

Oh dear, my wee God, Marie calls, as if something is getting under her feet.

Let that guy alone, he's got to sleep now, says Krönert. And turns over in the cow shed and says: Seeing as he's kept an eye on me the whole night. And Schipporeit stands in the door, very much in a boozier's contentment, and sings: Put Satan's fierce assaults to flight.

A morning conversation, Schipporeit recounts further. Oh my goodness, Marie calls, now just listen. Krönert says: Let him sleep now, man, that guy can't find any peace and quiet at all, first keeping an eye on me the whole night, and not even any peace now.

I comes by Naussedén, everything quiet, I turns on to the highway, in a flash two men are on the road, one up front to the horses,

the other with me. Why waste words, I got the wagon stanchion lying there, I bashes him one on the head with it. Already wanted to jump up, then he falls back, you can just picture it: as dark as up your ass hole, right and left, woods. Then I whistles — Schipporeit whistles, that piercing gypsy whistle with the slur back and front — the horses are off, dunno where the guy's got to. And at Vieberneit's barn, as I comes by there, sits the old woman Varszus, clasping a grave-stone. I says: Hey you, now — the night? She shouts: I'm just resting. Sits there, clings to the stone.

Oh that one, says Marie, the red one.

And then up comes the thunderstorm, says Schipporeit, I sees it coming over the Jura, not straight over, it goes towards the bridge, thins out real fine and comes over the bridge, nose high, as is fittin', now it's on our side, thickens up again. But it's still doing a pretty good job of holding the rain in.

Now that's enough, says Krönert, so much bull so early in the morning.

But Krönert old man, the red stone, you know?

Oh yeah, says Krönert, she's schlepped it up *again*. That old woman creepin' roun', at night, with the stone.

I'll drive by afterwards and bring it back, says Schipporeit. Yes, do that, says Marie.

And what's gonna happen to the cows, asks Krönert.

What's going to happen to the cows?

The stone is lying in front of Lina Varszus' house, red, a red stone, a cross, but yet more a block because the arms are just hinted at and the head piece too. They protrude only two fingers broad, too little's been hewn away, on the right and on the left and above and below. This red cross, this stone for seven children, died of diphtheria in one week, in the same year the father drowned, Skaliks, that was the family's name, no one there anymore. The floods came once and burrowed about till it was underneath the stone. But nothing there anymore.

Krönert shoveled in the hole, with sand. It was none of his business. And old woman Varszus fetched the stone again for the fourth time.

Schipporeit — to resume — says: Whoa, the horses stop short. There's the stone lying in front of the door. Where is Lina?

Come on out, says Schipporeit.

Hermann deary, says Lina Varszus, the old girl is sitting in her parlor, in front of her earthen pot full of spirits. Hermann deary.

But Hermann Schipporeit doesn't hear that, outside on the wagon. Hermann deary.

So get down, towards the door, the stone is heavy, a left heave, set it upright, there it's standing, the chunk. Like the Gustabalde, says Schipporeit, there comes Lina Varszus out of the house.

Leave that thing here, Hermann deary, says Lina Varszus.

Buzz off, says Schipporeit.

And what's going to happen to the cows?

The cows are lying in Mahnke's shed, ten head of cattle, the water drips off their hides. Along the top of their butter-soft backs. The milk-blue eyes, good heavens, hard and black as pitch. In Mahnke's shed, at Vieberneit's where else?

Hermann deary, but you know! says Lina Varszus.

Old hag, says Schipporeit, the stone belongs in the cemetery.

And what's going to happen to the cows?

It's one of those days. Gray and dull-yellow. Like brittle ice. When it cracks the floes become white because the water emerges now and is all black. One of those days. And everything wet from the thunderstorm, which came from the bridge unscathed as far as the village, but then cracked open after all, in this direction and that, a couple of bolts into the river, then it was a heavy rain, till about five.

There the sky was flinging water and

didn't stop at all, and still didn't wash itself shiny, not itself and not the day, not even the edge of the woods along the village, not even Staschull's garden, not even the blackberries along the river.

I don't want to see that, says Schipporeit. Ah come on in, I'll show you.

In the parlor Schipporeit says: You could open the shutters. But the old woman draws him to the spirits pot. It's full almost to the brim, and bands are stretched over it, cross-wise, in which the snakes are bound, right behind their heads, they stand out above the brim of the pot.

Poison vipers, you can see the markings.

Another four days, says Lina Varszus.

That much Schipporeit knows himself: Then the snakes have turned quite light. For six weeks they've been hanging in the spirits and sweating out all their poison. Then they're buried. And the spirits are sprinkled in the sheds, and a couple of cows kick the bucket, and a couple get up again, and the epidemic is over. Some time or other it'll come again. So that's the business with the cows. And what about the stone?

Then the spirits are carried over there. Even held a while above it.

But the stone is a cross, isn't it?

Yeah, just barely a cross, if not a very distinct one. They sure didn't take much pain

with this stone. And the color, where are there red stones here?

The Gustabalde is also red. It stands on the road to Sommerau, a thick, flattened-off stone, which a couple of rills have been driven into, nose and mouth, the navel and over the whole body a circular line. A heathen stone. That one's from a long time ago, Schipporeit knows.

And this stone, this cross?

Well we know after all where it's from. From the cemetery.

And I'm taking it back, says Hermann Schipporeit. You people and your nonsense!

Another four days, says Lina Varszus.

Schipporeit rushes off in the wagon, home, there the cows are sick. Well for all I care, four more days.

Are you givin' it now or aren't you, says Vieberneit. Just another four days, says Lina Varszus.

Dammit I'm not going to have my cattle croak on me, says Vieberneit. At least just another three days, says Lina Varszus. I mean you've gotta wait.

Like hell I will, says Vieberneit quietly and in a flash is at the pot and rips off the bands. Vieberneit!

Old hag, shouts Vieberneit and shakes off the woman and thrusts her against the oven. And there she lies.

Vieberneit, don't! Just another three days.

Lina Varszus raises herself. The dirty dog. And stays crouched where she had lain. And Vieberneit's gone out, with the pot. Who knows, the stone is after all still lying in front of the door. But it shan't work, it shan't, let them croak, if that's what he wants. The dog, the dirty dog.

The old woman sits there till nearly evening. Her hair over her forehead, in her eyes. Sings to herself, talks, babbles something half out loud. And now she rolls to the side, gets up on to her knees, steadies herself with her arms, stands up. And knows: They're walking into the shed now, the Vieberneiterians, first up to the back wall, stand still, turn to each other, now they turn completely around and make their way back, the dog with the pot, the damned dog, sprinkle with the pine brush, from left to right, from right to left, always nice and slow, one more, one more.

But the special words, my goodness, those people don't know them, you can't do it without the special words.

Who knows, maybe they fetched Aukthun's grandma, but what does she know! A few spells for St. Anthony's fire or warts, not these special words though.

Here Lina says them to herself, the special words. In her parlor. Where it is somber. She takes the steps, up to the other wall and back

again, swings her arms, speaks. Now it's over. She fastens her headscarf and goes out of the house. And stands on the stone. And comes back again and sits down in the chair. I'm through, I'm through. And shakes her head, not at all quickly, not at all concerned, shakes her head and falls into singing. Who are these like stars appearing, these, before God's throne who stand? Each a golden crown is wearing: who are all this glorious band? I'm through. The sin, the sin. Which will be held against me before the heavenly Father.

The stone is still lying in front of the door.

That night the sky becomes absolutely clear. Above the clearing behind Lina Varszus' little house a couple of stars keep aloft a long time, they don't move on at all. The heavenly Father can look down there if he has a mind to, or listen down to the screech owl, which hoots behind the first spruces, at the end of the clearing.

The old woman toils away with the stone diagonally across the clearing, past the birch stumps, across the sand, drags it on, bit by bit, moaning again leans over it. I'll just rest.

That night it doesn't grow dark at all. Although the moon keeps aloft behind the woods. Later it will come down the river and help the fish-eating fish with its light, light up everything, up into the bushes on

the shore. Beat it will you, you shiny fishies, don't dream around there.

Let it lie there, the stone, the heavenly Father might say at this point, who can look down if he has a mind to. What're you tormenting yourself so much for, at your age.

But Lina doesn't hear. She lies there, her face on the stone. Lina is dead.

