

JOZA HORVAT — Born at Kotoriba on March 10, 1915. His works have a marked humoristic note verging occasionally on satire. They have been translated into foreign languages.

Works: *The Seventh B*, a novel, 1939; *For Victory*, sketches, 1945; *The Finger Before the Nose*, a comedy 1948; *Writings*, 1951; *Conscience on Sale*, a play, 1957; *Neither Dream nor Reality*, a novel, 1958; *The Cat with a Helmet*, a novel, 1962. Horvat has written several screenplays and radio plays.



JOZA HORVAT

Mousehole

FROM THE NOVEL »THE CAT WITH A HELMET«

WHEN A MAN is hit on the head with a rifle butt all kinds of things rush into his mind while other things rush out. An unbelievable, but true discovery: Partizans, Ustashe and Domobrans are living together like turtle doves in love and harmony in the village of Mousehole. These are the tactics and strategy of the village leader, who has never been to a military academy. Will Kapara agree to shoot wild duck instead of fascists, and hunt tench, carp and village girls instead of Domobrans, Ustashe and Germans? Face to face with the vast steel hulk of a tank what did he do to save his life, when there was nothing else he could do?

Kapara opened his eyes with difficulty. He was lying in a bed in a strange room, fully dressed, covered with a light eiderdown. There were pictures of saints on the walls, pictures of unknown people, a bride and groom in their wedding clothes, old men with moustaches, children in white... Through the window he could see willows and part of a murky river flowing lazily and sleepily by. Frogs croaking, some birds singing. Where was he? He closed his eyes again to try to think how he had come to be here and where in fact he was. Had he been wounded, captured, what had happened to him? The sound of voices reached him as though in a dream — »Has he come round?« »No.« He opened his eyes just enough to see who was so concerned about him, who it was talking. Through his eyelashes in the half-light he made out an Ustasha! He was leaning against the window sill and looking towards the bed, looking at Kapara! The Ustashe emblem — a bomb and the letter »U« — could be clearly distinguished on the yellowish-brown uniform. There could be no doubt about it, Kapara had fallen into the hands of his deadly enemies! What now? Where had it happened? When, how? But before he could think of anything, another shadow moved and stopped by the window. He opened his eyes a fraction — and gasped! A Partizan soldier was now standing beside the Ustasha! Two caps, a red star beside the fizzing bomb! An Ustasha and a Partizan! They were standing side by side, looking at Kapara. — »I must be dead,« he thought. »I'm dead or I've gone off my head! What's happening to me, where am I?« — He closed his eyes to try to think more clearly, but wherever he began, however hard he racked his brains, he could not for the life of him remember when and how he had come there. Or was he perhaps in a fever, seeing things, and that vision of the Partizan and the Ustasha did not really exist, was it all a mirage, a hallucination, a dream? To make sure, he opened his eyes once again, opened them wide this time, but there was no longer either a Partizan or an Ustasha by the window. Sun, the trailing branches of willows, and the murky water barely trickling along the river bed. What had happened to him? Where was he? — »Where am I? Where am I?« he cried aloud, his voice trembling with fear and uncertainty, and a voice from beside his pillow replied: »Thank God... have you come round?«

Kapara recognized the voice. The Domobran! Yes, that must be his voice! Delighted, he called him: »Franjo!... Franjo!«

»Here I am, here I am?«

The Domobran ran up, put his hand on Kapara's forehead and asked anxiously:

»You're alive, then?«

He tried to turn his head, but it hurt him. »Franjo, where are we?«

»In my house.«

»In your house?«

»That's right... In Mousehole. You know you wanted to come here.«

»Mousehole? What's that?«

»You know... I told you about it... it's my village, the one my sister wrote that the war was over in.«

»The war is over...?!« Kapara was dumbfounded, he sat up and opened his eyes wide. »The war is over? Then what am I doing here?!«

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»Calm down, Kapara, the war is over, but it isn't over. It's only in our village... Lie down, don't move... Lie quietly!«

He did not lie down. He stared open-mouthed at the Domobran not believing his ears. Frogs croaking, birds singing...

»And how did I get here? What happened to me?«

The Domobran asked compassionately:

»Don't you remember anything, Kapara?«

»No.«

»Can you have forgotten how we met up in that barn that night, and how we killed an Ustasha early next morning?«

»Yes... yes... I remember! I took the knife to him while you held his legs to stop him struggling. And then what happened?«

»Do you remember how we gave the Ustashe the slip, got out into the yard and ran through the garden and the orchard till we got to that little wood, to that canteen...?«

»Yes, I remember that as well...«

»Just before sunset we reached a shack in a vineyard, where we rested, had something to eat and drink, slept the night and set off again the next morning. We walked for hours and hours without stopping until you got fed up. You said that you had done enough walking in this war and you didn't want to go any further when there were so many cars racing along the roads. I begged you not to do anything stupid, but you ordered me to be quiet and set out straight for the main road.«

»No, I don't remember that,« admitted Kapara truthfully.

»You don't? We reached the wide asphalt highway and the first person to come along was a legionary, you shot him, took his revolver and rifle, kept the revolver and gave me the rifle. We dragged the body into a ditch, and then you put your arm round my neck and ordered me to hold you up and take you to the middle of the road. So I did as I was told and you began to limp as though you had been wounded in the leg. And we walked and walked like that until a car suddenly appeared. You waved to the driver to stop, the brakes screeched and the car drew to a halt. Do you remember that?«

»No, I don't. What happened next?« Ilija was worried.

»Next? Well, all sorts of things happened and I was driven yet again to curse the day I met you. So, seeing you limping along like that the driver stopped the car, and two soldiers got out and came towards us, presumably to see what had happened to us. And as they were coming towards us a third soldier got out of the car, a giant — a German, with a rifle in his hand! It was too late to run for it. You raised your pistol, and while you were killing the first two the third one, the German, rushed up and hit you on the head with the butt-end of his rifle, but he hit you so hard that you immediately collapsed and lost consciousness. Seeing that everything was going so badly, I aimed my rifle hastily at the giant and shot him.«

»You killed the German?« asked Kapara in a tone of disbelief, but the Domobran was adamant.

»Yes, I did. I killed him and then I threatened to kill the driver too if he so much as moved and tried to escape. We dragged you somehow into the car and I sat beside the driver and showed him where to go. Just before we got to Mousehole I told him to stop, we

pulled you out, I went to the village for help and we brought you by cart to my house. And here you are now, under my roof.»

»And is that all?« asked Kapara.

»All? Do you want more?«

He did not reply at once. He was thinking about what the Domobran had said and he could not get over his amazement at having forgotten it all. Or was it because he had been hit on the head?

»When did it happen?«

»Three days ago. If you hadn't a helmet, your skull would have cracked open like a hazel-nut in a squirrel's teeth. The squire came to see you the day we brought you in.«

»Squire? What squire?«

»The Squire, our squire... you, know our village squire, our landlord. He's got an inn and a shop. A very able man. He's our organizer and, as we soldiers would say, our strategist! He never went to military school, but he manages to arrange everything... wisely and cunningly! He knows everything and understands everything. A politician!«

Kapara frowned. Something deep down warned him to be on his guard. »An able man... landlord... strategist... politician...« These were all words that meant a lot to a Partizan, he smelt a rat, and Kapara had good reason to frown. He had heard various things about these village philosophers and peacemakers already and had met some of them here and there and argued with them. And that is why he now asked cautiously:

»And this general of yours came to see me, a corporal?«

»Yes, he came as soon as he heard what had happened. You were lying here like this and he came to your bed-side, looked at you for a while and said: »If he doesn't kick the bucket soon, he'll live a long time and not be any the worse for this!« And then he added: »Let me know when he opens his eyes and when he can stand up.« He went away and I've been sitting here for three days now, I'm on duty, I make you hot and cold poultices alternately, and wait for you to come round. And here you are, conscious again, thank God!«

He was worried: what did that squire want from him? Let him know as soon as he could stand? I shall certainly call on him as soon as possible, let us reassure the fellow, in a moment he will see before him Ilija Kapara, partizan warrior. What an interesting meeting that will be!

»And why do you keep making me these hot and cold poultices, Franjo?«

»Because I was scared stiff. I wasn't sure which was better for you, hot or cold compresses, and I was terrified in case you died on me! People could have thought I poisoned you or got rid of you in some other way. How could I have proved my innocence to your mates in the brigade? A Domobran would rather die than try to explain the truth to Partizan. That's why I nursed you as best I could, and now that you've opened your eyes there's a weight off my mind. You once saved my life, Kapara, and I am happy to have been able to repay you somehow.«

Kapara briefly reviewed his »saved life« and said, without particular enthusiasm: »Thanks!«

»There's nothing to thank me for. How are you feeling?«

»Yes, how am I feeling?« wondered Kapara bitterly. Perhaps it would have been better if he were dead, if that German had finished him off in the road, perhaps that really would have been best. And he must have hit his head mighty hard as he could not remember anything at all. Bloody... He tried to turn his head—and succeeded! He did feel a dull pain in the back of his head, but since he had heard all that had happened to him that pain was not even worth mentioning. He tried to turn his head again. No problem. All was well! Then he stretched his toes to make sure that he could move his joints. He was satisfied. Kapara knows—as long as a Partizan's head and feet are all right, there is no need to worry about anything else.

»Do your bones creak?«

»Where?«

»In your head.«

»No, nothing creaks.«

The Domobran looked carefully at Kapara and noted with satisfaction. »Well, you certainly are quite a fellow! Anyone who goes anywhere with you had better take at least three spare heads; I never believed I would make it to the village alive with you, but whenever we've been in a spot together, I've seen that you are a really crafty old fox and that there aren't many like you. If I had to travel through the world again, on the run, a deserter or a fugitive, I would always go with you.«

He was not listening to the Domobran. His thoughts were circling round the picture that had caught his attention when he had opened his eyes a short time before: the Ustasha and the Partizan side by side leaning on the window sill...! Had he been awake or dreaming?

»No, you weren't dreaming,« explained the Domobran. »That was my cousin Torban and his son.«

»Your cousin is an Ustasha?« Kapara was alarmed.

»An Ustasha... he's not an Ustasha. Well, he is, but only sort of...«

»And his son? Is he a Partizan... only sort of?«

»Of course. We are all Ustashe and Partizans and Domobrants, but no-one is really either an Ustasha or a Partizan or a Domobran. We are only sort of...«

»Sort of what?! How?«

»Simple. All the men in the village have been divided into three groups—Partizans, Ustashe and Domobrants. Everyone has his own uniform and spends a month in each group.«

»What, a month—as a Partizan?!« exclaimed the astounded Kapara, quite unable to grasp this remarkable system.

»That's right.«

»And then?« gaped Kapara. »What happens then?«

»You change! All those who were Partizans become Domobrants, the Domobrants become Ustashe and the Ustashe Partizans. And so on, in turn, because no-one wants to be an Ustasha before the time comes, people are frightened. And to avoid a few people suffering for the whole village, we take it in turns.«

»I don't understand,« said Kapara, »how do you mean—so that a few don't suffer... Suffer what?«

The Domobran was a little confused. But then thought of something.

»Well, because we're armed. We're protecting the village.«

»From whom?«

»From everyone.«

»And?«

»What?«

»If soldiers come, do you fight?«

»My goodness, you are slow!« said the Domobran, amazed. »Why, that's just why we've been so clever!«

»How?«

»Because we don't fight. We are for everyone! We are for whichever army comes to village.«

»If Ustashe come?« Kapara was studying the Domobran carefully out of the corner of his eye, but the latter continued to answer calmly and reasonably.

»If Ustashe come they are met by our Ustashe. What else?«

»When your turn comes you'll put on an Ustashe uniform?«

»Of course.« The Domobran was astonished that Kapara could not understand. »I've already explained that it's all just for show... We are all Partizans and Ustashe and Domobrants, it's all mixed up here. The Squire decides each month and organizes the shifts... and you take what you get.«

Kapara found himself becoming gradually but uncontrollably angry. He stared furiously at the Domobran, he would have liked to hit him, but he restrained himself somehow and went on quietly:

»And what's your duty?«

The Domobran blinked and sat down on the bed beside Kapara to sort out his ideas. This Partizan corpse had scarcely opened his eyes and come partially back to life and here he was bombarding him with questions, examining him like a criminal on trial, tormenting him and worrying him. Now what did he want explained—duties?

»Our duty... our most important duty is not to join any side. Not Tito's or Pavelić's. None outside our own village! To stay at home, look after ourselves, keep quiet and save our skins, that's our first undertaking, our main slogan, and our only one! The Squire says—»When the war is over we shall see who is left alive and what will happen. For the moment our motto is: wait and save your skin!«

»So that's it,« thought Kapara. »That's your great strategist Squire's policy! Let others fight, let others perish for freedom, and he will sit tight in Mousehole until the war is over. The wretch! Kapara had known about all these lordly dodges for a long time, he knew all the infamous ways of village peacemakers like this one who slumber beneath the skirts of the occupiers like badgers and long for only one thing: that there should be as few partizans as possible, that the fascists should kill as many of them as possible so that on the day of liberation they can poke their noses out of their lairs and snatch the power from those who fought for freedom! Kapara knew all this, but still, seeing that he was in this pig-sty, he wanted to hear and learn as much as he could.

»So that's how it is you say... The Squire decrees the shifts and you suffer...! It's quite fair, a month as a time for everyone! And what happens when soldiers come to the village?«

The Domobran answered readily: »It doesn't happen very often. Our village is cut off from the rest of the world. There is a river

running round it and impenetrable forests all round. It's really very rare that an army calls on us.«

»All right, it doesn't often happen,« Kapara granted. »But nevertheless if it does sometimes occur that a group of soldiers gets lost and wanders even into this Mousehole of yours, what happens then?«

»You'll see when you recover a little... In the middle of the village there's a high firemen's tower. It is manned day and night by a watchman who keeps a look out and as soon as he catches sight of approaching soldiers he rings the bells, and that's the signal for alarm.«

»And then what? Do you grab your guns?«

»Oh no! First we listen carefully to the bells. Because we've got a special signal for Ustashe, a different one for Partizans, a third for Domobrans and a fourth for Germans... The whole village listens, and according to which army it is, some stay in the village and others run for it.«

»Ah, so some people do run after all!« Kapara was relieved.

»Well, yes...« Franjo affirmed, »some run. No-one absolutely trusts anyone else. Someone has a relation in the real partizans or the real Ustashe and everyone watches carefully to see who's coming. The only person who never stirs from the village is the Squire. He meets all the soldiers and sees them off. His door is wide open to all commands and all officers. The other people who always stay here are the men on duty.«

»You have men on duty as well, do you? Well, I never!« Kapara was genuinely surprised.

»On duty... I don't mean duty officers like in the army, but Mousehole duty officers, Domobrans or whatever depending on which army is coming. If it is a Domobran division then the Domobran shift is on duty in the village, and so on. They're like landlords, if you like.«

»And what do these landlords of yours do when they're on duty?«

»They meet the army... My goodness, Kapara, you sound as if you'd never been a soldier! They are on duty in order to meet the army and when they come, whoever they are, they go out to meet them and ask them what they want, whether they would just like to rest a little or whether they intend to stay for a longer period, whether they would like something to drink, to quench their thirst, a light snack or a hearty meal. If they only want a little rest, the men on duty offer them shade in orchards, barns, farmyards... If they want to stay the night they get rooms and beds. If they want to drink they are offered wine, brandy, beer. If they want a snack they are given spare ribs, green paprika, and yoghurt. If they are hungry and want a good meal, then they are offered goose, duck, turkey, chicken, fresh fish, dried fish, wild duck, sausage, prosciutto, dry chops, cheese, butter cream, eggs, dripping, calves, a heifer, a cow. They are given anything they ask for.«

Kapara shook his head sadly: »How nice...!«

»Why, yes, it is... That's our contribution to the struggle. We look after them, stock them up, feed them, and when they've had enough we accompany them to the edge of the village, making sure they don't steal anything on the way.«

»That too!«

»Yes, of course, soldiers steal!«

Kapara closed his eyes . . . »Oh, Ilija, where the hell have you got yourself! All around you are lairs, squires and howkers, frogs croaking, murky rivers flowing, and where are the Domobrans and guns, where is your brigade, where are you mates, where is Kalnik—you slob! Get up, whatever are you sitting here for!«

Kapara lowered his feet to the floor and tried to stand. He staggered but the Domobran held him, helped him and Kapara stood upright. He tightened his belt, buttoned his shirt, pulled on his boots and asked where his helmet was. His helmet was in the cupboard and when the Domobran took it out and showed it to him Kapara was able for the first time to assess the blow that had laid him out. The thick steel had a deep dent about ten centimetres long in it. The Domobran remarked confidently:

»If he had hit an ox, it would have been curtains!«

»For whom—the ox, me or the German?«

»The ox! But your head is so hard that you could drop a tree on it without ill effect.«

Kapara did not reply. He tried to straighten the helmet as best he could, placed it slowly and carefully on his head and then turned to the Domobran.

»Where is my rifle?«

»What do you want if for?«

»I need it.«

The Domobran took the rifle out of the cupboard and gave it to Kapara. He opened it and pushed a bullet into the barrel.

»Let's go!«

»Where?« asked the Domobran, non-plussed.

»To the Squire!«

»The Squire?«

»You told me he had been here and that he wanted to see me.«

»Yes, I did . . .« the Domobran was confused. »I did, but there's no need for you to go rushing straight off there now. There's plenty of time. The main thing is that you are risen from the dead, and there's lots of time for the living. Lie down!«

»I don't want to. I want to see the Squire. Show me the way!«

The Domobran could see that Kapara was angry and that no good could come of this unexpected meeting with the Squire, and that is why he tried to persuade Kapara to postpone the visit for the time being, but to no avail. He had no alternative but to follow Kapara outside. When they were in the street outside the house Ilija stopped and looked round to see what this famous village looked like. There was an endless row of one storey houses along the bank of the river which encircled the village like a horse-shoe. Woods stretched away into the distance on the far side of the river: willows, poplars, acacia and reeds. Fat grey gulls were circling over the river catching fish and squealing quarrelsomely. There were water lilies near the bank. Here and there fishing nets. Frogs croaking. A whole flotilla of slim, black boats was rocking sleepily in the shallow water nearby.

»What do you need so many boats for?«

»The Squire had them made.«

»Who for?«

»For us. I told you, as soon as any soldiers come, some of the villagers run away. They jump into the boats which are always ready,

push themselves off, cross the river and then disappear in the woods and undergrowth. There is a lot of quick-sand on the other side of the river and if you don't know the way you get sucked down without a trace. That's why no-one chases the ones who run away. They are too frightened. The boats save us!»

»And the Squire thought all this out?»

»Everything!»

»What a wise man!»

»Very wise. You'll see him in a minute.»

Kapara pointed to the tower which rose up in the middle of the village. »Is that your tower?»

»Yes, that's right. His house is right beside it. He's got an inn and a shop.»

»A shop... what kind?»

»Oh, he sells everything. Needles, petrol, shoes, scythes, yeast, handkerchiefs, flour, matches, tobacco, postage stamps, buttons... everything! He feeds and clothes half the village. We are all in his debt, but the Squire is a good man, he says—just take it, you'll pay when the war is over!»

»He's a good man all right... the skunk!» Kapara made a face and added: »He'll pay and all!»

They passed the fire tower and stopped in front of the largest house in the village, a huge one-storey building, the façade of which was divided into two parts. Over one door was the sign »The Inn of the Happy Hunter« and over the other: »General Stores—Anton Squire«. The landlord received them in the inn. He could have been fifty and weighed twice that in kilos. He was wearing a shirt with the sleeves rolled up, he was hairy, red-faced, greasy—a real Squire. Seeing Kapara he waved cheerily:

»Hello soldier! Have you recovered? As soon as I saw you I said—the likes of him are not going to get killed by rifle butts. Mortar fire only mortar fire! That or the gallows. Anything else is a toy. How are you?» He held out his huge brawny hand and went on gaily, reaching for a bottle of brandy: »People returning from the other world must first have a drink of brandy, good strong double-distilled brandy, to wash away everything that is not of this world. If everyone on earth lived in the kind of friendship that exists between soldiers and brandy, there would never be any wars. Drink up!... Your good health, soldier!»

They drank. The three of them sat down at a table, then Squire frowned and began:

»Well?»

»Well, what?» asked Ilija naively.

»Are you staying?»

»He's staying, why shouldn't he stay?» The Domobran butted in. »That's why we've come, to make arrangements. Isn't that right...?»

But Squire interrupted: »Quiet! I wasn't talking to you. Well...?»

Kapara did not reply immediately. It was not easy for him to reply when he did not know himself which way to turn. Whether to go to Zagreb, to go back to Kalnik, to cross the Sava and go to look for his brother in the Kozara mountains?

»I asked you a question...«

»I don't know how to get across the Sava. I'd like to make it to Kozara, my brother's commander of a brigade there and I'd like to join him. But I don't know how to get across the river.«

»That's your problem!« Squire frowned harder and began to drum his fingers on the table. »I'm only interested in one thing: do you or do you not wish to stay here?«

Trying to find a way out, Kapara replied cautiously: »I'm not from your village...«

»I don't give a damn!« replied Squire.

»Absolutely,« the Domobran broke in again, »the main thing is that you're one of us. It doesn't matter where you come from or where you are going. If you're for peace live with us as long as you like.«

»At least until I'm stronger« added Kapara but he was thinking: »I really should have slit this Domobran's throat in that barn, it wouldn't have been any loss... Yes, until I'm stronger,« he repeated.

»Until you're stronger, or weaker, I don't mind. If you like you can stay here until the end of the war. Only you must remember—there's no such thing as popular rule here—I do the ruling, I, Anton Squire!«

»I know,« muttered Kapara gloomily.

»If you want to stay here, you'll have to abide by my laws, the village laws. Do what you like, during the day you can walk in the fields or fish, there are pike and sheath fish in the river, at night you can sleep or try your luck with the girls, play cards, sing, enjoy yourself—live, do whatever you feel like, there is just one thing I forbid you: you must not harm anyone. There's no war here. I've had the greatest difficulty in making our village secure, but now I'll answer with my life if anyone touches any soldier of any allegiance whatsoever who comes into my village. I'll answer with my life for any of my followers, but I insist on obedience and peace from everyone!«

Kapara twisted on his chair, scratched his chin, straightened his helmet, and then calmed down, leaned on the barrel of his rifle and looked intently at Squire:

»So... it's peace?«

»Yes, peace to all.«

»Peace to the Ustashe?«

»Them too.«

»Peace to the Germans?«

»And them.«

»And what do we do about everything the fascists are burning all over the country?«

Squire replied readily, decisively and without hesitation: »That's none of your business! Has my village been burned? No. Has anyone from my village been killed here, at home? No, it's true that some people have died because they did not want to listen to me but went off somewhere, »to fight for justice!« Thanks to my policy no-one has lost a hair from his head in my village. If you like the sound of such a policy, stay, if not, no-one's standing in your way.«

Slowly and cautiously Kapara offered resistance:

»If all of us think of saving our own skins, who's going to drive out the occupiers and liberate the country?«

»Not you and I in any case! Not fifty partizan brigades, nor a hundred! The liberation of the country is other people's business. The

Big Powers! The English, Americans, Russians, will worry about getting the Germans out of our country, and we, we weak as we are, we must just cover our heads or crawl into a badger's lair and wait for the storm to pass.«

Kapara straightened his helmet. He felt that the battle was about to begin and he instinctively tightened the belt of his trousers.

»Right, then! If I have understood correctly, the Americans, Russians and English can die for us and we just creep into a badger's lair and wait. Yes, that's nice, that's very nice...« Kapara agreed and then inquired cunningly: »And then, what will we have waited for?«

»When?« asked Squire, not seeing what he was getting at.

»When the war is over,« explained Kapara.

»What for? You'll be alive! What more do you want?«

»Right... and then, what then?«

»Peace! There'll be peace!«

Kapara shook his head doubtfully: »I'm not so sure, I'm not sure... I can't help thinking that the people who clamour for peace now, in wartime, will be the very ones to start a war when peace comes.«

He stared at Kapara with his sharp little eyes as though he could not understand the point of what he was saying.

»All I'm saying is that I guarantee that you will stay alive, and you, what are you talking about? I've told you: we'll see what happens when the war is over.«

Kapara frowned and nodded significantly: »Ah, yes... you will see, and I know now! If all the Partizans take your advice, throw away their guns and hide themselves away in places like Mousehole, if the people's army ceases to exist, then, when the war is over our dear King Peter Karađorđević II will calmly return, and with him our dear police agents, our dear district governors, revenue officers, tax collectors, notaries—and what is more to the point our dear Draža Mihajlović and our dear Chetniks will return, and the first thing they will want to know will be »where are you, Kapara, damn your eyes, show up so that we can slit your throat, you lousy Croat, you filthy, Ustasha, you filthy Austro-Hungarian, where are you?« And thanks to you, there won't be any partizans to protect me, and what then? Beat Kapara up, slaughter the poor systematically, and the Croatian and Serbian gentlemen will get along together again and share the power! So that's what you are proposing I should wait to see?!«

Well, not even Squire, the great village wise man and strategist, had expected such a torrent from a partizan corporal. He gaped at Kapara, flushed with fury, opened his mouth so wide that his little pig's eyes almost disappeared, brought his fist down on the table and thundered:

»That's enough! I refuse to go on talking to you! I've seen your sort before! You all trot out what you've heard from your commanders. Now you talk about the occupying forces, and tomorrow you'll be destroying God and private ownership! You'll be taking each other's wives and living like pigs! I've nothing more to say to you. Just answer: do you want to stay in the village or don't you?«

»I don't!« Kapara said angrily.

»Then get out, this minute! I don't want to see you for another second, get out of the village immediately!«

»I can't go immediately. Wait until I'm a bit steadier on my feet. Don't worry, I shan't stay.«

»I've told you you can stay as long as you like, a day, a year, or to the end of the war, I don't care, but as long as you are in this village, you are obliged to obey my laws. For the last time—are you going to obey them or not?«

Scething with hatred, Kapara stared under his helmet at this fat monster of a Squire, but what could he do where could he go when he could scarcely stand upright. If he could only stay here a day or two to regain his strength and be fit to undertake the journey. What should he answer, what?

»Well?«

»We'll see...« said Kapara sadly, bowing his head. »I'll think about it all.«

The Domobran patted him on the shoulder in a friendly way and encouraged him. »Don't you think about anything but just make up your mind to stay here.«

»No, no, I can't... I must think. I can't do anything like this. If you let me walk around a bit, to clear my head...«

Squire stood up from his chair, knocked back another brandy and agreed good-naturedly: »All right... so be it! Go for a walk and think. The countryside round here is lovely, you'll see. If you're a hunter, or if you have shooting and killing in your blood, then take a double-barrelled hunting rifle and kill some wild duck, hunt foxes, snipe, deer, shoot to your heart's content!«

He went out and set off into the fields. Absorbed in his thoughts he did not notice where he was going, or how much time has passed since he left the village. As he walked along a path between rows of ripe maize, he suddenly heard the sound of an engine! He stopped. Had he heard right? No there was no doubt about it—an engine! And not only one—a whole motorized convoy was moving along somewhere nearby. The thought that the enemy was somewhere near him filled him completely. He forgot the Squire and Mousehole and his promises and obligation—everything! He took his gun from his shoulder and crept silently forward. At one point he looked round to see how far he had come from the village, but there was no sign of it, or the firemen's tower. And the engines went on humming, irritating his ears and nostrils. Like a wild animal stalking its prey, Kapara lowered himself to the ground and continued on his hands and knees, protected by the leaves and stalks of the maize. He was getting nearer and nearer to the place where his heart was dragging him irresistibly—to the enemy! That is the way it is: whatever the cat whelps hunts mice, whatever the forest rears chases fascists! Just one or two more steps and he must see them, he could already see the clouds of dust billowing in the wind. They must be somewhere here, he must see them any minute now! He was right. At the end of the plantation the view opened out in front of him and Kapara caught sight of the road. It stretched out silver in all the green, straight as a ruler, almost within arm's reach. Motor bikes were moving along it in two columns, and between them raced trucks, tanks, heavy artillery...! The soldiers had helmets, rifles on their shoulders, mackintoshes streaked with various colours—Germans! They were going at a steady pace, their eyes on the road ahead. »Withdraw would you, you bastards, run

would you!» Kapara gasped his rifle more firmly. He could scarcely wait for the end of the convoy. At the end rode a solitary soldier, as if protected. Kapara took aim, followed the cycle for about ten meters with his rifle, as a hunter follows an animal on the run, and fired. The rifle cracked, the soldier let go of the handle bars, slumped forward and careered with his cycle into the ditch.

He returned to the village as fast as he could, Squire met him outside the inn.

»Well, how do you like the country?»

»Very much of course!» Kapara admitted sincerely. »I never dreamed you had such a wonderful surroundings. Meadows, willows, the river, it's really wonderful!»

Squire understood what these words meant, and smiled triumphantly: »So, you're staying?»

»I'm staying! I'm staying, but on condition that I can go off like this every morning and every evening, with my gun on my shoulder, to walk in this beautiful countryside and fresh air. I need it, it's like a tonic!»

»Quite right, Kapara, quite right...« approved the Squire. »I knew you would stay. You'll like it, you'll stay with us till the end of the war, you'll see. Come in and have a drink...«

And they went in. The Squire took the bottle to treat his new follower, the late Partizan Ilija Kapara, but just as he was raising his glass, the bells rang out from the tower. Squire listened attentively.

»What is it?» asked Kapara, himself alarmed.

»They're ringing strangely, I don't understand the signal.«

He ran out into the street, Kapara after him. At that moment a grenade whistled over the village and exploded. Rifle fire, mortar shells. Cries for help, panic and a crowd by the boats. Germans were pouring in from all directions, between the houses, across the gardens. Motor cyclists, tanks, trucks, heavy guns... Smoke belched out and the whole village was suddenly enveloped in flame. Kapara took his gun, ran into the inn and rushed through the kitchen out into the yard, but there, in the yard, as though it had been waiting especially for Kapara, a great monster of a tank was bearing straight down on him! The barrel of the gun was pointing straight at Kapara's chest and the engine was roaring so that the ground shook. Ilija could see there was no way out. He could not run, nor could he destroy the great steel hulk that was cutting off his retreat. He had no bomb, no petrol and no bottle, what could he do, nothing! He stood helplessly facing the jaws of death and waited for his last hour to come. Must he die, must he really die? Crazed with fear and despair he grabbed the tank gun with both arms and shoved it with all his force back into the tank. Kapara succeeded in thrusting the barrel right back into the tank but the crew realized and drove it out once more into Kapara's chest. Kapara pushed it away from him, turned it in all directions, but the luckless fellow felt his strength failing, he saw his fate, there was no avoiding it. Once more, with his last shred of strength, he turned the gun, and turned not only the gun but the whole tank, and as he turned it over he kicked its steel backside...

...and then he woke up. He woke up sweating and struggling. It was dark, where was he? A smell of damp a smell of grapes, grape skins, must, wine... Was that someone breathing beside him? He felt around

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him... The Domobran! Yes, it was Franjo, the Domobran! And he remembered everything. The flight, the vineyard keeper's hut! The wonderful escape, the Zagorje vineyard hut! He jumped up, and shouted at the top of his voice: »I'm alive... I'm still alive!!!«

Translated by Celia Williams