

Biography: Andrejs Upīts (1877–1970) was an author, literary scholar, and literary critic. He lived through several different eras and their contradictions, which left a clear mark on all of his writing. Upīts wrote in a wide range of genres. His body of work includes 20 novels, 12 collections of short stories, and a succession of plays – dramas, comedies, and historical tragedies. Throughout his career, the author was both a literary scholar and a literary critic. Upīts was also a poet, journalist, and translator.

Synopsis: *Gold* was serialised in periodicals in 1914 and published as a novel in 1921. This book, like most of Upīts’ writing, contains a notable analysis of contemporary social issues. Several artistic techniques, symbols and motifs characteristic of Upīts – also present in his later works – appear throughout this novel. For example, the title embodies a symbol which becomes a leitmotif of the book. In this case, gold (or money) is a convenient literary device, used in a manner similar to its appearance in the works of Émile Zola, Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and other nineteenth-century authors, demonstrating that wealth can fundamentally test a person’s fundamental humanity.

Excerpt

The great wind in the night had broken off the signboard from its support. For a long time the little screws had been moving in the rotten board – wobbling, but not actually falling off. But tonight the wind had completely torn off the lower iron support; the upper one, the big one, could not hold out alone and was bending downwards. And the corner of the signboard was now sticking into the door, so it was hard to close it. That was why Sveilis had come out, first thing in the morning, with a chair, and climbed up to nail down the torn supporting post.

It wasn't high up, but he had to stretch. The chair wobbled on the uneven paving stones, and his worn cloth slippers slipped off. But Sveilis pressed his kneecaps against the jamb, and by stretching, hit the spot. He had already driven in the second nail, but the third was still in his mouth. Up in the attic the two children living there were looking down, one at one window, one at the other; their dirty black faces were pressed against the pane and laughing as they watched.

Now all the nails were in. They went in as if into sap-wood. They wouldn't hold out for long like that. Climbing down, Sveilis looked around. All the panels in the little house were discoloured, crumbling away in places. The blinds on both windows had toppled off. The threshold was worn out; there was quite a gap under the door. But now the sign was straight again: quietly squeaking, swinging slowly in the wind. "Portnoy" in Russian letters above, "Schneider" below, and in the middle, a worn uniform with a sword-sheath transversely across it. Sveilis went over to the other side. The same image, but with a different inscription: "August Sveile, Tailor". But then he noticed that the children upstairs were making faces; he angrily threatened them with the hammer and, gathering up the chair, went inside.

"Well, wasn't it broken off?" his wife inquired, squatting by the stove, on which the coffee pan was starting to steam.

But Sveilis saw no need to answer. Having got cold outside, he was shivering. He was coughing, spluttering and rubbing his foot. He clasped his frozen hands together and got to work: the buttonholes on Juškans the beer-merchant's coat had to be stitched. The suit had to be ready by noon.

The fire in the stove was crackling pleasantly. Now and then Sveilis cast a glance at it.

Behind his glasses, fogged by the warmth, and at a distance, two fires appeared to him, the

flames of both completely extended. Long wisps of pale reddish flame stretched all over the room. A very pleasant warmth. Sveilis cleared his throat and scratched his thin grey beard.

The pot on the stove was starting to hiss. His wife filled the iron with coals, then cleared a corner of the table and started carrying the breakfast things. Stitching the buttonholes, Sveilis cast a harsh and critical look at each unnecessary object on the table in turn. Two coffee mugs and two glasses. The floral-patterned saucers of the two mugs, a white one for one glass, with a notch chipped out of the edge. Another glass at the edge of the table, without a cup... Mrs. Sveile, stopping at the end of the table, surveyed it all. Sveilis, sewing up the buttonholes of Juškans' coat, was not looking, but still saw it. He saw that the sugar-bowl and the knives were still missing; he saw his wife looking at the table, but he also saw something quite different much further away. The thimble squeaked against the needle, his sizeable nose visibly reddened, but Sveilis did not utter a word. And straight away Mrs. Sveile **came to her senses** and rushed off to get the missing things. Right there behind the door, in the cupboard, everything was stored.

The pot on the stove started to jump. A couple of times Mrs. Sveile, chattering around in circles, took it off and put it back on again. She stirred the fire in the stove, knocked the billets against each other and dug among the ashes. Hissing ever more quietly, the pot slowly stopped boiling. Mrs. Sveile **poured** the black liquid into the blue floral-patterned battered tin jug. An agreeable warmth rose in the room, a mixture of dampness, coffee and the smell of incandescent cast-iron.

Sveilis, taking a new thread of silk on his needle, blithely stretched his back against the back of his chair. He recrossed his legs one over the other. He carried on sewing. Mrs. Sveile attended to the iron.

“Neither one nor yet the other –“ she intoned. Her voice sometimes sounded surly, but her thin, prematurely aged face with its milky blue eyes and pointed nose was simply tired and apathetic.

“It will cool down,” said Sveilis, and through his long grey eyelashes flashed a glance toward the door. “Don’t’ bring it yet.”

“Not yet, no.” Mrs. Sveile was already pushing the jug onto the hottest place on the stove. She stooped again over the iron. “It just doesn’t want to light up.”

Sveilis stopped his needle halfway and suddenly straightened up.

“Well, **get busy!**” he almost screamed. Even the tips of his ears were flushed. “Is this the first time you’ve picked up a smoothing-iron?”

Mrs. Sveile **got busy**. White cinders ran in bursts along the curved front of the iron. The room seemed to be filling with a grey, drizzly mist smelling of coal. But the iron started glowing inside: the heart-shaped little hole grew redder with every stroke.

A chattering throng of Jewish children walked past. For a moment a face with a huge cap, its peak drawn over the eyes, and white teeth, was caught in the glass of the door. It disappeared, and then from somewhere at the side an arm in a ragged sleeve reached out, and a hard little fist beat resoundingly. And for a moment later, and further away, was heard a mocking reedy voice calling “Sveile, Sveile! Eh!” Laughing and chattering away, the group of mischievous boys went on their way. Sveilis wasn’t looking, but he did see and hear. He only bent even lower over Juškans’ coat, nervously threading his needle.

But now the door opened too, and in came a young lad, his leather belt girdling his cloth shirt, with a pupil’s cap from the town school on his head. He closed the door with a rattle, went to the end by the window, pushed away the rags piled on top of his books, sat down at

the table opposite Sveilis, flung his cap off, bottom downwards, and started to open the exercise-book he had just brought in.

Mrs. Sveile came with the jug of coffee.

“Darned Jew!” the boy muttered, scornfully turning over with his fingers a prize picture he had put in the book. “Every day he gets more stingy!”

Sveilis shifted in his seat.

“What are those pictures for? You ought to go to Pētersons’ – he’ll refill the pen.”

The boy stuck the picture behind the wrapper of the book’s cover.

“A lot of things from a pen/feather like that...”

Mrs. Sveile was standing at the end of the table with the coffee jug.

“Well, young Robert, why not? Doesn’t a pen cost money too?”

“Can you write with what Pētersons has got? The boy opened a little round ink-bottle. “A cheap pen – he gets a dozen for three kopecks himself. There’s this and that, but nothing to try out calligraphy with.”

Sveilis wanted to say something more, but he couldn’t manage. He just looked at Robert and started sewing rapidly. Mother sighed, wiping the bottom of the jug with the corner of her apron and refilled his mug to the brim. Robert, his chest hunched against the table, his lips pursed, wrote a word in his new exercise-book. Sveilis stopped sewing and, without raising his head, followed every stroke of the pen attentively with his eyes.

Having waited until the boy had finished writing, tilting his head to view it from both sides, with a slight hum Mother delicately intervened: “Drink your coffee now. Made won’t wait.”

Having closed the ink-bottle, Robert got up by the window.

“Made’s been writing again. She’s always borrowing ink from me.”

Sveilis looked severely at Mother. She became quite nervous.

“She really hasn’t, Robert. She didn’t get anything written yesterday. I haven’t seen it.”

“Don’t tell me” interjected Robert. “I sketched it clearly yesterday morning – up to this little groove. And where is it now? She’s always borrowing ink from me.” He pulled out a drawer from the table and from the very back of it fetched a battered notebook. He browsed roughly through the pages, and finally he must have found what he needed. “Look here: at the gates of Plevna, at the fortress. That was where we fought. This wasn’t here yesterday morning – again she’s been writing it.” He skimmed through one more page, and another – calculating for a moment. “Thirty-seven verses. That’s how she uses up that ink of mine.”

Mother was shuffling, as if caught.

“I don’t know – perhaps. I didn’t get to see. Now drink your coffee, Robert. You’ll have to go soon.”

Sveilis pulled his thimble onto another finger.

“Babbles nothing but rubbish...”

Robert poured sugar into the mug, but he didn’t put away the song-book. Drawing closer, stirring the mug with a spoon, he read – at first with an ironic, scornful face, but later with visible interest. He turned to another place and read again. His mother was busy around the stove. As he sewed, his father often cast a glance across the table.

“But Mum, where’s the milk?” Robert suddenly asked peevishly.

As if stung, Mother clapped her hands together and hurried to the cupboard behind the door.

“Well, you’d be better off taking a book than that nonsense,” remarked Father, but when Robert didn’t reply and didn’t even look up from Made’s song-book, he carried on working.

“Eat those bread rolls now, son,” urged his mother, adding milk to his mug. “The pretzels have completely dried up overnight. It’s not as if there wasn’t a cool place to keep them in.”

She shoved the bowl of milk closer and arranged the knife more conveniently.

“Bread in a cool place ripens even sooner.” Sveilis pulled a new thread so nimbly that a knot ran through the cloth with a crackle. When he pierced, he had to look carefully, but in pulling through his eyes might overlook it. And every time he withdrew, Sveilis’ eyes flashed across the table through his glasses. He saw his son spreading butter on white bread but not taking any milk. He saw his white teeth biting into big pieces, and each time he took a mouthful of steamy brownish coffee on top of it, and the soft yellow mixture remained in a half-arc on his teeth, and tiny white crumbs from his raised hand pressed against his elbow fell onto the worn sleeves of his smock. And the glossy black cloth looked covered in frost. Your teeth would freeze just to touch it. Your teeth would freeze, but your mouth would feel a fragrant sweetness that would make your mouth water. Sveilis coughed and decided not to look. But he couldn’t – he just had to look. He bent his head down lower, pierced even more agilely and pulled more quickly. The silken thread whizzed as it ran through the soft blackish-grey cloth. His lips were tightly pursed, his face looked strangely malevolent.

Both the pieces of bread roll had been eaten up. Mother, nibbling on something, threw aside a piece of cloth and pushed a slice of black bread to her son.

“Take a piece of this – put milk on it. This time Mrs. Baumane has managed well: yellow, from young rye. And such a lovely crust –“ She broke off as Sveilis started coughing strangely and clenched his teeth, so that deep dimples appeared on the outside of his cheeks. And then, sounding harsher, as if arguing with someone, she added: “You won’t get any until the evening. As for that dried pretzel, put some in your pocket for lunch...”

Robert broke off a bit of the slice of black bread. Now he no longer took such large bites or ate so quickly. His father was preparing the last buttonhole. Mother was behind him, at the sewing machine.

"Sveilis! Sveile-e-e-e!" called the reedy mocking voice some distance away down the street.

Only Sveilis' thin grey beard quivered slightly. Mother suddenly stepped on her sewing machine. But Robert's hand, holding a piece of bread, stopped momentarily at his mouth.

For a moment he seemed to freeze, then he flushed suddenly and, bending over the coffee mug, started eating rapidly. And when he looked timidly over the table at his father, his eyes were full of tears. He no longer enjoyed it. He put the little piece of bread back on the table.

Leaning back, he spent a long time drinking the last dregs in his mug.

He looked at the old wall clock above the bed. It was time to go. To convince himself, he kept gathering the individual books together at the end of the table. He blew away the coal cinders, the fluff from the woollen clothes and wadding. And then he suddenly said: "This week the German lessons have to be paid for."

Father left off sticking the needle in, and raised his head. Mother came back too.

"This week? But I – but you –" He couldn't find what to say. His eyes flashed helplessly behind his spectacles.

"Everyone's already paid. The teacher told me again yesterday. This week is the last one."

Mother, wiping her fingers on her apron, looked anxiously at the one and the other. Turning to her son, she bent her head.

"Well then, it must be paid. What then –"

"T-to hell with your payments!" Father went on sewing angrily, so that the needle flashed.

"How long have schools been paid? Thirty roubles! Again!"

"It does have to be paid at some time." Robert had already put his cap on, pulling the peak down over his eyes.

"Five roubles," Mother quietly put in. "Today you'll take that coat to Juškans."

"Ten roubles!" Sveilis interjected bitterly. "To hell with it! There's lining in it, it's all done. We have to buy firewood. How much does good wood cost now? There's the rent, the week after next –"

Offended, Robert left the room with great clattering strides. Mother remained with the needles at the end of the table.

"Well! You always do that when you have to pay. Is the child to blame then? You wanted those German lessons! Last year and the year before you could pay, now this year you just can't. And it's nothing at all! The other day Mrs. Skrastiņa was saying her husband and son will be needing new suits for the society bazaar."

Sveilis cast a long incredulous look at his wife.

"They'll be needing them... For the summer fair, when they had to play at the society ball, they needed them then too. Then for Sprinģers, then for the Jew – friends of theirs! Word of mouth, all great friends of theirs, but when they had to measure up – nothing!" All that excitement, but the hunger didn't go away. With every moment the fragrance seemed to get stronger. The yellow-brown slice of bread was enticingly close to the dish of curds. Sveilis could stand it no longer. He stuck the needle in, put Juškans' coat on the table and with his long bony fingers grabbed the bread in one hand, the knife in the other. With a skilful movement the knife cut the piece of bread into two equal parts in a moment. "Pour. Let's eat. Made probably won't be there today."

Mrs. Sveile poured for her husband. She looked over at the door and poured for herself as well. She sat down on a chair at the end of the table. She cut off half of the remaining piece

of bread and carefully strewn crumbs of dry curds on it. She took little bites, striving not to munch with her toothless mouth in eating.

Sveilis chewed robustly, and took noisy draughts from his mug. His brow was furrowed in one big frown. His thin, sparse little grey beard twitched curiously. His nose snorted loudly. For quite a while Sveilis didn't say a word. His eyes only moved from the mug to the curd dish and back. He didn't smear the whole implement, but took each morsel in turn from the dish. Onto the corner of the bread he moved his index finger around and with it swept the raised end of the knife, on which was a little butter and a decent portion of curds. As he bit, his lips also stroked the crook of his finger – it was wet and shiny. Not a crumb fell to the ground.

“Pour me another.” Sveilis shoved the mug toward his wife. “Maybe that Made won't come home at all today.”

Mrs. Sveile slowly poured. And it was clear from her face: there was enough left for Made too. Nevertheless, having poured, she cast a timid look into the bottom of the jug.

“Naughty girl,” Sveilis resumed after a moment. “I don't know where she gads about. She won't bring buttons. Juškans' suit has to be ready by noon.”

“She doesn't gad about,” Mrs. Sveile objected.

“What do you mean, doesn't gad about! Who was it had to run to the ball the other Sunday? Thirty kopecks gone down the drain! The boots have to be mended, a new buckle for the belt. How are we supposed to manage?”

Now Mrs. Sveile was also starting to worry.

“You just talk! Is she supposed to hang around here all week in those rags? A young person needs her pleasures too –”

“Pleasures!” Sveilis screwed up his mouth in disdain. His wife wasn't listening.

"What girl here still goes around in patched-up boots like those! She's had her only dress for over a year – goodness knows how many times it's been washed." She was quite agitated. She pushed her glass away so that it struck the jug with a clink. With her nervous fingers she kneaded a lump of bread. "Couldn't that August help us a bit –"

Sveilis dismissed her with his hand. With his elbows he pushed his wife's knife downwards. While she lifted it up, he quickly ate a chewed morsel. Having eaten, he said nothing, however. Only after quite a while did he speak again.

"Nothing will come of those German lessons, nothing. Just like that Skrastiņš' son: he went to that school, he just did. There, while his father doesn't have any schooling. He just plays at dances as a fiddler. That's a great skill, that. Who knows – like our own. If one is like that, will the other be much better!"