarily concerning Polish-Russian relations. He was a strong anti-communist and opponent of all kinds of nationalism – he proclaimed the idea of equality of all nations. The Sejm of the Republic of Poland has decided that the year 2022 will be devoted to the figure of Józef Mackiewicz.

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