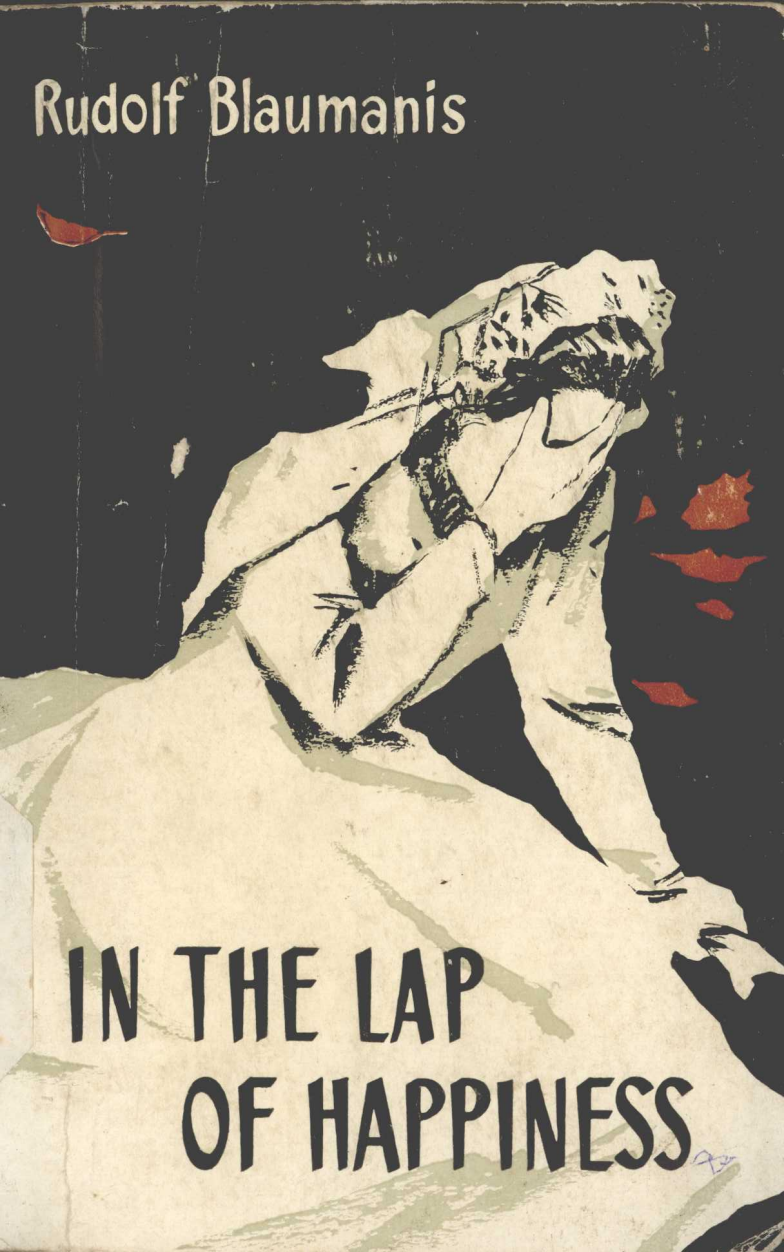
Rudolf Blaumanis



IN THE LAP OF HAPPINESS

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Foreign Languages Publishing House
Moscow

РУДОЛЬФ БЛАУМАН

У СЧАСТЬЯ ЗА ПАЗУХОЙ

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Printed in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

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RAUDUP'S WIDOW

A tolling of church bells—a chanting of funeral hymns in the churchyard—mourners gathered around an open grave—within the grave a magnificent black coffin covered with a beautiful wreath of fresh flowers—and not a single tear.

Who was it taken to his last resting place that day? It was the rich farmer Raudup.

"The days of our years *are* threescore years

and ten; and if by reason of strength *they* be fourscore years, yet *is* their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off and we fly away," the pastor solemnly quoted from the Scriptures, describing the life of the deceased as one of labour and sorrow. He spoke of his long years of illness, and of the humble and truly Christian spirit in which he had borne his cross. Although endowed with worldly wealth, he had kept his heart unspoilt, set on that wealth which neither rust nor moth could destroy, nor thieves steal. Lastly, the pastor mentioned the poor orphaned child and the broken-hearted widow, and ended the funeral service with a prayer to Him who alone could dry the tears of all the bereaved.

And the broken-hearted widow covered her face with a snow-white handkerchief so that no one might see she had no tears to dry, while the poor orphaned child sat on the edge of the grave and stared at the coffin with mingled awe and curiosity, wondering why they should have put his Daddy to sleep so deep in the earth.

The pastor gave the benediction and moved away from the graveside. Four young men with spades took his place. One of them bent over the child and whispered in his ear, "Now, little Matis, throw three handfuls of sand on your father's coffin, and take a last look at Daddy. You won't

see him any more."* The child half-heartedly obeyed and threw little handfuls of sand into the open grave. The young man dug his spade into the ground, took the boy in his arms and carried him away from the crowd, setting him down on a nearby grave. "Sit here, little Matis, while we bury your Dad."

The child, having weak legs, liked to be carried about. "Karlis!" he said, looking up.

"Yes?"

"Stay with me."

"Sit a while by yourself, I haven't any time now. I'll be back soon." But the child would not let him go. Just then the widow came up and said, "Go along, I'll stay with the child." Karlis returned to the grave. The yellow sand fell with hollow thuds upon the coffin. The beautiful wreath was crushed, and presently disappeared from view as the grave filled up. The funeral guests sang a farewell hymn for the dead. Little Matis began to cry. "Where is Karlis?" he demanded. "I want Karlis." His mother tried to soothe him by offering him sweets. "I don't want sweets, go away," the child cried petulantly. "I want Karlis!"

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* According to Latvian superstition the souls of departed parents find no peace unless their children throw sand in their graves.—*Author's note.*

When Karlis returned, Matis grasped his hand and made him sit down beside him. And there they sat together, the three of them, under the moss-grown wooden cross: Raudup's widow, little Matis, and Karlis.

Presently the widow got up and went over to the fresh mound which she covered with wreaths of bilberry leaves entwined with artificial flowers made of dyed shavings. The mourners returned to the carriages that were waiting for them outside the cemetery gates. There they were treated to the traditional brandy and wheaten cakes. They ate and drank, and the widow ate and drank with them, and filled a glass for Karlis who had lifted little Matis into his mother's buggy.

"I want to ride home with you," the child said. "Mother can take your place in Father's cart," meaning the hearse Karlis had driven down to the cemetery. But there was plenty of room for three in the widow's buggy, and so they rode home together. The child fell asleep on the way, and the woman talked incessantly, and was far more lively than befitted a broken-hearted widow. Karlis listened to her in silence, occasionally yawning. It wasn't the first time she was telling him that the late farmer Raudup had been old and poorly, that she had had a hard time nursing him; that she

was now left with a large farm on her hands, which she would find it difficult to run without the help and advice of a man. Neither was it news to him that he had been Raudup's only godson and that the widow was not thirty-five yet. Why listen to it all over again? Only when she mentioned the hundred rubles that farmer Raudup had bequeathed to his godson, saying she was rather short of cash at the moment, but if he wanted it immediately she could find it for him, did Karlis reply:

"Never mind the money just now, you can keep it for me till I need it, and that certainly won't be before St. Martin's day."

The widow nodded and said:

"And don't forget us! Come and see your godfather's son as you used to. Little Matis is so fond of you."

"Yes," Karlis said. "I'll come of a Sunday."

They drove into the Raudup farm. One of the farm-hands attended to the horse, while Karlis helped the widow to alight and carried little Matis indoors. The room was stuffy and smelled of freshly cut fir branches. On the table occupying the whole length of the wall stood two dishes of boiled peas—the traditional symbol of tears at a Latvian funeral. Two servants removed these "tears" and proceeded to lay the table for supper.

The room was soon crowded with funeral guests. Some had brought with them from the cemetery twigs of fir with which they made cuts at the young people amidst general laughter, exclaiming as they did so, "Don't die, don't die, no room for you in the graveyard!" While to the old folk who had stayed at home they chanted, "Time to die, time to die, there's plenty of room in the graveyard!"

Then they all sat down at the table and ate anything. There was a bottle of strong liquor for every four persons and as the wine ran low the talk waxed high and merry, punctuated with bursts of laughter that shook the walls.

Raudup's widow was sitting just opposite Karlis. His face was flushed, what with the heat and the drink, and he looked very handsome indeed. The woman suddenly felt a hot current running through her....

Darkness fell while the guests were still at table. Candles were lighted in the many-forked wooden candlesticks that were wreathed with green twigs. While the older folk remained sitting over their beer and grog and a game of cards, the young ones gathered in the yard, which was now bathed in silvery moonlight. They strolled about, laughing and chattering, and some couples began to dance—without music.

"That's right, that's sensible!" an old man cried, coming out of the room, his voice husky with talk and drink. "Dance, children, dance and be merry! When my time comes, I want you to dance at my funeral too. What's the good of tears? It's all nonsense. When a man's dead, he's dead. Old Raudup was a good sort, aye, that he was. And he would say, 'When I die I want people to be as jolly at my funeral as if it were a wedding party!' "

Some of the young men came up closer and asked whether the deceased had really said so.

"Of course he did! Do you think I would tell a lie about him at his own funeral?"

"Hear that? Now we can really dance! What a pity we have no music. Maybe one of the farm-hands has a fiddle or a concertina?"

It turned out that someone had a concertina, and he fetched it quickly and began to play. More and more couples swung into its rhythm.

Karlis danced too. Leaning on the garden gate, the widow watched his lithe movements that made the girls so willing to rest in his arms. She drew nearer to the dancing couples.

A voice suddenly called for Karlis. Little Matis had woken up and was crying for him. Karlis left his dancing partner and hurried indoors. In the dim light of a tallow candle standing on the

bedroom table he saw two old women asleep in the late farmer's bed, while little Matis was sitting up in his mother's bed crying his eyes out. The loud voices in the adjoining room and the strains of music in the yard had wakened the highly strung child and frightened him. Karlis sat down on the edge of the bed and tried to soothe him, but the child wouldn't go to sleep again. Karlis had to give up dancing and stay with him. Presently the widow entered the room.

"Go to sleep," she said sharply to Matis, but the child took no heed of her, and keeping his large eyes fixed on Karlis, he snuggled up to him still closer.

The widow went over to the cupboard where she kept a bottle of sweet, ruby-coloured Hungarian wine that the doctor had prescribed as a tonic for little Matis. There was a phial there, too, containing a sleeping draught, a few drops of which she used to give to her late husband. She shook the phial, which had just a tiny drop of the medicine left, emptied it into a glass, added some wine, and gave it to the boy.

The child liked the sweet wine and drank it up willingly. In ten minutes he was fast asleep. Karlis gently tucked him in and turned to go, but the widow stopped him.

"Have some of this wine before you go," she said, filling a glass to the brim and handing it to him. "Drink it!"

Karlis needed no second invitation. He drained the glass, saying as he returned it to her, "That's fine!"

"Do you like it? Have another—to steady the other leg!"

He tossed off another glass, thanked her and went out.

The woman helped herself to a glass, too, locked the cupboard and followed Karlis out into the yard where she took up her former position by the garden gate. The music flowed on and on, and couple after couple whirled past her. Some elderly people had joined the throng of dancers, too. But there was none to equal Karlis. He seemed to float through the air, never touching ground.

Suddenly he stopped in front of her.

"Won't you dance?" he said jauntily, his eyes sparkling with the fire of the wine he had just been drinking.

"I will!"

He seemed taken aback, but after a moment's hesitation he took her arm and led her into the middle of the yard.

Raudup's widow danced with Karlis, while the moonbeams weaved their silver shroud over a fresh mound in the churchyard.

The Raudup farm was large indeed, and the widow found it difficult to manage it without the aid of a farmer. When she went out into the fields to supervise the men at work, the maids at home were idle. If she stayed at home to work with the maids, the men lounged about in the fields. And it was not mere laziness she had to contend with! They sowed flax in the barley fields, and barley in the flax fields, and buckwheat in the potato fields, thus messing up her late husband's firmly established system of farming. They harrowed where they should have ploughed, and ploughed where they should have harrowed, and if she ventured a word in protest she would be put off with:

"That's how the master did it," or "That's how he wanted it done."

And so the widow, who had taken no interest in farming when her husband was alive, was easily silenced.

The butter was piling up in the cellar, and had to be taken up to town. The widow knew the way to Riga, for she had been there once with her

husband, but during their absence a stallion had died, and so she didn't like to leave the farm by itself if she could help it. Sometimes she would send a farm-hand to town with the butter, or ask a neighbour to sell it for her, but each time it seemed to her that she got a few rubles less for it than her late husband would have brought home.

At last the poor widow took her troubles to her trustees, but they only laughed at her.

"Take a husband!" one of them said.

"You can't expect to run a large farm like yours without a farmer," the other joined in.

The widow blushed and said, "How can I take another husband before the grass has grown on my first husband's grave!"

The farm was indeed a large one, and the widow found it difficult to manage it single-handed. Her servants grew more rude and cheeky every day, till at last she was compelled to summon her trustees again and ask them for advice.

"I have already told you, take a husband," said the one.

"And I have told you, a farm like yours cannot be run properly without a farmer," added the other.

Again the woman blushed.

"Very well, if you say so . . . I could marry, of course. But who will have an old widow like me?"

The trustees laughed at that. "You old! Why, either of us would marry you right away if he could."

But neither was free to do so. They had come to realize long ago that it was not good for a man to live alone in the world.

However, they had lots of eligible candidates to propose: Marcis Micpapa, Spricis Šlakan, Pieteris Chuchakok, Andž Švaukst, Krustin Kvepin, Brencis Bezben. Between them the trustees named at least a dozen men who would be only too glad to take a hand in running the Raudup farm. But she turned them all down. The first two liked their drop, the other two gambled, and were bad-tempered to boot. Kvepin had lots of money, but little sense, and Bezben was ruled out because little Matis hated him. "What I need is not only a husband for myself, but a father for my child."

"That's true," the trustees agreed. "But where will you find a man to suit both yourself and the child?"

Just then Karlis entered. He called at the farm every other Sunday, but since his godfather's death he had been avoiding the house, and would play with little Matis either in the servants' room or out of doors. This time, however, on hearing voices in the widow's room, he went in. Little Matis