



THE MOROMETES

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MARIN PREDA

The Morometes

by Marin Preda

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The Morometes. Excerpts

Down the plane of the Danube, a few years before the Second World War, time seems to have been very good to the peasantry: life went on there without much trouble.

Seated on the rail of the plank-bridge, Moromete was looking across the road. He just sat there, at a loose end, looking at nothing in particular, but you could tell by his face that he wouldn't have minded if someone were to turn up... But the peasants were pottering round their houses; it wasn't the right time to be on the road. The smoke of the cigarette in his hand was rising straight up, without haste or purpose.

"And how are you, Moromete? Say, have you finished your hoeing?"

So, somebody had turned up after all. Moromete looked up and saw the neighbour, who lived at the back of his house, coming down towards the plank-bridge. He cast just one glance at him, as if nothing had happened; he obviously hadn't expected that kind of a person... "Curse you and your whole damn family, you one-eyed blighter!" muttered Moromete to himself, before answering very courteously:

"Yes, I've finished... And what about you, Bălosu, have you got any more to do?"

"I've finished too. There was still a small plot this side of Pămînturi; Ţugurlan's kinsmen hoed it for me. Well, Moromete, have you made up your mind? Will you let me have that acacia over there?"

So, that was why the neighbour had come along. Moromete just stared at him. He knew well enough why his neighbour had come out, so he didn't answer his question. "Yes, we once discussed my selling you an acacia tree:

Maybe I will, maybe I won't... What's the hurry?" he seemed to say to his neighbour.

"And your Victor... Doesn't he go in for hoeing any more, Bălosu? Or, is it no longer befitting since he's a commercial traveller?" said Moromete. "That is... if we take into consideration that he's so busy..." he added.

His neighbour rather suspected that these words weren't really as innocent as might appear from the tone in which they had been uttered, but he passed it over.

"Now just tell me why you will no longer give it to me, Moromete? Of course I meant to pay for it..."

Instead of answering, Moromete started gazing at the sky.

"Mark my word, it's going to rain tonight. And if it does, I shall make quite a fine mound of wheat, Tudor!"

So, that was why he no longer needed to sell him the acacia! For quite a while Bălosu didn't say a word, then he pretended to talk about something else:

"I met Albei at noon today. He said that tomorrow morning he'd be going on his rounds through the village to collect the taxes."

Moromete made no reply.

"He said he'd received an injunction, or rather some order, drat it, that those who owe land-taxes and won't pay them by tomorrow would have part of their household goods seized."

All of a sudden Moromete became quite gloomy. He wanted to answer but got up unexpectedly from the rail and rushed to the gate; a horse had escaped from the stable and was nearly out upon the high-road.

"Whoa! Back you go, you fool; where are you off to?" shouted the peasant shutting the gate in the beast's face.

But the horse wasn't afraid; it held its muzzle close to the fence, breathing heavily through its nostrils and then, as if in contempt, turned its back and began rubbing itself against the fence.

"Whoa! Can't you hear, you deaf bugger? Damn your soul!" shouted the infuriated Moromete.

The horse stopped rubbing itself and shambled leisurely towards the *prispă*¹ of the house, right to the spot where Paraschiv was resting. Moromete went after it, but the horse took no notice of him. It stopped near the *prispă* and stretched out its neck towards the balustrade where it started nibbling at a block of salt. Paraschiv woke up in a rage and kicked it with all his might in the belly.

Just then the mother appeared on the threshold. Her face was red and tired, and the sweat was running in sooty rivulets down her cheeks and her neck.

“Ilie, where have those girls gone to? What can I do here all by myself? It’s getting dark, and what are you going to eat?”

“It’s crayfish we’re going to eat, mother; is that what you’re wailing for?” answered Moromete dragging the horse to the stable.

The woman wiped her forehead listlessly, swallowed a lump in her throat and vanished into the lobby.

“Niculae, where are you, boy?” shouted Moromete gardenwards.

“Here I am!” a voice sounded from somewhere.

“What are you doing there? Come here and help your mother! So he’s gone into the garden, poor boy, to have a rest, as he’s been killing himself with work up to now. Get a move on quick, d’you hear me?”

Through the garden gate entered a boy of about twelve. Bareheaded, with his shirt hanging down in tatters. His bare feet were covered with old scratches showing traces of clogged blood mixed with dust.

“Go to your mother and see what job she’s got for you to do!” went on Moromete walking slowly off towards the garden.

The neighbour, who had meanwhile been waiting near the gate for the man to come back, shouted somewhat peevishly:

“Moromete, where are you going to, say?”

“Just wait a sec; I’ll be back in a jiffy,” mumbled Moromete. “Now run along to your mother; why d’ye keep staring at me?” he said in another tone to the boy who had remained mum near the garden gateway.

¹ Sort of raised platform running along the outer walls of many peasant houses. It is often closed in by a finely carved balustrade and roofed over, verandah-like (translator’s note).

“But what about Ilinca? Why doesn’t she go?” stammered the boy without looking at his father.

“Now then, that’ll do, Nicolae! When I box your ears you’ll find out why she isn’t going!” threatened the peasant disappearing behind the haystack.

Only Moromete seemed to be sitting above all the others. His place was on the threshold of the second room, whence he could survey each one with his eyes.

All the others sat close together, squeezed in shoulder to shoulder, the table being too small. Moromete hadn’t changed it since the time of his first matrimony, although the number of his children had grown. He sat comfortably on his threshold and could move at ease; besides, the thought of replacing that low table covered with burns from the pan had never crossed anybody’s mind. (...)

They all looked down and silence reigned in the room for some time. Catrina changed the platter and poured out the second course, boiled milk. Moromete took two slices of *mămăligă*² and dropped them into the brimful dish. At the same instant some half-dozen spoons were thrust forward towards the middle of the table, and they all began to cut the *mămăligă* in the dish into small pieces. Nicolae had also shoved his spoon amongst the others, but he hardly succeeded in getting hold of a morsel to carry to his mouth. The dish was soon empty. The woman filled it up again. Eventually, Nicolae got his sister’s spoon hooked into his own and jerking it aside, and gnashing his teeth, he sprayed them all with the boiling-hot milk. At the same instant Moromete raised his hand and dropped it down on the boy’s head like a sledge-hammer, with a crash. The boy turned purple, his eyes nearly popped out; he was gnashing his teeth and could hardly breathe. Although he had been sitting, he toppled over and fell down limply alongside the table.

“Get up!” said Moromete quietly, but in a harsh, menacing voice.

² Boiled maize meal; the Rumanian peasant’s staple food (translator’s note).

The boy propped himself on his hands and knees and sat up again.

“Go on eating!” said the man in the same voice.

Niculae turned back to the table, cast a glance full of hatred at his sister and got hold of his spoon. Meanwhile the dish had been emptied again. The woman filled it for the third time, looked threateningly at Ilinca and put the pot down.

“Finished, that’s all the milk we’ve got,” she said, although she hadn’t poured out the whole lot.

Till the end of the meal nobody said another word. Moromete stretched out his legs and pushed the table away from him, rubbing his hands against each other to clean off the *mămăligă*. The woman and the girls were meanwhile collecting the pots and pans.

About midnight, a quiet abundant rain came pouring down. It murmured on the roofs and on the ground with drops as soft as oil. No thunder was heard and no lightning was seen. It was pitch dark.

As the rain had come quite unexpectedly, nobody woke up when it became heavier and, when rivulets began to stream down the roofs, all along the *prispă*, those who were sleeping near the border did no more than move closer to the wall, whilst muttering in their sleep.

Just before dawn, the rain stopped and the clouds vanished from the sky. Moromete had gone to sleep very late, but he woke up when the rain stopped, and again remained motionless on the *prispă*. His sleepless immobility woke up Catrina who was lying at the far end of the *prispă*.

“Hie, what’s the matter with you? Why don’t you lie down?” she murmured rather anxiously.

Moromete didn’t answer, but coughed soothingly. But even so Catrina didn’t try to go to sleep again. Something was happening in the family! Maybe Achim’s departure for Bucharest, but they had been talking about that since early winter, and they had brooded over it long enough. During supper the name of the tax-collector’s agent had been mentioned; he was to come in the

morning for the land-taxes. But this too was an old tale; Albei came every year, and this year was in no way different from the last. The bank? But the bank's turn came only in the autumn. Would all those threats that had been creeping behind them for years heap themselves up this very year upon the family's head? Maybe. But it wasn't likely, because time was very patient, and the big threats crumbled into an infinity of smaller threats which, with the help of time, they carried daily on their backs. Thus it had happened that time had caused one of them to lag behind, one of the most terrible threats she could remember, that is the debt they owed the bank for the payment of the lots received in consequence of the agrarian reform that had come immediately after the war. Many had sold their plots, and some had remained with no land at all and had gone to the dogs. But they had been patient, they had plodded on, year after year, until the day when the state, realizing that the peasants were still unable to pay their debts, could find no other solution than to reduce the amount. Thus they came to look upon the bank as none too bad, and so, two years later, they made another loan to buy cattle. Would they be able to pay? They thought it over for quite a while, and realized that nothing worse could happen to them than to lose what they hadn't gained. It was therefore clear that Moromete alone was responsible for his worries and Catrina thought this so very strange that she made the sign of the cross.

"You've entered the year of your death," she whispered. And she laid her head on the bolster, reflecting that that was the way things happened; when man forgets God, God will also forget him and will leave him to face his sins by himself.

"Because — she murmured into the bolster — it's only your sins that won't let you sleep."

At these last words Moromete coughed meaningfully, and answered with curst merriment:

"That's why you sleep like a log, may God strike you dead, because you've got no sins on your conscience, eh?"

He threw down his cigarette, stepped down from the *prispă* and slowly walked towards the garden without waiting for his wife's answer. (...)

But Moromete was no church-goer and, as to the other way, he had never adopted it as a solution.

He was ten years older than Catrina (the 1911 contingent; he had been in the war) and now he was of that age between youth and old age when only great mishaps or great joys can alter a man's nature.

Moromete had taken as a joke not only Catrina's anxiety about the house but also her frightening nightmares. "It would be fine to have as many pigs as you're dreaming of," he would say, but he soon realized that to beget and to rear a lot of children may often be an overwhelming task for a mother. The events that later occurred in the family disturbed Moromete to a lesser degree. Only one of them, which took place one winter, shortly after the family was rid of debts thanks to the conversion law, made him understand that even for him was it dangerous not to attend to the children. That year the crop had been rich, and everybody had traded his cereals in the mountain region. The peasant holdings recovered from the terrible crisis they had lived through during the years 1929-1933. Prosperity knocked at the door of many of the villagers, the cattle increased in number, the market price of cereals was high, cotton stuffs and tools were cheaper, and the price of land higher than ever before.

Those who first felt that prosperity was knocking at their family's door were the three sons, Paraschiv, Nilă and Achim (at the time they weren't quite sure of their right to accuse their father for having married a second time; they did realize, vaguely, that their father couldn't bring them up, that only a woman could do that kind of thing; it was only later they gave their father to understand that their Aunt Guica could have brought them up very well).

The family had come out of the crisis with their plots untouched, but their household was short of cattle.

They had two miserable horses that wagged their tails when you whipped them up.

Autumn had come round, and maize was plentiful (maize and wheat, and amongst the maize, pumpkins, sunflowers and beans; that was all they cultivated, although the soil did quite well when sown with hemp, flax, tobacco,

and beetroot, and — as it was to be proved some ten or fifteen years later — even with cotton, rice and expensive medicinal plants). The three brethren rubbed their hands with glee and said to their father one night: “We ought to fatten up those nags, dad! Tudor Bălosu went to the highlands last week and made one thousand lei.”

Moromete couldn't understand how one could earn one thousand lei in a single journey to the mountains, but he didn't object to fattening up the horses. They sold some maize, bought oats, and, before winter was over, the horses' coat was shining like silk.

Moromete, however, wouldn't move. He spent long evenings with his friend Cocoșilă, discussing politics or listening to Niculae, who read wonderful stories out of books borrowed from the school library. Thrilling evenings those were! Eleven brothers who were under a spell, wandering about in daytime, in the guise of eleven swans, at sunset landing and crowding on a rock, right in the middle of the sea, once more in human shape. How they thus stayed herding together, tortured and terrified by the night's darkness and by the mutinous waves that threatened to wash them away... And the agonies endured by their sister who was to weave with her own hands, in a given time and without speaking, eleven tunics made of nettles, in order to save them from the spell; and how she was pressed for time in finishing one sleeve of the last tunic, and how her youngest brother remained for ever with a bit of a swan's wing...

And then Cocoșilă was a character who roused in Moromete's heart something exceedingly pleasant, just as Niculae's tales did. He would drop in at dusk, knocking at the door like a gentleman. Somebody would say: “Come in!” and he would come in and say good evening to Catrina alone, adding every time that “those other fools he would not bid good evening” causing Catrina to feel embarrassed, but also ready to burst out laughing.

He would ask Niculae questions about grammar and history, to Paraschiv he would repeat his one and only question (when was he going to marry?) and then would advise the elder daughter to marry Năstase Besensac (a worthless young fellow). With Moromete, however, he had older accounts to settle, and he would never miss the opportunity of chiding him. Many years ago a new party had made quite a sensation. It was called the “Peasant Party” and its program had at the time filled Cocoșilă with enthusiasm. Moromete had been

rather more reserved (Moromete was a Liberal) and when the “Peasant Party” came into power and when Cocoșilă became wild seeing that Maniu and Mihalache had not only disregarded their program but had proved even more ravenous than the Brătianus, Moromete didn’t spare his friend but kept making fun of him, stating that “fools ought not to have the right to vote, because it’s on account of them that the country will suffer.”

But four years later, the Liberal Party was again in office and Cocoșilă had his revenge because the Liberal Party raised the land-taxes and introduced toll at markets for exchanging goods. “See, you fool?” jubilated Cocoșilă.

He kept ragging Moromete ever since, without mercy. “You’re a fool,” he kept saying in every tone of voice, sometimes resignedly, at other times condescendingly, all according to circumstance. As a matter of fact he was trying to convince Moromete that he, Cocoșilă, was far cleverer, which only made Moromete merrier, the more so as Cocoșilă behaved quite differently with other people. He generally swore in the most vulgar manner, cursed people, and didn’t just say “you’re a fool,” but much worse: “you’re talking balls...!” He was famous for his swear-words, he even cursed his own father — saying why the devil he had sired him — he also cursed the priest, the mayor and the tax-collector, saying the filthiest things about all of them, damning their spoon, the napkin they wiped their mouth on, down to the most insignificant things: their lamp, candlestick, socks and so on, as well as their sheep’s pen, their garden, relatives and ancestors, nephews and grandchildren... Catrina would burn incense in the house to expel the evil, but she couldn’t help bursting out laughing. One day Cocoșilă came into the house and said just this much: “The tax-collector has been to my house and taken all my traps away,” whereupon he started swearing and cursing and never stopped till late in the night when he got up and left without another word. Cocoșilă would especially drag God down into the village, and curse Him with a sort of philosophy, accusing Him and asking Him questions as he would have asked of any other man. (...)

When, after the war, Moromete had become a landowner himself, he lived in such complete happiness at having got rid of the big landowner, that he didn't notice, or rather didn't want to notice, how far he was free or tied to the plots he owned. The soil had indeed given him some sort of a liberty. But he never asked himself to what degree he was independent. On the other hand he rebelled against any restrictions and was full of hope. So then, he would take up trading in cereals and make money! And what would he do with the money? Pay taxes! Strange indeed, to have come to that! All right, let it be trade then, but it should be well understood that this wasn't his aim in life...

Moromete would sometimes retire — was it a sign of old age, or was it the need to prove to himself that even the most intricate thoughts might make themselves heard? — to some corner of the garden, or to the back of the house and would then start talking to himself.

“What a funny ideal,” he whispered thoughtfully, stopping near the garden gate. He got hold of the point of a fence-pale and stood there with bent head. “If it's really my sins that are the cause of my sleeplessness — he went on testing the resistance of the pale with a gentle pull — it would signify that this Paraschiv of mine who once he's in bed can sleep like a dormouse... it would signify — and at this point Moromete stopped talking aloud and went on thinking the rest without a word — it would mean that he is the man with the purest heart on earth. Such a fool that wife of mine,” he wondered aloud, whilst ascertaining that it would be difficult to pretend the fence-pales around his yard were not rotting away. “One more rain, and these fence-pales will grin at the house with their blackened teeth,” he went on thinking, without speaking aloud.

Somebody had once asked him jokingly why he was talking to himself. Moromete had answered in all seriousness the reason was that there was nobody with whom he could discuss things, which meant that he didn't think anybody worth talking to.

When Moromete walked in through the gate of the yard, there was no need to look round to see what had happened, why his daughter had called him away from the smithy. He had known it ever since the night before. Two men were waiting for him on the *prispă* of his house.

One of them was dressed as townsfolk are, in a black suit, as if he were in mourning. He had a thin face, as if he only ate on a Friday and Wednesday, as the women say; on his head there was a white straw hat with a black ribbon; his sunken cheeks made his eyes look as if they were popping out of his head, giving him an air of restrained fury. Although none too young, he was clean-shaven, with no moustache. He was called Flayed Face, because when he shaved, his face looked as if it had been flayed. He was an honest tax-collecting agent, which meant he was a fool, as the peasants would say, cursing him at the same time. He had enriched — that's what they thought — two tax-collectors, but he himself had always remained poor. The truth was that he had begun as poor as a church mouse, but nobody knew what he actually owned now. He was the son of a widow, the Albuleasa woman, who hadn't left him a farthing. After four years at the elementary school he had got the post of an assistant secretary at the town hall because he had a good hand-writing, a post where he had sometimes worked with no salary, since they would tell him he hadn't been included in the budget that month. But as after a few years he had begun to be quite an expert at some of the jobs of the town hall, the tax-collector helped him to get appointed as his assistant. He had married before that appointment and his marriage hadn't brought him any money. But now he owned some six acres of land — as every agent ought to, Moromete would say — and he had built himself a nice cottage.

Moromete passed the *prispă* without looking at the two who were waiting for him and stopped straight before the lobby:

“Catrina, woman, come and fetch these sickles!” he shouted angrily, throwing the sickles down on the *prispă* as though the sickles were the cause of his annoyance.

Nobody fetched the sickles. Catrina had gone to church, and the girls seemed to be lying in wait inside the house.

Moromete then turned towards the garden with his back to the agent and to his companion and shouted again, as if the two on the *prispă* hadn't been there: "Paraschiv, where are you, lad? Don't you see that the hay-fork has been lying against the fence for more than five weeks? Take it and put it into the barn. It might stay there till it got rusty, or you might tread on it, and yet you wouldn't think of picking it up!..."

Paraschiv didn't answer, neither was he to be seen anywhere. For a few seconds Moromete stood with his back turned to the two men on the *prispă*, then he suddenly wheeled round, shouting:

"No money!"

The agent got up and tried to say something but Moromete shouted again, his arms wide apart:

"No money!"

"That's what you have been telling me, goodman Ilie, ever since I've known you," the agent said curtly, showing no sign of surprise. "The tax-collector doesn't ask me if you have money or not. This year it's all over with the: 'No money stunt.' Come and sit down on the *prispă* and don't cast such nasty looks at me." Moromete quietly drew nearer to the *prispă*. He was now looking elsewhere, exactly as if he hadn't heard a word of what was being said to him. He leaned leisurely against the pillar of the cottage and began to search the pockets of his woollen waistcoat. From the bottom of the pocket he produced a little tobacco dust mixed with dirt, prepared to empty it on a cigarette paper, then blew it away quickly and cast an ugly look at the man who accompanied the agent. He addressed him in an angry and commanding voice:

"Give me a fag!"

The man hastily took out his tobacco pouch and handed it to him.

"The land-taxes for the Moromete plot, three thousand lei. On the Catrina Moromete plot, there's to be paid a balance of two thousand eight hundred sixty-three lei," said the agent turning over the pages of a register with flexible covers. "That isn't such a lot of money, after all! Goodman Ilie, see how we shall arrange it: you now pay the balance, which is more urgent, and for this year's taxes I shall wait till after the reaping. That's all I can do for you. And now hurry up because I've got to collect money from sixty more villagers till dinner-time..."

Moromete, who had meanwhile rolled himself a cigarette, looked up at the agent with an enquiring glance and said:

“Catrina, or Tita, whichever of you is in the lobby: give us a light.”

The agent sat down on the edge of the *prispă*, took out a booklet with receipt forms, and began to write in it: “That is three thousand lei have been received from Mr. Ilie Moromete...” Before writing it down, he had looked at the peasant to hear him confirm it. But Moromete hadn’t said a word.

Tita came out on the *prispă* with a piece of burning coal which she held out to her father to light his cigarette. Flayed Face tore off the receipt and handed it hastily to Moromete, shoving the loosely bound register into a portfolio which he held under his arm. Moromete took the receipt, looked at it searchingly as if he’d wanted to ascertain whether it was in good order, turned it over, then put it down carefully on the *prispă*, whilst smoking his cigarette quietly.

“Come on, goodman Ilie, come on!” said Flayed Face hastily, shutting his portfolio with a snap.

“But haven’t I told you I haven’t got any money?” said Moromete innocently. “What can I do if I haven’t got any? Where should I take the money from? I haven’t got any!”

“The devil, goodman Ilie!” shouted the furious agent. “Don’t you see I’ve already detached the receipt? Don’t you make me waste my time. The state doesn’t pay me for wasting my time in the villager’s homes...”

“Just look at him!” Moromete wondered humorously. “Am I keeping you?”

“Goodman Ilie, he’s detached the receipt!” the attendant said in his turn, in a serious voice.

“Yes, I can see that,” said Moromete as if to excuse himself.

“Pay up, Moromete!” said the wrathful agent. “What the devil, are we playing at blind-man’s buff?”

Moromete looked at the agent and tried to smile. “It’s easy to say, pay! But what shall I pay you with? Don’t you hear I haven’t got any money?” “Come here!” said the agent to his attendant. They climbed up the *prispă* and went into the house. Moromete sat silent on the *prispă*, smoking his cigarette. Only his bulging forehead was wrinkled up. Flayed Face went into the largest room in which the Morometes lived and rushed up to the head of a bed where, on top of a chest decorated with painted flowers, some half dozen peasant carpets and a

few small rugs were piled up. The agent pulled at the pile on top of the chest and threw it onto the bed, telling his attendant: "Take them! We'll teach Mr. Moromete to pay the land-taxes to the state! Take them all!"

The assistant strained himself to heave the whole lot, groaning under the load. The agent took what was left and both of them came out again. But in the lobby they were met by Tita who began to yell at them: "Leave these things here, how dare you take them? Didn't you find anything else to take? I won't give you these carpets!"

She got hold of the man who was carrying the carpets on his shoulders and began to pull at him. She wrenched from him, in wild rage, the pile he was carrying, threw it down rigid in the middle of the room, jumped over the threshold and bolted the door. She had done all this so unexpectedly and so swiftly that the agent and his attendant remained flabbergasted in the lobby, with gaping mouths.

"Ah! So that's how it is? Alright. Here, go and call the chief of gendarmes," said the agent banging the door with his fist.

"You may come with ten gendarmes, you won't enter the house again!" Tita yelled from within, in a jeering voice.

"Let's take something else from the yard!" Flayed Face decided. "Come on!"

They went to the *prispă* and the agent pointed at the corner of the outhouse:

"The wagon! Pull it out and drag it to the town hall!" said he walking on to open the gate.

Paraschiv had come out of the stable and was passively looking on at the man who had got hold of the shaft of the wagon and was making an effort to drag it towards the gate.

"Do you think you will be able to drag it away?" asked Moromete interested.

"Harness the horses!" shouted the agent impatiently. "No, wait! Take both the horses to the town hall, and you'll see how easily we shall get the land-taxes for them."

The man went up to the stable, but at the door he came up against Paraschiv.

“You can’t take the horses — he muttered between his sinuous lips — they are my horses, they don’t belong to my father.” Though the stable was empty, he still defended it with a queer grin.

“Shove him aside and go into the stable!” shouted the agent coming up towards the two.

“No, you ain’t taking the horses!” Paraschiv said again, quite sure of himself.

“My opinion is you’d better leave the horses alone,” said Moromete in a conciliatory tone. “Don’t you understand I have no money? Take a thousand lei here, and we’ll see about the rest later on, we shall talk it over in time! Do you think we ye an money?”

Moromete fetched two banknotes from an inner pocket of his woollen waistcoat and began to wave them under the agent’s nose.

“Within a week or two, I shall pay you some more. My son is going to Bucharest, and I shall pay. Please to understand, once and for all!” Moromete added this time very impatiently, as if he had told the agent all this a long time ago, and the agent had refused to understand.

“Damn it all... goodman Ilie!” the agent burst out furiously walking up to the *prispă* of the cottage. “It’s now six whole years since I have been squabbling with you, as if you had to pay me the money and not the State.”

He sat down on the *prispă*, banging the portfolio onto his knees and taking out the booklet with the receipt forms. He hurriedly wrote out a fresh receipt, tore it off, and threw it at the peasant’s face:

“It’s the last time, I warn you, Moromete; if you don’t come to the town hall to pay the money, I will come here myself in a fortnight, with the gendarmes, and I shall take not only the horses, but you too. And I shall take you bound hand and foot!”

Realizing he had gone too far, Flayed Face jumped up waving his arms about:

“The devil, goodman Ilie!” said he in a voice that tried to imply how astounded he was. “What the devil? Can’t you pay a few thousand lei? Why don’t you pay it off and get rid of all this worry? What are you waiting for?”

“How can I pay you, if I haven’t got any money?” answered Moromete thoughtfully, again rummaging in the pocket of his woollen waistcoat. “Come on,

give us one more fag," he said. "Where should I get the money from, Flayed Face? Haven't I just told you: if I could only hatch money, I'd hatch some every time you came, and I should say: here you are, sir!"

"But how do other people manage to pay?" the other man shouted, wild at the peasant having called him by his nickname. "I've never met the like of you!" he yelled. "You aren't poor! You've no small children to rear! You aren't ill either! So what? Everybody pays for their plots, while you have been putting it off and dragging it out for more than fifteen years!"

"Fifteen years did you say?" mumbled Moromete rolling his cigarette.

"What d'you mean by: 'fifteen years did you say?' How many years is it now since the war, when you received your plot? It's sixteen-seventeen years!"

"Seventeen years, is it?!" Moromete muttered again. "Tita or Ilinca," he called looking at the entrance to the lobby, "give me a fire."

"What d'you mean by: 'seventeen years, is it?' How many years is it since 1920?"

As Moromete didn't answer, the agent exploded again: "It is seventeen years!" he shouted and then repeated: "Seventeen years! For seventeen long years have you constantly put off both the payment of the bonds, and that of the land-taxes. Then came the Conversion law, and you were cleared of your debt. And then Mister Moromete went and borrowed from the bank as if he were a grand pasha, and bought himself sheep and horses... You own fourteen acres of land and out of fourteen acres, just imagine! he isn't able to pay for the lots come to him like a windfall from the State!"

"What fourteen acres, what windfall?" asked Moromete, this time looking at the agent with hatred, and muttering some curses in which the word windfall was heard two or three times.

"You may well curse, but I'm telling you once and for all: for the last six years, since I have been an agent, you have been trying to blindfold me, giving me once five hundred, another time five hundred and fifty, and even the large sum of six hundred and one lei..."

"You may be glad that I gave you even that one leu," muttered Moromete.

“I ought to be glad even of that one leu? Now let me tell you that this year the comedy is over. D’you get me?” stressed the agent. “Fifteen years of playing the clown is quite enough!”

“Goodman Ilie, the newspaper!” the postman cried at that very moment, driving past and throwing the paper out of his cabriolet over the fence.

“And he goes in for politics moreover!” exclaimed the much perplexed agent. Ilie subscribes to a newspaper, but refuses to pay the land-taxes!”

As regards his subscription, the truth was that Moromete had only once paid twenty lei for one month, but the “Mișcarea” had been sent him regularly for nearly two years.

The furious agent went up to the gate followed by the other man, shouting aloud in the same tone of astonishment:

“He goes in for politics too! He subscribes to a newspaper! But he refuses to pay the taxes! Just you wait and see, my friend! We shall soon have a little chat together!”

In the yard, teachers and schoolmistresses called those who had received prizes, and the children recited poems.

When the turn of the fourth form came, the former director mounted the platform and, before calling out the names of those rewarded with a prize, he stopped a while in front of the desk, intimating that he had something to say. Everyone was instantly quiet, and some peasants, who were chatting in a subdued voice, got up from their seats and stopped whispering. Only a few deaf old women, looking at the teacher, remembered his parents; the former director was a native of this village.

“That poor boy of Niță Teodorescu’s,” one of them pitied him. “He’s always so thin, poor chap!”

“It’s all that schooling that’s made him thin, he’s always been learning too much. I’ve known him since he was a child,” said another.

“Hey, shut up, those women over there!” a man said indignantly, turning towards the place whence the whispers were heard. “What’s all the fuss about,

we're just having a chat, Ghiță, why d'you stare at us like that?" answered one of the old women in an unconcerned voice.

"Go out in the road, if you feel like jabbering."

"Now then, Ghiță, look out you don't catch cold keeping your mouth open. You're raising the dust with all that talk of yours!" said another old woman laughing.

"Shut up all of you! Quiet!" rang out the angry voice of the director.

"My friends! The director told you at the beginning of his speech that the most stupid man is he who doesn't send his child to school. But I have it from my parents that there are only two categories of people. Those who have the money to send their children to school, and those who haven't got the means, who can't send them because they need them for their household work and have no money to buy them shoes and clothes nor get books for them. There are fools too who refuse to send their children to school, but those are few, and even they aren't fools, they just don't know better, and, if they don't, it's their parents' fault who never made them go to school. My friends! Why must we learn to read and write? I'm not only talking of the poor people who can't come. But there are others who though having the means, won't send their children to school. If a child stays at home in winter-time, the peasant needn't give him a rag to cover his back with, nor *opinci* for his feet. He sits behind the oven with an empty belly and waits for the spring to come. I ask you, is there anyone here who wouldn't like to see his child with clothes on his back and shoes on his feet, and to have him learn during the winter, so that he shouldn't remain an illiterate?"

"People have grown wicked, my dears," said an old woman sitting at the back with a bunch of rosemary in her hand (she had just come from church to attend the festival).

"They may have indeed, my good woman," the teacher approved, "but this means that God doesn't look after them."

Some people laughed. The teacher's brow darkened, and he wiped the sweat off carefully. For a moment silence reigned all over the courtyard.

Aristide, sitting in the front row, with a youthful appearance, was looking on amusedly, and was nodding his head from time to time. As he was sitting

there, his legs crossed, he sometimes waved a foot in the air watching the teacher on the stage, much intrigued.

“My good friends, I was explaining a moment ago why we’ve got to learn. There are countries that aren’t so rich as ours, and yet live better than we do. They’ve given up tilling the soil and have taken up building factories. In those factories they weave cotton cloth and exchange it for our wheat, for our own food. If you had some schooling... You did receive land after the war, but your life hasn’t become any better. Some of you have no land whatever, and what I want to say is this: you must send your children to school to learn to read and write, and to learn a trade so as to become artisans. You have no other choice for your children — that’s what my father did with me — so in the autumn send your children to school without fail, be they in rags or with patched clothes, as you can. Save a morsel and buy them just one or two books, and allow them to go to school. Here at Miroși there’s an artisans’ school, and those who get a scholarship don’t pay a penny. I’ve been reading in yesterday’s papers (you, who don’t know how to read and write, can’t read the papers) that at Bucharest, at the Grivița workshops, an apprentices’ school has been opened, free of charge. They keep the apprentice at a hostel, they give him food and clothes, in the afternoon he learns his lessons, in the morning he learns his trade... He remains there four years, and after four years he leaves the school and hostel and receives a salary. I also read that there’s another school at Spanțov, on the state farms... This means that, if your children go for at least four years to the elementary school, you can send them after that to a place where they can earn their living.”

The teacher broke off: the sweat was streaming down his face and his neck. It was very hot, and you could see that the teacher wasn’t accustomed to making a speech.

“I’m going to call the roll now,” he said. “Come nearer, boys! First prize, Irina Boțoghină and Niculae Moromete!” he announced. “Come on right here, Boțoghină!”

At last the peasants recovered from their strained attention. The teacher seemed to have been listened to with the utmost concentration.

Boțoghină’s daughter stepped up to the desk and looked straight up at the teacher.

“Come here!” said Teodorescu taking her by the shoulders and pushing her right in front of the stage. “Recite your poem!”

As the teacher’s speech had made an incredible impression, the peasants weren’t listening very carefully to the girl’s poem.

“Stop that noise, gentlemen, one can’t hear a word! The prospectus concerning Spanțov and Grivița has reached the town hall too. It’s going to be posted up and you’ll be able to read it,” said the director.

On the stage, Irina Boțoghină had got to the end of her poem about some cats who, fighting for a piece of cheese, had gone to the tom-cat to arbitrate their dispute; the latter broke the cheese in two and kept biting off it to make the two parts equal. The peasants were beginning to listen:

This tom-cat bit some off this side,
Most anxious fairly to divide
The cheese, and then repealed it again,
To avoid the cats any unjust pain.
And so he went on nibbling it,
One bit, and yet another bit,
Until his belly was replete:
“Oh, tom cat, what a silly feat!”
“Those little bits, is it all that’s left?”
Quite unperturbed, with movements deft
The bits he set up in a row
And gave each cat one with his paw!

The little girl wanted to wind up, but the peasants burst into hoarse and boisterous laughter. They laughed loudly, roaring with wide-open mouths.

“Clever tom-cat!” a voice was heard somewhere at the back of the yard.

“That’s what I call justice indeed,” said Cocoșilă in a low voice. “Did you listen to the poem, Moromete?”

Moromete wished to answer, when his gaze suddenly remained riveted on the stage. Not believing his eyes, he murmured: “Cocoșilă, man! Isn’t that my Nicolae?”

“Boys’ first prize, Nicolae Moromete!” schoolmaster Teodorescu said in a loud voice; then pushed the boy towards the front of the stage.

Moromete couldn't doubt it any longer, especially as he recognized his hat on his son's big head; quite overcome with emotion, the father shouted from his corner:

"Hey, sonny boy, don't you hear? Take your hat off!" And then added in a low voice, speaking to Cocoșilă: "Poor boy, as I've never bought him a hat, he hasn't learnt how to wear one; he keeps it on his head all the time."

Teodorescu waited for the audience to calm down, taking the opportunity to tell his pupil to take his hat off — then gave him a wreath and a few books and whispered to him to recite his poem.

No sound was heard, but the prize-winner hadn't yet started reciting his poem; the teacher kept on whispering to him, and you could have told that something was amiss with the pupil.

The prize-winner finally coughed and began to recite the poem in a loud voice, but he only succeeded in reciting two or three verses.

He stopped and began to totter; he got hold of the desk with one hand, swallowed his spittle, and tried to go on. The teacher who understood what was the matter with him, stopped him:

"That's enough, Moromete!"

The pupil's teeth began to chatter; the hand which was holding on to the desk was trembling badly, yet he still tried obstinately to recite his poem.

"What's wrong with your boy, why didn't they let him finish?" asked Cocoșilă.

Moromete didn't answer. He forced his way out and sped towards the door at the back of the stage.

After that he never heard a word that was said during the festival. He entered the corridor of the school and rushed up to his son in such a hurry that the children in the hall were frightened, thinking the man was coming to beat one of them.

Niculae was leaning against the wall all atremble, and yet smiling happily, the wreath in one hand and several small thin books under his arm. Moromete got hold of his hand, and pressed it. He asked him in a ponderous, heavy voice:

"What's the matter with you? Why are you trembling?"

The boy withdrew his elbow from his father's rough hand and answered in a low voice, his teeth chattering:

"Why, today is the day I have my fits of malaria, don't you know? No fever two days and then the third they seize me."

He didn't know that, how should he? This fever wasn't a disease one need take into account.

"Come home, don't stay, here!" said Moromete in the same ponderous voice.

The boy tried to resist, but finally allowed his father to get hold of his hand and drag him slowly between the rows of peasants outside the school yard. Moromete kept holding him by the hand, urging him on:

"Come on, boy! Come on!"

They reached the road. The child was walking along, trembling all over; he stopped from time to time, pressing his arms against his chest, his teeth chattering. He was shrivelled up and shivering as if a north wind were blowing over him.

"Oh, ow, ow! Brrr! Oh, dad, I'm ice-cold, dad!"

"Come on, boy! Come over here in the sun," answered Moromete in a whisper.

After a while, half way on the road home, the boy suddenly sank down on his heels, and his teeth started chattering in his mouth, as if his jaws had been worked by a motor. His teeth were now rattling unceasingly and he was moaning deeply. The wreath fell down on the ground, the books also slid from under his arm and lay scattered on the ground.

Moromete looked round, at a loss what to do, and stooped down to collect the boy's belongings. He picked up the wreath with shy fingers, hardly touching the flowers, then, with the same smooth movements he collected the books that were scattered in the road. He bent slowly, got hold of a corner of a book and wiped the dust off it by wiping it along his shirt and trousers; then he took it under his arm and picked up another book.

The boy meanwhile tried to get up and he nearly managed to do so, but immediately nestled up against his father's knees:

"Daddy, uhuhuh! Daddy, I'm giddy... I'm shivering... I'm fainting..."

And clinging to Moromete's trousers, he dropped down, crushing his hat against his father's legs.

The peasant then made as if to seize him under the arms, but he stopped and stretched his neck up in the air; below his chin the merciless Adam's apple had got stuck in his throat. With open lips the peasant tried to get some air, then drew a deep breath, painfully trying to swallow the aching ball that prevented him from breathing. He then bent down, thrust an arm under the boy's thin legs and, getting hold of him with the other arm round the waist, he lifted him up.

But this movement seemed to hurt the sick boy, because the latter wound his arms tightly round his father's rough neck and, groaning, he pressed his body against his father's chest.

But the boy's arms, tight round his neck, didn't seem to suit Moromete: his voice could be heard on the road in the summer quietude:

"Come on, sonny! Come on! Damn it all! How can you people get ill so easily, without any ado... When I tell you... not to..."

Moromete walked on with the boy in his arms and took good care not to look at him. He was talking to himself and, quite contrary to his custom, taking long, fast strides.

He seemed dissatisfied and perplexed, shaken — as it were — in his unshakable balance.

What was wrong with Niculae? Where had he got the idea about the school? And after all was said and done, what did he want?

When he reached the gate, he pushed it open with his foot, went in, walked up to the *prispă* whitened by the scorching midday sun, and shouted angrily:

"Ilinca, Tita!"

Tita, the elder girl, came out of the lobby where she was preparing the food. When she saw her father with Niculae in his arms, she was scared. She asked him what had happened.

Instead of answering that the fever had come over the boy, Moromete, turned his head away, dissatisfied, and said that the boy had received the first prize.

The girl drew near and got hold of Niculae's chin with her two fingers:

“Why, bull-head, you don’t mean to say you’ve received the first prize, do you?” she asked merrily.

Niculae moaned and opened his eyes; he had apparently heard the words “bull-head,” which meant something connected with his big head. He wriggled in his father’s arms and tried to hit out at his sister. He was raving:

“Just you wait till I pass the valley... You’ll see how I shall lead you with a bit of garlic... you blasted Bisisica!”

“Come on, Ilinca, don’t stand staring, lay down some old blanket on the *prispă*, my arms are stiff!” Moromete ordered, laying the boy down.

The girl laid down a strip of a blanket on the *prispă*, and a cushion, and got hold of Niculae under his arms. She raised him onto the *prispă* and covered him with the blanket.

After that Moromete handed the girl the wreath and the books:

“Take these and put them somewhere... poor boy... when I saw him on that stage my heart nearly stopped beating... for he never does tell you anything... I expected they’d plough him...”

“Did he really, get the first prize, father? Or are you joking?” the girl asked doubtfully.

From the *prispă* Niculae was looking at his father and sister with burning eyes. The shivering was over, and he was lying motionless under the blanket, listening. Ilinca turned to him and asked:

“Tell me, is it true?”

But the sick boy didn’t answer. The girl went into the lobby, while Moromete, bewildered and troubled by the unusual event, sat down silently near the boy who soon began to rave again.

That year, at reaping, there was no reason why Moromete shouldn’t be his usual self, that is, careless about what was being gathered behind him, forgetting about everything, endlessly day-dreaming on the stubble-field. He never suspected that Paraschiv reckoned this harvesting to be the last he would ever take part in, and even less did he suspect that Paraschiv was planning to

rob his family, shortly after, not only of its sheep and horses but also of a part of the harvest.

On the contrary, Moromete was certain that all his calculations were amply fulfilled. That morning upon waking up he had rightly calculated the harvest would be particularly plentiful. What should he be afraid of?

True, he couldn't quite understand why Paraschiv, instead of rejoicing that the wheat harvest was the richest they could remember, was despondent all the time, reaping listlessly as if he were harnessed to a wagon.

As a matter of fact, as the year was so prosperous, he ought to marry in the autumn, as every youngster, did and set up a family of his own. But apparently he hadn't found the girl to suit him, a girl with lots of land; and that must be the reason why he was despondent. That's what Moromete was imagining.

On the contrary, Niculae was, nobody knew why, extraordinarily merry; the girls had also got used to the idea of doing without any sheep, and the mother never ceased to praise God for the "heavenly manna," as she called the wheat with which Heaven had blessed them.

As usual, Moromete rather muddled through the binding of the sheaves, but, when a few hours later the sun rose high and began to shed its unbearable heat onto the back of his head, he calmly stuck his sickle into a sheaf and, in a voice that sounded as if he were punishing himself, he sent himself away: "I'm going a little further away !" said he angrily, and sauntered off leisurely to the wagon (first of all to the wagon where he had his woollen waistcoat with his tobacco, and only after that to his neighbours).

His family first saw him at one place, then it became evident that he had been for a long time at some other place, finally he had vanished nobody knew where, and, when the time for dinner came and they all got ready to have their meal, they had to call him time and again. Niculae climbed up the front seat of the wagon and called out at the top of his voice:

"Hey, father! Fa-a-ather!..."

He was close by, chatting with his neighbour, but, as he was sitting down on the ground, he couldn't be seen because of the wheat-stalks.

The girls took the food out of the box and shaded the place with matting; the mother lit the fire to warm up the large saucepan full of haricot beans. In the

white daylight the flames of the straw-fire would sometimes flicker with yellow tints, white shadows of a live molten air, which deceived the woman and made her burn her hand. Meanwhile, Paraschiv and Nilă were lying under the wagon, their faces pressed against the soil. Nilă's face seemed to have swollen up and, flaming red as his cheeks were, one might have thought that the youngster had been taken ill, that he had high fever and was suffering silently with a raving mind.

"I tell you, it'll be the death of us!" said Moromete coming over to the wagon. "That fellow Voicu was saying that, when the sun would be high up at mid-day, we would simply melt!"

Niculae was bleating on the top of the wagon like a kid: "He-he!"

"Get down! You climbed up there so that people should see you!" said his elder sister reproachfully.

"Leave him alone, he's been working very hard," said the father, taking his defence, as he sat down in the shade of the matting. "He has been very good at school too, where he got the first prize, and he's also been very hardworking at reaping," his father praised him.

"Well, father!" mewed Niculae whom his father's voice had deluded for an instant into thinking he was praising him. "Why, haven't I been learning conscientiously? And say, Ilinca, don't I reap well?"

"Yes, you've learnt to do it quite well," said Ilinca. "You hold the sickle in your hand as if you were a stork."

"Come to dinner," said the mother, who had arrived with the saucepan of beans under the shade of the matting.

Moromete looked at the saucepan for a moment. The beans, with their big grains, didn't look as if they had just been taken off the fire; there was a sort of crust on top of them, which made the food seem dry and cold.

Paraschiv and Nilă crept out from beneath the wagon and sat down on the ground.

Moromete broke off a bit of the *mămăligă*, took some beans out of the saucepan and carelessly swallowed the morsel. But the next moment he seemed to stiffen on the spot, his face became dark red and tears squirted out of his eyes. But instead of drinking water to mitigate the burning, he controlled himself and turned to the girls:

“And why didn’t you warm up these beans?” he asked casually, with an impenetrable expression on his face, and in no loud voice, so that the mother who was just taking some onions from the wagon-box didn’t hear him and couldn’t answer that she had just taken the beans off the fire.

“Come on, mother, what are you doing there?” asked Tita wonderingly. “And you, Niculae, why do you keep fidgeting behind me? Sit down, you’re stricken!”

“What d’you mean, he’s stricken?” asked Moromete.

What she meant was that, if Niculae was ill, he had better lie on his stomach.

Paraschiv was acting as if he were all by himself. He didn’t wait for the others to sit down, but breaking off, like his father, a lump of *mămăligă*, he mopped up part of the contents of the saucepan with it.

Moromete riveted his eyes upon him expectantly. Paraschiv gulped down the whole lump with absent-minded greediness, whereupon an overwhelming stupor spread over his face, and he suddenly gave a howl.

“Here, Paraschiv, drink some water,” said Moromete hastening to get hold of the jug and to hand it to him eagerly. “Has it burnt you badly? I thought it was cold,” he confessed naively.

With shining eyes Niculae kept looking alternately at Paraschiv and then at his father. Astounded, the mother didn’t understand a thing.

“What d’you say is cold?” she asked.

“Those beans!” answered Moromete.

“Why, I’ve just taken them off the fire!” said the mother trying to apologize.

The girls burst out laughing, and Niculae, who finally understood what it was all about, began to roar and to kick his legs in the air, pointing at Paraschiv with his finger. The latter, his face distorted with pain and rage, was drinking water from the jug; suddenly he took it from his lips, reached out and landed Niculae a blow with such fury that Niculae didn’t even feel the pain, so pleased was he with his brother’s rage.

Even Nilă was laughing.

“You’re behaving like a silly child,” said the mother angrily, without looking at her husband. “Can’t you at least hold your mouth shut? As if it were not enough you don’t do a stroke of work! You can’t even hold your trap!”

“But what have I been saying, woman?” Moromete exclaimed quite perplexed, which made his children who had only just calmed down burst out again into boisterous laughter. “I only looked at the beans and, when I saw them crusted over and not the lightest steam coming out of them, I thought they were cold and I simply asked why you hadn’t warmed them up. How could I guess that they were piping hot!?” he exclaimed with an astounded mien. (...)

There was peace all over the field, everything was quite still in the great heat. Niculae was whispering in his mother’s ear in a voice wherein concentration and anxiety mingled in a request so pure that his mother opened her eyes:

“What is it, Niculae, my boy?” she asked, weary with exhaustion. “What d’you want, sonny, why aren’t you resting?”

Niculae kept looking at her with a wistful gaze, his eyes burning with hope and anxiety...

“Have you told father, mummie?” he asked shyly, terrified lest his mother should have neglected his entreaty.

“I’ve told him, I have, Niculae; leave me alone now, go away!” his mother said in a beseeching voice, terrified at the idea that she was incapable of resisting this child. “Go away, d’you hear, and let me rest!”

Niculae didn’t go away, and she couldn’t rest. The boy remained near her, his feet tucked under him, his body bent sideways and his head facing the stubble-field.

“I’m going, I tell you, I’m going, but do ask father,” he began again, scratching the burning earth with his finger. “Tell him, mother, that, you see, I got the first prize without going to school too often, and if father agrees, it won’t cost anything. I shall learn and I’ll get a scholarship. Honestly, mother, what shall I do at home all the winter long? I shall come for the vacation and I shall be here to do the reaping with you all, and I shall stay away from home only in autumn and in the spring. Anyhow I can’t be of any help to you with the ploughing in the autumn, and in the spring, when hoeing begins, the school-year is over; so I shall be here for the hoeing too... And it won’t cost a penny,

mother, and after eight years..." Nicolae turned his face away from the stubble-field, stared again at his mother and whispered with fervid passion: "Mother, after eight years I'll be a teacher, and..."

"What are you jabbering there, Nicolae?" the elder sister suddenly shouted, and Nicolae was nearly terrified by this sharp, merciless voice.

"Look out, I don't make a priest of you, nor a teacher," said Ilinca in her turn, from elsewhere.

Both of them had been listening, but Nicolae didn't rebel against them as he used to do. They were unkind and overbearing and he did realize that what he desired, couldn't possibly be achieved against their will.

"Come, come Ilinca, don't you shout at me like that," he said gently. And Ilinca, astounded that the erstwhile arrogant boy had become so conciliatory, tried to make fun of him, but in a kindly spirit:

"You think you can become a teacher, a fool like you?"

"Shut up, Ilinca, why d'you call him a fool?" said the mother reprovingly.

"Why, didn't you see that I got the first prize, Ilinca?" Nicolae again entreated.

"And if you did, what about it?"

"Hey, you over there, are you resting, or what are you doing?" Moromete shouted from the wagon.

Nicolae looked so sad that it broke one's heart to watch him.

When they started reaping again, Moromete, much intrigued, asked the mother in a whisper what that boy had been after.

He had never forgotten the incident with the prize and the fever. The anxiety that he had experienced that day had left a trace that wouldn't be wiped out. There was something unaccountable here. For the first time Moromete could not escape a feeling of guilt which rose every time he looked at the boy and saw his big, feverish eyes and his yellow-black face. And he was angry too, for he hadn't overburdened him with work, and had let him have all the food he wanted. Then what was wrong with him? And why was it that he alone suffered from malaria?

The mother repeated the new tale about the school, and Moromete chuckled:

“So that’s it, Nicolae? Is that why you are sad? Just you wait, we shall make a priest of you, not a teacher!”

“But why?” murmured Nicolae, his lower lip hanging.

“Why, because it’s better to be a priest, believe me,” his father said, trying to comfort him. “You’ll be getting cakes and masses from the women, my boy.”

The girls laughed and told Nicolae to put the loose stalks on top of the sheaves. Paraschiv was grinning:

“Nicolae, let’s see if you’ll make a good teacher: tell me, what does a cat cover up? If you can answer that, then you’ll do!” Paraschiv decided.

“Leave the boy alone!” said the father.

But they didn’t leave him alone; they kept teasing him and laughing at him, everyone of them and when Nicolae lay down and hid his face in the crook of his arm, the girls shouted at him that he should start binding the loose stalks.

But he didn’t get up, and they were all quite astounded when, on the spot where he was sitting, they heard him burst into tears unexpectedly.

Betrayed trust and thwarted hopes were torturing the boy, and so severely accusing was his desperate sobbing, that they all got very angry and ordered him to get up.

The mother protested and made the girls shut up, and the father went up to the boy and got hold of his arm. Nicolae tried to wrest himself free, so his father lifted him up by the arm as if he were a bird, and obliged him to stand, telling him he was crying in vain, like a fool who can’t put up with a joke.

“Leave me alone!” Nicolae furiously shouted, tearing himself away and walking across the stubble-field, towards the road.

So that was how he behaved! Moromete ordered one of the girls to follow him and give him a good spanking. Ilinca went, firmly decided to drag him back by the ears, but when she tried to get hold of him, Nicolae slapped her face so hard that she began to yell.

“The dogs tear you to pieces!” snarled Nicolae rushing at her and pulling her by the hair.

“What is the matter with that boy?” the father wondered trying to control his anger. “Ilinca, leave him alone! Come back, and let him be!”

They did leave him alone, but Niculae didn't declare himself vanquished. He sat down on the stubble-field at quite a distance from them, and laid his head on his knees.

Hours and hours elapsed, yet he never moved from that place. It was noon, and they sat down again to feed, but he never stirred nor did he come to eat.

Moromete was now thoroughly cross. He went up to him and asked him quite perplexed:

"What is it you want, Niculae? You want to go to school, do you? All right! But do you want to go now, today? Or are you crazy?" And he began to cross himself: "He comes with all of us, on a morning in the wagon, he does his best, as the good boy that he is, to learn to reap, and then, all of a sudden, he thinks of nothing but going to school. D'you want to go to school now, this minute?"

"I told you the day before yesterday what our teacher, Mr. Teodorescu, said. Why didn't you say anything then?"

"If you were a clever boy, I would like you better," said the father. "A clever boy says the thing that he's got to say just once and doesn't repeat it a second time. You've already told me once: that's enough!"

There seemed to be a promise in his father's voice! Anyhow, he had made it plain that there wasn't only Paraschiv, Nilă and Achim in the family, and the bank and the land-tax that he had to think about. From now on he would also have to think of Niculae.