

The woman was right. Leiba was really ill.

Night had fallen. For a long time Leiba had been sitting, listening by the doorway which gave on to the passage.

What is that?

Indistinct sounds came from the distance--horses trotting, the noise of heavy blows, mysterious and agitated conversations. The effort of listening intently in the solitude of the night sharpens the sense of hearing: when the eye is disarmed and powerless, the ear seems to struggle to assert its power.

But it was not imagination. From the road leading hither from the main road came the sound of approaching horses. Leiba rose, and tried to get nearer to the big door in the passage. The door was firmly shut by a heavy bar of wood across it, the ends of which ran into holes in the wall. At his first step the sand scrunching under his slippers made an indiscreet noise. He drew his feet from his slippers, and waited in the corner. Then, without a sound that could be heard by an unexpectant ear, he went to the door in the corridor, just as the riders passed in front of it at walking pace. They were speaking very low to each other, but not so low but that Leiba could quite well catch these words:

"He has gone to bed early."

"Supposing he has gone away?"

"His turn will come; but I should have liked----"

No more was intelligible; the men were already some way away.

To whom did these words refer? Who had gone to bed or gone away? Whose turn would come another time? Who would have liked something? And what was it he wanted? What did they want on that by-road--a road only used by anyone wishing to find the inn?

An overwhelming sense of fatigue seemed to overcome Leiba.

"Could it be Gheorghe?"

Leiba felt as if his strength was giving way, and he sat down by the door. Eager thoughts chased each other through his head, he could not think clearly or come to any decision.

Terrified, he re-entered the inn, struck a match, and lighted a small petroleum lamp.

It was an apology for a light; the wick was turned so low as to conceal the flame in the brass receiver; only by means of the opening round the receiver could some of the vertical shafts of light penetrate into a gloom that was like the darkness of death--all the same it was sufficient to enable him to see well into the familiar corners of the inn. Ah! How much less is the difference between the sun and the tiniest spark of light than between the latter and the gloom of blindness.

The clock on the wall ticked audibly. The monotonous sound irritated Leiba. He put his hand over the swinging pendulum, and stayed its movement.

His throat was parched. He was thirsty. He washed a small glass in a three-legged tub by the side of the bar and tried to pour some good brandy out of a decanter; but the mouth of the decanter began to clink loudly on the edge of the glass. This noise was still more irritating. A second attempt, in spite of his effort to conquer his weakness, met with no greater success.