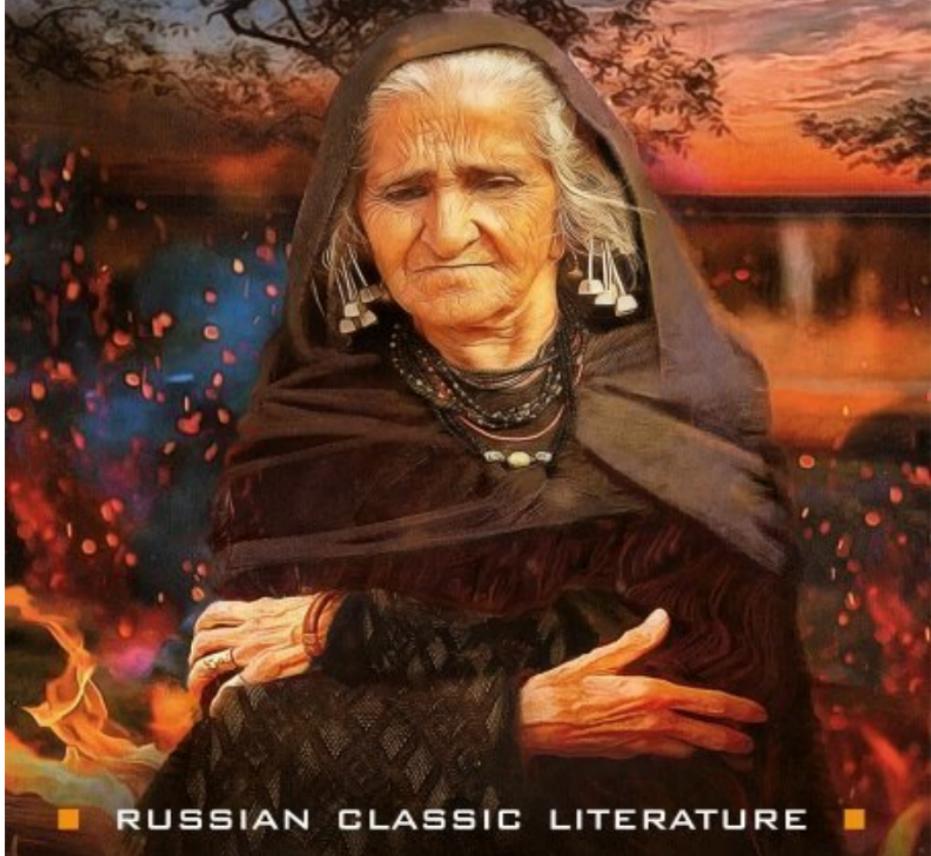


MAXIM GORKY

**OLD IZERGIL
AND OTHER STORIES**



■ RUSSIAN CLASSIC LITERATURE ■

Максим Горький
Old Izergil and other stories /
Старуха Изергиль и другие
рассказы. Книга для чтения
на английском языке
Серия «Russian Classic Literature»

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=39427555

*Old Izergil and other stories / Старуха Изергиль и другие рассказы. Книга
для чтения на английском языке: КАРО; Санкт-Петербург; 2018
ISBN 978-5-9925-1335-6*

Аннотация

В предлагаемом сборнике представлены, пожалуй, самые известные рассказы Максима Горького в переводе на английский язык.

Содержание

Old Izergil	5
I	5
II	15
III	31
Chelkash	39
I	42
II	56
III	77
The Philanderer	89
Makar Chudra	113
Afloat	133
I	133
II	148
Twenty-Six Men and a Girl	154
The Romancer	175
The Breakup	204

Maxim / Gorky

Old Izergil and other stories /

**Старуха Изергиль и другие
рассказы. Книга для чтения
на английском языке**

© КАРО, 2018

Old Izergil

I

These stories were told to me on the shore of the sea near Akkerman, in Bessarabia.

One evening, when our grape-picking was over for the day, the group of Moldavians with whom I had been working went down to the sea-shore, leaving me and an old woman named Izergil lying in the deep shadow of the grape-vines, silently watching the silhouettes of the people who had gone down to the shore merge with the blue shadows of night.

They sang and laughed as they went; the men were bronzed by the sun, they had thick black moustaches and curly hair that hung clown to their shoulders, and they were wearing short jackets and wide trousers tight at the ankle; the girls and women were gay, they had dark-blue eyes and graceful bodies, and their skins were as bronzed as the men's. Their silky black hair hung loose and the warm breeze played with it, making the coins plaited into it tinkle. The wind flowed over us in a broad continuous current, but from time to time it seemed to come up against some obstacle, and then there would be a great gust that blew out the women's hair, making it stream about their heads in fantastic manes. This gave them the appearance of strange creatures out

of fairy-tales. As they went farther and farther away, the night and my imagination clothed them in increasing beauty.

Someone was playing a violin, a girl was singing in a deep throaty voice, bursts of laughter could be heard...

The air was heavy with the tang of the sea and the vapours rising from the earth, which had been drenched by rain just before nightfall. Even now tattered storm-clouds were meandering across the sky in odd forms and colourings – here they were vague, like columns of smoke, grey and ashen-blue; there they were mottled black and brown and as sharp as fragments of rock. And between them gleamed the tender night sky dotted with gold. All of this – the sounds and the smells, the clouds and the people – was sad and beautiful and seemed to be the introduction to a marvellous tale. It was as if everything had been checked in its growth and was dying. The sound of the voices faded away as they receded, becoming nothing but mournful sighs.

“Why did you not go with them?” asked old Izergil, nodding in the direction of the sea.

She had become bent in two by time, her eyes, once shining black, were now dull and rheumy. And she had a strange voice – it sounded as if her tongue were made of crunching bone.

“I did not wish to,” I replied.

“You Russians are born old. All of you are as gloomy as demons. Our girls are afraid of you. But you, my lad, are young and strong.”

The moon came up. Large, round and blood-red, it seemed to have emerged from the bowels of that steppe which had swallowed up so much human flesh and blood; this, perhaps, was why it was so rich and fertile. The old woman and I were caught in the lacy shadow of the leaves as in a net. Across the steppe, which extended to our left, flitted cloud shadows made pale and transparent by the blue moonshine.

“Look, there goes Larra!”

I turned to where the old woman pointed a crooked shaking finger and saw the shadows moving – there were many of them, and one, darker than the others, was travelling faster; it was cast by a wisp of cloud sailing closer to the earth and more swiftly than its sisters.

“There is no one there,” I said.

“You are blinder than me, an old woman. Look. Do you not see something dark fleeing across the steppe?”

I looked again, and again saw nothing but shadows.

“It is only a shadow. Why do you call it Larra? “

“Because it is Larra. A shadow is all that is left of him, and no wonder – he has been living for thousands of years. The sun has dried up his flesh and blood and bones and the wind has scattered them like dust. Just see how God can punish a man for his pride!”

“Tell me the story,” I said to the old woman, anticipating one of those delightful tales born of the steppe.

And she told me the story.

“Many thousands of years have passed since this took place.

Far across the sea, in the place where the sun rises, is a land where a great river flows, and in that land every leaf and blade of grass casts a shadow large enough to protect a man from the sun, which pours down mercilessly there.

“That is how generous the earth is in that land.

“A tribe of powerful people once lived there; they tended their flocks and displayed great strength and courage in hunting wild animals, and they feasted when the hunt was over, singing songs and making merry with the maids.

“One day, during such a feast, an eagle flew out of the sky and carried off a black-haired maiden as lovely as the night. The arrows the men sent after the bird fell back on the ground without injuring it. And so the men set out in search of the maiden, but they could not find her. And in time she was forgotten, as everything on this earth is forgotten.”

The old woman drew a deep breath and grew silent. When she spoke in her crackling voice it was as if she were voicing the sentiments of all the forgotten ages embodied in the shades of remembrance dwelling in her breast. Softly the sea echoed the introduction to this ancient legend which may have had beginning on these very shores.

“But in twenty years she herself came back, worn and wizened, and with her was a youth as strong and handsome as she had been twenty years before. And when she was asked where she had been, she replied that the eagle had carried her off to the mountains and had lived with her there as his wife. This was

their son. The eagle was no more; on feeling his strength ebbing he had soared high into the sky for the last time, and, folding his wings, had plunged to his death upon the jagged cliffs.

“Everyone gazed in amazement at the son of the eagle, and they saw that he in no way differed from them except that his eyes had the cold proud gleam of the king of birds. When they addressed him, he sometimes did not deign to reply, and when the elders of the tribe approached him, he spoke to them as their equal. This they took as an insult, and they called him an unfeathered arrow with an unsharpened tip, and they told him that thousands like him and thousands twice his age paid them homage and obeyed their commands. But he looked them boldly in the eye and said that there were no others like himself; let others pay them homage if they wished, but he had no mind to. Oh, then the elders were angry indeed, and in their anger they said:

“There can be no place for him among us. Let him go wherever he wishes.’

“He laughed and went where he wished: he went over to a fair maid who had been studying him intently, and he took her in his arms. And she was the daughter of one of the elders who had reproved him. And although he was very handsome, she thrust him away, for she was afraid of her father. She thrust him away and walked off, and he struck her mightily, and when she fell down he stamped upon her breast until the blood spurted out of her mouth as high as the sky, and the maiden gave a great sigh

and writhed like a snake and died.

“Those who saw this happen were speechless with fear; never before had they seen a woman killed so brutally. And for a long time they stood there in silence, looking at her where she lay with wide-open eyes and blood-stained mouth, and at him who was standing beside her, standing alone, apart from everyone else, very proud – he even held his head high as if he were calling down punishment upon it. When at last people recovered from their surprise, they seized him and bound him and left him there, finding that to kill him now would be too simple and would give them little satisfaction.”

The night deepened and darkened and became filled with odd little sounds. The marmots peeped mournfully in the steppe, the grasshoppers whirred among the vines, the leaves sighed and whispered to one another, the disc of the moon, which had been blood-red, paled as it withdrew from the earth and poured its blue light down on the steppe more lavishly than ever.

“And then the elders gathered to decide on a punishment equal to such a crime. At first they thought of having horses tear him to pieces, but this seemed too mild; they thought of having each of them send an arrow into his body, but this, too, was rejected; it was suggested that they burn him alive, but the smoke of the fire would hide his sufferings from them; many suggestions were made, but not one of them satisfied everyone. And all the while his mother knelt silently before them, finding neither words nor tears to move them to pity. For a long time they spoke together,

and at last one of their wise men said, after due consideration:

“Let us ask him why he has done this.’ “And they asked him. “Unbind me,’ he said. ‘I shall not say a word so long as I am bound.’

“And when they had unbound him he said: “What would you have of me?’ – and his tone was that of a master to his slaves.

“You have heard,’ said the wise man.

“Why should I explain my actions to you?”

“That we may understand them. Listen, proud one: it is certain that you are to die; then help us to understand why you have done such a thing. We shall go on living, and it is important that we add to our store of knowledge.’

“Very well, I shall tell you, although perhaps I myself do not wholly understand why I did it. It seems to me that I killed her because she repulsed me. And I had need of her.’

“But she was not yours,’ they said to him.

“And do you make use of only those things which are yours? I see that each man has nothing but arms and legs and a tongue to speak with. And yet he owns cattle and women and land and many other things.’

“To this they replied that a man must pay for whatever he takes possession of – pay with his mind or his strength or even his life.

“He said that he had no wish to pay.

“When they had spoken to him for some time they saw that he considered himself above everyone else, that indeed he had no thought for anyone but himself. And they were horrified when

they realized that he had isolated himself from the whole world. He had neither tribe nor mother nor cattle nor wife; nor did he wish to have any of these things.

“And, seeing this, they again discussed what might be a fitting punishment for him. But they had not spoken long before that same wise man, who until this moment had taken no part in the discussion, said:

“‘Wait. A punishment has been found, and a dreadful one it is. In a thousand years you could not think of anything to equal it. The punishment lies in himself. Unbind him and let him go free. That will be his punishment.’

“And then a wonderful thing happened. A bolt of thunder struck out of a cloudless sky. In this way the heavenly powers confirmed the decision of the wise man. Everyone accepted it, and, having done so, they went away. And the youth, who was henceforth named Larra, meaning the despised and rejected – the youth laughed at the people who had rejected him; laughed loudly on finding himself alone and as free as his father had been. But his father had not been a man, whereas he was. Yet he began to live as free as a bird. He stole cattle and maidens and anything else he wished from the tribesmen. They shot arrows at him, but they could not pierce his body, protected as it was by the invisible armour of the highest punishment. He was adroit, rapacious, strong and cruel, and never did he meet people face to face. He only saw them from a distance. Thus for a long time did he hover alone at the edge of human communities – for a long,

long time. And then one day he crept close to a settlement, and when the people rushed out to attack him, he remained where he was and made not the slightest effort to defend himself. Then one of the men guessed his intention and cried out:

“Do not touch him! He is seeking death!”

“And the people stayed their hands, not wishing to kill him and thereby bring relief to one who had wronged them so. They stayed their hands and laughed at him. And he shuddered at the sound of their laughter, and he clutched at his breast, as if searching for something there. And suddenly he hurled himself at the people and threw stones at them. But they dodged his stones and did not throw a single one in return, and when at last, exhausted, he let out a cry of despair and threw himself down on the ground, they withdrew and stood watching him. They saw him struggle to his feet and pick up a knife someone had dropped in the scuffle and strike himself in the breast with it. But the knife broke in two as if it had struck upon stone. And again he threw himself down on the ground and beat his head against it, but the earth, too, withdrew from him, leaving a hollow where his head struck it.

“He is unable to die!” cried the people in joy.

“And they went away and left him. He lay on his back gazing up into the sky, and he saw the black dots of mighty eagles soaring far, far away. And there was enough misery in his eyes to sadden the whole world. From that time to this he has been alone, at large, waiting for death. He does nothing but wander

over the earth. You yourself have seen how like a shadow he has become, and like a shadow he will remain till the end of time. He understands nothing, neither human speech nor actions; he just goes on and on, for ever in search of something. He cannot be said to live, and yet he is unable to die. And there is no place for him among men. Just see what a man's pride can bring him to!"

The old woman heaved a sigh, and once or twice she gave an odd shake of her head, which had fallen on her breast.

I looked at her. Sleep, it seemed, was overpowering her, and for some reason I felt sorry for her. She had ended her story in an exalted, admonishing tone, and yet I had detected a note of fear and servility in it.

The people down by the sea were singing, and singing in an unusual way. The tune was begun by a contralto, who sang only two or three notes before a second voice took it up from the beginning while the first carried it forward. A third, fourth and fifth voice joined in in the same way, and suddenly this same tune was begun by a chorus of men's voices.

Each of the women's voices was heard separately, and they were like streams of different colours tumbling down over rocks, leaping and sparkling as they rushed to join the rising swell of men's voices, were drowned in it, darted up out of it, drowned it out in their turn, and again, one by one, separated themselves from the heavier stream and soared, clear and strong, into the heights.

The sound of the surf could not be heard for the singing.

II

“Have you ever heard such singing before?” asked Izergil, raising her head to give me a toothless smile.

“No, I have not. Not anywhere.”

“And you never will. We love to sing. Only a handsome race can sing well – a handsome race that is filled with love of life. We are such a race. Look, think you those people who are singing are not weary from the day’s labour? They laboured from sunrise to sunset, but now that the moon has risen they are singing. People with no interest in life would have gone to bed; but those who find life sweet are singing.”

“But their health —” I began.

“One always has enough health to last a lifetime. Health! If you had money, would you not spend it? Health is gold no less than money. Do you know how my youth was spent? I wove rugs from dawn till dusk, scarcely unbending my back. I, who was as full of life as a ray of sunlight, had to sit as motionless as a stone. Sometimes my very bones ached from sitting so long. But when evening came I ran off to embrace the man I loved. For the three months that my love lasted I ran to him and spent all my nights with him. Yet see to what a great old age I have lived! The blood in my veins was sufficient, it seems. How often I fell in love! How many kisses I gave and took!”

I looked into her face. Her black eyes were still dull; not even

her memories could restore their shine. The moon poured light on her dry, cracked lips, on her sharp chin tufted with grey hair, and on her wrinkled nose that was curved like the beak of an owl. There were dark hollows where her cheeks had been, and in one of them lay a strand of grey hair that had escaped from under the red rag she had twisted round her head. A web of wrinkles covered her face, neck, and hands, and at every movement she made I expected this parchment-like skin to split and peel off, leaving a bare skeleton with dull black eyes sitting beside me.

Once more she began to talk in her cracked voice:

“I lived with my mother near Falmi, on the banks of the Birlat River, and I was fifteen years old when he came to our farm. He was tall and dark and graceful and very gay. He stopped his boat under our window and called out in a ringing voice: ‘Hullo! Can I get some wine and something to eat here?’ I looked out of the window, and through the branches of the ash-tree I saw the river all blue in the moonlight, and him standing there in a white blouse tied with a wide sash, one foot in the boat, the other on the bank. And he was rocking the boat and singing, and when he caught sight of me he said: ‘Just see what a fair maid lives here, and I knew nothing of it!’ – as if he knew all the other fair maids in the world. I gave him some wine and some pork, and four days later I gave myself to him. Every night he and I went boating together. He would come and whistle softly, like a marmot, and I would jump out of the window like a fish on to the river-bank. And off we would go. He was a fisherman from

the Prut, and when my mother found out about us and beat me, he urged me to run away to Dobruja with him and even further – to the tributaries of the Danube. But I had grown tired of him by then – he never did anything but sing and make love. I found it boring. And just at that time a band of Hutsuls came roaming through these parts and they found sweethearts for themselves here. Those maids had a merry time of it! Sometimes one of the lovers would disappear, and his sweetheart would pine away, sure that he had been put in prison or killed in a fight, and then, lo and behold! he would drop out of a clear sky, alone or with two or three comrades, bringing rich gifts (they came by their riches easily). And he would feast with her, and boast of her to his comrades. And this would give her pleasure. Once I asked a girl who had such a lover to introduce me to the Hutsuls. Yet see, what was that girl’s name? I have forgotten. My memory has begun to fail me. But it happened so long ago, anyone would forget. Through this girl I met a young Hutsul. He was handsome. A red-head. Red hair and red whiskers. Flaming red. At times he was moody, at others tender, and again he would roar and fight like a wild beast. Once he struck me in the face. I sprang up on his chest like a cat and sank my teeth into his cheek. From then on he had a dimple in his cheek, and he liked me to kiss him on that dimple.”

“But what happened to the fisherman?” I asked.

“The fisherman? He stayed on. He joined their band – the Hutsuls. At first he begged me to come back to him and

threatened to throw me into the river if I did not, but he soon got over it. He joined their band and found himself another sweetheart. They were both hanged together – the fisherman and my Hutsulian lover. I went to see them hanged. In Dobruja. The fisherman was deathly pale and wept when he went to his death, but the Hutsul smoked his pipe. He walked straight ahead, smoking his pipe, his hands in his pockets, one of his moustaches sweeping his shoulder, the other his chest. When he caught sight of me, he took the pipe out of his mouth and cried out: ‘Farewell!’ I wept for him a whole year. They had been caught just when they were ready to go back to their native mountains. They were holding a farewell party at the house of a certain Rumanian when they were captured. Just the two of them. Several others were killed on the spot and the rest escaped. But the Rumanian was made to pay for what he had done. His farm and his mill and his barns of grain were burnt to the ground. He was turned into a beggar.”

“Did you do it?” I hazarded a guess.

“The Hutsuls had many friends – I was not the only one. Whoever was their best friend did this in their memory.”

The singing on the sea-shore had ceased by this time, and no other sound but the murmur of the waves accompanied the old woman’s tale. Their murmur, restless and brooding, was fitting accompaniment to this tale of a restless life. Milder grew the night, deeper the blue of the moonshine, and softer the indefinable sounds of night’s invisible denizens whose clamour

was drowned out by the increasing roar of the sea as the wind rose.

“And then there was a Turk I fell in love with. I was one of his harem in Scutari. For a whole week I lived there without minding it, but then I found the life tiresome. Nothing but women everywhere. He had eight of them. All day long they ate and slept and chattered nonsense. Or they quarrelled, and then they were like a set of cackling hens. The Turk was not a young man. His hair was almost white, and he was very rich and important. He spoke like an emperor. His eyes were black and straight – I mean they looked straight into your soul. And he was always praying. I first saw him in Bucharest. He was strutting about the bazaar like a king, looking very important. I smiled at him. That same evening I was seized in the street and brought to him. He traded in sandal and palm wood and had come to Bucharest to make purchases of some sort.

“Will you go away with me?” he asked.

“I will indeed,” I said.

“Very well,” he said.

“And I went away with him. He was very rich. He had a son, a slim dark-haired youth of sixteen. It was with him I ran away from the Turk – ran away to Bulgaria, to Lom-Palanka. There a Bulgarian woman knifed me in the chest because of her husband or lover, I have forgotten which.

“For a long time after that I lay ill in a nunnery. A Polish girl, a nun, took care of me, and her brother, a monk from a monastery

near Artzer-Palanka, used to come to see her. He kept wriggling round me like a worm, and when I got well I went off with him to Poland.”

“But wait: what happened to the Turkish boy?”

“Oh, him? He died. He pined away with homesickness, or perhaps it was love. He began to wither like a sapling that has too much sun. Just withered away. I remember him lying there blue and transparent as ice, yet consumed by the flames of love. He kept asking me to bend over and kiss him. I loved him dearly and kissed him a lot. Little by little he became so weak he could hardly move. He would just lie there and beg me, as if he were begging alms, to lie down beside him and warm his poor body. And I did. The minute I lay down beside him he would be all aflame. One day I woke up to find him stone-cold. He was dead. I wept over him. Who can tell? Perhaps it was I who had killed him. I was twice his age and very strong and vigorous, but he? – he was just a child.”

She sighed and crossed herself – I had not seen her do that before. Three times she made the sign of the cross, muttering something between her dry lips.

“So you went off to Poland —” I prompted.

“I did, with that little Pole. He was beastly and absurd. When he wanted a woman, he would rub up against me like a tom-cat, the honey oozing between his lips; when his desire was satisfied he would lash me with his tongue as with a knout. One day when we were walking along the bank of a river, he said something

proud and insulting. Oh, I was angry! I seethed like boiling pitch. I picked him up like a baby – he was very small – and squeezed him until he went black in the face. Then I swung out and hurled him over the bank into the river. He gave a shout, and it sounded very funny. From the top of the bank I watched him struggling in the water, and then I went away and I have never seen him since. I was lucky in that respect: I never met my lovers after I had left them. It would be bad to meet them – like meeting the dead.”

The old woman grew silent. In my mind’s eye I saw the people her tale had conjured up. I saw her Hutsulian lover with the flaming-red hair and moustache calmly smoking his pipe as he went to his death. His eyes, it seemed to me, were a cold blue, and their glance was firm and intense. Beside him walked the dark-whiskered fisherman from the Prut. Loath to die, he was weeping, and his once merry eyes stared dully out of a face that had grown white in the anticipation of death, while his tear-drenched moustaches drooped mournfully at the corners of his twisted mouth. I saw the important old Turk who was no doubt a fatalist and a despot, and beside him his son, a pale delicate flower of the Orient, poisoned by kisses. And the conceited Pole, polite and cruel, eloquent and cold. And all of them now were but wan shades, and she whom they had kissed so ardently was sitting beside me, still alive but shrivelled with age – bloodless, fleshless, with a heart bereft of all desire and eyes bereft of their shine – almost as much of a shade as they themselves.

She continued:

“I found it hard to live in Poland. The people there are false and cold-blooded. And I could not speak their snake-like tongue that does nothing but hiss. Why do they hiss? God gave them a snake-like tongue because they are so false. And so I set off, I knew not for where, and saw the Poles getting ready to rise up against you Russians. I came to the town of Bochnia. There a certain Jew bought me, not for himself, but to trade with my body. I agreed to this. One has to know how to do something if he is to earn a living; I did not know how to do anything, and I paid for it with my body. But I resolved that if I could get enough money to take me back to my native town on the Birlat, I would break my bonds, however fast they were. I could not complain of my life there. Rich gentlemen came and feasted with me. That cost them big sums. They fought with each other over me and were brought to ruin. One of them tried for a long time to win my heart, and at last this is what he did: he came with his servant, who was carrying a big sack, and he emptied the sack over my head. Gold coins came showering down over me and it cheered my heart to hear their ring as they struck the floor. And yet I turned the man out. He had a fat greasy face and his belly was as puffy as a pillow. He looked like a stuffed pig. Yes, I turned him out, even though he told me he had sold all his land and his house and his horses to bring me that gold. But by that time I was in love with a worthy gentleman with a scarred face. His face was criss-crossed with scars left by Turkish sabres. He had just come back from helping the Greeks fight the Turks. There was

a man for you! What were the Greeks to him, a Pole? Yet he went and helped them fight their enemy. The Turks marred him cruelly – under their blows he lost an eye and two fingers of the left hand. What were the Greeks to him, a Pole? Yet he fought for them, and he did this because he yearned to do brave deeds, and when a man yearns to do brave deeds, he will always find an opportunity. Life is full of such opportunities, and if a man does not find them, it is because he is lazy or cowardly or does not understand life, for if he understands, he is sure to want to leave some memory of himself behind him. And if everyone wished to do this, life would not gobble people up without leaving a trace of them. A very fine man he was, he with the scarred face. He would have gone to the ends of the earth to do a good deed. I am afraid your people killed him in the uprising. Why did you go to fight the Magyars? But hush, say nothing.”

And admonishing me to hold my tongue, old Izergil herself grew silent and thoughtful.

“I knew a certain Magyar. One day he left me – it was in the depths of winter – and in the spring, when the snow melted, they found him in a field with a bullet through his head. As many people die of love as of the plague – quite as many, if they were to be counted. But what was I talking about? Ah, yes, about Poland. It was there I played my last game. I happened to meet a gentleman who was very handsome, devilishly handsome. But by that time I was old. Ugh, so old! I must have been forty by then – at least forty. And he was proud and had been pampered

by the women. I came to love him dearly. He thought I would be his for the asking, but I did not give myself up so easily. Never had I been the slave of anyone, and by that time I had broken off with the Jew, which cost me a pretty penny, I can tell you. I was living in Krakow in fine style, with horses and gold and servants and everything else I wanted. He came to see me, the proud demon, and expected me to throw myself into his arms. A pitched battle took place between us. I grew haggard under the strain, for it lasted a long time, but at last I won. He fell on his knees before me. But no sooner had he got me than he cast me off. Then I knew I had grown old, and a bitter realization it was. Very bitter. I loved him, the fiend, and he would laugh in my face when he met me. He was a beast. And he would speak mockingly of me to others, and I knew it. Oh, how I suffered! But there he was, always near me, and I doted on him in spite of everything. And then one day he went away to fight the Russians. I could not bear it. I tried to take myself in hand, but I could not master my feelings. I decided to go to him. He was stationed in a wood near Warsaw.

“But when I got there I found out that your soldiers had beaten them and he had been taken prisoner and was being held in a village not far away.

“In other words, I shall never see him again!” I thought to myself. And I wanted desperately to see him. So I thought of a way to do so. I dressed myself as a beggar-woman, pretended to be lame, covered my face, and set out for the village where he

was imprisoned. I found it full of soldiers and Cossacks; it cost me dear to stay there. When I found out where the Poles were, I realized it would be very hard to reach them. But reach them I must. And so one night I set out. As I was crawling between the beds of a vegetable garden I saw a sentry standing in front of me. I could hear the Poles singing and talking in loud voices. They were singing a song to the Virgin, and my Arkadek was singing with them. And I remembered with bitterness that once men had crawled after me, and now here was I crawling like a worm after a man, perhaps crawling to my death. The sentry had pricked up his ears and was leaning forward. What was I to do? I stood up and went towards him. I did not have a knife or any other weapon with me – nothing but my hands and my tongue. I was sorry I had not taken a knife with me. The sentry levelled his bayonet at my throat, and I whispered: ‘Wait! Listen to what I have to say and spare my life if you have a heart in your breast. I have nothing to offer you, but I beg your mercy.’ He lowered his gun and whispered: ‘Go away, old woman. Go away. What brings you here?’ And I said that my son was imprisoned there. ‘My son, soldier; does that mean nothing to you? You, too, are somebody’s son. Then look at me and understand that I have a son like you, and that he is imprisoned here. Let me have one look at him. Perhaps he must die soon, and perhaps you, too, will be killed on the morrow. Will your mother not shed tears over you? And will it not be hard for you to die without a last look at her, your mother? It will be just as hard for any son. Take pity

on yourself, and on him, and on me, his mother!’

“How long I stood there trying to persuade him! The rain poured down, drenching us. The wind blew and wailed, buffeting me now in the back, now in the chest. And I stood swaying in front of that stony-hearted soldier. He kept saying ‘no,’ and every time I heard that unfeeling word, the desire to see Arkadek flared up hotter within me. As I talked I measured him with my eye – he was small and thin and had a cough. At last I threw myself on the ground in front of him, and, still pleading with him, I seized him round the knees and threw him on the ground. He fell in the mud. Quickly I turned him face down and pressed his head into a puddle to keep him from crying out. He did not cry out, but he struggled to throw me off his back. I took his head in both hands and pushed it deeper into the puddle. He was suffocated. Then I rushed over to the barn where the Poles were singing. ‘Arkadek!’ I whispered through a chink in the wall. They are sly fellows, those Poles, and so they did not stop singing on hearing me. But suddenly I saw his eyes opposite mine. ‘Can you get out of here?’ I asked. ‘Yes, under the wall,’ he said. ‘Then come quickly.’ And so four of them crawled out of the barn, my Arkadek among them. ‘Where is the sentry?’ asked Arkadek. ‘There he lies.’ Then they crept away as quietly as possible, bent almost double. The rain kept coming down and the wind wailed loudly. We reached the end of the village and walked on through the woods for a long time without saying a word. We walked quickly. Arkadek held my hand in his, and his hand was hot and trembling. Oh,

how good it was to walk there beside him as long as he kept silent! They were my last moments – the last happy moments of an insatiable life! But at last we came to a meadow, and there we stopped. All four of them thanked me for what I had done. They talked on and on – I thought they would never stop – and as I listened to them I kept feasting my eyes on Arkadek. How would he treat me now? And he put his arms about me and said something in a very pompous tone, I do not remember just what he said, but it was something to the effect that he would love me for having set him free, and he knelt before me and said with a smile: ‘My queen!’ Ugh, what a false dog he was! I gave him a kick and would have slapped him in the face, but he sprang aside and leapt to his feet. And he stood before me, very grim and white. And the other three stood there looking sullen and saying not a word. I stared back at them. And I remember that a great weariness and indifference came over me. And I said to them: ‘Go your way.’ And they said to me, the dogs: ‘And will you go back and tell them in what direction we have gone?’ That is what beasts they were. But they went away. And I, too, went away. And on the next day your soldiers caught me, but they did not keep me long. Then I realized it was time for me to make a home for myself – the life of a cuckoo was a thing of the past. My body had grown heavy, my wings feeble, my feathers dull. I was old, I was old. And so I went to Galicia, and from there to Dobruja. For the last thirty years I have been living here. I had a husband, a Moldavian, but he died about a year ago. And

I go on living. All alone. No, not alone – with them —” and the old woman pointed to the waves. They were quiet now. Now and again there would be a faint suggestion of sound that died away as soon as it was born.

“They love me. I tell them many tales, and they like them. They are so young. I feel happy with them. I gaze at them and think: ‘Time was when I was as they are. But in my day people had more strength and fire, and that made life gayer and more worth while. It did indeed.’”

She relapsed into silence again. I felt sad, sitting there beside her. Soon she dozed off, nodding her head and muttering something, perhaps a prayer, under her breath.

A thick dark cloud with the jagged outlines of a mountain range rose out of the sea and moved towards the steppe. A wisp was torn off its highest tip and went flying ahead, putting out the stars one by one. The sea began to murmur. A sound of kissing, of whispering, and of sighing came from the grape-arbour not far away. A dog howled out in the steppe. The air was filled with a strange odour that pricked the nostrils and made one’s nerves tingle. The clouds cast dark clusters of shadow which crept over the earth, now fading, now growing sharply distinct. Nothing remained of the moon but a vague opalescent glow that at times was completely blotted out by a bit of cloud. Tiny blue lights flickered far out in the steppe, which now had become dark and lowering, as if something fearful were lurking there. The lights flared up as if people were wandering over the steppe in search

of something, lighting matches which the wind instantly blew out. They were very strange, these blue lights, and suggested the fantastic.

“Do you see any sparks out there?” asked Izergil.

“Those little blue lights?” said I, pointing out to the steppe.

“Blue? Yes, those little lights. So they are still to be seen! But not by my eyes. There are many things I do not see any more.”

“Where do they come from?” I asked the old woman.

I had already heard one explanation of them, but I wanted to hear what old Izergil would say.

“They come from the flaming heart of Danko. Once upon a time there was a heart that broke into flame, and those sparks are what is left of it. I shall tell you that tale. It, too, is old. Everything is old. See how many fine things there were in olden times! Today there is nothing – no men, no deeds, no tales – that can be compared with those of olden times. Why is that so? Come, tell me. Ah, you cannot. What do you know? What do any of you young people know? If you searched the past you would find the answer to all life’s riddles. But you do not, and so you know nothing. Think you I do not see what is happening? I see only too well, even if my eyes have grown weak. And I see that instead of living, people spend their whole lives getting ready to live. And when they have robbed themselves by wasting all that time, they blame it on fate. What has fate to do with it? Each man is his own fate. There are all sorts of people in the world today, but I see no strong ones among them. What has become

of them? And the handsome ones are growing fewer and fewer.”

The old woman stopped to reflect on what had become of the strong and the handsome, and as she mused she gazed out into the dark steppe, as if searching for the answer there, I waited in silence until she should begin her tale, fearing that any comment would distract her. And presently she began.

III

“Long, long ago there lived some people in a place that was bounded on three sides by impenetrable forests and on the fourth by the steppe. They were a strong, brave, and cheerful people, but evil times came upon them. Other tribes put in an appearance and drove them into the depths of the forest. The forest was dark and swampy, for it was very ancient, and the boughs of the trees were so closely interwoven that they shut out the view of the sky, and the sun’s rays had all they could do to pierce the thick foliage and reach the waters of the swamp. And wherever they reached those waters, poisonous vapours arose, and the people began to take sick and die. Then the women and children of that tribe began to weep, and the men brooded on what had happened and grew despondent. There was nothing for it but to get out of the forest, but there were only two means of getting out: one of them was to go back over the road they had come, but at the end of this road strong and vicious foes awaited them; the other was to push forward through the forest, but here they would come up against the giant trees whose mighty branches were closely entwined and whose gnarled roots were sunk deep into the mire of the bogs. These stone-like trees stood silent and motionless in the grey gloom of daylight, and they seemed to close in upon the people at nightfall when the fires were lit. And always, day and night, this tribe, born to the freedom of the steppe, was walled

in by shadows that seemed waiting to crush them. Most fearful of all was the wind that went wailing through the tops of the trees, causing the whole forest to sing a grim dirge to the people imprisoned there. They were, as I have said, a brave people, and they would have fought to the death with those who had once defeated them, had they not feared being wiped out in the fight: they had their ideals to defend, and if they perished, their ideals would perish with them. And for that reason they sat pondering their fate through the long nights, with the poisonous vapours rising all around them and the forest singing its mournful song. And as they sat there, the shadows of the fires leaped about them in a soundless dance, and it seemed as if it were not mere shadows that were dancing, but the evil spirits of forest and bog celebrating their triumph. And nothing, not even work or women, can exhaust a man as do despondent thoughts. The men grew weak from brooding. Fear was born in their hearts, binding their strong arms; terror gripped them as they listened to the women wailing over the bodies of those who had died of the poisonous vapours or lamenting over the fate of the living made helpless by fear. And cowardly words came to be spoken in the forest – at first softly and timidly, but louder and louder as time went on. And at last the people thought of going to the enemy and making him a gift of their freedom. So frightened were they by the thought of death that not one of them shrank from living the life of a slave. But at this moment Danko appeared and saved them from such a fate.”

The old woman, it seems, had often recounted this tale about the flaming heart of Danko. As she intoned it in her hoarse crackling voice, I seemed to hear the sounds of the forest, in whose depths these unfortunate exiles were poisoned to death.

“Danko was one of them, and he was young and handsome. Handsome people are always courageous. And he said to his comrades:

“‘Stones are not to be removed by thinking. He who does naught will come to naught. Why should we exhaust our energies thinking and brooding? Arise, and let us go through the forest until we come out at the other end; after all, it must have an end – everything has an end. Come, let us set forth!’

“They looked at him and saw that he was the best man among them, for his eyes were aglow with life and strength.

“‘Lead us,’ they said.

“And he led them.”

The old woman stopped talking and gazed out over the steppe, which was growing darker and darker. Sparks from the flaming heart of Danko flared up in the distance like ethereal blue flowers that bloomed but for a moment.

“And so he led them, Danko. And they followed him willingly, for they believed in him. It was a difficult path. It was dark, and at every step the yawning bogs swallowed people up, and the trees were like a mighty wall barring the way. Their branches were closely interwoven, their roots were like snakes reaching out in every direction, and every step these people took cost them blood

and sweat. For a long time they went on, and the further they went, the thicker grew the forest and the weaker grew their limbs. And then they began to murmur against Danko, saying that he was young and inexperienced and had no right to bring them here. But he kept walking at their head, his spirit undaunted, his mind unclouded.

“But one day a storm broke over the forest, and the trees whispered together menacingly. And instantly it became as dark as if here were gathered all the nights that had passed since the forest was born. And the little people walked on under the big trees amid the roar of the storm, and as they walked the giant trees creaked and sang a sinister song, and the lightning flashed above the tree-tops, throwing a cold blue light over the forest for a brief instant, disappearing as quickly as it had appeared and striking terror into the hearts of the people. And in the cold flashes of the lightning the trees seemed to be live things that were stretching out long gnarled arms and weaving them into a net to catch these people who were trying to escape from darkness. And something cold and dark and fearful peered at them through the dark foliage. It was a difficult path, and the people who had set out on it grew exhausted and lost heart. But they were ashamed to admit their weakness, and so they poured out their anger and resentment on Danko, who was walking at their head. They began to accuse him of being incapable of leading them.

“They came to a halt, and, tired and angry, they began to

upbraid him there in the quivering darkness, amid the triumphant roar of the storm.

“You are a despicable and evil creature who has brought us to grief,’ they said. ‘You have exhausted us by leading us here, and for that you shall die.’

“You said: “Lead us!” and I led you,’ cried out Danko, turning to face them. ‘I have the courage to lead you, and that is why I undertook to do it. But you? What have you done to help yourselves? You have done nothing but follow me, without so much as husbanding your strength for the greater march. You merely followed me like a flock of sheep.’

“His words only infuriated them the more.

“You shall die! You shall die!’ they shrieked.

“The forest roared and echoed their cries, and the lightning tore the darkness to shreds. Danko gazed upon those for whose sake he had undertaken such great labour, and he saw that they were like wild beasts. Many people were pressing about him, but he could detect no signs of humanity in their faces and he knew that he could expect no mercy from them. Then resentment seethed in his breast, but it was quelled by compassion. He loved these people, and he feared that without him they would perish. And the flames of a great yearning to save them and lead them out on to an easy path leaped up in his heart, and these mighty flames were reflected in his eyes. And seeing this, the people thought he was enraged; they thought that was why his eyes flashed so. And they instantly grew wary, like wolves, expecting

him to throw himself against them, and they drew closer about him that they might seize him and kill him. He saw what they were thinking, but the flames in his heart only flared up the brighter, for their thoughts added the oil of sorrow to the flames of his yearning.

“And the forest went on singing its mournful song, and the thunder crashed, and the rain poured down.

“What else can I do to save these people?” cried out Danko above the thunder.

“And suddenly he ripped open his breast and tore out his heart and held it high above his head.

“It shone like the sun, even brighter than the sun, and the raging forest was subdued and lighted up by this torch, the torch of a great love for mankind, and the darkness retreated before it and plunged, quivering, into a yawning bog in the depths of the forest. And in their astonishment the people were as if turned to stone.

“Follow me!” cried Danko, and he rushed forward, holding his flaming heart high above his head to light the way.

“And the people followed him as if under a spell. And once more the forest began to murmur and wave its tree-tops in wonder. But its murmur was drowned out by the sound of running feet. The people were running ahead boldly and swiftly, lured on by the wonderful vision of the flaming heart. And even now there were those who perished, but they perished without tears and complaints. And Danko went on ahead of them, his

heart flaming brighter and brighter.

“And suddenly the forest in front of them parted; it parted to make way for them and then closed behind them, a mute and solid wall, and Danko and his followers plunged into a sea of sunlight and rain-washed air. The storm was now behind them over the forest, while here the sun shone, the steppe throbbed with life, the grass was hung with diamond rain-drops and the river was streaked with gold. It was evening, and the rays of the sunset painted the river as red as the blood which poured in a hot stream from the wound in Danko’s breast.

“The brave Danko cast his eye over the endless steppe, cast a joyful eye over this land of freedom, and gave a proud laugh. And then he fell, down and died.

“And his followers were so full of joy and hope that they did not notice he had died and that his brave heart was still flaming beside his dead body. But one timid creature noticed it and, fearing he knew not what, stamped on the flaming heart. And it sent up a shower of sparks and went out.

“And that is why blue sparks are always to be seen in the steppe before a thunder-storm.”

As the old woman finished her beautiful tale, the steppe grew incredibly still, as if overawed by the strength of the brave Danko, who set fire to his own heart for the sake of his fellow-men and died without seeking the least reward for what he had done.

The old woman dozed off. And as I looked at her I wondered

how many more tales and memories her mind contained. And I ruminated on the flaming heart of Danko and on the power of the human imagination, which has created so many beautiful and inspiring legends.

The wind blew the rags off the bony chest of old Izergil, who had fallen fast asleep by this time. I covered up her old body and lay down on the ground beside her. It was dark and still in the steppe. Clouds floated slowly... wearily... across the sky, and the sea murmured softly... mournfully...

1894

Chelkash

The blue southern sky was so obscured by dust that it had a murky look. The hot sun stared down at the greenish sea as through a thin grey veil, and its rays found poor reflection in the water, churned up as it was by the strokes of oars, the propellers of steamers and the sharp keels of Turkish feluccas and other craft which ploughed the crowded harbour in all directions. The waves of the sea, crushed within their granite encasements by the enormous weights gliding over their surfaces, hurled themselves at the shore and the sides of the ships – hurled themselves growling and foaming, their flanks littered with all sorts of rubbish.

The clang of anchor chains, the clash of the buffers of goods cars, the metallic wail of sheets of iron being unloaded on to paving-stones, the dull thump of wood against wood, the clatter of carts, the whistle of steamships rising from a wail to a shriek, the shouts of stevedores, seamen and customs guards – all this merged to form the deafening music of the working day which surged rebelliously in the sky above the harbour, while from the earth below new waves of sound kept rising to meet it – now a rumble that shook the earth, now a crash that rent the sultry air.

The granite, the steel, the wood, the paving-stones, the ships and the people – everything was impregnated with the mighty sounds of this impassioned hymn to Mercury. But human voices

could hardly be detected in the general chorus, so weak and even ridiculous were they. And the people themselves, they whose efforts had given birth to all this sound, were ridiculous and pitiable; their ragged dirty wiry bodies were bent double under the loads on their backs as they rushed hither and thither in the dust and the heat and the noise, and they were as nothing compared with the steel leviathans, the mountains of merchandise, the clanging railway cars, and all the other things which they themselves had created. The things of their own creating had enslaved them and robbed them of personality.

The gigantic ships lying with steam up whistled and hissed and heaved great sighs, and every sound they uttered was filled with mocking contempt for the drab and dusty creatures crawling over their decks to load their deep holds with the products of the servile labour. It made one laugh till the tears ran to see these long files of stevedores carrying thousands of poods of grain on their backs to be deposited in the iron bellies of the ships so that they themselves might earn a few pounds of grain to fill their own bellies. A poem of bitter irony could be read in the contrast between these ragged sweating men, stupefied by the heat, the noise, and the exhausting labour, and the powerful machines these men had made and which stood radiating well-being in the sunlight – machines which, when all is said and done, had been set in motion not by steam, but by the blood and muscles of those who made them.

The noise was oppressive; the dust tickled the nose and got

into the eyes; the heat scorched and enervated the body, and everything seemed tense, as if the end of endurance had been reached and catastrophe was imminent, a tremendous explosion that would clear the air so that men might breathe freely and easily. And then silence would descend on the world and there would be no more dust and turmoil to deafen and irritate people and drive them mad; and the air of the town, of the sea, and of the sky would be fresh and clear and beautiful...

Twelve measured strokes of a bell were heard. When the last brassy vibrations had died away the savage music of labour was found to have subsided, and a minute later it turned into a mere rumble of discontent. Now the voices of the people and the splash of the sea were more audible. It was the dinner hour.

I

When the stevedores stopped work and scattered over the docks in noisy groups to buy victuals from the vendors and find shady corners where they could squat on the pavement to take their meal, Grishka Chelkash put in an appearance. He was well known to all the dockers, a confirmed drunkard, a bold and clever thief. He was barefooted and bareheaded, had on a pair of threadbare corduroy trousers and a filthy cotton shirt with a torn collar that exposed a bony chest covered by brown skin. The matted state of his iron-grey hair and the crumpled look of his lean and hawk-like face indicated that he had just waked up. A straw had become caught in his moustache, another in the stubble of his left cheek, while behind his ear he had stuck a sprig of linden. Long and lanky and a bit stooped, he sauntered slowly down the cobbled street, sniffing the air with his hooked nose and casting a glittering grey eye about him as he searched for someone among the dockers. His long dark moustache kept twitching like a cat's; he held his hands behind his back and kept rubbing them together and twisting his crooked grasping fingers. Even here, among hundreds of other roughs, he instantly attracted attention because of the resemblance to a steppe-hawk conveyed by his predatory leanness and aimful walk, which, like the flight of the bird of prey he resembled, concealed a tense alertness under an appearance of poised tranquillity.

As he came up to a group of stevedores sitting in the shadow cast by a pile of coal baskets, a stocky young chap, with a blotched and vapid face and with scratches on his neck suggesting a recent fight, got up to meet him. He fell into step beside Chelkash and said under his breath:

“The seamen have discovered two bales of cloth missing. They’re searching.”

“So what?” Chelkash asked, calmly running his eyes over him.

“What d’ye mean ‘so what’? They’re searching, I tell you.”

“And you thought I might join in the search?”

“Go to hell!”

The chap turned back.

“Wait! Who gave you those beauty-marks? A pity to mess up your shop front like that! Seen Mishka?”

“Not for a long time,” called back the chap as he joined his comrades.

Everybody who met Chelkash greeted him as an old acquaintance, but he, usually so cheery and biting, must have been out of sorts, for his replies were all very terse.

From behind a pile of merchandise suddenly appeared a customs guard – dark-green, dusty, aggressively erect. He planted himself in front of Chelkash in a challenging pose, his left hand on the hilt of his dirk, his right reaching out for Chelkash’s collar.

“Halt! Where you bound?”

Chelkash retreated a step, lifted his eyes to the guard’s red

face and gave a cool smile.

The face, wily but good-natured, tried to assume a dread aspect: the cheeks puffed out and turned purple, the brows drew together, the eyes rolled, and the effect on the whole was extremely comical.

“I told you once to keep away from these docks if you didn’t want me to smash your ribs in, and here you are again!” he roared.

“Howdy, Semyonich! Haven’t seen you for a long time,” said the imperturbable Chelkash, holding out his hand.

“I wouldn’t cry if I didn’t see you for another fifty years. Move on, move on.”

But he shook the extended hand.

“Here’s what I wanted to ask,” went on Chelkash, holding the guard’s hand in steel fingers and shaking it in an intimate sort of way. “Seen Mishka anywhere?”

“What Mishka? I don’t know any Mishka. Move on, man, or the packhouse guard may see you and then —”

“The red-headed chap I worked with on the Kostroma last time,” persisted Chelkash.

“That you thieved with, you mean. They’ve put him in hospital, that Mishka of yours – got his leg crushed by some iron. Get out of here, I tell you, get out before I throw you out by the scruff of the neck.”

“Listen to that, now! And you said you didn’t know no Mishka. What makes you so nasty, Semyonich?”

“None of your talk! Get out!”

The guard was getting angry; he glanced about him and tried to free his hand, but Chelkash held on to it as he looked at him calmly from under bushy eyebrows and went on talking:

“What’s the rush? Don’t you want to have a nice little chat with me? How you getting on? How’s the wife and kiddies? Well?” His eyes twinkled and his teeth flashed in a mocking grin as he added: “Been wanting to drop in to see you for ever so long, but just can’t seem to manage it. It’s the drink —“

“Drop it, I tell you! None of your joking, you lanky lubber. I mean what I say. But maybe you’re turning to house-breaking, or robbing people in the street?”

“Why should I? There’s enough here to keep you and me busy a lifetime. Honest there is, Semyonich. But I hear you’ve snitched another two bales of cloth. Watch out, or you’ll find yourself in trouble yet!”

Semyonich trembled with indignation and the saliva flew as he tried to give voice to it. Chelkash let go of his hand and calmly strode off on his long legs to the dock gates. The guard followed at his heels, cursing him roundly.

Chelkash was in better spirits now; he whistled a tune through his teeth, thrust his hands into his pockets, and retarded his steps, tossing off well-aimed quips to right and left. He was paid in his own coin.

“Just see what good care of you the bosses are taking, Grishka!” called out a stevedore who was stretched out on the

ground with his comrades, taking a rest after their meal.

“Semyonich’s seeing I don’t step on any nails in my bare feet,” replied Chelkash.

They got to the gates. Two soldiers ran their hands down Chelkash’s clothes and pushed him out into the street.

He crossed the road and sat down on the curbstone opposite a pub. A line of loaded carts came thundering out of the dock gates, while a line of empty ones moved in the other direction, their drivers bouncing in their seats. The docks belched forth a roar of sound and clouds of dust that stuck to the skin.

Chelkash was in his element amid this mad welter. He was anticipating a good haul that night, a haul that would cost him little effort but require a great deal of skill. He did not doubt but that his skill was sufficient, and he screwed up his eyes with pleasure as he reflected on how he would spend all his banknotes the next morning. He thought of his pal Mishka. He needed him badly, and here he had gone and broken his leg. Chelkash cursed under his breath, for he feared he could not handle the job alone. What would the weather be like? He glanced up at the sky, then down the street.

Sitting on the pavement, his back against a hitching post some half a dozen paces away, was a young lad in a blue homespun shirt and trousers, with bast sandals on his feet and a torn brown cap on his head. Beside him lay a small knapsack and a haftless scythe wrapped in straw and neatly tied with string. The lad was sturdy, broad-shouldered, fair-haired, his face was tanned by wind and

sun, and he had large blue eyes that stared amiably at Chelkash.

Chelkash bared his teeth, stuck out his tongue, made a frightful face and stared back with popping eyes.

The boy blinked in astonishment at first, then he burst out laughing, calling out between spasms: "Crazy as a loon!" Without getting up, he hitched along the curbstone to where Chelkash was sitting, dragging his knapsack through the dust and allowing the tip of his scythe to clank over the cobbles.

"Been on the booze, eh?" he said to Chelkash, giving a tug at his trousers.

"You're right, baby-face, you're right," confessed Chelkash with a smile. He was instantly drawn to this wholesome good-natured chap with eyes as clear as a baby's. "Been haymaking?"

"Yes. Made hay, but no money. Times are bad. You never saw so many people! They all come drifting down from the famine districts. No point in working for such pay. Sixty kopeks in the Kuban, think of that! They say they used to pay three or four roubles, or even five."

"Used to! They used to pay three roubles just to get a look at a Russian! That's how I earned a living ten years ago. I'd come to a Cossack village: 'Here I am, folks, an honest-to-God Russian!' They'd all crowd round, look me over, poke me, pinch me, oh-and-ah and pay me three roubles. Give me food and drink besides and invite me to stay as long as I liked."

At first the boy opened wide his mouth, an expression of wondering admiration on his round face, but as he realized

Chelkash was fabricating, he snapped his mouth shut, then burst out laughing again. Chelkash kept a straight face, hiding his smile in his moustache.

“A queer bird you are, talking talk as if it was God’s truth and me swallowing it. But honest to goodness, it used to be —“

“Isn’t that just what I was saying? It used to be —“

“Oh, come!” said the boy with a wave of his hand.

“What are you, a cobbler, or a tailor, or what?”

“Me?” Chelkash mused awhile and then said: “I’m a fisherman.”

“A fisherman? Think of that! So you catch fish, do you?”

“Why fish? The fishermen here don’t only catch fish. Mostly dead bodies, old anchors, sunken boats. There’s special fish-hooks for such things.”

“Lying again. Maybe you’re one of those fishermen who sing:

We cast our nets Upon the shores, In market stalls, in open doors.

“Ever met fishermen like that?” asked Chelkash, looking hard at the boy and grinning.

“No, but I’ve heard about them.”

“Like the idea?”

“Of people like that? Why not? At least they’re free; they can do what they please.”

“What’s freedom to you? Do you hanker after freedom?”

“Of course. What could be better than to be your own boss, go where you like and do what you like? Only you’ve got to keep

straight and see that no millstones get hung round your neck. Outside of that, go ahead and have a good time without a thought for anything save God and your conscience.”

Chelkash spat contemptuously and turned away.

“Here’s what I’m up against,” went on the boy. “My father died without leaving anything much, my mother’s old, the land’s sucked dry. What am I supposed to do? I’ve got to go on living, but how? God knows. I have a chance to marry into a good family. I wouldn’t mind if they’d give the daughter her portion. But they won’t. Her old man won’t give her an inch of land. So I’d have to work for him, and for a long time. For years. There you are. If only I could lay hands on, say, a hundred and fifty roubles I’d be able to stand up to her father and say: ‘Do you want me to marry your Marfa? You don’t? Just as you say; she’s not the only girl in the village, thank God.’ I’d be independent, see? and could do what I liked.” The boy heaved a sigh. “But it looks as if there was nothing for it but to be his son-in-law. I thought I’d bring back a couple of hundred roubles from the Kuban. That would be the thing! Then I’d be a gentleman! But I didn’t earn a damn thing. Nothing for it but to be a farm-hand. I’ll never have a farm of my own. So there you are.”

The boy squirmed and his face fell at the prospect of being this man’s son-in-law.

“Where you bound now?” asked Chelkash.

“Home. Where else?”

“How do I know? Maybe you’re bound for Turkey.”

“Turkey?” marvelled the boy. “What honest Christian would ever go to Turkey? A fine thing to say!”

“You are a blockhead,” murmured Chelkash, turning away again. Yet this wholesome village lad had stirred something in him; a vague feeling of dissatisfaction was slowly taking form within him, and this kept him from concentrating his mind on the night’s task.

The boy, offended by Chelkash’s words, muttered to himself and threw sidelong glances at the older man. His cheeks were puffed up in a droll way, his lips were pouting and his narrowed eyes blinked rapidly. Evidently he had not expected his talk with this bewhiskered ruffian tramp to end so suddenly and so unsatisfactorily.

But the tramp paid no more attention to him. His mind was on something else as he sat there on the curbstone whistling to himself and beating time with a dirty toe.

The boy wanted to get even with him.

“Hey, you fisherman! Do you often go on a bout?” he began, but at that moment the fisherman turned to him impulsively and said:

“Look, baby-face, would you like to help me to do a job tonight? Make up your mind, quick!”

“What sort of job?” asked the boy dubiously.

“What sort! Whatever sort I give you. We’re going fishing. You’ll row.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t mind doing that, I’m not afraid of work. Only

– what if you get me into trouble? You’re a queer egg; there’s no understanding you.”

Chelkash had a sensation as of heart-burn.

“Don’t go spouting on things you don’t know anything about,” he said with cold animosity. “I’ll give you a good crack over the bean, and then you’ll understand a thing or two.”

He jumped up, his eyes flashing, his left hand pulling at his moustache, his right clenched in a hard and corded fist.

The boy was frightened. He glanced quickly about him and then he, too, jumped up, blinking nervously. The two of them stood there silently measuring each other with their eyes.

“Well?” said Chelkash harshly. He was seething inside, twitching all over from the insult taken from this puppy he had held in such contempt so far, but whom he now hated with all his soul because he had such clear blue eyes, such a healthy tanned face, such short sturdy arms; because he had a native village and a house there, and an offer to be the son-in-law of a well-to-do muzhik; he hated him for the way he had lived in the past and would live in the future, but most of all he hated him because he, a mere child as compared with Chelkash, dared to hanker after a freedom he could neither appreciate nor have need of. It is always unpleasant to discover that a person you consider beneath you loves or hates the same things you do, thereby establishing a certain resemblance to yourself.

As the lad looked at Chelkash he recognized in him a master.

“I don’t really – er – mind,” he said. “After all, I’m looking

for work. What difference does it make whether I work for you or somebody else? I just said that because – well, you don't look much like a workingman.

You're so – er – down at heel. But that can happen to anybody, I know. God, haven't I seen drunks before? Plenty of them, some even worse than you."

"All right, all right. So you're willing?" said Chelkash in a milder tone.

"With pleasure. State your price."

"The price depends on the job. How much we catch. Maybe you'll get five roubles."

Now that the talk was of money, the peasant wanted to be exact and demanded the same exactness from the man who was hiring him. Once more he had his doubts and suspicions.

"That won't suit me, brother."

Chelkash played his part.

"Don't let's talk about it now. Come along to the tavern."

And they walked down the street side by side, Chelkash twirling his moustache with the air of a master; the lad fearful and distrusting, but willing to comply.

"What's your name?" asked Chelkash.

"Gavrilla," answered the lad.

On entering the dingy, smoke-blackened tavern, Chelkash went up to the bar and in the off-hand tone of a frequenter ordered a bottle of vodka, cabbage soup, roast beef and tea; he repeated the list and then said nonchalantly: "On tick," to

which the barman replied by nodding silently. This instantly inspired Gavrilla with respect for his employer, who, despite his disreputable appearance, was evidently well known and trusted.

“Now we’ll have a bite and talk things over. Sit here and wait for me; I’ll be right back.”

And he went out. Gavrilla looked about him. The tavern was in a basement; it was dark and damp and filled with the stifling smell of vodka, tobacco smoke, pitch, and something else just as pungent. A drunken red-bearded sailor smeared all over with pitch and coal-dust was sprawling at a table opposite him. Between hiccups he gurgled a song made of snatches of words which were all sibilant one minute, all guttural the next. Evidently he was not a Russian.

Behind him were two Moldavian women. Swarthy, dark-haired, ragged, they too were wheezing out a drunken song.

Out of shadows loomed other figures, all of them noisy, restless, dishevelled, drunken...

Gavrilla was gripped by fear. If only his boss would come back! The noises of the tavern merged in a single voice, and it was as if some huge multiple-tongued beast were roaring as it vainly sought a means of escape from this stone pit. Gavrilla felt some intoxication seeping into his body, making his head swim and his eyes grow hazy as they roved the tavern with fearful curiosity.

At last Chelkash came back and the two men began to eat and drink and talk. Gavrilla was drunk after his third glass of vodka. He felt very gay and was anxious to say something nice to this

prince of a chap who had treated him to such a fine meal. But somehow the words that surged in his throat would not come off his tongue, suddenly grown thick and unwieldy.

Chelkash looked at him with a condescending smile.

“Stewed? Ekh, you rag! On five swigs. How are you going to work tonight?”

“Ol’ pal!” lisped Gavrilla. “Don’t be ’fraid. I’ll show you. Gimme a kiss, c’mon.”

“That’s all right. Here, take another guzzle.”

Gavrilla went on drinking until he reached the point at which everything about him seemed to be moving up and down in rhythmic waves. This was unpleasant and made him sick. His face wore an expression of foolish solemnity. Whenever he tried to say anything, his lips slapped together comically and garbled sounds came through them. Chelkash twisted his moustache and smiled glumly as he gazed at him abstractedly, his mind on something else.

Meanwhile the tavern was roaring as drunkenly as ever. The red-headed sailor had folded his arms on the table and fallen fast asleep.

“Time to go,” said Chelkash, getting up.

Gavrilla tried to follow him but could not; he let out an oath and laughed idiotically, as drunks do.

“What a wash-out!” muttered Chelkash, sitting down again.

Gavrilla kept on laughing and looking at his boss with bleary eyes, while Chelkash turned a sharp and thoughtful eye on him.

He saw before him a man whose fate he held in his wolfish paw. Chelkash sensed that he could do what he pleased with him. He could crush him in his hand like a playing-card, or he could help him get back to the solid peasant way of life. Conscious of his power over him, he reflected that this lad would never have to drink the cup it had been the fate of him, Chelkash, to drink. He envied and pitied the boy; he despised him, and yet he was sorry to think that he might fall into other hands, no better than his own. In the end, Chelkash's various emotions combined to form a single one that was both fatherly and practical. He pitied the boy and he needed him. And so he took Gavrilla under the arms and lifted him up, giving him little pushes with his knee as he led him out into the tavern yard where he laid him down in the shade of a wood-pile, he himself sitting beside him and smoking his pipe. Gavrilla tossed about awhile, gave a few grunts and fell asleep.

II

“Ready?” whispered Chelkash to Gavrilla, who was fussing with the oars.

“In a minute. The rowlock’s loose. Can I give it a bang with the oar?”

“No! Not a sound! Push it down with your hands; it’ll slip into place.”

Both of them were noiselessly busy with a boat tied to the stern of one of a whole fleet of barges-loaded with oaken staves and of Turkish feluccas carrying palm and sandal wood and thick Cyprus logs.

The night was dark, heavy banks of tattered clouds floated across the sky, the sea was calm and black and as heavy as oil. It gave off a moist saline odour and made tender little noises as it lapped at the shore and the sides of ships, causing Chelkash’s boat to rock gently. At some distance from shore could be seen the dark outlines of ships against the sky, their masts tipped by varicoloured lights. The sea reflected these lights and was strewn with innumerable yellow spots that looked very beautiful quivering upon the background of black velvet. The sea was sleeping as soundly as a workman who has been worn out by the day’s labour.

“Let’s go,” said Gavrilla, dipping an oar into the water.

“Let’s.” Chelkash pushed off hard with the steering oar,

sending the boat into the lanes between the barges. It glided swiftly over the water, which gave off a blue phosphorescent glow wherever the oars struck it and formed a glowing ribbon in the wake of the boat.

“How’s your head? Ache?” asked Chelkash solicitously.

“Something fierce. And it’s heavy as lead. Here, I’ll wet it.”

“What for? Wet your insides; that’ll bring you round quicker,” said Chelkash, holding out a bottle.

“Ah, God be thanked.”

There was a gurgling sound.

“Hey! That’s enough!” interrupted Chelkash.

Once more the boat darted forward, weaving its way among the other craft swiftly and soundlessly. Suddenly it was beyond them, and the sea – the mighty boundless sea – stretched far away to the dark-blue horizon, from which sprang billowing clouds: grey-and-mauve with fluffy yellow edges; greenish, the colour of sea water; leaden-hued, throwing dark and dreary shadows. Slowly moved the clouds across the sky, now overtaking each other, merging in colour and form, annihilating each other only to appear again in new aspects, grimly magnificent. There was something fatal in the slow movement of these inanimate forms. It seemed as if there were endless numbers of them at the rim of the sea, and as if they would go on crawling across the sky for ever, impelled by a vicious desire to keep the sky from gazing down upon the slumbering sea with its millions of golden orbs, the many-hued stars, that hung there alive and pensively radiant,

inspiring lofty aspirations in the hearts of men to whom their pure shine was a precious thing.

“Nice, the sea, isn’t it?” asked Chelkash.

“I suppose so, but it makes me afraid,” said Gavrilla as he pulled hard and evenly on the oars. The water let out a faint ring and splash as the oars struck it, and it still gave off that blue phosphorescent glow.

“Afraid! You are a boob,” grunted Chelkash.

He, a thief, loved the sea. His nervous, restive nature, always thirsting for new impressions, never had enough of contemplating its dark expanses, so free, so powerful, so boundless. And he resented such a tepid response to his question about the beauty of the thing he loved. As he sat there in the stern of the boat letting his steering oar cut through the water while he gazed calmly ahead, he was filled with the one desire to travel as long and as far as he could over that velvety surface.

He always had a warm expansive feeling when he was on the sea. It filled his whole being, purging it of the dross of daily life. He appreciated this and liked to see himself a better man hero among the waves and in the open air, where thoughts about life lose their poignancy and life itself loses its value. At night the soft breathing of the slumbering sea is wafted gently over the waters, and this unencompassing sound fills the heart of man with peace, crams away its evil impulses, and gives birth to great dreams.

“Where’s the fishing tackle?” asked Gavrilla suddenly, glancing anxiously about the boat.

Chelkash gave a start.

“The tackle? I’ve got it here in the stern.”

He did not wish to lie to this green youth and he regretted having his thoughts and feelings dispelled in this abrupt way. It made him angry. Again he had that burning sensation in his throat and chest and said to Gavrilla in a hard and impressive voice:

“Listen, sit where you are and mind your own business. I hired you to row, so you row; and if you start wagging your tongue it will go hard with you. Understand?”

The boat gave a little jerk and came to a halt, the oars dragging and stirring up the water. Gavrilla shifted uneasily on his seat.

“Row!”

A fierce oath shook the air. Gavrilla lifted the oars and the boat, as if frightened, leaped ahead in quick nervous spurts that made the water splash.

“Steady!”

Chelkash half rose without letting go of the steering oar and fastened cold eyes on Gavrilla’s white face. He was like a cat about to spring as he stood there bent forward. The grinding of his teeth could be heard, as could the chattering of Gavrilla’s teeth.

“Who’s shouting there?” came a stern cry from out at sea.

“Row, you bastard! Row! Shhh! I’ll kill you, damn your hide! Row, I tell you! One, two! Just you dare to make a sound! I’ll rip you to pieces!” hissed Chelkash.

“Holy Virgin, Mother of God!” murmured Gavrilla, trembling with fear and exertion.

The boat swung round and went back to the harbour where the ships’ lanterns formed clusters of coloured lights and their masts stood out distinctly.

“Hi! Who’s shouting?” came the cry again.

But it came from a distance now. Chelkash was reassured.

“It’s you who’s shouting!” he called back, then turned to Gavrilla who was still muttering a prayer.

“Luck’s with you this time, lad. If those devils had chased us it would have been all over with you. I’d have fed you to the fishes first thing.”

Seeing that Chelkash had calmed down and was in a good humour, the trembling Gavrilla pleaded with him:

“Let me go; for the love of Christ, let me go. Set me down somewheres. Oi, oi, oi, I’ve been trapped! For God’s sake, let me go. What do you want of me? I can’t do this. I’ve never been mixed up in such business. It’s the first time. God, I’m lost for sure. Why have you done this to me? It’s a sin. You’ll pay for it with your soul. Oh, what a business!”

“Business?” asked Chelkash sharply. “What business? “

He was amused by the boy’s terror; he took pleasure in contemplating it and in thinking what a ferocious fellow he himself was.

“Bad business, brother. Let me go, for the love of God. What do you need me for? Come, be a good chap —“

“Hold your tongue! If I didn’t need you I wouldn’t have brought you, understand? So shut up!”

“Dear God,” murmured Gavrilla.

“Stop blubbering,” Chelkash cut him off sharply.

But Gavrilla could no longer control himself; he whimpered softly, coughed, sniffled, wriggled, but rowed with a strength born of despair. The boat flew ahead like an arrow. Once more they found themselves surrounded by the dark forms of ships. Their boat became lost among them as it turned and twisted through the narrow lanes of water.

“Listen, you! If you get asked any questions, keep your mouth shut if you value your life, understand?”

“God!” breathed Gavrilla, adding bitterly: “It must be my fate.”

“Stop blubbering,” whispered Chelkash again.

This whisper robbed Gavrilla of his mental power; he was numbed by a chill premonition of disaster. Like one in a trance he dropped his oars into the water, threw himself backwards as he pulled, lifted them and dropped them again, his eyes fixed steadily on his bast sandals.

The sleepy plash of the waves was dreary and terrifying. But now they were in the docks. From the other side of a stone wall came the sound of human voices, of singing and whistling and a splashing of water.

“Stop,” whispered Chelkash. “Put down your oars. Push with your hands against the wall. Shhh, damn you!”

Gavrilla guided the boat along the wall by holding on to the slippery masonry. The boat moved without a sound, the slime on the stones deadening the sound of its bumping.

“Stop. Give me the oars; give them to me, I say. Where’s your passport? In your knapsack? Let’s have it. Hurry up. That’s to keep you from running away, pal. No danger of that now. You might have run away without the oars, but not without your passport. Wait here. And mind, if you blab, I’ll find you even if it’s at the bottom of the sea!”

And then, pulling himself up by his hands, Chelkash disappeared over the wall.

It happened so quickly that Gavrilla gave a little gasp. And then the heaviness in his heart and the fear inspired by that lean bewhiskered thief fell from him like a garment. Now he would run away! Drawing a free breath, he glanced round. To his left rose a black hull without a mast, a sort of gigantic coffin, empty and abandoned. Every time the waves struck it, it let out a hollow sound that might have been a groan. To the left was the slimy wall of the breakwater, a cold heavy serpent uncoiled upon the sea. Behind him loomed other dark forms, while ahead, in the opening between the wall and the coffin, he got a glimpse of the empty sea with black clouds banked above it. Ponderous, enormous, they moved slowly across the sky, spreading horror in the darkness, threatening to crush human beings with their great weight. Everything was cold, black, sinister. Gavrilla was frightened. And his present fear was greater than that inspired by

Chelkash. It clamped him tightly round the chest, squeezing all resistance out of him and pinning him to his seat.

Everything was quiet. Not a sound was to be heard but the sighing of the sea. The clouds moved as slowly and drearily as ever, and so many of them rose out of the sea that the sky was like a sea itself, an agitated sea turned upside down over this smooth, slumbering one. The clouds were like waves whose foamy crests were rushing down upon the earth, rushing back into the chasms out of which they had sprung, rushing upon the new-born billows which had not yet broken into the greenish foam of savage fury.

So oppressed was Gavrilla by the austere silence and beauty about him that he was anxious to have his master come back. What if he should not come? Time dragged slowly – slower than the movement of the clouds across the sky. Arid the longer he waited, the more menacing grew the silence. But at last a splash, a rustle, and something like a whisper came from the other side of the breakwater. Gavrilla felt that he would die in another minute.

“Hullo! Sleeping? Here, catch this. Careful,” came the muffled voice of Chelkash.

Something square and heavy was let down over the wall. Gavrilla put it in the boat. A similar bundle followed. Then the lanky form of Chelkash slid down, the oars appeared, Gavrilla’s knapsack fell at his feet, and Chelkash, breathing hard, took his seat in the stern.

Gavrilla gave a diffident smile of joy.

“Tired?” he asked.

“Ra-ther! Well, lay on the oars. Pull with all your might. You’ve earned a neat little sum. Half the job’s over; all you’ve got to do now is slip past those bastards and then – collect and go back to your Masha. I s’pose you’ve got a Mashka, haven’t you?”

“N-no.” Gavrilla was putting forth his best effort, his lungs working like bellows, his arms like steel springs. The water gurgled under the boat and the blue ribbon in its wake was wider than before. Gavrilla became drenched in sweat but he did not let up on the oars. Twice that night he had a great fright; he did not wish to have a third one. The only thing he wanted was to get this accursed job over as quickly as possible, set foot on dry land and escape from that man while he was still alive and out of jail. He resolved not to talk to him, not to oppose him in any way, to do everything he ordered him to, and if he managed to get away safely, to say a prayer to St. Nicholas the Miracle-Worker on the very next day. An impassioned prayer was ready on his tongue, but he held it back, panting like a locomotive and glancing up at Chelkash from under drawn brows.

Chelkash, long and lean, was crouching like a bird about to take wing, his hawklike eyes piercing the darkness ahead, his hooked nose sniffing the air, one hand clutching the steering oar, the other pulling at his moustache, which twitched as his thin lips spread in a smile. Chelkash was pleased with his haul, with himself, and with this youth whom he had terrorized and converted into his slave. As he watched Gavrilla exerting himself, he felt sorry for him and thought he would offer him a word of

encouragement.

“Ekh!” he said softly, with a little laugh, “got a good scare, did you?”

“Not so bad,” grunted Gavrilla.

“You can take it easier now. The danger’s over. There’s just one place more we’ve got to slip past. Take a rest.”

Gavrilla obediently stopped rowing, and dropped his oars into the water again.

“Row softly. Keep the water from talking. There’s a gate we’ve got to get past. Shhh. The men here can’t take a joke. Always ready with their guns. You’ll have a hole in your head before you know what’s struck you.”

Now the boat was gliding through the water almost without sound. The only sign of its movement was the blue shine of the water dripping off the oars and the blue flare of the sea as the drops struck it. The night grew darker and stiller. The sky no longer resembled an agitated sea – the clouds had spread out to form a heavy blanket that hung low and immobile over the water. The sea was even more calm and black, its warm saline odour was stronger than ever, and it no longer seemed so boundless.

“If only it would rain!” murmured Chelkash. “It would hide us like a curtain.”

Great forms rose out of the water to right and left of the boat. They were barges – dark and dreary and motionless. On one of them a light could be seen moving: someone was walking about with a lantern in his hand. The sea made little pleading sounds as

it patted the sides of the barges, and they gave chill and hollow answers, as if unwilling to grant the favours asked of them.

“A cordon!” said Chelkash in a scarcely audible voice.

Ever since he had told Gavrilla to row softly, the latter had again been gripped by a feeling of tense expectation. As he strained ahead into the darkness it seemed to him that he was growing – his bones and sinews ached as they stretched and his head ached, too, filled as it was with a single thought. The skin of his back quivered and he had a sensation of pins-and-needles in his feet, His eyes felt as if they would burst from straining so hard into the darkness, out of which he expected someone to rise up any minute and shout at them: “Stop, thieves!”

Gavrilla shuddered on hearing Chelkash say “A cordon.” A dreadful thought flashed through his mind and struck upon his taut nerves: he thought of calling out for help. He even opened his mouth, pressed his chest against the side of the boat and took a deep breath, but horror of what he was about to do struck him like a lash; he closed his eyes and fell off the seat.

From out of the black waters rose a flaming blue sword of light; rose and cleaved the darkness of night; cut through the clouds in the sky and came to rest on the bosom of the sea in a broad blue ribbon of light. There it lay, its rays picking the forms of ships, hitherto unseen, out of the darkness – black silent forms, shrouded in the gloom of night. It was as if these ships had lain for long at the bottom of the sea, to which they had been consigned by the forces of the storm, and now, at the will

of this flaming sword born of the sea, they had been raised, that they might gaze on the sky and on all things that exist above water. The rigging of their masts was like clinging seaweed that had been brought up from the bottom of the sea along with the gigantic black forms it enmeshed as in a net. Then once again this fearsome blue sword rose, flashing, off the bosom of the sea, and once again it cleaved the night and lay down again, this time in another spot. And again the forms of ships which had not been seen before were illuminated by its light.

Chelkash's boat stopped and rocked on the water as if deliberating what to do. Gavrilla was lying in the bottom of the boat, his hands over his face, while Chelkash poked him with his foot and whispered savagely:

“That's the customs cruiser, you fool! And that's its spotlight. Get up. They'll have it pointed at us in a minute. You'll be the ruin of me and yourself as well, you idiot. Get up!”

A particularly effective kick in the back brought Gavrilla to his feet. Still afraid to open his eyes, he sat down, felt for the oars, and began to row.

“Easy! Easy, damn you! God, what a fool I picked up! What you afraid of, snout-face? A lantern – that's all it is. Easy with those oars, God damn you! They're searching for smugglers. But they won't catch us. They're too far out. Oh, no, they won't catch us. Now we're —” Chelkash looked about triumphantly “ – we're out of danger. Phew! Well, you're a lucky devil, even if you are a blockhead.”

Gavrilla rowed on, saying nothing, breathing heavily, stealing sidelong glances at the flaming sword that kept rising and falling. Chelkash said it was only a lantern, but he could not believe it. There was something uncanny about this cold blue light cleaving the darkness, giving the sea a silver shimmer, and once more Gavrilla was gripped by fear. He rowed mechanically, all his muscles taut as in expectation of a blow from above, and there was nothing he wanted now; he was empty and inanimate. The excitement of that night had drained everything human out of him.

But Chelkash was jubilant. His nerves, used to strain, quickly relaxed. His moustache twitched with gratification and his eyes sparkled. Never had he been in better humour; he whistled through his teeth, drew in deep breaths of the moist sea air, looked about him, smiled good-naturedly when his eyes came to rest on Gavrilla.

A wind sprang up, rousing the sea and covering it with little ripples. The clouds grew thinner and more transparent but the whole sky was still covered with them. The wind rushed lightly back and forth across the sea, but the clouds hung motionless, as if deeply engrossed in drab, uninteresting thoughts.

“Come, snap out of it, brother. You look as if you’d had all the spirit knocked out of you; nothing but a bag of bones left. As if it was the end of the world.”

Gavrilla was glad to hear a human voice, even if it was Chelkash’s.

"I'm all right," he murmured.

"You look it! Got no stuffings in you. Here, take the steering oar and let me row. You must be tired."

Gavrilla got up mechanically and changed places with him. In passing, Chelkash got a look at the boy's white face and noticed that his knees were trembling so that they could hardly hold him. This made him more sorry than ever for him, and he gave him a pat on the shoulder.

"Come, chin up! You did a good job. I'll reward you well for it. What would you think if I handed you a twenty-five rouble note, eh?"

"I don't want anything. Nothing but to get on shore."

Chelkash gave a wave of his hand, spat, and began to row, swinging the oars far back with his long arms.

The sea was quite awake now. It amused itself by making little waves, ornamenting them with fringes of foam, and running them into each other so that they broke in showers of spray. The foam hissed and sighed as it dissolved, and the air was filled with musical sounds. The darkness seemed to have waked up, too."

"So now," said Chelkash, "you'll go back to your village, get married, start working the land, raise corn, your wife will bear children, there won't be enough to eat, and all your life you'll work yourself to the bone. What fun is there in that?"

"Fun?" echoed Gavrilla faintly and with a little shudder.

Here and there the wind tore rifts in the clouds, revealing patches of blue sky set with one or two stars. The reflection of

these stars danced on the water, now disappearing, now gleaming again.

“Bear more to the right,” said Chelkash. “We’re almost there. Hm, the job’s over. A big job. Just think, five hundred roubles in a single night!”

“Five hundred?” repeated Gavrilla incredulously. Frightened by the words, he gave the bundles a little kick and said, “What’s in them?”

“Things that are worth a lot of money. They’d bring in a thousand if I got the right price, but I can’t be bothered. Slick, eh?”

“Good Lord!” said Gavrilla unbelievably. “If only I had as much!” He sighed as he thought of his village, his wretched farm, his mother, and all those dear and distant things for whose sake he had set out in search of work; for whose sake he had undergone the tortures of that night. He was caught up in a wave of memories – his little village on the side of a hill running down to the river, and the woods above the river with its birches, willows, rowans, and bird-cherry.

“How I need it!” he sighed mournfully.

“You don’t say. I s’pose you’d jump straight on a train and make a dash for home. And wouldn’t the girls be mad on you! Why, you could have any one of them you liked. And you’d build yourself a new house; although the money’s hardly enough for a house.”

“No, not for a house. Timber’s dear up our way.”

“At least you’d repair the old one. And what about a horse? Have you got a horse?”

“Yes, but it’s a feeble old thing.”

“So you’ll need to buy a new horse. A first-rate horse. And a cow... And some sheep. And some poultry, eh?”

“Ekh, don’t mention it! Couldn’t I set myself up fine!”

“You could, brother. And life would be like a song. I know a thing or two about such things myself. I had a nest of my own once. My father was one of the richest men in the village.”

Chelkash was scarcely rowing. The boat was tossed by the waves splashing mischievously against its sides, and it made almost no progress through the dark waters, now growing more and more playful. The two men sat there rocking and looking about them, each absorbed in his own dreams. Chelkash had reminded Gavrilla of his village in the hope of quieting the boy’s nerves and cheering him up. He had done so with his tongue in his cheek, but as he taunted his companion with reminders of the joys of peasant life, joys which he himself had long since ceased to value and had quite forgotten until this moment, he gradually let himself be carried away, and before he knew it he himself was expounding on the subject instead of questioning the boy about the village and its affairs.

“The best thing about peasant life is that a man’s free, he’s his own boss. He’s got his own house, even if it’s a poor one. And he’s got his own land – maybe only a little patch, but it’s his. He’s a king, once he’s got his own land. He’s a man to be reckoned

with. He can demand respect from anybody, can't he?" he ended up with animation.

Gavrilla looked at him curiously, and he, too, became animated. In the course of their talk he had forgotten who this man was; he saw in him only another peasant like himself, glued fast to the land by the sweat of many generations of forefathers, bound to it by memories of childhood; a peasant who of his own free choice had severed connections with the land and with labour on the land, for which he had been duly punished.

"True, brother. How very true! Look at you, now; what are you without any land? The land, brother, is like your mother; there's no forgetting it."

Chelkash came back to his surroundings. Again he felt that burning sensation in his chest that always troubled him when his pride – the pride of a reckless dare-devil – was injured, especially if injured by someone he considered a nonentity.

"Trying to teach me!" he said fiercely.

"Did you think I meant what I said? Know your place, upstart!"

"You're a funny one," said Gavrilla with his former timidity. "I didn't mean you. There's lots of others like you. God, how many miserable people there are in the world! Homeless tramps."

"Here, take over the oars," snapped Chelkash, holding back the flood of oaths that surged in his throat.

Once more they exchanged places, and as Chelkash climbed over the bundles he had an irresistible desire to give Gavrilla a

push that would send him flying into the water.

They did no more talking, but Gavrilla emanated the breath of the village even when he was silent. Chelkash became so engrossed in thoughts of the past that he forgot to steer, and the current turned the boat out to sea. The waves seemed to sense that this boat was without a pilot, and they played with it gleefully, tossing it on their crests and leaping in little blue flames about the oars. In front of Chelkash's eyes passed a kaleidoscope of the past, of the distant past, separated from the present by the gulf of eleven years of vagrancy. He saw himself as a child, saw his native village, saw his mother, a stout red-cheeked woman with kindly grey eyes, and his father, a stern-faced, red-bearded giant. He saw himself as a bridegroom, and he saw his bride, the plump black-eyed Anfisa with a mild, cheerful disposition and a long plait hanging down her back. Again he saw himself, this time as a handsome Guardsman; again his father, now grey-haired and stooped with labour; and his mother, wrinkled and bent to earth. He saw the reception the village gave him when his army service was over, and he recalled how proud his father had been to show off this healthy, handsome, bewhiskered soldier-son to the neighbours. Memory is the bane of those who have come to misfortune; it brings to life the very stones of the past, and adds a drop of honey even to the bitterest portion drunk at some far time.

It was as if a gentle stream of native air were wafted over Chelkash, bringing to his ears his mother's tender words, his

father's earnest peasant speech and many other forgotten sounds; bringing to his nostrils the fragrance of mother-earth as it thawed, as it was new-ploughed, as it drew on an emerald coverlet of springing rye. He felt lonely, uprooted, thrown once and for all beyond the pale of that way of life which had produced the blood flowing in his veins.

“Hey, where are we going?” cried Gavrilla.

Chelkash started and glanced about with the alertness of a bird of prey.

“Look where we've drifted, damn it all. Row harder.”

“Daydreaming?” smiled Gavrilla.

“Tired.”

“No danger of getting caught with them things?” asked Gavrilla, giving the bundles a little kick.

“No, have no fear. I'll turn them in now and get my money.”

“Five hundred?”

“At least.”

“God, what a pile! If only I had it! Wouldn't I play a pretty tune with it, just!”

“A peasant tune?”

“What else? I'd...”

And Gavrilla soared on the wings of his imagination. Chelkash said nothing. His moustache drooped, his right side had been drenched by a wave, his eyes were sunken and lustreless. All the hawkishness had gone out of him, had been wrung out of him by a humiliating introspection that even glanced out of the

folds of his filthy shirt.

He turned the boat sharply about and steered it towards a black form rising out of the water.

Once more the sky was veiled in clouds and a fine warm rain set in, making cheerful little plopping sounds as its drops struck the water.

“Stop! Hold it!” ordered Chelkash.

The nose of the boat ran into the side of a barge.

“Are they asleep or what, the bastards?” growled Chelkash as he slipped a boat-hook into some ropes hanging over the side. “Throw down the ladder! And the rain had to wait till this minute to come down! Hey, you sponges! Hey!”

“Selkash?” purred someone on deck.

“Where’s the ladder?”

“Kalimera, Selkash.”

“The ladder, God damn you!”

“Oo, what a temper he’s in tonight! Eloy!”

“Climb up, Gavrilla,” said Chelkash to his companion.

The next minute they were on deck, where three bearded, dark-skinned fellows were talking animatedly in a lisping tongue as they stared over the gunwale into Chelkash’s boat. A fourth, wrapped in a long chlamys, went over to Chelkash and shook his hand without a word, then threw Gavrilla a questioning look.

“Have the money ready in the morning,” Chelkash said to him briefly. “I’m going to take a snooze now. Come along, Gavrilla. Are you hungry?”

“I’m sleepy,” said Gavrilla. Five minutes later he was snoring loudly while Chelkash sat beside him trying on somebody else’s boots, spitting off to one side and whistling a sad tune through his teeth. Presently he stretched out beside Gavrilla with his hands behind his head and lay there with his moustache twitching.

The barge rolled on the waves, a board creaked plaintively, the rain beat on the deck and the waves against the sides of the barge. It was all very mournful and reminded one of the cradle-song of a mother who has little hope of seeing her child happy.

Chelkash bared his teeth, raised his head, glanced about him, muttered something to himself and lay down again with his legs spread wide apart, making him look like a pair of giant scissors.

III

He was the first to wake up. He glanced anxiously about him, was instantly reassured, and looked down at Gavrilla, who was snoring happily, a smile spread all over his wholesome, sunburnt, boyish face. Chelkash gave a sigh and climbed up a narrow rope-ladder. A patch of lead-coloured sky peered down the hatchway. It was light, but the day was dull and dreary, as is often so in autumn.

Chelkash came back in a couple of hours. His face was red and his whiskers had been given a rakish twist. He was wearing a sturdy pair of high-boots, a leather hunting jacket and breeches as a hunter wears. The outfit was not new, but in good condition and very becoming to him, since it filled out his figure, rounded off the edges and gave him a certain military air.

“Get up, puppy,” said he, giving Gavrilla a little kick.

Gavrilla jumped up only half-awake and gazed at Chelkash with frightened eyes, not recognizing him. Chelkash burst out laughing.

“Don’t you look grand!” said Gavrilla with a broad grin at last. “Quite the gentleman.”

“That don’t take us long. But you’re a lily-livered fellow if there ever was one. How many times were you about to pass out last night?”

“You can’t blame me; I’d never been on a job like that before.

I might have lost my soul.”

“Would you do it again, eh?”

“Again? Only if – how shall I put it? What would I get for it?”

“If you got, let’s say, two smackers?”

“You mean two hundred roubles? Not bad. I might.”

“And what about losing your soul?”

“Maybe I wouldn’t lose it after all,” grinned Gavril-la.

“You wouldn’t lose it, and you’d be made for the rest of your life.”

Chelkash laughed gaily, “Well, enough of joking; let’s go ashore.”

And so they found themselves in the boat again, Chelkash steering, Gavrilla rowing. Above them stretched a solid canopy of grey clouds; the sea was a dull green and it played joyfully with the boat, tossing it up on waves that had not yet grown to any size, and throwing handfuls of pale spray against its sides. Far up ahead could be glimpsed a strip of yellow sand, while behind them stretched the sea, chopped up into coveys of white-caps. Behind them, too, were the ships – a whole forest of masts back there to the left, with the white buildings of the port as a background. A dull rumble came pouring out of the port over the sea, mingling with the roar of the waves to form fine strong music. And over everything hung a thin veil of fog that made all objects seem remote.

“Ekh, it’ll be something to see by nightfall!” exclaimed Chelkash, nodding out to sea.

“A storm?” asked Gavrilla as he ploughed powerfully through the waves with his oars. His clothes were soaked with wind-blown spray.

“Uh-huh,” said Chelkash.

Gavrilla looked at him inquisitively.

“Well, how much did they give you?” he asked at last, seeing that Chelkash had no intention of broaching the subject.

“Look,” and Chelkash pulled something out of his pocket and held it out.

Gavrilla’s eyes were dazzled by the sight of so many crisp bright bank-notes.

“And here I was thinking you had lied to me! How much is it?”

“Five hundred and forty.”

“Phe-e-w!” gasped Gavrilla, following the course of the notes back to the pocket with greedy eyes. “God! If only I had that much money!” and he gave a doleful sigh.

“You and me’ll go on a big spree, mate,” cried Chelkash ecstatically. “We’ll paint the town red. You’ll get your share, never fear. I’ll give you forty. That enough, eh? Give it straight away if you want me to.”

“All right, I’ll take it if you don’t mind.”

Gavrilla was shaking with anticipation.

“Ekh, you scarecrow, you! ‘I’ll take it!’ Here, go ahead and take it. Take it, damn it all. I don’t know what to do with so much money. Do me a favour and take some of it off my hands.”

Chelkash held out several notes to Gavrilla, who let go of the

oars to clutch them in trembling fingers and thrust them inside his shirt, screwing up his eyes as he did so and taking in great gulps of air as if he had just scalded his throat. Chelkash watched him, a squeamish smile on his lips. Once more Gavrilla picked up the oars and began to row nervously, hurriedly, with his eyes cast down, like a man who has just had a bad fright. His shoulders and ears were twitching.

“You’re a greedy bloke. That’s no good. But what’s to be expected? – you’re a peasant,” mused Chelkash.

“A man can do anything with money!” exclaimed Gavrilla in a sudden flare of excitement. And then hurriedly, incoherently chasing his thoughts and catching his words on the fly, he drew the contrast between life in the village with money and without it. Honour, comfort, pleasure!

Chelkash followed him attentively, his face grave, his eyes narrowed thoughtfully. From time to time he would give a pleased smile.

“Here we are!” he interrupted Gavrilla’s tirade.

The boat was caught on a wave that drove it into the sand.

“Well, this is the end. But we’ve got to pull the boat up good and high so that it don’t get washed away. Some people will come for it. And now it’s good-bye. We’re about ten versts from town. You going back to town?”

Chelkash’s face was beaming with a sly and good-natured smile, as if he were contemplating something very pleasant for himself and very unexpected for Gavrilla. He thrust his hand into

his pocket and rustled the notes there.

“No – I’m not going. I’m – I’m —” Gavrilla stammered as if choking.

Chelkash looked at him.

“What’s eating you?” he said.

“Nothing.” But Gavrilla’s face turned first red, then grey, and he kept shifting on his feet as if he wanted to throw himself at Chelkash or do something else of insuperable difficulty.

Chelkash was nonplussed by the boy’s agitation. He waited to see what would come of it.

Gavrilla broke into laughter that sounded more like sobbing. His head was hanging, so that Chelkash could not see the expression of his face, but he could see his ears going from red to white.

“To hell with you,” said Chelkash with a disgusted wave of his hand. “Are you in love with me, or what? Squirming like a girl. Or maybe you can’t bear to part with me? Speak up, spineless, or I’ll just walk off.”

“You’ll walk off?” shrieked Gavrilla.

The deserted beach trembled at the shriek, and the ripples of yellow sand made up by the washing of the waves seemed to heave. Chelkash himself started. All of a sudden Gavrilla rushed towards Chelkash, threw himself at his feet, seized him round the knees and gave him a tug. Chelkash staggered and sat down heavily in the sand; clenching his teeth, he swung up his long arm with the hand closed in a tight fist. But the blow was intercepted

by Gavrilla's pleadings, uttered in a cringing whisper:

“Give me that money, there's a good fellow! For the love of Christ give it to me. What do you need with it? Look, in just one night – in one single night! And it would take me years and years. Give it to me. I'll pray for you. All my life. In three churches. For the salvation of your soul. You'll only throw it to the winds, while I? I'll put it in the land. Give it to me! What is it to you? It comes so easy. One night, and you're a rich man. Do a good deed once in your life. After all, you're a lost soul; there's nothing ahead of you. And I'd – oh what wouldn't I do with it! Give it to me!”

Chelkash – frightened, dumbfounded, infuriated – sat in the sand leaning back on his elbows; sat without a word, his eyes boring into this boy whose head was pressed against his knees as he gasped out his plea.

At last Chelkash jumped to his feet, thrust his hand into his pocket and threw the notes at Gavrilla.

“Here, lick it up!” he cried, trembling with excitement, with pity and loathing for this greedy slave. He felt heroic when he had tossed him the money.

“I was going to give you more anyway. Went soft last night thinking of my own village. Thought to myself: I'll help the lad. But I waited to see if you'd ask for it. And you did, you milksop, you beggar, you. Is it worth tormenting yourself like that for money? Fool. Greedy devils. No pride. They'd sell themselves for five kopeks.”

“May Christ watch over you! What's this I've got? Why, I'm

a rich man now!” squealed Gavrilla, twitching all over in ecstasy and hiding the money inside his shirt. “Bless you, my friend. I’ll never forget you. Never. And I’ll have my wife and children say prayers for you, too.”

As Chelkash heard his joyful squeals and looked at his beaming face distorted by this paroxysm of greed, he realized that, thief and drunk that he was, he would never stoop so low, would never be so grasping, so lacking in self-pride. Never, never! And this thought and this feeling, filling him with a sense of his own freedom, made him linger there beside Gavrilla on the shore of the sea.

“You’ve made me a present of happiness,” cried Gavrilla, snatching Chelkash’s hand and pressing it against his own face.

Chelkash bared his teeth like a wolf but said nothing.

“And just to think what I almost did!” went on Gavrilla. “On the way here I thought – to myself – I’ll hit him – you, that is – over the head – with an oar – bang! – take the money – and throw him – you, that is – overboard. Who’d ever miss him? And if they found his body – nobody’d bother to find out who did it and how. He’s not worth making a fuss over. Nobody needs him. Nobody’d go to the trouble.”

“Hand over that money!” roared Chelkash, seizing Gavrilla by the throat.

Gavrilla wrenched away once, twice, but Chelkash’s arm wound about him like a snake. The sound of a shirt ripping, and – there was Gavrilla flat on his back in the sand, his eyes popping

out of his head, his fingers clutching the air, his feet kicking helplessly. Chelkash stood over him lean, erect, hawk-like, his teeth bared as he gave a hard dry laugh, his whiskers twitching nervously on his sharp bony face. Never in all his life had he been wounded so cruelly, and never had he been so furious.

“Well, are you happy now?” he laughed, then turned on his heel and set off in the direction of the town. Before he had gone five steps Gavrilla arched himself like a cat, sprang to his feet, swung out with his arm and hurled a big stone at him.

“Take that!”

Chelkash let out a grunt, put his hands to his head, staggered forward, turned round to Gavrilla, and fell on his face in the sand. Gavrilla was frozen with fear. Chelkash moved one leg, tried to lift his head, stretched out, trembling like a harp string. Then Gavrilla ran for all he was worth, ran out into the dark space where a shaggy black cloud was hanging over the fog-enshrouded steppe. The waves rustled as they scurried up the sand, mingled with the sand for a brief moment, scurried back again. The foam hissed and the air was filled with spray.

It began to rain. At first it came down in single drops, but soon turned into a torrent that came pouring out of the sky in thin streams. These streams wove a net of watery threads that enveloped the whole expanse of the steppe, the whole expanse of the sea. Gavrilla was swallowed up in it. For a long time nothing was to be seen but the rain and the long figure of the man laying in the sand at the edge of the sea. Then Gavrilla came swooping

like a bird out of the darkness. When he reached Chelkash he fell on his knees beside him and tried to lift him up. His hand came in contact with something warm and red and sticky. He shuddered and started back, with a wild expression on his white face.

“Get up, brother, get up!” he whispered in Chelkash’s ear above the noise of the rain.

Chelkash opened his eyes and gave Gavrilla a little push.

“Go away,” he whispered hoarsely.

“Brother! Forgive me! It was the devil’s doings,” whispered Gavrilla trembling as he kissed Chelkash’s hand.

“Go away. Leave me.”

“Take this sin off my soul. Forgive me, brother.”

“Away! Go away! Go to hell!” Chelkash suddenly cried out and sat up in the sand. His face was white and angry, his eyes were hazy and kept closing as if he were sleepy. “What else do you want? You’ve done what you wanted to do. Go away. Get out!” He tried to give the grief-stricken Gavrilla a kick, but he could not and would have collapsed again had not Gavrilla put an arm round his shoulders. Chelkash’s face was on a level with Gavrilla’s. Both faces were white and dreadful to see.

“Bah!” And Chelkash spat into the wide-open eyes of his assistant.

Gavrilla humbly wiped his face on his sleeve.

“Do what you want to me,” he whispered. “I won’t say a word. Forgive me, in the name of Christ.”

“Scum. Can’t even do your dirty work like a man,” cried

Chelkash scathingly as he slipped his hand inside his jacket and ripped off a piece of shirt with which he silently bound his head, grinding his teeth from time to time. "Have you taken the money?" he asked through his teeth.

"I haven't, brother. And I won't. I don't want it. Nothing but bad luck comes of it."

Chelkash thrust his hand into a pocket of his jacket, pulled out the pile of notes, peeled off a hundred-rouble one, put it back into his pocket, and threw the rest at Gavrilla.

"Take it and go away."

"I won't, brother. I can't. Forgive me what I've done."

"Take it, I say," roared Chelkash, rolling his eyes fearfully.

"Forgive me. I can't take it if you don't," said Gavrilla humbly, falling at Chelkash's feet in the rain-drenched sand.

"That's a lie. You will take it, you scum," said Chelkash with conviction. Pulling up his companion's head by the hair, he thrust the money under his nose.

"Take it. Take it. You didn't work for nothing. Don't be afraid, take it. And don't be ashamed that you almost killed a man. Nobody would hunt you down for killing a man like me. They'd even say thank you if they found out. Here, take it."

Seeing that Chelkash was laughing, Gavrilla's heart grew lighter. He clutched the money.

"And do you forgive me, brother? Don't you want to do that for me?" he begged tearfully.

"My beloved friend," replied Chelkash in the same vein, as he

got up and stood swaying on his feet. "What's there to forgive? Nothing to forgive. Today you get me; tomorrow I get you."

"Ah brother, brother," sighed Gavrilla disconsolately, shaking his head.

Chelkash stood in front of him with an odd smile on his face. The rag on his head, which had gradually been getting redder, resembled a Turkish fez.

The rain had become a downpour. The sea gave a low roar, the waves hurled themselves savagely at the shore.

The two men were silent.

"Well, good-bye," said Chelkash mockingly as he turned to go.

He staggered, his legs were shaking, and he held his head as if afraid of losing it.

"Forgive me, brother," pleaded Gavrilla once more.

"That's all right," said Chelkash coldly, setting off.

He stumbled away, holding his head with his left hand, pulling gently at his dark moustache with his right.

Gavrilla stood watching him until he disappeared in the rain which kept coming down in fine endless streams, enveloping the steppe in impenetrable steel-grey gloom.

Then he took off his wet cap, crossed himself, looked at the money in his hand, heaved a deep sigh of relief, hid the money in his shirt, and strode off firmly down the shore in the opposite direction to that taken by Chelkash.

The sea growled as it hurled its huge waves on the sand, smashing them to foam and spray. The rain lashed at the water

and the land. The wind howled. The air was filled with a roar, a howl, a murmur. The rain cut off sight of sea and sky.

Soon the rain and the spray washed away the red spot on the sand where Chelkash had lain, washed away the footsteps of Chelkash, washed away the footsteps of the youth who had walked so bravely down the beach. And not a sign was left on this deserted shore to testify to the little drama enacted here by these two men.

1894

The Philanderer

At about 6 o'clock in the morning I felt a living weight thrust itself upon my bed, and somebody shook me and shouted right into my ear:

“Get up!”

This was Sashka the compositor, my chum. An amusing fellow, about nineteen years of age, with a mop of tousled red hair, greenish eyes like a lizard's, and a face smudged with lead dust.

“Come on, get up!” he shouted, pulling me out of bed. “Let's go on the spree today. I have some money, six roubles twenty kopecks, and it's Stepakha's birthday! Where do you keep your soap?”

He went to the wash basin in the corner and fiercely scrubbed his face. In the midst of his puffing and snorting he asked me:

“Tell me: ‘star’ – is that ‘astra’ – in German?”

“No, I think it's Greek.”

“Greek? We have a new proof-reader at our place who writes poetry, and she signs herself ‘Astra.’ Her real name is Trushenikova, Avdotia Vassilievna. She's nice little lady – good-looking, only – rather stout... Where's your comb?..”

As he forced the comb through his red mop of hair, he wrinkled his nose and swore. Suddenly he broke off in the middle of a word and closely examined the reflection of his face in the

murky windowpane.

Outside the sun was playing on the brick wall opposite. The wall was wet from the previous night's rain and the sun tinted it red. A jackdaw was sitting on the funnel of the rain pipe, preening itself.

“What an awful mug I've got!” said Sashka, and then he exclaimed: “Look at that jackdaw! How all dressed up she is! Give me a needle and cotton, will you; I'll sew a button on my coat.”

He pirouetted round and round, as if he were dancing on hot bricks; so much so that the draught he caused blew some scraps of paper from my table.

Then, standing at the window and clumsily plying the needle, he asked:

“Was there ever a king named Lodir?”¹

“You mean Lothar. Why do you ask?”

“That's funny! I thought his name was Lodir, and that all lazy people descended from him! Let's go to a tavern first and have some tea. After that we'll go to the nunnery church for late matin and have a look at the nuns – I'm fond of nuns!.. And what does ‘prospectives’ mean?”

He was as full of questions as a rattle with peas. I began, to tell him what “prospects“ means, but he went on talking without waiting for me to finish.

“Last night that feuilleton writer, Red Domino, came to the

¹ Literally – lazybones. Trans.

printing office, drunk, of course, as usual, and kept pestering me with questions about my prospectives.”

After sewing on the button, higher than he should have done, he nipped the cotton with his white teeth, licked his red puffy lips and mumbled plaintively:

“Lizochka is quite right. I ought to read books, otherwise I shall die a boor and never know anything. But when can I read? I never have any time!

“Don’t waste so much time courting the girls...”

“What am I – a corpse? I’m not an old man yet! Wait! When I get married, I’ll give it up!

Stretching himself, he mused:

“I’ll marry Lizochka. That’s a fashionable girl for you! She has a frock made of... what do you call it?... barege, I think. Well! She looks so lovely in it that my legs tremble when I see her wearing it. I feel I could gobble her up!”

In the tone of a grave mentor I said:

“Take care you are not gobbled up yourself!”

He smiled self-confidently and shook his head.

“The other day two students had an argument in our newspaper. One said that love was a dangerous business, but the other said no, it’s quite safe! Aren’t they clever? The girls like students. They are as fond of them as they are of military men.”

We left the house. The cobble-stones, washed by the rain, glistened like the bald pates of government officials. The sky was almost shut out by banks of snow-white clouds, and every

now and again the sun peeped through the spaces between these cloudy snow-drifts. A strong autumn wind was blowing people down the street like withered leaves. It buffeted us and rang in our ears. Sashka shrivelled up and thrust his hands deep down into the pockets of his greasy trousers. He wore a light summer jacket, a blue blouse, and brown top boots, down at heel.

At midnight an angel flew across the sky,

he declaimed in rhythm with our footsteps. "I love that piece! Who wrote it?"

"Lermontov."

"I always mix him up with Nekrassov."

*And long she languished in the world,
Filled with strange desires.*

And screwing up his greenish eyes he repeated in a low and pensive voice:

Filled with strange desires...

"Good Lord! How well I understand that! I understand it so well that I would fly myself... Strange desires..."

A girl walked out of the gate of a gloomy house in holiday attire – a "claret-colour" skirt, a black blouse with jet trimmings and a golden-yellow silk shawl.

Sashka pulled his crumpled cap from his head, and bowing respectfully, said to the girl:

“Many happy returns of the day, Miss!”

The girl’s pretty round face first lit up with a tender smile, but she immediately drew her thin brows together in a stern frown and said in an angry, and half-frightened voice:

“But I don’t know you!”

“Oh, that’s nothing!” answered Sashka cheerfully. “It’s always like that with me. They don’t know me at first; but when they do they fall in love with me...”

“If you wish to be impudent...” said the young lady, glancing round. The street was deserted, except for a cart laden with cabbages at the very far end.

“I’m as gentle as a lamb!” said Sashka, walking beside the girl and glancing at her face. “I can see it’s your birthday...”

“Please leave me alone.”

The girl stepped out faster, clicking her heels determinedly on the brick sidewalk. Sashka halted and mumbled:

“By all means. There! I’ve dropped behind. Isn’t she proud! What a pity I haven’t a costume in which to play the part! If I had another suit on, she would have taken an interest in me, don’t you worry.”

“How do you know that it’s her birthday?”

“How do I know? She comes out in her best clothes and is going to church. I’m too poor. That’s what’s the matter. Ekh! If only I had lots of money! I’d buy myself a little estate in the

country and live like a gentleman... Look!

Four rough-bearded men were carrying a plain deal coffin out of a side street. In front of them, carrying the coffin lid on his head, walked a boy, and behind them walked a tall beggar, carrying a shepherd's staff. His face was stern, and looked as if it were hewn out of stone; and as he walked he kept his red-rimmed eyes fixed on the greyish nose of the corpse that was visible above the edge of the open coffin.

"The carpenter must have died," surmised Sashka, removing his cap. "Lord rest his soul and keep him far away from his relations and friends!"

A broad smile lit up his face, and his bright eyes flashed merrily.

"It's lucky to meet a corpse," he explained.

"Come on!"

"We went to the 'Moskva' tavern, and entered a small room crowded with chairs and tables. The tables were covered with pink cloths. The windows were hung with faded-blue curtains. Flower pots were ranged on the window sills, and above the flower pots canaries in cages were suspended. The place was bright and warm and cosy.

We ordered some fried sausage, tea, half a bottle of vodka, and a dozen cigarettes of the "Persian" brand. Sashka sat down at a table near the window, spread himself out like a gentleman and launched into a discourse:

"I like this polite and genteel life," he said. "You are always

complaining that this is bad and the other is bad, but why? Everything is as it should be. Your character is not human, it lacks harmony. You are like the letter ‘yer.’² The word can be understood without it, but they stick it on the end for form’s sake, or perhaps because they think it looks better.”

While he was criticizing me I looked at him and thought to myself:

“How much verve there is in that lad! A man who has so much in him cannot pass out of this life unobserved.”

But he had grown tired of sermonizing by this time. He took up his knife and scraped it on his plate to tease the birds. At once the room rang with the shrill trilling of the canaries.

“That set them going!” said Sashka, extremely pleased with himself. Then, putting down the knife, he ran his fingers through his red hair and thought aloud:

“No! Lizochka won’t marry me. That’s out of the question. But who knows? Perhaps she’ll learn to love me. I’m madly in love with her!”

“But what about Zina?”

“Oh, Zinka is so plain. Lizochka – she’s smart, she is,” Sashka explained.

He was an orphan, a foundling. At the age of seven he was already working for a furrier. Then he worked for a plumber. For two years he worked as a labourer at a flour mill that belonged

² The hard sign formerly placed after consonants at the end of a word, now obsolete.
– Trans.

to a monastery, and now, for over a year, he had been working as a printer's compositor. He liked the work on the newspaper very much. He learned to read and write in his spare time, hardly noticing it himself, and the mysteries of literature had a great fascination for him. He was particularly fond of reading poetry, and he even wrote verses himself. Sometimes he would bring me scraps of lead-smudged paper with formal lines scribbled on them in pencil. The subject of these verses was always the same, and they ran approximately as follows:

*I loved thee at first sight when
On Black Lake my eyes met thine,
And all my thoughts have been since then
Of thee and of thy face divine.*

When I told him that this was not poetry, he would ask in surprise: "Why not? Look! It ends with 'en' here and here, and with 'me' here and here!"

"But then, remember how Lermontov's verses sound."

"Oh, well! He had lots of practice, whereas I have only just begun! Wait until I get used to it!"

His self-confidence was amusing, but there was nothing repellent about it. He was simply convinced that life was in love with him, as the laundress Stepakha was; that he could do whatever he pleased, and that success awaited him everywhere.

The church bells were ringing, calling for late ma-tin. The canaries, listening to the sound, which made the windowpanes

rattle, stopped singing.

Sashka mumbled:

“Shall we go to matin or not?”

And then he decided.

“Let’s go!”

On the way he said in a tone of complaint blended with self-condemnation:

“Tell me, how do you explain it? I always feel bored in church, but I love to go! The nuns there are so young. I’m sorry for them!”

In the church he stood at the gates where the beggars and other supplicants were gathered. His greenish eyes opened wide with wonder as he gazed at the choir where a crowd of choiristers were assembled, pale-faced and in pointed hoods, all standing stiff and straight as if they were carved out of black stone. They were singing harmoniously, and their silvery voices sounded amazingly pure. The gold on the icons glittered and the glass cases reflected the lights of the candles, which looked like golden flies.

The beggars sighed and muttered their humble prayers, raising their faded eyes to the dome. This was a week day, and there were few people in the church: only those had come who had nothing to do and did not know what to do with themselves.

In front of Sashka, telling her beads, stood a nun, rather a large woman, wearing a cowl. Sashka, who reached only up to her shoulder stood on tiptoe to peep into her round face and eyes, which were hidden by the cowl: and he stood like that, insolently

staring at the nun with his lips pursed, as if for a kiss.

The nun slightly bent her head and gave him a sidelong glance, like a well-fed cat looking at a mouse. He collapsed at once, pulled me by the sleeve and hurried out of the church.

“Did you see the look she gave me?” he said, closing his eyes with fright. Then he drew his cap out of his pocket, wiped his perspiring face with it and wrinkled up his nose.

“Gee! The way she looked at me... as if I were the Devil! It made my heart sink!”

Then he laughed and said:

“She must have had some bad experiences with us fellows!”

Sashka was kind-hearted, but he had no pity for people. Probably, he gave more money to beggars, and gave it more willingly, than many a rich man, but he gave it because he hated poverty. The little daily tragedies of life touched him not at all. He used to talk about them and laugh.

“Have you heard? Mishka Sizov has been sent to prison!” he said to me one day with animation. “He walked and walked about, looking for work, and one day he stole an umbrella and was caught. He didn’t know how to steal. They hauled him before the beak. I was walking along and suddenly I saw him being led like a sheep by a policeman. His face was pale and his lips were parted. I shouted out to him: ‘Mishka!’ but he didn’t answer, as if he didn’t know me.”

We went into a shop and Sashka bought a pound of marmalade sweets.

“I ought to buy Stepakha some pastries,” he explained, “but I don’t like pastries. This marmalade is better!”

In addition to the sweets he bought some cakes and nuts, and then we went to a wine shop and he bought two bottles of liqueur, one the colour of red lead and the other the colour of vitriol. Walking down the street with the packages under his arm, he composed the following story about the nun:

“A buxom woman, isn’t she! She must have been a shopkeeper’s wife. Probably a grocer. I suppose she was unfaithful to her husband! He must have been a puny fellow... Aren’t those women cunning! Take Stepakha, for example...”

By this time we had reached the gates of a house, painted brown, with green shutters. Sashka kicked the wicker gate open as if he were at home, set his cap jauntily on the side of his head and strode into the yard, which was strewn with yellow birch, poplar and elder leaves. At the other end of the yard, built against the garden wall, stood a wash-house, banked with turf right up to the windowsills. Its roof was covered with yellowish-green moss, and the treetops swayed over the roof, reluctantly shedding their leaves. With its two windows the wash-house seemed to be gazing at us mournfully and suspiciously, like a load.

The door was opened for us by a big woman, about forty years of age, with a large pock-marked face, merry eyes and thick red lips, which were stretched in a pleasant smile.

“What welcome guests!” she cried in a singsong voice. And Sasha, placing his hands on her ample shoulders and bringing his

face close to hers, said:

“Many happy returns of the day, Stepanida Yakimovna, and congratulations on receiving the holy mysteries!”

“But I didn’t go to communion!” protested Stepakha.

“It’s all the same!” answered Sashka, kissing her three times on the lips, after which both wiped away the traces of the kisses, Stepakha with the palm of her hand and Sashka with his cap.

In the dark anteroom, encumbered with pokers, baskets and wash tubs, they found Stepakha’s daughter, Pasha, busy with the samovar. Pasha was a young girl with large, bulging eyes that stared with stupid astonishment, typical of children who suffered from rickets. She had a wonderfully thick plait of hair of a soft golden colour.

“Many happy returns, Panya!”

“All right,” answered the girl.

“You dummy!” exclaimed Stepakha. “You should say Thank you.”

“Oh, all right!” retorted the girl angrily.

A third of the laundress’ habitation was taken up by a large oven, and where the shelves for the bathers used to be there was; now a wide bed. In the corner, under the icons, stood a table, laid out for tea, and at the wall stood a wide bench, on which it was convenient to place the wash tub. A shaggy dog looked through the open window like a beggar, resting his heavy paws with their broken claws upon the window sill. On the window sills there were flower pots with geraniums and fuchsias.

“She knows how to live,” said Sashka, looking round the squalid room and winking to me, as much as to say: “I’m joking!”

The hostess carefully drew a pie from the oven and flipped its rosy crust with her fingernail. Pasha brought in the samovar, glistening like the sun, and cast an angry glance at Sashka. But he said, licking his lips:

“Hell! I must get married! I do love pie!”

“One doesn’t marry for the sake of pie,” observed Stepakha, gravely.

“Oh. I understand that!”

The buxom laundress laughed merrily at this, but her eyes were grave when she said:

“You’ll marry one day and forget me.”

“But how many have you forgotten?” retorted Sashka with a grin.

Stepakha also smiled. Dressed as she was, too gaudily for her age, she resembled not a laundress, but a matchmaker, or a fortune teller.

Her daughter, looking like a silent gnome out of a sad fairy tale, was unwanted here, and indeed seemed to be totally unwanted on earth. She ate very carefully, as if she were rating not pie, but fish that was full of bones. And every now and again she slowly turned her large eyes towards Sashka and gazed into his thin mobile face in a queer way, as if she were blind.

The dog whined pitifully at the window. The brassy strains of martial music, the steady tramp of hundreds of heavy marching

feel, and the beat of a base drum keeping them in step, came floating in from the street.

Stepakha said to her daughter:

“Why don’t you run out and look at the soldiers?” don’t want to.”

“This is fine!” exclaimed Sashka, throwing the dog a piece of pie crust. “I don’t think I need anything more!”

Stepakha looked at him with motherly eyes, and straightening her blouse over her high breast she said with a sigh:

“No, that’s not true. There’s a lot more things you need.”

“What I just said was quite true.” answered Sash-ka. “I don’t need anything more now, if only Pashka would stop boring through me with her eyes.”

“A fat lot I care about you,” the girl retorted softly and contemptuously. Her mother angrily raised her eyebrows, but pursed her lips and said nothing.

Sashka moved in his scat uneasily and looking sideways at the girl said ardently:

“I feel as though I have a hole in my soul. So help me God! I would like my soul to be full, and calm, but I cannot fill it! Do you understand me, Maximich? When I feel bad I want to feel good. And when I get a happy hour I begin to feel bored! Why is that?”

He was already “feeling bored.” I could see that. His eyes were roaming restlessly round the room as if taking in its squalor; a critical and ironical spark flashed in them. Obviously, he felt out

of place here, and had only just realized it.

He talked warmly about the wrongs that were done in the world, and about the blindness of men who had grown accustomed to these wrongs and failed to see them. His thoughts flitted about like frightened mice, and it was difficult to keep pace with their rapid changes.

“Everything is all wrong – that’s what I see! You have a church in one place and next to it you have the devil knows what! Innokenti Vassilievich Zemskov writes poetry like this:

*Thanks for those few flashes
Which lit up the gloom of my heart, For those sweet moments
of contact
With your body divine.*

But it did not prevent him from cheating his sister out of her house by a lawsuit; and the other day he pulled his parlour maid Nastya by the hair.”

“What did he do that for?” asked Stepakha, glancing at her rough hands, which were as red as the feet of a goose. Her face had suddenly become hard and she lowered her eyes.

“I don’t know... Nastya wanted to take him to court for it, but he gave her three roubles and she let it drop, the fool!”

Suddenly Sashka jumped up and said:

“It’s time for us to go!”

“Where to?” the hostess asked.

“We have some business to do,” said Sashka untruthfully. “I’ll

look in in the evening.”

He offered Pasha his hand, but the girl looked at his fingers for a moment or so, not daring to touch them, and then she took Sashka’s hand and shook it in a way that seemed as if she were pushing it away.

We went out. In the yard Sashka mumbled as he pulled his cap tightly over his head:

“The devil! That girl doesn’t like me... and I feel ashamed in her presence. I won’t go there tonight.”

Unpleasant thoughts appeared on his face, like a rash. He blushed.

“I must give Stepakha up,” he said. “It’s not a nice business! She’s twice my age, and...”

But by the time we turned the corner he was already laughing and saying to himself cheerfully, without a trace of boastfulness:

“She loves me. She tends me like a flower. So help me God! It makes me feel ashamed. Sometimes I feel so good being with her... better than with my own mother! It’s simply wonderful. I tell you, brother, they are troublesome things, are women. But they’re a good lot for all that. They deserve all our love... But is it possible to love them all?”

“It would be good if you loved at least one well,” I suggested.

“One, one,” he mumbled pensively. “But try loving only one!..

He gazed into the distance, beyond the blue strip of the river, at the yellowing meadows, at the black bushes stripped by the autumn wind and sparsely clothed with golden leaves. Sashka’s

face looked kind and thoughtful. It was evident that he was full of pleasant recollections, which played upon his soul as sunbeams played upon a river.

“Let’s sit down,” he suggested, halting at the edge of a gully near the nunnery wall.

The wind was driving the clouds across the sky. Shadows were flitting across meadow. On the river a fisherman was tapping away, caulking his boat.

“Listen,” said Sashka. “Let’s go to Astrakhan.”

“What for?”

“Oh, just like that. Or else, let’s go to Moscow.”

“But what about Liza?”

“Liza... Y-e-ss...”

He looked straight into my eyes and asked me:

“Have I fallen in love with her yet, or not?”

“Ask a policeman,” I answered.

He laughed freely and heartily, like a child. He glanced up at the sun and then at the shadows flitting across meadow, and jumping to his feet he said:

“Those confectionary girls will be coming out soon, come along!”

He strode rapidly down the street. There was a look of concern on his face, he had his hands in his pockets, and his cap was drawn low over his forehead. From the gates of a one-story, barrack-like building, girls came running, one after another, in kerchiefs and grey aprons. One of them was Zina, a dark,

graceful girl with Mongolian features and almond eyes, wearing a red blouse fitting tightly round her bust.

“Come and have some coffee,” said Sashka to her, clutching her by the arm. Then he went on to say hurriedly:

“Do you mean to tell me you intend to marry that mangy cur? Why, he’ll be jealous of you...”

“Every husband ought to be jealous.” answered Zina gravely. “Do you want me to marry you?”

“No, don’t marry me either!”

“Drop that,” the girl said, frowning. “Why aren’t you at work?”

“I’ve taken a holiday.”

“Ekh, you!.. I don’t want any coffee.”

“What do you mean?” exclaimed Sasha, pulling her into a pastry shop.

When they sat down at a small table by the window, he asked her:

“Do you believe me?”

“I believe every animal, the fox and the hedgehog. As for you – I’ll wait a bit,” the girl answered slowly.

“Well, without you I shall go to the dogs!”

At that moment Sashka really believed that he was passing through a tragedy – his lips trembled, his eyes were moist. He was sincerely moved.

“Well, I’m a lost man, drowned in my own tears. But it serves me right, since I can’t catch fortune by the hem of her cloak. But it won’t be easy for you either! I shall give you no rest. Let him

have a business and own horses, but you'll not be able to eat a thing, thinking of me. Mark my words..."

"It's time I stopped playing with dolls." the girl said softly but angrily.

"Oh, so I am a doll to you, eh?"

"I wasn't speaking of you."

"There, look at them. Maximich! They are a race of snakes. They have no feeling. She slings me in the heart, and I suffer. But she says: Oh, you are a doll!"

Sashka was indignant. His bands trembled, and his eyes grew dark with anger.

"How can one live with creatures like that?" he demanded.

"A fine actor," I thought to myself, watching him almost with admiration.

His acting obviously captivated the girl, touched her. Wiping her lips with a corner of her kerchief, she asked in a kindly voice;

"Will you be free on Sunday?"

"Free from what? From you?"

"Don't play the fool... Come over here..."

They went over to a corner, and Sashka, with flashing eyes, talked long and ardently to the girl in an undertone. Finally, she exclaimed with sad vexation:

"Good Lord! What kind of husband will you make?"

"I?" shouted Sashka. "This kind!"

And without being in the least embarrassed by the presence of the fat pastry cook, he tightly hugged the girl and kissed her

on the lips.

“What are you doing, are you mad?” the girl exclaimed in confusion, tearing herself out of his arms.

She fled out of the door like a bird, and Sashka, wearily sitting down at the table shook his head and said disapprovingly:

“What a temper! She’s a wild animal, not a girl!”

“What do you want of her?”

“I don’t want her to marry that bald droshky driver. It’s a scandal. I won’t allow it. I can’t bear it!”

Finishing his coffee, now quite cold, he seemed to have forgotten the tragedy he had just passed through and began to reflect lyrically:

“Do you know? On holidays, or even on week days, when a lot of girls are out together strolling, or going home from work, or from high school, my very heart trembles. Good Lord! I think to myself. What a lot of them there are! Each one must love somebody; and if they don’t they certainly will love someone tomorrow, or within a month, it makes no difference. Now this is what I understand. This is life! Is there anything better in life than love? Just think – what is night? Everybody is embracing and kissing – oh, brother! that’s something, d’you know... It’s something you can’t even find a name for! It is really a heaven-sent joy.”

Jumping up he said:

“Come along, let’s go for a walk!”

The sky was overcast with grey clouds, the rain was coming

down in a fine drizzle, like dust. It was cold, raw and miserable. But Sashka, oblivious to everything, strolled along in his light summer jacket and chattered without ceasing about everything in the shop windows that caught his greedy eye – about neckties, revolvers, toys, and ladies' frocks, about machines, confectionary and church vestments. He caught sight of the bold type of a theatrical poster.

“Uriel Acosta! I have seen that! Have you? Those Jews talk well don't they? Do you remember? Only it's all lies. There's one kind of people on the stage and another kind in the street, or in the market place. I love jolly people – Jews and Tatars. Look how heartily the Tatars laugh... It's a good thing they don't show you real life on the stage, but something remote – boyars and foreigners. As for real life – thank you very much. We have quite enough of our own! But if they do show you real life, let it be all true, and without pity! Children ought to play on the stage, because when they play, it's real!”

“But you don't like what is real?”

“Why not? I do if it's interesting.”

The sun peeped out again, reluctantly lighting up the rain-drenched town. We roamed through the streets until vespers, when the church bells called for prayers. Sashka pulled me to a waste lot to the fence of an orchard that belonged to a stern government official named Renkin, the father of beautiful Liza.

“Wait for me here, will you?” he begged of me, leaping onto the fence like a cat. He sat down on a post and whistled softly.

Then, raising his cap with a pleased and polite gesture, he began to talk to a girl, who was invisible to me, wriggling so restlessly that he was in danger of falling off the fence.

“Good evening, Elizaveta Yakovlevna!”

I did not hear what the answer was on the other side of the fence, but through a chink between two boards I saw a lilac skirt, and the thin wrist of a white hand holding a large pair of gardener’s clippers.

“No,” Sashka went on to say sadly, but untruthfully. “I haven’t managed to read it yet. You know how hard I work. And I work at night. In the daytime I have to sleep – and my churns give me no rest. As I set the type, letter by letter, I think only of you... Yes, of course! Only I don’t like full lines of type; verse is much easier to read... May I come down? Why not? Nekrassov? Yes... very, only he doesn’t write much about love... Why are you angry? Wait a minute – is there anything offensive about that? You asked me what I liked, and I said that most of all I liked love – everybody likes it... Elizaveta Yakovlevna... wait...”

He stopped talking, hung over the fence like an empty sack, and then, sitting up straight, he sat there for several seconds like a mournful raven, tapping his knee with the peak of his cap. His red hair was beautifully lit up by the setting sun, and tenderly ruffled by the wind.

“She’s gone!” he said angrily, jumping to the ground. “She’s offended because I didn’t read some book – a book, the devil take it! She gave me something that was more like a flat iron than

a book! It was about an inch and a half thick... Let's go!"

"Where to?"

"What does it matter."

He walked on slowly, barely dragging his feet along. His face looked tired, and he glanced with vexation at the windows that were lit up by the slanting rays of the sun.

"After all, she must love somebody," he said plaintively. "Why doesn't she love me? But no! She wants me to read books! Thinks I'm a fool! Her eyes are brighter than the light of day – and she wants me to read books! It's ridiculous. Of course, I'm no match for her... but good Lord, you don't always fall in love with your equal!"

After remaining silent for a moment, he softly muttered:

*And long she languished in the world,
Filled with strange desires,*

and remained an old maid, the fool!"

I laughed. He looked at me in surprise and asked:

"What, am I talking nonsense? Ekh, brother Maximich! My heart is swelling and swelling without end, and I feel as if I am all heart!"

We reached the edge of the town, but the other side this time. Before us spread a field, and in the distance loomed the Young Ladies Institute, a tall white building surrounded by trees, standing behind a brick wall, and with brick columns running

along the porch.

“I’ll read books for her, it won’t kill me,” mused Sashka. Prospectives... like hell! I’ll tell you what, brother. I’ll go and see Stepakha... I’ll put my head in her lap and go to sleep. Then I’ll wake up, we’ll have a drink, and then go to sleep again. I’ll stay the night with her. We haven’t spent a bad day, the two of us, have we?”

He squeezed my hand lightly and looked tenderly into my eyes.

“I like to walk with you,” he said. “You are by my side, and yet you seem not to be there. You don’t hinder me in the least. Now that’s what I call being a real chum!”

Having paid me this doubtful compliment, Sashka turned on his heel and rapidly walked back to town. His hands were thrust into his pockets, his cap was balanced precariously on the back of his head, and he went along whistling. He looked so thin and sharp, like a nail with a golden head. I was sorry he was going back to Stepakha, but I understood that he had to give himself to somebody, he had to spend the richness of his soul on someone!

The red rays of the sun struck his back and seemed to be pushing him along.

The ground was coldish, the field deserted, the town seemed to murmur softly. Sashka stooped down, picked up a stone, and swinging his arm threw it far away.

Then he shouted to me: “So long!”

Makar Chudra

A cold damp wind came out of the sea, wafting over the steppe the pensive melody of the waves breaking on the shore and the rustle of dry bushes. Now and then a gust would lift up some shrivelled yellow leaves and throw them into our camp-fire, causing the flames to flare up; then the darkness of the autumn night would shudder and start back in fright, giving us a glimpse of the boundless steppe to the left, the limitless sea to the right, and in front of me – the form of Makar Chudra, an old Gipsy who was keeping watch over the horses belonging to his camp pitched some fifty paces away.

Heedless of the cold wind that blew open his Caucasian coat and struck mercilessly at his bare hairy chest, he lay facing me in a graceful and vigorous pose, drawing regularly at his enormous pipe, emitting thick clouds of smoke through his nose and mouth, gazing fixedly over my head into the silent darkness of the steppe, talking incessantly and making not the slightest effort to protect himself from the vicious attacks of the wind.

“So you go tramping about the world, do you? Good for you. You have made the right choice, young falcon. That is the only way. Go about the world seeing things, and when you have looked your fill, lie down and die.”

“Life? Your fellow-men?” he queried on hearing my objections to his “That is the only way.”

“Why should you worry about that? Are not you life itself? And as for your fellow-men, they always have and always will get on famously without you. Do you really think anybody needs you? You are neither bread nor a stick, and so nobody wants you.

“Learn and teach others, you say. Can you learn how to make people happy? No, you cannot. Wait until your hair is grey before you try to teach others. What will you teach them? Every man knows what he needs. The wise ones take what life has to offer, the stupid ones get nothing, but each man learns for himself.

“A curious lot, people: they all herd together, trampling on each other, when there is this much space —” and he made a sweeping gesture out towards the steppe. “And all of them work. What for? Nobody knows. Whenever I see a man ploughing a field I think to myself: there he is pouring his strength and his sweat into the earth drop by drop, only to lie down in that very earth at last and rot away. He will die as big an ignoramus as he was born, leaving nothing behind him, having seen nothing but his fields.

“Is that what he was born for – to dig in the soil and die without having had time even to dig himself a grave? Has he ever tasted freedom? Has he a knowledge of the vastness of the steppe? Has his heart ever been cheered by the murmur of the sea? He is a slave – a slave from the day of his birth to the day of his death. What can he do about it? Nothing but hang himself, if he has the sense to do that.

“As for me, at fifty-eight I have seen so much that if it were all

put down on paper, a thousand bags like the one you have there would not hold it all. Can you name a land I have not seen? You cannot. I have been to places you have never even heard of. That is the only way to live – moving from one place to another. And never stop long in one place – why should you? Just see how day and night are always moving, chasing each other round the earth; in just the same way you must chase away your thoughts if you would not lose your zest for life. One is sure to lose it if he broods too much over life. Even I did once; I did indeed, young falcon.

“It was when I was in jail in Galicia. ‘Why was I ever born?’ I thought in my misery. It is a great misery to be locked up in jail – ekh, what a misery! My heart was gripped as in a vice every time I looked out of the window at the open fields. Who can say why he was born? No one can, and one should never ask himself such a question. Live, and be thankful to be alive. Roam the earth and see what there is to see, and then you will never be miserable. Ah, but I almost hanged myself with my belt that time.

“Once I had a talk with a certain man. A stern man he was, and a Russian, like you. A person must not live as he likes, he said, but as is pointed out in the word of God. If a man lives in obedience to God, he said, God will give him whatever he asks for. He himself was dressed in rags and tatters. I told him to ask God for a new suit of clothes. He was so angry he cursed me and drove me away. But just a minute before he had said one ought to love his neighbours and forgive them. Why did he not forgive me if I had offended him? There’s your preacher for you! They teach

people to eat less, while they themselves eat ten times a day.”

He spat into the fire and was silent as he refilled his pipe. The wind moaned softly, the horses whinnied in the darkness, and the tender impassioned strains of a song came from the Gipsy camp. It was Nonka, Makar's beautiful daughter, who was singing. I recognized the deep throaty timbre of her voice, in which there was always a note of command and of discontent, whether she was singing a song or merely saying a word of greeting. The haughtiness of a queen was frozen upon her swarthy face, and in the shadows of her dark eyes glimmered a consciousness of her irresistible beauty and a contempt for everything that was not she.

Makar handed me his pipe.

“Have a smoke. She sings well, doesn't she? Would you like to have a maid like that fall in love with you? No? Good for you. Put no faith in women and keep away from them. A maid gets more joy out of kissing a man than I do out of smoking my pipe. But once you have kissed her, gone is your freedom. She holds you with invisible bonds that are not to be broken, and you give yourself to her heart and soul. That is the truth. Beware of the maids. They always lie. She swears she loves you above all else, but the first time you cause her a pin-prick she will tear your heart out. I know what I say. There are many things I know. If you wish, I will tell you a true tale. Remember it well, and if you do, you will be as free as a bird all your life.

“Once upon a time there was a young Gipsy named Zobar – Loiko Zobar. He was a fearless youth whose fame had spread

throughout Hungary and Bohemia and Slavonia and all the lands that encircle the sea. There was not a village in those parts but had four or five men sworn to take Zobar's life, yet he went on living, and if he took a fancy to a horse, a regiment of soldiers could not keep him from galloping off on it. Was there a soul he feared? Not Zo-bar. He would knife the devil himself and all his pack if they swooped down on him, or at least he would curse them roundly and give them a cuffing, you can be sure of that.

“All the Gipsy camps knew Zobar or had heard of him. The only thing he loved was a horse, and that not for long. When he had tired of riding it he would sell it and give the money to anyone who asked him for it. There was nothing he prized; he would have ripped his heart out of his breast if he thought anyone had need of it. That was the sort of man he was.

“At the time I am speaking of – some ten years ago – our caravan was roaming through Bukovina. A group of us were sitting together one spring night – Danilo, a soldier who fought under Kossuth; old Nur; Radda, Danilo's daughter, and others.

“Have you seen my Nonka? She is a queen among beauties. But it would be doing her too great an hon-our to compare her with Radda. No words could describe Radda's beauty. Perhaps it could be played on a violin, but only by one who knew the instrument as he knew his own soul.

“Many a man pined away with love for Radda. Once in Moravia a rich old man was struck dumb by the sight of her. There he sat on his horse staring at her and shaking all over as if

with the ague. He was decked out like the devil on holiday, his Ukrainian coat all stitched in gold, the sabre at his side set with precious stones that flashed like lightning at every movement of his horse, the blue velvet of his cap like a patch of blue sky. He was a very important person, that old man. He sat on and on staring at Radda, and at last he said to her: 'A purse full of money for a kiss!' She just turned her head away. This made the rich old man change his tune. 'Forgive me if I have insulted you, but you might at least give me a smile,' and with this he tossed his purse at her feet, and a fat purse it was. But she just pressed it into the dust with her foot, as if she had not noticed it.

"Ah, what a maid!" he gasped, bringing his whip down on his horse's flank so that the dust of the roadway rose in a cloud as the horse reared.

"He came back on the next day. 'Who is her father?' he asked in a voice that echoed throughout the camp. Danilo came forward. 'Sell me your daughter. Name your own price.' 'It is only gentlemen who sell anything from their pigs to their consciences,' said Danilo. 'As for me, I fought under Kossuth and sell nothing.' The rich man let out a roar and reached for his sabre, but someone thrust a lighted tinder into his horse's ear and the beast went flying off with its master on its back. We broke camp and took to the road. When we had been on the way two whole days, we suddenly saw him coming after us. 'Hey!' he cried. "I swear to God and to you that my intentions are honest. Give me the maid to wife. I will share all that I own with you, and I am very

rich.' He was aflame with passion and swayed in his saddle like feathergrass in the wind. We thought over what he said.

"Well, daughter, speak up,' muttered Danilo into his beard.

"If the eagle's mate went to nest with the crow of her own free will, what would you think of her?" said Radda.

"Danilo burst out laughing and so did the rest of us.

"Well said, daughter! Have you heard, my lord? Your case is lost! Woo a pigeon – they are more docile.' And we went on our way.

"At that the rich man pulled off his hat and hurled it down on the ground and rode off at such speed that the earth shook under his horse's hoofs. That was what Radda was like, young falcon.

"Again one night we were sitting in camp when all of a sudden we heard music coming from the steppe. Wonderful music. Music that made the blood throb in your veins and lured you off to unknown places. It filled us all with a longing for something so tremendous that if we once experienced it there would be no more reason to go on living, and if we did go on living, it would be as lords of the whole world.

"Then a horse came out of the darkness, and on the horse a man was sitting and playing the fiddle. He came to a halt by our camp-fire and stopped playing, looking at us and smiling.

"Zobar! So it is you!" called out Danilo heartily.

"This, then, was Loiko Zobar. His moustaches swept down to his shoulders, where they mingled with his curly hair; his eyes shone like two bright stars, and his smile was the sun itself. It

was as if he and his horse had been carved of one piece. There he was, red as blood in the fire-light, his teeth flashing when he laughed. Damned if I did not love him as I loved my own self, and he had not so much as exchanged a word with me or even noticed my existence.

“There are people like that, young falcon. When he looked into your eyes your soul surrendered to him, and instead of being ashamed of this, you were proud of it. You seemed to become better in his presence. There are not many people like that. Perhaps it is better so. If there were a lot of good things in the world, they would not be counted good. But listen to what happened next.

“Radda said to him: ‘You play well, Zobar. Who made you such a clear-voiced fiddle?’ ‘I made it myself,’ he laughed. ‘And not of wood, but of the breast of a maiden I loved well; the strings are her heart-strings. It still plays false at times, my fiddle, but I know how to wield the bow.’

“A man always tries to becloud a girl’s eyes with longing for him so that his own heart will be protected from the darts of those eyes. And Zobar was no exception. But he did not know with whom he was dealing this time. Radda merely turned away and said with a yawn: ‘And they told me Zobar was wise and witty. What a mistake!’ And she walked away.

“‘You have sharp teeth, my pretty maid!’ said Zo-bar, his eyes flashing as he got off his horse. ‘Greetings to you, friends. I have come to pay you a visit.’

“‘We are glad to have you,’ replied Danilo.

“We exchanged kisses, chatted a while and went to bed. We slept soundly. In the morning we found Zobar with a bandage round his head. What had happened? It seems his horse had kicked him in the night.

“Ah, but we knew who that horse had been! And we smiled to ourselves; and Danilo smiled. Could it be that even Zobar was no match for Radda? Not at all. Lovely as she was, she had a petty soul, and all the gold trinkets in the world could not have added one kopek to her worth.

“Well, we went on living in that same place. Things were going well with us, and Loiko Zobar stayed on. He was a good companion – as wise as an old man, and very knowing, and able to read and write Russian as well as Magyar. I could have listened to him talk the night through, and as for his playing – may the lightning strike me dead if there ever was another his equal. He drew his bow once across the strings and the heart leaped up in your breast; he drew it again and everything within you grew tense with listening – and he just went on playing and smiling. It made you want to laugh and cry at the same time. Now someone was moaning bitterly and crying for help, and it was as if a knife were being turned in your side; now the steppe was telling a tale to the sky – a sad tale. Now a maid was weeping as she said farewell to her lover. Now her lover was calling to her from the steppe. And then, like a bolt from the blue, would come a gay and sweeping tune that made the very sun dance in the sky. That

was how he played, young falcon!

“You felt that tune with every fibre of your body, and you became the slave of it. And if at that moment Zobar had called out: ‘Out with your knives, comrades!’ every man of us would have bared his knife against anyone he pointed out. He could wind a person round his little finger, but everyone loved him dearly. Yet Radda would have nothing to do with him. That was bad enough, but she mocked him besides. She wounded his heart and wounded it badly. He would set his teeth and pull at his moustache, his eyes deeper than wells, and at times something would flash in them that struck terror into your heart. At night he would go deep into the steppe and his violin would weep there until morning – weep for his lost freedom. And we would lie and listen and think to ourselves: what will happen next? And we knew that when two stones are rolling towards each other, they will crush anything that stands in their way. That was the way things were.

“One night we sat for long round the fire discussing our affairs, and when we got tired of talking, Danilo turned to Zobar and said: ‘Sing us a song, Zobar, to cheer our hearts.’ Zobar glanced at Radda who was lying on the ground not far away gazing up at the sky, and he drew his bow across the strings. The violin sang out as if the bow were really being drawn over a maiden’s heart-strings. And he sang:

Hi ho, hi ho! My heart is aflame,

*The steppe is like the sea,
And like the wind, our gallant steeds
Are bearing you and me.*

“Radda turned her head to him, propped herself up on one elbow and laughed in his face. Zobar flushed crimson.

*Hi ho, hi ho! My comrade true,
The hour of dawn is nigh;
The steppe is wrapped in shades of night,
But we shall climb the sky.
Spur on your horse to meet the day
That glimmers o'er the plain,
But see that lovely Lady Moon
Is touched not by its mane!*

“How he sang! No one sings like that nowadays. But Radda murmured under her breath:

“I would not climb so high if I were you, Loiko Zobar. You might fall down into a puddle and spoil those lovely moustaches of yours.’

“Zobar threw her a furious glance, but said nothing. He was able to control himself and go on singing:

*Hi ho, hi ho! If daylight comes
And finds us both asleep,
Our cheeks will burn with crimson shame
As out of bed we leap.*

“‘A splendid song,’ said Danilo. ‘Never have I heard a better one; may the devil turn me into a pipe if I have!’

“Old Nur stroked his whiskers and shrugged his shoulders, and all of us were pleased with Zobar’s brave song. But Radda did not like it.

“‘Once I heard a gnat trying to imitate the eagle’s call,’ she said. It was as if she had thrown snow in our faces.

“‘Perhaps you are longing for a touch of the whip, Radda,’ drawled Danilo, but Zobar threw down his cap and said, his face as dark as the earth:

“‘Wait, Danilo! A spirited horse needs a steel bridle! Give me your daughter to wife!’

“‘A fine speech,’ chuckled Danilo. ‘Take her, if you can.’

“‘Very well,’ said Zobar; then, turning to Radda: ‘Come down off your high horse, maid, and listen to what I have to say. I have known many a girl in my day – many, I say – but not one of them ever captured my heart as you have. Ah, Radda, you have enslaved my soul. It cannot be helped – what must be will be, and the horse does not exist that can carry a man away from himself. With God and my own conscience as witness, and in the presence of your father and all these people, I take you to wife. But I warn you not to try to curb my liberty; I am a freedom-loving man and will always live as I please.’ And he walked up to her with set teeth and blazing eyes. We saw him stretch his hand out to her, and we thought: at last Radda has put a bridle on the wild colt

of the steppe. But suddenly Zobar's arms flew out and he struck the ground with the back of his head.

“What could have happened? It was as if a bullet had struck him in the heart. But it was Radda who had flicked a whip about his legs and jerked it. That was what had made him fall.

“And again she was lying there motionless, a scornful smile on her lips. We watched to see what would happen next. Zobar sat up and held his head in his hands as if he were afraid it would burst, then he got up quietly and went out into the steppe without a glance at anyone. Nur whispered to me: ‘You had better keep an eye on him.’ And so I crept after him into the steppe, in the darkness of the night. Think of that, young falcon. “

Makar scraped the ashes out of the bowl of his pipe and began to refill it. I pulled my coat tighter about me and lay back, the better to study his aged face, bronzed by sun and wind. He was muttering to himself, emphasizing what he said by shaking his head gravely; his grey moustaches twitched and the wind ruffled his hair. He reminded me of an old oak which has been struck by lightning but is still strong and powerful and proud of its strength. The sea went on whispering to the sand, and the wind carried the sound to the steppe. Nonka had stopped singing. The clouds that had gathered made the autumn night darker than ever.

“Loiko dragged one foot after the other as he walked, his head drooping, his arms hanging as limp as whip-cords, and when he reached the bank of a little stream he sat down on a stone and groaned. The sound of that groan nearly broke my heart, but I did

not go near him. Words cannot lessen a man's grief, can they? That is the trouble. He sat there for an hour, for another, for a third without stirring, just sitting there.

"I lay not far away. The sky had cleared, the moon bathed the whole steppe in silver light so that you could see far, far into the distance.

"Suddenly I caught sight of Radda hurrying towards us from the camp.

"I was overjoyed. 'Good for you, Radda, brave girl!' thought I. She came up to Zobar without his hearing her. She put her hand on his shoulder. He started, unclasped his hands and raised his head. Instantly he was on his feet and had seized his knife. God, he'll kill her, I thought, and was about to jump up and raise the alarm when I heard:

"'Drop it or I'll blow your head off!' I looked: there was Radda with a pistol in her hand aimed at Loiko's head. A very daughter of Satan, that girl! Well, I thought, at least they are matched in strength; I wonder what will happen next.

"'I did not come to kill you, but to make peace,' said Radda, pushing the pistol into her belt. 'Put away your knife.' He put it away and gazed at her with fuming eyes.

What a sight that was! These two staring at each other like infuriated beasts, both of them so fine and brave! And nobody saw them but the bright moon and me.

"'Listen, Zobar, I love you,' said Radda. He did nothing but shrug his shoulders, like a man bound hand and foot.

“Many a man have I seen, but you are the bravest and handsomest of all. Any one of them would have shaved off his moustaches had I asked him to; any one of them would have fallen at my feet had I wanted him to. But why should I? None of them were brave, and with me they would soon have gone womanish. There are few brave Gipsies left, Zobar – very few. Never yet have I loved anyone, Zobar. But I love you. And I love freedom, too. I love my freedom even more than I love you. But I cannot live without you any more than you can live without me. And I want you to be mine – mine in soul and body, do you hear?”

“Zobar gave a little laugh. ‘I hear,’ he said. ‘It cheers my heart to hear what you say. Speak on.’”

“This is what else I would say, Zobar: do what you will, I shall possess you; you are sure to be mine. And so waste no more time. My kisses and caresses are awaiting you – and I shall kiss you passionately, Zo-bar! Under the spell of my kisses you will forget all the brave life of the past. No longer will your gay songs, so beloved by the Gipsies, resound in the steppe; now shall you sing soft love songs to me alone – to Radda. Waste no more time. This have I said, which means that from tomorrow on you will serve me as devotedly as a youth serves an elder comrade. And you will bow at my feet before the whole camp and kiss my right hand, and then only shall I be your wife.’”

“This, then, was what that devilish girl was after. Never had such a thing been heard of. True, old people said that such a custom was held among the Montenegrins in ancient times, but

it never existed among the Gipsies. Could you think of anything more preposterous, young man? Not if you racked your brains a whole year.

“Zobar recoiled and the steppe rang with his cry – the cry of one who has been mortally wounded. Radda shuddered, but did not betray her feelings.

“Good-bye until tomorrow, and tomorrow you will do what I have said, do you hear, Zobar?”

“I hear. I shall do it,” groaned Zobar and held out his arms to her, but she went away without so much as glancing at him, and he swayed like a tree broken by the wind, and he fell on the ground, sobbing and laughing.

“That was what she did to him, that accursed Radda. I could hardly bring him back to his senses.

“Why should people have to suffer so? Does anyone find pleasure in hearing the groans of one whose heart is broken? Alas, it is a great mystery.

“When I got back to camp I told the old men what had taken place. We considered the matter and decided to wait and see what would happen. And this is what happened. In the evening when we had gathered about the fire as usual, Zobar joined us. He was looking downcast, he had grown haggard in that one night and his eyes were sunken. He kept them fixed on the ground and did not raise them once as he said:

“This is how things are, comrades. I searched my heart this night and found no room in it for the freedom-loving life I have

always lived. Radda has taken up every corner of it. There she is, the beautiful Radda, smiling her queenly smile. She loves freedom more than she loves me, but I love her more than I love freedom, and so I have decided to bow before her as she ordered me to, that all shall see how her beauty has enslaved the brave Loiko Zobar who, until he met her, played with women as a cat plays with mice. For this she will become my wife and will kiss and caress me, and I shall lose all desire to sing songs to you and I shall not pine for the loss of my freedom. Is that how it is to be, Radda? He raised his eyes and looked at her grimly. She nodded without a word and pointed to the ground in front of her. We could not imagine how this had been brought about. We even felt an urge to get up and go away so as not to see Loiko Zobar throw himself at the feet of a maid, even though that maid be Radda. There was something shameful in it, something very sad.

“Well?” cried Radda to Zobar.

“Do not be in so great a hurry. There is plenty of time – time enough to grow tired of me,” laughed Zobar. And his laugh had the ring of steel.

“So that is how things are, comrades. What is left for me to do? The only thing left for me to do is to see whether my Radda’s heart is as strong as she would have us think. I shall test it. Forgive me.”

“And before we had time to guess what he was up to, Radda was lying on the ground with Zobar’s curved knife plunged into her breast up to the handle. We were dumbstruck.

“But Radda pulled out the knife, tossed it aside, held a lock of her black hair to the wound, and smiled as she said in a loud clear voice:

“Farewell, Zobar. I knew you would do this.’ And with that she died.

“Do you see what the maid was like, young man? A devilish maid if there ever was one, so help me God.

“Now I shall throw myself at your feet, my proud queen,’ said Zobar in a voice that rang out over the steppe. And throwing himself on the ground, he pressed his lips to the feet of the dead Radda and lay there without stirring. We bared our heads and stood in silence.

“What is to be said at a moment like that? Nothing. Nur murmured: ‘Bind the fellow,’ but nobody would raise a hand to bind Loiko Zobar; not a soul would do it, and Nur knew this. So he turned and walked away. Danilo picked up the knife Radda had tossed away and stood staring at it for some time, his grey whiskers twitching; there were still traces of Radda’s blood on the blade, which was curved and sharp. Then Danilo went over to Zobar and plunged the knife into his back over the heart. After all, he was Radda’s father, was the old soldier Danilo.

“You’ve done it,’ said Loiko clearly, turning to Danilo, and then he went to join Radda.

“We stood looking at them. There lay Radda, pressing her hair to her breast with her hand, her wide-open eyes gazing up into the blue sky, while at her feet lay the brave Loiko Zobar. His

curly hair had fallen over his face, hiding it from us.

“For some time we stood there lost in thought. Old Danilo’s whiskers were quivering and his thick brows were drawn. He looked up at the sky and said not a word, but hoary-haired Nur had thrown himself on the ground and his body was shaking with sobs.

“And there was good cause to cry, young falcon.

“The moral is, let nothing lure you off the path you have taken. Keep going straight ahead; then, perhaps, you will not come to a bad end.

“And that is the whole story, young falcon.”

Makar stopped talking, slipped his pipe into his tobacco pouch, and pulled his coat over his chest. A fine rain was falling and the wind was stronger. The waves broke with a dull angry rumble. One by one the horses came up to our dying fire, gazed at us with big intelligent eyes, then ranged themselves in a ring about us.

“Hi, hi!” Makar called to them affectionately, and when he had patted the neck of his favourite black, he turned to me and said: “Time to go to sleep.” He wrapped himself from head to foot in his Caucasian coat, stretched out on the ground and lay still, I had no desire to sleep. I sat there gazing into the darkness of the steppe, and before my eyes floated the image of Radda, so proud, so imperious, so lovely. She was pressing the hand with the hair in it to her breast, and from between the slender dark fingers oozed drops of blood that turned into fiery stars as they

struck the ground.

And behind her floated the brave figure of Loiko Zobar. Locks of curly black hair covered his face, and from under the hair streamed big cold tears.

The rain increased and the sea sang a solemn dirge to these two handsome Gipsies – Loiko Zobar and Radda, daughter of the old soldier Danilo.

And the two of them whirled round and round, soundlessly, gracefully, in the darkness of the night, and try as he might the handsome Zobar could not overtake the proud Radda.

Afloat

An Easter Story

I

The leaden clouds crept slowly over the sleepy river, seeming to sink lower and lower; in the distance their grey tatters appeared to touch the surface of the swift, turbid springtide waves, and where they touched the water, rose towering to the skies in an impenetrable wall of cloud, blocking the current and barring the way of the rafts.

And the waves, ineffectually trying to lift this wall, beat vainly against it in a low, plaintive murmur, recoiling from each impact to roll back into the damp gloom of the fresh spring night.

But the rafts sailed on, and the distance receded before them in a wilderness of heavy tumbled cloud masses.

The shores were invisible, hidden by the night, pushed back by the sweeping surge of the tide.

The river resembled a sea. The sky above it was wrapped in clouds. Everything was damp, oppressive and dreary.

The rafts glided swiftly and noiselessly over the waters, and in front of them a steamboat loomed out of the darkness, its funnel shooting out a merry swarm of sparks and its wheel blades

churning the water...

Two red lanterns on the shallows glimmered larger and brighter, and the lamp on the mast swayed gently from side to side and winked mysteriously at the darkness.

The air was filled with the splash of water and the heavy sighs of the engine.

“Look ou-oot!” came a deep-chested shout from the rafts.

At the tail-end of the raft two men stood at the helm oars. One of them was Mitya, the son of the timber-floater, a fair, sickly-looking, thoughtful youth of twenty. The other was Sergei, the hired workman, a morose-faced strapping fellow with a red beard framing a set of strong prominent teeth with a bared upperlip drawn up in a sarcastic expression.

“Put over to larboard!” a loud cry from the head of the rafts once more rent the darkness.

“We know what to do, what you hollering about?” muttered Sergei testily, and taking a deep breath he bent his body to the oar.

“Oo-ooch! Get going, Mitya!”

Mitya, with his feet braced against the wet logs, lugged the heavy pole of the tiller over to him with his thin hands, breaking into a hoarse cough.

“Put her over... more to port!.. Godammit!” cried an anxious infuriated voice in front.

“All you know’s to yell! Your weakly son couldn’t break a straw across his knee, and you put him on the tiller and then

holler all over the river. Too stingy to hire another man, damned skinflint – messing around with your daughter-in-law. Well, yell yourself blue now!..”

Sergei now grumbled aloud, apparently not afraid of being heard – in fact, as though wanting to be heard...

The steamboat raced past the rafts, churning the waters under its blades into a hissing foam. The logs pitched and tossed from the surge, and the braces made from twisted branches creaked with a dreary wet sound.

The steamer’s lighted windows gazed out upon the river and the rafts like a row of huge eyes, casting their reflection in shimmering bright patches on the turbulent water, then vanished from sight.

The heaving swell threw waves splashing over the rafts, the logs tossed up and down, and Mitya, swaying on his feet, clung hard to the tiller for fear of losing his balance.

“Now, now!” Sergei muttered mockingly, “doing a dance! Mind your father doesn’t yell at you again... Or he’ll give you a poke in the ribs that’ll send you dancing properly! Put over to starboard! Heave-ho, now! Oo-ooch!..”

And Sergei, with brawny arms, powerfully plied his oar, cleaving deep into the waters...

Tall and energetic, a trifle morose and sarcastic, he stood as if rooted to the logs with his bare feet, tensely poised, peering into the distance, ready at any moment to veer the rafts round.

“Christ, look at the way your dad’s cuddling Mash-ka! The

devils! No shame or conscience – the man hasn't! Why don't you go somewhere, away from those foul devils?.. eh? D'you hear what I say?"

"I hear!" said Mitya in an undertone, keeping his eyes averted from where, through the misty gloom, Sergei could see his father sitting.

"I hear! Ugh, you sop!" mocked Sergei and burst into a laugh.

"Some goings-on, I tell you!" he went on, provoked by Mitya's apathy. "There's an old devil fox you! Marries off his son, then takes his daughter-in-law for himself and doesn't give a rap! The old blighter!"

Mitya said nothing and gazed back at the river where the clouds have closed in another dense wall.

Now the clouds were everywhere, and it seemed that the rafts were not floating down the current but standing motionless in the thick black water, crushed beneath the weight of these dark-grey masses of cloud which had fallen upon it from the heavens and stemmed its progress.

The river looked like a fathomless pool hedged in by towering mountains and clothed in a dense cloak of mist.

An oppressive stillness reigned all around, and the water, gently lapping the sides of the raft, lay as if in a hushed expectancy. There was an infinite sadness, a timid question in that frail sound, the only one amid the night, that seemed only to deepen its stillness...

"A bit of a breeze now wouldn't be bad..." said Sergei.

“Though better not – a wind’ll bring rain,” he debated with himself as he filled his pipe.

There was the flash of a lighted match, the sizzling sound of a clogged pipe, and the broad face of Sergei swum out of the murk in the light of a flickering red flame.

“Mitya!” came his voice. He was less morose now, and the amused tone in his voice was more in evidence.

“What?” answered Mitya in an undertone, his eyes still peering into the distance, staring at something he saw there through his big melancholy eyes.

“How’d the thing happen, my lad, eh?”

“What thing?” retorted Mitya in a tone of annoyance.

“How d’you get married? What a scream! How’d it happen? Now, you went to bed with your wife – and what happened next, eh?!”

“Hey, you fellows there! Look ou-oot!” a warning shout echoed across the river.

“He can yell all right, that damned rip!” Sergei observed in a tone of admiration, and returned to his subject.

“Well, come on, tell us about it! Mitya! Tell us how it happened, eh?”

“Oh, leave me alone, Sergei! I told you already!” said Mitya in a pleading whisper, and, probably aware that he would not shake off the importunate Sergei, he hurriedly began:

“Well, we went to bed. And I says to her – ‘I can’t be your husband, Maria. You’re a strong healthy lass, and I’m a sick,

weakly man. I didn't want to marry at all, but Dad made me – you've got to, he says, and that's that! I'm not fond of your sex, and still less of you,' I says. 'Too lively by half... Yes... And I can't do anything of that kind... you know... It's just filthy and wicked... Children too... You've got to answer for them before God...'"

"Filthy!" screamed Sergei, rocking with laughter, "Well, and what about her, Masha – what did she have to say, eh?"

"She... 'Well, what am I to do now,' she says. Sits and cries. 'Why don't you like me?' she says. 'It isn't as if I was ugly,' she says. She's a shameless hussy, Sergei!.. 'What am I to do – go to my father-in-law with my fine health?' I told her – 'do just as you please... Go wherever you want. I can't go against my soul. Grandpa Ivan used to say that thing's a mortal sin. We're not beasts, you and I, are we?' And all she does is cry. 'You've spoiled my life, youth, poor girl that I am.' I was awfully sorry for her. 'Never mind, things'll come round somehow. Or, maybe you'll go into a convent?' I says. She starts swearing at that – 'you're a fool, Mitya, a scoundrel, that's what you are...'"

"Well, I'm blowed!" stuttered Sergei in amazement. "D'you actually mean to say you gave her that bit of advice – told her to go into a convent?"

"That's what I told her," answered Mitya simply.

"And she called you a fool?" said Sergei in a rising voice.

"Yes... She swore at me."

"I should think so too! And quite right! I'd have boxed your

ears in the bargain if I was her,” he added in a sudden change of tone. He now spoke sternly and weightily.

“D’you think a man can go against the law? That’s what you’ve gone and done! It’s the way of the world – and that’s all there is to it! There’s no arguing about it! And what do you do? Crikey, what a thing to say! Go into a convent! Silly ass! What d’you think the lass wants? And you talk about a convent! Good lor’, some people make you sick! D’you realize what you’ve done, you muff? You’re no damned good yourself and you’ve ruined that girl’s life, made her that old gaffer’s mistress – and led the old fellow into the sin of lechery. Look how much law you’ve broken! Silly ass!”

“The law’s in a man’s soul, Sergei. It’s the same law for all – don’t do anything that goes against the soul and you won’t be doing any evil on earth,” said Mitya gently and soothingly, with a toss of his head.

“But that’s just what you have done!” Sergei countered energetically. “A man’s soul! Bah!.. What’s the soul got to do with it? You can’t put a ban on everything – it isn’t done. The soul... You’ve got to understand it first, brother, and then talk...”

“No, Sergei, that’s not so!” Mitya broke in warmly, seeming to have suddenly kindled. “The soul’s always pure, brother, like a dewdrop. It’s in a shell, that’s where it is! It’s deep. And if you hearken, to it you won’t go wrong. It’ll always be God’s way if it’s done the soul’s way. For isn’t God in the soul? – and if so, the law’s there too. It’s God who created it, God who breathed

it into man. Only you've got to be able to look into it. Only by forgetting self can a man..."

"Hey, you! Sleepy devils! Look sharp!" a thundering voice echoed over the river.

Judging by its lustiness the voice clearly belonged to a healthy, vigorous man pleased with himself and the world, a man richly endowed with vitality and well aware of it. He shouted not because he was provoked to do so by the raftsmen, but because his heart swelled with a sense of elation and vigour, the sheer joy of living that sought an outlet and found it in that lusty boisterous sound.

"Hear him bark, the old devil!" Sergei noted with pleasure, keeping a vigilant lookout in front of him. "Spooning like a couple of doves! Ain't you envious, Mitya?"

Mitya turned his eyes indifferently to the fore oars where two figures could be seen running across the rafts from side to side, now stopping close to each other, now merging into a dark blur.

"Don't you envy 'em?" repeated Sergei.

"Why should I? It's their sin, and they'll answer for it," answered Mitya quietly.

"So!" drawled Sergei ironically, and refilled his pipe. The darkness was once more lit up by a red glow.

The night grew deeper, and the grey, black clouds, descended still lower over the still broad river.

"Where'd you get all that wisdom from, Mitya, eh? Or were you born that way? You don't lake after your Dad a bit. He's

full o' spunk, your Dad is. Just think – the old fellow's half a century, and look at the peach lie's getting off with! She's a regular beauty! And hasn't she fallen for him – you can see that with half an eye. Yes, she loves him, my dear fellow. She's crazy about him. Who wouldn't love a trump like that? The king of trumps, that's what your Dad is, a topnotcher. It does your heart good to see the way he handles his work; he's made a pretty penny too; looked up to plenty, and his head's screwed on right. M'yes. You don't take after your Dad, or after your mother either. Mitya? I wonder what your father'd do if your mother, Anfisa, had been alive? Humph! I can just see it... She was pretty hot stuff too. your Ma was... A match for Silan."

Mitya was silent, leaning on his oar and gazing into the water.

Sergei fell silent too. From the front of the rafts came a woman's rippling laughter, answered by a man's deep laugh. Their figures, woven into the darkness, were barely visible to Sergei, who peered at them with curiosity through the gloom. One could distinguish that the man was tall and was standing by the oar with his legs wide apart half-facing a plump little woman who was leaning her bosom against another oar within ten feet of the first. She wagged a premonitory finger at the man and went into gales of merry laughter. Sergei turned away with a sigh of regret, and after a profound silence, began again:

"Ah, well! They're having a sweet time. Lovely! Nothing for a lonely vagabond like me! Gad, I'd never in my life leave a woman like that if I had her! Hang it, I'd squeeze the life out of her if I

got her in my hands. There! That's the way I love you – let her know it... Hell! I've got no luck with women... Looks like they don't take to ginger fellows. M'yes. She a capricious bit – that one is. A proper minx! She's out for a good time, Mitya! Hi, are you asleep?"

"No," Mitya answered softly.

"Good for you! How d'you intend to go through life, brother? Come to think of it, you're all alone in the blessed world. That ain't very cheerful! What d'you intend to do with yourself? You won't be able to live among people. You're a poor fish of a man. What's the use of a man who can't stand up for himself! What you need in life, brother, are fangs and claws. Everyone'll try to worst you. Now, tell me, can you stick up for yourself? I'd like to sec you doing it! Bah! You're a poor fish!"

"D'you mean me?" Mitya came out of his reveries with a start. "I'll go away. This very autumn – to the Caucasus – and that's all! God! Only to get away from you people! Soulless people! Godless men you are – only to get away from you is salvation! What are you living for? Where's your God? It's a mere word to you... D'you live according to Jesus Christ? You – you're wolves! People over there are different, their souls live in that of Christ, and their hearts are filled with love and they yearn for the world's salvation... And you? Oh, you! Beasts, sinks of corruption! There are different people. I've seen them. They've called me. I'll go to them. They brought me the holy book of scriptures. Read it, man of God, they said, dear brother of ours,

read the word of truth!.. And I read it, and my soul was reborn, by this word of God. I'll go away. I'll run away from you mad wolves, who feed on each other's flesh. May you be damned!"

Mitya uttered all this in a passionate whisper, choking with wrath and withering scorn towards these mad wolves, overcome by a sudden hungering for the people whose souls yearned for the salvation of the world.

Sergei was astounded. He stood silent for a while with his mouth agape and his pipe in his hand. Then, after a moment's thought, he glanced round and said in a hollow, sullen voice:

"Fancy going off the deep end like that!.. You're pretty fierce too. You shouldn't ha' read that book. Who knows what kind o'book it is? Oh, well... go ahead, clear out, or you may get spoilt altogether. Go along with you, before you get real wild... What kind of people are they down in the Caucasus? Monks? Or maybe the Old Believers? What are they – Molokans, perhaps? Eh?"

But Mitya had gone out as quickly as he had kindled. He plied his oar, gasping with the effort, and muttered something rapidly and nervously under his breath.

Sergei waited long and in vain for a response. His robust simple nature was oppressed by the grim, deathly-still night. He wanted to be reminded of life, to waken the hushed world with sound, to stir up and frighten the lurking rapt stillness of these ponderous masses of water slowly winding to the sea, and those inert mountains of cloud hanging drearily in the air. Life was

being lived at the other end of the rafts, and that roused him to life.

From there now and again came floating a soft thrilling laugh and snatches of exclamations, muffled by the silence and darkness of a night saturated with the fragrance of spring, a night that stirred a passionate longing to live.

“Stop it, Mitya – what you tacking for? The old man’ll start swearing, you watch,” he said, no longer able to endure the silence, and noticing that Mitya was stabbing the water with his oar in a desultory fashion. Mitya stopped, wiped the perspiration from his brow, and froze motionless on his oar, breathing hard.

“Very few steamboats about today somehow... Been sailing so long and only came across one of ’em.”

And seeing that Mitya evinced no intention of replying, he went on argumentatively:

“I suppose that’s because navigation hasn’t started yet. It’s only just beginning. We’ll make Kazan in fine time – the Volga’s pulling grand. Got a giant’s spine, she has – lift anything on earth. What’s the matter with you? Got the wind up, Mitya, or what? Eh?”

“What do you want?” answered Mitya irritably.

“Nothing. Funny chap you are... Why don’t you say something? Thinking all the time? Chuck it. It ain’t good for a man. Oh, you wiseacre – you think you’re wise, but that you haven’t a ha’porth of wisdom – that you can’t see! Ha-ha!”

Giving himself a laugh in the knowledge of his own

superiority, Sergei followed it up with a deep grunt, then fell silent for a while, broke off a whistle he had started, and pursued his train of thought.

“Thinking! That ain’t a pastime for a common man. Look at your father – he doesn’t worry his head, yet he lives. Spooning with your wife and making fun o’ you, the two of ’em, you wise chump. Yes! That’s the stuff! I bet you Masha’s pregnant already, what? Don’t get scared, the kid won’t take after you. He’ll be a sturdy bounder like Silan Petrov – you can take that from me. He’ll be registered as yours, you know. Some business, let me tell you! Ha! Call you ‘daddy.’ And you won’t be his daddy but his brother, by the looks o’ it. His daddy’ll be his grandpa! How do you like that! Gad, what a dirty bunch o’ sinners! A dare-devil lot! Isn’t that so, Mitya?”

“Sergei!” came a passionate, agitated, almost sobbing whisper. “For Christ’s sake, don’t tear my heart, don’t torture me, leave me alone! Be quiet! In the name of God, I beg you not to speak to me; stop tormenting me, stop sucking my blood. I’ll throw myself in the river, and a great sin will lie on you. I’ll destroy my soul – leave me in peace! I swear by God – please!..

The silence of the night was rent by a painfully shrill cry, and Mitya dropped on the logs as though struck down by something heavy that had fallen out of the sullen clouds poised above the black river.

“There, there!” muttered a dismayed Sergei, watching the figure of his companion writhing on the logs, as though seared

by a burning flame. “You’re a funny chap! If you take it so bad why didn’t you... er... why didn’t you say so, silly...”

“You’ve been tormenting me all the way. Why? What am I – your enemy? eh? your enemy?” Mitya whispered passionately...

“Funny chap you are! Really, you are!” stammered Sergei in a flustered and injured tone. “How’s I to know? I don’t know what’s going on in your soul!”

“I want to forget it all, don’t you understand! Forget it for all time! My disgrace... the terrible anguish... You’re savages! I’ll go away! I’ll go for ever... I can’t stand it any more!..”

“Yes, go away!..” bellowed Sergei in a voice that reverberated over the river, and followed up the exclamation with a thunderous cynical invective. But the words suddenly died on his lips and he seemed to shrink as he squatted down, apparently stunned at the human drama that had unfolded before him and to which he could no longer shut his eyes.

“Hey, you!” the voice of Silan Petrov came floating over the river. “What’s up there? What’s the barking about? Eh-ho-o?”

Silan Petrov seemed to like making a noise, wakening the heavy silence of the river with his deep, powerful lungs. His shouts followed one another in quick succession, rending the warm damp air with a lusty vitality that seemed to crush the puny figure of Mitya who was again at his oar. Sergei answered his employer at the top of his voice, while in an undertone he cursed him in picturesque, spicy Russian terms. Two voices split the silence of the night, tore it and shook it in a tumult of sound that

now mingled in a deep rich note like the tone of a brass trumpet, now rose to a shrill falsetto, floated in the air, faded, and died. Then silence reigned once more.

Yellow patches of moonlight fell upon the water from out the rifts in the clouds and vanished with a brief gleam into the smudgy greyness around.

The rafts drifted on amid the darkness and silence.

II

At one of the fore oars stood Silan Petrov in a red shirt open at the throat, revealing a powerful neck and a strong hairy chest, as hard as an anvil. A mop of raven-black hair tumbled over his brows, and from under them gleamed a pair of smiling hazel eyes. His sleeves, rolled up to the elbows, bared his muscular hands that were gripping the oar. Leaning slightly forward, he peered intently into the murky distance.

Masha stood within three paces of him, sideways to the current, and regarded the broad-chested figure of her man with a smile. Both were silent engrossed with their observations – he gazing into the distance, she studying the play of his vivacious bearded face.

“A fisherman’s campfire, I suppose!” he said at length, facing her. “It’s all right then. We’re keeping straight! Oo-ooch!” he puffed, sending out a column of hot air, as he dipped his oar to larboard and gave a powerful tug.

“Don’t overdo it, Masha dear!” he observed, seeing her make the same dexterous movement with her oar.

Plump and round, with black impudent eyes and rosy cheeks, barefooted, wearing only a wet sarafan that clung to her body, she turned her face to Silan and said with a tender smile:

“You take too much care of me. I’m pretty strong, thank God!”

“I don’t when I kiss you,” said Silan with a shrug.

“You shouldn’t!” she whispered provokingly.

They said nothing for a while, devouring each other with hungry eyes.

The water rippled dreamily beneath the rafts. Somewhere far away on the lee the cocks began to crow.

The rafts sailed on with a faint rocking motion towards the thinning, melting darkness, where the clouds now stood out in sharper contours and lighter shades.

“Silan! D’you know what they were squealing about there? I know, honestly I do! Mitya must have been complaining about us to Sergei, and started whining for misery, and Sergei swore at us.”

Masha searched his face, which at her words had grown grim, cold and hard.

“Well, what of it?” he asked drily.

“Oh, nothing.”

“If it’s nothing, there was nothing to talk about.”

“Don’t be angry!”

“What, at you? I’d like to at times, but I just couldn’t.”

“Do you love your Masha?” she whispered playfully, bending towards him.

“Oo-ooch!” he ejaculated with an expressive grunt, and holding out his powerful arms to her, he said between clenched teeth:

“Come here... Don’t tease...”

She curved her lithe body like a cat and slipped softly into his

arms.

“We’ll throw the rafts off it lie course again!” he whispered, kissing her face that flamed under his lips.

“Enough! It’s getting light... They can see us from the other end.”

She tried to wriggle free, but his arm tightened about her.

“Can they? Let ’em see! Let everybody see! To hell with them all. I’m committing a sin, that’s a fact. I know it. What of it? I’ll answer for it before God. You haven’t been his wife anyway. That means you’re free to do anything you like with yourself. It’s hard on him? I know it is. What about me? D’you think there’s anything flattering in living with a son’s wife? Though, it’s true, you’re not his wife... Still! Taking my social position, what do I look like now? And isn’t it a sin before God? It is! I know it all! And I’ve gone against it all. And damme, it’s worth it! We live once on this earth, and may die any day. Ah, Maria! If only I’d have waited another month before marrying off Mitya! Things would ha’ been different. As soon as Anfisa died. I’d have sent a matchmaker down to you – and the things done! All lawful and proper! No sin and no shame! It was my mistake. It’ll eat the heart out o’ me for five or ten years, that mistake will. Kill you before you die...”

“Oh, come, drop it, don’t worry about it. We’ve talked it over plenty and enough,” whispered Masha, and gently twisting out of his arms, she went back to her oar. He began jerkily and violently plying his oar as if desirous of shaking off the weight that pressed

on his chest and cast a sudden shadow across his handsome face.

Day was breaking.

The clouds, growing thinner, straggled across the sky as if reluctant to make way for the rising sun. The water assumed the cold lint of steel.

“He mentioned it again the other day. ‘Dad,’ he says. ‘isn’t it a shame and disgrace for both you and me? Give her up’ – meaning you,” said Silan Petrov with a wry smile. “‘Give her up and come to your senses.’ ‘My son.’ I says, ‘my dear son, get out o’ the way if you wish to keep alive! I’ll tear you to pieces like a rotten rag. There’ll be nothing left of your virtue. Cursed be the day that I brought such a degenerate like you into the world.’ He stood trembling. ‘Dad, is it my fault?’ he says. ‘It is your fault, you whimpering mongrel, ’cause you’re a stone in my path. It’s your fault ’cause you can’t stand up for yourself. You’re just carrion, that’s what you are – a stinking garbage. At least if you were strong one could kill you – but one can’t even do that to you, you miserable scarecrow.’ He started howling! Ah, Maria! Men haven’t got any gumption nowadays! Another fellow in my place – ugh! We’d soon shake off the noose! And we’re only putting our heads into it! Who knows but we’ll draw it tight about each other.”

“What do you mean?” Masha asked timidly, gazing fearfully at the grim face of the man, whose whole personality emanated a cold tremendous force.

“I mean if he died... that’s what I mean. If only he’d die...”

wouldn't it be wonderful! Everything'd drop into its rut. I'd give your folks the land – that would keep their mouths shut – and you and I'd go to Siberia... or to the Kuban! Who's she? She's my wife. D'you get me? We'd obtain the necessary document... I'd open a shop in some village. And we'd live our lives together, and pray off our sin to God. We don't need much. We'd help people, and they'd help us to ease our conscience... How'd you like it? Eh? Masha?!"

"Y-yes," she sighed, and with eyes tightly screwed up, she became lost in thought.

They were silent for a while... There was no sound but the rippling of the water...

"He's a sickly fellow... Maybe he'll die soon..." said Silan Petrov in a muffled voice.

"I hope to God it happens soon!" murmured Masha in a fervid voice, and made a sign of the cross.

The beams of the spring sun streamed in a flood of sparkling gold and rainbow on the water. A wind rose, and everything quivered into life, stirred and smiled... The blue sky amid the clouds smiled too at the sun-kissed waters. The clouds were now left behind the rafts.

There, gathered in a dark heavy cluster, they hung irresolute and motionless over the broad river, as if contemplating a way of escape from the living spring sun, rich with joy and lustre, the inveterate enemy of these mothers of winter blizzards who had tarried before the onset of spring.

In front of the rafts the clear blue sky shone brightly, and the sun, still matutinally fresh but vernaly brilliant, mounted majestically into the azure depths of the heavens out of the purple-gold waves of the river.

To the right loomed the tawny ridge of the hilly bank in a green girdle of forests, and to the left the pale emerald carpet of the meadows gleamed in a diamond spangle of dew.

The succulent smell of the earth, of new-born grass and the resinous odours of the pine were wafted on the air.

Silan Petrov threw a look at the oarsmen behind.

Sergei and Mitya stood motionless at their oars, but it was too far to discern the expression on their faces.

He shafted his glance to Masha.

She was chilled. Standing by her oar, she shrank into a small round ball. All bathed in sunlight, she grazed before her with wistful eyes, her lips parted in that elusive alluring smile that makes even an unattractive woman seem fascinating and adorable.

"Keep a lookout there, lads! Oho!" roared Silan Petrov with all the power of his lungs, feeling a mighty surge of elation rising in his broad chest.

His shout seemed to send everything rocking, and long did the startled echoes resound over the hilly bank.

Twenty-Six Men and a Girl

We were twenty-six: men, twenty-six living machines cooped up in a dark hole of a basement where from morn till night we kneaded dough, making pretzels and cracknels. The windows of our basement faced a sunken area lined with bricks that were green with slime; the windows outside were encased in a close-set iron grating, and no ray of sunshine could reach us through the panes which were covered with meal. Our boss had fenced the windows off to prevent any of his bread going to beggars or to those of our comrades who were out of work and starving – our boss called us a bunch of rogues and gave us tainted tripe for dinner instead of meat...

Stuffy and crowded was life in that stony dungeon beneath a low-hanging ceiling covered by soot and cobwebs. Life was hard and sickening within those thick walls smeared with dirt stains and mildew... We got up at five in the morning, heavy with lack of sleep, and at six, dull and listless, we sat down to the table to make pretzels and cracknels out of the dough our comrades had prepared while we were sleeping. And all day long, from morning till ten o'clock at night some of us feat at the table kneading the stiff dough and swaying the body to fight numbness, while others were mixing flour and water. And all day long the simmering water in the cauldron where the pretzels were cooking gurgled pensively and sadly, and the baker's shovel clattered angrily and

swiftly on the hearthstone, throwing slippery cooked pieces of dough onto the hot bricks. From morning till night the wood burned at one end of the oven, and the ruddy glow of the flames flickered on the bakery walls, as though grinning at us. The huge oven resembled the ugly head of some fantastic monster thrust up from under the floor, its wide-open jaws ablaze with glowing lire breathing incandescent flames and heat at us, and watching our ceaseless toil through two sunken air-holes over its forehead. These two hollows were like eyes – the pitiless impassive eyes of a monster; they looked at us with an invariable dark scowl, as though weary with looking at slaves of whom nothing human could be expected, and whom they despised with the cold contempt of wisdom.

Day in, day out, amid the meal dust and the grime that we brought in on our feet from the yard, in the smelly stuffiness of the hot basement, we kneaded the dough and made pretzels which were sprinkled with our sweat, and we hated our work with a fierce hatred, and never ate what our hands had made, preferring black rye bread to pretzels. Sitting at a long table facing one another – nine men on each side – our hands and fingers worked mechanically through the long hours, and we had grown so accustomed to our work that we no longer watched our movements. And we had grown so accustomed to one another that each of us knew every furrow on his comrades' faces. We had nothing to talk about, we were used to that, and were silent all the time – unless we swore, for there is always something

one can swear at a man for, especially one's comrade. But we rarely swore at each other – is a man to blame if he is half-dead, if he is like a stone image, if all his senses are blunted by the crushing burden of toil? Silence is awful and painful only for those who have said all there is to say; but to people whose words are still unspoken, silence is simple and easy... Sometimes we sang, and this is how our song would begin: during the work somebody would suddenly heave a deep sigh, like a weary horse, and begin softly to sing one of those long-drawn songs whose mournfully tender melody always lighten the heavy burden of the singer's heart. One of the men would sing while we listened in silence to the lonely song, and it would fade and die away beneath the oppressive basement ceiling like the languishing flames of a campfire in the steppe on a wet autumn night, when the grey sky hangs over the earth like a roof of lead. Then another singer would join the first, and two voices would float drearily and softly in the stuffy heat of our crowded pen. And then suddenly several voices at once would take up the song – it would be lashed up like a wave, grow stronger and louder, and seem to break open the damp, heavy walls of our stony prison...

All the twenty-six are singing; loud voices, brought to harmony by long practice, fill the workshop; the song is cramped for room; it breaks against the stone walls, moaning and weeping, and stirs the heart with a gentle prickly pain, reopening old wounds and wakening anguish in the soul... The singers draw deep and heavy sighs; one will suddenly break off and sit listening

for a long time to his comrades singing, then his voice will mingle again in the general chorus. Another will cry out dismally: “Ach!” singing with closed eyes, and maybe he sees the broad torrent of sound as a road leading far away, a wide road lit up by the brilliant sun, and he himself walking along it...

The flames in the oven still flicker, the baker’s shovel still scrapes on the brick, the water in the cauldron still bubbles and gurgles, the firelight on the wall still flutters in silent laughter... And we chant out, through words not our own, the dull ache within us, the gnawing grief of living men deprived of the sun, the grief of slaves. And so we lived, twenty-six men, in the basement of a big stone house, and so hard was our life, that it seemed as though the three stories of the house were built on our shoulders...

Besides our songs there was something else that we loved and cherished, something that perhaps filled the place of the sun for us. On the second floor of our house there was a gold embroidery workshop, and there, among many girl hands, lived sixteen-year old Tanya, a housemaid. Every morning a little pink face with blue merry eyes would be pressed to the pane of the little window cut into the door of our workshop leading into the passage, and a sweet ringing voice would call out to us:

“Jail-birdies! Give me some pretzels!”

We would all turn our heads to the sound of that clear voice and look kindly and joyfully at the pure girlish face that smiled at us so sweetly. We liked to see the nose squashed against the

glass, the little white teeth glistening from under rosy lips parted in a smile. We would rush to open the door for her, jostling each other, and there she would be, so winsome and sunny, holding out her apron, standing before us with her little head slightly tilted, and her face all wreathed in smiles. A thick long braid of chestnut hair hung over her shoulder on her breast. We grimy, ignorant, ugly men look up at her – the threshold rises four steps above the floor – look up at her with raised heads and wish her good morning, and our words of greeting are special words, found only for her, When we speak to her our voices are softer, our joking lighter. Everything we have for her is special. The baker draws out of the oven a shovelful of the crustiest browned pretzels and shoots them adroitly into Tanya's apron.

“Mind the boss doesn't catch you!” we warn her. She laughs roguishly and cries merrily:

“Good-bye jail-birdies!” and vanishes in a twinkling like a little mouse.

And that is all... But long after she has gone we talk about her – we say the same things we said the day before and earlier, because she, and we, and everything around us are the same they were the day before and earlier... It is very painful and hard when a man lives, and nothing around him changes, and if it doesn't kill the soul in him, the longer he lives the more painful does the immobility of things surrounding him become... We always talked of women in a way that sometimes made us feel disgusted with ourselves and our coarse shameless talk. That

is not surprising, since the women we knew did not probably deserve to be talked of in any other way. But of Tanya we never said a bad word; no one of us ever dared to touch her with his hand and she never heard a loose joke from any of us. Perhaps it was because she never stayed long – she would flash before our gaze like a star falling from the heavens and vanish. Or perhaps it was because she was small and so very beautiful, and everything that is beautiful inspires respect, even with rough men. Moreover, though hard labour was turning us into dumb oxen, we were only human beings, and like all human beings, could not live without an object of worship. Finer than she there was nobody about us, and nobody else paid attention to us men living in the basement – though there were dozens of tenants in the house. And finally – probably chiefly – we regarded her as something that belonged to us, something that existed thanks only to our pretzels; we made it our duty to give her hot pretzels, and this became our daily sacrifice to the idol, almost a holy rite, that endeared her to us ever more from day to day. Besides pretzels we gave Tanya a good deal of advice – to dress warmly, not to run quickly upstairs, not to carry heavy bundles of firewood. She listened to our counsels with a smile, retorted with a laugh and never obeyed them, but we did not take offence – we were satisfied to show our solicitude for her.

Often she asked us to do things for her. She would, for instance, ask us to open a refractory door in the cellar or chop some wood, and we would gladly and with a peculiar pride do

these things for her and anything else she asked.

But when one of us asked her to mend his only shirt, she sniffed scornfully and said:

“Catch me! Not likely!”

We enjoyed a good laugh at the silly fellow’s expense, and never again asked her to do anything. We loved her – and there all is said. A man always wants to foist his love on somebody or other, though it frequently oppresses, sometimes sullies, and his love may poison the life of a fellow creature, for in loving he does not respect the object of his love. We had to love Tanya, for there was no one else we could love.

At times one of us would suddenly begin to argue something like this:

“What’s the idea of making such a fuss over the kid? What’s there so remarkable about her anyway?”

We’d soon brusquely silence the fellow who spoke like that – we had to have something we could love: we found it, and loved it, and what we twenty-six loved stood for each of us, it was our holy of holies, and anybody who went against us in this matter was our enemy. We love, perhaps, what is not really good, but then there are twenty-six of us, and we therefore want the object of our adoration to be held sacred by others.

Our love is no less onerous than hate... and, perhaps, that is why some stiff-necked people claim that our hate is more flattering than love... But why do they not shun us if that is so?

* * *

In addition to the pretzel bakehouse our boss had a bun bakery. It was situated in the same house, and only a wall divided it from our hole. The bun bakers, however, of whom there were four, held themselves aloof from us, considered their work cleaner than ours, and themselves, therefore, better men; they never visited our workshop, and treated us with mocking scorn whenever they met us in the yard. Neither did we visit them – the boss banned such visits for fear we would steal buns. We did not like the bun bakers, because we envied them – their work was easier than ours, they got better wages, they were fed better, they had a roomy, airy workshop, and they were all so clean and healthy, and hence so odious. We, on the other hand, were all a yellow grey-faced lot; three of us were ill with syphilis, some were scabby, and one wag crippled by rheumatism. On holidays and off-days they used to dress up in suits and creaking high boots, two of them possessed accordions, and all used to go out for a stroll in the park, whilst we were dressed in filthy tatters, with rags or bast shoes on our feet, and the police wouldn't let us into the park – now, could we love the bun bakers?

And one day we learned that their chief baker had taken to drink, that the boss had dismissed him and taken on another in his place, and that the new man was an ex-soldier who went about in a satin waistcoat and had a watch on a gold chain. We were

curious to have a look at that dandy, and every now and then one of us would run out into the yard in the hope of seeing him.

But he came to our workshop himself. Kicking open the door he stood in the doorway, smiling, and said to us:

“Hullo! How do you do, boys!”

The frosty air rushing through the door in a smoky cloud eddied round his feet, while he stood in the doorway looking down at us, his large yellow teeth flashing from under his fair swaggering moustache. His waistcoat was indeed unique – a blue affair, embroidered with flowers, and all glittering, with buttons made of some kind of red stone. The chain was there too...

He was a handsome fellow, was that soldier – tall, strong, with ruddy cheeks and big light eyes that had a nice look in them – a kind, clean look. On his head he wore a white stiffly starched cap, and from under an immaculately clean apron peeped the pointed toes of a highly polished pair of fashionable boots.

Our chief baker politely asked him to close the door. He complied unhurriedly and began questioning us about the boss. We fell over each other telling him that the boss was a skinflint, a crook, a scoundrel and a tormentor – we told him everything there was to tell about the boss that couldn't be put in writing here. The soldier listened, twitching his moustache and regarding us with that gentle, clear look of his.

“You've a lot of girls around here...” he said suddenly.

Some of us laughed politely, others pulled sugary faces, and some one informed the soldier that there were nine bits in the

place.

“Use ’em?” asked the soldier with a knowing wink.

Again we laughed, a rather subdued, embarrassed laugh... Many of us would have liked to make the soldier believe they were as gay lads as he was. but they couldn’t do it, none of us could do it. Somebody confessed as much, saying quietly:

“How comes we...”

“M’yes, you’re a long way off!” said the soldier convincingly, subjecting us to a close scrutiny. “You’re not... er, up to the mark... Ain’t got the character... the proper shape... you know, looks! Looks is what a woman likes about a man! Give her a regular body... everything just so! Then of coarse she likes a bit of muscle... Likes an arm to be art arm, here’s the stuff!”

The soldier pulled his right hand out of his pocket, with the sleeve rolled back to the elbow, and held it up for us to see... He had a strong, white arm covered with shining golden hair.

“The leg, the chest – everything must be firm... And then a man’s got to be properly dressed... in shipshape form... Now, the women just fall for me. Mind you, I don’t call ’em or tempt ’em – they hang about my neck five at a time...”

He sat down on a sack of flour and spent a long time in telling us how the women loved him and how dashingly he treated them. Then he took his leave, and when the door closed behind him with a squeak, we sat on in a long silence, meditating over him and his stories. Then suddenly everybody spoke up at once, and it transpired that we had all taken a liking to him. Such a simple,

nice fellow, the way he came in. sat down, and chatted. Nobody ever came to see us, nobody talked to us like that, in a friendly way... And we kept on talking about him and his future success with the seamstresses, who, on meeting us in the yard, either steered clear of us with lips offensively pursed, or bore straight down on us as though we did not stand in their path at all. And we only admired them, in the yard or when they passed our windows, dressed in cute little caps and fur coats in the winter, and in flowery hats with bright coloured parasols in the summer. But among ourselves we spoke of these girls in a way that, had they heard us, would have made them mad with shame and insult.

“I hope he doesn’t... spoil little Tanya!” said the chief baker suddenly in a tone of anxiety.

We were all struck dumb by this statement. We had somehow forgotten Tanya – the soldier seemed to have blotted her out with his large, handsome figure. Then a noisy argument broke out: some said that Tanya would not stand for it, some asserted that she would be unable to resist the soldier’s charms, and others proposed to break the fellow’s bones in the event of him making love to Tanya. Finally, all decided to keep a watch on the soldier and Tanya, and warn the kid to beware of him... That put a stop to the argument.

About a month passed. The soldier baked buns, went out with the seamstresses, frequently dropped in to see us, but never said anything about his victories – all he did was to turn up his moustache and lick his chops.

Tanya came every morning for her pretzels and was invariably gay, sweet and gentle. We tried to broach the subject of the soldier with her – she called him “a pop-eyed dummy” and other funny names and that set our minds at rest. We were proud of our little girl when we saw how the seamstresses clung to the soldier. Tanya’s attitude towards him bucked us all up, and under her influence as it were, we ourselves began to evince towards him an attitude of scorn. We loved her more than ever, and greeted her more gladly and kindly in the mornings.

One day, however, the soldier dropped in on us a little the worse for drink, sat down and began to laugh, and when we asked him what he was laughing at he explained:

“Two of them have had a fight over me... Lida and Grusha... You should have seen what they did to each other! A regular scream, ha-ha! One of ’em grabbed the other by the hair, dragged her all over the floor into the passage, then got on top of her... ha-ha-ha! Scratched each other’s mugs, tore their clothes... Wasn’t that funny! Now, why can’t these females have a straight fight? Why do they scratch, eh?”

He sat on a bench, looking so clean and healthy and cheerful, laughing without a stop. We said nothing. Somehow he was odious to us this time.

“Why am I such a lucky devil with the girls? It’s a scream! Why. I just wink my eye and the trick’s done!”

He raised his white hands covered with glossy hairs and brought them down on his knees with a slap. He surveyed us

with a look of pleased surprise, as though himself genuinely astonished at the lucky turn of his affairs with the ladies. His plump ruddy physiognomy shone with smug pleasure and he repeatedly passed his tongue over his lips.

Our chief baker angrily rattled his shovel on the hearth and suddenly said sarcastically:

“It’s no great fun felling little fir trees – I’d like to see what you’d do with a pine!”

“Eh, what? Were you talking to me?” asked the soldier.

“Yes, you...”

“What did you say?”

“Never mind... Let it lay...”

“Here, hold on! What’s it all about? What d’you mean – pine?”

Our baker did not reply. His shovel moved swiftly in the oven, tossing in boiled pretzels and discharging the baked ones noisily onto the floor where boys sat threading them on bast strings. He seemed to have forgotten the soldier. But the latter suddenly got excited. He rose to his feet and stepped up to the oven, exposing himself to the imminent danger of being struck in the chest by the shovel handle that whisked spasmodically in the air.

“Now, look here – who d’you mean? That’s an insult... Why, there ain’t a girl that could resist me! No fear! And here are you, hinting things against me...”

Indeed, he appeared to be genuinely offended. Evidently the only source of his self-respect was his ability to seduce women; perhaps this ability was the only living attribute he could boast,

the only thing that made him feel a human being.

There are some people for whom life holds nothing better or higher than a malady of the soul or flesh. They cherish it throughout life, and it is the sole spring of life to them. While suffering from it they nourish themselves on it. They complain about it to people and in this manner command the interest of their neighbours. They exact a toll of sympathy from people, and this is the only thing in life they have. Deprive them of that malady, cure them of it, and they will be utterly miserable, because they will lose the sole sustenance of their life and become empty husks. Sometimes a man's life is so poor that he is perforce obliged to cultivate a vice and thrive on it. One might say that people are often addicted to vice through sheer boredom. The soldier was stung to the quick. He bore down on our baker, whining:

“No, you tell me – who is it?”

“Shall I tell you?” said the baker, turning on him suddenly.
“Well?”

“D’you know Tanya?”

“Well?”

“Well, there you are! See what you can do there...”

“Me?”

“Yes, you.”

“Her? Easier’n spitting!”

“We’ll see!”

“You’ll see! Ha-a!”

“Why, she’ll...”

“It won’t take a month!”

“You’re cocky, soldier, ain’t you?”

“A fortnight! I’ll show you! Who did you say? Tanya? Pshaw!”

“Come on, get out, you’re in the way!”

“A fortnight, and the trick’s done! Oh, you!..”

“Get out!”

The baker suddenly flew into a rage and brandished his shovel. The soldier fell back in amazement, then regarded us all for a while in silence, muttered grimly “All right!” and went out.

All through this argument we had kept our peace, our interest having been engaged in the conversation. But when the soldier left we all broke out into loud and animated speech.

Somebody cried out to the baker:

“That’s a bad business you’ve started, Pavel!”

“Get on with your work!” snapped the baker.

We realized that the soldier had been put on his high ropes and that Tanya was in danger. Yet, while realizing this, we were all gripped by a tense but thrilling curiosity as to what would be the outcome of it. Would Tanya hold her own against the soldier? We almost unanimously voiced the conviction:

“Tanya? She’ll hold her ground! She ain’t easy prey!”

We were terribly keen on testing our idol; we assiduously tried to convince each other that our idol was a staunch idol and would come out on top in this engagement. We ended up by expressing our doubts as to whether we had sufficiently goaded the soldier,

fearing that he would forget the wager and that we would have to prick his conceit some more. Henceforth a new exciting interest had come into our lives, something we had never known before. We argued among ourselves for days on end; we all somehow seemed to have grown cleverer, spoke better and more. It seemed as though we were playing a sort of game with the devil, and the stake on our side was Tanya. And when we had learned from the bun bakers that the soldier had started to “make a dead set for Tanya” our excitement rose to such a furious pitch and life became such a thrilling experience for us that we did not even notice how the boss had taken advantage of our wrought up feelings to throw in extra work by raising the daily knead to fourteen poods of dough. We didn’t even seem to tire of the work. Tanya’s name was all day long on our lips. And we awaited her morning visits with a peculiar impatience. At times we fancied that when she came in to see us it would be a different Tanya, not the one we always knew.

We told her nothing, however, about the wager. We never asked her any questions and treated her in the same good-natured loving way. But something new had crept into our attitude, something that was alien to our former feelings for Tanya – and that new element was keen curiosity, keen and cold like a blade of steel...

“Boys! Time’s up today!” said the baker one morning as he began work.

We were well aware of it without his reminder. Yet we all

started.

“You watch her... She’ll soon come in!” suggested the baker. Some one exclaimed in a tone of regret:

“It’s not a thing the eye can catch!”

And again a lively noisy argument sprang up. Today, at length, we would know how clean and incontaminate was the vessel in which we had laid all the treasure that we possessed. That morning we suddenly realized for the first time that we were gambling for high stakes, that this test of our idol might destroy it for us altogether. All these days we had been hearing that the soldier was doggedly pursuing Tanya with his attentions, but for some reason none of us asked her what her attitude was towards him. She continued regularly to call on us every morning for her pretzels and was always her usual self.

On that day, too, we soon heard her voice:

“Jail-birdies! I’ve come...”

We hastened to let her in, and when she came in we greeted her, contrary to our custom, with silence. We looked hard at her and were at a loss what to say to her. what to ask her. We stood before her in a silent sullen crowd. She was obviously surprised at the unusual reception, and suddenly we saw her turn pale, look anxious and stir restlessly. Then in a choky voice she asked:

“Why are you all so... strange!”

“What about you?” threw in the baker in a grim tone, his eyes fixed on her face.

“What about me?”

“Nothing...”

“Well, give me the pretzels, quick...”

“Plenty of time!” retorted the baker without stirring, his eyes still glued on her face.

She suddenly turned and disappeared through the door.

The baker picked up his shovel, and turning to the oven, let fall calmly:

“Well – she’s fixed! The soldier’s done it... the blighter!..”

We shambled back to the table like a herd of jostling sheep, sat down in silence and apathetically set to our work. Presently some one said: “Maybe it isn’t...”

“Shut up! Enough of that!” shouted the baker.

We all knew him for a clever man, cleverer than any of us. And that shout of his we understood as meaning that he was convinced of the soldier’s victory... We felt sad and perturbed...

At twelve o’clock – the lunch hour – the soldier came in. He was as always, clean and spruce and – as always – looked us straight in the eyes. We felt too ill at ease to look at him.

“Well, my dear sirs, d’you want me to show you what a soldier can do?” he said with a proud sneer. “You go out into the passage and peep through the cracks... get me?”

We trooped into the passage, and tumbling over each other, pressed our faces to the chinks in the wooden wall looking onto the yard. We did not have to wait long. Soon Tanya came through the yard with a hurried step and anxious look, skipping over puddles of thawed snow and mud. She disappeared through the

door of the cellar. Presently the soldier sauntered past whistling, and he went in too. His hands were thrust into his pockets and he twitched his moustache...

It was raining and we saw the drops falling into the puddles which puckered up at the impacts. It was a grey wet day – a very bleak day. Snow still lay on the roofs, while on the ground dark patches of slush stood out here and there. On the roofs too the snow was covered with a brownish coating of dirt. It was cold and disagreeable, waiting in that passage...

The first to come out of the cellar was the soldier. He walked leisurely across the yard, twitching his moustache, his hands deep in his pockets – much the same he always was.

Then Tanya came out. Her eyes... her eyes shone with joy and happiness, and her lips smiled. And she walked as though in a dream, swaying, with uncertain gait...

It was more than we could endure. We all made a sudden rush for the door, burst into the yard and began yelling and whistling at her in a fierce, loud, savage uproar.

She started when she saw us and stood stock-still, her feet in a dirty puddle. We surrounded her and cursed her with a sort of malicious glee in a torrent of profanity and shameless taunts.

We did it unhurriedly, quietly, seeing that she had no way of escape from the circle around her and that we could jeer at her to our heart's content. It is strange, but we did not hit her.

She stood amid us and turned her head from side to side, listening to our insults. And we ever more fiercely, ever more

furiously, flung at her the dirt and poison of our wrath.

Her face drained of life. Her blue eyes, which the moment before had looked so happy, were dilated, her breath came in gasps and her lips quivered.

And we, having surrounded her, were wreaking our vengeance on her – for had she not robbed us? She had belonged to us, we had spent our best sentiments on her, and though that best was a mere beggar’s pittance, we were twenty-six and she was one, and there was no anguish we could inflict that was fit to meet her guilt! How we insulted her!.. She said not a word, but simply gazed at us with a look of sheer terror and a long shudder went through her body.

We guffawed, we howled, we snarled... Other people joined us... One of us pulled the sleeve of Tanya’s blouse...

Suddenly her eyes blazed: she raised her hands in a slow gesture to put her hair straight, and said loudly but calmly, straight into our faces:

“Oh, you miserable jail-birds!..”

And she bore straight down on us, just as if we had not been there, had not stood in her path. Indeed, that is why none of us proved to be in her path.

When she was clear of our circle she added just as loudly without turning round, in a tone of scorn and pride “Oh, you filthy swine... You beasts... And she departed – straight, beautiful, and proud.

We were left standing in the middle of the yard amid the mud,

under the rain and a grey sky that had no sun in it...

Then we too shuffled back to our damp stony dungeon. As of old, the sun never peered through our window, and Tanya came never more!..

1899

The Romancer

There was a man named Foma Varaxin, a cabinetmaker, aged twenty-five, a most absurd man with a large skull, flattened at the temples and elongated behind above the nape; this top-heavy skull tilted up his cropped head, and Foma walked the earth with his broad nose stuck up in the air, so that from a distance he gave the jaunty impression of wishing to cry out:

“Here, touch me, you just try!”

A single glance, however, at his nondescript face with its mouth of generous proportions and neutral-tinted eyes showed him to be just a good-natured fellow looking happily embarrassed over something or other.

His comrade, Alexei Somov, who was also a cabinet-maker, once told Foma:

“Your mug looks awful dreary! Why don’t you stick on a pair of eyebrows or something. There’s nothing on the whole panel except a nose, and that’s as bad a job I’ve ever seen!”

“That is so,” agreed Foma, fingering his upper lip. “Features couldn’t exactly be called handsome, but then didn’t Polly say I had fine eyes!”

“Don’t you believe it. She says that to get you to treat her to an extra bottle of beer.”

Alexei was two years Foma’s junior, but he had spent five months in prison for politics, read many books, and when he was

loath or unable or too lazy to understand a comrade he used to say:

“That’s a bourgeois prejudice. Utopia. You must know the history of culture. You don’t understand the class contradictions.”

He introduced Foma into a circle where little sharp-nosed Comrade Mark, waving hands that resembled bird’s feet, rattled off an account of the labour movement in the West. These narrations had an instant appeal for Foma, and after several lectures he pressed a varnish-stained hand to his chest and gushed:

“That’s the stuff, Alexei! That’s just about right! It does exist...”

Dry sardonic Somov, screwing up his greenish eyes and pursing his lips, asked:

“What does?”

“That same attraction people have towards unity – it does! Now take me. It’s all the same to me whether it’s a fire, or a religious procession, or a public fair – I always feel myself drawn terribly strong to any kind of place where people are gathered. People! Now take the church – why do I like to go to church? A gathering of souls, that’s why!”

“You’ll get over that!” Alexei assured him with an ironical grin. “When you grasp the idea...”

Foma thumped himself on the chest and cried joyously:

“I have grasped it! Here’s where it is! I grasped it from the very first. Now it’s a joy to me like Our Lady of all the afflicted...”

“Off he goes!”

“No, wait a minute. ‘Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.’ Isn’t that it? That’s the idea!”

“Don’t be silly – that’s the Gospel!”

“What of that? The idea is always the same, it strikes me. It may take on different shapes and different forms but the image is the same! It’s the Mother of Love! Isn’t that so?”

When Alexei was angry his upper lip curled, his sharp nose quivered, and his green pupils grew round like a bird’s. In a dry voice that crackled oddly on its high notes, and in words that sounded like snaps, Alexei impressively and at great length tried to prove to his comrade that he was a Utopian, that his class consciousness was dormant and would probably never be awakened because Foma had been brought up in a clergyman’s home where his mother served as cook and where his soul was poisoned by bourgeois prejudices and superstitions.

“But Alexei!” Foma exclaimed in an earnest tone, “it wasn’t poisoned – so help me God! Quite the contrary! When I was a kid, frinstance, I didn’t go to church at all. Good Lord, you don’t think I’m lying, do you? That happened afterwards, when I began to read books, and in general was drawn towards people! It isn’t a matter of church-going, but a – you know – communion of souls! That’s the idea! Now, what’s it all about? Brothers, shame on you, how can you live like that? You’re not beasts, are you? It’s a matter of inspiring love and conscience, Alexei, that’s the

important thing it seems to me! Isn't that right?"

"No, it isn't right!" snapped Alexei, his anger rising and his cheeks breaking out in patches of red, and Foma often had the impression that Alexei's words rapped his nose like cards in that game people played.

Foma maintained an embarrassed silence, stroking his head and now and then making a timid attempt in a guilty voice to appease Ms comrade:

"I understand, Alexei. I really do! Of course – there's the struggle! Nobody's denying that – that's where you've got to sit tight!"

Then he would suddenly meander off, and begin to argue in an earnest tone:

"You see, I was only thinking about man. Now, what is man, generally speaking? I'm not a chisel, am I? Now, say some one began using you as a chisel, they'd start using a mallet on you – that's what I mean, don't you see! A man's not a tool, is he? Then, there's the struggle, to be sure – you can't get away from that! By all means – the struggle! But the apostolic, you know, idea – that er... general er... universal concord... peace on earth and goodwill among men..."

Sometimes Alexei would say nothing and fix his comrade with a long contemptuous stare. Then he would begin in a cutting voice, as though he were snipping off Foma's ears:

"No you're stupid! It's a muddle-head you are, a hopeless muddle-head!"

Or he would threaten him, icily and impressively:

“You wait – we’ll soon begin to read the history of culture – you’ll see.”

Foma then felt very small. Incomprehensible words always exercised a depressing effect on him, inspired a reverential awe for the people who used them and elicited strange associations of ideas. Utopia he visualized as a hummocky swamp all covered with a stunted overgrowth, while over the chilly knolls, with arms outstretched, walks a woman clad all in white with the face of Our Lady, as always, filled with the vast sadness of the Mother – and she walks in silence with mute tears in her eyes. He had more than once heard the words “religious cult,” and culture he envisaged as a divine service, something in the nature of a solemn matins at Easter. It slowly dawned on him that this wise science could untie all the knots of life’s tangled problems, reduce all thoughts to proper order and bathe the variegated tints of life in a single steady mellow light. He spoke a lot, rapturously and breathlessly and always looked his interlocutor straight in the face with lack-lustre, tipsy-looking eyes. Every new thought that entered his mind evoked a torrent of words – he would wave his arras and cry in low and delighted tones:

“Wonderful! That’s just it! So simple!”

At first his comrades of the circle and workshop lent him an attentive ear out of curiosity, but they soon discovered that Foma was simply a chatterbox, and Yegor Kashin, the dour-faced fitter, advised him more than once:

“Cut your tongue in halves, windbag!”

Rut this did not cool Foma’s ardour – he surveyed everyone with a friendly glance and babbled on like a gushing spring brook.

When he came to the first lesson on the history of culture and found that it was to be given by a plump little blue-eyed young lady with smooth hair and a thick braid hanging down her back he was sadly puzzled, and tried all the time to avoid looking at the young lady.

He noticed, however, that she was ill at ease, trying in vain to impart a serious expression to her childish face, speaking hurriedly, incoherently, and when asked a question her face blushed crimson and her eyes blinked swiftly in confusion. She was so white and dainty that she stirred in him a feeling of pity.

“Clearly the first time,” thought Foma, studiously examining the dark damp wall above her head. He was surprised to hear her speak about lightning, the clouds, sunset, the heroes of fables and Greek myths – he could not see the connection and complained about it to Alexei on their way home:

“That was a flop, Alexei! On a subject like that they should have put a different person entirely, a serious man, some one with grey in his hair like... and a deep voice... make it sound like some one was reading the Twelve Gospels!”

Somov too was disgruntled and snorted:

“Fancy appointing that froggish little thing for such a job! A fat lot I care who the Evil Serpent is... We know who he is all right – tell us better how to destroy him...”

“Better she’d had just read straight off that thick little book!” said Foma deprecatingly, but soon forgetting the unfortunate lesson, he rambled on in his usual tone of benign dreamer: “Isn’t it wonderful, brother, a little person like that coming into our rough company – here, sec you, this is what I know, will you just listen! Wonderful! By getting closer to each other...”

“Talking drivel again!” Alexei brusquely stemmed the verbal tide.

“Why is it drivel?” Foma persisted gently, kindly. “You talk about class – now what kind of class is she? Simply a generous-hearted little girl. She feels sort of conscious-stricken living among people of our like, and so she...”

“When will all that treacle ooze out of you?” cried Somov in annoyance. “What’s conscience got to do with it? Simply necessity – conscience be hanged! If she had another place to go to, she’d find something easier and wouldn’t come to us, don’t kid yourself!”

Foma looked down the street at the flaming beads of the lamp lights and asked:

“So you think she does it because she’s obliged to?”

“Of course...”

“You think so?” said Varaxin with a backward toss of his head. “I don’t believe it somehow!”

“Why not?”

“What’s the sense in doing a thing because you’re obliged to? If I’m a cabinet-maker and used to my job – why should I do the

work of a common carpenter? She's kind of whittling logs..."

Alexei spat, saying:

"Let her whittle logs..."

At the second lesson Foma seemed to catch a glimpse of interesting ideas in the girl's words which stirred his heart, and when she had finished he asked:

"Comrade Liza, will you lend me that book until next time?"

"Certainly," she said, looking obviously pleased.

Then Foma walked by her side through the streets of the town, and was careful not to touch her with his elbow. They walked up a hilly street, on both sides of which the little houses of the suburb gazed at them through darkened windows. A lamp burned at the top of the street, casting a trembling patch of dull yellow around, and the damp gloom of the autumn night was filled with the odours of rotting wood and refuse.

Foma, coughing discreetly and trying to express himself elegantly, asked Liza:

"Then, I can take it for granted that in ancient times man spoke a single language – is that so?"

"Yes, the Aryans," a low voice answered him.

"And that's been proved, has it?"

"Definitely proved."

"Fine! Thai's wonderful! Then all the nations that are now scattered were once devoted to the unity of life, hence in ancient times people were united by a single common idea – y-yes..."

His words, however, shaped themselves laboriously, and he

was thinking not of ancient limes but of the little figure of the girl hurrying uphill half a pace in front of him on his left. Cloaked in the darkness she looked smaller than she was. Foma noticed that every time she passed a lighted window she bent her head and tried to slip quickly out of the patch of light.

“Wonderful!” he thought, not ceasing to talk and seeming to become a dual personality, as it were. “Such a little person, without fear, amid strange men, at night, in such a lonely spot... Wonderful!”

To keep his hands from gesticulating he thrust them into his pockets. This was uncustomary and constraining.

“Aren’t you afraid of drunks?” he asked.

She answered quickly, softly:

“Oh, I’m dreadfully afraid! There are so many of them around here...”

“Yes,” said Foma with a sigh, “they drink an unconscionable lot! The point is – life wants filling up, but there isn’t anything to fill it with! I mean life in the sense of the soul. Wine, we know, enriches the fancy. You can’t blame people harshly – is it a man’s fault that he’s obliged to sustain life by fancies?”

“I don’t blame them!” exclaimed Liza, slowing her pace. “I understand. What you said is so true, so very true!”

That cheered Foma up – he never remembered any one ever having agreed with him. Drawing his hands out of his pockets and tapping the book under his jacket he resumed in earnest confidential tones:

“Now, frinstance, if books were more accessible – that would be a different matter! Generally speaking, there’s no reason to be afraid of people, I assure you they deserve the fullest interest and compassion in the empty lives they lead. The fact of the matter is there is very little of everything, as you know, and that’s why everybody’s wild. No comforts of any kind, a man’s only friend is just naked fate with the awful face of poverty and vice, as the poet has it. But then, of course, when people like you will come down in large numbers from the summit – it’ll certainly give to life something that’ll make it worthy of man...”

Liza walked still more slowly, holding her skirt with one hand, while she passed the other hand across her face, saying with a sigh:

“Yes, yes, that’s true!”

“Fyodor Grigorievich,” Foma went on, interrupting her, “the son of the clergyman in whose place my mother lived – a good woman, my mother was, but she’s dead – Fyodor Grigorievich who’ll now soon be a professor, he used to say, when arguing with his father: ‘To live is to know!’ Very simple! Supposing I live and don’t know what I am, the why and wherefore and all that – now could you call that living? Just eking out an existence under the exploitation of all kinds of sinister forces originating in man and prejudices created by him – isn’t that so?”

“To live is to know!” repeated Liza. “That’s just the thing, comrade – you have such a wonderfully broad outlook...”

Foma did not remember what else he said, but this was the

first time in his life that he had spoken so much, so boldly and ardently. They parted at the gate of a large two-storied house with columns on the façade, and Liza, shaking his hand, earnestly asked him:

“Thursday and Monday – don’t forget! After seven I’m at home, I’ll wait till nine – you won’t forget?”

“With the greatest pleasure!” cried Foma, stamping his foot on the pavement. “Awfully grateful! Splendid!”

All night long till morning he roamed about the streets with his head reared in the air, mentally composing ardent invocatory speeches about the necessity of rendering aid by word and deed to people who had still failed to grasp the intrinsic ideas: to live and to know. He felt very happy. The grey sky of autumn seemed to yawn before him and out of the deep blue gulf words tumbled like falling stars, beautiful rich words that formed themselves into shining ranks of good and kindly thoughts on life and men, and these thoughts left Foma astonished before their unconquerable simplicity, their truth and force.

Thursday found Foma sitting in Liza’s room, seeing nothing except the tense glance of her blue eyes which, he could see, were trying to follow the drift of his words, while he looked into their blue depths and spoke:

“Then it looks, figurely speaking, as if the idea about the triumph of light over darkness is of heavenly origin?”

“If you like, yes – but – still – why must you have the heavenly?”

“It kind of looks nicer! And so – the main idea is the Sun that sheds around it the force of life! That’s wonderful and quite right. I went out of town yesterday – to Yarillo³, you know – to watch the sunset! Quite easy and simple to imagine the way it’s all described – serpent, swords, the struggle, the defeat of darkness and then the sunrise in a triumphant blaze! There wasn’t any sunrise, though, it was raining, but that doesn’t matter. I’ve seen the sunrise many a time, and I’ll make it a point to see it on a clear day, I will!”

He looked round and took a liking to the clean cosy little room with the white bed in the corner chastely screened in a soft veil of gloom. On a table before Foma lay numerous books, others stood slanting on a shelf, the walls were hung with familiar photographs of writers and learned men with long hair and melancholy faces. Rubbing his palms covered with callouses and stained with varnish, Foma laughed softly to himself and went on:

“Wonderful, comrade, there I was sitting on a steep bank with my legs over the side, when a dog comes up, kind of beggarly looking dog it was, you know, all covered with dirt and burs, with grey whiskers on its face. Hungry, old and homeless. Comes up and sits down near me and also watches: there was the sky flaming yellow and red, blue figures kept on changing, the rays broke ’em up and set ’em alight again, golden rivers flowed past – and we, a man and a dog, sat watching, just like that. Generally speaking, comrade, nobody knows for certain what a dog really

³ An allusion to the ancient Slavonic sun-god called Yarillo. – Trans.

is, you know, and what it's attitude is to the sun? Maybe it also – mind you, I don't know, it's just fantasy – but why shouldn't a dog be able to understand what the sun means, if it feels cold and warmth and can look at the sky? Now, a pig – that's another matter, of course! D'you know, I even joked with it – d'you understand, says I, who the real creator of life is, eh? It looked at me out of the corner of its eye and moved off a little... Surprising how every living thing on earth is mistrustful and cautious of one another – very sad, when you come to think of it! Mind you, maybe it's silly, but when I read those two chapters I all of a sudden, you know, seemed to realize it for the first time – why, the sun! The sun – extraordinary simple!”

“You've read two chapters?” Foma heard her ask.

The question struck him as sounding sort of strict.

“Only two,” he returned, and for some reason began fingering the chair on which he sat. “We've got a lot of work just now, you know, an urgent job. Klobistyaev, the merchant, is giving his daughter away in marriage– the son-in-law's going to live with them – and we're touching up a dining room suite. Splendid furniture he bought, fine antique workmanship – solid oak, you know...”

He saw the girl's eyes close wearily, and that instantly made him tongue-tied and threw him into confusion. Foma resumed not without an effort, smiling embarrassedly:

“Maybe I'm chattering too much – pardon me please!”

The young lady exclaimed hastily:

“Oh no! Your talk is so interesting. I’ve only just started work, and it’s very important for me to study the mentality of people who... people of your class.”

Foma brightened up again, became emboldened, and, waving his arms in the air, broke into song, like a bird at sunrise.

“Allow me to say that people of my kind are like little children – timid, you know! Between ourselves, frinstance, we crafts men very rarely have heart to heart talks. Yet every one would like to say something about himself – because – well, you know, a man sees very little kindness, and... if you bear in mind that every one had a mother... and was used to being caressed, it’s... a very sad thing!”

He moved up to the little hostess with his chair – something creaked with a snap and a thick book dropped on the floor.

“I’m sorry,” said Foma. “Very little elbow-room in here!” Dropping his voice, he continued in a mysterious undertone: “I want to tell you how remarkably true it is that it’s no good for a man to live by himself! Of course, unity of interests among the workers is a very good thing – I understand that – but interest is not the whole story – there’s a mighty lot in a man’s soul besides that! A man definitely wants to lay bare his soul, show it in full dress parade, in all its magnitude... A man’s a young creature, as you know! Not in years, of course, but taking it as life as a whole – life’s not an old story, is it? Eh? And suddenly, there you are, nobody wants to listen to anything – and there you have it – loneliness of the soul... dumbness and death of thought! I don’t

agree with it – the unity of people is absolutely necessary, isn't it? Unity of interests – all right... but how can one explain the loneliness and the awful misery at times? You see..."

"I don't quite follow you," said Liza, and her voice once more sounded teacher-like and strict.

Foma regarded her smilingly, and she, with knitted brows, returned his look with a very intent stare that once more dampened his enthusiasm. With a lift of her shoulders she drew her plait over her breast and her fingers moved swiftly twining and untwining the black ribbon, while she said in an unnaturally deep voice:

"That's rather a strange argument. While admitting the unity of interests..."

"You see, the point is," broke in Foma, "if one ray is here, another there, there won't be any warmth... all the rays must be merged into one, isn't that so?"

"Well, yes, but what do you call a ray?"

"My soul, and yours – there you have the rays of the sun, figurely speaking."

When Foma took his leave he thought Liza looked at him suspiciously and shrank back, and when he shook her hand she tried to pull it back.

And again he wandered nearly all night through the deserted streets of the sleepy town, rousing the night watchmen dozing at the house entrances, and exciting the interest of the policemen on their night rounds.

He recalled the things he had spoken and made a wry face, feeling that he had bungled things and had not said what he wanted to.

“Funny!” he thought, “when I went to her I had everything so pat in my head. Next time I’ll rehearse it properly...”

He suddenly stopped, remembering that Liza had not told him when he could come again.

“She’s forgotten! I’ve been speaking too much!”

And then again he escorted her home at nights, and all the way he bombarded her with his rapturous speeches, confided to her, before he was aware of it, the secrets of an awakened soul, not noticing that she listened to him in silence, answered his questions in monosyllables and no longer invited him to come to her warm little room.

“Why, I believe you’re a romancer!” she once exclaimed with a feeling akin to regret, and looking him squarely in the face she shook her head deprecatingly.

Foma was disconcerted by a word that was reminiscent of romance and love, and he laughed softly while Liza continued:

“How strange! Of course, I understand romanticism, but...”

She spoke long and didactically, and Foma could not understand what it was all about.

And gradually it became a necessity for him to see Liza – her eyes produced on him a heady pleasant sensation and elicited new words, kindled oddly fervent thoughts. Seeing her surrounded by a close ring of workers listening attentively and thoughtfully to

her low persuasive voice, seeing her white hands fluttering like little doves in the semi-dusk of the room, her dark brows moving above the blue eyes and rosy lips quivering like budding petals.

Foma thought:

“That’s the Idea! To all the afflicted I bring joy...”

And he pictured to himself a cool babbling brook meandering down the hillside to a parched valley where the trees stand forlorn and dusty, their faded leaves drooping wearily, while the living water makes its way to their roots.

And he recalled the lovely fairy tale of the little girl lost in the woods – how she wandered into the cave of the dwarfs and sat among them trustfully, filled with love and goodwill to every living thing.

Sometimes Liza, warming to her subject, grew excited, stammered, found difficulty in choosing her words, and her eyes darted anxiously over the faces of her audience. At such moments Foma sat tense and breathless, he felt an urge to intervene and help her out with the missing words and – so painful was the ordeal to him – that he even perspired with the tension.

“Alexei!” he said to Somov, gesticulating. “What a wonderful thing it is when a pure person like that – almost a child she is! – comes to people and says: excuse me, that’s not so, it’s all wrong, you don’t see the main thing – the idea of the world’s unity! Extraordinary! Just like a fairy tale, eh?”

Alexei threw him a look out of the corner of his eye and muttered sarcastically:

“Mind you don’t melt, you’ll make the floor dirty!”

“Don’t be silly! Why, you yourself – you believe, you feel it...”

Somov curled his lip and snubbed his comrade with an angry snort:

“You’d better listen more and chatter less. And don’t start explaining to people what you don’t understand yourself. You just look, you haven’t made yourself too popular – you get on people’s nerves with your talk...”

“I get on people’s nerves?” queried Foma incredulously.

One day he had a toothache which he assiduously tried to relieve by stuffing cotton wool saturated in varnish into the cavity; he even bought some creosote, though he considered it injurious, but the pain was not allayed and he was unable to attend the lesson.

Late in the evening Somov, looking gloomy and disgruntled, came into the workshop, and calling Foma aside, demanded sternly:

“What were you talking about with Liza the day before yesterday?”

“Me? Oh, various things. Why?”

Alexei, his lips twisted, looked at him askance and, drawing at his cigarette, asked:

“Complained about being lonely, eh?”

“Complained? Me? Nothing of the kind! I just happened to mention it...”

“You ought to take better care of your words!”

“Did you see her home?”

“Sure.”

“What did she loll you about me?” asked Foma, stroking his swollen cheek.

“What I’m telling you – you’re a muddle-headed fellow.”

“No, really?”

Somov studied the smoking tip of his cigarette and said with a sneer:

“You can take it from me! That’s what she said!”

“Never mind!” exclaimed Foma, and even his tooth seemed to ache less. “I’ll prove to her that...”

“Look here,” said Alexei with a sardonic grin, kicking aside the shavings on the floor, “let me give you a bit of advice – or better I’ll tell you what happened to me once. When I was in prison I saw a girl, one of the educated sort, during the promenade, and went nuts over her right off the bat, just like you...”

“You don’t say!” Foma exclaimed in astonishment.

But Alexei, his face as wry as though he too suffered from toothache, went on without looking at his pal:

“We tapped out messages to each other at night and all that kind of thing... I started that stuff about loneliness, and it worked out pretty rotten, my dear fellow, let me tell you!”

“You don’t say!” repeated Foma in a soft whisper, waving his hands. “What makes you think – who said I was in love? Where did you get the idea?”

“Come on, kid your grandmother! I advise you to drop it...”

“That’s nonsense, Alexei!” said Foma, pressing a hand to his heart and feeling that it was beating with astonishing rapidity, as though at once frightened and overjoyed. “Good Lord, who the devil would have thought it? That’s extraordinary, that is! The thing never entered my mind! But what’s the use? Though, on second thought, she’s made up her mind to go with us fellows, and – well, so what? Very simple, I should say! Supposing we put it like this: let a person melt in our insipid midst like a pinch of salt, and satiate...”

Somov crushed the cigarette end slowly between his fingers, stared around and started whistling between his teeth. Seeing that his comrade had no desire to listen to him Foma sighed and remarked:

“That damned tooth’s a nuisance – hurts...”

“Mind something else doesn’t start hurting!” Alexei warned him, concealing his eyes under his lashes, then suddenly resumed in a tone Foma had never heard him use before:

“Look here, if we’re going to talk this thing out – though I’m not gifted with the gab – let me tell you this. People say that you’re a muddle-headed fellow – I say it myself... it’s only true – sometimes you talk such piffle, fit to make a fellow sick. Still... I always hear you – I mean listen...”

He sat on a work-bench, his back bent and his shoulders, elbows and knees sticking out in sharp angularities, and he looked as though he had been knocked together out of odd

fragments of wood. Stroking his stiff dark hair he continued slowly and quietly:

“What I like about you is that you’re somehow like a little child – you put faith in everything you know...

“Alexei – that’s just it!” cried Foma, leaning over to him confidentially. “D’you remember me telling you about Fyodor Grigorievich? He says the same thing. His father’s all for faith. But he says, even behind faith there’s a certain amount of knowledge, for without it no interpretation of life is possible...”

“You chuck that, my boy!” advised Somov. “I don’t understand that...”

“No, but can’t you see, it’s very simple! First knowledge – then faith! Its the mother of faith, it gives it birth – you just think – how can a man have faith unless he has knowledge? Comrade Mark and Vassili, if you ask me – they simply don’t believe in the power of knowledge, that’s why they talk against faith in general...”

Somov regarded him with a sorrowful ironical look and observed with a shake of the head:

“It’s hard to talk with you! Crammed yourself chock-full with all kinds of drivel, and it looks to me you’ll never get rid of it. Let me tell you – I’m sorry for you! Get me? And take my advice – leave Liza alone!”

Foma Varaxin forced a reluctant laugh and screwed up his eyes like a stroked cat.

No, I’ll see this thing through. I will, right full ahead! I’ll ask

her – that’s a wonderful idea! Now, what’ll she say, eh?”

“What are you going to ask her?” enquired Alexei drily.

“Generally, I’ll ask her about complete unity. Word and deed – is that it?”

Somov drew out a cigarette with a trembling hand and put it into his mouth the wrong end. He bit off the moistened end, spat it out on the floor, flung the cigarette after it and asked:

“Do you love her, or what? Might as well say it!”

To which Foma replied without a moment’s hesitation:

“Yes, of course, very much... I mean, if you hadn’t mentioned it – I might not have guessed it perhaps – but now it’s clear! When I speak with her I feel so happy and light, as though I really were a child, upon my word!”

“Good-bye,” muttered Alexei, thrusting out his hand, and made for the door. He stopped in the depths of the workshop, looking small and dark, and asked in a quiet voice:

“Damn it, maybe you only just made it up?”

“What?”

“That love of yours?”

“You’re a funny chap!” exclaimed Foma. “You said it yourself. I didn’t make am thing up. I simply didn’t grasp the fact yet... it was you...”

“I’m a fool too!” said Somov and disappeared.

What with excitement and agonizingly anxious visions of his forthcoming meeting with Liza, Foma forgot his toothache and began pacing backwards and forwards among the rustling

shavings. An oil lamp burned smokily on the wall, dimly illuminating the yellow strips of boards stacked on racks overhead, a pile of curly shavings in the corner on which lay sprawled the little body of a sleeping boy, the dark work-benches, the curved legs of chairs and boards gripped in vices.

“Wonderful!” thought Foma rubbing his hands together vigorously.

He conjured up a simple, delightful life with a clever and loving little wife full of understanding and able to find an answer to every question. Around her are dear friends and comrades, and she herself is dear and near.

“Beautiful!”

Then will come exile – that’s sure to come! Somewhere far away in a lonely little village snowed up to the roofs and lost amid dark towering forests – forests towering to the very sky – he sits alone with her, studying. The walls are lined with shelves of thick impressive-looking books that tell you everything you want to know, and they both pass mentally from one to another of them by the bright ways of human thought. Outside there reigns a frozen hush, the white snow has wrapped the earth in a downy cloak and above it hangs the low cupola of the northern skies. Inside the room it is warm, clean and cosy, the fire in the stove dances in vivid yellow tongues of flame, the shadows dart silently along the walls and in a little cot by one of them lies another sweet bit of humanity born into the world to fight for the unity of all mankind into a single family of friends,

workers, creators. The wintry sky of this cold country is painted by flaming sunsets, reminiscent of the primeval days when, the first childish thoughts of men were born, when the invincible idea of uniting all mankind, the idea of the triumph of light was first nourished in men's minds.

Foma Varaxin did not believe in dawdling – Sunday saw him dressed in his best suit, one side of which, for some unaccountable reason, was longer than the other, and the collar of which evinced an inclination to climb to the back of his head: he put on shirt with a starched front and frayed cuffs, donned a blue necktie with red spots, hunched his shoulders high and went forth to visit Liza.

The bright winter day was bedecked in hoarfrost and velvet draperies of snow, strengthening in Foma's breast a joyous resolve inspiring him with words bright and pure. The telegraph wires, white and shaggy with hoar-frost, stretched prettily in the air straight towards the street where lived the girl whom Foma had already more than once and without any shadow of doubt mentally called his bride and wife. It was a glorious day, a joyous day, resplendent with light and silver scintillations.

“Oh, it's you!” said Liza, opening the door of her room.

“Are you coming in or going out?” asked Foma, smiling and giving her hand a hearty squeeze.

“I'm going out,” she said, her face twisted with pain, as she blew on her fingers and shook them in front of her face. She had a little sealskin cap on her head and her left hand was gloved.

“Well, I won’t keep you long!” promised Foma, settling himself into a chair in his overcoat and slapping his knee with his cap.

“Why do you look so radiant?” asked Liza, her blue eyes travelling over his figure.

He took his time, regarding her with an affectionate searching look – she was so like an apple, small, round and rosy.

“A little doll!” it flashed through his mind.

She walked to and fro between the door and the window, her heels clicking on the floor. She glanced through the window, then at the visitor with wrinkled brows, and swaying slightly, moved slowly towards the door. It seemed to him that her face looked sterner and more preoccupied than usual.

“Perhaps she feels what’s coming?” he thought.

“I’ll explain why I look radiant.” said Foma aloud and invited her: “Sit down, please!”

She shrugged her shoulders and reluctantly, irresolutely sat down facing him.

“Well?”

Foma leaned towards her, put out a yellow-nailed varnish-stained hand, and began in a low, soft, tender voice:

“Do you know. Comrade Liza. I want to tell you just one word.” He rose to his feet, pointed his finger in front of him and exclaimed in an impressive tone: “Full ahead!”

“What’s that?” asked Liza, smiling.

“Let me explain: imagine a steamboat on the river, engines

throttled down because the fairway's unfamiliar. Then the situation becomes clear. 'Half speed!' yells the captain down to the engine room, and then, when all's plain sailing, the captain commands: 'Full ahead!'"

Liza opened her eyes in a puzzled look, silently biting her lips with little white teeth.

"You don't understand?" queried Foma, moving up closer.

"N-no! Who's the captain?"

"The captain? You! And me – we're both captains of our lives – you and me! We have the right to command our own destiny – isn't that so?"

"Why, yes, but – what's it all about?" exclaimed the girl, laughing.

Foma held his arms out to her and repeated in broken accents:

"Full ahead, comrade! You know us, me and all the rest – come to us, come with us to complete unity!"

Liza stood up. It seemed to him that a shadow passed over her face and chased the bloom from her cheeks, quenched the shining light of her eyes.

"I don't understand," she said, lifting her shoulders. "It goes without saying – of course I am with you... What makes you speak of it? What is the matter?"

Foma seized her hands in his own hard palms, shook them and almost shouted:

"It goes without saying! Wonderful, comrade! I knew it... of course you'll – you'll do it!"

“Do what?” she questioned nervously, snatching her fingers away. “Don’t shout, there are other people in the house... Do what?”

Her voice sounded angry and a little indignant. Foma caught the note and hastened to explain:

“Marry me – that’s what I propose! Right full ahead! D’you imagine what it’ll be like – our life, comrade? What a holiday it’ll be...”

Standing before her, with his arms frantically sawing the air, he began to sketch the long pondered scenes of their life together, their work, pictures of life in exile, and as he spoke his voice dropped lower and lower, for Liza seemed to be melting before his gaze, dwindling and shrinking and receding further and further away.

“Good God, how stupid!” he heard a muffled distressed exclamation. “How vulgar!”

It seemed to Foma as if somebody had imperceptibly sprung at him and clenched a hand over his mouth so hard that his heart instantly stopped beating and he gasped for breath.

“You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Foma!” he heard a low indignant voice saying. “It’s simply – why, it’s awful! It’s stupid – don’t you see? Oh, how disgusting, how silly!”

It seemed to him that the girl was shrinking into the wall, burying herself among the portraits, and her face grew as grey and lifeless as the photographs above her head. She pulled her plait with one hand and fanned the air in front of her with the

other, shrinking ever smaller and speaking in a low but sharp voice:

“Aren’t you ashamed of yourself to regard me only as a woman?”

Foma spread his hands and stammered:

“Why? Not a woman, but generally... as people – you and me...”

“What kind of comradeship is this?” she asked. “What am I to think of you now? Why did you have to insult me, why?”

Foma had no recollection of how he left the little room with the many photographs on the walls, how he took his leave of Liza and what she said at parting – she had utterly dwindled and merged into the grey smudge of the rigid tutorial faces, had become one with them, inspiring, as they did, a cold stern deference.

He paced the streets, seeing nothing but misty circles before his eyes, and pulled his cap down low over his head, musing concentratedly, obstinately, drearily:

“Why stupid? Of what should I be ashamed? Vulgar? A woman? What’s wrong with a woman? Does that matter so much? If there are two souls united in a single idea – what if it is a woman?”

And he pulled his cap lower. His head felt cold, as though it had been stocked with ice and the sense of chilliness was so keen that his heart ached with a dull pain, as if he had been breathing asphyxiating fumes in an ill-ventilated room.

He caught up with a funeral procession. A soldier was being buried. Four stalwarts in uniforms, taking broad even strides, carried the coffin on their shoulders, and it swung measuredly from side to side in the frosty air. In front walked a drummer, adroitly beating a tattoo with his drumsticks, scattering into the air the impressive roll of his drum. Behind marched a platoon of soldiers with shouldered rifles. The soldiers wore black ear-caps tied under their chins and they all seemed to be wounded with deep gashes.

Alongside the coffin ran a little dun dog with its tail between its legs, and when the drum ceased beating the burial roll, it ran closer to the coffin, and when the drumsticks resumed their music it darted back with a timorous plaintive whimper.

Foma took off his cap with a great effort, leaned against a fence and watched the strange soldiers go by, shuddering with the cold that filled his breast and thinking, as though enquiring of some one: "Why ashamed?"

1910

The Breakup

On the river opposite the city, seven carpenters were hurriedly repairing an ice apron the townsfolk had taken apart for firewood during the winter.

The spring was late that year – the stripling March looked more like October; only around midday, and not every day at that, a pale, wintry sun would appear in a sky shot through with sunbeams, and diving through the blue rents in the clouds, squint down ill-naturedly at the earth.

It was already Friday of Passion Week and still at night the dripping eaves froze into blue icicles a good half-arshin long; the ice on the river, now bare of snow, had the same bluish tint as the wintry clouds.

While the carpenters worked, the church bells in the town rang out their mournful, metallic appeal. The workers raised their heads and gazed into the murky haze that enveloped the town, and often an axe poised for a blow would hang for a moment in mid air as though reluctant to cleave the gentle sound.

Here and there on the broad surface of the river fir branches, stuck into the ice to mark the paths, cracks and fissures, pointed skywards like the hands of a drowning man twisted with the ague.

The river presented a dreary spectacle; deserted and bare, its surface a scabrous mass, it spread desolately away into the gloomy space from which a dank, chill wind breathed lazily and

dismally.

...Foreman Osip, a neat well-built little chap with a tidy silver heard that clung in tiny curls to his pink cheeks and mobile neck, old Osip always in the fore, was shouting:

“Get a move on there, you hen’s spawn!”

And turning to me, he said mockingly:

“Now then, overseer. What’re you standing there mooning for? What do you think you’re supposed to be doing? Didn’t Vassil Sergeich, the contractor, put you here? Well, then it’s your job to keep us at it, ‘Get a move on you so-and-so!’ You’re supposed to yell at me. That’s what you’re here for, and you stand there blinking like a fish. You’re not supposed to blink, you’re supposed to keep your eyes open, and do some shouting too. You’re a sort of boss around here. Well, then, go ahead and give orders, you cuckoo’s.

“Get moving there, you demons!” he yelled at the men. “We’ve got to finish the work today, don’t we?”

He himself was the laziest of the lot. He knew his business quite well, and could work with dexterity and zeal when he had a mind to, but he didn’t care to take the trouble and preferred to entertain the others with tall stories. And so when work would be forging ahead and the men would be at it in silent absorption, suddenly obsessed by the desire to do everything well and smoothly, Osip would begin in his purring voice:

“Did I ever tell you about the time...”

For two or three minutes the men would appear to pay no heed

to him, engrossed in their sawing and planing, and his soft tenor would flow dreamily on, meandering around them and claiming their attention. His light-blue eyes half-closed, Osip fingered his curly beard and, smacking his lips with pleasure, mulled happily over each word.

“So he catches this here carp, puts it away in his basket and goes off into the woods, thinking about the fine fish soup he’s going to have... And all of a sudden he hears a woman’s voice pipe up, he can’t tell from where: ‘Yelesy-a-a, Yelesy-a-a!..’”

Lyonka, the lanky, angular Mordvinian, nicknamed Narodets, a young man with small eyes full of wonderment, lowered his axe and stood gaping.

“And from the basket a deep bass voice answers: ‘Here I am!’ And that very same minute the lid of the basket snaps back and out jumps the fish and darts straight back into the pool...”

Sanyavin, an old discharged soldier and a saturnine drunk who suffered from asthma and had a grudge of long-standing against life, croaked hoarsely:

“How could a carp move about on land?”

“Have you ever heard of a fish that could talk?” Osip retorted sweetly.

Mokei Budyryn, a dull-witted muzhik whose prominent cheekbones, jutting chin and receding forehead lent his face a canine appearance, a silent unprepossessing fellow, gave vent to his three favourite words in his slow nasal drawl:

“That’s true enough...”

His unfailing response to any story – incredible, horrible, filthy or malicious – would be those three words uttered in a low voice that rang with conviction.

“That’s true enough.”

Each time I heard them it was as though some heavy fist struck me thrice on the chest.

Work stopped because lame and stuttering Yakov Boyev also wanted to tell a fish story, in fact he had already begun his tale, but no one listened to him; instead everybody laughed at his painful efforts to speak. He cursed and swore, brandished his chisel and foaming at the mouth yelled to everyone’s amusement:

“When one man lies like a trooper you take it for gospel, but I’m telling you a true story and all you can do is cackle like a lot of numbskulls, blast you...”

By now the men had dropped their tools and were shouting and gesticulating, whereupon Osip took off his cap, baring his venerable silver head with its bald pale, and sternly admonished:

“Hey that’ll do now! You’ve had your breathing spell, now get back to work!”

“You started it,” croaked the ex-soldier spitting disgustedly on his hands.

Osip began nagging at me:

“Now then, overseer...”

I felt that he had some definite purpose in distracting the men from their work with his chatter, but what I did not understand was whether he did it to conceal his own laziness or to give

the workers a breather. When the contractor was around, Osip behaved with the utmost servility, acting the simpleton in front of the boss, contriving every Saturday to wheedle a little extra money out of him for the artel.

On the whole he was devoted to the men. but the old workers had no use for him – they considered him a clown and a good-for-nothing and had little respect for him: and even the young folk who enjoyed listening to his stories did not take him seriously, regarding him rather with ill-concealed mistrust and often with hostility. I once asked the Mordvinian, an intelligent chap with whom I often had some heart-to-heart talks, what he thought of Osip.

“I dunno...” he replied with a grin. “Devil knows... he’s all right, I suppose...” Then after a pause he went on:

“Mikhailo, the chap who died a sharp-tongued fellow he was, and clever too, quarrelled with him once, with Osip, that is, and lammed into Osip something fierce. ‘What kind of a man are you?’ says he. ‘As a workingman you’re finished and you haven’t learned to be a boss, so you’ll spend your days dangling like a forgotten plummet on a string.’ That’s pretty near the truth, and no mistake...”

Then after another pause he added uneasily: “But he’s all right, a good chap on the whole...” My own position among these men was an extremely embarrassing one. Here I was, a lad of fifteen, put there by the contractor to keep accounts, to see that the carpenters did not steal the nails or turn the boards in at

the saloon. Of course, they filched nails right under my nose, going out of their way to show me that I was quite superfluous, a downright nuisance, in fact. And if any opportunity afforded itself to bump me with a board or to do me some other minor injury, as if by accident, they would not hesitate to make the most of it.

I felt awkward and ashamed in their midst; I would have liked to say something to reconcile them to my presence, but I could not find the words and the oppressive sense of my own uselessness weighed heavily upon me.

Whenever I entered in my book the materials taken, Osip would walk over to me in his deliberate way and say:

“Got it? Now then, let’s have a look...”

And he would screw up his eyes and scrutinize the entry. “You don’t write clearly enough,” he would comment somewhat vaguely.

He could read only printed lettering and he wrote in church Slavonic letters, too. Ordinary writing was unintelligible to him. “What’s that funny-looking curlicue there?”

“It’s the letter ‘D.’”

“Ah, D! What a fancy loop... And what’ve you written on that line?”

“Boards, nine arshin, five.”

“Six, you mean.”

“No, five.”

“What do you mean, five? Look, Soldier cut up one...”

“He shouldn’t have...”

“Who says he shouldn’t? He took half to the pub...”

He looked straight at me with his eyes as blue as corn-flowers, twinkling merrily, and, fingering his beard, said with shameless imperturbability:

“Come on, now, put down six! Look here, you cuckoo’s egg, it’s wet and cold and the work’s hard; a fellow’s got to have a little drink now and again to warm his soul, don’t he? Don’t be so upright, you won’t bribe God that way...”

He talked long and earnestly, his gentle, caressing words seemed to engulf me like a shower of sawdust until I felt dazed and blinded by them and found myself altering the figure without protest, “Now that’s more like it! Why, the figure even looks nicer, sitting there on the line like a nice, fat kind-hearted wench...”

I saw him triumphantly reporting his victory to the carpenters and knew that they all despised me for my weakness, and my fifteen-year-old heart wept with humiliation and ugly, dreary thoughts whirled in my head.

“How strange and stupid all this is. Why is he so sure that I won’t go and change the six back to a five, and that I won’t tell the contractor they sold the board for drinks?”

Once they stole two pounds of eight-inch spikes and clamps.

“Listen here,” I earned Osip, “I’m going to put that down!”

“Go ahead!” he replied lightly, his grey eyebrows twitching. “It’s time to put a stop to all this nonsense! Go ahead, write it

down, that'll teach the sons of bitches..."

And he shouted to the men:

"Hey you, loafers, you'll be paying a fine for those spikes and clamps!"

"What for?" the ex-soldier demanded grimly.

"You can't get away with that sort of thing all the time," Osip calmly explained.

The carpenters grumbled and looked askance at me, and I was not at all sure that I would carry out my threat and whether, if I did, I would be doing right.

"I'm going to quit this job," I said to Osip. "You can all go to the devil! I'll be taking to thieving myself if I stay with you fellows much longer."

Osip pondered this for a while, stroking his beard thoughtfully. Then he squatted down beside me and said softly:

"You know, lad, you're quite right!"

"Eh?"

"You've got to clear out. What sort of a foreman or overseer are you? In a job like this a man must have respect for property, he's got to have the soul of a watchdog to guard his master's belongings like his own hide... A pup like you's no good for a job like this, you haven't any feeling for property. If Vassil Sergeich knew how you let us carry on he would take you by the scruff of your neck and throw you right out, he would! Because you're not an asset to him, you're a liability and a man has to be an asset to his master. See what I mean?"

He rolled a cigarette and handed it to me.

“Have a smoke, penpusher, it’ll clear your head. If you weren’t such a smart, handy lad, my advice to you would be: take the holy orders! But you haven’t got the character for that; you’re a stubborn, hard sort of chap, you wouldn’t give in to the abbot himself. With a character like yours you’ll never get on in the world. And a monk’s like a jackdaw, he don’t care what he pecks; so long as there are seeds he don’t care where they come from. I’m telling you all this from the bottom of my heart because I can see that you’re out of place here, a cuckoo’s egg in a strange nest...”

He took off his cap, as he always did when he was about to say something particularly important – stared up at the bleak sky and observed piously:

“God knows we’re a thieving lot and he won’t forgive us for it...”

“That’s true enough,” Mokei Budyryn trumpeted.

From that moment silver-haired Osip with his bright eyes and dusky soul had a pleasant fascination for me; a sort of friendship sprang up between us, although I noticed that his good relations with me embarrassed him somehow; in front of the others he looked at me vacantly, his corn-flower blue eyes darting this way and that, and his lips twisted in a false, unpleasant grimace as he addressed me: “Now then, keep you eyes peeled, earn your living, can’t you see Soldier over there chewing nails for all he’s worth...”

But when we were alone he spoke with a gentle wisdom and a clever little gleam played in his bright blue eyes as they looked straight into mine. I listened carefully to what this old man had to say, for his words were true and honestly weighed, although sometimes he spoke strangely.

“A man ought to be good,” I remarked once. “Yes, indeed!” he agreed. Then he chuckled and with downcast eyes, he went on softly:

“But what exactly do you mean by ‘good’? The way I see it, people don’t care a hang about your goodness or honesty so long as it doesn’t benefit them. No, it pays to be nice to them, amuse them, humour them... and someday perhaps it will bring you good returns! Of course, I don’t deny it must be a fine thing to look at yourself in the mirror and know you’re a good man. But as far as I can see it’s all the same to folks whether you’re a ruffian or a saint so long as you’re nice to them... That’s about the size of it, lad!”

I am in the habit of observing people carefully for I feel that each individual I come in contact with might help me fathom the secret of this mysterious, muddled, painful business called life; moreover, there is one question that has never ceased to torment me: What is the human soul?

It seems to me that some souls must be like brass globes fixed rigidly to the breast so that the reflection they cast back is distorted, ugly and repulsive. And then there are souls that are as flat as mirrors. Such souls might just as well not be there at all.

But most human souls I imagine to be formless as clouds, of an indeterminate opaqueness like the fickle opal always ready to change its hue to conform to whatever colour comes in contact with it.

I did not know, nor could I imagine what comely old Osip's soul was like; it was something my mind could not fathom.

I pondered these things as I gazed out over the river to where the town clung to the hillside, vibrating with the peal of bells from all of its belfries that soared skywards like the white pipes of my beloved organ in the Polish church. The crosses on the churches, like blurred stars captured by the dreary sky, winked and trembled and seemed to be reaching out toward the clear sky behind the grey blanket of wind-torn clouds; but the clouds scurried along, effacing with dark shadows the gay colours down below, and each time the sunbeams emerged from the bottomless abysses between them to bathe the town in bright hues, they hastened to blot them out again, the dank shadows grew heavier, and after one instant of gladness all was gloomy and dreary again.

The buildings of the town were like heaps of soiled snow, the ground beneath them was black and bare, and the trees in the gardens were like clods of earth; the dull gleam of the windowpanes in the grey house walls reminded one of winter, and the poignant sadness of the pale northern spring spreads softly over the whole scene.

Mishuk Dyatlov, a tow-headed, broad-shouldered, gawky lad with a harelip, essayed a song:

*She came to him in the morning,
But he died the night before...*

“Shut up, you bastard,” the ex-soldier shouted at him, “have you forgotten what day it is?”

Boyev was also angry. He shook his fist at Dyatlov, hissing: “S-swine!”

“We’re a hardy, tough lot,” Osip said to Budyryn as he sat astride the top of the icebreak measuring its slant with narrowed eyes “Slip it out an inch to the left... that’s it! A savage lot, that’s what we are: Once I saw a bishop come along and the people crowded around him, fell on their knees and begged and implored him: ‘Your Reverence,’ they said, ‘drive away the wolves, the wolves are ruining us!’ And he towered over them and thundered: ‘You’re supposed to be Orthodox Christians? I’ll have you all severely punished!’ Very wrathful he was, why he even spat in their faces. A little old chap he was, with a kindly face, bleary-eyed...”

About fifty yards down the river from the ice aprons some boatmen and tramps were chopping the ice around the barges; the crowbars cracked into the ice, crushing the brittle, greyish-blue crust of the river, the slender handles of the boat-hooks swayed back and forth pushing the broken pieces under the solid ice, the current gurgled and from the sandy beach came the murmur of streamlets. On the ice apron planes cut into wood,

saws screeched and hammers pounded, driving clamps into the yellow, smoothly planed wood – and all these sounds mingled with the ringing of the bells which, softened by the distance, stirred the soul. It was as if all the labour of the bleak day had been a paean to spring, urging her to descend upon the thawing but still naked and wretched earth...

“Call the German!” someone yelled hoarsely, “we need more men...”

From shore came the response:

“Where is he?”

“Look in the pub...”

The voices floated heavily in the moisture-laden air and echoed drearily over the broad river.

The men worked feverishly but carelessly; everyone was anxious to get to town, to the bathhouse and then to church as quickly as possible. Sashok Dyatlov a well-built, agile lad with a shock of curly hair bleached white like his brother's was particularly worried. He kept glancing up-stream, saying softly to his brother:

“Don't you hear it crackling?”

The ice had stirred the night before and the river police had been keeping the horses off the river ever since the morning before; a few pedestrians were still slipping across over the foot-bridges, like beads sliding on strings, and you could hear the boards smacking against the water as they bent under the weight.

“It's cracking up,” said Mishuk, blinking his white lashes.

Osip, who had been scanning the river his eyes shaded with his hand, cut him short.

“It’s the sawdust in your noodle cracking!” he said. “You get on with the job, son of a sorceress! Overseer, take your nose out of your book and keep them at it!”

There was about two hours’ work left; the sides of the icebreak were already covered with gleaming planks as yellow as butter, and only the thick iron bands remained to be spiked on. Boyev and Sanyavin had out the grooves for the strips of iron but it was now discovered that they had made them too narrow.

“You blind bat, you!” Osip scolded the Mordvinian, clapping his head in despair. “Call that work?”

Suddenly a voice raised in a joyful shout was heard from the shore.

“It’s moving! Hooray!”

As if in accompaniment to the howl, a faint crunching rustling sound came down the river; the gnarled claws of the pine-bough markers trembled and seamed to clutch at the air for support, and, waving their boat-hooks, the boatmen and tramps noisily clambered up rope ladders to board their barges.

It was strange to see the deserted river suddenly become crowded with people; they seemed to have popped up from under the ice and were now rushing back and forth like jackdaws scared by a gunshot, running hither and thither hauling boards and poles, dropping them and picking them up again.

“Get your tools together!” roared Osip. “Lively there, you...”

We're going ashore!"

"There goes Easter Sunday!" exclaimed Sashok bitterly.

To us it seemed as if the river stood still, while the city shuddering and swaying, with the hill under it, began to sail slowly up the river. The grey sandy landslip about seventy feet ahead of us also stirred and floated away.

"Get moving!" Osip shouted, giving me a push. "What're you gaping at?"

A dread sensation of danger gripped me, and my feet, feeling the ice shift underneath, mechanically propelled my body to the sand spit where the willow wands broken and bent by the winter winds jutted up naked and bare. Boyev, Soldier, Budyryn and the two Dyatlovs got there ahead of me. The Mordvinian ran beside me swearing angrily while Osip brought up the rear.

"Stop your howling, Narodets..." I heard Osip shout.

"But what are we going to do, Uncle Osip..."

"Everything's all right, you'll see."

"We'll be stuck here for a couple of days."

"Then you'll sit it out..."

"What about the holiday?"

"They'll manage this year without you."

"Bunch of cowards," sneered Soldier, sitting on the sand and smoking his pipe. "It's only a hop skip and a jump to the shore and you're ready to run like mad."

"You were the first to take to your heels," Mokei put in.

"What're you afraid of?" Soldier continued. "Christ was the

Saviour and even he had to die...”

“But he was resurrected, wasn’t he?” the Mordvinian muttered, hurt by the other’s remarks.

“Shut up, you pup!” Boyev shouted at him. “Sure he was resurrected. Today’s Friday, not Sunday!”⁴

The March sun broke through a blue gulf between the clouds, and the ice glistened as if mocking at us. Osip scanned the deserted river, shading his eyes with his hand.

“She’s stopped,” he said. “But not for long...”

“No holiday for us,” Sashok muttered sullenly.

Angry furrows cleft the Mordvinian’s beardless, moustacheless face, as dark and rough-hewn as an unpared potato.

“So we can sit right here,” he muttered, blinking, “with nothing to eat and no money. People are enjoying themselves, but we... Victims of greed, that’s what we are...”

“It’s a matter of need, not greed!” Osip, his eyes glued to the river and his thoughts apparently far away, spoke as if talking in his sleep. “What are these ice breakers for? To protect the barges and everything else from the ice. The ice hasn’t any sense, it’ll just pile up on the string of boats – and good-bye property...”

“Spit on it. It isn’t ours, is it?”

“No use reasoning with a fool...”

“Ought to’ve fixed them earlier...”

Soldier twisted his face in a frightful grimace.

⁴ Sunday in Russian is “voskresenye“ which also means resurrection. – Trans.

“Shut up, Mordvinian!” he shouted.

“It’s stopped,” Osip repeated.

The boatmen were shouting on board their vessels. From the river a chill breath and an evil, ominous silence were wafted. The pattern of the markers scattered over the ice altered, and everything seemed altered, pregnant with tense expectation.

“Uncle Osip, what are we going to do?” one of the young lads asked timidly.

“Eh?” he responded absently.

“Are we going to stay here?”

“Maybe the Lord doesn’t want you sinners celebrating his holiday, eh?” Boyev said, in a mocking nasal twang.

Soldier came to the assistance of his comrade and pointing to the river with his pipe muttered:

“Want to go to town, eh? Who’s stopping you? The ice’ll go too. Maybe you’ll get drowned – it’d save you from getting hauled to the clink anyway.”

“That’s true enough,” said Mokei.

The sun slipped out of sight, the river grew dark, and the town was now more clearly visible. The young men gazed at it with impatient, longing eyes, silent and still.

I had’ that oppressive feeling which comes with the realization that everyone around you is concerned with his own thoughts and that there is no single purpose that might unite all into an integral, stubborn force. I wanted to get away from them and set off down the ice alone.

With a movement so sudden that he might have just awakened from a deep sleep, Osip got up, removed his cap and, making the sign of the cross in the direction of the town, said in a simple, calm tone of authority:

“Well, lads, let’s go, and God be with us...”

“To town?” cried Sashok, jumping to his feet.

Soldier made no effort to move.

“We’ll drown!” he declared.

“Stay here, then.”

Casting his eye over the men around him, Osip cried:

“Come on, let’s get going!”

Everybody was now on his feet and gathered in a huddle.

Boyev, who was rearranging the tools in his basket complained:

“Once you’re told to go, you might as well go... But the one who gives the orders will have to answer...”

Osip seemed to have grown younger and stronger. The crafty, good-natured expression had faded from his rosy face, his eyes grew darker, graver and more matter-of-fact. The indolent swagger too disappeared and he now walked with a firm, confident tread.

“Pick up a board, each of you, and hold it crosswise in front. In case the ice cracks, which God forbid, the ends will hit the solid ice and stop you from going under. They’ll help in crossing the cracks too. Anybody got a rope? Here, you, give me the level... Ready? I’ll go ahead, and after me... who’s the heaviest? I suppose you, Soldier. Then Mokei, Mordvinian, Boyev, Mishuk,

Sashok. Maximych, being the lightest, will bring up the rear... Off with your caps and let's pray to the Virgin. Here comes the sun to give us a send-off..."

With one accord the grey and brown heads of matted hair were bared, and the sun glanced down at them through a thin white cloud, only to hide again as if loth to raise unwarranted hopes.

"Let's go!" said Osip in a dry, strange voice. "God be with us! Keep your eyes on my feet. And no crowding. Keep at least a sagene apart and the more space the better. Come on, lads!"

Shoving his cap inside his coat and carrying the level, Osip stepped on the ice, cautiously sliding his feet along its surface. No sooner had he done so than a wild cry came from the river bank behind.

"Where're you going, you... sheep."

"Keep going, no looking behind!" the leader commanded crisply.

"Get back, you devils!"

"Come on, lads, and keep God in your mind! He's not going to invite us for the holidays..."

A policeman's whistle was heard.

"Now we're in for it!" Soldier grumbled aloud. "They'll let the police know over on the other side – and if we get through alive we'll be locked up for sure... I'm not going to take any responsibility for this..."

The string of men on the ice followed Osip's ringing voice as if it were something tangible to cling to.

“Watch the ice in front of your feet!”

We were crossing the river diagonally upstream, and being the last I had a good view of small, dapper Osip with his white, fluff) head as he skilfully slid along, barely lifting his feet from the ice. Behind him, as if threaded on an invisible string, filed six dark figures, doubled over and unsteady on their feet; now and then their shadows appeared next to them, then disappeared underfoot only to spread out on the ice once more. Their heads were bent low, as if they were coming down a mountainside and were afraid of stumbling.

On the shore behind us a crowd evidently had gathered, for the outcry had risen to an unpleasant roar and you could no longer make out what they were shouting.

The cautious procession resolved itself into mechanical, tiresome work. Accustomed to walking fast, I now found myself sinking into that somnolent, detached frame of mind when the soul seems to grow void and all thought of self is forgotten, while vision and hearing become inordinately sharp. Underfoot was the bluish-grey, leaden ice worn thin by the current; its diffused glitter was blinding. Here and there it had cracked and jammed into hummocks, ground by the movement of the river into fragments porous like pumice-stone and as jagged as broken glass. Blue fissures yawned coldly, ready to trap the unwary foot. The wide-soled boots shuffled along and the voices of Boyev and Soldier, continually harping on the same theme, tried my patience.

“I’m not going to answer for this...”

“Neither will I...”

“Just because a man has the right to order you about doesn’t mean someone else mightn’t be a thousand times smarter...”

“You think being smart means anything – it’s a glib tongue that counts around here...”

Osip had tucked the hem of his sheepskin jacket under his belt and his legs, encased in pants of grey army cloth, strode along with the ease and resilience of a spring. It was as if some creature visible to him alone were dancing in front of him, preventing him from walking straight ahead, and he was doing his best to circumvent it, slip away from it, darting to the left or the right, sometimes doubling sharply in his tracks, and doing it all at a dance-step describing loops and semicircles on the ice. His voice rang out clearly and resonantly, and it was pleasant to hear it merge with the ringing of the church bells.

We were half-way across the four-hundred-sagene strip of ice when an ominous rumble came from upstream and at the same moment the ice shifted under my feet; taken by surprise I lost my balance and fell down on one knee. I looked up the river and terror gripped me by the throat, throttled me and made the world turn black in my eyes: the grey crust of ice had sprung to life, it was buckling up, sharp angles appeared on the even surface, and a strange crunching like heavy boots walking over broken glass, filled the air.

With a quiet rush, clear water appeared next to me,

somewhere splintering wood whined like a living thing, the men shouted huddling together, and through it all rang the voice of Osip:

”Scatter, there... Get away from each other... What are you crowding together for! She’s going good and proper now. Get a move on, lads!”

He leapt about as if attacked by wasps, jabbing the air around him with the level as though it were a gun and he were holding off some invisible assailant, while the town swam jerkily past him. Under me the ice crunched and crumpled into fine slivers, water washed against my feet and, springing up. I made a wild dash toward Osip.

“Where d’you think you’re going!” he shouted, swinging the level, “Stop, you bloody fool!”

The man before us was not the old Osip; the face had grown strangely young, all the familiar features had gone, his blue eyes were now grey, and the man seemed to have grown a half-arshin taller. Straight as a brand-new nail, his feet firmly planted, he was shouting with his mouth wide open:

“If you don’t stop running around and getting into a huddle I’ll smash your skulls in!”

Again he swung at me with the level.

“Where’re you going?”

“We’ll drown!” I said in a whisper.

“Hush!” Then, observing my sorry plight, he added softly:

“Any fool can drown, you make it your business to get out of

here!”

Again he began shouting encouragements to the others his chest thrust out and his head thrown back.

The ice crackled and crunched as it broke up lazily. In the meantime we were slowly being carried past the town. Ashore it seemed some fabulous titan had awakened and was rending the earth asunder; the shoreline below us was stationary while the bank opposite was slowly moving upstream – it could only be a matter of moments before it was ripped apart.

This ominous, creeping movement seemed to cut off our last link with land; the familiar world was receding into oblivion and my breast was laden with grief and my knees quaked. Red clouds slowly sailed across the sky and the jagged chunks of ice catching their reflection turned red too as if with the strain of reaching out for me. All the vast earth was in the throes of the birth pangs of spring, racked by convulsions, its shaggy, moist breast heaving and its joints cracking; and in the massive body of the earth the river was a vein pulsating with thick, warm blood.

It hurt to realize one’s insignificance and helplessness in the midst of the calm, irresistible movement of the mass, and deep in the soul a bold dream took shape fed by this sensation of humiliation: if only I could reach out and lay my hand on the hill on shore and say:

“Stop until I reach you!”

The resonant pealing of the bells was now waning to a melancholy sigh, but I remembered that the next night they would

once more speak out gaily to proclaim the resurrection.

If only I could live to hear them ringing!

...Seven dark figures danced Before my eyes as they leapt from one foothold to another and paddled in thin air with the boards they were carrying; and ahead of them the old man turned and twisted like a groundling, reminiscent of Nicholas the Miracle-Maker, his imperative voice ringing out ceaselessly:

“Keep your eyes op-e-n!”

The ice buckled and the living back of the river shivered and heaved underfoot like the whale in the “Hunch-Backed Horse“; and with increasing frequency the fluid body of the stream gushed from under the armour of ice – the cold, murky water that greedily licked at the men’s feet.

We moved along a narrow perch overhanging a deep abyss. The quiet, luring splash of the water conjured up visions of bottomless depths, of my body settling slowly, slowly into the dense icy mass, saw my eyes grow blind, my heart ceasing to beat. I recalled the drowned bodies I had seen, with their slimy skulls, bloated faces and glassy, bulging eyes, the fingers jutting out from swollen hands and the sodden skin that hung on the palms like a rag.

The first to get a ducking was Mokei Budyryn; he had been ahead of the Mordvinian, as silent and retiring as always; he had been calmer than the others and yet he disappeared as suddenly as if he had been pulled in by the legs, only his head and his hands gripping the plank remained above the ice.

“Lend a hand!” Osip cried. “Not all of you, one or two’ll be enough.”

“Never mind, boys,” said Mokei to the Mordvinian and me, as he blew the water out of his mouth. “I’ll manage... myself.”

He clambered onto the ice and shook himself.

“Damn it anyway, it looks as if you really might drown down here.”

His teeth chattering, he licked his wet moustache with his large tongue, his resemblance to a big, genial dog more marked than ever.

A transient recollection flashed in my mind; I remembered how a month before he had chopped off the thumb of his left hand at the first joint and picking up the pallid, blue-nailed joint had looked at it darkly, with wondering eyes, and addressed it in a low, apologetic tone:

“I’ve hacked at the poor thing so many times I’ve just lost count... It was out of joint anyway, didn’t work properly... So now I suppose I’ve got to bury it.” He carefully wrapped the amputated thumb into some shavings and put it in his pocket. Only then did he proceed to bandage the wound.

The next to get a ducking was Boyev; it looked as if he had purposely dived under the ice. He let out a frenzied cry at once.

“O-ow, help! I’m drowning! Save me, brothers, don’t let me go down...”

He thrashed about so hard out of sheer terror that we barely managed to haul him up, and in the fuss we almost lost the

Mordvinian who went right under, head and all.

“That was pretty nearly a trip straight to the devils,” he said with an abashed smile as he clambered back on the ice, looking lankier and more angular than ever.

A minute later Boyev went down again with a shriek.

“Shut up, Yashka, you soul of a goat!” Osip shouted, threatening him with the level. “Why must you scare everybody out of their wits? I’ll teach you a lesson! Loosen your belts, boys, and turn your pockets inside out, it’ll be easier that way...”

Every dozen paces or so the ice, crunching and spuming, opened wide, sharp-fanged jaws dripping a murky froth and the jagged blue teeth reached out for our feet; the river seemed anxious to suck us down as a snake swallows a frog. The sodden boots and clothes hampered our movement and pulled us down; we were all clammy as if we had been licked down; clumsy and speechless, we plodded along slowly and submissively.

Osip, as wet as the rest of us, seemed to divine where the fissures were and leapt like a hare from floe to floe. After each leap we would pause for a moment, look around and give a resonant whoop:

“Thai’s how it’s done, see?”

He was playing with the river; the river stalked him, but so light and nimble on his feet was he that he easily dodged its passes and avoided the pitfalls. One might have thought he was steering the course of the ice and driving the large, solid floes for us to walk on,

“Keep your chin up, you children of God! Ho! ho!”

“Good for Uncle Osip!” the Mordvinian said in quiet admiration. “There’s a man for you! The real sort...”

The closer we got to the shore the finer the ice was chopped and men kept falling through it more and more frequently. The town had already practically floated by and the Volga was not far ahead; there the ice had not moved yet and we were in danger of being sucked under.

“Looks like we’ll drown,” the Mordvinian said quietly, looking over his left shoulder at the blue haze of evening.

Suddenly, as if out of pity for us, a huge ice floe ran end on against the shore, climbed up it shivering and crunching, and then stopped.

“Run!” Osip shouted frenziedly. “Leg it for all you’re worth!”

He jumped for the floe, slipped and fell down, and sitting on the edge of the ice where the water lapped up to him he let the rest of us pass. Five of us dashed for the shore jostling one another in an effort to get there first; the Mordvinian and I stopped to lend Osip a hand.

“Run, you pig’s progeny, d’you hear me!”

His face was blue and trembling, his eyes had lost their lustre, and his jaw hung queerly.

“Come on, Uncle...” His head dropped.

“Must have broken my leg... Can’t get up...”

We picked him up and carried him while he kept on mumbling through chattering teeth, clinging to our necks.

“You’ll drown yourselves, you fools... We’d better thank the Lord for pulling us through... Look out, it won’t carry three, step easy there! Follow the spots where there’s no snow... it’s more solid there... Better drop me, though...”

Osip screwed up an eye and looked me in the face.

“That ledger of yours where our sins are recorded must’ve gotten all soaked up, or maybe you’ve lost it, eh?” he said.

As we stepped off the end of the ice floe that had piled up on the bank, smashing a boat into smithereens in the process, the other end of the floe which was still afloat scrunched, broke off and sailed away, rocking in the current.

“Well, well,” the Mordvinian said approvingly. “It knew what it was about!”

Soaking wet and chilled to the marrow but in high spirits, we were now ashore surrounded by a crowd of townsfolk. Boyev and the ex-soldier were already having an altercation with them.

“Well boys,” Osip cried gaily as we lowered him onto some timbers, “the book’s all mucked up, soaked right through...”

The book, tucked away inside my coat, weighed like a brick; I pulled it out when no one was looking and threw it far out into the stream where it plunked into the dark water like a frog. The Dyatlovs were racing up the hillside to the saloon for some vodka, pounding each other with their fists as they ran and shouting:

“R-r-rah!”

“Ekh, you!”

A tall old man with the beard of an apostle and the eyes of a

thief was speaking earnestly right into my ear.

“You ought to have your mugs bashed in for scaring peaceable folk, you anathemas, you...” he was saying.

“What the hell did we do to you?” shouted Boyev, who was busy pulling on his boots.

“Christian folk were drowning and what did you do?” Soldier complained, his voice hoarser than ever. “What could we have done?”

Osip was lying on the ground, his leg stretched out, going over his jacket with trembling hands.

“Soaked all the way through. Oh mother mine,” he moaned. “Done for, these clothes are, and I didn’t wear them a year!”

He had shrunk and his face was wrinkled and he seemed to be growing smaller and smaller as he lay there on the ground.

Suddenly he raised himself, sat up, groaned and was off in an angry, high-pitched voice:

“So you had to get to the bathhouse and the church, you bloody fools. Devil’s spawn! You can go straight to hell! As if the Lord couldn’t celebrate his day without you... Pretty nearly lost our lives... And clothes all mucked up... Hope you croak...”

Everybody else was draining the water from shoes and wringing clothes, wheezing and groaning from exhaustion and arguing back and forth with the townsfolk, but Osip went on still more vehemently:

“Of all the things to do, damn their hides! Had to get to the bathhouse – the police station is where they belong, that’s where

you'd get your backwashing..."

"They've sent for the police," one of the townsmen said in a placating tone.

"What're you trying to do?" Boyev turned on Osip. "Why put on the act?"

"Me?"

"Yes, you!"

"Wait a minute! What do you mean?"

"Who started this business of coming across, eh?"

"Well, who?"

"You!"

"Me?"

Osip started as if a spasm had seized him.

"Me-e?" he repeated, his voice breaking.

"That's true enough," Budyryn said in a level, distinct voice.

"Honest, it was you, Uncle Osip," the Mordvinian bore out the others, but quietly, apologetically. "You must've forgotten..."

"Of course you started it," the ex-soldier ejaculated sullenly and emphatically.

"Forgotten eh!" Boyev cried in fury. "Tell me another one! I know him, he's trying to shove the blame onto somebody else!"

Osip fell silent and narrowing his eyes surveyed the dripping, half-naked men.

Then emitting a strange whimper – I could not make out whether he was laughing or sobbing – twitching his shoulders and spreading out his arms, he muttered:

“That’s right... true enough, it was my idea... now what do you make of that!”

“Aha that’s better!” Soldier cried triumphantly.

Gazing at the river, which was now seething like a millet gruel coming to a boil, Osip puckered up his face and guiltily looked away.

“My mind must have gone blank like that, by God!” he continued. “How we ever made it I don’t understand... Makes me sick to think of it. Anyway, boys, I hope you won’t hold it against me – after all, there was the holiday coming, wasn’t there? You’ll forgive me. I must have sort of gone off a bit or something... True enough, I started it... old fool that I am...”

“You see?” said Boyev. “And what’d you say if I got drowned?”

It seemed to me that Osip really was stricken by the uselessness and foolishness of what he had done as he sat there on the ground, looking as slippery as a new-born calf licked by its dam; he shook his head, passed his fingers through the sand around him and continued mumbling penitently in a strange voice, all the while avoiding everyone’s eyes.

I looked at him and wondered what had happened to the captain of men who had taken his place at the head of his fellows and led them so considerately, ably and imperiously.

An unpleasant emptiness welled up in my soul. I dropped down beside Osip and, hoping to salvage something from the wreckage, spoke to him in a low voice.

“Don’t, Uncle Osip...”

“Ever see anything like it?” he responded in the same lone, giving me a sidelong glance while his fingers were busy unangling his matted beard. Then he went on as loudly as before for everybody’s benefit: “What a to-do, eh?”

...The dark stubble of the tree-tops on the crest of the hill was silhouetted against the extinguished sky, and the hill itself pressed against the shore like some huge beast. The blue shadows of evening appeared from behind the roofs of the houses that clung scab-like to the dusky hide of the hillside, and looked out from the wide-open rusty-red, moist maw of a clayey gully creating the illusion that it was reaching out thirstily for the river.

The river grew black and the rustle and crunching of the ice became duller and more regular; every now and then an ice floe dug end on into the shore as the hog roots the earth, remained motionless for a moment, then rocked, broke loose and sailed on farther while the next floe crept into its place.

The level of the water rose rapidly, sweeping against the bank and washing away the mud, and the silt spread a dark stain in the murky blue water. Strange noises filled the air – a scrunching and champing as if some tremendous beast were devouring its meal and licking its chops with a giant tongue.

From the direction of the town the sweet and pensive melody of the pealing bells, now muted by distance, floated down.

Like two romping puppies the Dyatlovs dashed down the hillside carrying bottles in their hands while at right angles to

them, alone the river front, came a grey-coated police officer and two policemen in black.

“God Almighty!” Osip groaned, tenderly rubbing his knee.

As the police approached, the townspeople cleared a passage for them and an expectant silence fell. The police officer, a lean little chap with a small face and a waxed reddish moustache, strode up to us.

“So you were the devils...” he began sternly in a rather hoarse affected bass.

Osip threw himself back on the ground and began hastily to explain:

“It was me, Your Honor, who started the business... Begging your pardon. Your Honor, it was because of the holidays...”

“You old devil,” the police officer yelled, but his shouting was lost in the avalanche of humble entreaties.

“We live here in town and on the other bank we’ve got nothing; didn’t even have money to buy bread and, Your Honor, the day after tomorrow’s Easter – got to take a bath and go to church like all good Christians, so I says, let’s go, fellows, and take a chance; we weren’t doing anything wrong. I’ve been punished for my fool idea though – leg’s broken, see.

“That’s all very well and good!” the police officer shouted sternly. “But what if you had drowned?”

Osip heaved a deep, tired sigh.

“What would have happened, Your Honor? Begging your pardon, probably nothing...”

The policeman swore, and everybody listened to him in attentive silence as if the man was uttering words of wisdom to be heard and remembered instead of mouthing obscene, brazen insults.

After taking down our names he left. We had drunk down the fiery vodka and feeling warmed up and in better spirits were getting ready to head for home when Osip, chuckling and throwing a look after the receding policeman, jumped lightly to his feet and fervently crossed himself.

“Thank God that’s the end...”

“Why... looks like your legs all right!” Boyev said in his nasal twang, astonished and disappointed. “D’you mean you didn’t break it?”

“You wish I had, eh?”

“Oh, you old comedian! You miserable clown...”

“Come on, boys!” Osip commanded, pulling his wet cap on his head.

...I walked alongside him behind the others, and as we went, he spoke to me in a quiet, tender way as if sharing a secret known only to him.

“No matter what you do and how you try, you just can’t live unless you’re crafty and cunning – that’s life for you, damn it anyway... You would like to climb to the top of the hill but there’s always some devil tripping you up...”

It was dark, and in the gloom, red and yellow lights burst forth as if signalling the message:

“This way!”

We walked up the hill toward the ringing of bells. At our feet rivulets rippled, drowning Osip’s caressing voice in their babble.

“Got around the police neatly, didn’t I? That’s how you’ve got to do it, so that nobody knows what it’s all about and everybody thinks he’s the main spring. Yes... it’s best to let everyone think he’s the one who did it...”

I listened to him, but found it hard to understand what he was saying.

Nor did I want to understand him; as it is my heart was light and at ease. I did not know whether I liked Osip or not, but I was ready to follow him to the ends of the earth, even across the river once more, over ice that would be constantly slipping away from under my feet.

The bells pealed and sang, and the joyous thought came to my mind: How many more times shall I be able to welcome spring!

“The human soul’s got wings,” Osip sighed. “It soars in your dreams...” A winged soul? Wonderful!

1912