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SUNFLOWERS IN THE MOONLIGHT

A SHORT STORY

by

JULIUS KAUPAS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Julius Kaupas (1920-1964) was one of the most talented Lithuanian writers of the post-war generation. Although a doctor by profession, he was a writer by vocation. After the medical studies in Lithuania, at the conclusion of World War II, he spent several years studying literature, art, and philosophy in various European universities.

*In Lithuanian literature Julius Kaupas is especially noted for his tales and short stories. He grew up in the classical European tradition of literature, under the influence of such writers as E. T. A. Hoffmann, Charles Dickens, and M. de Unamuno. In his tales Julius Kaupas deals with basic moral issues in a context which refuses to make a strict distinction between fantasy and reality (one of his tales — "The Story of Harlequin's Love and the Magician Without a Name" — was previously published in **Lituanus**, Summer, 1964 Vol. 10, No. 2). In his short stories a psychological viewpoint of the human condition is presented, as in the story presented here. Now we meet an idealist, seeking to escape the deadening burden of everyday routine and the limited opportunities for realizing one's individuality. Although the setting is a small town in Lithuania, the problem is universal.*

Ibant obscuri sola sub nocte per umbram.
Vergil

One humid August night the sleeping villagers of Kurkliškės were suddenly aroused by the droning of an organ. It was long past midnight and millions of stars were glittering in the sky over the roofs of the village. The weathervane on the pharmacy moved lazily in the mild breeze, flashing bright reflections.

"Well, what could that be?" wondered the shoemaker's wife, Antosė, full of curiosity as she shuffled to the window and glanced at the church.

The moon floated between light clouds, making the steeple roof silver. Neither the usual chirping of the crickets in the grass nor the croaking of the frogs in Anicetas' pond could be heard above the droning of the pipes.

"What's that to us, old woman?" the shoemaker grumbled in his sleep, and pulled the blanket over his ears with a greasy hand. "Haven't you ever heard an organ before? Stop pestering me and go to bed."

Antosė shuffled back to the bed in her bare feet, wrapped herself in a shawl, stuck her feet in her shoes and then opened the door.

The dusty street was empty. The yellow blossoms of the sunflowers, sprinkled with starlight, leaned over the tar-smeared fence. The smell of vegetables blended with the odor of paint coming from the next yard.

"How muggy it is!" sighed Antosė, looking at the rows of cucumbers and beets near the fence. "This is the weather for cold beet soup."

The sound of the organ still floated between the poppies and the dills. The moonbeams played on the signboard of the butcher shop.

"Look, Juozas, isn't that sexton Vaišnys heading toward the church?" she shouted and impatiently shook her husband by the shoulder. "Do you hear? Get up! All you do is sleep! You should help the man! Who knows what's going on! If, God forbid, something should happen, your conscience would eat you alive!" she insisted, knowing full well that it was only curiosity that got her out of bed.

"What the devil can happen..." muttered the sleepy shoemaker as he reluctantly buttoned his shirt. "Anyway, who cares! It's none of our business..."

Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, he stumbled to the door. A furry moth bumped into his forehead.

"Shoo, you pest!"

A bent man trod through the darkened square. The window in the organ loft of the church was lit and half covered by the branches of a linden.

"Wait, Vaišnys!" shouted Kupstinis and walked with loud steps toward the churchyard.

The sexton stopped.

"Oh, it's you, Kupstinis," he said with a sigh of relief. He was a lean, freckled man with protruding ears and a drooping brown mustache. "What do you think it could be?"

The shoemaker shrugged his shoulders and looked at the full moon. A little cloud had wrapped it in a downy scarf. Again he shrugged his shoulders and both of them slipped through the stone portal into churchyard. Pale pebbles, littered with cigarette butts and chestnut shells, crunched under their feet. Silently they circled the church and then halted under the big chestnut tree at the vestry door.

"See, they got through the vestry window," Vaišnys observed, twitching his mustache. "But who would think of such a thing..."

He took a key and unlocked the door. A pleasant fragrance of oil and cut flowers issued from the vestry.

Vaišnys turned on the light. Two candlesticks glittered on the embroidered altar cloth. He cast a suspicious glance at the cabinet where the monstrance was kept. The door was untouched. The portrait of the Pope which hung over the blue vases was looking at them with reassuring eyes.

"It seems everything's in order," the sexton breathed with relief.

He dipped his fingers in the holy water, made the sign of the cross and entered the church.

The lights in the organ loft were on; the silvery pipes were trembling as they restlessly droned.

"It's a good thing there's two of us," the sexton encouraged his companion as they stepped near a shadowy confessional. "Well, let's go up..."

They silently climbed the choir stairs and then stopped.

On the organist's bench sat a man of about forty, stiff and dignified, a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles placed beside him, his eyes raised to the ceiling. He was partly bald and unshaven. His shoes were muddy and his clothes, although of gook quality, were wrinkled; the left knee of his trousers was torn. A suitcase had been tossed nearby.

"I've never seen him before," the sexton whispered.

They approached the organ and inspected the player. He turned his head, cast a surprised look at the two intruders, then raised his eyes to the ceiling again and continued to play without paying them further heed.

The puzzled sexton pushed aside a pile of sheet music.

"Who are you?" he asked with some hesitation.

When the stranger made no reply Vaišnys shook him by the shoulder.

"How did you get here?"

"I came," he mumbled, without looking at his questioner.

The shoemaker made a gesture with his hand.

"Who knows! All kinds roam the world."

Just then the organ began to drone in its fullest volume and startled the sexton.

"That's enough, mister. You've played the organ enough," he commanded in a stern voice. "Who ever heard of breaking into church in the middle of the night."

The man pushed the sexton's hand away.

"I am an organist," he retorted, "and nobody can forbid me to play when it's necessary. Don't touch me..."

"A real maniac," said the sexton, somewhat frightened, and stretching out his arms, looked at the shoemaker.

Kupstinis grabbed the man by the elbow.

"What the sexton says is true. Is this any time to be bothering with the organ? We'd better go down."

Vaišnys grabbed the stranger by the other arm and, after a short struggle, the organist slipped down from the bench.

"Your suitcase?" Kupstinis inquired.

"I don't know," the man hesitated, looking around as if in a daze. "Could be."

The shoemaker picked up the suitcase.

"Where are you from?"

The man thought intently for several moments, shrugged his shoulders and attempted to climb back onto the organ bench.

"Easy, easy mister," the shoemaker calmed him in a friendly manner. "That's enough. Who are you?"

"An organist!" he said proudly lifting his head.

The two villagers of Kurkliškės glanced at each other in disbelief.

"What organist?"

The man made no reply.

They went down the dark staircase, passed through the vestry and stopped on the threshold.

The bright moon was hanging between the branches of a linden tree. The frogs were happily croaking behind Anicetas' shack. An owl hooted in the belfry.

"What's to be done with him?" the sexton wondered out loud.

"Let him go, with the grace of God," the shoemaker said slowly. "He's no criminal. Why should we poke our fingers in when there's no need?"

Meanwhile, the sound of many footsteps approaching along the sidewalk grew louder.

"What's that, sexton?" asked the joker Kaladė. "Is it the end or the world or something?"

The sexton turned to the stranger without answering. The stranger raised his right hand and fixed his eyes on the steeple cross which was silhouetted against a small white cloud. Tears were running down his cheeks. "Don't you see, there is nothing more beautiful than the organ," he said in a solemn voice. "Many forsaken souls serve the devil, sitting in taverns, hoarding money and not caring about the life of the spirit, while the children of God are searching for a path to their Father. Do you see the cross? The organ. Do you know the meaning of the organ? The organ relieves us of our misery. It lifts our hearts toward God. What do you want from me, you slaves of the earth? I see that you don't understand the ways of Providence. Let me go!" and he flung himself toward the church but was met with the vigorous resistance of the villagers. "Let me go or God will curse you!"

"Easy, easy," Kupstinis interrupted.

"I think there's something wrong with him," the sexton finally decided, taking a firm hold on the stranger's arm and studying his face. "What should we do with him now? We can't let him go like this."

The villagers pondered, occasionally glancing at the cause of the disturbance from under their brows.

"Take him to the police," Kaladé proposed. "He must be drunk. And he fights too. It's not our business."

The sexton nodded his head, "Let's go." He and the shoemaker were still holding the man by his arms.

"I'll help you," volunteered the skinny postal clerk, grasping the suitcase. He did not have much strength but was always the first to offer assistance. They walked down the cracked sidewalk where tufts of grass thrust themselves through the crevices.

The voices of the crowd of aroused spectators dimmed in the darkness. Only one or two windows still glowed, gilding the cobblestones. A breeze suddenly blew from the lake, stirring the dusty leaves of the plum trees and raspberry bushes. In the tavern yard the looming figure of a drunkard clung to the battered gate.

"What do you say, boys? How about another?" he drawled in a faded voice. "The morning's a long way off..."

The dark police station slumbered in the moonlight. Here the men halted. The postal clerk threw the suitcase on some burdock leaves which had forced their way between the fence staves out into the street.

"Maybe it would be best if we kept an eye on this guy," said Kupstinis to the sexton. "Meanwhile, you go and get Kazlėkas up."

The sexton nodded his head and tramped off down the street, while the shoemaker flopped himself down on the stone step and lit his pipe.

The stranger leaned against a wall with advertisements pasted all over it, looked around. From time to time the moonlight flashed on the glass of his spectacles. He was silent for a long time, as though he could not grasp the situation.

"What town is this?" he asked at last and ran his hand through his hair.

"What a question!" smiled the astounded shoemaker. "Kurkliškės, mister, Kurkliškės..."

"Kurkliškės..." the stranger repeated, surveying the streets flooded in moonlight.

After a while they heard the clatter of footsteps and soon Vaišnys and police chief Kazlėkas dashed around the corner. He was a huge, broad shouldered man who had hardly enough room in the tight uniform he wore. After a few awkward motions he managed to open the door of the police station and summoned everybody inside.

He dropped into a chair, opened his collar and started to rummage in the top drawer of his desk.

"I've already heard part of the story," he said, pulling out a record book. "Please repeat everything once more and in an orderly fashion."

Vaišnys faithfully described everything that he had seen and heard, while Kupstinis nodded his head from time to time. Finally Kazlėkas understood what had passed and turned to the stranger who timidly perched on his chair with his eyes lowered as if unable to understand where he was.

"So it was you who raised all the racket. What's your name?"

"I don't know," the man replied after a moment's thought.

"What do you mean you don't know?" Kazlėkas angrily retorted and pulled out a handkerchief. "You don't look drunk."

"He said he's an organist," Kupstinis put in.

"An organist?" Kazlėkas doubted. "Show me your papers."

The man rapidly searched through his pockets.

"It seems I don't have any," he excused himself.

"We have no choice, citizen," the police chief said decisively and rose from his chair. "We'll have to search you."

The stranger obediently jumped up and raised his arms. Kazlėkas drew from his pockets a handkerchief, a bundle of keys, a billfold, a handful of coins, and two green apples.

"Perhaps you stole these from somebody's orchard," Kazlėkas disdainfully remarked. "But where are your papers?"

"I don't know. It seems I don't have them..." the stranger said in an effort to defend himself.

"Unlock your suitcase," the policeman said sternly.

The man inserted the key and opened the lid. Inside was a many-colored array of several pairs of socks, a tube of toothpaste, a prayerbook, three clean shirts, a bundle of sheet music, fine brown shoes, a book of poetry and a new blue suit.

Kazlėkas pushed the inkstand aside and piled everything on the table. A photograph fell out of the book and fluttered into the wastebasket. Kazlėkas pulled it out and inspected it. He mopped his forehead at last and eyed the stranger.

"Aha, now we have the start of the thread!" He went closer to the newcomer. "Do you know these people?"

The stranger took the picture from Kazlėkas' hand and thought for a moment.

"Yes, that's me there," he finally admitted.

"We see very well that it's you. But who is this woman and this girl?"

"There? I couldn't say." He intently examined the picture, futilely trying to remember. Small veins marked his temples. "Completely strange faces. But, wait, I've seen this girl somewhere..."

"Blast it!" bellowed Kazlėkas, his face flushing violently. He tore the picture from the hand of the frightened man and jabbed at the back side with a sweaty finger. "Do you see the inscription? "Nikodemas, Julija and Onutė, Kaunas, 1937." The picture was taken only last year and you say that you don't know who you were with! Why are you so evasive? Whose handwriting is this?"

"Mine," the man admitted. "Yes, Nikodemas, I remember now. My name is Nikodemas... Nikodemas."

"See? We've got you! Why do you try to get out of it by lying?" Kazlėkas drew himself up to his full height and his head nearly reached the light.

The man trembled and sweat ran down his face. A dirty knee could be seen through his torn trousers. Kupstinis, who all this time had been observing everything carefully, slowly took the pipe from the mouth.

"Who knows, perhaps he really has forgotten everything," he put in. "All sorts of things happen in life. I wouldn't be surprised..."

"Forgotten!" the police chief laughed angrily. "He's a criminal, that's what. That's why the scoundrel doesn't remember."

"That may be," the shoemaker said thoughtfully. "But who ever heard of a criminal playing a church organ?"

Kazlėkas, reddened, glanced at the speaker and slapped the photograph down on the table. Then he looked at the clock on the wall. It was three.

"It will soon be dawn," *he* remarked. "We'll have to keep this fellow behind bars all night until this matter gets cleared up. Somebody will have to be called to go on duty."

He made a phone call and then began pacing impatiently up and down the office. He halted in front of the unknown man:

"Do you know anybody here?"

The man looked around, perplexed, as if searching for an answer which eluded him.

"No, I don't think so."

"So how did you get here, blast it all!" Kazlėkas yelled at the peak of his anger. "Explain yourself; what are you looking for?"

Nikodemas watched the yellow flypaper dangling from the ceiling. A fly stuck to it buzzed, vainly trying to free itself. Suddenly something lit up his eyes.

"Kurkliškės!" he exclaimed as if awakening and attempting to remember a forgotten dream. "Kurkliškės! Now I remember. Long, long ago..."

And he began to tell his story in a musing voice:

"A long time ago, perhaps thirty years back, I remember I came here to a fair. With uncle Anupras. Uncle bought me candy. It was big day in my childhood. Many wagons full of cheese and bagels. Everybody was dressed up, farm boys with flowers in their button holes. I remember it like it was today. Later my uncle took me to the church. Stained glass windows, flowers, candles, a kind, gray-haired organist. He said to me: 'Come, Nikodemas, if you like I'll teach you to play the organ.' Of course, I didn't do so well! But it was nice just to press the keys. My uncle laughed. Then the organist said: 'Now let me try.' When he started to play, I couldn't believe it; the bagel dropped out of my hand onto the floor. No one will ever be able to play like the old organist of Kurkliškės. I studied the organ for many years, but it's impossible, no one can come near him."

The stranger became silent and thoughtful.

Kazlėkas leaned on the desk, pushed the pile of clothes aside and scratched his neck:

"So who are you then? Really an organist?"

Nikodemas started.

"Oh, no... I gave it up. There was no opportunity." His face cleared. "Yes, I remember, I'm a bookkeeper."

"A bookkeeper? From where?"

The stranger lowered his eyes and gazed at his shoes covered with mud and grass.

"I remember I used to go down the steps of Dawn Lane, then across the museum yard to Freedom Boulevard." Here he fell silent and seemed unable to find his way any further. "In Kaunas... somewhere in Kaunas."

At that moment the door opened with a crash and policeman Gairys, his clothes in disorder, rushed inside.

"So here you are," said Kazlėkas, jumping off the table. "You'll have to guard this fellow overnight. Vaišnys and Kupstinis caught him playing the organ in church. Most likely some crackpot, but he might be a criminal. Put his stuff back in the suitcase."

He unlocked the barred door of a narrow cell which contained only a wooden bed and then turned back to the bookkeeper Nikodemas.

"Step in here."

Nikodemas shuffled wearily into the cell.

Before he locked the door the chief asked once more:

"But tell us, why did you come from Kaunas to Krukliškės? To play organ?" He glanced at the torn clothes of the strange visitor and added: "You should change. You have better clothes in the suitcase." He gave a few orders to Gairys and then tramped out into the street with the villagers.

It was gradually dawning. A cool breeze made the peeling posters on the wall wave lazily back and forth. The gables of the shoemaker's roof amidst the rustling linden trees were black against the brightening eastern sky.

Kazlėkas buttoned the collar of his uniform.

"What do you think he is?" he asked. "Isn't he pulling the wool over our eyes?"

"I can't understand how he could forget his address," said the postal clerk. "Sometimes we receive letters marked 'General Delivery' but that's for a different reason. Except for that, every addressee knows his address."

Vaišnys looked at the fading stars and added: "But, phew, how he played!.. He would make a pretty good organist."

"Perhaps," the shoemaker said after a moment, "but that's over my head. I can only say this. From the looks of his shoes I would guess that he came all the way from Kaunas on foot."

* * *

The next morning Kazlėkas strolled toward the police station later than usual, thinking about the unusual incident of the night before. The straw roof of Kupstinis' shop as well as its rusty sign, displaying an awkwardly painted boot, shone in the sun. The farmer's wagons raised clouds of dust as they clattered toward the mill. Pigeons circled the blackened belfry, vigorously clapping their blue wings.

"Wouldn't it be a surprise if I hooked a big one this time," Kazlėkas thought. "The names of Kurkliškės and Kazlėkas would be in all the newspapers. There would be honor and fame to repay such a distinguished achievement." Old women with kerchiefs on their heads chattered in front of the open post office door.

The old idiot Kleiza waddled toward the lake, leaning on his cane and sighing and muttering under his breath: "I'm innocent, I'm innocent. Have pity on me!" Kazlėkas arrived at the police station. He went in and clanked down the hallway. Several farmers who were patiently waiting on the bench stirred clumsily, unable to decide whether or not to get up.

Kazlėkas fell into a chair, crossed his legs and opened his collar.

"Well, how was it?" he asked the policeman on duty.

"Not bad, sir..." he reported, jumping up from a comfortable slumber. "Everything is under control. The prisoner had a restless night. He was arguing with somebody and shouting in his sleep that he couldn't stand any more."

"Hmm," Kazlėkas mumbled. "The devil only knows who he is..."

"That's it!" Gairys eagerly agreed and immediately became active. "This morning he said that he wanted to change and asked for his clothes from the suitcase. If you have nothing against it, I'll give them to him."

"Go ahead," Kazlėkas assented. "I'll have to look after the complainants first. Call them in."

He listened to the long-winded complaints of the farmers and finally promised to forbid the driving of cattle through Rugiškė's pasture. Then he ordered the prisoner to be brought before him. He timidly entered and, after passing his hand through his hair, froze in front of Kazlėkas. He was somewhat pale, but in clean clothes he made a much better impression. It now seemed to Kazlėkas that all of the questions which he had thought of that morning were somehow beside the point.

"Well, how did you sleep?" he asked. "Have a chair."

"Not bad," the visitor answered.

"This is sure no hotel," he said with a smile. "We keep a couple of bedbugs for breeding purposes," He leafed through some record books in silence. "Well now, explain yourself. Why the deuce did you come here and raise all that racket?"

The man took off his glasses and cleaned them with a handkerchief.

"I must confess, it's hard to remember," he finally admitted. "I don't know what happened. I remember as though through a fog that I played the organ in a church. Then some men brought me here. I remember you. You asked me some questions but I can't recall what they were about. Everything is foggy... like a dream."

"Then maybe you've remembered your name?" Kazlėkas encouraged him somewhat deceitfully.

The man blushed.

"Everything is still unreal... I don't know what to believe... Yesterday, with your help, I remembered a few things... But not my name; it seems it is on the tip of my tongue, but I still can't get it. You must know how it is sometimes to forget..."

"Forget, yes!" Kazlėkas suddenly became angry in his disbelief. "But not, my dear sir, one's own name! It'll be much easier if you confess at once. We'll find out everything anyway."

"I would like to..." the man stuttered, seemingly ashamed. "I have nothing to hide. It's only that..."

After a minute he added:

"I have a vague recollection... Show me that photograph."

"Gairys!" Kazlėkas shouted. "Where the devil did you hide all his stuff?"

"In the suitcase, sir. As you ordered, in the suitcase," the policeman hopped closer. "As you ordered."

Kazlėkas snapped open the lock, took out the photograph and shoved it at the bookkeeper. He turned it over for a while, adjusting his glasses and bringing it close to his nose.

"Why, that's my family..." he finally recognized, somewhat surprised. "Here is my wife with my daughter on her knees, and that's me. A friend took the picture."

"That's a different story," the pleased police chief brightened up and tossed the photograph onto the pile of papers. "You say you live in Kaunas?"

"Yes," the man answered, "on Poppy Street, in a red house, third from the corner. But the number..."

"Okay, okay," Kazlėkas interrupted him. He came closer to the stranger and looked sharply into his eyes. "I know, you can't remember. But why did you have to leave Kaunas? To take a vacation? Did you embezzle any money?" He became silent when he noticed the man's frightened face.

"Wait... let me think. On August third I was still in Kaunas. You see, that's my birthday. What day is it today?"

"Today?" Kazlėkas said, astonished. "August the eighth."

"The eighth!" The man was stunned. He hit his forehead with the palm of his hand. "Where have I been all this time? The eighth! Five days. My family, my job!"

"Take it easy, mister, take it easy..." Waving his hand, the chief returned to his seat behind the desk. "Have patience. We want to learn everything too. There's no reason to get upset."

"Tell me, sir, what's the matter with me?" he said, regaining his voice. "I can't be drunk. I'm a family man. I have the best wife God could give a man, and a daughter... How long have I been here?" He seized Kazlėkas by the front of his uniform. "This is Kurkliškės, isn't it? I haven't been here since I was a child..."

Kazlėkas put his hand in front of his mouth, cleared his throat and turned to Gairys:

"Take this fellow back to the cooler. He's going out of his mind again."

Then he turned back to the bookkeeper:

"Since we're still in the dark about many things, we'll have to keep you here for a while. We'll have to phone Kaunas. The central office will certainly know who's missing. The devil only knows why you lit out of there like you did. If you could at least remember your name..."

He opened the window and looked at the street, drumming on the glass with his fingers. Several sparrows hopped up and down on the telephone wires which were like black lines engraved in the humid blue of the sky. Hens cackled and scratched in a neighboring garden between the cucumbers and watermelons. A peeling advertisement dangled on the restaurant wall, showing a fat washer-woman with a bar of soap in her hand. Some children had drawn a mustache and a pair of crooked spectacles on her face with charcoal.

"I should get after those rascals some day," the policeman muttered, knitting his eyebrows.

He went to the telephone and tried to reach Kaunas.

"We have a suspicious character here," he explained into the receiver. "About forty years of age, somewhat bald, wears glasses. His first name is Nikodemas. We caught him last night causing a disturbance. Otherwise he seems to be alright. He says he is a bookkeeper from Kaunas, but he either doesn't want to give his last name or he doesn't remember it. His wife's name is Julija. Are you looking for such a person?"

Kazlėkas lowered his head and listened intently, sticking a finger in his other ear.

"How's that? You say you'll check and call back? Good. We'll wait."

He lit a cigarette, returned to the window and leaned out into the street.

The idiot Kleiza waddled down the street, his cane in the crook of his arm, covering his ears with his hands. A crowd of noisy children followed him.

"We'll hang Kleiza. We'll hang him on the gallows!" they mocked him. "He killed a sparrow!"

"I'm innocent," the old man jabbered, making his beard shake. "Have pity on me. I'm innocent."

"Hush, you rascals!" Kazlėkas shouted and angrily shook a finger at them. The yelling children scattered in all directions and hid in the doorways.

"So this is what they've been up to," the policeman mumbled under his breath while he followed the old man with his eyes. "The man is already so crazy that he's afraid of his own shadow. And those little snot-noses still..."

Kazlėkas had never paid much attention to Kleiza because he was just a harmless curiosity of the village and did not interfere too much with the established order. However, this time his thoughts persisted. Maybe the prisoner is like Kleiza. No, it can't be. As far back as he could remember Kleiza had always been the same: old, frightened, mocked by children, always hurrying around with his cane in his hand. He had heard that Kleiza's mother had died giving birth to him and that his father was a drunkard and quarrelled with everyone and beat his children.

He returned to the desk and untangled the telephone cord. At last he lifted the receiver.

"Doctor Penėyla? This is Kazlėkas. Say, could you drop by the police station for a moment? We have a peculiar fellow here. Might be some kind of crackpot. What did you say? No, I don't think so... We would like to have your opinion. No, it won't take long. In fifteen minutes? Very good. I'll be expecting you."

He hung up and waited. To pass the time he turned over the pictures of wanted criminals. Not a single one looked like his prisoner.

The village doctor came on a bicycle. He was in his shirtsleeves, with a bowler on his head and the bottom of his right trouser wrapped around his shin and held in place with a safety pin so that it wouldn't get caught in the chain. Black shadows filled the sunken eyes in his pale face.

Kazlėkas briefly explained the situation.

"So that's how it is," the doctor murmured as he put the bowler on the desk and entered the cell.

"Pale as a skeleton," Kazlėkas thought to himself. "It would be pretty bad if all his patients looked like him."

Kazlėkas sat down at the desk, opened a newspaper and started munching an apple. Hitler had delivered another fiery speech, earning great ovations from the crowd. The Negus of Ethiopia may publish his memoirs. Japan was shaken by an earthquake with destroyed two villages. Kazlėkas yawned and chased away a buzzing fly. Life as going on as usual everywhere but in Kurkliškės. He tried to overhear the conversation that was taking place in the cell but only caught an occasional coherent word. The doctor was talking longer than he had expected.

At last Dr. Penėyla emerged from the cell and wiped the sweat from his forehead.

"Well?" Kazlėkas asked, rising from his chair.

"You know, it's not too clear to me either," the doctor admitted. "The man isn't crazy; not like old Kleiza. He talks normally. He has some interesting ideas. But he's also rather strange. Doesn't remember anything, therefore not completely right. When he talks about Kurkliškės you'd think it were some land of miracles. And as for Kaunas — nothing."

"Okay, okay," Kazlėkas interrupted him impatiently. "That's not the important thing. Tell me your opinion as a doctor. Mainly, is he all right or is there something missing up here?" and he jabbed his forehead with a fat finger.

"It's hard to say," the doctor said evasively. "I've seen only one other case like this, and that was a long time ago at the university."

Dr. Penėyla began to muse. In his thoughts he went back to hospitals full of the odors of drugs, to noisy auditoriums and to student days filled with sunlight, big plans and many ideals. What had become of all these things? He sighed and glanced through the window at the quiet village. A mangy cat was sleeping on a barrel. A man with his shirt sleeves rolled up was calmly repairing a hole in a fence. Fixing his eyes on a shabby lilac tree which was drowning in the shadow of a tar-smearred woodshed, he continued:

"Considering all the facts of the case, it would seem that the man is probably all right. What does it matter that he doesn't remember? Anyway he's not sick. The pulse is good, the blood pressure normal, nothing in the lungs or heart, and he has full consciousness. We had a heart to heart talk. An interesting man. Very pleasant. It seems he's not satisfied with his life. You know how it is sometimes: one gets disgusted with everything, bored, it seems as though life is worth nothing. Then you think that if you were only somewhere else everything would be different: the sun would shine, people would laugh, and you wouldn't feel so crushed. Sometimes at night a man dreams such beautiful dreams that he doesn't want to wake up. That's the way it is with him. Although he's not drunk, he's like one intoxicated, somewhere in the clouds."

Here the doctor fell silent as if he had said everything.

Kazlėkas watched him cynically and shook his head.

"You always talk about the same old thing," he said. "The other day you talked exactly like this over a drink. Always about other places. And Kurkliškės isn't a bad village. But what can be done?" he added while escorting the doctor through the door. "Well, thanks anyway. It seems like I'll have to make the decision myself."

Just then the telephone rang and the policeman jumped to his desk and lifted the receiver.

"Hello! Yes, that's me. Oh, from Kaunas? You have some news? Good, very good... Yes, we're still holding him under lock and key... Imagine that. Wait, let me make a note. Nikodemas Rasutis. Disappeared five days ago? Bookkeeper for the "Maistas" company? No embezzlements or anything? No? You say everything is in order? What do you know, an honest citizen. His wife what? Excuse me, could you speak a little bit louder? You say she is coming on the six o'clock bus? So, do you think we can let him go? No difficulties, you say? Good. What? Ha-ha-ha! To tell the truth, we didn't know what to do either. Caused a little disturbance in the church by playing the organ, that's all. Otherwise he's a nice fellow. An unusual case, to be sure."

Kazlėkas replaced the receiver and looked absent-mindedly out the window. A dirty piece of newspaper lay on the butcher shop roof. A tired crow slumbered near it. In the blue sky a kite flown by the children could be seen, its red ribbons rippling and glittering in the sunlight.

* * *

The bus was late. It rolled into the village square covered with dust, frightening the chickens, spreading the odor of gasoline, and pursued by a black, barking dog.

Gairys threw his cigarette butt and rose from the bench. He was assigned to meet the woman visitor from Kaunas.

She was easy to recognize. She was a tall woman, heavily made up and probably near forty. She raised the veil of her hat and, putting a thin glove on her hand, surveyed the village. When she noticed the policeman she approached him without hesitation and smiled:

"You are probably waiting for me. Kindly take me to the police station. I have come to pick up my husband."

The fragrance of a strong perfume came from her.

"Oh... Oh, yes," said the embarrassed Gairys. "It's not far. Here, just down this street."

A group of curiosity-seekers lingered around the advertisement post and followed the two of them with their eyes. She walked with small steps, her head raised, and did not say a word. Gairys was embarrassed because he could not walk in step with her and did not dare start a conversation because he felt that it was unbecoming for him, a common provincial policeman, to address such a fine lady. He started to breathe easier when they finally reached the police station. Although there was still some daylight left, the station windows were happily glowing and shedding their light on the white dahlias in the next yard.

Gairys opened the door and she rustled inside, abruptly nodding her head as she passed him. Kazlėkas, who had been making some notes in a book while he was waiting, smiled broadly when he saw the lady come in, threw the pen on the table and rose from his chair. He made a polite gesture with his hand as if he intended to say something but she spoke first:

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Kazlėkas; I have already heard about you in Kaunas. My name is Mrs. Rasutis. I believe my husband is in your care. I hope he didn't cause too much trouble. He has made me so upset. And so much worry! He disappeared without letting anybody know, without giving a thought to us, as if we had no concern about his whereabouts."

"Yes, madam, he's here. We had to put him in a cell temporarily until we found out who he was," Kazlėkas apologized while unlocking the barred door. "We're very sorry."

Nikodemas Rasutis stood in the doorway, pale and motionless, his gaze bent on his wife, seeming not to recognize her. He resembled a shipwrecked sailor watching a strange and foreboding island while clinging to his bit of floating wreckage. His eyes were half closed as if the official police posters, the desk, the policeman, and this elegantly dressed woman radiated a blinding and unbearable light. He adjusted his glasses and opened his mouth as if to say something, but in the end did not say a word, seeming to be overcome by doubt.

"Well, Nikodemas, have you done enough traveling?" the woman asked coldly.

It appeared as though, when he heard his wife's voice, he was hearing a factory siren through his sleep calling him back to work. His lips trembled. Suddenly his expression brightened, as if he was waking from a pleasant dream, once more to face the world.

"Julija!" he shouted. "It's you! What's happened?"

He looked around, bewildered. Suddenly he ran over to his wife whom he embraced and kissed excitedly on the cheek. She allowed him to do it and then stepped back and gestured with her glove:

"How did you get here, Nikodemas? And why didn't you let us know? It's been almost a week that we've been worrying about you, not knowing where you had gone."

"I swear, Julija, in the name of God, I don't know," he apologized with fervent obedience. "All day I've been trying to remember who I am, how I got here, and why... It's as though somebody removed those days from my life. As if I was dead. My conscience tormented me all those hours when I was trying to remember. The last thing I can recall is Saturday. I remember that I packed my suitcase, planning to go somewhere, I don't know myself where. I remember I went out to the street, tied my shoelace on the doorstep of a store, and then it seemed like a fog came over me. As if some evil power took possession of me. However, now I realize that I have only myself to blame. Thank you for coming."

Kazlėkas, hardly able to believe his eyes, gave an amazed snort. He was accustomed to seeing criminals ridicule the law, refuse to confess even though the evidence and the testimony of witnesses were overwhelmingly against them. But this apparently polite and meek individual felt that he was guilty when he obviously did not remember a thing. His wife stood in the middle of the room, proud, piercing him with a calm look, as if she were his conscience, strict, righteous and unquestionable.

"Do you feel alright?" Kazlėkas inquired sympathetically, putting a hand on the bookkeeper's shoulder.

"Oh, yes," he smiled, "I'm all right now. I can remember everything clearly. Thank you for your concern."

"Not at all!" the policeman shrugged his shoulders and felt uneasy when he took a look at the cell where the strange visitor had spent the day. "No need for thanks. Gairys, escort the gentleman out to the hallway and wait there. I have a few matters to clear up with this lady. It won't take long, Mr. Rasutis. You know: formalities... ha-ha..."

Left alone with the lady, Kazlėkas flopped down in his chair and offered her a seat.

"I have to ask you a few questions," he began, taking up a pen. "We're not sure ourselves what really happened. Your husband woke up the village last night by playing the church organ. When we asked him who he was he said he didn't remember. And he didn't look drunk..."

The lady adjusted a shiny earring.

"My husband never drinks, Mr. Kazlėkas. They say that it's good not to drink, but sometimes it's also inconvenient. We might entertain some guests, for example; everybody would have a drink, but not him. If he drinks only a glass he gets sick to his stomach. He is against drinking as a matter of principle. So sometimes it is inconvenient at gatherings."

Kazlėkas coughed into his fist and knit his eyebrows.

"Is that so?" he questioned. "Well then, why did he come here? Perhaps you could suggest some reasons."

"I doubt whether I can help you much. Last Saturday, around five o'clock, I left him at home and went with my daughter to visit some friends. For some reason he was restless and irritable. When I returned about eight o'clock he was gone. It seemed strange because he usually doesn't go anywhere. In the evening he sits in his room and reads a book. He doesn't go to movies or any other entertainments, except occasionally to church. At first I didn't suspect a thing. Later I noticed that some of his clothes and suitcase were missing. I became worried and phoned several friends. Nobody knew anything. I waited awhile and then notified the police. The first I heard about him was today, thanks to you, Mr. Kazlėkas," and she smiled pleasantly.

"I'm pleased that I could be of some service. Excuse my question, but didn't he have any serious reason to leave the city so suddenly, let's say some trouble with the police or something?"

"Who, my husband?" Mrs. Rasutis laughed loudly. "Don't be silly, Mr. Kazlėkas. He wouldn't dare to try anything risky. When his colleagues invite him to a restaurant he refuses to go. It's certainly no fault, but why should he be so different? He doesn't like to play cards. He is the most reliable employee of the Maistas Company and works more than any of the others, and yet he gets the smallest salary. How many times I have urged him to ask for a raise. He really deserves it. On his last birthday, while cutting the cake, I made this wish: Nikodemas, I told him, you're approaching fifty; it's time to be reasonable. You're not young anymore. Instead of chasing the wind you ought to concern yourself with your social position. But talking to him is like talking to a wall. He always insists (just listen to this): When the boss decides that it's necessary he will raise my salary himself. Why should I push myself on him? he says. I was so upset that I went out to visit some friends. Everybody thinks that he's a very good man, but I've lived with him for twelve years and I know that he's a difficult person. He's like a child that has to be shoved. Without me he would have been lost a long time ago. Instead of concerning himself with the welfare of his family he reads poetry. Instead of meeting influential people he spends his time with the organist of the Carmelite Church. Before we got married he used to play the organ. It's alright to play the organ if you're an organist, or let's say, a musician on the stage, but it's of no use to him. If anything happens to go wrong he heads straight for the organ instead of doing something realistic. Sometimes even I have my doubts whether he's entirely alright. He's not like everybody else. I admit he's obedient and kind, but so what? He lacks manliness. I don't know anything about this trip

of his: this is the first time he ever took a journey without asking my permission. When we get back to Kaunas I plan to take him to a doctor."

"The general situation is fairly clear," Kazlėkas decided, "although such a case doesn't come up every day."

He entered their names, address, and other necessary data in the record book, and then called Rasutis back.

"Excuse us for the uncomfortable accommodations but, you see, such were the circumstances," he said, laughing good-naturedly as he bade them farewell. "I hope you'll forgive me."

Rasutis shook his hand and assured him that he had slept very well.

Gairys watched the visitors as they left. Two silhouettes moved away between the village lights.

"Well, we should be leaving too, Gairys," Kazlėkas said, and his smile seemed somehow friendlier. "We've sat here long enough."

They strolled slowly down the street. The moon was rising behind the church steeple. Crows screeched as they circled the belfry. Tired sunflowers, longing for the noon, bent over Kupstinis' fence enveloped in cold moonbeams. Kazlėkas stopped and lit a cigarette. He hesitated for a moment, holding the burning match in his fingers, and watched how the gentle light glimmered on the yellow sunflower petals. For a brief moment they seemed to raise their heads, but the match soon went out, and the garden was once again downed in the coolness of the full moon.

"It's a pity that he can't drink," Kazlėkas murmured. "Anybody else in his place would take to drink in a minute."

Following Kazlėkas' eyes, Gairys also looked at the sunflowers.

"Very true, chief," he reported, almost drawing himself to attention. Both policemen walked on down the street which resounded with the chirping of crickets.

Translated by Julius Kaupas and Robert Page