

And, crushed close together, the crowd swayed, ready to run.

'Stop, good people, stop!' several men began shouting. 'It's nothing, nothing at all!'

The people quietened down and returned to their places. But in front, by the altar, an empty space remained. Then a man suddenly appeared there, a young man, but blackened and covered in dust. His eyes, fixed on the bride, burned like glowing embers. Swaying on his feet, he tried to step forward, but doubled up in terrible convulsions. Black blotches appeared on his face. His legs gave way beneath him and he fell to the ground.

'The plague! He has the plague!' Someone shouted. 'Run!'

The crowd reeled back, pushing and shouting. Then there was a stamping of feet like that of a herd of cattle, and the church, quite empty now, grew lighter. Alone beneath the chandelier stood Tiha. She too wanted to run, but her eyes fell upon a woman and she stopped. It was widow Dochka. She was wringing her hands and staring at the man who had fallen by the altar, her eyes like those of one possessed.

'Oh God! What am I to do?' she cried, 'he is my son, but he has the plague! Oh God!'

Several times she made as if to move towards him, then she drew back, and in the end, clutching at her hair, she burst into tears and fled like the others.

Then Tiha went to the sick man. It was indeed Velichko - she had recognized him the moment he appeared. She bent down, turned his face towards her, sat down on the stone step in front of the altar and, placing his head on her knees, gazed into his eyes. Her veil fell forward, hiding her face and his. Behind them, from the blackened icon, Jesus looked down upon them, his right hand raised.

THE DOE IN THE FOREST

*Not by name did she call him,
For she bleated like a doe.....*

(From an ancient chronicle)

Over there in the valley, where the white screes come down from Krainitsa, that is where Old Tsono's water-mill once stood. The willows are still there, and the mill-stream too, but the mill itself has vanished. All that remains are some crumbling walls overgrown with brambles, and a few wooden beams, grey with age and flattened like fungi. For all this happened long, long ago, and now neither the people nor the places are what they once were.

Two people used to come to the mill: Tsono himself and Stefan his son. Tsono was an old man. Old people all bend low, and, while the young look upwards, the old cast their eyes down and look at the earth that will soon take them to itself. But Old Tsono did not have a mere stoop: some disease had bent him almost double, and the only way he could walk was by putting a stick across the small of his back and grasping it at both ends. This helped him keep his balance, and he walked slowly, staring at the ground as if searching for something. When he went to the mill he turned off neither to the right nor to the left, but followed each twist and turn of the winding track.

Stefan was different. For him there was no track. Hardly had you seen him leave

the village, than there while the children, with sight of him and not make off as fast as they swooped on a flock of

But Stefan did not down the mountain. Stoenichina's house of she knew everything, fairies too. The fairies ways, but one it seemed sharing her house with that Stefan passed this corner of the garden outside the wattle fence cast down. He was framed his face but remained dark, each

With or without a his shoulders; leaping flash he was at the clatter. But what was house like a swallow hollowed-out trough gushed out below craves from the dark mouth stone walls, splashing and bursting with air. When the sun shone the light from the sun mill-clapper's song, ravines.

One day Old Tsono set out to repair the forest and widen na washed their rug showed sharp on the smooth as a writing animal. Stefan stopped goat-tracks, although by. Nor were they there Stefan bent lower to face shone and his that had appeared in evenings, as they walked the trees above the into their hearts, but the doe was there. The cutters, who came with bill in their hair, told like the eyes of a hawk

Old Tsono's son women thought, no

to run.
nothing, nothing at all!
But in front, by the
ed there, a young man,
e, burned like glowing
led up in terrible con-
y beneath him and he

was a stamping of feet
y, grew lighter. Alone
ut her eyes fell upon a
inging her hands and
hose of one possessed.
has the plague! Oh God!
she drew back, and in
like the others.

— she had recognized
face towards her, sat
is head on her knees,
is. Behind them, from
it hand raised.

VEST

ve did she call him,
ted like a doe.....
rom an ancient chronicle)

n from Krainitsa, that
ill there, and the mill-
s are some crumbling
s, grey with age and
ow neither the people

Stefan his son. Tsono
ng look upwards, the
ake them to itself. But
im almost double, and
small of his back and
nd he walked slowly,
e went to the mill he
a twist and turn of the

ad you seen him leave

the village, than there he stood, big and tall, erect on the skyline above the mill. while the children, who often stole into the orchard to pick the plums, would catch sight of him and not simply climb from the trees, but come showering down and make off as fast as their legs would carry them. It was as though a falcon had swooped on a flock of sparrows.

But Stefan did not always take the shortest path to the mill. Sometimes he came down the mountainside over there on the edge of the village where Moutsa Stoenichina's house once stood. Moutsa was a wise-woman and a fortune-teller and she knew everything there was to know about herbs and hob-goblins and good fairies too. The fairies, she said, had vanished long ago, for men had turned to evil ways, but one it seemed, the most beautiful fairy of all, had remained behind, sharing her house with her. Moutsa had a beautiful daughter. It was because of her that Stefan passed this way when going to the mill. They would talk in some hidden corner of the garden amongst the sun-flowers and the plum-trees. While he stood outside the wattle fence, she stood inside. She was fair, her eyes blue and modestly cast down. He was swarthy, with broad shoulders and a small black beard that framed his face but did not cover it completely. His thin lips smiled, yet his eyes remained dark, each with a tiny flame at the centre, lit as if by some evil thought.

With or without a flower from Doina, when he left, Stefan felt wings grow from his shoulders; leaping over the ravines and bounding from hill top to hill top, in a flash he was at the mill. He released the water and the mill-clapper began to clatter. But what was Old Tsono's mill really like? Merely a low, tumble-down little house like a swallow's nest under the eaves, clinging to the side of the hill. Yet the hollowed-out trough was huge, all green, sodden and swollen, filled by water that gushed out below crashing onto the blades of the mill-wheel. On the other side, as if from the dark mouth of some cave, the water frothed up, foaming against the old stone walls, splashing against a wet and glistening slab of stone set across the stream and bursting with a roar into a million droplets which hung like a fine mist in the air. When the sun shone, a small rainbow appeared there. And it was as though all the light from the sun came to a focus in that rainbow and everything joyful sang the mill-clapper's song. For all around there was nothing, save dark forest and silent ravines.

One day Old Tsono's son Stefan left the mill with a mattock on his shoulder and set out to repair the mill-race. He reached the spot where the stream emerged from the forest and widened to form a clear, cold pool in which the women from Zheravna washed their rugs and bleached their cloth. There was no-one there, every pebble showed sharp on the bottom of the pool and the sand all around was as clean and as smooth as a writing slate. But here and there in the sand were the tracks of some animal. Stefan stopped, squatted down and began to examine them. They were not goat-tracks, although Kalistrat's goats did graze and rest from the midday sun close by. Nor were they the tracks of a cow, although the village herd did pass that way. Stefan bent lower to take a closer look at the tracks. Finally he straightened up. His face shone and his eyes flashed: these tracks were the tracks of a doe. The same doe that had appeared in the mountains and of which the women used to tell in the evenings, as they watched the fires burning in the forest or listened to the wind in the trees above the village. At any other time such things would have struck fear into their hearts, but now they looked trustingly to the mountains and were glad, for the doe was there. The shepherds told how it ran like the wind, and the gypsy wood-cutters, who came down from the mountains with cowslips and sprays of crane's-bill in their hair, told how they had seen it from close to, and its eyes had been just like the eyes of a human being.

Old Tsono's son Stefan had heard all this. But he had little time for the way women thought, nor for the tales they told. He was a hunter, hard and tough, and