

**Biography:** Jānis Jaunsudrabiņš (1877–1962), one of the most well-known Latvian authors of psychological prose. left a lasting mark on every literary genre imaginable, though in the present day he is mostly remembered for his skilful portrayals of country life. Past and present critics have also remarked on Jaunsudrabiņš' realistic approach to describing people and his use of vibrant and picturesque "popular language".

**Synopsis:** At the beginning of the novel *The Farmer and the Devil*, the retired Latvian army officer Krasts is building his new farm. Together with his wife Aina and her father Andrāns, he works tirelessly to complete it, turning the surrounding spruce forest into pastures and putting up new farm buildings. However, a devil, a figure in Latvian tradition who is more of a trickster than a diabolical villain, has lived in this part of the forest for centuries and is angered by the destruction of his home, so he directs a series of misfortunes at the farmer – a beautiful woman named Manga, lack of money, etc. – to try and make him leave. At first the farmer is somewhat susceptible to the devil's temptations, but in the end he pulls himself together and defeats them, so that good triumphs after all at the end of the novel.

## Excerpt

### Prologue

It was midday. The Devil, the very grandfather of all devils, had emerged from his winter den and was basking in the sun amongst the brushwood on the hillside. There was still a slight whiff of sludge and fish about him, an attraction for the flies that swarmed around him in great clouds, attacking his back, crawling into his ears and getting in the slits of his eyes and the corners of his mouth.

Shaking out his legs as if about to swim, pulling at last year's grass and letting the ants run through his fingers, the Devil reflected on what a pleasure it was to live in God's world. All winter long, he slept amongst the weeds at the bottom of the lake atop great caskets full of gold coins, but as soon as the opening of water between the ice and moss grew large enough, he crawled back outside. Edging out, he snorted and shook himself off, twisting, turning and stretching out his limbs. Then, swaying slightly, he circled the lake. As he walked, he picked the cranberries glistening like red buttons on the pale hillocks then poured handfuls of them into his mouth, crushing them with his tongue. They were the first thing to pass his lip after his long winter's sleep.

It brought the Devil great pleasure to think back over the many previous springs and summers when the lake had lain like a blue eye within a tranquil face of moss, reflecting all that slumbered or flew over it. Right there, down by the water where it was perpetually damp, bog bilberries, cloudberry and lingonberries grew in lush clusters. Berry pickers were inebriated by the heady scent of marsh tea. At midday on days as intoxicating as this, the Devil had to do no more than sneeze or poke one of his horns out of the bushes and folk would run away in haste without even crossing themselves. It was only the permanent inhabitants of the bog land who didn't fear him. The fox ran about in peace, hares leapt around and grass-snakes warmed themselves on hillocks, twisted into speckled knots. Black-grouse hens slept all night under crippled, tatty pine-trees, sheltering their chicks beneath their wings. Yes, the Devil had been stomping round the bog, lolling about on its slope, for hundreds, maybe even for thousands of years, and would continue to do so for a further hundred years or more, as the seasons emerged from eternity before dancing away into the air like dragonflies.

And yet, has there not been some change this last winter?

As with the start of each bright new spring, a blue strip of snow stretched across the northern side of the hill, separating the damp, mossy bog from the fir trees on dryland. It was cool there in the shade whereas here, on the southern side, the sun beat down so warmly that all kinds of bugs crawled about and gnats buzzed everywhere. Unlike other springs however, the ants and flies, the flies especially, paid no heed to the Devil whatsoever. Instead, they feasted around the birch tree stumps, overflowing with sap running right down to their moss-covered roots.

Over the mountains and above the treetops glistening with last year's pinecones, spring-like clouds, light and easy and without even a hint of darker shadows, drifted slowly from the northern evenings to the southern mornings. Everywhere, the ground was the colour of dry thatch – only along the sides of ditches did clusters of marsh marigolds swirl and the first spring flowers, as blue as the sky between the clouds, bloomed in the coves of grey alder-trees ...

The same scene, as good and as familiar as ever. And yet, still so foreign as if it had never been seen before.

How on earth could it have happened over such a short span of time – during the darkness of just one winter?

What had brought on all these changes?

Could it be the fault of the tall piles of firewood, where large birch logs lay about, their backs covered in white bark? Or were the fat pine and fir trees alongside the evenly sawn-off tree stumps to blame, their surfaces glittering like amber with their covering of clear acorns of resin?

Creeping forwards on all fours, rowing himself ahead with his elbows, the Devil drew closer to the nearest birch stump and covered its sawn-off face with his tongue as if it were

a red cloth. Who could possibly keep him from delighting in such achievements of civilization? He licked the sweet sap, blissfully smacking his lips, totally unperturbed by the fact that, along with the sap, he was lapping up tiny gnats, unable to escape due to their sap-soaked wings.

Warmed through to the bone, refreshed and cheered by the beautiful spring day, maybe even slightly reconciled with the unpleasant changes, the Devil eventually lay his ear on the crook of his arm and closed his eyes. Given his great age, the Devil's eyelids were already so heavy that he could only keep them open during the darkest hours of night. When the sun was high, his eyes were like two finely chiselled splinters under his rough-skinned brow.

But what was that?

The Devil stuck his nose, shaped like a crooked sheep's muzzle, up into the air.

'I smell a stranger! I smell a stranger!' he murmured anxiously.

Hastily, like a hay stack tossed by wind, he rolled into the alder undergrowth where he clung like glue to a thick fir tree, drenched in water droplets. Pricking up his ears, his eyes as big as saucers, he listened and watched to see what would unfold.

Suddenly, a man appeared on top of the hill. He was about thirty years old, his hat pushed in a carefree manner back on his head. The wind tousled his longish blond hair. A young woman wearing a white headscarf came to join him. A grey woollen shawl was wrapped over her shoulders, in which she carried a child. The little mite had stretched out both his arms, as if wishing to catch the sunshine, everything else reflected in his blue eyes.

The broad-shouldered man, the father of the little creature, turned towards his wife and, taking the child's little hand in his big one, said,

'Uldis, look, we shall build a house for ourselves right here. What do you say to this sunny spot of land?'

The mother spoke in place of her child.

'There is no more beautiful corner of the world since this one belongs to us. Just look - there's the railway track and station. A train must be going past right now as I see a white thread of smoke gliding towards Riga. There is a small city nearby. There is a river. There must be a watermill, too, as one side of the river is wide and blue while the other draws close into the bank. From where I'm standing, there's a perfect view for miles around ...'

'Over here ...' her husband continued, 'on this side, there is a meadow, a marsh, a lake ... Food for the cattle, berries and fish for us.'

'And our home right here, on top of the hill?'

'Nowhere else would do!'

'Won't all kinds of winds roar round it, perched up here?'

'Look carefully, see how it is enclosed by a semi-circle of tall fir trees. They will shield the house from the North wind. We won't build our cattle-sheds and barns or woodsheds up here but down at the bottom of the slope. That way, we won't have to pull the carts up such a steep hill and we will be able to see over their rooftops and far into the distance from our windows. Yes, only the house will be up here, the other buildings will be down below, the orchard on the left, the vegetable patch on the right, the road in between, zig-zagging down the hillside.'

The couple sat on the ground and for a while were lost in thought. The man had now pulled his hat down over his eyes, looking thoughtfully at the logs lying beside him and the heaps of firewood. Meanwhile, his wife unwrapped a round, white breast from her light-weight blouse which was greedily latched onto by the baby's pink mouth, who then sucked

contentedly. When the little one had had his fill, his mother spread her woollen shawl on the ground and placed the child on top where he was free to crawl about to his heart's content. The pair then looked around themselves. They nattered on at such length that the Devil found himself feeling quite piqued. He had had a feeling that this spring would bring something new to his life, something previously unheard and unseen. Oh, oh! Here, in the forest, not only had they cut down the trees, which was no great wonder, but they were going to use the timber to build a house in his part of the forest. And he, the old Devil and sole possessor of the whole place, might now have to abscond like some baron or earl...Well, well, well, mustn't let that lad think too highly of himself. The Devil was certainly no ordinary squire, one to be bribed as his father's father may have been with a kiss to the hand, or one to be pushed aside by changing times, lacking the agility to resist. Very well! So, this young pair of humans were set upon building a home for themselves at the top of the hill. The Devil would squat at the corner of the house, just as he was sitting now by the fir tree, and wouldn't budge an inch from what was rightfully his. Who was to say the pair wouldn't be worn down eventually and concede that the Devil was the sole owner of the lake – the lake that had been his territory and home since time immemorial. Not to mention the marsh, which was his berry orchard and parkland, and hillside where he basked in the sun all spring, summer and autumn before the lake froze over. Let them sit there, talking away, planning how to build it all, which tree stumps they will pull up, how they will plough the land and sow it. Whilst he, the Devil, will do exactly as he sees fit. He would take all necessary steps to trick and deceive them to ensure that they failed in every way possible...

For the first time in his extraordinarily long life, the Devil felt really bad-tempered ... Clenching his fists and looking back over his shoulder, he slipped sideways back into the bog.

## Chapter 1

'Good day to you and your household! May I presume that you are the owner of this house?'

'I am indeed, Captain, sir.'

Krasts was startled by the reply. Taken back, he looked at the young man standing in front of him, who gave him a military salute, his fingers on his hare fur trapper's hat.

'Captain, sir, I doubt you remember me, sir, but I fought under your command in the campaign which saw us hound Bermont out of Torņakalns. My name is Vītols. Our house is called Rozas.'

'Captain, sir ...'

Those days seemed so very long ago. What kind of captain was he now? The only things left now were the long indentations on the fur collar of his battle coat where the red stripes denoting his rank had once lain. That was all that remained of his old life. Apart from the injury to his hip, of course, and the ensuing operation which had left one leg shorter than the other and him with a permanent limp.

The two men met at the front door of Rozas. Vītols, as the proprietor, had come out to save the empty-handed guest from the dogs that continued barking so ferociously that it was almost impossible for them to make themselves heard. Seeking somewhere quieter, the owner of Rozas led Krasts inside where he gathered up a chair and, delighted that providence had brought to him this officer, greatly respected and revered by his privates, took him out into his garden.

'What winds bring you here, Captain, sir?'

'The wind of my own wings. Now I am going to captain my own plot of land, one within the regulated size. For now, I don't have a living creature under my command but I have already declared war – on the pine and fir trees on the hillside, to start with. You may not have been aware that, since Christmas, I have been your closest neighbour. I have been granted new farmland, right here on the edge of the marsh.'

'Is that so? I'm delighted and honoured to hear it!'

Vītols summoned his cross-eyed wife from the adjacent room and introduced their guest, telling her briefly who he was and what he was to be. His wife was followed by two boys, aged about sixteen and fourteen.

'These are my sons from my first marriage,' said the lady of the house. 'They've completed secondary school and now loaf about in the yard. Our pockets can't stretch to any further education for them.'

'But they must be a great help to you at home, and out in the field, too,' Krasts said, shaking the boys' hands.

'If only they had the will to work, the little scoundrels,' Vītols quietly replied.

Not quietly enough for his wife, who snorted and said in a sharp voice,

'There will be enough time for work when they are old enough. The later the colt is saddled, the bigger cart it can pull. Let us take Estonian horses as an example.'

From her speech and demeanour, it was clear that she wore the trousers in that household and had sole control over the two boys. Even without her speaking, a careful observer would have perceived the same, appearing as she did to be her husband's senior – he could not have been more than thirty while she looked around forty at the youngest. On top of which, he was skinny, lithe and fast while she was as heavy as a sod of turf.



A monumental amount of work lay ahead of Krasts. The farmland assigned to him, next to the Rozas field, was no more than a fallow plot from the former estate field. In addition, there were a couple more hectares of damp meadow alongside the marsh, which would provide them with peat, and a beautiful, tree-clad hillside leading up from the marsh below. It all had to be worked upon and cleared. To start with, he would turn to building sheds and barns in the middle of the forest and, most importantly, a single-roomed building with a chimney that would have to be ready by autumn. It was already early February. The forest had to be cut and the wood had to be worked by springtime. Together with his father-in-law, Andrāns, who at fifty was still in his prime and a carpenter, they had resolved to do all the work themselves. While carrying out his winter work, Krasts needed somewhere to stay which had taken him to the door of who turned out to be one of his former soldiers, although Krasts had no recollection of ever having seen his face before.

This made him rather uncomfortable but he consoled himself with the thought that few officers during the war could have recognized all their privates and known them by name.

So here he was. Krasts, a former captain, now having to ask a lowly private, a certain Vītols, owner of Rozas and his closest neighbour, if he would provide board and lodgings to the two of them until spring. They would have to buy food, anyhow. If you have to spend time preparing food for your stomach in the forest, there's no time for working. There's no time to rest if you have to slave over a stove after a day in the fields and again in the morning before going out again.

As Krasts made his request, Vītols looked at his wife, waiting for an answer along with their guest. It wasn't that he was averse to idea, more that it was not for him to say either 'yes' or 'no'.

After a pregnant pause, the mistress of the house turned towards the window and, bending over slightly, as if trying to spot something beneath the window, said,

'We can hardly go turning away such fine folk. Maybe they did you good in the past. I wouldn't know.'

It was hardly a warm welcome, but Krasts was grateful all the same and thanked them, adding,

'What good could I have done. I probably only pushed him to go where no one wants to set foot. Things were not easy back then. '

'Master Captain, sir, those ...'

'Wouldn't it be better to call each other neighbour from now on?'

'Those were good times, my dear neighbour!'

Krasts believed he had found a truly sincere and well-meaning neighbour in this humble man. Feeling cheerful, he took his leave.

It was Krasts' first tentative visit to his neighbours. It was the first time he had seen his plot of land, despite it being under a deep layer of snow. In his application, he had only put down for the rural territory of Tiltene as that was where his father's cradle had hung ... beyond that, he put his trust in what fate had in store for him. As far as he could see that winter, fate had granted him a beautiful and, he hoped, fertile plot of land.

Despite the sense that his new surroundings were quite foreign to him, Krasts was most content. The countryside was, indeed, quite unknown to him. He had been born and raised in Riga where his father, who had no land to his name, had headed during the years of rapid industrial growth. He was surprised at just how attracted he was to these alien surroundings. Could it be the so-called love of his motherland, that innate desire to have

your own corner of the world, a sense shared by animals and birds, not to mention human beings?

Krasts and his father-in-law were now staying at Rozas, having united their separate households in Riga. Krasts had sold his five-room apartment close to the centre, getting a high enough price for it to buy a good horse and a couple of cows. He found himself with more money than he had expected, quite a windfall. Both the men's wives, mother and daughter, along with Krasts' young son, had settled as well as they could into Andrāni's small house on the outskirts of the city –although by the time all the furniture was in, there was hardly room to swing a cat. But then, they were hardly going to be dancing there and being cooped up like that was not going to last forever. By April, they would hopefully be in their own home in the country. Just imagine, in their own country house garden!

The women's husbands were hardly leading the high life. Rozas was a house from former days with a very old-fashioned main room, built in keeping with traditions from generations back. There was an outside door and chimney right in the centre of the house. A spacious shared room at one end, the masters' quarters at the other, divided into two chambers by a thin board wall. The entrance, in the middle, had doors leading to both rooms and kitchen. The kitchen had a stable door; the top half could be left open to let out smoke or whatever else without leaving it wide open to allow the dogs and pigs that roamed freely round the garden, especially in winter, access to the food. The lower part was generally kept closed, the upper part left ajar. The door was only closed fully when no one was working in the kitchen and the fire in the stove was out. This upper half also served as a window since no light came down the chimney which narrowed up near the roof and was invariably clogged with meat hung up to smoke. There was a small pantry with a tiny

window behind the kitchen with two doors leading into both the masters and the servants' room. You could lay the table in either without having to run far to fetch bread.

The house was clearly well furnished and comfortable. Problems only arose when trying to put people up since every wall and corner was spoken for. In the past, people believed the huge central room to be necessary for all manner of necessary household tasks, neglecting the fact that they could make more space by splitting it up. In so doing, they would achieve more walls and Latvians love to have a wall to cling to.

Krasts and Andrāns, therefore, had to make do with the benches set alongside the large household table, usually only occupied by beggars and travelling Jewish tradesmen. Their host wanted Master Captain, as he insisted on calling his new neighbour by force of habit, to sleep with them in the masters' quarters. In the boys' beds, maybe, who could sleep on the floor in sleeping bags. Krasts wouldn't hear of it, especially as the wife said nothing to back up her husband's offer. To his mind, it was not fair either that two guests, both there for the same reason, should be separated and if they were, his father-in-law should be the one to sleep in a bed. So they both slept on the benches in the servants' room, their heads touching as the benches met at a right angle in the corner. That way, at night they could also discuss things which they hadn't thought of during the day. When there is a house to build, there is no end to the issues needing to be considered and decided upon. Like travelling Jews (tradesmen), they would unroll their sleeping bags at night and roll them up again the next morning, stashing them out of the way beneath the bench with blankets on top to stop them getting covered in dust.

Their lives were spent in the forest now, except for their lunch break when they returned to the house. Every morning, Krasts and Andrāns treaded their usual path to their place of work, one of them carrying an axe over one arm and a saw under the other, its

blade filed so sharply and with such perfectly cut tiny teeth that a needle would slide over them. They walked like that in the morning and back again in the evening, by then their steps a little wearier. They were starting to look like real lumberjacks, too. At first, they had both worn high boots bought in Riga, but they revealed themselves to be totally unsuitable. Their feet froze. Besides, the snow of early spring gnawed at their boots so much that, even when they rubbed their feet well with grease the night before, the next day they were again as red as a fox. Before long, it was unbearable, leaving them no option but to tie rough cow hides on their feet, creating the sort of coarsely made footwear their forefathers had worn. With their feet clad in these comfortable, light-weight coverings, they could wade through the snow without worry, despite having three pairs of thick woollen socks on, too.

The work in the forest wasn't especially difficult, even for someone with so little experience of manual labour as Krasts. Blessed with great physical strength and agility, he worked tirelessly despite his hip replacement that had made of him a war invalid. In the first few days, his soft hands developed several blisters from the saw handle and hard wood of the axe, which refused to break. These eventually turned into yellowish callouses his father-in-law would tease him about, saying his son-in-law was now truly initiated into the working class. With hands like those, he could safely tackle any battle, toiling against the earth, as awaited them once the snow had melted.

After having identified the most convenient spot for the outbuildings, both men set to work. They cut down the pine and fir trees that, with a great soughing, cracking and clap, came down in a windward direction, crashing into the deep snow, their half-broken branches flailing like arms. They cleaned off the good logs, cutting away their tops. They piled these tops along with rotten-cored logs and branchy birch trees aside for firewood, tying them with fresh alder or birch into beautifully neat bundles. They left untouched the

northern slope adjacent to the marsh - only fir trees grew there and the incline was so steep that there was no hope of ever working the land. It was best left as a wooded shield against the winds, preserving the area as it had been as part of the original estate park. Whereas the top of the hill and the whole of its southern slope they cleared meticulously. Constantly waded through, the snow appeared to have been ploughed. Viewing it from one side, the white dent in the dark forest grew bigger and bigger with each passing day. The locals, who had previously mocked the fine folk from Riga, looked at what they had achieved and commented, 'Never mind. These people won't steal your horses.'