



*Vincas Krėvė in the last years of his life*

*With the printing of "The Herrings" we commemorate the 75th anniversary of the birth of Vincas Krėvė-Mickevičius.*

*When Mr. Krėvė-Mickevičius died in 1954, as an exile in Philadelphia, he left behind a literary treasure of epic proportions. He was one of these few writers who are pronounced classics when still alive, acclaimed by the critics, venerated by the readers. His creation was a mighty river which started with a musical flow of the archaic and heroic "Tales of the Old Folks of Dainava" (Dainavos šalies senų žmonių padavimai), mirrored realistically the life of the Lithuanian countryside "In the Thatch-covered Cottage" (Šiaudinėj pastogėj), roared and dashed against the limitation of the genre with such historical plays as "Šarūnas" and "Skirgaila", and — finally — entered the dark ocean with an unfinished biblical novel "The Children of Heaven and Earth" (Dangaus ir žemės sūnūs).*

*Unmistakably Lithuanian and truly universal, Krėvė-Mickevičius was an artist worthy of global recognition.*

## The Herrings

Vincas Krėvė

It was mid-Lent. Spring had come. The days were sunny and mild. The snow had melted and the hilltops all around were black. Little streams rippled down the furrows and ruts in the road. And as they rippled, they spoke the story of spring — of its presence.

"Ladies, have you any feed, chickens, eggs?" asked Kušlius as he tapped on the window-pane with his fingers one such spring day.

He was an old Jew with a long, red beard and a hairy forehead. His hair was completely gray except for his beard which was spotted with gray. Yet this did not mar or hide the natural color of his hair. His eyesight was very poor and he could not see even that which lay directly before him. Consequently as he walked he felt his way with a cane like a blind man. And he was sure to be cautious whenever he carried a basket of eggs.

"Why don't you buy a pair of eyeglasses?" people had often asked him.

"Eyeglasses?" And where am I to get the money for them?", he would ask with deep sighs.

His bitterest trials were the pranks of the village lads. They enjoyed placing a stick or something in front of his feet just to see him trip and fall. What fun then! But Kušlius knew well their pranks and he was on guard whenever he passed any lads or young men at play.

"Why do you harm an old man?" he would ask the pranksters as he pushed aside with his cane the stick or stone placed in front of him. "Would it be nice now if I were to fall and kill myself?"

But he never became angry. Perhaps he was already inured to this type of ridicule.

He dressed the same both in the winter and the summer. As he made his rounds of the farmhouses, he carried a basket in his hands and a veritable warehouse on his shoulders. He was sure not to miss a family.

Now as he stood beneath Gerdvilas' window with his ear to the pane, he waited to hear the answer of the women.

"We have ram's liver," mocked a shepherd lad who sat on a stool near the window and mended his fishing net. Kuslius, accustomed to such ridicule, paid no attention to him. He waited a while longer and not having received an answer again rattled the pane with his fingers.

"Do you need any soap, needles, matches, herrings?"

"Come in! Come in! We'll see." Gerdvilienė [*Mrs. Gerdvilas in Lithuanian*], invited him into the house. She whispered something to her daughter-in-law who was nursing her baby in the crib.

Kuslius hobbled across the yard to the door. The shepherd ran over to the woodbin beside the fireplace, selected the largest piece of kindling, and placed it on the threshold.

"Pick up that stick! Pick up that stick!" Gerdvilienė scolded the lad. "Do you want an old man to kill himself! You shameless one!"

"He — a man! That unbaptized one!" the shepherd jeered and sat down by the window. "That was the least we did to him when I served at Silakiemis."

Monica, the daughter of Gerdvilas, a girl of fifteen years, rose quickly, for Kuslius was already coming through the hall, picked up the stick and threw it back into the woodbin.

"You good-for-nothing! I'll beat in your hump. Then perhaps you'll learn," she reprimanded the shepherd as she passed by him.

"Your arms are too short. Maybe you'd like to be Kuslius' daughter-in-law. You defend him so," the lad taunted the young girl.

"Look how the little frog squirms! Like a mouse in the peabin."

"Whatever you did in Silakiemis, be sure, you'll never do it here," Gerdvilienė also scolded him. "Such a bad boy. Making fun of an old man. Don't laugh! You yourself will be old someday. Sin against God by ridiculing old age now and God will not let you live to see a ripe age."

"There's no sin against God if one ridicules a Jew," intervened Marcele, the maid. "Didn't they persecute God Himself?"

At this point and with pain-filled groans, Kuslius crossed the threshold. He was obviously very tired.

"Praise be to God!" he greeted them but did not remove his hat.

"Forever and ever!" Gerdvilienė alone answered.

Kuslius walked over to the table, took down the bag of wares from his back and threw it down on a chair. The basket of eggs he put under the chair first having tapped with his cane to see if the space were free. The bucket of herrings he placed on a stool and removed from it the lid with which it was covered.

"All right! Come on! Get your herrings!" he invited the women as he began to pick out the smallest fish from the top of the bucket. "How many do you want? Two? Three?"

Gerdvilienė arose from her place by the fire and adjusted her apron. She walked over to the stool and began to pick out the herrings from the bucket, selecting those that looked the best to her.

"Nu! You are taking my best herrings. Who will buy the others?" scowled Kuslius.

"That's all right. The folks will buy even the bad ones once the good ones are gone."

Gerdvilienė selected five herrings and lay them out on a stool.

"How many eggs do you want for them? she asked the Jew. Kuslius took the fish up into his hands, turned them over and felt their weight.

"How many eggs? Eggs are very cheap nowadays. Besides you have picked the largest herrings. Vy look! Fat like chickens!" He shoved them in front of Gerdvilienė.

"Keep them away from my eyes! I'm not blind. The herrings are thin as wafers."

"Nice wafers! That I may never eat any better in my life. Nu. Give me a fourth of a gross. All right?"

"What! May you never see the day when I will give so many for such small wafers, you unbaptized one. Here, take your fish and keep them."

She took the fish from the stool, threw them back into the bucket and walked over to the fireplace where lay her spindle.

"Nu them. How many will you give me? Tell me!" the Jew cried out after her. Kuslius dug into the bucket and brought out the same herrings and placed them on the stool.

Gerdvilienė wiped her hands on her apron and sat down behind the spinning wheel.

"Do you want eight?" she offered Kuslius. "If so, I'll take them."

"Eight eggs for five such herrings!" Kuslius exclaimed in astonishment. "Would that my enemy got that much! I swear they cost me much more than that. Will you give me fourteen?"

"Never. Nine and not one more."

She set up the spindle, wet the end of the thread and began to spin, as if the herrings were of no concern to her.

"Make it thirteen," begged Kuslius. "I can't give them for less. As I live I can't!" and he picked up the herrings and put them back into the bucket.

"Ten. That's my last offer. I will not give you an egg more."

"If only the herrings were good," her daughter-in-law seconded. She had covered the baby with blankets and was now examining the fish which lay on the stool. "They're small and thin like shiners."

"As I live and breathe, they cost me much more"

Kuslius threw the herrings back into the bucket, lifted the bag of wares onto his pack, picked up the basket and walked to the door with a sigh.

"Make it twelve?" he asked stopping by the door.

"I said ten. I won't give an egg more. So don't bargain uselessly. I'm not a small child."

"I can't. Oi' I can't."

"You can't. Then don't sell them," grumbled the daughter-in-law.

The Jew walked out into the yard. He went to the window and again asked.

"Lady, will you give me eleven?"

Still here! I said ten."

Kuslius was silent for a minute, deeply wrapped in thought. Should he go on, or should he go back into the house. How could he but not go back, for there would be some profit f... six, seven cents or perhaps even ten.

The Jew returned into the house. He replaced his wares in their former position and started to take the herrings from out of the bucket.

"Nu, bring out the eggs and take your herrings," he called after setting them out on the stool.

Gerdvilienė stopped the spindle and took down a large bowl from the shelf to put the fish in.

"What kind of herrings are you trying to give me? Do you think I'd be so foolish as to take these!" she angrily demanded of him as she turned over the herrings. The Jew had now substituted some smaller fish.

"What more do you want?" cried out Kuslius. "These are the best herrings ... as I live."

"You can keep them. I don't want them," she crowded them back into his hands. "Just look at him! Picked out the worst of the lot."

"For ten eggs you want good fish," stormed Kuslius as he exchanged two herrings with better ones. "Nu, here are some better fish. Take them and bring me the eggs."

Gerdvilienė sat down behind the spinning wheel and did not even once glance at the fish.

"I don't want them. If you can't give me the best, you may as well keep them all."

The Jew again dug into the bucket. He pulled out two herrings, sniffed them over, and exchanged them with the others.

"Will you take them now lady? I haven't time to waste," the Jew howled in anger. "All right, take the ones you had picked out before."

Gerdvilienė saw now that he had laid out the best fish.

"Marcele, get the herrings," she ordered the maid, while she herself picked up the bowl and went into the larder to get the eggs.

Marcele, without rising from her chair, picked up a pot lid and placed the herrings onto it.

"What kind of eggs are you trying to give me?" scowled Kuslius. "Whoever saw such eggs. I won't get even two cents for them."

"You don't want them, don't take them. I can always sell them at Merkinė," Gerdvilienė snapped back. "Marcele, give him back his herrings."

"Nu, nu, not so fast." Kuslius spoke softly and condescendingly and began to put the eggs into his own basket. "Will you give me a few cooked potatoes? I haven't eaten anything as yet."

"Mona, give him some potatoes," Gerdvilienė spoke to her daughter.

Mona spilled a handful of potatoes onto the table. Kuslius peeled three and greedily ate them. The remainder he put into his pocket.

While the Jew was peeling and eating the potatoes, Marcele had filched a first, second and a third herring from his bucket. She lifted them out so deftly that no one saw her. Marcele hid them behind her chair. The shepherd, however, did see her. He winked at her and after she had hidden them he began to fill the entire house with loud guffaws.

"Now what's got into you?" asked Mona full of amazement. "Bellowing like a trumpet."

"He's laughing at an old man. What a hard lot he has," the Jew complained swallowing a potato. "It is not good to laugh at a tired man."

Marcele looked at the lad and began to laugh herself. She realized that he had seen all and winking at him, signalled that he should not say anything.

"I will bring the others home to my wife. She is very sick," explained Kušlius after he had pocketed the other potatoes. He then tightened the cord around his pack, lifted it onto his shoulders, and sighed deeply.

"Lady, have you a chicken to sell? No chicken?.. A rooster?"

"I haven't. Besides who would sell a chicken at this time of the year?"

"My wife is sick and wuld like chicken, but I can't buy any anywhere," complained Kuslius as he picked up the rest of his wares. He walked over to the door. He groaned beneath the load. It was a heavy one to carry. The old man's feet scarcely cleared the floor when he walked. And here he must wade through slippery slush, dirty and wet to the ankles, while at home his wife lay sick, alone and helpless.

"Oi! If it were only as easy for my enemies to live as it is for me," he imprecated.

After he had crossed the threshold both the shepherd and Marcele burst into peals of laughter.

"What wrong have you shameless ones now played on the old man?" Gerdvilienė wanted to know.

Marcele raised up the three herrings by their tails.

"You've stolen them, you wretch. For shame!" the daughter-in-law mockingly scolded. Marcele and the shepherd lad laughed all the more.

"Aren't you the least bit sorry for him, you bad girl!" reprimanded Gerdvilienė. "It may be his entire profit for the day! And his wife perhaps hasn't eaten today. Aren't you afraid of God?"

"He won't die," argued Marcele who had now stopped laughing. "He has cheated more than one of our people."

"That's his concern. We'll see what Father has to say to you when you go to confession next."

Marcele became frightened when she thought of the priest in the confessional. The thought that perhaps Kuslius and his family were really starving smote her to the quick. She recalled how greedily he had downed the cooked potatoes.

"You both will get a chance to laugh in the next world when with herrings between your teeth you will beg Kuslius to take them back," prophesied Mona.

"You'll never see the day when I will ask a Jew pardon," the shepherd retaliated. "As if Jews will be with us Christians in the hereafter."

"When you find yourself in hell, you'll see all manners of people there, Catholics and Jews, landlords and peasants."

"Goodness sakes! You'd think it were a sin against God to swindle a Jew," Marcele tried to defend her action. "Weren't they the people who tortured and crucified God our Lord!"

"My dear girl!" Gerdvilienė reminded her. "We ourselves daily torment and crucify the most beloved God. Yet He always forgives us!"

## II

Marcele dreamt that night that she was in heaven. It was beautiful there. Like the church in Pivasunus. Candles and lights glittered everywhere. God Himself, grey-haired, with a long beard, sat high above on His throne, surrounded by angels. Some angels were very small, like those in a picture of the Blessed Virgin. They flew up and down around God. The others, much taller and with long wings, knelt with hands joined before the throne, like young priests or clerics, adoring their Creator.

All heaven was full of dead. Marcele couldn't see a single soul that was still living on earth. She became frightened and her heart skipped a beat. She knew she must also be dead for she was in heaven. But she couldn't remember when she had died. There wasn't time to think either for the dead were continually arriving and entering through heaven's small gates by which she was now standing. In no time she found herself hemmed into a corner next to a wall. There were as many dead in heaven as there were people during the feast of Saint Rocco in Merkine. Everyone was well-dressed — his funeral best. There were both men and women, priests, landlords and peasants.

The landlords and their wives sat near God, just a few paces from His throne. When Marcele noticed this she exclaimed, "O God, it's good for the landlords even here in heaven!"

Marcele also saw a number of her friends, some dead a long time, others who had died only last year. There was Peter Lukosius, her Godfather, for whom as a young girl she had served as a maid for five years. Then there was her Godmother, Vaksienė, who had given her a silk kerchief the day of her first confession. True, the kerchief was no longer new and had a tiny hole worn through in the center, but Marcele always wore it to church on big feasts. There were many others whom Marcele could not recognize.

Marcele stood by the gates and gazed about. Near the throne she saw her mother kneeling. She had so longed to see her mother that when she did a pain shot through her heart, as if someone had pressed it together with a vise. At long last she could talk with her mother. She could tell her everything — all her hardships — just as of old, when her mother was alive and would come over to visit her Sundays.

She started to elbow her way through the crowd. Her arms and flanks cleared a straight path. The girl bumped into one soul and tread another's foot. The souls glanced angrily at her and shook their heads. But she paid no attention to them and continued to elbow her way.

She had reached the center of heaven and was just a few steps away from her mother when an angel barred her path. He was dressed in white. A red sash, decked with gold leaf, crossed his shoulders and in his hand he bore a large golden staff.

"Why do you intrude like a fool and hinder the souls in adoring God, the Father?" he thundered at the girl. The angel looked her over from head to toe. "You've come here in rags and are soiling the white garments of the souls."

Marcele looked at herself. She certainly was in unpresentable clothes. It was her house frock, the shirt of which she had not changed for two weeks. Shame covered Marcele. Frightened, she cast her eyes to the ground. The angel's anger continued to increase.

"How dare you bring herrings into the House of God!" the angel demanded of her. "Do you wish to create a stench? Give them to me. I'll throw the fish out."

Marcele only now saw that she held several herrings in her hand; the very same fish she had taken from Kuslius' bucket. She could not understand why she had brought them with her to heaven. Then she remembered that she had eaten the herrings and her fears multiplied. Marcele felt the juice of the fish running through her fingers and falling onto her frock. Quickly she stretched out her arm and handed them to the angel. But he did not take them. He summoned a cherub to perform the task.

"Take these herrings and throw them out. Heaven has its own food and drink, and it is not of the earth."

The cherub was about to take the fish from the girl when a gruff voice was heard behind the gates of heaven.

"Give me back my herrings! Those my fish she has stolen!"

The voice was only too familiar to Marcele. Her fear reached a new pitch. She noticed that all the souls withdrew from her and God had looked at her. The girl was too terrified to look at Him directly, but from the corner of her eye she saw that He was angry. Kuslius, the prude, continued his bellowing on the opposite side of the gate. She'll pull his beard out for him and send the dogs after him! Wouldn't it be worthwhile? Why couldn't he have met her somewhere else, all alone, since he's detected her crime, and there ask for restitution. But not here in heaven before all the angels and God Himself!

"Isn't there any justice in heaven that you do not give me back my herrings! Is a weary Jew to be wronged even here!" stormed Kuslius.

"Then you have entered heaven with stolen fish? You have dared to bring into the House of God stolen property?" the angel questioned Marcele. The girl did not know what to say and was silent as a mute. So frightened was she.

"Since you do not answer we will go to God. He will judge you as you deserve."

The angel took her hand and led the girl through the crowd to the throne of God. Shame burst through-out her body and the girl wished she could fall through the floor of heaven. Everyone drew away from her as if she were a contagious disease. The angered souls turned their faces away.

"Thief!" You've stolen a Jew's herrings!" she heard someone say.

The souls followed her. The most agonizing part of her journey occurred when the angel guided her past her mother. Though Marcele did not raise her eyes she could feel her mother's sad gaze upon her. The girl turned as red as a beet. She blushed as she well may.

"Did you steal Kuslius' herrings?" God asked Marcele who had knelt down before His throne.

The girl was silence itself. She covered her eyes with her hands and trembled like a poplar tree.

God also was silent and waited to hear Marcele's answer. Since she did not defend herself, God turned to His angels and said to them:

"Take her unto hell and give her over to the devils. Let them persecute her forever"

When God had rendered his decree, an angel immediately took Marcele and thrust her out through the gates of heaven, which locked after her.

On the other side of the gates it was dark, bleak and terrifying. The doors had hardly locked when a mob of devils surrounded her. They were red, tailed and fire belched forth from their throats as from a furnace. They crawled over one another and tried to come closer to Marcele. The filthiest of them readied his fork to stab her. The girl clung to the gates when she saw this and screamed uncannily and — awoke.

Once she had awakened, Marcele sat up on the eiderdown blankets. Her body was drenched with perspiration. And she was still feverishly trembling.

Her first thought was to leap out of bed, run over to Kuslius, admit her guilt and beg him to forgive her. But she looked out into the yard and saw that it was still dark and night. Furthermore, Merkine, where Kuslius lived, was far away; and more than likely, he would not be home at this hour.

Marcele, with her knees clasped before her, remained some time in bed. She glanced apprehensively at the windows to see if any horned-ones weren't stealing their way into her bedroom.

She signed with a cross, the bed, the floor, all the walls and the corners. Marcele repeated the cross several times over the door and windows. Then she tiptoed over to Gerdviliene's bed and searched carefully in the dark for the latter's dress. She found it. Cautiously, lest perhaps she awaken anyone, and with trembling hands, Marcele lifted the key to the larder from the pocket of the dress.

The maid slowly opened the door without so much as a squeak and went into the hall. Here very silently and stopping often to listen, she unlocked the larder. Marcele started to hunt in the dark for the egg-container.

The girl found one container and sunk her hand into it — it was full of milk. Another — all her fingers were covered with cream. Her third try found her hand surrounded by grain. At last she located the egg-container. She took out six eggs and locked the larder. The eggs she hid in the sandpile, which had been placed in the corner during the fall, so that when winter arrived it could be used to cover the freshly swept floor.

Once the eggs were safely concealed, Marcele returned quietly to her room and replaced the key in Gerdviliene's dress. She crawled in under the covers and went calmly to sleep.

The next morning Gerdviliene was amazed to find milk on the doors of the larder, on the door knob and on her dress. She knew she could not have gone to the larder in her sleep,

She checked the containers and found that some eggs were missing. The shepherd lad immediately felt her wrath. Despite his protests and swearings he was unsuccessful in convincing Gerdviliene that he was innocent.

Marcele heard all, said nothing. Every night thereafter she searched the sandpile to check its precious treasure. Impatiently the girl waited for Sunday when she would be able to bring them to Kuslius and pay him for the stolen herrings.

Once her fault was righted she would no longer have any fears of being again expelled from heaven for stealing.

**Translated by PRANAS PRANOKUS**