



IVAN FRANKO

**DOWN AND OUT IN
DROHOBYCH**

G L A G O S L A V P U B L I C A T I O N S



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DROHOBYCH**

**UKRAINIAN
//III BOOK
INSTITUTE**

This book has been published with the support
of the Translate Ukraine Translation Program

DOWN AND OUT IN DROHOBYCH

by Ivan Franko

Translated from the Ukrainian by Yuri Tkacz

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Proofreading by Stephen Dalziel

Cover image © Max Mendor 2024

English translation © Glagoslav Publications 2024

Book cover and interior book design by Max Mendor

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www.glagoslav.com

ISBN: 978-1-80484-180-8

ISBN: 978-1-80484-181-5

Published in English by Glagoslav Publications in November 2024

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

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TRANSLATED FROM THE UKRAINIAN BY YURI TKACZ

GLAGOSLAV PUBLICATIONS



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(1856 – 1916)

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LITTLE MYRON

I

Little Myron was a peculiar child. His father took great delight in him, often proclaiming him to be exceptionally intelligent. But then a father can be partial, especially one such as Myron's. He was an older man who had eagerly awaited the birth of his child, and any child would have been considered precious to him, regardless of their actual abilities. The neighbours quietly whispered among themselves that Myron was 'not quite like other children'. He would walk around gesturing wildly, muttering to himself, picking up a stick and swishing it through the air, deadheading weeds. With other children, he was shy and unassertive. And when he did speak up, his words were so peculiar that older folks merely shrugged their shoulders in response.

"Vasyl," little Myron said to little Vasyl, "what's the biggest number you can count to?"

"Me? And what number am I supposed to count to? Five, seven, parkateen."

"Parkateen! Ha-ha-ha! And how much is parkateen?"

"How much is it meant to be? I have no idea!"

"Well, it means nothing at all. Sit down with me and we'll count together!"

Vasyl sat down, and Myron began to count, tapping a stick on the ground as he uttered each number: "One, two, three, four..."

Vasyl listened for a while, then got up and ran off. Myron didn't even notice: he sat there, tapping away and counting on and on. Along came old man Riabyna, coughing, clearing his throat, and sighing. But Myron was oblivious to him, he was in his own world. The old man stopped nearby and listened... Myron had already reached four hundred.

"Ah, you little imp, you!" the old man uttered in his usual slightly nasal voice. "What are you up to here?"

Startled, little Myron looked up at Riabyna with frightened eyes.

"You're beating the holy earth there, eh? Don't you know that the earth is our mother? Give me that stick!"

Myron handed him the stick, not quite understanding what the old man wanted from him. Riabyna flung the stick into the nettles. Myron almost cried, not so much because of the stick, but because the old man had interrupted his counting.

"Run off home and say the Lord's Prayer before you start causing any more trouble!" said the old man sternly and he shuffled off. Myron watched him go for a long time, unable to understand why the old man was angry or what he had wanted of him.

II

Little Myron loved nothing more than running alone through the green meadows festooned with flowers, among the broad leaves of burdock and the fragrant wild chamomile. He delighted in the sweet scent of dew-covered clover and revelled in being covered from head to toe in sticky burdock burrs. And then there was the stream, which one had to cross to reach the pasture. Nestled in the hills, it was small and tranquil, with steep rugged banks, a clay bottom, and gurgling shallows paved with small stone blocks overgrown with soft weed, its long silky strands resembling green hair. The river

was magical and Myron was drawn to it. He loved to sit there for hours on end, nestled in the tall green grass or among the dense leafy undergrowth of the riverbank. He would sit and gaze into the rippling water, at the flickering grass swaying in the current, at the small fish that occasionally darted out of their hollows or emerged from deeper pools, scooting along the bottom, chasing water insects, then poking their blunt, whiskered heads out of the water, grabbing a mouthful of air, before disappearing into their hiding places, as if they had just tasted some rare tidbit. Meanwhile, the sun beat down from the cloudless blue sky, warming Myron's shoulders and his entire body, but the leafy cover shielded him from its harsh rays. He enjoyed this. His small grey eyes darted about, his childish forehead became wrinkled as thoughts began to stir in his mind.

'Now look at the sun above,' he thought, 'why is it so small, when daddy claims it's very big? There's probably just a little hole cut out in the sky for it, so you can't see all of it!'

But then another thought began to stir in his head:

'But how can that be? There's a small hole where it rises, and another one where it sets. So does the hole travel along with the sun across the sky?'

This became too much for him to comprehend, and he promised himself that as soon as he got home, he would ask his dad what kind of hole had been cut out in the sky for the sun?

"Myron! Myron!" he heard someone calling from afar. It was his mother. Myron jumped up and dashed along the riverbank to the shallow crossing, but then suddenly stopped. He had crossed the river many times before, and nothing had happened, but now he noticed something different. He was standing facing the sun, staring into the water, and instead of the usual shallow water, pebbles, and soft green strands of weed, he saw an extremely deep blue stretch of water. He didn't understand that the sky was being reflected from the

water, and he stopped. How could he venture into such deep water? And where had it appeared from all of a sudden? He stood and carefully examined the depths. Everything was the same. He squatted. Yes, everything was the same, except that near the bank he could see the familiar pebbles, and hear the usual murmur of the water in the shallows. He turned away from the sun: the deep water disappeared and the crossing was shallow once more. This discovery both reassured and surprised him. He began to turn in all directions, trying to understand, and marvelled at this strange phenomenon. And he completely forgot that his mother had called him!

Little Myron stood there for a long time, sometimes bending down, sometimes turning around, but still unable to bring himself to venture into the water. It seemed to him that at any moment, amid the shallow pebbly crossing, the earth would open up and a bottomless blue pit would appear in the stream, and he would fly headlong into the depths, disappearing like a twig thrown into a deep dark well. Who knows how long he would have stood there at the crossing, had the neighbour Martyn not appeared, on his way with his forks and rakes to the hayfield.

“Why are you standing here? Your mum’s been calling you. Why aren’t you heading home?”

“I want to, but I’m scared.”

“Of what?”

“Look there!” and he pointed to the bottomless deep blue water. Martyn did not understand.

“What’s there to be scared of? It’s shallow water.”

“Shallow?” Myron asked sceptically. “But look how deep it is!”

“Deep? It’s not deep at all,” retorted Martyn and, without removing his moccasins, made his way across the river, barely getting his feet wet. This emboldened Myron, and he crossed to the other side and ran home uphill through the garden.

“What a foolish boy! Five years old and still afraid of crossing the river,” muttered the neighbour as he set off to deal with his mown hay.

III

When all the adults had left the house in summer to work in the fields, Myron stayed behind, but not inside the house. He was afraid of being indoors. Afraid of the ‘old men in the corners’, meaning the shadows, afraid of the bulging chimney, black inside from soot, afraid of the rough wooden hook embedded in the trapdoor in the ceiling, so that it could be propped open to allow smoke to escape from the burning kindling used to provide light in the house in winter. Myron remained outside. There he could play, pick plants and divide them up, build little houses with twigs and sticks from the woodpile, or just lie on his back and bask in the sun, gazing into the blue yonder and listening to the chirping of sparrows in the young apple trees. He enjoyed this, until a cloud seemed to pass across his childish forehead as another thought crossed his mind.

‘What allows people to see things? The sky, the plants, mummy and daddy?’ The question popped into his head out of nowhere. ‘And what allows people to hear things? The screech of a hawk, the clucking of hens... What allows me to hear these sounds?’

It seemed to him that people used their mouths to see and hear. He opened his mouth and there it was: he could see and hear everything...

‘Maybe not! Maybe people use their eyes?’

He closed his eyes tightly. There, he couldn’t see a thing. He opened them – he could see and hear. He closed them again – he couldn’t see, but he could hear this time.

Aha, so that’s how it worked! You could see with your eyes, but how did you hear? Once more he opened and closed his

mouth – he could hear. Then he closed and opened his eyes – he could hear everything. Suddenly he had a thought – what if he tried poking his fingers into his ears. There was a rustling sound. What was that? He could hear the rustling, but not the clucking of the hens or the screech of the hawk. He pulled his fingers out – he could hear the clucking, but not the rustling sound. He repeated this with the same result.

‘What can this be?’ Myron thought to himself. ‘Aha, I know now! With my ears I hear the clucking, and with my fingers – the rustling sound! Of course!’

He tried it again and again – yes, that was exactly the way it was!

And when the reapers came back to have lunch, he raced up to his father, skipping with excitement.

“Daddy, Daddy! I know something!”

“What is it, my child?”

“I know that people see with their eyes.”

A smile played on his father’s face.

“And they hear clucking with their ears, and rustling sounds with their fingers.”

“What, what?”

“Yes, just like that! If you don’t poke your fingers into your ears, you can hear the hens clucking, but if you do, you only hear a rustling noise.”

His father burst out laughing, while his mother glared sternly at Myron and, waving a wooden spoon at him, declared:

“Go, you little troublemaker! You’re big enough to have been married off already, and yet you talk such nonsense? Why don’t you ever think before you blurt something out...? Of course, people hear everything with their ears! Both the noise and the clucking.”

“But why can’t you hear both at the same time? Why can you hear the clucking only when you don’t cover your ears, and when you do, you hear the rustling noise?” the boy asked.

“Here, try it!” And to convince her, he poked his fingers into his ears.

His mother mumbled something, but she was unable to find an answer to the question.

IV

Myron’s biggest problem was with thinking! He just couldn’t think properly, and that was that. Whatever he said was always somehow not right, not as it should be, and his mother or other people would say to him:

“Dingbat, why don’t you think before you speak, instead of flailing about like a fisherman striking the water with his oars!”

But no matter how hard poor Myron struggled to gather his thoughts and come up with something smart to say, he just couldn’t manage it. Eventually Myron came to the conclusion that he simply was unable to think!

Once, the whole family was sitting down to a meal around a large table in the middle of the room. His mother was serving cabbage. It was a delicious cabbage dish, with bacon and it even had cooked grain mixed in. Everyone was eating in silence. Little Myron took a couple of bites, then noticed how quiet it had become in the house, not a peep from anyone. Out of the blue, he felt that it was up to him to say something. But what? He needed to think things through first, or else everyone would laugh, and his mother might even scold him. What should he say? And little Myron began to think hard. His spoon, as he moved it from the bowl to his mouth, suddenly froze in mid-air along with his hand. His eyes stared into empty space, then became inadvertently fixed on the Mother of God icon hanging on the wall. His lips began to move, as if he was whispering something.

The servants noticed this. They glanced at one another, nudged each other with their elbows, and the maid even whispered to old Ivan:

“Watch out, he’s about to blurt out some nonsense.”

“Heaven only knows,” Myron began slowly, “why the Holy Mother keeps looking and looking, but never eats any of this cabbage...?”

Poor Myron, despite his struggle, couldn’t come up with anything better, perhaps because he was trying so hard to think ‘like people’.

There was laughter, he was ridiculed, and the usual reprimand from his mother left poor Myron in tears.

“I’m sorry, I just can’t think like other people!” he said, as he wiped away his tears.

V

What will become of this boy? What kind of flower will bloom from this little bud? It is not hard to foresee. One can come across quite a few such unique people in our villages. From a young age they are quite different to other people in the way they walk, their looks and the cut of their hair, together with their speech and actions. If such a child spends their life in the confines of a thatched village house, without being exposed to wider experiences, without obtaining a clearer knowledge, and if from a young age their narrow-minded relatives begin to inculcate in them a need to act ‘as other people do’, the child’s innate inclination toward being unique will simply be suppressed. All the unused and thwarted abilities of the child will wither and die in the bud, and those like little Myron will grow into poor farmers, or worse still, their unfulfilled vivacity and energetic character will push them toward the dark side – they will become bullies, sorcerers who believe in their own phantoms, and they will confuse others with their sincere heart.

But if such a child encounters a loving and broad-minded father who wants to provide his child a window into the world and is prepared to go the extra mile, then what?

Do you think the child's fate will be better, as most people would understand this? Hardly! In school, the child will grasp at knowledge at an astonishing rate, imbibing it like a sick person would fresh air, and end up enthralled by the truths of science and a burning desire to apply them to life. Little Myron will then become a fervent preacher of such truths, bringing them like a candle among the dark and the oppressed, into village homes... In any case, an enviable fate would not await him! He would curse both prison walls and dungeons, denouncing the violence men perpetrate against men, and would end up either perishing somewhere in poverty, solitude, and degradation in some attic, or behind bars. He would carry the seeds of some deadly disease that would prematurely drive him into the grave or, having lost faith in lofty truths, he would start to drown his despair in liquor. Poor little Myron...!

1879

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ivan Franko (1856–1916) was a prominent Ukrainian poet, writer, journalist, and social activist. Born in a small village in Galicia, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and now Ukraine, Franko emerged as a leading figure in Ukrainian literature and cultural revival during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Franko's literary career began with poetry, where he expressed his deep love for his homeland and its people. His works often touched on themes of social justice and the plight of the Ukrainian peasantry. He also contributed significantly to the development of modern Ukrainian literature, introducing innovative literary forms and styles.

Beyond his literary pursuits, Franko actively engaged in political and social activism, fighting for the recognition of the Ukrainian language, culture, and education. He co-founded and edited several Ukrainian newspapers and journals, using them as platforms to promote his ideas.

Franko's contributions extended beyond literature and politics. He was an accomplished translator, bringing the works of many Western European authors to Ukrainian readers. Additionally, his plays and novels, such as *Zakhar Berkut* and 'Stolen Happiness' remain staples of Ukrainian literature.

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

Born in a working-class suburb of Melbourne, Australia in 1954, Yuri Tkacz grew up speaking no English until he entered school. A warm love for Ukraine and its literature led him to abandon his profession as an engineer, and in 1979 he began to translate Ukrainian authors into English full-time. His published translations include works by a diverse group of authors, such as Igor Kaczurowskyj, Oles Honchar, Anatoly Dimarov, Valeriy Shevchuk, Sergij Kariuk, Volodymyr Vynnychenko, Yuri Yanovsky and Borys Antonenko-Davydovych. He lived and worked in Canada in the early 1980s and in Ukraine in the early 1990s, but has now returned to Melbourne. His translations of *Hardly Ever Otherwise* by Maria Matios, *Hard Times* by Ostap Vyshnia, *The Lawyer from Lychakiv Street* by Andriy Kokotiukha, *Precursor* by Vasyl Shevchuk and *Boryslav in Flames* by Ivan Franko have all been published by Glagoslav Publications.

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And more forthcoming . . .

Many of the stories in this volume deal with the life of a young boy growing up in Galicia, in the far east of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the mid-1800s. They depict the poverty and difficult conditions in the region at that time. Although autobiographical in nature, Ivan Franko wrote that the stories could not unreservedly be considered a part of his autobiography, because in all of them he had allowed himself a fair amount of creative freedom.

Franko's stories often deal with people's struggles with their own conscience, agonizing over the morality of their actions. From those of a young boy having killed a bird, to those of a prisoner having killed a cellmate.

After his second arrest for his strident socialist views in 1880, Franko wrote the deeply psychological novella "Down and Out in Boryslav" in one night under extremely difficult conditions. In it he showed how different people reacted to being unjustly incarcerated.

From the torment imposed on children by Catholic schools of the time to the inner monologue of a burglar being punished by his victim, when reading Franko's prose, one has the stark impression of a director's movie camera shooting scene after scene.

The interests and aspirations of the common people were the cause to which Ivan Franko devoted all of his many and varied talents. Throughout his literary career his creative effort was invariably focused on working-class people and their struggle for a better future.

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