

LITUANUS

LITHUANIAN QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Volume 16, No.4 - Winter 1970

Editors of this issue: Antanas Klimas, Ignas K. Skrupskelis

Copyright © 1970 LITUANUS Foundation, Inc.



A ROSE TO THURSDAY

KAZYS ALMENAS *

We were about a hundred men. The number changed constantly, sometimes swelling with newcomers, sometimes decreasing after several especially hot days, when many would hop the first passing train to seek their fortunes elsewhere.

It would be impossible to describe each one separately, impossible and useless. However, they possessed several unifying traits. Most were alcoholics of one degree or another, most had been in jail. Some were bad men, and others happy ones, some were just average bums, and others — very gentle souls.

But of them all, I remember Rose the best, our stinking darling Rose. Only now, I do not smile when I think of him.

He deserved his striking name. You see, Rose was totally a slave to alcohol, and could exist at all only with the appropriate amount of alcohol in his veins. But to maintain this level, he had to find alcohol cheap enough, so that the fortnightly railroad man's pay would last both these weeks. With pride Rose would boast that he had solved this problem completely. His notorious secret and the reason for his name was "Rose Hair Tonic," forty-nine cents for a pint bottle, nicely adorned with three blood-colored roses on the label. Between their thorny stems, the small print assured one that this was a mixture of the best reddish lanolin and guaranteed 69.8 percent alcohol.

Rose would assure everyone that in his years of drinking the stuff, the lanolin never hurt the taste, on the contrary, he really liked it. It massaged the throat and the stomach and helped to digest absolutely everything, including the salted bacon served by the company.

Whichever way it was with his digestion, the tonic certainly did give him an odor. The favorite joke among the men was simply this: no need to see or hear this creep, you can smell him coming three miles away, even with the wind blowing in the opposite direction.

As for Rose himself, the tonic was what sustained his life. Every other Friday, after getting paid, he would buy about twenty reddish bottles, gently wrap them in a large green towel, and store them in his locker. He would lock the door with a big black padlock, and carry the key on a string around his neck next to a leaden St. Christopher's medal.

* * *

I first met Rose on the train, in the rear of the car reserved for railroad employees. I was on my way to a summer job somewhere in the prairies of Wyoming. I was nineteen, had been to college for a year, and was very pleased with the unfamiliar job I had gotten, far in the West. I had been briefly informed that a column of workers was being collected in Glenrock, Wyoming, to replace two hundred miles of old rails. We would live in railroad cars, the company would provide everything we needed. In a word, it seemed like the army without uniforms.

With interest I watched the endless plains of Wyoming passing before me, broken here and there by reddish or most often dusty gray masses of rock. I was almost enchanted with my fate.

The reveries broke off suddenly when the conductor shoved a small withered man into our car. He, meanwhile, seemed not at all indignant about the conductor's doings and smiling staggered between the seats, carrying in one hand a green bundle.

"You're supposed to sit in this part, you know that, so why go where you don't belong," muttered the conductor.

"O.K., O.K.! Sure, O.K.," the man gestured gaily with his free hand. "I'll never forget these nice Burlington conductors. Hearts of gold!"

He looked around and collapsed beside me on the bench.

"Hell, a real hound, for sure. Doesn't even let a body sleep. Doesn't cost him anything!"

I examined with interest my unexpected traveling companion. He was quite different from the railroad men I was used to; they usually were heavy men, with necks red from the wind, with that real solidity of working men. But I hadn't yet seen one like this. Pants, perhaps even of good material, but now so encrusted that it was difficult to recognize their original color, stretched over his narrow knees. Shoes, tied together with a ragged string, completed this uniform. The sole of the left one was loose and flapped about like a tongue hanging out. It was hard to decide whether they were of the same pair. I thought that surely I had seen better ones in a city dump.

But the queerest feature of this personage stabbed me right in the nose. You would think that his appearance would be followed by an appropriate odor. The odor, it is true, was extremely powerful, but it was a sickeningly sweet odor, like that of perfume. At first I could not believe that that was really emanating from him, but when the personage grinned, and a new wave hit me in the face, there could be no doubt.

"Hello," he said, keeping his grin even while talking.

"Where you going?"

"Glenrock, Wyoming,"

"No?!" he opened his mouth wide and I winced as a new cloud of perfume washed over me.

"Why not?"

"Well, just going there myself."

"Oh yes?" I did not wish to appear overly interested.

"What will you do there?"

"Hell knows. Anything they tell me. Dragged me out of jail in Nebraska, gave me a ticket, and here I am."

"Jail?" I thought that I had not heard him correctly, but the fellow smiled quietly, as if talking about the weather.

"Sure. Locked me up for hardly anything. What a place ... God save us! That sheriff — the worst crook. Son of a bitch. But, well. Hey, I am Rose."

I told him my name.

"Wait, we'll find you a better one. What kind of a name is that, you know! Have you laid rails before? No? Well, you'll see. The work is not bad, but in a hell of a place. If it were around Chicago, like last year. You know Chicago? Sure, all good bums know Chicago."

He combed his hair carefully with an almost toothless comb and seemed pleased with having found a listener. All that he needed from me in order to continue was an occasional attentive glance and a "come on, you don't say," pronounced in an amazed voice.

What I had begun to suspect was confirmed. Namely, that such irregular jobs in scattered places around the world, like laying rails, had to be content with any labor that came to hand. The work force was made up mostly of drunks plucked from jails. The company paid their fines, gave them tickets, and off they go to shovel gravel.

In half an hour, we became good friends. With ceremony Rose announced that any proper friendship had to be initialed with a decent drink. He removed from the green bundle a half empty bottle decorated with roses and began to expound upon the infinitely good features of the liquid. Convinced that I would recognize the great thing I was getting he offered me the first sip. I could not refuse: it would have insulted him and, what is most important, I thought that it would not be manly.

I closed my eyes, put the bottle to my lips, sipped and almost choked. It would be hard to find a fitting adjective to describe the taste. Smiling heroically and with a hoarse thank you, I returned his treasure to Rose. He licked his dry lips, rubbed the neck with a dirty hand, and with a grand flourish turned it up side down. Once finished, he licked his lips again, sighed deeply, and carefully wrapped the bottle in the green towel.

"My friend, just think, no taxes on this. A shaft to Uncle Sam, and that's all. And that stuff, so warm," with pleasure he rubbed his thin belly. "Ever have anything like it?"

I could only reply with a muffled cough. Surely, there could be nothing like it at all.

Perhaps we would have pursued this important topic further, but Rose needed just that warmth in his belly to become fully at peace with his world. His head sank into the space between the seats, his mouth remained half open, and through gaps in his teeth, the sweet smell of cologne pulsated rhythmically towards me. I looked at the unchanged landscape of Wyoming, and although I did not feel quite so brave, I was still content with my fate.

I was certain that this would not be a routine summer.

* * *

That it never was. Especially those days after payday! God knows what devils would descend upon our yellow cars with that accursed dollar. Then, the best bourbon replaced the morning coffee, the sad ones became hysterically happy, and the friendly ones — mean like hornets. There was noise, brother, how much noise can be made in the middle of the prairie. There were fights. Women would appear from nearby towns, and the police followed shortly.

In a few days, the money would be gone. The foreman would visit jails in nearby towns, collecting a part of his work force, and we would lay steel once again.

In the evenings, the men would lie on their mattresses, staring at the yellow fly covered ceiling, and talk about past times.

And, of course, we played poker.

Poker began shortly after I came, and was still in full swing when I left three long months later. Strange that it received its permanence from the currency, the essential thing in poker, which, of course, everybody lacked. You see, near the mess hall was the company canteen, where you could obtain cigarets and other trifles against your future pay. Thus, a pack of cigarets became the basic unit of betting and was followed by a carton, while the third and largest unit was a watch with copper insides, available at the canteen for \$9.95.

This honored institution was begun by a man in our car, a stocky fellow, almost completely bald, with a torn red coat. The very first night he covered our one and only table with a green military blanket, hung two kerosene lamps above the table using some barbed wire, and the club room was prepared.

"A little game, hey!" he glanced about, shuffling some well-worn cards. "If you have nothing, get some cigarets, and let's go. Smiley, you'll play, no?"

Smiley joined. Three others. The redcoat sought a sixth. Interested, I followed the proceedings from a nearby double-decker bunk.

"Hey, kid, afraid you'll loose your pants?"

That was an insult. My pants, like hell. I had learned to play poker in back alleys.

"Just watch out, Dad, you might even loose your rag of a coat."

No more was needed here for coining names. And so we remained for the whole summer — Dad and Kid.

Six of us began. All played amazingly well. I was not used to such intense play, and my first lessons cost me dearly. But advances could be had and poker became the constant occupation of our evenings, interrupted only by the fortnightly pay.

The most faithful and devoted player was Blackie, who earned his name by his flourishing, jet-black beard, which he shaved only just before payday. For the rest of the time, it flourished on Blackie's heavy cheeks and neck up to the dirty collar of his shirt, from beneath which rose the even thicker and more entangled hair of his chest. Blackie was one of the biggest men in our column. A horse of a man, he had a vicious temper, a bad combination, especially when drunk.

But Blackie was a changed man when playing cards. His anger exploded only against dame Fortune, a difficult lady to offend, for Blackie firmly believed that she loved all, except him. Although very superstitious, he still played well. His huge and hairy paws quickly and accurately tossed out the cards, but his eyes did not follow them, for the eyes stared intently at the faces of the players. Small and narrow eyes, beneath heave, black eyebrows which came together above his nose. He would play intently, and with a sudden finality, without hesitation. He would shove a watch into the middle and with his huge body cover almost half the table. A chewed up cigar would roll slowly from side to side in his lips, and the whole table would become tense, like a string ready to burst. Heavy fingers quietly tapped a corner of the table, as if counting the

seconds you need to decide whether to bet or pass. You needed a great deal of courage to cover his bet, especially since in his presence every one felt an almost instinctive fear.

Everyone, except Rose. Perhaps because Rose was never sober enough to be afraid. Besides, he was not one of our regulars, and joined in only to pass the time. He seemed to receive more pleasure from Blackie's moods, than from the cards. As much as Blackie was convinced that he himself was unlucky, so Rose was certain that he was a true son of fortune. He was almost right. More than once I saw Blackie jump up, blue with rage under his black beard. He would slam his cigar butt to the ground, grind it in with his heel, as if trying to kill it, and scream: "Isn't that the devil? What day were you born, you shithead? Three queens, I got, and that bastard shows all hearts."

Rose smiles pleasantly through his rotting teeth, and stacks in piles the cigarets he has won. Blackie, having run out of words, spits and with heavy steps, enough to make the car sway, stomps to his locker to get a fresh cigar and some more cigarets.

The play continues with even greater intensity.

After each deal, Blackie bites his cigar so hard that his teeth rasp, spits under the table, and cautiously glances at his cards. Soon he again hulks over the table, and with knit brows observes Rose. While Rose feels as if he now occupies the center of the stage.

"What, only half a carton on the first card? Well, mine is only a seven, but I feel an ace."

Most of the time, things worked out just this way. Without any effort, Rose would get the cards as if he had picked them out himself.

"Of course, I'm lucky. I live right, and am lucky. Ha, there's the ace! What do you say, Blackie? Need another card? Pay a carton."

Blackie chews his cigar, like an enraged bull. He throws out a carton. Smiley deals another card.

Blackie gets nothing good. Rose — a second ace. Now Rose has two aces in his hand, shining like a pair of eyes, and both are red to boot.

"Hell!" Screams Blackie again, and another cigar meets its end under the heel.

"You dirty son of a mad bitch! And what were my first two cards? Two kings, one after the other! Without luck, what can you do, you ass?"

Rose is not at all impressed with Blackie's rage.

"Blackie, you just don't know how to live right. If you left those whores alone, luck would come your way!"

"Hell, why don't you wipe your nose!"

"See, he doesn't even take good advice. From my heart, Blackie, my heart. See, I'm talking from experience — get to bed earlier, your luck will change..."

Having said this, Rose collects his newly won possessions, and slowly moves off towards the bed.

"That dog, coward! Wins and off to bed," rages Blackie. "Just wait. I'll catch him, that shithead, some day all the luck under the sun won't help him!"

And his huge cheeks tremble almost imperceptibly.

* * *

That day did dawn. It was an ordinary Tuesday, noteworthy only because there was so little money in our pockets, and so much time, for we were to be paid Friday after lunch.

Of course, we played poker. First of all, the four faithful: Blackie, Dad, Smiley and I; plus a sturdy Mexican with a pimpled face and slick, plastered, black hair, whom we simply called Pancho, like all the other Mexicans.

With five, the game is not bad, but it is best with six. Thus, seeing a good humoured Rose swaying past, Dad tugged his coat tail. Rose looked around happily.

"Sure, if Blackie is playing, I should sit in, what would I smoke without Blackie!"

Blackie spat contemptuously and leaned closer to the table, pushing aside a half-dozen watches he had won.

Rose exchanged one watch for four cartons of cigarets — the standard rate of exchange.

"Four will do, What? You know, Blackie, luck is really with me today: I shaved this morning and there is a full moon... You too could shave once in a while, make yourself a little more human."

"You ever stop your blabber? Deal!" Pancho, licking his thick fingers, skillfully distributed two cards each, one face down and one face up.

"That man lacks love," Rose philosophized while he picked his nose. "Love for one's neighbor, so to speak. Besides, of course, he really hates to loose those cigarets..."

"Will you never be quiet, you perfumed goat! Look at your cards!"

"Yes. The cards. Here is my ace, and I will have another one underneath. Two aces — two packs. Right?"

Blackie grasped his open card and leaned back, with his eyes following Rose. The open card was only a jack.

Pancho passed and stayed only to deal. Everyone else threw in two packs. A second jack fell to Blackie. For Rose — a queen. For the rest — nothing noteworthy. With two open jacks, it was Blackie's turn to bet. He drummed a quick rhythm with his fingers and suddenly pushed in a whole carton. The rest passed, a heavy price for the first three cards, especially when a pair of jacks was already showing. Rose's turn came up.

"Well, what else, let's stack up some more cigarets. I hate to pick up those small piles; my hand gets tired."

Slowly and carefully, Pancho dealt the fourth card. Blackie got a three of hearts. Rose — a jack. The tip of the cigar trembled, the ashes almost fell off, and Blackie tossed in a watch.

"What you trying to prove there? I got one of your jacks."

Rose rummaged in his pockets, and pulled out a watch, kissed it loudly, and threw it in.

"Well, good bye. You'll be back soon..."

Perhaps I only imagined it, but it seemed that Blackie smiled.

Pancho cleared his throat, rubbed his pockmarked nose, and sensing the importance of the moment, slowly and with ceremony dealt each a fifth and last card.

For Blackie — an eight. Rose screamed with delight when he was dealt a second queen.

"Come to papa, my beauty. Yes, I love queens, especially in pairs."

Blackie licked his lips till they glistened with moisture. His eyes were shining.

"Play, play, damn it."

"Sure, with pleasure, never with greater pleasure. Here, I have three cartons, so that will be it."

Blackie leaned back carefully and just sat there staring at Rose. Finally, he straightened up and spat under the table. Pancho was even startled. Slowly he counted out three cartons, added three watches, and pushed out the whole mass.

"You're covered, and I bet three watches. What do you say, shithead?"

Rose looked around looking for help.

"Kid, let me have three watches. You'll get them back and more."

I had three, but to stick them in with the situation so unclear! Besides, I was afraid of angering Blackie.

"I cannot..."

"Ha, a coward! I thought you were a man. What about you, Dad?"

In silence, Dad shook his head.

Pancho turned away and rapped the bench with his fingers.

Smiley only had a few packs anyway.

"Well, so that's the way... Hey, Kid! Bet those three watches. I have a good card here underneath. Do you want to see it?"

I stared at my hands, as if held enraptured by the dirty fingernails, and remained silent.

Blackie spat once again.

"Well, shithead, will you play?"

"Well, but... Wait a minute..."

"Not forever! You got that crap you drink in your locker. Use that!"

This time, Rose was noticeably hurt. Not even in a dream would he think of risking his precious bottles. Slowly he leaned back, no longer smiling. He lifted up the face down card, as if he had forgotten what it was, and glanced at Blackie. Blackie stared at him, like a cat at a cornered mouse.

"I have six, can I bet them?"

"Six bottles of that stinking stuff, against my three watches! Are you crazy?"

Rose seemed to shrink and looked around apologetically.

"But I only have ... six ..."

Blackie kneaded the thick fingers of his left hand, and the cigar slowly rolled around between his thick lips. "Alright, the devil, bet six!"

Now it was our turn to be surprised. First of all, none thought that Blackie would retreat; secondly, this did not at all fit the course of play. Up to then, it had seemed that Blackie was trying to put over a pretty crude bluff.

Rose too was surprised. Surprised and afraid. It is one thing to speak about it, quite another to place the bottles themselves on the table. He needed time to become fully aware of this.

He looked around again with an almost pleading glance. We sat tense, like an audience when the play nears its end.

There was no mercy.

Once again he looked at his bottom card. Suddenly he stood up and strode straight to his locker. Blackie observed him intently.

Rose unwrapped the towel carefully and proceeded to place the bottles on the table, as if not with his own hands. First... second ... third ... slowly and rhythmically, with lean fingers lovingly caressing the red roses. After the fifth one, he stopped, sighed, and timidly looked at Blackie.

"Five?"

Blackie shook his head very firmly and resolutely.

"Six," said Rose in a hoarse voice and pushed in the last bottle.

The towel lay empty, like a burst balloon.

Blackie removed the cigar from his teeth and intently stared at its burning end. Time was hanging like congealed wax. Carefully he replaced the cigar, and with the same movement of the hand adroitly turned over his face down card — a third jack!

Rose, staring at the three jacks, collapsed on the bench. Someone turned over his bottom card — a second ace. Two pairs. A good hand, but this time worth nothing.

Blackie collected the six bottles, banging them against each other mercilessly. Now, clearly, he was smiling: the teeth shone with an uncomfortable whiteness in the black beard.

* * *

Wednesday passed by very much like all other days. I saw Rose only in the evening.

Seven of us were playing. In addition, we had some spectators who wanted to play. All of us were in a good mood and had just finished a loud argument over some technical trifle. Perhaps we would not have noticed the personage sliding by, but

Blackie shouted:

"Hey shithead, what kind of a moon rose for you today, full of luck or of tonic?"

All of us raised our heads ready to laugh, for the story of how Blackie won Rose's precious bottles was already known to all. But none laughed. Rose was all hunched up, and his right shoulder jutted out and swayed strangely. He looked us over with deepset eyes, opened his mouth as if to say something, turned away again, and dragging his feet with difficulty swayed off in the direction of his bed. He had to try twice, in order to catch hold high enough to drag himself up to his second level bunk.

"He won't play today," Smiley decided philosophically. "Have you tried any of that tonic yet, Blackie?"

"I won't drink that crap straight! I'll try to filter it through some bread. We'll see what we get."

Thursday.

About noon I finished putting in order the tool car and decided that it was time to catch up. on some sleep. With that thought, I turned towards my car and bed.

I hardly opened the door when I saw Rose slumped over our butt covered table. He was facing away from the door, one of his legs was sticking out as if lacked joints. That right shoulder protruded like a broken bone and twitched spasmodically, as if he was crying, but the twitching was somehow too frequent and was not followed by any sound.

"What's the matter?" I said, feeling ashamed of my own voice.

Rose started, as if struck, but remained hunched up. Finally, he raised his uncombed head and turned around. Dirty grey hair was falling over his face and revealed a bluish-red blotch on the left temple. The thick bluish skin was pulsating with each heartbeat.

"They kicked me out... That bastard foreman, let me go ..."

He stood up, and holding on to the table, staggered towards me. Slowly, I began to back up, till I came to rest leaning against the door.

"You won't kick me out...?"

His lower jaw was slack as if he couldn't control it, and he had to put a great deal of effort into each word.

"Won't kick me out... a?"

"Kick out what?"

For a while the mouth moved without any sound.

"Where is the key? ... locker..."

I understood what he wanted, and threw up my hands in uncertainty.

"Don't know."

Swaying, he stood in front of me, but could not maintain his balance. He grabbed for the handle of the door, and with his whole body leaned against me. With bowed head, he breathed heavily. His right shoulder dug into my chest.

"There is no key ... no key ..."

For some reason I imagined that his saliva was dripping on my shirt.

"Well, I have to go to work," I said and felt uncomfortable.

Have to go to work ...

"Don't go, oh, don't leave me."

With one hand he embraced my waist, and slowly both his knees began to bend. I was overcome with real disgust, I felt as if something was trying to climb out through my throat out of the emptiness in my stomach. I tried to loosen his hand, but was afraid to touch his protruding and twitching shoulder.

"I have to go to work," I repeated senselessly and squeezed past him.

Rose collapsed on his knees and hung there holding on to the door handle.

I heard sobbing and pushed the door shut.

Outside, the sun was shining on an amazingly bright world. Almost blinded I stood on the steps. I wanted to be angry because of the interrupted sleep, but I did not succeed. All I felt was a sick sadness.

When I returned to the car after supper, I found Rose in the same corner where I had left him. He now sat on a bench, with his whole withered body leaning in the direction of the beds. There, staged especially for his benefit, a comedy was taking place.

Blackie had a wash basin on his knees and was holding with a few slices of bread a dirty handkerchief over it. He was preparing to filter. The spectators were generous with advice, it seemed that all of them were specialists in this field.

Slowly Blackie poured the reddish liquid from the rose-decorated bottle. After he had poured out half of it, he picked up the handkerchief by the corners and raised it high, so that the dripping liquid could be plainly heard. As if too modest to touch it, with two fingers he squeezed the bottom of the handkerchief, licking his fingers from time to time.

"God, but its crap!"

Rose's jaw was hanging slack. From one corner of his mouth, a thick spit drooled down.

"Tfu, what dirt, feed it to the dogs," continued Blackie, having ascertained with a glance that Rose was observing everything. "Anybody want a taste?"

The spectators showed no interest. But from the second level of one bunk, someone reached out and Blackie handed him the basin. There, someone slurped a few times, coughed hoarsely, and the basin came back.

"U... can't get my breath back. It's bitter enough without the snots, at least you could have used a clean handkerchief."

"What in hell do you know!" Said Blackie with contempt and standing up he spread his legs wide. "If that goat can drink, am I any worse.?"

And he turned the basin over. He drank in large gulps, till he choked. He spat in Rose's direction and coughed, for a while unable to regain his breath.

"Tfu... What crap... For sure, I won't get that in hell! Hey, shithead, you want to suck the bread out?"

But Rose did not react. His stare, it seemed, was fixed directly on each one, but most likely, he saw nothing. The spit was still hanging in a thin thread.

An uncomfortable silence descended upon us.

Blackie felt it his duty to break it.

"Well, what the hell, it's time to play, no?"

None showed any enthusiasm.

"Dad, where did you put the cards? Let's go!"

More slowly than usual, we all sat down at the table. Dad sat down next to the shaken Rose and politely, but firmly, pushed him away to the end of the bench. Blackie came carrying a stack of cigaret cartons and five well known bottles. He wanted to put everything on the table, but hesitated, and placed the bottles on the ground next to his feet.

"Well, you dead or stupid? Deal the cards."

We began, but not in the usual mood. I in particular was depressed by Rose's presence. I avoided looking at the thing hunched up By the table. Blackie cursed and tried to laugh, but his voice seemed very lonely and not receiving encouragement from the others, he quieted down.

Thus, when a sound came from Rose's direction, I was startled.

"Can I play?"

Dad slowly shuffled the cards, and all of us, as if acting in agreement, stared at the table.

"Here... how much will you give me?" Rose addressed Dad, and opening his fist showed a thin pocket knife.

Without a word, Dad shoved three cartons in his direction and took the knife. The trade was nonsense, for the knife cost only a dollar and a half at the canteen. But even Blackie was silent.

Cards were dealt out. Rose, with one hand trying to support an uncontrollable head, looked only at his own hand. It was not clear whether he was betting simply on instinct or knew what he was doing, but the first two times he passed in time and lost little. The third time, he took away a pile of cigarets and a watch.

The fourth time, clearly, the play was strictly between Blackie and Rose. After the third card, we all dropped out, not having even a ten. Blackie and Rose each had an open king and queen. A mood of tension ran over the whole car and the nearby beds became filled with spectators.

Blackie chewed his cigar. This time he seemed not to be pleased with the attention. He muttered something under his nose and threw in a carton. Rose's eyes blinked, as if he did not see his own hand. He too threw in a carton.

For a fourth card, Blackie received a second king, and Rose — only a ten. Blackie was about to bet a watch, but stopped.

"No! Hell, wait, by the new rules, these two are worth a watch ..."

And, with a great clatter he picked up two bottles from under the table.

Rose shuddered, as if shocked by electricity. With his left hand he tried to brush back the hair which had fallen over his forehead, but he could not stretch out his trembling fingers, and brushed with his closed fist, like a child. Finally, he realized that he himself had a watch and quickly shoved it in.

Only the buzz of an annoying fly could be heard when the fifth card was dealt. To Blackie — a jack; to Rose — an ace of spades.

Clearly, with his pair of kings, Blackie was master of the situation.

"Hell, I can't even give the stuff away. I'll be kind this time — for three bottles give us a watch!"

We all saw that Rose only had a carton, so that this kindness was merely mockery, because for a watch one needed four.

We all saw this, except Rose. He pushed in his carton and sat there, swaying his head and staring at the bottles which were tinged with pink in the light of the oil lanterns.

Again silence. We were all looking at Blackie. He was smiling and continued to chew his cigar, pretending to be waiting for the remaining cartons.

Rose nodded his head jerkily.

"Santa Maria!" spat Pancho, unable to bear the silence, and threw in a carton. I too revived, as if waking from sleep, and threw in another. Dad also joined in.

"O.K., you dumb asses! I don't care, whose cigarets I win." Blackie jumped up and turned over Rose's bottom card. An ace of hearts!

"Son of a bitch, you shithead..." Blackie was beginning, but no one was listening to him.

We were all watching Rose. He only needed a second to realize that the bottles were again his. With a hand like a vice he grabbed the nearest one, and groping about with trembling fingers, he at last succeeded in opening it. He practically sucked the liquid out. From a corner of his mouth, a reddish stream flowed and dripped on the protruding Adam's apple, which was bobbing furiously in its haste to keep up.

We were silent. Only Rose's slurping was audible. I felt as if I was seeing a forbidden sight and, turning away, I methodically shuffled the cards. It was my turn to deal.

Having finished, breathing heavily, Rose stood up. He belched, and concentrating every effort, he pulled himself up and leaned against the wall. The bottle fell from his hands and with a clatter rolled down the aisle. He grabbed three more bottles, knocking over the fourth in the process, and swayed away in the direction of his bed. Upon reaching it, he placed two on the floor and took out the cork of the third. With a halfway dramatic gesture, he lifted the bottle towards the spectators.

"To Wednesday..."

This time, he drank rhythmically and without hurrying. Having emptied it, he sighed and carefully placed it on the floor. Seeing two more bottles, he smiled, chose one and lifted it against the light. Suddenly, he understood that he was being

observed by everyone and in the blink of an eyelash became the former, well known Rose. Ceremoniously, he looked around.

"The first bottle was for the victory," he bowed deeply in Blackie's direction.

"The second, for Wednesday ... This one ..." he stood up straight and very solemnly raised the bottle high.

"This one, sirs and bums, to Thursday."

At once, the tension receded and we were all very gay. Some one repeated the joke about Rose's odor, and that one need not see him coming and this time it was the funniest joke in the world. Everyone laughed, even Rose had to lower the bottle, to keep from choking on his laughter. Composing himself, he resumed his drinking; only two thirds were left.

Statistics quickly raced through my head, three pints of 70 percent alcohol! The devil take such a man!

However, Rose could not finish. He put a third of it away and said apologetically:

"No more room. Well, so what, anyway, Thursday is a day good only for dogs. Why should one drink for Thursday!"

Without any effort he jumped upon his bed and before disappearing stuck out his head.

"Good night, gentlemen and ladies, good night to you too, Blackie..."

* * *

We returned to the play. Time passed quickly and we did not notice the approach of midnight. We no longer had enough players. Only four of us remained and that makes for a slow game. We debated as to who should go to a neighboring car for help.

"Well, why should we guard that shithead's junk?" Blackie glanced at Rose's possessions piled in a corner. "Jump Kid, go wake his up. Maybe he has sobered up."

I felt insulted. I was used to the "Kid," but I did not like the "jump."

"Well, move, move, your rear end full of lead? You're the youngest."

With protests, I arose and walked over as slowly as I could. Standing on the lower bunk I groped in the upper one.

"Hey, Rose, get up and loose your..."

Here, my words broke off, because I had caught hold of his hand.

Without even turning around, I jumped down.

"He is dead!"

"Dead? Are you kidding?"

Dad and Blackie glanced at each other. Dad came over, carrying a chair. He climbed up, bent over the upper berth and after listening for a while, climbed back down.

"Enough cards for tonight. Let's go to bed..."

1960-II-16

* The story was translated with the permission of the author, from his collection *Bėgiai (The Railroad Track)*, Nida Press, London, 1965. Almenas is also the author of another collection of stories *Gyvenimas tai kekė vyšnių* (Life is a Cluster of Cherries), 1967, and a long novel, *Upė į rytus, upė į šiaurę, (River to the East, River to the North)*, 1964.

Kazys Almenas was born in Lithuania in 1935. He attended the University of Nebraska and Northwestern University. Between 1965 and 1967, he studied at the University of Warsaw and received a doctorate in physics. Almenas is currently teaching at the University of Maryland.