

Z D R A V K A E V T I M O V A

I N T H E B A R R E L

There was a black whirlpool in the Struma River not far from our house. The place was wild, overgrown with stubborn willows. You'd break your axe before you cut one of those huge trees and you'd end up disappointed in the end. The wood wouldn't burn; you'd say it was made of bones. A couple of guys died there last summer; since then everybody called it Bludgeon pool. My father was that kind of a man: there was a lot of the gnarled willow wood and a lot of the Bludgeon pool in him. He could crush you with his words. He was a wealthy man, too, and very hard to please.

One day a guy, Stancho, passed out while he dug the new vines in Dad's vineyard. Dad shouted, "Bloody faker!" then set the dogs on the man. I saw the mutts biting and clawing Stancho, but he didn't shift, just lay there, sprawling like a heap of cabbages in his dirty clothes. Since that day, folks in these parts dubbed Dad "Nasty", but he didn't give his nickname much thought. He didn't lose weight on account of it, nor did he complain of any lack of sleep. His face grew darker, it was true, and guys made way when they saw him in the street.

I had a rough time of it when I tried to persuade my father to accept one simple thing: I wanted him to hire Rosko to clean our wine barrels.

"That Rosko is pretty bullheaded," Dad said. "You know he's Stancho's son. Why have you chosen him?"

"Because Rosko will do a good job and because you'll pay him very little for it. His family is flat broke. His father's bakery went bust, and his mother cleans our neighbor's stables. As for Rosko's sister ... look at her. She looks more like a broom than a high school student."

"It's not that," Dad grumbled. "Tell me openly why you want that rascal Rosko to clean our wine barrels."

I had two brothers. Both of them were like the clayey land where the vines in our vineyard grew: when it was hot the clay cracked and you could thrust your whole arm into the crevice. My brothers' minds cracked just as easily, and Dad could shove anything into their heads. The two of them listened to him like calves. Dad knew I was not made of that clay.

I was the one who paid Dad's workers their wages and I checked how much each of them had earned. It made no difference if the fellow fawned over me, whispering, "Hey, you look sexy. You've no idea what I'll do to you if you meet me tonight in the park." Or he simply said, "You bitch."

One day, a worker mowed the meadow near our house and complained he was sick. It was too hot, he said. The sun was intolerable and he wanted to know if he could go home earlier.

"Yes, you can go," I said. "But don't come back tomorrow."

The worker said his nose would bleed and it bled.

“Galla, will you pay me for the work I did today before I go?” the man asked.

“Yes, I will. Come and take your money when everybody else does – at 9 pm.”

The man grumbled a string of obscenities under his breath and then put nettle leaves in his nose. It stopped bleeding and he took to mowing again, every now and then stuffing crushed nettles in his nostrils. After that day, the entire village referred to me as Nettles Galla, or Galla the viper. Vipers bred in our meadows as thick as motorcycle tires. So what? I wouldn't pay a guy who wouldn't work hard and made his nose bleed instead.

“You are tough like me,” my father said. “There's no blood under your skin. There is slate.”

I couldn't care less about the slate under my skin, but I reckoned it would be good the other folks knew about it. I liked it when guys made way for me when I rode my bicycle along the road, and I hated looking at men's backs. Let the guys turn their backs to their wives.

“So, Galla, you want Rosko to scrape and caulk our wine barrels?” Dad repeated, looking me in the eye. “No way. Rex and Buck (those were Dad's two dogs) gnawed through Rosko's father's pants when the bloody faker fainted in my vineyard. The next day the idiot came to thrash me with a stake. I was lucky. Buck and Rex saved my neck.”

“Rosko kicked our dogs real bad and busted their ribs,” my elder brother chimed in. “I paid the vet a fat bundle to cure them.”

“Rosko beat me at the disco!” my younger brother barked, frothing at the mouth. “I think he punctured the tire of my new Peugeot, too!” At that point he was on the verge of muttering a curse, but he took himself in hand. Dad hated it when my brothers cussed in his presence. “I'll pay two thugs to kick his ass the way he deserves.”

My mother sat silently at the table. When she heard about Rosko, she heaved a deep sigh. She was given to crying and she'd whimper over her cooking stove for no reason at all. Once I asked her, “What's wrong, Mom? What are you sniffing and sobbing for? We've got money, we've got plenty of food, and we hire guys to work for us. Here, take this handkerchief and blow your nose.”

“Galla, I'm not sure you are a good woman. I worry about you.”

“Don't,” I told her. “I'll be always okay. You can take my word for that.”

“Galla, I can scrape the wine barrels if you want me to,” my younger brother offered. He'd stoop to wiping the village beggar's snot. “Give Rosko the slip,” he advised me.

“I have taken a fancy to Rosko,” I said.

“No, you haven't” Dad said.

“Yes, I have,” I said. “I’ve already told him to come to our place. I’ll pay him fifty levs¹ per barrel.”

“What?” Dad thundered. Every time you told him you’d give a guy fifty levs to clean a wine barrel my father’s lumbago gave him big trouble. “You are out of your mind,” he declared at last. “I wouldn’t fork fifty levs to the Mayor if he came here and said he was willing to scrape my wine barrel.”

“Look here, Dad,” I said. “I’ll give Rosko my money, not yours.”

“No, you won’t,” Dad said.

I could hear Mom sigh in her chair.

“What was that sigh of yours for?” I asked her.

“Listen Galla,” she started. “Every time you fancy somebody, the poor guy leaves the village and moves to another part of the country.”

“I’m none the worse for my loss,” I said, and she once more heaved a deep sigh.

About a year ago, I fell for a young man. The worst part about it all was that the guy’s mother was my mom’s friend. The lad was suddenly crazy about me but I soon tired of him. He came day and night to my place “to shoot the breeze”, as he put it. After I said I didn’t want to see him, he took to drinking hard. His whole family moved to the town of Radomir, and my mother lost her friend.

“We won’t pay anybody fifty levs per barrel,” Dad declared.

“You won’t pay, but I will,” I said. “The barrels are big: a barrel of ours can hold the cow, the bucket in which you milk her and the stool on which you sit.”

“I strongly disapprove,” Dad muttered and thought hard. Finally he said, “Well, I’m going to give you enough rope to hang yourself.”

“A woman ready to give a guy fifty bucks to have him clean her wine barrels won’t hang herself,” I said. “You can count on that”.

“Even our dogs will have no respect for a woman who squanders money on men!” Dad growled.

“A woman who gives Rosko fifty bucks per barrel couldn’t care less about Rex and Buck,” I said. “The mutts still go with their tails between their legs at the sight of her shadow.”

You couldn’t imagine what happened when I visited Rosko’s place.

His father still had the scars that Rex’s and Buck’s fangs had dug in his arms, and Rosko wore the pants all patched up after my younger brother’s thugs kicked his ass. Rosko’s family was having bean soup for lunch when I entered their house. They froze the minute they saw me. It looked as though the food turned into sawdust in their mouths. His mother blew her nose; his father fidgeted and coughed. Rosko, however, didn’t bother to look up.

¹ Lev – Bulgarian monetary unit. One lev is equal to 69 Canadian cents.

“What do you want with us, Galla?” his mother said. “I wouldn’t poke my nose in an honest family’s affairs if I were you.” That woman had the gift of the gab. She rarely kept her mouth shut, I’ll grant her that. Dad was right: she was as noisy as a railway station. Well, she could be dead with all her noises for all I cared.

“Good afternoon, Aunt Dobra,” I said. “You look good today. But it’s not you I’d like to talk to.”

“I haven’t invited you to our place,” Rosko’s father remarked, his eyes gleaming viciously. I made up my mind: I’d buy top quality pork for Rex and Buck. The dogs deserved a reward for having bitten that boor.

“Uncle Stancho, you needn’t extend an invitation to me,” I said. “I’m not that important. You have an honest family, Uncle Stancho. I come to your home hat in hand. In fact, I come to have a word with Rosko.”

“You are not welcome here,” Rosko said as he gorged himself on his bean soup, his eyes intent on his bowl. I loved it when a guy’s family glared at me, the tattered linoleum floor the friendliest thing in sight. I simply adored that!

“Rosko, I’d like to put an end to our long-running feud,” I said. Every word I uttered felt like a knife I stuck in my own back. I bowed to them all, but that was something I could live with. “I’d like to make you an offer, Rosko.”

“You know where you can stick your offer,” he said.

“Why should you say that?” I said, sticking in another knife. “It’s true I’ve made mistakes, but I can correct them. The scales fell from my eyes and I realized I was wrong.” I tried to stare him down. “My family did the wrong thing to you and I am here to pay for it.”

They stared. I hoped the bean soup had scorched their stomachs. Well, I wouldn’t forget to buy Rex and Buck the best pork in the neighborhood. I never forgot insults; they remained in my bones the way the blood of the lambs stuck to the chopping-log after Dad killed them.

“What do you want?” Rosko’s father asked gruffly.

“I want nothing from you, Uncle Stancho,” I began. “Only a young man can do this job: it’s slimy and slippery, and the dregs have congealed at the bottom. One could slip and fall. Uncle Stancho, it upsets me to think of you having a broken leg, you know.”

“What’s slippery and slimy?” asked Dobra, the woman with the gift of the gab, her eyes clawing me. “Why should you speak about congealed dregs? We have nothing to do with the dregs. Or do you want us to clean your toilets?”

“By no means, Aunt Dobra! I clean my toilet myself. I need a professional hand at scraping wine barrels. We put the most precious thing we have in those barrels – our wine,” I explained carefully, watching her. “My father lives for that wine, you know. In the evenings, he drinks half a glass and doesn’t allow the rest of us to try it. That’s why I came to your place: I’d like to ask Rosko to come and scrape our barrels. I’d like him to prepare them for the new wine. He has both the guts and the skilful hands for the job, I think.”

“Who, me?” Rosko cried. “Why don’t you clean your own barrels, Nettles? Your poison is enough to disinfect all the wine-cellars in the district.”

“Rosko, if I could disinfect them, would I crawl to you for help? Would I trudge all the way to your house? You are the best for the job, Rosko. You can scrape the barrels in a way that will make the new wine swoop down over men like a kettle of hawks. You can make it smell like a pool in the river where naked girls swim.”

“It’s interesting you speak about naked girls,” the railway station woman croaked at me. “Why, Galla, perhaps you’ve come out as a girl-lover?”

“No, I haven’t, Aunt Dobra,” I said. “Everybody in these parts say my father’s wine makes men think of naked girls, especially when the guys have had too much.”

“Your wine makes me think of your father’s grave,” Rosko’s mother said, and the railways in her voice clanged. At that moment I imagined Rex and Buck chewing that pork I’d buy for them. Let the woman cackle on about graves until kingdom come.

“Hey, how much will you pay him per barrel?” Rosko’s father said, looking at me shrewdly. He tried hard to concentrate on his bean soup and appear lukewarm about my offer. Of course, he failed. His eyes were about to jump into my mouth.

“If she gives us less than twenty levs per barrel, I’ll set the dog on her right away,” Rosko’s mother said. “That’s exactly what Galla deserves.”

I knew their dog Pirin, the scraggy mongrel. The fur on his neck had fallen off, and the beast stank of ointments. Poor Pirin whined every time he saw my boots. I had kicked him a couple of times and I guess he’d never forget me.

“We needn’t talk about Pirin now,” I told Dobra. “Your son is the man I can do business with. I wish all of you well.”

“Well my foot!” Rosko’s father said, and scratched the scars on his arms. “Rosko won’t work for you if you pay him less than twenty-two levs per barrel.”

“Look here.” Rosko turned to me. “Can you see this pair of sandals by the door?”

“Yes, I can,” I answered.

“That’s good. Now go and bring the sandals to me. I want you to clean them before I finish my soup.”

If I hadn’t put so much energy in my project so far, I would have kicked his ass. Perhaps I’d even set fire to their barn with their two nanny-goats inside, and Pirin who slept like a log on the straw. I knew better than that. I had to put up with the flames and the poison that spewed from Rosko’s mouth. I wanted our wine redolent of skies and summer nights.

I brought Rosko the sandals. They were a sorry sight. Their straps were frayed, trodden. I left the pair in front of Rosko, watching his toes. They were covered with a layer of dust that was at least an inch thick.

“I want thirty levs per barrel,” Rosko declared. At that moment, his father choked on his own tongue. His mother was suddenly speechless. After a couple of seconds she banged a heavy fist on the table. I kept silent.

“Thirty levs per barrel and I want you to put the sandals on my feet,” Rosko said.

“Come on,” I thought to myself. “You’ve shoveled cow dung and chicken droppings onto trucks, you’ve dug heaps of manure and those heaps have been often taller than you, girl. Rosko’s dirty feet won’t frighten you.”

“I’ll give you forty levs per barrel, but I won’t put the sandals on your feet,” I said. I played a trump and hoped to win the game.

Rosko’s father poured a spoonful of soup onto the tablecloth instead of putting it in his mouth.

“Well done, son!” his mother shouted.

Their son, however, had a different opinion on the subject. I watched his blond hair. To be honest, I wasn’t much interested in it. I was watching the changes in his eyes, where stallions neighed and kicked, and sparks flew. I loved fighting stallions and sparks in a guy’s eyes.

“Twenty five levs per barrel, but you’ll put the sandals on my feet for me!” Rosko said, his eyes ablaze.

“Are you crazy?” the railway station roared to her son. “Her father, the nasty squirt, has more than thirty barrels. We’ll lose heaps of money! You might as well be hung for a sheep as for a lamb and—”

“Shut up, woman! Your son is speaking,” Rosko’s father cut her short. “I’m proud of you, my boy! Let Nettles bow down before you and put the sandals on your feet!”

I bent forward to pick up the sandals. If you scraped the dust from Rosko’s feet and collected it, it could fill their bungalow halfway to the roof. I didn’t look at the dust, though. I concentrated on his legs, I stroked his ankles, and I did that very gently. Then I caressed his toes, although I couldn’t see clearly which toe I touched: the dust was so thick.

“What are you doing, viper?” Rosko shouted. Wasn’t I surprised! I thought he’d smile at me, but what did he do? He called me names instead.

“Can’t you see what I’m doing? Your feet are covered with mud and grime. You haven’t washed them since you trod on well-rotted manure in your cowshed last week.”

“We don’t have a cowshed. I’ve been ploughing the fields.”

“Never mind. I thought I could wipe your feet first. Otherwise, you’ll make your sandals dirty.”

“Let your father know one thing, Nettles,” Rosko’s mother barked. “If the squirt harms a hair on my son’s head while he’s working for you, I’ll, well ...” The woman gnashed her teeth. “I’ll trap him and I’ll flay him alive.”

“Nettles is much worse than her father!” Rosko’s father chipped in. “Nettles, if your brothers pester my son, I’ll cut their noses off. Do I make myself clear?”

“Uncle Stancho, listen. I’d like to offer you something. I’ll stay in your house while Rosko scrapes the barrels. I’ll be held hostage. Aunt Dobra and I will sit in the kitchen, talking. ”

“Talking? To you? I can’t stand you,” the woman said.

“Why not?” Rosko’s father said. “Let her stay in our kitchen and Rosko will be safe enough. She’ll pay him in the evening. He scrapes, let’s say, three barrels, she gives him the money. Fair’s fair. Then your wine will smell of naked girls, Nettles.” He spat on the linoleum.

“Fair’s fair,” I agreed. “Short reckonings make long friends. One should always be honest with people.”

“As honest as vipers can be,” Rosko’s father remarked.

“She could be as mad as a hatter for all I care,” his mother said smugly. “The important thing is she’ll pay. She can go jump in the lake after that.”

“Give me an advance of ten levs,” Rosko said suddenly. “I want ten levs now.”

I had a hundred lev bill in my pocket but I never offered anybody an advance. I hated doing that.

“I have no penny to bless myself with,” I said. “And I tell you the truth.”

“Then leave your sweatshirt here. I’ll take it instead of an advance,” his mother said.

“I’m ready to give you my sweatshirt, Aunt Dobra, but I have no clothes under it. I’ll have to go back home naked,” I said.

“I don’t give a damn about you naked or not,” Rosko declared. “Leave your shoes here. You can go back home barefoot.”

I took off my shoes and left them in front of his mother.

“Rosko, you come tomorrow at 6 am to my father’s wine-cellar,” I said. “So long.” I took the narrow road home, which ran parallel to the river.

Never in my life had my feet touched softer dust. I had never been so happy since the day in my childhood when Dad bought me a kite. I had worked hard for it. I sold all our lettuce at the marketplace in Pernik at a price twice higher than the one Dad had set. I remembered I felt like a million dollars: quite a crowd thronged to buy my merchandise. I could sell those guys nettles instead of lettuce. It was not the profits that made me happy. I was walking on air because I saw the way the guys looked at me. If a woman couldn’t sell her merchandise at a good price then she’d better go and clean her cattle-shed while I sold lettuce to her husband.

On the following day I went to my father’s wine-cellar. I knew Rosko was there. I immediately picked out the barrel in which he worked. The sounds of his scraping made the air in the room bristle.

“Rosko,” I said. He didn’t answer me.

My workers arrived as dawn broke and I gave each one of them a fiver.

"It's my birthday today," I lied to them. "Go and drink a beer to my health. You can drink some yellow brandy, too. Don't come back before noon."

The yellow brandy was most abominable, indeed. I suspected Dad brewed it from rotten tomatoes. I sold the concoction at daybreak when the night shift workers came back to the village on their jangling bus.

"The viper has put on a dress that hides nothing of her," someone said. I couldn't care less. The yellow brandy sold like hot cakes. They ogled me and they leered at me. I didn't try to stop them. What the hell! Their eyes couldn't bite my skin sore, could they?

"Rosko, can you hear me?" I shouted.

He stopped scraping. It occurred to me he had stopped smelling of cows. I wondered how, knowing that even the roof tiles in their house smelled of cows.

"Rosko, can you hear me?"

"What do you want?" He didn't stop working with his chisel.

"Stop scraping, please. I'd like to make you an offer."

He scraped on assiduously.

"Rosko, will you marry me?"

I couldn't tell you what happened exactly. Perhaps he dropped the hammer and it hit his toe, or he simply stomped around the bottom of the barrel. If my father was here, he'd give Rosko a piece of his mind. Dad hated it when somebody ruined his wine barrels.

"Now Rosko, try to concentrate and don't drop the hammer on your toes again," I advised him. "If you marry me, I'll make Dad give you the wine-cellar." It was so quiet that I could hear the sun crawl on the roof tiles. "If the cellar is not enough for you, I'll give you the two stallions: Whitey and Black, you know them. They are mine and I can give them to anyone I want."

"Go away!" he thundered from inside the barrel, and his hammer and chisel went to work again.

"Calm down, please. You'll ruin the barrel and then Dad will shoot you with his gun. Even I'll do that if you ruin that barrel."

"Go away, snake!" Rosko roared.

"Does that mean yes?" I asked him. "I didn't quite get your meaning."

"I won't marry you even if your father gave me the wine cellar, the smithy, the wheat fields, Whitey and Black, his car and the bed he sleeps in."

"Are you sure?" I asked. "I don't make an offer like that every day."

"Listen what, you cow! You are lucky I am in the barrel. If I wasn't, I'd slap you across the face. Do I make myself clear now?"

He did, and if he wasn't in the barrel, I'd spray my hair conditioner in his eyes. It was true I was good at enduring insults, but I wasn't that good. Rosko's luck was up today. I imagined the stallions fighting in his eyes and I saw the sparks fly under their hooves. I thought to myself, "You don't know me, Rosko. I'll show you."

“Okay,” I said, taking myself in hand. “You are unwilling to marry me, I understand. Wouldn’t you like to kiss me at least? I sent all the workers to the pub and gave them money for two gallons of yellow brandy. There’s no one in the cellar but you and me.”

“What?” His hammer hit the bottom of the barrel with a dull thud.

“Look,” I said, “if you drop anything in that barrel once again, I’ll dump a bucket of slops onto your head. I have the bucket ready at hand. What would you say to my proposal?”

“Every time I look at you I feel like puking.”

“It’s dark in the barrel. You couldn’t look at me even if you wanted to,” I said. “In case you can see in the dark, I’ll blindfold you. What do you say to that?”

I didn’t wait for his answer.

I had prepared a ladder beforehand; Dad and my brothers used it when they thrashed the big walnut tree behind the sheep pen. Rosko had used that ladder, too, to climb up and get into the barrel.

“Go chase yourself!” he called out.

“It’s too late,” I said.

I clambered up the ladder and jumped into the barrel. Rosko tried hard to protect himself. He put up his hands to ward me off, then violently pushed and jostled me. It was impossible to shove me out. A barrel, unlike a bus, had no doors, so he couldn’t kick me out.

There was another thing: I was good at loving guys. It was as easy as shelling peas and selling lettuce at the marketplace in Pernik. The night shift workers called me “grass snake” and “Nettles”, but they drank gallons of my yellow brandy all the same. I could sell any man the dust his wife had collected in her vacuum cleaner while she hoovered the kitchen floor.

“Go away! Go oh ... away aw ... Oh!” Rosko could say no more.

I did the most natural thing to him. I kissed him. In the beginning, Rosko tried to repulse my attacks, but soon he became aware that I wished him well. He calmed down and let me do what I had planned. It felt good. It felt fabulous, and I liked it the way I liked the silver kite Dad had bought me in my childhood. The barrel felt warmer than the dust on the road the other day. I was so happy I stroked the staves twice although they were grimy with the dregs.

“My God!” Rosko whispered.

I saw him stroke the barrel, too.

“Do you want me to blindfold you?” I asked him.

“Yes,” he said

“But I’ll have to tear my blouse. Will you buy me a new one?”

“Uh-uh.”

“What does that mean: “yes” or “no”?”

“I’ll buy two blouses for you, you cow!”

“What? What did you call me? ‘Cow’?”

I was convinced cows were good-natured and noble animals. If Rosko had called me “snake”, I wouldn’t have taken offence. I was a snake in the grass and I couldn’t do anything about it

Even when we were in the sixth grade, I noticed how Rosko’s eyes gleamed beautifully. He used to walk home after school and I followed him, heaving deep sighs. I loved Rosko so much I thought I’d die for him. Fifteen years later, I knew love was not love if it made a girl die for a guy or trot after him like a horse. Love happened best in a wine barrel: the guy cleaned the dregs and scraped the staves for you, and besides, he wasn’t able to kick you out because, as I mentioned before, a barrel has no doors.

“It was great! Oh boy!” Rosko breathed.

“It was not a boy, it was me,” I told him.

He said again, “Oh boy! Oh boy!” an hour later, and soon after that I climbed out of the barrel.

“Look here,” I said as I reached for the bucket of slops I had prepared beforehand in case he kept on calling me names. “Rosko, there are many more barrels to scrape. I’ll bring you boiled eggs, honey and sausages in the morning. That sort of food will make you very strong. I know that from experience. You remember Petarcho? That was the guy who took to drinking after he broke up with me.”

“You’ve got a nerve speaking about Petarcho, cow!” Rosko thundered from inside of the barrel.

I had given a pledge that if he called me once again the name of that useful animal, I’d pour the slops on his head, and so I did. I ran the risk of ruining Dad’s reputation of a vintner: his wine might lose its fragrance of naked girls. It could acquire a different smell.

“I’ll kill you!” Rosko shouted then took to swearing. In these parts, we believed that if a man didn’t cuss, he was seriously ill.

“Rosko, be careful,” I warned him. “I’ll drop another bucket onto your head.” “Cow slut!”

I didn’t hesitate for a moment. I hurled the empty bucket at him and left the wine cellar, its thick stone walls muffling the sound of his voice. That was good, for I wasn’t that keen on being told what kind of a bitch I was.

On the following morning, I slipped into the next wine barrel. My father had marked the thing with a white cross, so Rosko knew which barrel he was to scrape that day. At 7 am he crept into my barrel, not suspecting I was waiting for him.

At a certain point, both of us must have fallen asleep right there – sprawled full length across the bottom of the barrel, the boiled eggs and the sausages I had brought scattered around us.

“Son! Son, you look done in! You’ll become a hard drinker! That Nettles bitch! She’s already ruined Petarcho ...” I was awoken by a string of raucous, wild shouts. Rosko stirred by my side.

Somebody was shining flashlights and lanterns in our faces. I saw my father, clutching the big petroleum lamp with which he illuminated the room for the newborn colts in the stable. I saw Rosko's mother, too. She played the powerful torch over the two of us. I remembered I had seen her carry that torch when she came back from work at night, climbing up the hill to their house.

"She'll ruin him for sure, that bitch!" That was Stancho, growling. His voice sounded far away from our cozy barrel.

"Stancho, wait a minute!" my father yelled.

"Hey, squirt!" Rosko's mother yelled back. "I hope you'll fork over enough money to make us keep our mouths shut about what we saw. Why should we wait for you?"

"Wait for me to bring my gun to shoot you and your husband with," my father said. "You've just called my only daughter a bitch. I could hear that clearly."

"She is a bitch all right!"

"Dobra," my father said calmly. "Don't forget one thing: I'll make you pay for the bullets I'll shoot through your ass. Mark my words."

"She's a bitch! Yes, she is a bitch!" Dobra insisted.

Rosko hid his chest with my skirt. His skin glistened like a wet quince in the light of my father's petroleum lamp

Suddenly Rosko sat up and shouted, "She's not a bitch! Galla is the most kind-hearted girl I have ever met!"

"What?" they all roared in unison.

"What did you say?" Dad muttered.

"I ..." Rosko started. At that moment, I wasn't looking at him, but I knew that the stallions kicked and jumped in his eyes, and sparks flew under their hooves. These were magnificent sparks. I was sure they could set fire to the wine cellar.

The flashlights and the lamps burned in my eyes, making me itch all over. But I felt like a million dollars. No one had ever said I was the most kind-hearted girl he knew in the world.

"I can't live without her!" Rosko yelled.

The wine barrel thundered so powerfully that the iron hoops, which kept it bound together, shook and pealed like church bells. Dad, or maybe Rosko's father, had given them a kick.